

Chapter 47

Study of Intergenerational Craft and Revival in Himalayan Communities

Gauri Karanjkar* and Reena Pandey

Vishwakarma University, Pune, India

Abstract

Uttarakhand, a culturally rich and geographically diverse state in the Indian Himalayan region, has a longstanding tradition of wool-based handicrafts such as handknitting. These practices are not only utilitarian but also serve as a medium for transmitting cultural heritage across generations. This paper explores the role of handknitting as a conduit for intergenerational bonding and the preservation of traditional knowledge within Himalayan communities. Drawing on qualitative data collected through interviews with artisans and community members, the study highlights how the act of craft-making fosters deep interpersonal connections. These shared creative experiences strengthen familial ties and offer a sense of identity and belonging, particularly between elders and younger generations. Despite this, the tradition faces critical challenges in the context of modern consumer culture. The increasing availability of inexpensive, mass-produced garments has marginalised handmade crafts, diminishing their market appeal and limiting their visibility. There is also a marked decline in the number of young people engaging with these practices, posing a serious threat to their continuity. The diminishing interest among youth is identified as one of the most pressing concerns for the sustainability of these cultural expressions. This paper examines both the underlying factors contributing to this decline and its broader cultural implications. It also sheds light on current revival efforts, including community initiatives, institutional support, and evolving strategies aimed at re-engaging younger generations with their craft heritage.

Keywords: *Uttarakhand, Intergenerational, Community, Craft, Revival, Cultural Expressions*

Introduction

Uttarakhand State was carved out of the state of Uttar Pradesh on 9th November 2000. It is divided into two broad regions—Garhwal and Kumaon. The state is comprised of 13 districts, namely, Chamoli, Pauri, Tehri, Uttarkashi, Dehradun, Haridwar, and Rudraprayag in the Garhwal region and Nainital, Almora, Pithoragarh, Udham Singh Nagar, Champawat, and Bageshwar in the Kumaon region. Of these 13 districts, four (Nainital, Haridwar, Dehradun, and Udham Singh Nagar) have large areas in the plains, whereas the other nine districts comprise the state's hill region. In the hill regions of Uttarakhand, it is common to see women seated on the verandas of their homes in the morning sunlight, engaged in activities such as knitting, spinning, and other crafts. These quotidian interactions extend beyond utilitarian production, serving as important sites of sociality and community building. The shared practice of craft not only sustains traditional knowledge systems but also fosters collective bonds among women, reinforcing networks of support within the community. An important aspect of craft-making and transmitting culture is spending time together across generations and within the

community. Craft-making can also connect people with their roots and ancestors through inherited shared skills and craft objects¹. As scholars have noted, craftmaking functions as a vehicle for heritage transmission, with women seeking to “keep the family tradition alive”² or to “leave a legacy” for future generations³. The shared practice of craft not only sustains traditional knowledge systems but also fosters collective bonds among women, reinforcing networks of support within the community⁴.

Discussion

Field observations in Dunda village (Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand) highlight the persistence of wool-based crafts, particularly knitting, among older women who gather in the morning sun to practice and socialise (Figure 1). These scenes embody both the continuity of cultural practices and the role of craft as a community-building activity. However, they also make visible a generational gap: while elderly women remain active, younger women are rarely seen participating. This reflects a wider trend in India, where inexpensive, mass-produced garments and shifting aspirations have undermined the appeal of traditional handicrafts, leading to a marked decline in participation among younger people⁵.



Figure 1: Women knitting in a group, basking in the sun at Dunda, Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand.

¹Ute Schönplflug, “Introduction: Cultural Transmission— A Multidisciplinary Research Field: Cultural Transmission— A Multidisciplinary Research Field,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 32, no. 2 (2001): 131–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022101032002001>.

²Joyce Starr Johnson and Laurel E. Wilson, “It Says You Really Care”: Motivational Factors of Contemporary Female Handcrafters,” *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 23, no. 2 (2005): 115–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X0502300205>.

³Kathleen W. Piercy and Cheryl Cheek, “Tending and Befriending: The Intertwined Relationships of Quilters,” *Journal of Women & Aging* 16 no. 1–2 (2004): 17–33, https://doi.org/10.1300/J074v16n01_03.

⁴Riikka Myllys, “Nowhere and Everywhere: Everyday Religion in the Intergenerational Transmission of Craft Making,” *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 56, no. 1 (2020): 53–74; Johnson and Wilson, “It Says You Really Care,” 115–30.

⁵Surabhi Mittal et al., “*Development Strategy for the Hill Districts of Uttarakhand*,” Working Paper No. 217 (New Delhi: Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), 2008), <https://ideas.repec.org/p/ind/icrier/217.html>.

The continued relevance of these practices is closely tied to broader questions about the value of handmade objects. Smith notes that handmade artefacts possess a ‘soul’, reflecting the spirit of the maker and offering consumers a sense of personal identity distinct from mass-produced goods⁶. Yet, rapid urbanisation, mechanisation, and changing consumer preferences have marginalised artisans, a challenge made more acute by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted supply chains and worsened economic vulnerabilities. At the same time, scholars emphasise that each handmade motif carries symbolic meaning and ecological awareness, underscoring the cultural stakes of preserving such traditions.

Youth Disinterest

The decline in participation is most evident among younger generations. Interviews and secondary research reveal that economic, educational, and social factors shape this disengagement (see Table 1).

Table 1: Key reasons and explanations for the decline in participation among younger generations.

Sr. No.	Reasons	Explanation
1	Economic/market pressures	Many youths have seen parents struggle for fair prices or stable income, making other trades more appealing ⁷ .
2	Educational/career pathways	Formal schooling encourages aspirations for urban or white-collar jobs, pushing youth away from craft practices ⁸ .
3	Social stigma and identity	Certain crafts carry caste associations or are perceived as ‘old-fashioned’, leading to disengagement ⁹ .
4	Modern preferences/lifestyle	Ready-made knitwear and modern fashion trends reduce demand for handcrafted goods, making them seem outdated ¹⁰ .

⁶Paul J. Smith, ed. *Objects for Use: Handmade by Design* (New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with the American Craft Museum, 2001), pp.; Akansha Dobriyal and Swati Sarkar, “A Review of Uttarakhand’s Craftsmanship in Natural Textiles and Traditional Weaving,” *Tuijin Jishu/Journal of Propulsion Technology* 45, no. 4 (2017): 1001–55,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/392848346_A_Review_of_Uttarakhand's_Craftsmanship_in_Natural_Textiles_and_Traditional_Weaving.

⁷Dasra, *Crafting a Livelihood: Building Sustainability for Indian Artisans* (Mumbai: Dasra, 2013), <https://www.dasra.org/pdf/resources/Crafting%20a%20Livelihood%20-%20Building%20Sustainability%20for%20Indian%20Artisans.pdf>

⁸LiveMint, “Is the Indian Karigar Ageing?,” Mint, June 2023.

⁹LiveMint, “Is the Indian Karigar Ageing?”

¹⁰Uttarakhand Handloom and Handicraft Development Council (UHHDC), District Units and Programs (Government of Uttarakhand, n.d.), https://doi.uk.gov.in/mysite/about_uhhdc.

This generational shift highlights an urgent need for adaptive strategies to re-engage youth, whether through integrating craft education into schools, ensuring artisans earn sustainable wages, or reframing crafts as contemporary and aspirational practices.

Revival Efforts

Despite these challenges, several initiatives aim to revive crafts in Uttarakhand. The Uttarakhand Handloom and Handicraft Development Council (UHHDC) has established district units to provide training, organise fairs, and create producer–buyer linkages¹¹. NGOs like Avani in Kumaon have introduced design interventions and established cooperatives such as *EarthCraft*, enabling artisans to experiment with natural dyes and sustainable practices¹². Similarly, Rishikesh Natural Fiber Handicrafts has conducted government-sponsored training programs in Bhimal fibre weaving and design¹³. Design-led enterprises like *Peoli* in Almora employ local knitters, pay them higher wages, and adapt traditional techniques for modern markets¹⁴.

At the national level, programs under the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts)—including the National Handicrafts Development Programme (NHDP)—promote training, design support, and recognition for artisans¹⁵. Together, these initiatives illustrate how heritage preservation can intersect with livelihood development, offering a model of revival that balances tradition and innovation.

Conclusion

This study, inspired by observations in Dunda village, underscores the fragile continuity of Uttarakhand’s craft traditions. While wool-based practices like knitting remain central to older women’s daily lives and community bonds, youth disengagement and market pressures pose existential challenges. Revival efforts in Uttarakhand—spanning government councils, NGOs, cooperatives, and design enterprises—demonstrate that culturally grounded crafts can be revitalised when linked to economic sustainability and contemporary relevance.

The findings resonate beyond Uttarakhand. Similar patterns of generational decline are evident in other Indian craft communities, where modernisation and mass production erode traditional skills. By framing crafts as aspirational, ensuring dignified livelihoods, and embedding them within broader cultural and economic strategies, India can preserve its diverse heritage. As UNESCO emphasises,

¹¹Avani, Sustainable Livelihoods through Craft, Avani Earthcraft Cooperative, <https://avani-kumaon.org/>.

¹²Rishikesh Natural Fiber Handicrafts Producer Company, Bhimal Fiber Training Program (Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, 2023), <https://rishikeshnaturalhandicrafts.com/index.html>.

¹³“About Us,” Peoli, https://www.peoli.in/pages/about-us?srsId=AfmBOopRvNVkWRvYYLGdtnjyC6dnyzaHg413wPm_wX8yjniWvBcbEh7E.

¹⁴Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, National Handicraft Development Programme (NHDP), <https://www.india.gov.in/information-national-handicrafts-development-programme-nhdp?page=1>.

¹⁵UNESCO, “Safeguarding West Bengal’s Intangible Cultural Heritage,” UNESCO, 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/safeguarding-west-bengals-intangible-cultural-heritage#:~:text=Through%20its%20initiatives%2C%20the%20Rural,Nations%202030%20Sustainable%20Development%20Agenda>.

safeguarding intangible cultural heritage requires intergenerational participation and community ownership¹⁶. Ultimately, the Uttarakhand experience illustrates both the risks of cultural erosion and the possibilities of revival, offering lessons for sustaining traditional crafts across the subcontinent.

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¹⁶UNESCO, "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage," UNESCO, 2003, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>.

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