

HANDICRAFTS AS CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC SOFT POWER: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF INDIA AND AFRICA

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Abstract

The handicrafts represent both cultural and economic soft power in the case of regions of India and Africa. It attempts to transcend the romanticisation or the mere description of the problem, putting the handicrafts into the context of theoretical discussions of soft power and indigenous knowledge, and critically but attentively using the empirical evidence in the form of credible government reports, multilateral institutions, and peer-reviewed literature. Instead of presenting a shallow statistical comparison, the present paper provides a more contextual and analytical approach to bring out similarities and differences in institutional structures, cultural definitions, and economic integration of handicraft as cultural and ecological soft power. By doing so, it would seek to add to a more sophisticated understanding of how the mundane practices of cultures, like handicrafts, have a globalised perception and influence in small but long-lasting ways.

Introduction

Handicrafts are one of the most traditional and deeply rooted material productions in human society. In contrast to industrial commodities, handicrafts cannot be isolated from cosmology, social relations, ecological contexts, and indigenous knowledge systems from which they are shaped. Traditionally, in Asia and Africa, handicraft traditions are not only a means of livelihood but also a repository of common memory, identity, and aesthetic values. In the modern global system, where interaction and competition between cultures have become more widespread, these traditions have gained a new meaning and become a new tool of cultural and economic soft power.

Soft power, as defined by Joseph S. Nye (2004), is a possibility of actors to influence the preferences and the end results by means of attraction instead of coercion or material inducement (Nye, 2004). This process revolves around culture, especially when the expressions of the culture are viewed to be authentic, meaningful and morally acceptable by the outside viewers and listeners. The tangible representations of culture, such as handicrafts, are used as a point of attraction and meaning. They convey collections of

tradition, creativity, sustainability, and continuity of civilisations, thus contributing toward the evolving image of international societies and cultural attraction of societies where they are produced.

In the case of postcolonial countries like India and countries of Africa, handicrafts take on a new dimension of meaning. Colonial economies tended to marginalise the native artisan economies and reshape them to extractive-based or export-driven economic systems, which weakened the local control and the local economies. The resurgence and re-evaluation of handicrafts during the post-independence period have been well-accepted in the context of larger initiatives of cultural claims, economic self-sufficiency, and identity restoration. According to Agrawal (1995), Indigenous knowledge systems do not remain as dead relics of the past but are dynamic and adaptive systems of knowledge, which keep changing according to the new social and economic realities. A good example of this dynamism is in handicrafts; whereby indigenous methods have been merged with the modern market needs and aesthetic values that sustained their relevance and impact.

Soft Power, Culture, and Indigenous Knowledge

The conceptual basis of this paper is based upon the notion of soft power, which has been most thoroughly elaborated by Joseph S. Nye in an international relations context. According to Nye (2004), soft power is the capacity of an actor to impact the likes and actions of other actors without force or material rewards. Culture takes centre stage in this system, especially when the expression of cultures translates into values that are appreciated or are deemed legitimate by external groups. Nye (2011) also states that cultural resources are effective sources of soft power when they are integrated into daily practice, and are not only a strategy. Material expressions of culture, in their case, handicrafts, are well placed in this interpretation since they convey the deep-rooted values of civilisation in the form of a tangible piece of work.

The cultural political economists have also reiterated the fact that culture cannot be considered as a symbolic field but a closely related area to systems of production, labour and exchange. According to Throsby (2001), cultural goods have both economic and cultural values, and the importance of the goods cannot be determined by the market prices alone. Handicrafts are the perfect example of such multiple values, as they have both aesthetic meaning, continuity in history and social relations and the commercial purpose. Such duality adds to their ability to work as cultural soft power, as their usefulness goes well beyond an economic value to encompass

symbolic and moral aspects like sustainability, heritage, and production based on community.

The concept of indigenous knowledge offers an essential conceptual tool that mutually links culture and soft power. Agrawal (1995) argues that the divide between so-called scientific and so-called indigenous knowledge is quite rigid, but the author emphasises that indigenous knowledge systems are dynamic, adaptive and contextually specific ways of knowing and not relics of tradition. Within the context of handicraft, the indigenous knowledge is incorporated in skills, techniques and aesthetic values that have developed over generations through interaction with the domestic ecologies and social institutions. Such knowledge systems, as Sillitoe (1998) observes, are pragmatic, experience-based and are continually perfected in the living context, hence extremely resilient to change, both social and economic.

The connection between indigenous knowledge and cultural power takes on special meaning in the postcolonial view. Colonial powers tended to marginalise the native crafts, either turning them into an ethnographic interest or making them the origin of the low-cost labour in the imperial markets. Said (1993) emphasises the way in which cultural representations of colonialism created the world hierarchies of knowledge and value. It is during the postcolonial period that the rebirth of handicrafts and global presentation of the crafts can thus be interpreted as an act of cultural reclamation. In the process of mediating handicrafts by exhibitions, tourism, and global markets, states and communities not only sell, but also regain control over narratives and representations of culture.

This has been one of the linkages that have been realised by the international organisations to exist between culture, indigenous knowledge and development. According to UNESCO (2022), cultural expressions based on local knowledge systems are related to inclusive development and enhancing the cultural diversity within a globalised world. This recognition strengthens the argument that handicrafts are not marginal forms of the economy but integral elements of cultural economies that have high soft power potential. Combining the theory of soft power developed by Nye with the research on indigenous knowledge and cultural economy, the article formulates the concept of handicrafts as living cultural practices that produce attraction, legitimacy, and influence at the cross-border. This unified framework offers the analytical frame for understanding the local economics of India and Africa and reveals that culturally entrenched types of production can be used as the subtle but long-term tools of cultural and economic soft power.

Handicrafts as Cultural Soft Power in India

The various traditions of India, including handicrafts is one of the most vast and continuous traditions of artisanal production in the world. These crafts have much more than material or economic value to the culture; they are archives of history, social practices, and local selves. Essentially every craft reflects centuries of knowledge, practice and symbolism of the community—as can be seen in the elaborately patterned textiles of Varanasi and Kanchipuram, the terracotta figurines of West Bengal, or the Dhokra metal casting of Chhattisgarh (Agrawal, 1995; UNESCO, 2013). These crafts do not serve only as utility or aesthetic objects but rather as forms of material expression of cultural plurality, the moral and aesthetic essence of India.

The cultural expression and ritual practice have always been closely connected with Indian handicrafts. Similarly, Dutt (2007) finds in their study that Madhubani painting, which began in Bihar, is so entrenched in the local religious rituals and social initiations and can be used to narrate stories, mythological representations and integration of the community. Likewise, Kutch embroidery in Gujarat and Phulkari in Punjab also have artistic and symbolic value of representation of social identity, family heritage and gendered knowledge systems. These crafts are a non-verbal conveyor of cultural values, and by using them, Indian local communities passed on a culture of norms, ethics, and cosmologies between generations to become analyzation craft.

Indian handicrafts have become an important dimension of soft power projection in the nation in the modern age. As Nye (2004) points out, soft power comes as a result of the appeal of culture, political values and policies that are viewed as legitimate. Similarly, Indian crafts represent an image of continuity, creativity, and authenticity when represented in the international market, which promotes the image of the nation. The perception of India as a country with rich and living traditions has been reinforced with government-led programs, including Geographical Indication (GI) tagging of goods and services such as Pashmina shawls, Banarasi silk, and Mysore silk or the promotion of handicrafts such as the India International Trade Fair and the overseas cultural exhibition (PIB, 2025).

Handicrafts are also used as a tool of cultural diplomacy. Cultural fetes, craft fairs and exhibitions held in foreign countries not only help in the sale of Indian products but also it opens avenues of intercultural interaction and communication. These objects of heritage of India are a window to the international audience. India, where they became aware and appreciated

the values, skills and histories that lie behind these objects. According to Nye (2011), culture is capable of making a long-term impact when it causes admiration and affinity. This is precisely what Indian handicrafts do by offering a story of a civilisation which prioritises creativity, work and ethical production.

The contribution of women towards the handicraft industry is an additional advantage to its cultural soft power. A major section of the artisan population in India consists of women who have been utilising traditional knowledge, complex skills and production practices based on community. Their involvement in handicraft production not only empowers the marginalised groups but also enables social inclusion and gender equity values in the global cultural discourse (UNESCO, 2022). Combining the local, gendered knowledge and the aesthetics valued all over the world, these crafts add to the cultural popularity of India, while staying very intact in terms of community and native structures. Women have helped to retain the original techniques intact and transferable.

Besides, Indian handicrafts can also be a cultural translator in the world due to their aesthetic diversity. Textiles, pottery, jewellery and metalwork are a rich source of regional identities and convey common artistic values that appeal to global audiences. These crafts are instruments of soft power through visual language and symbolism, together with material innovation, as they create perceptions about India as a culturally diverse and historically profound society. They offer a different way of seeing Indian modernity, one that includes tradition, imagination and moral labour that has modern relevance and thus, strengthens the presence of the global culture of the country while remaining local.

Handicrafts as Economic Soft Power in India: Empirical Dimensions

Handicrafts in India have been known to not only have a cultural importance but also to provide livelihoods, vitalises economy in the rural areas and contribute to the national economic performance. The intersection of the economic and the soft power aspects of the handicrafts lies in their economic viability, which contributes to improving the cultural visibility and influence of India, while also being a product that has the capacity to be exchanged internationally. Throsby (2001) say that, in this regard, economic and cultural aspects of handicrafts are complementary, forming the so-called dual value system, in which cultural and market value co-exist and support each other.

The size and variety of the handicraft sector are evidenced by empirical evidence in India. The Ministry of Textiles (2025) estimates that the handicraft sector has around 6.466 million artisans, most of whom (almost 60 per cent) are women. This population pattern underscores the fact that the sector is instrumental in ensuring gender-inclusive development, especially in the rural and semi-urban regions where there is a limited availability of employment opportunities. The industry includes more than 300 types of craft that include textile arts (embroidery, block printing, and weaving), metalwork, woodcraft, pottery and jewellery-making. These forms are also endowed in certain geographical clusters, like Bhuj (Rogan Art), Varanasi (Silk), Jaipur (Blue Pottery), Moradabad (Metal Work) and Bastar (Dhokra), and these are able to serve as nodes of artisanal production and innovation.

Export statistics also give a picture of the international accessibility and soft power capabilities of Indian handicrafts. The Export Promotion Council of Handicrafts (EPCH, 2024) reports that the export of handicrafts in India was about USD 3.48 billion in 2024, with the major markets being the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and the Middle East. The export line has textiles, carpets, home decor, metalware, wooden crafts and artisanal jewellery. These figures not only indicate the economic importance but also show the international popularity of Indian cultural aesthetics. The consumers of India are also appreciating its handicrafts and have credited the products with authenticity and sustainability, as well as ethical manufacturing, which are contributing to the image of India as a culturally rich, socially cohesive and ecologically responsible country.

Institutional interventions to integrate the market and add value also support the economic aspect of handicrafts. Programmes like the Handicrafts and Handloom Export Promotion Schemes, craft clusters and introduction of Geographical Indication (GI) tags have increased the competitiveness of Indian crafts in the market and at the same time have maintained the traditional traits of the crafts (PIB, 2025). These processes help the artisans to sell their work at a higher price, to the foreign markets as well as to spread the cultural authenticity that forms the basis of the soft power capabilities.

In his study regarding Dhokra in Chhattisgarh metal casting, Chaturvedi (2019) observes that micro-level analyses indicate the subtle forms by which handicrafts are being used to empower the economy and support soft power diplomacy. Indicatively, hundreds of tribal artisans are employed in the Dhokra metal casting clusters in Bastar, Chhattisgarh, to

make complex artefacts of brass and bell-metal. These products are sold not only at the domestic level, but also have been increasingly exported to Europe, the United States and East Asia. He also believes that aesthetic peculiarities, the folk methods, and the local stories related to Dhokra artworks are the major appeal and interest that draw foreigners, which is why economic relations strengthen the cultural soft power. Rao (2020) notes that on the same note, centuries-old weaving methods are integrated with modern designs in handloom weaving clusters in cities like Varanasi and Kanchipuram that attract both local and international consumers and maintain the livelihood of the local residents and the transmission of traditional knowledge to subsequent generations.

The fact that economic activity is connected to cultural influence can also be described as government and private sector efforts that are aimed at incorporating handicraft into the wider cultural diplomacy plans. Exhibitions, trade fairs and international festivals are often held through the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of External Affairs to display Indian handicrafts in other countries. The benefits of such events include generating export income as well as showing the cultural identity and heritage of India and artistic sophistication to the world. The ability of material culture to serve as a multidimensional tool of soft power can be demonstrated by Indian handicrafts by combining economic viability with cultural aesthetics.

Moreover, the sector is part of the Sustainable Development Goals by facilitating inclusive growth, advancing gender equity, and nurturing environmentally responsible production. The local and renewable raw materials used by artisans, such as bamboo, clay, natural fibres and vegetable dyes increases the sustainability of Indian handicrafts in international markets. These products have an added appeal due to the ethical and ecological values they have, as more international buyers seek socially conscious and culturally authentic products.

The handicraft industry of India is situated at the point of culture, economy, and influence of the world. It has been significantly contributing to employment, export revenue and livelihoods of the communities and this is verified empirically. Meanwhile, handicrafts serve as a tool of cultural soft power as they represent the values of authenticity, creativity, and ethical production, which appeal to the consumers of other countries. Through their ability to bring economic payoffs and improve cultural presence at the same time, handicrafts are illustrative of how material culture can have a dual impact on the world's perceptions, as well as the ability of the local populations to survive.

Handicrafts in Africa: Cultural Foundations and Diversity

The African handicrafts are deeply integrated in the social, cultural, and historical life of the continent, as there is a dynamic interaction of material culture, indigenous knowledge systems and community identity. Handicrafts do not exist as industrial products, but as objects of culture, located symbolically, aesthetically and ritually. The variety of crafts in the African continent reflects the immense ecological, ethnic and linguistic diversity of the continent. Scholars like Iwu (2014) and Nettleford (2012) say that the “kente” cloths of Ghana and the beads of the Zulu of South Africa, the Tuareg silverwork of Mali and the basketry of Ethiopia and Rwanda, all the handicrafts impose a similar interplay of technical expertise and cultural signification, of local knowledge.

In the past, handicrafts in Africa have served as objects of social communication as well as identity formation beyond decorative purposes that they have been playing. As an example, Amu (2019) stresses that the complex shapes and colours of the “kente” cloths do not just show visual beauty, but also imply social status, lineage and political power, and thus the textiles are a kind of cultural language which can convey something inside and outside the community. Similarly, Sithole (2017) found that Zulu beadwork also uses symbolic motifs to spread information concerning courtship, social status, and religious views, demonstrating how strong the semiotic and communicative potential of African art can be. This implied symbolism underscores the fact that African handicrafts are not commodities, but rather interwoven with the moral, spiritual and political aspects of society.

African art also relates well to indigenous knowledge systems. Iwu (2014) says that Artisanal knowledge is usually passed orally and via apprenticeship within the family or community, and supports continuation and inter-generational learning. Such systems of knowledge are dynamic, craftsmen have to be inventive according to the environmental conditions, the availability of materials and the fashion trends and still preserve the key cultural values incorporated in practice. According to Sillitoe (1998), this knowledge is utilitarian, experiential, and very contextual as it offers the community not only cultural congruence but also economic strength. This flexibility can be seen in Africa in the replication of local natural resources in crafts, which are both practical and culturally significant: clay, wood, fibres, and dyes.

The social aspects of handicrafts also emphasise the role of handicraft in the strengthening of communal identity and unity. Ncube (2018) sees it as

a social activity and insists that a craft production is often carried out in a social or collective environment, especially among women, where information exchange and shared work are the focus of the creative process. These practices in most African cultures build strong social bonds, support traditional systems of governance, and support ethical principles like reciprocity and solidarity. Engaging in the practice of artisanal production, the community members not only guarantee themselves the means of livelihood but also are involved in cultural reproduction, which makes sure that the local histories, beliefs, and identities do not disappear across the generations.

In addition to its local meaning, African handicrafts have increasingly become a means of cultural soft power in the international arena. African crafts are displayed in international exhibitions, museums, and cultural festivals, which provide a platform on which the global audience can access African creativity, heritage, and stories of resilience (UNESCO, 2022). Akyeampong (2013) believes that although the African crafts in the colonial past were mostly exoticised to diminish the agency and authenticity of the locals, the role of governments, NGOs, and artisan cooperatives in the contemporary world has been to reclaim the authorship, authenticity, as well as cultural value in the international representations.

Furthermore, the multiplicity of crafts expresses the diversity and richness of Africa in relation to it being a geographically regional entity. The West African textile arts are much different from the Southern African beadwork, the East African basketry, and the North African metalwork, but they all focus on the cultural symbolism, community involvement, and technical competency. Nettleford (2012) finds this diversification of craft and arts enables African handicrafts to convey such a subtle and multifaceted image of the continent that they challenge simplistic stereotypes and present creativity, heritage, and cultural richness to the outside world.

African handicraft works are within the boundaries of culture, knowledge, and social organisation. They maintain local methods and knowledge regimes, which teach moral and aesthetic principles, and strengthen social integration, as well as provide sources of international cultural exposure and soft power expression. The analysis of these crafts in their cultural, historical and social backgrounds helps one realise that they are not marginal and fixed items but living tools of identity, creativity and influence both locally and globally.

Economic Dimensions of African Handicrafts

In Africa, handicrafts have formed a significant point of intersection between culture and economy. African handicrafts, unlike industrial or mass-produced products, can be created in localised, community-based enterprises that are capable of combining traditional skills, native knowledge, and culturally specific aesthetic norms. Both important in terms of cultural preservation and also a major source of income for artisans and the communities housing them, these crafts include not only beadwork, basketry, and pottery, but also textiles, wood carving, and metalwork (UNESCO, 2022; Tadesse, 2015). The economic aspects of the African handicraft industry are difficult to determine as they majorly being the informal and unorganised sector. Thus, there is a scarcity of generalisations about the whole continent, which are likely to be inaccurate.

Handicrafts are especially important to the African economy in places where tourism is a major contributor to the economic revenue. The countries that rely heavily on revenue from cultural tourism include Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Morocco and Ghana, as these countries depend on cultural tourism that helps to generate demand for local crafts. According to Akyeampong (2013), souvenirs, decorative objects and functional items are provided by the artisans and small-scale producers into the local and foreign markets, thus bringing revenue and livelihood in otherwise economically marginalised regions. Besides, the sector tends to involve women, young people, and the marginalised in its activities, and they also have a chance to be empowered and integrated. For example, in the Rift Valley in Kenya, Ncube (2018) says that the majority of basket-weaving is run by women, who earn their household income and pass cultural traditions to their women. In South Africa, the Zulu people have beadwork, which is a mostly women-led business that provides income to households and provides women with traditional knowledge.

The African handicraft has economic importance, but there are serious structural issues, which affect it becoming soft power and economic earner. To begin with, the sector remains mostly informal and, as such, restricts its access to formal finance, infrastructures, and market connections (UNCTAD, 2022). It further reports that the artisans are often unregistered, unregulated in terms of quality standards, and unprotected by a system of intellectual property, which may decrease the profitability and complicate the process of scaling up production. Second, supply chains tend to be discontinuous. Artisans can sell to local

intermediaries who mediate access to the international markets, and thereby cause unequal distribution of income and underestimation of cultural work. Third, the set of official statistics is very limited, which creates major gaps in analysing the economic contribution of the sector, and general statements regarding its impact on the entire continent cannot be trusted (UNESCO, 2022).

However, empirical case studies have shown that African handicrafts have economic potential when they are institutional and supported by policies. Sithole (2017) found that Zulu bead workers and wood carvers working in South Africa formed cooperatives, but are provided by NGOs and governmental initiatives to enhance their access to the market, skills acquisition, and product quality. Besides boosting income, these interventions have augmented the popularity of the Zulu cultural heritage, which is indicative of the dual role of handicrafts as an economic and cultural soft power tool. Equally, in Ghana, Amoah (2019) finds that “Kente” weaving has been promoted by regional craft associations and international shows, thus enhancing revenue sources of the artisans and showcasing Ghanaian culture to the world.

The economic soft power of the handicrafts in Africa is also witnessed by how they are placed in the international markets. The products are being promoted as authentic, sustainable, and produced in an ethical way, and this can be associated with the current values of the global consumer. The fact that African crafts are perceived by international buyers as a representation of cultural richness and communal production boosts the image of the continent as a cultural entity in the eyes of international buyers (UNCTAD, 2022). In this regard, even minor economic transactions in Africa have symbolic value, which strengthens the African soft power through the values of heritage, innovation, and moral working methods.

These economic contributions need to be taken with caution, though. In contrast to India, where the systematic data collection makes it possible to quantify employment and export revenue accurately, in Africa, the statistics of handicrafts tend to be partial or sometimes regional. This is due to the fact that overgeneralization may result in incorrect inferences of the economic importance of the sector to the continent. Rather, a micro-level, evidence-based strategy that centres on localised clusters, cooperatives, and tourism-related areas gives a more dependable representation of the economic contribution of handicrafts in Africa (Tadesse, 2015; Sithole, 2017).

To sum up, African handicrafts are very important to the economy of the local communities, as they not only provide a livelihood but also enhance gender and social inclusion and connect communities to the global markets. Even though the industry has its problems in the form of informality, fragmented supply chain, and inaccessibility to data, institutional support and strategic promotion can be used to improve not only economic gains but also cultural impact. These crafts are evidence of how an economic activity, when combined with the cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge, can be used as a tool of soft power, acknowledging the creativity of the continent, as well as its sustainability and cultural stability, before the rest of the world.

Comparative Analysis: Handicrafts in India and Africa

In a comparative study of handicrafts in India and Africa, one can see some similarities as well as differences in how cultural traditions can be converted into soft power and economic influence. Although the geographical and historical, as well as socio-political dissimilarities between the two regions are immense, handicrafts in both areas have several common grounds; in both regions, they are part of the indigenous knowledge system, carry a significant socio-cultural implication, and form a core part of the local livelihoods. Meanwhile, the structural aspect, policy support, and integration into global markets vary, which results in different potentials of soft power projection.

On the cultural level, both of the regions prove that handicrafts are the storage of the knowledge, identity and the continuity of the history. The Dhokra metal casting, Madhubani painting, and Kanchipuram silk weaving are Indian craft which imprinted regional pasts, religious principles, and social stratifications in material objects (Agrawal, 1995; Lahiri-Dutt, 2007). In the same way, African crafts, including Zulu beads and Ghanaian “Kente”, as well as Ethiopian basketry, are symbolic systems that convey ancestry, social rank, societal expectations and ethics (Sithole, 2017; Amu, 2019). Indian and African handicraft has passed on moral, aesthetic and spiritual knowledge through the generations, and that culture and craft are very closely connected in social life.

The differences between the two regions are, however, in the visibility and codification of cultural knowledge. Some of the mechanisms used in India to safeguard its heritage include Geographical Indication (GI) tagging, cluster mapping, and official recognition of craftsmanship, which not only shield the heritage but also boost the overall image of genuineness and

cultural richness in the world (EPCH, 2024; Ministry of Textiles, 2025). By comparison, African handicraft is mostly dependent on oral tradition and localised apprenticeship. That does provide authenticity and flexibility, but it restricts global awareness and organised market interaction (Iwu, 2014; Nettleford, 2012). As a result, the crafts in India have a better chance to be a tool of cultural soft power at the international level, whereas the African crafts, despite being rich and diverse, are much more dependent upon the exposure associated with tourism and NGOs.

The Indian handicraft industry enjoys increased market penetration and institutionalisation. The policies and export promotion councils, as well as the skill development programs, have been used to help the artisans to gain access to the international markets and negotiate good prices and scale production (EPCH, 2024; Rao, 2020). The Indian handicrafts are important to the national economy, with six million artisans employed and close to USD 3.48 billion of export value generated in 2024 alone (Ministry of Textiles, 2025). The concentration of industries in areas like Varanasi, Jaipur and Bastar has created innovation and at the same time maintained the traditional practices, thus enabling the sector to prosper economically and culturally.

Handicrafts in Africa are mostly an informal and decentralised sector, and this limits economic returns and soft power potential. The artisans commonly distribute through local intermediaries or the tourism markets, which restricts the revenue capturing and scalability (UNCTAD, 2022; Tadesse, 2015). Nevertheless, locally, it indicates that there is a major impact on livelihood and empowerment. Zulu beadwork cooperatives of South Africa have helped artisans gain access to higher-value markets, secure household incomes, and market cultural heritage, and in Ghana, “Kente” weaving associations have done the same (Sithole, 2017; Amoah, 2019). The industry also encourages gender inclusivity because women head the manufacture of baskets, textiles, and beadwork in various regions (Ncube, 2018). Though African handicrafts are yet to reach the institutional level as witnessed in India, it shows great potential for economic, as well as cultural soft power when policy interventions or cooperative frameworks support them.

Handicraft is one of the soft power projections that is closely attached to the international visibility, availability and perception management. Indian crafts have been systematically marketed under trade fair, exhibition and cultural diplomacy programs, which have generated long-term opportunities to have worldwide interaction (Nye, 2004; Press Information

Bureau, 2025). African arts are also widely introduced and appreciated to the world by tourists, non-governmental organisations, and joint cultural shows. UNESCO is also promoting handicrafts as an integral part of the Indian Knowledge System. African handicrafts find a much more welcoming response in the markets of the world that appreciate sustainability, ethical production, and authenticity, thus, correspond to the modern consumer tendency to seek culturally significant products (UNESCO, 2022).

The other vital dimension that has been making handicraft more acceptable is innovation and adaptation. Rao (2020) says that Indian craftsmen are using modern designs and commercial preferences in the traditional techniques according to the national and foreign demand, but at the same time, they retain cultural identity. Similarly, Iwu (2014) found that African artisans also change materials, designs and methods according to the market expectations, which can be an illustration of the dynamic nature of indigenous knowledge systems. Handicraft in these two regions proves that they are not obscure objects but dynamic, evolving practices which can accommodate the past with the present economic and aesthetic contexts to create a unique product.

According to Throsby (2001), the challenges still exist in the two regions. Finally, mechanisation, rural-urban migration and competition by mass-produced imitations create threats to the sustainability of artisanal knowledge in India. Tadesse (2015) and UNCTAD (2022) reports say that this is true of Sub-Saharan Africa, which also lacks economic scaling and global soft power projection due to informality, disjointed supply chains, and no statistical records. The only way of dealing with such dilemmas is through policies that focus on a combination of cultural conservation and economic empowerment, gender inclusiveness, and access to the global market. The cooperation development, intellectual property protection, design development, and marketing abroad are the new aspects that appear as the effective levers to improve the economic and cultural impact of handicrafts.

Through these insights, one can say that both India and Africa can be seen to have potentials of handicrafts to be an economic soft power tool. The more institutionalised ecosystem in India can be engaged in a systematised manner for market involvement, export revenue, and projecting the Indian culture to the world. Africa has shown an incredible level of cultural diversity, but there are real and foreseeable structural constraints that limit the economic and soft power potential of Africa. Nonetheless, in both

regions, handicrafts are found to work as a common ground of identity, knowledge, and influence: Within them, cultural narratives are passed on, the communities are empowered, livelihoods are continued to be maintained, and values are projected to other international places. Through the dual lens approach of understanding handicrafts, policymakers, scholars, and development practitioners are able to appreciate the potential of handicrafts as tools of sustainable cultural diplomacy as well as economic development.

Analysis

The above analysis has shown that these material cultural forms act at the same time as an authorised outcome of indigenous knowledge, tools of cultural expression and tools of economic and soft power. In both areas, handicrafts are rooted in social organisation, ritual and historical memory, centuries-old technical proficiency, aesthetic sensitivity and collective wisdom. The article highlights that handicrafts are not only ornamental or practical objects, but they are dynamic living objects, which convey cultural stories, support livelihoods, and exert influence internationally and in the home.

In terms of culture, there is a lot of similarity between India and Africa. In both situations, social norms, spiritual values, and regional identities are passed on through handicrafts. The Dhokra metal casting, Kanchipuram weaving and Madhubani painting of India and the Zulu bead work, Ghanaian “Kente” and East African basketry are examples of how material culture can express and convey collective identity. The crafts are the non-verbal carriers of cultural knowledge, and this enables the community to pass history, morality and aesthetics across generations. Further, the cultural soft power of both regions is made possible by the international visibility of these crafts through exhibitions, cultural diplomacy, and tourism, which creates a global idea of creativity, heritage and the social structure (Nye, 2004; UNESCO, 2022).

There are economic disparities that arise. The handicraft industry of India enjoys the advantage of a strong institutional support in the form of government policy, cluster development, design innovation and export promotion initiatives (EPCH, 2024; Ministry of Textiles, 2025). The combination of local and global value chains boosts revenue-generating and culture-making effects. In relation to African handicrafts, despite being very diverse and culturally meaningful, are mostly informal, with disjointed value chains, poor access to funding, and dependent on local

markets or tourism (Iwu, 2014; UNCTAD, 2022). Nonetheless, the case of South African Zulu beadwork cooperatives, Ghanaian “kente” associations, and East African basketry clusters has shown that strategic interventions, including cooperative development, skills training and international exposure, can gradually improve the level of economic returns and project soft power (Sithole, 2017; Amoah, 2019).

In both areas, gender and social inclusion become important aspects. The percentage of women who are artisans is considerably high, and they contribute to skill and culture and also contribute towards household income. About 60% of artisans in India, especially in the textile and pottery industries, are women (Ministry of Textiles, 2025), and there are more women prevailing in the industries of basketry, beadwork, and weaving in Africa (Ncube, 2018). The inclusion of women also makes marginalised groups too powerful, not just socially and culturally, but it also promotes the popularity of handicrafts as soft power tools.

The other important discovery is associated with flexibility and innovation. Both Indian and African artisans show great abilities to develop traditional styles in accordance with the modern market needs. Indian handloom centres are combining the new designs with the old ones, and at the same time, the African artisans are experimenting with the materials and patterns to appeal to the international taste. It is this flexibility that enables handicrafts to be both compatible and financially sustainable without affecting the cultural integrity of these systems, which shows how the indigenous knowledge systems are dynamic (Rao, 2020; Iwu, 2014).

Though these are positive dimensions, the two regions have challenges that need strategic intervention. Mechanisation, rural-urban migration, and imitation products which devalue the traditional skills are some of the threats in India (Throsby, 2001). The informality of the sector, fragmented value chains, and statistical uncertainties are limiting the ability to scale and impact the world (Tadesse, 2015; UNCTAD, 2022). To maintain the dual economic and cultural potential of handicrafts in both regions, good policy interventions like intellectual property safeguards, joint development, global marketing, and funding are essential.

Comparative analysis indicates that handicraft is a multi-dimensional tool of soft power, which serves as a cultural carrier, an economic resource, and a mark of identity at the same time. The institutional ecosystem of India facilitates systematised market interaction and international presence, and the crafts of Africa reveal the outstanding cultural richness, genuineness, and versatility. The two areas demonstrate how indigenous knowledge in

material culture can make a difference to the world and empower local communities and heritage in a fast-globalising world.

Conclusion

Handicrafts from India and Africa add a layer to the soft power in cultural diplomacy that is required in the present geopolitical scenario to move beyond political economics and commodity exchanges. Since it is the shared heritage, commonality of cosmological understanding, rural empowerment and local development between the two regions that form the core of soft power. The use of handicraft to exchange mutual influences on the other side of the Indian Ocean has been very ancient and historical. For example, beadwork from Africa helps to share the aesthetic and creative understanding of Africa with the people of India. Textile, as in the case of both traditional societies of India and Africa, remains a strong medium of storytelling.

Handicrafts are a powerful tool of skill transfer and income generation, as seen in the “Barefoot College Model” where women from African nations are trained in solar technology and informally called “Solar Mamas”. Collaborations like Surajkund International Crafts Mela and cultural exchange programmes provide an informal platform for capacity building and mutual respect. This also enables strengthening people-to-people ties. Handicraft is not only a craft in itself but a major domain of soft power. It can be said that handicraft is an important component of the “Make in India” initiative of the Government of India and one of the major realms of African aspirations.

At the intersection of cultural heritage, economic strategy and diplomatic engagement, handicraft emerges as a critical domain of soft power. It is furthering industrial and cultural aspirations under the Make in India initiative and, at the same time, advancing African aspirations that resonate through the revivification of the Indigenous Knowledge System.

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