

WEAVING LIVELIHOODS ON THE FOOTPATH: A STUDY OF THE TOKRI (BASKET) WORKERS AT MAHIM, MUMBAI

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the livelihood, production process, and market linkages of *tokri* (basket) makers from Rajasthan who live and work on the footpaths near Mahim in Mumbai. Based on hypothetical primary data collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 artisans, the research highlights their migration story, daily work routines, income, challenges, and relationships with wholesalers and buyers, including fisherfolk, vegetable vendors, and toy markets in Mumbai.

A chi-square analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between years of experience and daily earnings. The findings reveal that despite their skilled craftsmanship, these artisans face income stagnation due to dependence on middlemen and lack of formal recognition. The study concludes by suggesting market integration, skill upgradation, and policy inclusion to support their sustainable livelihood.

Keywords: Tokri artisans, informal economy, Rajasthan migration, chi-square analysis, handicrafts, street vendors, Mumbai.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the crossroads of Mumbai's bustling streets and informal economy lie hundreds of artisans whose crafts supply the city's vast retail and wholesale networks. Among them are *tokri* makers — traditional basket weavers from Rajasthan — who bring age-old techniques of bamboo, cane, and reed weaving to the urban marketplace.

In Mahim, a small cluster of around 8–12 families lives on the footpath near the railway station and market, crafting baskets by hand and selling them to wholesalers in Crawford Market, retailers in Dadar and Dharavi, and to fisherfolk, vegetable vendors, and toy markets across South Mumbai.

Despite their contribution to the city's trade ecosystem, their presence remains informal, unnoticed, and economically fragile. This study seeks to illuminate their invisible labor, economic struggles, and the structural forces shaping their survival.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To document the socio-economic profile of *tokri* artisans living and working at Mahim.
2. To analyze their production methods, costs, and earnings.
3. To identify their target markets and buyer segments.
4. To understand their relationship with wholesalers and retailers in Mumbai.
5. To examine the challenges in sustaining their livelihoods in an urban environment.
6. To test whether years of experience significantly affect earnings.

7. To propose interventions for improving income security and preserving traditional craftsmanship.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The informal craft sector in India supports over seven million artisans, yet it remains largely invisible in formal labor statistics (Singh & Kumar, 2022). Studies by the Craft Council of India (2023) and Jain (2021) emphasize that urban migration has transformed rural artisans into street-based producers who depend on city markets but lack institutional protection.

Research on Mumbai's informal economy (Maharashtra State Urban Livelihood Mission, 2023) shows that footpath artisans like *tokri* makers play a crucial role in supplying low-cost, eco-friendly goods to markets and vendors. However, due to lack of storage space, microcredit, and marketing channels, their profit margins remain minimal.

Similar studies on basket weavers in Delhi and Chennai (CCI, 2022) reveal a pattern of exploitation through middlemen who control pricing and logistics. Moreover, according to the *PM Vishwakarma Scheme Guidelines* (2024), such artisans require formal recognition and digital access to markets for long-term sustainability.

This literature highlights the urgent need for integrating traditional artisans into urban value chains through fair trade practices, skill development, and access to e-commerce.

4. HYPOTHESIS

- H₀:** There is no significant relationship between years of experience and daily income.
H₁: There is a significant relationship between years of experience and daily income.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

A qualitative descriptive study supplemented by quantitative analysis using a chi-square test was adopted. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation.

5.2 Sampling

- **Sample Size:** 10 *tokri* makers (5 men, 5 women)
- **Origin:** Nagaur and Barmer districts, Rajasthan
- **Location:** Footpath settlement near Mahim Station
- **Data Type:** Hypothetical primary data representing field patterns

5.3 Data Collection Tools

- **Interview Schedule:** Demographics, income, production, material sourcing, aspirations
- **Observation Checklist:** Living conditions, tools, market interactions

6. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

6.1 Socio-Demographic Profile

Variable	Observation (Average)
Average Age	36 years

Variable	Observation (Average)
Gender	5 male, 5 female
Education	8 illiterate, 2 up to primary school
Family Size	5 members
Origin	Nagaur (6), Barmer (4)
Years in Mumbai	8–15 years
Working Hours	10–12 hours/day

“We came from Nagaur after drought years. In our village, we made baskets for farmers. Here, at least we can sell something daily,” said Girdhari, 42.

6.2 Production and Raw Materials

Indicator	Data
Material	Cane, bamboo, palm leaves, jute ropes
Tools	Simple knives, cutters, pliers
Production/day	6–10 baskets
Cost/basket	₹25–₹40
Selling price	₹60–₹80
Profit margin	₹25–₹30
Average daily earnings	₹300–₹450
Weekly income	₹2,000–₹2,500

“Wholesalers come twice a week. We load their tempos here. No one buys directly from us — they take in bulk and sell at triple price,” shared Laxmi, 33.

6.3 Target Market and Linkages

Buyer Type	% of Total Sales	Payment Type	Remarks
Crawford wholesalers	40%	Cash	Bulk orders, price control
Fisherfolk (Mahim–Worli)	20%	Cash	Baskets used for fish transport
Vegetable vendors	15%	Cash	Used for market display and transport
Toy market sellers	10%	Cash	Baskets for gift/toy packaging
Dadar flower market	10%	Cash	Seasonal demand
Dharavi packaging units	5%	Cash	Food hamper and decorative use

“Fisherwomen buy smaller baskets early morning, vegetable sellers prefer bigger ones. They all pay in cash, no credit,” said Sita, 40.

6.4 Livelihood Constraints

Problem	Frequency (out of 10)	Impact
High raw material costs	8	Reduces profit
Eviction threats	10	Disrupts production
Lack of storage space	9	Limits inventory
No microcredit	8	Prevents bulk buying
Middlemen exploitation	7	Low prices
Health issues	6	Reduces productivity

“When it rains, our baskets get wet and spoiled. Sometimes we lose the whole week’s work,” said Shankar, 45.

7. HYPOTHESIS TESTING

H₀: There is no significant relationship between years of experience and daily income.

H₁: There is a significant relationship between years of experience and daily income.

Experience Group	Low Income (<₹330)	Medium (₹330–₹400)	High (>₹400)	Total
A (8–10 yrs)	2	3	1	6
B (11–13 yrs)	1	1	0	2
C (14–15 yrs)	0	0	2	2
Total	3	4	3	10

$\chi^2 = 6.67$, $df = 4$, **Critical Value = 9.49** ($p = 0.05$)

Since $\chi^2 < 9.49$, **H₀ is accepted** — there is no statistically significant relationship between years of experience and income.

8. DISCUSSION

The findings show that artisans’ income is not determined by experience or skill but by **market forces and middlemen control**. The inclusion of fisherfolk, vegetable vendors, and toy markets expands their consumer base, yet dependence on bulk buyers and wholesalers restricts fair pricing.

Artisans earn only 25–30% of final retail value, with profits absorbed by intermediaries. Despite their resilience, absence of credit, housing, and infrastructure limits livelihood stability.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

For Local Authorities

- Create legal vending zones and rainproof artisan sheds near Mahim.
- Include *tokri* workers in the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation) Act.

For NGOs / CSR Partners

- Facilitate SHGs for microcredit and digital payment access.

- Conduct design and marketing workshops for premium markets (e.g., decorative baskets).

For Market Development

- Develop a collective brand “**Mahim Tokri Collective.**”
- Sell through **Amazon Karigar, Etsy India, and Fair Trade platforms.**

For Policy Makers

- Include artisans under **PM Vishwakarma Yojana** and **Urban Livelihood Missions.**
- Provide artisan ID cards and welfare coverage for housing and health.

10. CONCLUSION

The *tokri* workers of Mahim weave not only baskets but stories of migration, struggle, and resilience. Their craft sustains local economies and embodies eco-friendly urban enterprise. However, lack of recognition, credit, and policy inclusion perpetuates their poverty cycle. Future interventions must focus on **market integration, fair pricing, and collective branding** to ensure that traditional craftsmanship thrives as a viable urban livelihood.

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