Recognition before Reform: Valuing *Karigar* Skills

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Abstract

Karigars are skilled artisans in India whose craft knowledge is passed down through hands-on training rather than formal certification, and who are often described as workers even though their work involves creative judgment, cultural knowledge, and technical mastery. Indian Karigars face a form of mistreatment rarely called by its name, marked by constant haggling, the erasure of who actually made a piece, and skill undervalued because no one asks what it took. Government schemes and certification programmes treat this as a paperwork problem, yet the disrespect plays out face to face rather than on a form. Drawing on Axel Honneth's recognition theory and Amartya Sen's capability approach, this chapter argues that the mistreatment is interpersonal at its root, since institutions can formalise a respect that already exists between people but cannot manufacture it through policy alone. It examines why documentation-heavy approaches such as certification and geographical indication tagging have done little to change buyer behaviour, and traces how this gap compounds into irregular work, underused expertise, and stalled career progression for Karigars. The chapter argues that respect for Karigars has to be rebuilt through direct contact and showing up, rather than a certificate or a sympathetic story. Its central recommendation is a recurring, open-format engagement at existing craft venues, where Karigars work in full view of visitors, prices are set by Karigars themselves and held

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static, and craft is credited by name. It traces how this could be sustained by organisations and individuals alike, and how the recognition feeds into better job prospects, a stronger reputation, and more room to negotiate price, before weighing the limitations that shape how far such a shift can travel.

Keywords:

Karigar dignity; recognition theory; creative labour; artisan esteem; capability deprivation; procurement ethics.

Introduction

A *karigar* is a skilled artisan or craftsperson who creates handmade products using traditional techniques passed down through generations. Their specialized craftsmanship sustains India's diverse handmade industries while preserving the nation's rich cultural heritage and craft traditions. Their mistreatment is seldom announced as mistreatment. It shows up as a lowball offer, a cursory glance at a finished piece, a buyer who wants to know the price before they have asked how it was made. No single moment looks damning on its own. But string enough of them together across a season of markets, government emporia, and procurement counters, and a pattern emerges, a steady failure to register that a living hand, not a factory line, shaped the object being sold. That failure carries a real cost, and *Karigars* pay it every day, in prices that undercut their skill and in credit that goes to everyone but them.

Most existing policy tackles this problem at one remove, through certification schemes, geographical indication tags, and recognition-of-prior-learning frameworks, all of them tools built to operate on institutions and paperwork. Well-meaning as these tools are, they aim at the wrong location. Disrespect toward *Karigars* plays out between two people long before it ever lands on a policy desk. An institution can put its stamp on recognition once that recognition already exists between people; it has no way to conjure recognition into being where every day conduct has not already built it.

That distinction is the starting point for everything that follows, not a side note to it. If the harm is interpersonal, no amount of well-designed paperwork will fix it alone; what has to change is what happens the moment a buyer stands in front of a *Karigar's* work.

The chapter that follows work toward a concrete answer to a question the field has mostly sidestepped, not how to certify a *Karigar's* skill, but how to make sure it is actually seen.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on artisan welfare in India has concentrated heavily on formal recognition mechanisms. GI tagging protects craft provenance and lets artisans command premium prices, at least on paper. In practice, registering and enforcing a GI claim takes a level of literacy and institutional access most *Karigars* do not have, which is why its reach has stayed limited. Recognition-of-Prior-Learning frameworks run into a related problem, since they are built to formalize skill through certification, but certification rewards what can be documented, not the uncodified, hands-taught expertise that actually defines craft work (Wilkinson-Weber, "Skill, Dependency, and Differentiation"; UNESCO). Broader employment data from the sector confirms this documentation gap has not translated into improved income stability for most *Karigars* (National Council of Applied Economic Research).

Fieldwork on artisan communities elsewhere in India adds texture to this picture. A survey of rural artisans found that most operate with almost no working capital of their own and little access to formal credit, leaving them dependent on the very intermediaries who capture much of the margin on their work (Banik). A study of *pattachitra* painters in Odisha similarly found that a low capital base, weak decision-making power among women artisans specifically, competition from machine-made imitation products, and dependence on middlemen were the main forces blocking the craft's development, regardless of the welfare schemes formally available to painters (Biswal). Interviews with women artisans in Srinagar found financial hardship, exploitation through low wages, and exploitation by intermediary agents to be recurring, compounding themes in artisans' own accounts of their working lives (Khan et al.). Read together, these studies describe conditions consistent with the argument advanced here, in that institutional support exists, yet the artisan's position in the immediate chain of interaction, with buyers, with intermediaries, within their own household, remains structurally weak.

Scholars examining the broader political economy of artisan labour have observed that *Karigars* are frequently positioned as subcontracted producers within supply chains that value their output but not their authorship, a dynamic that persists regardless of formal certification status (Scrase; Liebl and Roy). Useful as this literature is, it speaks mainly to institutions and asks how *Karigars* can be made legible to a system, not how they are treated by the people that system is ultimately meant to serve.

Two complementary theoretical traditions help close that gap. Axel Honneth's recognition theory argues that a person's sense of self-worth is built across three relational domains, love and care, legal standing, and social esteem, with esteem in particular resting on whether a community actually values what that person specifically contributes (Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition). This third kind of recognition cannot simply be handed down through a legal or institutional label; it has to be earned by being seen, in the moment, as someone whose work matters (Honneth, Disrespect). Honneth's account has not gone unchallenged. Fraser contends that recognition cannot be cleanly separated from material redistribution, a disagreement she and Honneth work through directly in their own exchange (Fraser and Honneth; Fraser). What follows leans on Honneth's emphasis on interaction, while treating Fraser's point less as a rival claim than as a reminder that recognition and material fairness are, in the end, part of the same outcome.

Sen's capability approach asks a different question than either of these frameworks does. Instead of what entitlements exist on paper, it asks what a person can actually do and become, and here whether being disrespected in everyday transactions limits a *Karigar's* real ability to earn a living, keep their dignity intact, and pass the craft on to the next generation (Sen, Development as Freedom; Sen, Inequality Re-examined). Nussbaum pushes this further, treating dignity and self-respect as capabilities worth measuring on their own terms, not as something that follows automatically once income improves (Nussbaum).Together, these frameworks reposition artisan mistreatment as a failure of interpersonal esteem with measurable downstream effects, rather than a gap in institutional documentation.

Statement of Problem

At the heart of the problem sits a basic category error, one baked into everyday transactions with *Karigars*. A buyer pricing a handcrafted object usually reads it as a commodity, material cost plus hours worked, while the *Karigar* has poured in creative judgment, cultural knowledge, and technical mastery, none of which the transaction has any framework to register. Step into almost any market, emporia, or procurement counter, and the same pattern plays out, a number gets thrown out within seconds of a glance, usually before the buyer has bothered to ask how the piece was made, how long it took, or what it demanded technically. Whatever bargaining follows starts from the assumption that the asking price is padded, not that it reflects years of trained hand-eye coordination, knowledge handed down across generations, or the risk of working materials that ruin the whole piece, and the income with it, over a single slip. Layered on top of this are the middlemen most *Karigars* sell through, each one skimming a cut before the piece ever reaches a paying customer, so that even a fair price at the top of the chain rarely trickles down to the maker at the bottom of it. Women *Karigars* in particular tend to have the least say of anyone in this chain, rarely setting the price of their own output even inside their own household workshop. What this mismatch produces, in practice, is visible enough, haggling that lands consistently below fair value, dismissiveness toward the *Karigars'* account of their own work, and a quiet erasure of authorship whenever a piece is resold or credited to a brand instead of a maker. To an untrained eye, or a buyer in a hurry, a hand-thrown terracotta pot and a mould-cast copy look interchangeable, both priced by weight and dimensions rather than by the skill that actually tells them apart. The *Karigar* rarely gets a chance to explain what went into the piece, since the interaction was never structured to leave room for that explanation, the transaction is effectively over the moment a number is agreed on. After years of transactions like this, a *Karigar* learns that explaining the craft rarely moves the price, and stops bothering, which only deepens the assumption that there was never anything worth explaining. This is not a case of one rude buyer here and there; it is baked into how craft objects change hands in most everyday settings, showing up consistently enough across markets, exhibitions, and procurement counters that it functions less like an exception and more like an unwritten rule.

It is important to distinguish this diagnosis from pity. A framing that asks buyers to pay more out of sympathy for hardship concedes the very point being contested here, that *Karigars* are objects of charitable concern rather than creative agents deserving evaluation on their skill. The problem, properly stated, is not that *Karigars* are struggling and therefore deserve support; it is that their work is being systematically misread as low-skill commodity production, and that misreading occurs person to person, transaction by transaction, largely outside the reach of policy instruments designed to fix it after the fact. A *Karigar* who receives a fair price because a buyer felt sorry for them has not been recognised for their skill any more than one who receives an unfair price; both transactions rest on the same underlying failure to see the work for what it is. Sympathy is not a substitute for an accurate estimate of what an object is worth.

Current Institutional Support

On paper, *Karigars* are not without support, and the range of schemes built around them is genuinely wide. Financial assistance and credit schemes are meant to ease the upfront cost of raw material and tools, an acknowledgment that most artisans operate with little working capital of their own and cannot absorb a bad month the way a larger business can. Skill development and certification programmes exist alongside this, aiming to take years of hands-taught expertise, the kind passed down within a family or a workshop rather than learned in a classroom, and formalise it into a credential that a buyer, an employer, or a procurement officer can recognise on paper. Marketing platforms and exhibitions add a third layer of support, state emporia, design fairs, and government-run craft bazaars are built specifically to give *Karigars* a route to customers beyond their immediate locality, since most would otherwise be limited to whoever happens to walk past their workshop or local market stall. Entrepreneurship promotion schemes complete the picture, aiming to help *Karigars* build independent businesses around their craft, with their own pricing and their own client base, rather than remain permanently dependent on middlemen who set both.

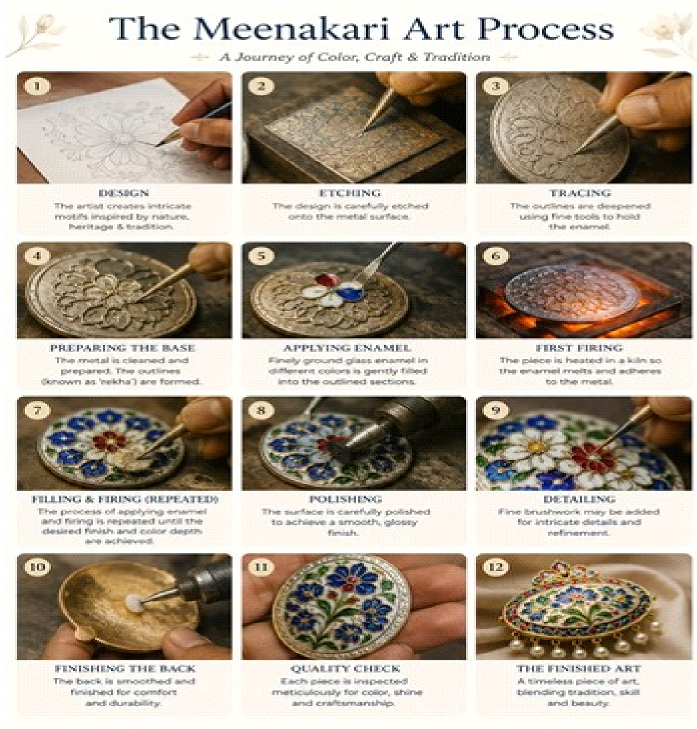

Figure 1: The step-by-step process of Meenakari Art and the Creative Labor put into the piece

Each of these four instruments addresses a real and specific constraint that *Karigars* actually face. What none of them do, individually or together, is touch the one moment where a *Karigar's* value is actually decided, the moment they are standing in front of a buyer.

The Persistent Gap

Even with all this support in place, four gaps show up again and again in nearly every *Karigar's* experience, and they persist precisely because none of the instruments above were built to close them. First, institutions almost never recruit through them into public projects, such as government furnishing contracts, infrastructure commissions, and municipal art installations rarely think to call on credentialed *Karigars* as a matter of course, even though the certification exists partly to make that call easier to justify. Second, multidisciplinary collaboration stays limited. Designers, architects, and *Karigars* seldom sit at the same table as equal partners working from a shared brief; more often, a *Karigar's* knowledge gets consulted after the fact, treated as a technique to borrow, rather than folded into the process from the start. Third, professional recognition stays weak in the sense that actually matters day to day, a *Karigar's* name attached to their own work, cited in credit lines, remembered by repeat clients, rather than a scheme number sitting in a government file no buyer will ever open. Fourth, there is no policy pathway pulling artisans into mainstream design and retail supply chains, which leaves most *Karigars* entering these markets informally, without the standing or leverage formal inclusion would give them. Taken together, these four gaps point to one underlying pattern, certification is everywhere, but the relationships, recruitment, credit, and standing it is supposed to unlock mostly never materialise.

Impact on Employability

These four gaps do not stay abstract; they compound into a specific and measurable employability problem for *Karigars*. Without recruitment into public projects, most *Karigars* cycle through irregular, seasonal employment rather than the kind of steady, commissioned work that a formal credential would seem to promise. Underutilization of expertise follows closely behind, a *Karigar* trained over years in intricate, high-skill technique ends up spending much of their working life producing simplified, fast-turnaround pieces, because that is what the informal, price-driven market actually rewards, not because the skill for anything more has disappeared. Reduced career progression is the direct result of having no visible ladder to climb, no equivalent of a promotion, a portfolio review, or a raise, only the same transaction repeated at the same price point year after year regardless of how much a *Karigar's* skill continues to develop. And dependence on unstable craft markets leaves whatever income does arrive unpredictable in a way formal employment generally is not, since demand shifts with the season, tourist footfall, and passing fashion rather than any stable client relationship. Financial assistance and certification, however well designed, have not closed this gap, because none of them address the point of contact where a *Karigar's* value is actually judged, not a form, but a conversation with a buyer who has already decided what the work is worth before it begins.

Recommendation

This chapter proposes a mechanism that allows buyers, designers, and procurement officers to witness craftsmanship directly. The central proposal is a recurring, open-format engagement hosted at existing craft venues, such as haats, government emporia, design institutions, and craft fairs, in which Karigars should work in full view of visitors over a sustained period, rather than presenting only finished objects for sale. Observers should be able to see the sequence of decisions, the duration, and the precision that go into producing a finished piece, replacing description-based claims of skill with witnessed recognition.

This shift is intended to move the basis of respect from what a Karigar says about their work to what a buyer has personally observed. It is also intended to resolve the pity-versus-esteem distinction raised earlier in this chapter. Pity is triggered by a story of hardship and produces a one-time, guilt-driven payment that ends once the story stops being told; esteem, by contrast, is triggered by observed competence and should produce an ongoing willingness to pay fairly and to return. The two are not merely different in tone, they should produce different buyer behaviour, pity closes a transaction, while esteem opens a relationship. Witnessing sustained, skilled labour should generate respect for craft rather than sympathy for hardship, in a way that no card, clip, or narrative appeal can reliably achieve, because respect earned by watching someone work should not fade once the buyer walks away, whereas sympathy earned by hearing about someone's struggle usually does.

None of this should be read as an argument against compassion itself; compassion for a Karigar's circumstances should coexist with respect for their skill. The concern is narrower, compassion alone should not serve as the primary basis for a fair price, as doing so would quietly reinforce the idea that Karigars are recipients of charity rather than professionals whose work has earned its value on its own terms. During this engagement, pricing should be set by the Karigars themselves and held static rather than subject to negotiation, so as to establish a public benchmark for fair value, one that outlasts the event and should inform expectations in ordinary market transactions afterward.

Crucially, this mechanism should operate at both levels identified earlier in this chapter as necessary for lasting change. At the organizational level, participating venues should adopt this format as a standing practice rather than a one-time exhibition, embedding witnessed engagement into their existing calendar in the same way onboarding or training is embedded into a workplace. At the individual level, both Karigars and buyers should develop new habits through repeated participation, Karigars should learn to confidently narrate their technique rather than their hardship, buyers should learn to observe before evaluating, and both should engage through sustained attention rather than transactional exchange. Repeated over time, these habits should build the reputational visibility and direct buyer relationships Karigars need to move beyond one-off, anonymous sales toward sustained, better-paid work.

This kind of exposure should not depend solely on buyers and procurement officers; it should also be built by students themselves, drawn from disciplines with no obvious link to craft. A film and media student should document a Karigar's process and convert it into short-form content for social media, giving the Karigar an online presence and a body of visual proof of their skill that they would otherwise lack the means or time to produce. A finance or commerce student should work with a Karigar on their expenses and pricing, verifying whether the static price set for an engagement actually covers material cost, time, and a fair margin (a calculation most Karigars have never had the opportunity to make properly). Design students should collaborate with Karigars on translating traditional technique into new product forms without displacing the Karigar's authorship, and business or marketing students should help Karigars draft the kind of vendor profile or pitch that retail buyers expect to see. None of this requires new institutions; it only requires universities to recognize this work as valid, credited fieldwork rather than an extracurricular favour. Once students across these disciplines have spent real time working alongside a Karigar, rather than merely writing about one, they should carry that respect into the industries they eventually join, as designers who insist on crediting a maker, procurement officers who negotiate fairly, and communicators who tell a Karigar's story with accuracy instead of charity. In this way, Karigars should have people across sectors who understand their work well enough to advocate for it when the Karigar is not in the room.

Universities should not be treated as the only route to this kind of exposure; media and cultural institutions should extend it as well. Local newspapers, radio, and regional television already devote space to human-interest stories. Craft venues should invite them to cover witnessed-engagement events on their own terms, rather than folding Karigars into a one-off festival segment. This would give Karigars a public record of their skill that persists independently of any single sale, offering future buyers something to find and verify before they ever meet the Karigar in person.

Implementation Framework

Implementation does not require new institutions, only the adaptation of existing ones. Craft venues that already host seasonal fairs or maintain permanent stalls ; government emporia, design-week exhibitions, university outreach programs can incorporate a witnessed-engagement format into their existing calendars at minimal cost, since infrastructure, *Karigar* participation networks, and visitor footfall already exist. Precedents for community-anchored craft visibility already exist in India's craft documentation and exhibition traditions (Jain; Chattopadhyay), suggesting institutional appetite for this kind of format is not unprecedented. The primary audience should be deliberately curated to include design students, procurement officers, and retail buyers alongside the general public, since these are the actors whose downstream purchasing and sourcing decisions determine whether recognition translates into fairer everyday transactions.

Before the engagement period begins, participating *Karigars* should agree on static pricing among themselves, and venues should commit to holding that benchmark firm, with no bargaining down, for as long as the event runs. Doing this once will not be enough, a one-off exhibition reads as a novelty and fades from memory just as fast, whereas a format repeated each season or year, folded into calendars craft venues already keep, gives buyer habits and *Karigar* confidence time to build on each other, the way any skilled trade grows through repeat clients and word-of-mouth referrals.

Employability Impact

The employability harm covered in the persistent-gap discussion above is the same category error, just playing out across a *Karigar's* career instead of a single sale. A *Karigar* treated as an anonymous supplier at the point of sale leaves a buyer with no name to remember, a procurement officer with no direct line to reach them, and a design student with no record to cite when recommending them for future work. That is why documentation-based fixes like certification, empanelment lists, and marketing platforms have not translated reliably into steadier employment, since they register a skill category, not the kind of person a buyer has any particular reason to seek out again. In Sen's terms, the deprivation is not a lack of income opportunity in the abstract; it is a constrained capability to turn demonstrated skill into a lasting professional relationship.

The solution to this, consistent with the argument made throughout, is a change in conduct at the same witnessed-engagement events rather than a new credentialing layer. Three norms, adopted by participating venues as standard practice, are sufficient. First, *Karigars* are introduced to visitors by name and craft lineage rather than presented as an undifferentiated stall or vendor number, so that the skill on display is attached to a person a buyer can seek out again. Second, when a procurement officer, design student, or retail buyer wishes to follow up after witnessing a *Karigar's* work, contact is exchanged directly with that *Karigar* rather than routed through an intermediary or agency, preserving the professional relationship the event created instead of absorbing it into an institution. Third, venues encourage procurement officers and design students who attend one cycle to return in subsequent cycles seeking out the same *Karigars* they previously observed, rather than treating each event as a fresh, anonymous sourcing pool converting a single witnessed interaction into the beginning of a working relationship rather than a one-time impression. None of these require new infrastructure; they require venues and buyers to treat the *Karigars* they have already watched work as people worth returning to, which is the same shift in conduct argued for throughout, applied specifically to how a career gets built rather than how a single sale gets priced.

Expected Outcomes and Impact

In the near term, this framework is expected to reduce underpricing during and immediately following participating events, as static pricing establishes a visible reference point that outlasts the engagement itself. Over repeated cycles, it is expected to reduce attrition from traditional crafts by improving the everyday dignity and income stability associated with practicing them, addressing a driver of craft abandonment that documentation-based schemes have not resolved. Using Sen's capability framework, the relevant measure of success is not merely income but expanded real freedom, a *Karigar's* genuine ability to convert skill into sustained livelihood, respect, and choice to continue their craft, rather than procedural inclusion in a scheme that leaves daily treatment unchanged. As detailed above, repeated participation is also expected to compound into direct employability gains, named recognition, repeat-client relationships, and a stronger negotiating position rather than a one-time transactional benefit. Secondary effects may include improved buyer and procurement literacy around craft value more broadly, extending benefits beyond participating *Karigars* to the wider artisan economy.

Conditions and Limitations

This framework depends on the willingness of venues, institutions, and buyers to adopt a new recurring format, which cannot be mandated in informal market settings the way institutional policy can be. Its effects are also difficult to isolate and measure precisely, since respect and esteem are qualitative outcomes that resist the kind of clean metrics available to pricing or income data. The model further assumes *Karigars* are willing and able to work in a public, observed setting, which may not suit every craft, every individual temperament, or every stage of a piece's production. There is also a real possibility that some *Karigars* decline the help or exposure being offered, whether out of a justified wariness built from past schemes that promised visibility and delivered nothing, discomfort with being watched while working, or simply a preference to keep their practice private and transaction-based. This should not be read as a failure of the framework or of the *Karigar*; declining is itself a legitimate exercise of the agency this framework is built to respect. Where this happens, the appropriate response is not to withdraw support altogether but to keep the underlying commitments, fair static pricing, named credit, direct contact with buyers, available on the *Karigar's* own terms, offered again at the next cycle without pressure, rather than treated as a one-time invitation that expires once refused. Finally, scaling beyond well-resourced venues to remote or under-visited craft regions presents a practical challenge that remains unresolved here.

Future research could examine whether recognition built through witnessed engagement measurably persists in ordinary, non-event transactions over time, and could extend this framework to remote or digitally-mediated craft economies where physical witnessing is harder to arrange. Later work might also explore how complementary considerations such as sustainable and traditional material practices could be foregrounded within the same witnessed format, reinforcing skill-based recognition with an additional, compatible signal of value, though this remains a secondary avenue rather than a core component of the present proposal.

Conclusion

An institution can formalise recognition once it already exists, but it has no way to manufacture recognition where everyday conduct has not built it first. The mistreatment *Karigars* experience, the haggling, the erasure of authorship, the undervalued time, gets won or lost in direct interaction, not in how well a policy is designed. Certification, documentation, and credit schemes still matter, but they only ever arrive downstream of a problem that starts the moment a buyer decides, often without even realising it, whether the person standing in front of them made something worth respecting.

What is proposed here asks little in the way of new infrastructure and a good deal in the way of changed conduct, witnessed engagement at venues that already exist, static pricing set by *Karigars* themselves, named credit in place of anonymous stalls, and cross-disciplinary student involvement that turns a moment of exposure into a lasting working relationship rather than one sympathetic glance. None of it calls for a new ministry, a new portal, or a new certificate. What it calls for is a change in what buyers, institutions, and fellow citizens choose to do the next time they are standing in front of a *Karigar* at work, watch before naming a price, ask before assuming, and come back rather than drift on to the next anonymous stall.

This will not take hold everywhere at once, and some *Karigars* will reasonably turn it down before they trust it, that is expected, not a flaw that needs engineering away. What matters is that the commitments underneath it, fair pricing set by the maker, credit that follows the name, relationships that outlast a single sale, keep being offered consistently enough for trust to build over time. Recognition, in the end, is not something a scheme can hand to a *Karigar*. It is something a buyer, a student, an institution, or a government body has to extend through how it behaves, repeatedly, in the moments that matter most, and only once that behaviour changes will the paperwork stacked on top of it mean anything at all.

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