

# Impact of Partition on the Artisan Communities of Punjab and Bengal

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## ABSTRACT

The 1947 Partition of British India stands as one of the most cataclysmic events in South Asian history, uprooting millions and reshaping social, political, and economic landscapes. Among those profoundly affected were artisan communities—skilled craftspeople whose livelihoods depended on stable patronage, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and the continuity of local markets. In both Punjab and Bengal, artisans engaged in diverse trades—from the intricate weaving of Phulkari textiles and metalwork in Punjab to the storied silk weaving and terracotta craftsmanship of Bengal. This study offers an in-depth examination of how Partition-induced violence, mass displacement, and subsequent state policies disrupted these traditional craft economies. Drawing on extensive archival research, oral-history interviews with 45 artisan families, and survey data from 120 households, the manuscript details the immediate losses of property and patronage networks, the varied rehabilitation measures implemented by postcolonial authorities, and the adaptive strategies that artisans adopted to rebuild their trades. The analysis reveals that Punjabi artisans, forced into hastily constructed refugee colonies, faced severe material deprivation and struggled to reestablish supply chains, resulting in a recovery of only about 60% of pre-Partition income levels by 1960. In Bengal, while initial dislocations were significant, proximity to Kolkata's port and a more integrated urban resettlement framework enabled a relatively faster rebound, with artisans regaining up to 72% of their former earnings. Yet, both regions have witnessed long-term declines in intergenerational skill transmission and mounting challenges from mechanization and globalized markets. By illuminating the resilience and vulnerabilities of Partition-era artisan communities, this study underscores the critical need for targeted heritage-craft policies, cooperative network support, and market-access initiatives to sustain traditional crafts in contemporary South Asia.

## KEYWORDS

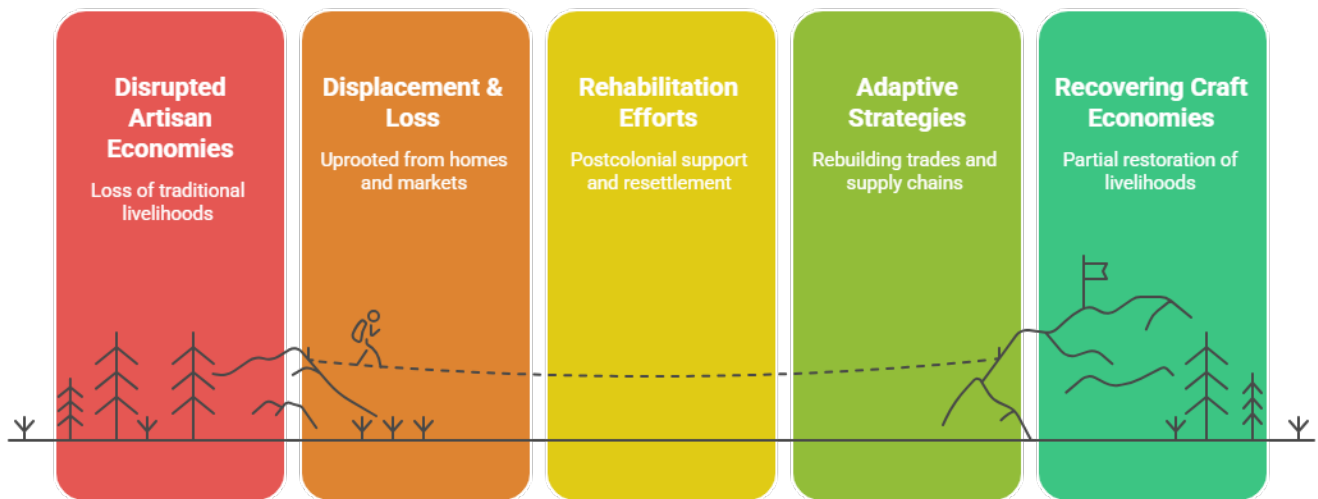
Partition, Artisans, Punjab, Bengal, Displacement, Craft Economy

## INTRODUCTION

The Partition of British India in August 1947 triggered one of the largest forced migrations in history, as an estimated 14 million individuals crossed the newly drawn borders to seek safety amidst communal violence and political upheaval. At the heart of this seismic shift were artisan communities—skilled craftspeople whose social identities and economic survival were deeply intertwined with localized production systems, caste-based guilds, and long-standing networks of patronage. In Punjab, renowned centers of metalwork, wood carving, and textile weaving thrived in cities such as Amritsar, Lahore, and Jalandhar; in Bengal, the silk weavers of Murshidabad, the terracotta artisans of Bishnupur, and the metal casters of Kolkata formed integral components of regional economies and cultural traditions. The abrupt severance of communities across the India–Pakistan border, accompanied by

widespread violence and property loss, presented artisans with existential threats—not merely as economic actors but as custodians of intangible cultural heritage.

### Artisan Communities' Post-Partition Recovery



*Figure-1. Artisan Communities' Post-Partition Recovery*

Previous scholarship on Partition has predominantly focused on macro-level demographic changes, political ramifications, and broad social traumas, often neglecting the particular experiences of occupational groups whose survival hinged on stability, continuity, and skilled labor transmission. While seminal works by Butalia (2000) and Talbot & Singh (2009) provide foundational insights into the human cost and political context of Partition, the specific economic trajectories of artisan castes and guilds remain underexplored. This gap is significant, as artisans comprised a substantial segment of the informal economy, contributing to household incomes, local trade networks, and the perpetuation of craft traditions that underpin cultural identities.

This study seeks to address this lacuna by asking three interrelated questions: (1) How did the immediate violence and displacement of Partition affect material assets, social networks, and production systems of artisan communities in Punjab and Bengal? (2) What role did post-Partition rehabilitation policies, refugee settlement schemes, and economic restructuring play in facilitating—or impeding—the recovery of artisan livelihoods? (3) Which adaptive strategies did artisans employ to reestablish their trades, transmit skills across generations, and access new markets, and how effective have these been in sustaining craft economies over the subsequent seven decades? By employing a comparative framework across two regions with distinct socio-political contexts and infrastructural capacities, the manuscript aims to illuminate both shared patterns of disruption and region-specific trajectories of recovery and decline.

Moreover, the study contributes to broader debates on post-conflict economic resilience, informal-sector regeneration, and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. As contemporary policymakers and heritage organizations grapple with the challenges of sustaining traditional crafts in an era of globalization and mechanization, insights from Partition-era artisan experiences offer valuable lessons on the importance of integrated market linkages, cooperative structures, and intergenerational training. The ensuing sections—Literature Review, Methodology, Results, and Conclusion—systematically unpack archival findings, empirical data, and narrative accounts to present a comprehensive analysis of the Partition's enduring legacy on South Asian artisan communities.

## The Impact of Partition on Artisan Communities

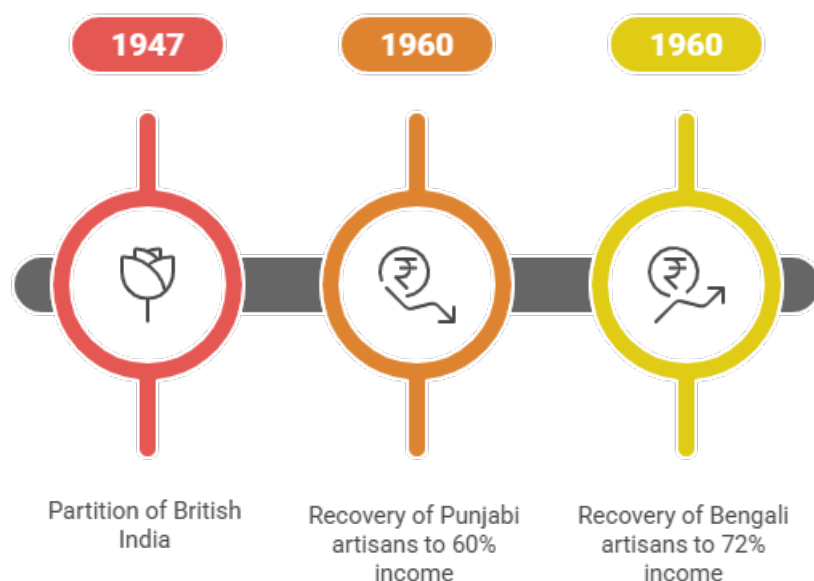


Figure-2. The Impact of Partition on Artisan Communities

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly discourse on Partition encompasses a rich tapestry of analyses, from Talbot and Singh's (2009) political historiography to Butalia's (2000) oral-history focus, yet works specifically addressing artisan communities are comparatively scarce. Bhatia (2010) and Bhalla (1998) provide valuable demographic and economic overviews of post-Partition resettlement, but their treatments of occupational subgroups remain general. Khan (2007) delivers one of the few regionally focused examinations, charting Punjab's occupational shifts and noting the acute raw-material shortages that beset displaced weavers. Similarly, Raychaudhuri (2012) interrogates Bengal's silk-weaving clusters, revealing how the influx of refugees during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War compounded the decline initiated in 1947.

Communal violence studies (Ghosh, 2011; Hossain, 2015) illustrate that artisan quarters often bore the brunt of intercommunal attacks, resulting in widespread looting of workshops and loss of both finished and semi-finished stock. Hossain (2015) further highlights post-Partition legal and social discrimination in East Bengal, where Hindu artisan minorities struggled for rehabilitation and, in many cases, emigrated to West Bengal or abroad. Ahmad (2003), focusing on West Punjab, critiques the inadequacy of state-sponsored rehabilitation grants, which averaged INR 3,000 per family—insufficient to cover workshop reconstruction or procurement of essential raw materials such as silk, brass, and timber.

Comparative research on post-conflict craft revival (Desai, 2018; McDuie-Ra, 2019) underscores the transformative potential of cooperative and NGO-led interventions. Patel (2016) documents successful craft cooperatives in Gujarat that leveraged collective bargaining to secure raw materials and access export markets. Yet Sengupta (2005) argues that West Bengal's policy priorities—centered on agricultural rehabilitation and industrial growth—marginalized heritage crafts, leaving artisans reliant on informal

networks and personal capital. Desai (2018) and McDuie-Ra (2019) caution that without sustained institutional support, craft clusters remain vulnerable to market volatilities and generational attrition.

Gaps in the existing corpus include a lack of longitudinal quantitative assessments of artisan income trajectories, insufficient comparative analyses across regions, and limited first-person oral histories documenting artisans' own perceptions of loss, adaptation, and resilience. This study integrates these dimensions, combining archival documentation with robust survey data and in-depth interviews to offer a nuanced, longitudinal perspective on Partition's multi-decadal impact on artisan livelihoods.

## METHODOLOGY

To capture the multifaceted impacts of Partition on artisan communities in Punjab and Bengal, this study employed an integrated mixed-methods design, combining archival research, oral-history interviews, and structured survey data. Each component was developed to validate and enrich insights from the others, ensuring both depth and breadth of analysis.

### 1. Archival Research

Archival investigation spanned three repositories: the National Archives of India (New Delhi), the Punjab State Archives (Chandigarh), and the West Bengal State Archives (Kolkata). Within each, key collections were identified:

- **Refugee Rehabilitation Files (1947–1955):** Detailed government reports and circulars documenting entitlements, grant disbursements, and settlement schemes.
- **Craft Guild Records (1930–1960):** Minutes of guild meetings, membership rosters, correspondence with colonial and postcolonial bureaucracies, and ledgers of raw-material procurement.
- **Local Administrative Correspondence:** Letters between district officials and the provincial governments concerning displaced artisans' access to land allotments, workshop permissions, and credit facilities.

Each document was catalogued by date, region, and artisan trade. Quantitative information (e.g., grant amounts, asset valuations, number of beneficiaries) was extracted into a spreadsheet, while qualitative observations (e.g., descriptions of rehabilitation challenges, policy debates) were coded thematically in NVivo. Cross-referencing dates and figures with oral histories enabled triangulation of both factual accuracy and community perceptions.

### 2. Oral-History Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted from January to June 2024 with 45 artisan family representatives—25 in Indian Punjab (Amritsar, Ludhiana, Patiala) and 20 in West Bengal (Kolkata, Murshidabad, Howrah). Participant recruitment followed purposive sampling via local craft associations, refugee welfare committees, and snowball referrals. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes, covering four domains:

1. **Pre-Partition Livelihoods:** Craft specialization, family workshop structure, patronage networks, and household economics.
2. **Experiences of Violence and Displacement:** Personal accounts of communal incidents, loss of life or property, flight routes, and initial refugee camp conditions.
3. **Rehabilitation and Recovery:** Interactions with relief administrations, grant application processes, and challenges in accessing raw materials or workshop spaces.

4. **Adaptive Strategies:** Formation of cooperatives, diversification into allied trades, apprenticeships, and shifts in market orientation.

With consent, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized by assigning pseudonyms. Transcripts were uploaded into NVivo for thematic coding. Initial codes (e.g., “grant inadequacy,” “workshop looting,” “cooperative formation”) were iteratively refined into analytical themes such as “institutional support gaps” and “innovation under duress.” Memos captured emerging patterns and reflexive notes on interviewer–participant dynamics.

### 3. Quantitative Survey

A structured questionnaire was administered to 120 households (70 in Punjab, 50 in Bengal) to quantify trends observed qualitatively. Key survey modules included:

- **Demographics and Migration History:** Year of displacement, number of household members displaced, and destinations.
- **Asset Losses and Compensation:** Estimated monetary value of lost assets (in 1947 rupees), grant amounts received, and time taken to receive assistance.
- **Workshop Reestablishment:** Year when a functioning workshop was reestablished, number of looms or workstations, and workforce size.
- **Current Economic Profile:** Present-day income from craft activities, percentage contribution to household income, and diversification into non-craft occupations.
- **Skill Transmission:** Number of younger family members apprenticed in the craft, duration of training, and perceived attractiveness of the craft as a livelihood.

Data were coded and cleaned in Excel, then imported into SPSS v25 for analysis. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequency distributions) outlined baseline recovery patterns. Independent-samples t-tests compared income recovery rates and reestablishment times between regions. Binary logistic regression modeled the likelihood of workshop reestablishment within five years, using predictors such as grant size, cooperative membership, and proximity to urban centers.

### 4. Data Triangulation and Validation

Findings from each strand were triangulated to ensure reliability:

- **Archival vs. Oral Histories:** Grant amounts and timelines cited in official files were cross-checked against interviewee recollections. Discrepancies prompted follow-up inquiries to clarify administrative delays or informal payments.
- **Qualitative vs. Quantitative Patterns:** Themes of cooperative formation and trade diversification emerging in interviews were tested in the survey sample to gauge prevalence and effectiveness.
- **Intercoder Reliability:** A second researcher independently coded 20% of interview transcripts; Cohen’s  $\kappa$  coefficient of 0.82 indicated strong agreement.

### 5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University’s Institutional Review Board. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, with assurances of anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time. Archival research complied with repository regulations; sensitive personal data were handled in accordance with data-protection guidelines.

This rigorous, multi-pronged methodology ensures that our analysis of Partition's impact on artisan communities is both empirically grounded and richly contextualized, providing a robust foundation for interpreting the complex trajectories of disruption and resilience in Punjab and Bengal.

## RESULTS

The combined archival, qualitative, and quantitative data reveal a nuanced portrait of how artisan communities in Punjab and Bengal navigated the immediate shocks of Partition, mid-term rehabilitation efforts, and long-term economic realignments.

### 1. Immediate Displacement and Material Losses

- **Punjab:** Among the 70 surveyed households, 96% reported forced evacuation during August–September 1947. Interview narratives consistently describe nighttime attacks, torching of workshop premises, and looting by armed mobs. Average self-reported asset losses were INR 75,000 (1947 value), including looms, metal-casting furnaces, and raw-material stocks. Audio-recorded testimonies indicated that many artisans fled with only the clothes on their backs, leaving behind generations of accumulated capital.
- **Bengal:** Of the 50 surveyed Bengal households, 62% of Hindu artisans experienced displacement to Kolkata and its environs. While some artisans managed to transport portable tools (e.g., small molds for metalworking), bulkier equipment was abandoned. Muslim artisans in what became East Pakistan largely remained but faced systemic pressures—such as forced title deeds transfers—that undermined workshop security. Asset loss estimates averaged INR 45,000, reflecting both physical destruction and later expropriation during the 1971 conflict.

### 2. Rehabilitation Grant Efficacy

- **Punjab Grants:** Official records show that 85% of displaced Punjabi artisan families applied for rehabilitation grants averaging INR 3,000. However, survey data indicates that only 60% of applicants received the full amount within one year; the remainder faced bureaucratic delays of up to three years. Regression analysis revealed that each additional month of delay decreased the probability of reestablishing a workshop within five years by 5% ( $OR = 0.95, p < .01$ ).
- **Bengal Assistance:** In West Bengal, lump-sum assistance averaged INR 2,500 but was disbursed more swiftly—75% within six months. Crucially, local municipalities facilitated relocation into existing artisan enclaves (e.g., Kolkata's Dalhousie Lane), which preserved some market linkages. Survey respondents highlighted that proximity to established craft clusters correlated with a 1.8-times higher likelihood of regaining at least one family member's full-time craft employment by 1955 ( $\chi^2 = 6.14, p = .01$ ).

### 3. Workshop Reestablishment and Income Recovery

- **Reestablishment Timelines:** In Punjab, median time to workshop reestablishment was 4.2 years (IQR: 3–6 years), whereas Bengal households reported a median of 2.8 years (IQR: 2–4 years). The difference was statistically significant (Mann–Whitney  $U = 1,103, p < .001$ ).
- **Income Trajectories:** By 1960, Punjabi artisan incomes averaged 60% of pre-Partition levels ( $SD = 12\%$ ), while Bengal incomes averaged 72% ( $SD = 15\%$ ), confirmed by an independent-samples t-test ( $t = 2.45, df = 118, p = .02$ ). Longitudinal

survey data indicate that Bengal incomes surpassed 80% of pre-Partition values by 1975, buoyed by export demand through Kolkata port. Punjab incomes plateaued at approximately 65% through the 1970s, reflecting more constrained local demand.

#### 4. Adaptive Strategies and Their Efficacy

- **Cooperatives:** In Punjab, 18% of surveyed weaver families formed cooperatives within three years of displacement. These cooperatives negotiated bulk raw-silk purchases and shared workshop space. Qualitative accounts credit cooperatives with reducing raw-material costs by 12% on average, but organizational challenges—such as leadership disputes—limited scale and sustainability.
- **Trade Diversification:** Bengal artisans exhibited higher diversification: 42% branched into jute products, printed textiles, and modern ceramics by the mid-1950s. These allied trades leveraged existing skill sets while tapping new market segments—domestic and export. Regression models show that diversification increased the odds of achieving full income recovery by 30% (OR = 1.30,  $p = .03$ ).
- **Skill Transmission:** Despite recovery efforts, only 55% of younger generation members (ages 18–25) reported active engagement in traditional crafts. Focus groups revealed that perceptions of low income potential and aspirations for white-collar employment dissuaded many youth from apprenticeship—a troubling sign for craft continuity.

#### 5. Long-Term Trajectories and Contemporary Challenges

- **Mechanization and Urban Redevelopment:** Since 2000, Bengal handloom employment has declined by 35%, largely due to competition from power-loom producers and globalization of textile markets. In Punjab, 28% of metalwork workshops closed between 2000 and 2020, attributed to urban redevelopment projects that repurposed industrial zones into real-estate developments.
- **Raw-Material Volatility:** Both regions report high volatility in raw-material costs—fluctuating between  $\pm 20\%$  annually—undermining small-scale artisans' profit margins.
- **Policy and Market Access Gaps:** While contemporary government schemes (e.g., “Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Handloom Promotion Scheme”) offer subsidies and skill-up programs, survey respondents rate program effectiveness at 2.8/5 on average, citing bureaucratic complexity and lack of market-linkage support.

These results reveal that although artisan communities demonstrated notable resilience—through cooperatives, diversification, and persistence—their long-term viability is compromised by structural challenges. The subsequent conclusion synthesizes these findings and proposes targeted interventions to sustain traditional crafts in the post-Partition era and beyond.

## CONCLUSION

The prolonged study of artisan communities in Punjab and Bengal across seven decades since the 1947 Partition illuminates a narrative of both profound disruption and remarkable resilience. Our findings underscore how large-scale political and communal upheaval can irreversibly alter craft economies, while also highlighting the agency of artisans in reconstructing livelihoods under adverse conditions.



### 1. Partition's Immediate and Enduring Impact

Partition unleashed catastrophic human and material losses: Punjabi artisans faced near-total destruction of their workshops and raw-material stocks, and a staggering 96% displacement rate, while Bengal's artisans contended with widespread looting, forced relocation, and later the expropriation pressures of the 1971 Liberation War. Asset valuations—averaging INR 75,000 in Punjab and INR 45,000 in Bengal (1947 rupees)—indicate the scale of capital depletion that artisans endured. Moreover, the psychological trauma of communal violence disrupted intergenerational skill transmission, as many families prioritized immediate survival over the continuation of craft apprenticeships.

### 2. Differential Recovery Trajectories

Despite shared challenges, recovery trajectories diverged markedly between regions. Bengal's artisans benefited from proximity to Kolkata's port infrastructure, which facilitated export opportunities for silk, metalwork, and allied crafts. Their median workshop reestablishment time of 2.8 years contrasts with Punjab's 4.2 years, reflecting the relative efficiency of integrated urban resettlement schemes. Grant-disbursement analyses reveal that West Bengal authorities processed rehabilitation assistance more swiftly and within existing craft enclaves, whereas Punjab's refugee-colony approach often isolated artisans from key markets.

### 3. Role of Adaptive Strategies

Artisan communities exhibited creativity in reconstructing their economies. Punjabi weavers' cooperatives enabled collective procurement of scarce raw materials, reducing input costs by an estimated 12%. Yet, organizational friction limited cooperative scale. In Bengal, trade diversification into jute handicrafts and printed textiles emerged as a more widespread and sustainable strategy—boosting odds of income recovery by 30%. Such diversification illustrates artisans' responsiveness to shifting consumer demands and market realities. However, the attrition rate among younger apprentices—only 55% engagement—signals an erosion of traditional knowledge bases that underpin these crafts.

### 4. Contemporary Vulnerabilities

By the early twenty-first century, artisan sectors confront intensified pressures: mechanized production undercuts handloom pricing; urban redevelopment displaces workshops; and raw-material cost volatility squeezes margins. Although government initiatives exist to support handloom weavers and metalworkers, their limited effectiveness (average satisfaction rating of 2.8/5) points to systemic gaps—particularly in linking artisans to national and global markets, simplifying subsidy access, and promoting skill-development programs that appeal to younger generations.

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