



## Traditional Skills in Transition: Socio-Economic Conditions and Occupational Mobility among the Viswakarma Community in Wayanad District, Kerala, India

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### **Abstract**

Traditional artisan communities form an essential yet increasingly vulnerable segment of rural economies in India. The Viswakarma community—historically associated with blacksmithing, carpentry, goldsmithing, and allied crafts—faces livelihood stress due to mechanized substitutes, changing markets, and shifting aspirations. This study examines socio-economic conditions and occupational mobility among Viswakarma artisans in Wayanad district, Kerala, using primary data collected in 2025 from respondents across three artisan categories and supplementary field interactions. Descriptive and proportional analyses are used to assess gender composition, dependency burden, income status among those continuing traditional work, workplace arrangements, and perceived income changes following the development of small industrial units. Results show high male concentration in core artisanal work (92%), sizeable dependency burdens, and income vulnerability among those continuing traditional occupations (notably, a large share earning below ₹10,000 per month). Occupational mobility is substantial: 54% of respondents have shifted to other jobs, while only 40% remain exclusively in traditional work. Industrial development has not translated into broad income gains; 49% reported no income change and 31% reported decline. Situated against Wayanad's wider livelihood transformations shaped by conservation governance, agrarian transition, and emergent service opportunities such as ecotourism, the findings point to the need for integrated policies combining market access, skill modernization, enterprise support, and social protection to sustain artisanal livelihoods and intergenerational skill transmission.

**Keywords:** *Traditional artisans; Viswakarma; Occupational mobility; Rural livelihoods; Wayanad*

JEL Classification Codes

J24; O15; R23; Z13

## 1. Introduction

Traditional occupational skills in rural India are undergoing significant transformation under the combined influence of market competition, technology, environmental governance, and changing livelihood aspirations. In many regions, livelihoods historically anchored in agriculture, forest-based work, and hereditary crafts now face reduced economic viability as mechanized substitutes lower prices and reshape consumer preferences, while access to resources is mediated through evolving policy regimes. These pressures often produce occupational diversification, movement into wage labour, or gradual exit from traditional skills—processes with direct implications for income security, cultural continuity, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

Wayanad district in Kerala provides a particularly relevant setting to examine these dynamics because livelihood choices are embedded within an ecologically sensitive and institutionally governed landscape. Studies focusing on Wayanad's livelihood transitions indicate that occupational change is not only an outcome of generic “modernization,” but also reflects the interaction of conservation policy, land-use pressures, rural–urban linkages, and emerging service-sector opportunities. For example, research on alternative livelihood perceptions in Wayanad shows how conservation policies and urbanization can disrupt existing livelihood patterns and encourage communities to explore ecotourism-linked activities as adaptive strategies (Patel et al., 2023).

Evidence from Wayanad also points to agrarian transformations and income dynamics among tribal households. Prathapachandran and Varuvel (2023) report that mixed and integrated farming systems can yield stronger income outcomes compared to purely traditional methods, highlighting differentiated adoption capacities and livelihood strategies across income groups. Such findings signal a broader pattern of livelihood adaptation and diversification within the district.

Governance interventions related to resource access and rights also shape livelihood security in Wayanad. Mathew (2019), examining implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), documents varied socio-economic outcomes across tribal communities and highlights that policy implementation trajectories can mediate livelihood change and vulnerability. Collectively, this scholarship underscores that occupational mobility in Wayanad is influenced not only by markets and technology but also by institutional arrangements and ecological governance.

However, while Wayanad research has expanded on tribal livelihoods and agrarian change, the experiences of non-tribal hereditary artisan communities remain less visible. This gap matters because artisan livelihoods differ from farming and forest-based work: they are embedded in caste-linked skill transmission, informal production systems, and cultural identities tied to craftsmanship. Wider scholarship on artisans highlights how “tradition” can become simultaneously a cultural asset and an economic constraint when craft labour is celebrated symbolically but undervalued materially (Herzfeld, 2004a). In this context, studying the Viswakarma community—traditionally associated with blacksmithing, carpentry, goldsmithing, and related crafts—offers a focused lens to understand how hereditary artisans negotiate livelihood pressures and occupational change in contemporary Wayanad.

The present study addresses this gap through a micro-level analysis of Viswakarma artisans in Wayanad district, examining socio-economic conditions, occupational mobility, income patterns among those continuing traditional work, workplace arrangements, and perceived income changes following small-scale industrial development in the district. The findings are intended to support evidence-informed strategies for inclusive rural development and cultural sustainability.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Livelihood change, value hierarchies, and intergenerational skill transmission**

Research on traditional occupations increasingly emphasizes that occupational transformation is not merely a shift in employment status; it is often a reconfiguration of identity, community valuation, and intergenerational aspiration. Scholarship on artisans argues that craft producers frequently operate within unequal hierarchies of value in which heritage is celebrated but economic rewards remain limited, producing persistent livelihood vulnerability (Herzfeld, 2004b).

Parallel work in diverse contexts shows that livelihood shifts can generate cultural loss and weakened transmission of local knowledge systems, even when households pursue more stable income strategies. Studies of heritage crafts and indigenous skills suggest that modernization and formal education may reduce intergenerational craft transfer unless education systems incorporate culturally responsive and place-based pathways that recognize and legitimize indigenous skill systems (Yadav & Gopinath, 2025).

### **2.2 Wayanad: conservation governance and alternative livelihoods**

Wayanad scholarship indicates that environmental regulation and conservation-related pressures shape livelihood strategies. The study by Muthulingam, Gopalsamy, and Chella (2018) examines perceptions toward alternative livelihood opportunities through ecotourism in Wayanad, noting how conservation policies and urbanization can threaten traditional livelihood models and motivate exploration of tourism-linked alternatives (Patel et al., 2023). Although focused primarily on tribal contexts, this work is important for understanding the institutional and ecological landscape within which rural livelihoods change.

Rights-based governance mechanisms also matter. Mathew (2019) assesses implementation and livelihood impacts of the FRA in Wayanad and reports differentiated outcomes across tribal communities, emphasizing implementation constraints and uneven livelihood gains. While not directly addressing artisan groups, the study strengthens the broader argument that policy, entitlements, and institutional functioning influence livelihood security and occupational mobility in Wayanad.

### **2.3 Agrarian transitions and income dynamics in Wayanad**

Research on Wayanad's rural economy also shows income-related transformations in agricultural practice. Prathapachandran and Varuvel (2023) report that mixed and integrated farming practices can enhance income outcomes compared to purely traditional methods and highlight the ways in which adoption varies across household income categories and capacities. This evidence supports a district-level framing where households restructure traditional livelihood systems through hybrid strategies rather than abrupt discontinuities alone.

### **2.4 Skill development, modernization, and policy lessons from comparative cases**

Comparative studies offer insights into sustaining traditional occupations under modernization pressures. Research from Meghalaya on promoting traditional occupations among indigenous communities emphasizes that traditional skills contribute to identity, self-worth, and local economies, and argues for capacity building, incentives, and reduced bureaucratic barriers to support artisanal continuity (Kurbah and Rao, 2020).

In a different policy domain, rural transformation initiatives emphasizing skill portability and employability can also accelerate occupational shifts away from traditional livelihoods, even if these programs aim at “development” outcomes (Patel et al., 2023). Such work is conceptually useful for

interpreting how education and skill interventions may shape occupational mobility, though they do not directly engage with hereditary craft loss.

## 2.5 Research gap and contribution

Despite a growing body of work on tribal livelihoods, conservation governance, and agrarian change in Wayanad, there is limited micro-level empirical evidence on hereditary artisan communities in the district—particularly the Viswakarma community—whose livelihoods are embedded in caste-linked skill transmission and localized informal markets. Existing Wayanad studies often foreground tribal and agrarian contexts and rarely analyze how industrial change and market competition affect artisan livelihoods specifically. The present study contributes by providing empirical evidence on socio-economic conditions, occupational mobility, workplace arrangements, and perceived industrial impacts among Viswakarma artisans in Wayanad, thereby extending district-level livelihood transition research to include hereditary skill-based artisan economies.

## 3. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse the economic background of the Viswakarma community in Wayanad district.
2. To examine occupational mobility among artisans in relation to industrialization, education, and changing aspirations.

## 4. Methodology and Methods

### 4.1 Research design

The study uses a descriptive, mixed-evidence design combining primary quantitative survey summaries with contextual field observations and interpretive discussion.

### 4.2 Data and sample

Primary data were collected in 2025 from **100 respondents** across three artisan categories: **Blacksmiths (62), Carpenters (29), Goldsmiths (9)**.

Snowball/community-network approaches were used due to the dispersed nature of artisan households and the absence of a reliable sampling frame.

### 4.3 Tools of analysis

The analysis uses descriptive statistics (counts, percentages) and proportional analysis within occupational categories. Findings are discussed in relation to Wayanad's broader livelihood transformation literature.

## 5. Results, Data Analysis, and Discussion

### 5.1 Gender composition and participation

The artisan workforce in the study is overwhelmingly male: **92% male and 8% female**.

Female participation is limited in core artisanal tasks, reflecting socio-cultural norms and the physical demands associated with many traditional crafts.

This pattern is consistent with wider observations of gendered occupational structures in many traditional artisan systems, where women's labour is often informal, supportive, or unpaid rather than recorded as primary craft work.

## 5.2 Dependency burden and household responsibilities

Dependency patterns indicate significant household responsibilities among artisans. In the distribution by dependents, large shares of artisans—especially blacksmiths—support **four dependents** (notably, 27 blacksmith households fall in this category).

High dependency burdens can intensify livelihood vulnerability when earnings are irregular or demand for traditional products fluctuates, reinforcing pressures for occupational diversification.

## 5.3 Income status among artisans continuing traditional work

Income analysis for respondents engaged in traditional occupations (n=46) shows considerable vulnerability. A sizeable share earns below ₹10,000 per month (including the ₹1,000–₹9,999 category).

The data also show a smaller segment earning moderate to higher incomes, particularly among carpenters, suggesting that traditional skills can yield better returns when aligned with value-added services or market demand.

From a livelihood transition perspective, these findings resonate with the broader argument that households with greater capacity (market access, tools, networks) can adopt “hybrid” strategies that make traditional skills more remunerative, while others remain trapped in low-return segments. This mirrors Wayanad evidence from agrarian contexts, where income level influences capacity to adopt more profitable livelihood strategies (Prathapachandran and Varuvel, 2023).

## 5.4 Occupational mobility: continuity, exit, and hybrid strategies

Occupational engagement patterns point to substantial mobility away from hereditary crafts. Across all categories, **40 respondents** remain exclusively in traditional work, **54 respondents** have shifted to other work, and **6 respondents** combine both.

This indicates that over half of the sample has exited exclusive dependence on traditional occupations, and a small group uses dual engagement as an income-smoothing strategy.

This outcome aligns with broader livelihood-transition evidence from Wayanad, where communities explore new income streams (e.g., ecotourism or modified farming systems) under economic and policy pressures (Patel et al., 2023). However, for artisan communities, occupational exit can carry an additional cultural cost because craft skills are embedded in identity and intergenerational transmission. This concern is consistent with wider scholarship on heritage crafts and indigenous skill decline, which emphasizes the risk of discontinuity across generations without supportive institutional pathways (Yadav and Gopinath, 2025).

## 5.5 Workstation patterns and vulnerability in the informal economy

Workstation data highlight three primary arrangements among those continuing traditional work: **home-based work (18), self-owned workshops (15), and coolie work (13).**

Home-based production reflects the persistence of cottage-industry forms that reduce overhead costs and integrate household labour.

Self-owned workshops suggest micro-enterprise potential and opportunities for skill-based entrepreneurship if supported through finance, training, and market linkage.

Coolie workers, by contrast, represent a vulnerable segment facing irregular work and limited autonomy, underscoring the need for targeted social security and labour protections.

## 5.6 Industrialisation and perceived income change

The study examined perceptions of income changes after development of small industrial units in Wayanad. Among 100 respondents, **20% reported increased income, 31% reported decreased income, and 49% reported no change.**

This indicates that industrial development has not generated broad-based income gains for traditional artisans and may have intensified competitive pressures for some groups. Blacksmiths were the largest group reporting “no change,” while a significant number still reported decline.

These results support a policy inference: industrial development, without deliberate inclusion of artisan value chains, may not benefit hereditary craft workers and can even contribute to market displacement. This resonates with comparative scholarship that calls for institutional and capacity support to sustain traditional occupations under modernization and competition pressures (Kurbah and Rao, 2020).

## 6. Policy Implications

The findings suggest the need for an integrated policy approach that treats traditional artisans not only as cultural bearers but as economic actors requiring institutional support.

1. **Market linkage and product repositioning:** Create mechanisms for artisan products to access local procurement systems, tourism markets, and e-commerce channels. In Wayanad, where livelihood diversification through ecotourism is already discussed, artisan crafts can be integrated into tourism value chains through certified outlets and heritage branding (Patel et al., 2023).
2. **Skill modernization without skill displacement:** Training should combine traditional techniques with contemporary design, safety standards, and productivity improvements to enhance competitiveness—aligning with broader evidence that “hybrid” strategies can improve incomes among those who remain in traditional work.
3. **Micro-enterprise support:** Expand access to microcredit and working-capital support for self-owned workshops, which already show entrepreneurial potential within the community.
4. **Social protection for vulnerable segments:** Coolie workers in the artisan economy require labour protections, health coverage, and social security mechanisms to reduce vulnerability.
5. **Education and intergenerational continuity:** Encourage culturally responsive skill programs and apprenticeship models to address intergenerational discontinuity and skill erosion, drawing on lessons from indigenous craft preservation debates (Yadav and Gopinath, 2025).

## Conclusion

This study examined socio-economic conditions and occupational mobility among Viswakarma artisans in Wayanad district using primary data from 100 respondents (2025). The evidence indicates strong occupational transformation: while 40% remain exclusively in traditional work, 54% have moved to other occupations, reflecting livelihood pressures and changing economic realities.



Those continuing traditional work exhibit income vulnerability, with a considerable share earning below ₹10,000 per month. Industrial development has not delivered broad income gains, as nearly half reported no income change and a larger share reported decline than improvement.

Placed within Wayanad's broader livelihood transformations—shaped by conservation governance, agrarian transition, and alternative livelihood pathways—these findings reinforce the argument that occupational change is structurally driven and policy-mediated, rather than solely a matter of personal choice. The paper concludes that sustaining artisanal livelihoods and skill transmission requires integrated interventions combining market access, enterprise support, skill modernization, and social protection. Without such measures, the transition away from hereditary crafts may deepen livelihood vulnerability and erode cultural knowledge systems embedded in artisanal work.

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### **Ethics Statement**

Informed consent was obtained from participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality was assured, and no personal identifiers were recorded. Data were used solely for academic purposes.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

### **End Notes**

1. The term *Viswakarma* refers to hereditary artisan groups traditionally engaged in craft occupations such as blacksmithing, carpentry, and goldsmithing.
2. Snowball/community-network approaches are appropriate for dispersed informal occupational groups but limit statistical generalization.
3. Income data are self-reported and may involve recall and reporting biases.

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