

Dastkar — The Bazaar That Bypassed the Middleman

The Indian handicraft sector employs around 70 million people — the second largest source of rural employment after agriculture. It produces objects of extraordinary skill and cultural complexity: block prints that encode centuries of design vocabulary, weaves that require years....

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And most of the people who make these things are poor.

The gap between the craft and the craftsperson's economic condition is not a mystery. It is the consequence of a specific market structure: middlemen, traders, and retailers who buy low from the maker and sell high to the consumer, capturing the margin that should flow to the person who did the work. Government handicraft corporations were supposed to fix this but typically added their own layer of extraction without solving the structural problem.

Dastkar was founded in 1981 on a specific diagnosis: the only way to close this gap sustainably was to bring the craftsperson and the consumer into the same room. Literally.

Who They Are

Dastkar — the name means "craftsperson" in Urdu — is a Society for Crafts and Craftspeople founded in New Delhi. Their mission is to use craft as a catalyst for socio-economic empowerment and to ensure the future of India's uniquely rich craft heritage by providing craftspeople with necessary tools, support, and most importantly, direct market access.

Starting with fourteen craft groups in 1981, Dastkar has grown to work with more than 750 artisan communities across 25 states and over one lakh craft families. Their approach rests on three pillars: the Bazaar (direct market access), the Shop and online platform (sustained livelihoods), and capacity building (skills, design, and business development). Each pillar addresses a different dimension of the craftsperson's market disadvantage.

The Bazaar Model: Radical in Its Simplicity

The Dastkar Bazaar is an exhibition where craftspeople come to Delhi — from their villages in Rajasthan, from the hills of Himachal, from coastal Andhra, from Bihar's tribal belt — and sell directly to consumers. No middlemen. No government corporation taking thirty percent. No

retailer marking up three hundred percent.

What sounds simple is operationally significant. Dastkar provides the exhibition infrastructure, the marketing, the logistics support, and critically the hand-holding that allows a Lambani tribal woman from Karnataka who has never operated a market stall to manage one with confidence. Over the years, hundreds of thousands of artisans have had their first direct-market experience through a Dastkar Bazaar.

The documented social consequence is specific: craftspeople who previously had no understanding of how their prices related to market prices learn — through direct consumer interaction — what their work is worth. The Lambani women's groups of Sandur Kushala Kala Kendra in Karnataka have been explicit about this: the Nature Bazaar is not just a sales platform but an education in market value and consumer psychology that no government training programme provides.

Joe Madiath, Founder of Gram Vikas in Odisha, has specifically acknowledged Dastkar's support: "Over the years a large number of craft groups have been able to get a foothold in the Delhi market for handicrafts. Dastkar has helped a lot and provided tremendous services in this regard." This from the founder of one of India's most credible development organisations is a meaningful endorsement.

The BMKS Story: 500% Sales Increase

In 1993, Dastkar initiated support for 75 bonded tribal women in Bihar's Godda district, supporting the formation of BMKS (Bihar Mahila Kalyan Samiti) — a Tussar silk spinning and weaving craft group. The strategic objective: empower the group to market independently, bypassing the exploitative middlemen who were capturing most of the value from their labour.

Dastkar provided design guidance, introduced innovative weaving techniques, promoted natural dye use, and offered financial support during resource constraints. The result was a 500 percent increase in sales — Tussar became a premium product rather than a commodity. BMKS now has around 500 members, of whom 400 are women, supporting 3,250 craftspeople and indirectly benefiting 4,000 individuals. They supply Tussar fabrics and yarns to craft producers across India.

The BMKS trajectory — from 75 bonded women to 500 members with national supply relationships — is the Dastkar model working over time.

The Ranthambore Project

The Dastkar Ranthambore Project is documented as a landmark: working with communities adjacent to Ranthambore Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan, Dastkar developed craft-based livelihoods that reduced forest dependence and human-wildlife conflict. Communities that had depended on

forest extraction for income developed craft skills marketable through Dastkar's networks, creating an economic alternative that made conservation compatible with livelihood.

This conservation-craft intersection — which Dastkar executed in Rajasthan — is directly applicable to Odisha's tribal forest communities. Kondh craft in Kandhamal, Bonda textiles in Malkangiri, Dongria weaving in Rayagada, Sora painting in Gajapati: the Dastkar model of design guidance + natural dye promotion + premium market access through curated exhibition platforms is directly transferable.

The Gram Vikas Connection

Dastkar's testimonial from Joe Madiath of Gram Vikas is specifically relevant for JaBaSu's Odisha context. Gram Vikas's 2024-25 Annual Report documents their own women entrepreneurs programme in Bargarh, Gajapati, Ganjam, and Kandhamal — exactly the districts where Dastkar's craft market expertise could intersect with Gram Vikas's community mobilisation infrastructure. The Knowledge Commons connection between these two organisations is a programme waiting to be designed.

Contact and Further Reading

Website: dastkar.org | **Nature Bazaar:** dastkar.org/nature-bazaar | **Online shop:** dastkar.org/shop

Key evidence:

- Give.do Dastkar profile — 100,000+ craftspeople, 25 states, BMKS 500% sales increase documentation
- SustainabilityNext: Dastkar: A Crafted Route to Development (February 2024) — most comprehensive recent institutional description
- Dastkar website testimonials — Veeranna (Sandur Kushala Kala Kendra) and Joe Madiath (Gram Vikas) endorsements

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