

Chapter 15

Strengthening Livelihoods and Empowerment: Craft-Based Capacity Building for Lahaul– Pangi Artisans in the Higher Himalayas

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ABSTRACT

The high-altitude Himalayan landscape of Lahaul-Pangi is marked by deforestation, land deterioration, diminished biodiversity, restricted agricultural productivity, and other environmental challenges. Although agriculture remains the primary occupation, handloom and handicrafts have emerged as potential revenue-generating resources, given the abundant availability of wool and the innate skills of the local artisans. NIFT conducted a field-based survey, involving 218 artisans across 09 panchayats, to grasp the region's needs and determine the most suitable skill development approaches. Following an analysis of the responses, NIFT developed and delivered training workshops to 09 panchayats in the Lahaul-Pangi region, ultimately empowering the artisans. The chapter presents key findings regarding the regional artisans, including information on their income and education levels, craft involvement and affiliations, assets, access to medical facilities, design, and technological proficiency, product pricing details, marketing and branding strategies, and training levels.

1. INTRODUCTION

The high-altitude Lahaul-Pangi region in the Himalayas exhibits deforestation, land deterioration, diminished biodiversity, and scarce livelihood prospects, among other challenges. This area is characterized by diverse climatic conditions, severe weather fluctuations, and significant climate variability.

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Strengthening Livelihoods and Empowerment

Consequently, local communities face limited livelihood options and experience considerable marginalization due to their heavy reliance on natural resources and inadequate infrastructure. The Himalayan ecosystem is highly susceptible to climate-related risks that can impact both economic and biophysical conditions. The challenges faced by the Lahaul-Pangi region in the Himalayas are indeed formidable. The consequences of limited livelihood prospects are deeply intertwined with the unique ecological conditions of this high-altitude terrain. The Himalayas, known for their grandeur, are equally known for their vulnerability to climate-related risks, such as erratic weather patterns and glacial retreats. These risks, when coupled with the heavy reliance of local communities on natural resources and inadequate infrastructure, create a complex web of challenges that demand innovative solutions. Recognizing the pressing need for intervention, the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) undertook a mission that extended far beyond the realms of fashion and design. Their holistic approach encompassed community capacity building, design interventions, product functionality enhancements, and market-driven strategies. These strategies were tailor-made to cater to the unique needs and constraints of the Lahaul and Pangi regions, where livelihoods are intertwined with the harsh realities of high-altitude living. The National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) embarked on the ambitious endeavor of discovering various avenues for community capacity building, design interventions, product functionality enhancements, and market-driven approaches to benefit the challenging terrains of the Lahaul and Pangi regions in the high Himalayas. The area presents difficulties in terms of terrain and livelihoods. Consistent efforts are needed to secure livelihoods and promote sustainable resource use to conserve these rugged landscapes. Appropriate interventions can aid in the creation of diverse livelihood opportunities and foster community capacity building. In the project landscape, handloom and handicrafts were recognized as potential resources for alternative livelihoods for the local community, owing to the easy availability of wool and the skills of the local population. The Lahaul-Pangi community members possess expertise in creating handicraft-based products, which they typically produce during the winter months. These local crafts, centered around artistic products, have evolved with the support of royal patronage. The choice to focus on handloom and handicrafts as potential resources for alternative livelihoods was a strategic one. The abundant availability of wool and the inherent skills of the local population made this an ideal avenue for economic growth. Traditionally, the people of Lahaul and Pangi have been adept at crafting handmade items, often during the long winter months when other livelihood options are limited. These crafts, steeped in history and tradition, have evolved with the support of royal patronage. While the community members possess intrinsic expertise in crafting handmade items, it was apparent that small, incremental developments were needed to harness their full potential. The key lies in introducing new designs, enhancing product functionality, refining production processes, and implementing market-level interventions. This approach aimed to rejuvenate wool-based handicrafts by making the best use of the readily available local resources. One of the remarkable aspects of this initiative is its ability to tap into the rich tapestry of indigenous knowledge. The craftspeople of Lahaul and Pangi, deeply connected to their land and culture, bring a wealth of traditional wisdom to their work. NIFT's interventions sought not to replace this heritage but to augment it with contemporary design sensibilities and market awareness. This harmonious blend of tradition and innovation is a testament to the adaptability and resilience of these communities.

Furthermore, the project's focus on sustainable resource use aligns perfectly with the fragile Himalayan ecosystem. By emphasizing responsible sourcing of materials and eco-friendly practices, it ensures that economic development is in harmony with environmental conservation. This approach safeguards the region's unique biodiversity, which is not just a source of pride but also essential for the well-being of

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