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MIGRATION PATTERNS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF ZARI WORKERS OF HOWRAH DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL

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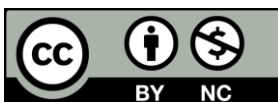
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Keywords

Zari Artisans,
Migration,
Informal Labour,
Gender,
Howrah.

Abstract

This paper explores the migration and socio-economic realities of Zari artisans in Howrah district, West Bengal, with a focus on gender and informal labour structures. It traces the movement of skilled artisans from Uttar Pradesh in the 1950s, driven by declining traditional patronage and the search for better economic opportunities. Their settlement in areas such as Panchla, Domjur, and Uluberia led to the growth of vibrant Zari clusters and the transfer of specialised skills, shaping a unique hybrid craft tradition. The study highlights the crucial yet often invisible role of women, who largely engage in home-based embroidery work. Despite their significant contribution to household incomes, they face multiple constraints, including limited mobility, lack of recognition, and restricted access to resources and markets. The paper also examines the impact of recent crises, particularly demonetization and the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely disrupted



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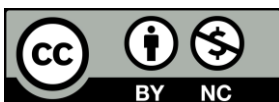
	<p>livelihoods, triggered reverse migration, and exposed the fragility of this cash-dependent informal sector.</p> <p>Overall, the study shows that while migration has historically supported the growth of the Zari industry, it has also produced enduring vulnerabilities. It calls for more inclusive and gender-sensitive policy measures to support artisans and sustain this traditional craft.</p>
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The establishment of the Zari industry in Howrah can be directly linked to the internal migration of artisans from Uttar Pradesh. In the 1950s, skilled craftsmen from Agra, Lucknow, and Banaras—regions historically known for Zardosi work—migrated to West Bengal, especially to Howrah district, in search of better economic prospects and industrial infrastructure (Saha 2015). These artisans laid the groundwork for what would become the nucleus of the Zari industry in areas such as Panchla, Domjur, Uluberia, and Dhulagori. Their mobility reflects a classic example of artisanal migration driven by both push factors (declining patronage in UP) and pull factors (emerging market demand in Bengal).

This migratory movement exemplifies classic artisanal migration driven by both structural and agency-based dynamics. Structurally, the push of declining patronage and shrinking traditional markets in Uttar Pradesh forced artisans to seek new production spaces. Concurrently, the pull of Howrah's expanding industrial base and favorable economic conditions presented attractive opportunities for sustaining and growing their craft. At the level of individual and collective agency, artisans demonstrated resilience and adaptability by relocating and reestablishing their livelihoods, negotiating new market relations, and integrating into local social and economic networks. Their ability to transplant and adapt the Zari craft underscores the dynamism of artisanal communities in responding to changing political economy landscapes (Chakraborty 2022).

Economically, the migration catalyzed a reconfiguration of Howrah's industrial profile by incorporating a significant handicraft component alongside its heavy and jute-based industries. The Zari clusters contributed to employment generation, especially among women, who predominantly undertook embroidery tasks within domestic and small workshop settings. This gendered division of labor, facilitated by home-based production models, allowed families to augment income without disrupting traditional household roles. Moreover, the artisan clusters fostered interdependent networks of suppliers, contractors, and traders that linked Howrah's Zari products to wider regional, national, and international markets, including the Middle East and Southeast Asia (Bandyopadhyay 2020).

Socially and culturally, the migrant artisans enriched Howrah's craft traditions by transmitting not only technical expertise but also cultural motifs and design philosophies associated with northern Indian Zardosi work. These cultural elements became embedded in the identity of Howrah's Zari industry, creating a distinctive hybrid style that blended the heritage of the migrants with local influences. The preservation and evolution of these motifs through familial apprenticeship systems and



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community-based training helped sustain the craft across decades, ensuring its continuity amid economic fluctuations (Jafri 2009).

However, the process of migration and settlement was not devoid of challenges. Migrant artisans often faced social integration issues, including linguistic barriers, differing caste and community dynamics, and competition with local producers. Additionally, the informal nature of much of the Zari production in Howrah, characterized by home-based work and subcontracting systems, limited artisans' access to formal credit, social security, and institutional support. Women, in particular, encountered constraints in terms of mobility, training opportunities, and market access, reflecting broader gendered disparities in the artisanal sector (Khatoon 2015; Sharma 2012).

Despite these challenges, the migration of Zari artisans from Uttar Pradesh to Howrah in the 1950s stands as a testament to the capacity of craft communities to navigate and negotiate socio-economic transformations. Their mobility facilitated the diffusion of artisanal knowledge, the expansion of craft production clusters, and the strengthening of cultural continuity within an evolving industrial context. This historical process highlights the importance of migration as a vehicle for craft sustainability and economic adaptation in India's traditional industries (Saha 2015).

This migration was motivated by a combination of push and pull factors. In Uttar Pradesh, particularly in cities like Agra, Lucknow, and Banaras, Zari artisans faced dwindling patronage and increased competition due to colonial economic disruptions and shifting market dynamics. The decline in royal and elite demand for handcrafted textiles, coupled with the advent of mechanized production, constrained economic prospects for many skilled workers. In contrast, Howrah, with its growing industrial base and proximity to urban markets such as Kolkata, presented new opportunities for artisanal production and commercial engagement. The promise of economic stability and the chance to establish new craft hubs attracted artisan families, prompting relocation despite the social and logistical challenges of migration (Saha 2015).

The mobility of these artisans played a crucial role in the diffusion of specialized knowledge and technical skills that are central to Zari embroidery. As migrants settled in areas like Domjur, Panchla, Uluberia, Dhulagori, and Sankrail within Howrah district, they brought with them refined techniques, design aesthetics, and production practices that had been honed over generations. This knowledge transfer revitalized local craft traditions, enriching the cultural tapestry of Howrah's artisanal communities. Furthermore, the establishment of production clusters in these locales created environments conducive to collaborative learning, skill sharing, and innovation, thereby enhancing overall productivity and craft quality. The consolidation of these clusters also enabled economies of scale and improved access to raw materials and market channels, reinforcing the economic viability of Zari production (Saha 2015).



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Beyond technical and economic impacts, the migration of Zari artisans contributed significantly to cultural continuity and identity preservation within an evolving industrial context. The transplantation of artisanal practices served as a conduit for sustaining intangible cultural heritage, embedding histories, symbols, and communal values within embroidered textiles. These practices became focal points of community cohesion, providing a sense of belonging and cultural affirmation for migrant artisans adapting to new socio-economic environments. This process illustrates the dynamic nature of craft traditions as living systems that negotiate continuity and change through social mobility and economic adaptation (Saha 2015).

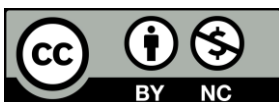
Nevertheless, the migration process was not without its challenges and complexities. Migrant artisans encountered socio-cultural adjustment issues, resource constraints, and competition within established craft markets. Integrating into existing social structures in Howrah required negotiation of identity, community relations, and access to production and distribution networks. Women artisans, in particular, faced additional barriers related to mobility, labor division, and social norms, influencing their participation and visibility within new clusters. Understanding these multifaceted experiences provides nuanced insights into the socio-economic dynamics of craft migration and the gendered dimensions of artisanal labor adaptation (Field Report 2025).

In contemporary reflections, the legacy of this migration continues to shape the structure and vitality of Howrah's Zari industry. The clusters established through this historical movement remain active centers of craft production, maintaining high standards of workmanship and cultural significance. The ongoing presence of migrant-descendant artisans contributes to intergenerational knowledge transmission and innovation, ensuring the craft's relevance amid changing market and technological conditions. This enduring influence underscores the significance of historical migration as a foundational process underpinning the sustainability and evolution of traditional crafts in India (Saha 2015).

Impact of Demonetization and COVID-19 Lockdowns on Reverse Migration

The socio-economic stability of these artisan clusters faced severe disruption during the twin crises of demonetization in 2016 and the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020. The sudden withdrawal of cash from the economy following demonetization severely impacted this largely cash-based, informal sector. Artisans faced halted payments, reduced orders, and liquidity crunches.

The COVID-19 lockdowns had an even more profound effect, triggering widespread reverse migration. With production units shuttered and markets closed, many migrant workers returned to their native villages, leaving the industry short-staffed and fractured (Saha & Mullick 2021). This disruption not only halted income flows but also severed artisans from their local supply chains and customer bases, leading to a near-collapse of small workshops.



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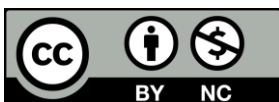
Demonetization, implemented by the Indian government in November 2016, involved the sudden withdrawal of ₹500 and ₹1000 currency notes from circulation. While the policy aimed at curbing black money, counterfeit currency, and corruption, its immediate effect on cash-driven informal economies was disruptive and severe. The Zari artisan clusters, operating predominantly on cash transactions and informal credit systems, were particularly exposed to the resultant liquidity crisis. Artisans and small-scale producers found their incomes frozen as payments from contractors, wholesalers, and exporters were delayed or withheld pending cash flow normalization. Since most artisans lack access to formal banking or digital payment infrastructure, they were unable to transact seamlessly during the demonetization period. This interruption led to stalled production schedules, unpaid wages, and an overall reduction in economic activity within the clusters (Saha & Mullick 2021).

The cash crunch severely undermined the purchasing power of consumers and intermediaries alike. Demand for luxury handcrafted textiles such as Zari-embroidered garments declined, as consumers prioritized essential goods amidst economic uncertainty. Consequently, orders from urban retailers and export houses were curtailed, forcing many workshops to scale back or temporarily cease operations. For many artisans, this translated to weeks or months without income, increasing indebtedness to informal lenders who charged exorbitant interest rates. The demonetization shock exposed the fragility of the supply chains underpinning the Zari industry, where delays in payments cascaded into shortages of raw materials such as metallic threads and fine fabrics, further halting production (Bandyopadhyay 2020).

One of the most visible consequences of the lockdown was the phenomenon of reverse migration. With production units shuttered and urban livelihoods eliminated, migrant workers—who form a significant portion of the Zari artisan workforce—were compelled to return to their native villages. This exodus fragmented the skilled labor pool within Howrah’s embroidery clusters, leading to chronic understaffing and operational paralysis in many workshops. The loss of these migrants, who often carried specialized skills and experience, undermined the continuity and quality of production, jeopardizing long-term industry viability (Chakraborty 2022).

Furthermore, the disruption of local supply chains aggravated the crisis. The procurement of raw materials, such as zari threads, sequins, and base fabrics, was hampered by transportation restrictions and vendor closures. Similarly, finished goods could not reach retailers, wholesalers, or export consignments due to logistic breakdowns. This severance between production and consumption nodes meant that even artisans who remained operational faced insurmountable obstacles in sustaining their enterprises. Many small workshops and home-based units, lacking financial reserves, were forced to close permanently, resulting in a significant loss of artisanal heritage and community livelihoods (Field Report 2025).

The combined effects of demonetization and the pandemic highlighted structural weaknesses in the artisanal economy’s dependence on informal cash transactions, migrant labor, and fragmented supply



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chains. Artisans, already vulnerable due to lack of formal recognition and limited access to institutional support, found themselves excluded from many government relief measures, which often required formal documentation or bank account linkage. The absence of tailored social protection schemes for informal workers meant that millions of artisans faced economic destitution with limited recourse (Mittal & Singh 2021).

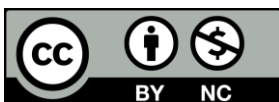
However, these crises also spurred innovative responses and adaptations within the sector. Non-governmental organizations, artisan cooperatives, and some private enterprises initiated measures such as doorstep delivery of raw materials, digital marketing workshops, and promotion of direct-to-consumer sales via online platforms. These interventions aimed to rebuild disrupted supply chains, enhance artisans' market access, and reduce dependency on intermediaries. Despite these efforts, the recovery remains uneven and fragile, with many artisans struggling to regain pre-crisis production volumes and income stability (Zoya & Rahman 2021).

One significant innovation was the introduction of doorstep delivery services for raw materials and inputs. Traditionally, artisans relied on intermediaries and local markets for procuring threads, fabrics, and embellishments, channels which were severely disrupted during lockdowns and movement restrictions. By organizing direct delivery systems, NGOs and cooperatives minimized interruptions in material availability, allowing artisans to continue production within their homes. This approach not only ensured continuity of work but also reduced reliance on middlemen who often charged inflated prices, thereby improving cost efficiency and economic returns for artisans (Zoya & Rahman 2021).

Complementing these measures was the promotion of direct-to-consumer (DTC) sales models facilitated through online platforms. By enabling artisans to bypass traditional intermediaries who historically dominated distribution and pricing, DTC approaches sought to empower artisans economically and strengthen their market agency. Online marketplaces, social media storefronts, and virtual exhibitions became vital channels for showcasing authentic, handcrafted Zari products. This transition not only enhanced artisans' visibility but also fostered consumer awareness regarding the cultural and labor value embedded in their crafts. Such direct engagement contributed to building trust, customer loyalty, and fairer compensation mechanisms, essential for the sector's sustainable recovery and growth (Zoya & Rahman 2021).

Displacement, Economic Precarity, and Unemployment

The combined effect of these economic shocks resulted in widespread displacement and heightened precarity. Artisans who had spent decades perfecting their craft found themselves unemployed or forced to take up alternative low-skilled labor. The absence of formal contracts and social security meant that these workers were excluded from formal relief mechanisms. Home-based women artisans were particularly hard-hit, as they lacked mobility, bargaining power, and institutional visibility. These



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outcomes are symptomatic of what Fraser (1989) identifies as “structural marginalization,” wherein social reproduction labor is economically devalued, even when it sustains the household and economy.

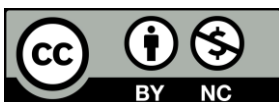
The lack of formal contractual arrangements within the Zari industry and broader informal economy exacerbated the precarity experienced by artisans during this period. Unlike workers in the organized sector, who typically benefit from legally binding employment contracts, minimum wage protections, and access to social security provisions, many artisans operated without such safeguards. Their employment was frequently mediated through informal networks of contractors and intermediaries, leaving them vulnerable to sudden wage cuts, delayed payments, or outright job loss with limited avenues for redress (Mittal & Singh 2021). The absence of documented employment relationships also excluded them from government relief schemes and emergency aid programs introduced in response to the crises, further deepening their marginalization.

The economic displacement caused by these shocks also had cascading social effects. Loss of income disrupted household stability, leading to increased indebtedness, food insecurity, and reduced access to healthcare and education. Artisan families faced heightened psychosocial stress as traditional safety nets were eroded, and community support mechanisms struggled to absorb the widespread need. In particular, the intergenerational transmission of craft knowledge faced threats as younger members, compelled by economic necessity, opted to migrate out of artisan vocations entirely, seeking employment in urban informal sectors or other low-skilled occupations. This posed a serious challenge to the preservation of Zari embroidery as a living cultural heritage (Chakraborty 2022).

Moreover, the shift toward alternative low-skilled labor often entailed a loss of artisanal identity and diminished opportunities for skill utilization and development. Artisans who transitioned to casual or seasonal work in construction, agriculture, or urban informal sectors encountered exploitative conditions, irregular earnings, and social exclusion. Such transitions also diluted the cultural and economic fabric of artisanal communities, undermining collective cohesion and weakening the social capital essential for cooperative action and community-based resilience (Breman 1996).

The compounded effects of displacement, labor devaluation, and social invisibility underline the urgent need for inclusive policy interventions that recognize and integrate the realities of informal women artisans. Efforts must go beyond short-term relief to encompass social protection schemes tailored to the unique needs of home-based workers, including access to health insurance, pension plans, and maternity benefits. Formalizing artisanal work through registration and the promotion of cooperatives can enhance visibility and bargaining power, enabling artisans to participate more effectively in market negotiations and policy dialogues (Kabeer 1999).

Furthermore, empowerment initiatives must address the structural gender norms that constrain women’s mobility and agency. This involves providing flexible, community-based training programs that enhance digital literacy, financial management, and entrepreneurial skills, thus equipping women



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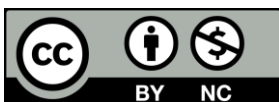
to leverage emerging market opportunities and diversify income sources. Such programs, coupled with targeted awareness campaigns, can foster greater participation of women artisans in decision-making processes both within households and artisan collectives (Mittal & Singh 2021).

A critical component of such empowerment initiatives involves the design and implementation of flexible, community-based training programs tailored to the unique circumstances of women artisans. These programs should encompass digital literacy, financial management, entrepreneurial skills, and market awareness, equipping women with the competencies necessary to engage effectively with contemporary economic environments increasingly characterized by digital platforms and complex supply chains. Given women's responsibilities within household and caregiving domains, training modalities must accommodate time constraints and socio-cultural expectations by offering localized, accessible learning spaces, flexible schedules, and peer support mechanisms. This flexibility enhances participation rates and allows women to build skills without compromising domestic obligations (Mittal & Singh 2021).

Digital literacy training is particularly vital in bridging the technological divide that hinders women's ability to leverage e-commerce, social media marketing, and digital payment systems. By gaining proficiency in digital tools, women artisans can expand their market reach, engage directly with consumers, and reduce dependency on intermediaries who often exploit labor and suppress earnings. Financial management education complements digital skills by fostering budgeting, savings, credit access, and investment capabilities, enabling women to optimize income, plan for contingencies, and pursue entrepreneurial ventures. Entrepreneurial training further develops business acumen, product innovation, pricing strategies, and negotiation skills, empowering women to participate more equitably within value chains and adapt to shifting market demands (Mittal & Singh 2021).

Complementing skill development, targeted awareness campaigns play a crucial role in challenging prevailing gender norms and promoting women's inclusion in decision-making processes. Such campaigns can engage families, community leaders, and broader social networks to foster supportive attitudes toward women's economic participation and leadership. Emphasizing the positive impact of women's empowerment on household welfare and community development can shift perceptions and reduce resistance to women's expanded roles. Awareness efforts can also disseminate information on legal rights, government schemes, and institutional support available to women artisans, enhancing their ability to access resources and assert entitlements (Sharma 2012).

Greater participation of women artisans in decision-making is essential for sustainable empowerment and sectoral development. Within households, this entails recognizing women's contributions to income and involving them in financial and production decisions, thereby enhancing autonomy and intra-family equity. At the community and industry levels, promoting women's leadership in artisan cooperatives, self-help groups, and trade associations strengthens collective bargaining power and advocacy capacity. Institutional mechanisms that facilitate women's representation and voice in policy



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dialogues, market negotiations, and program design ensure that interventions reflect their lived realities and priorities, enhancing relevance and impact (Mittal & Singh 2021).

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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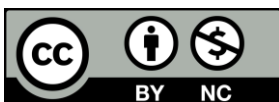
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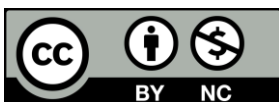
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