

Palm Leaf Craft in the Digital Age: Preserving India's Cultural Legacy

Reference: "Nava Women Empowerment Centre through Palm Leaf Crafts"



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Submission: August 24, 2025; **Published:** October 15, 2025

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Abstract

Palm leaf craft has been an integral part of Telangana and adjoining Andhra Pradesh, deeply embedded in the cultural and economic life of rural communities. As part of the training of Nava Women Empowerment Centre, a pilot study was conducted. As part of the study, a comprehensive analysis was conducted on the products manufactured using natural colors based on the products manufactured, and the products were safely examined and incorporated. Many villages such as palm leaf village (in Telugu Thati Akula Gudem, Thaduvai, Botthappa Gudem, Buttayi Gudem, Thadikapaludi, and Tadepalli Gudem) are historically associated with palm groves, with their very names reflecting this heritage. Traditionally, artisans process palm leaves by cutting, drying, soaking, and bundling them for use in diverse craft products such as baskets, mats, and decorative objects. This paper examines the traditional knowledge systems behind palm leaf craft while addressing contemporary challenges of sustainability, declining artisan livelihoods, and loss of heritage practices. It also explores the potential of integrating digital technologies, including CAD-based design and digitization, to document, preserve, and revitalize these crafts. The study argues that bridging tradition and technology can ensure the revival of palm leaf craft, positioning it as both a cultural asset and a sustainable design practice for future generations.

Keywords: Palm leaves; Palm baskets; Traditional craft; Sustainable design; Craft revival

Abbreviations: CSR: Corporate Social Responsibility; CAD: Computer Aided Design; CAM: Computer Aided Manufacturing

Introduction

Before the invention of paper, palm leaves were used by many poets to write poems, songs, and stories, and even in the days when technology was not yet available, people all over the world used them. Palvancha village is located in the Bhadradi Kothagudem district mandal of Telangana. People from about 10 villages around this village have gone beyond baskets and are skilled in making baskets from leaves. They are artists who have been trained in making baskets from leaves. They are capable of making any product. They are given free training programs in the village through CSR funds and provide employment to many people and provide free education. Wherever they have studied, they have established their own centers and are continuing their livelihood as handiwork. In addition, the products made by them are also exported to America and abroad. The products made by them are going to Hyderabad, Vijayawada, Guntur, Visakhapatnam, Bhadrachalam, Rajahmundry, and Golconda Emporium and other centers.

Auspicious Uses of Palm Leaves

Palm leaves have played an important role in the cultural and spiritual practices of South India since before the 19th century. Traditionally, they were not only used as writing material but also as a medium for recording horoscopes, wedding invitations, and naming ceremonies. It is widely believed that writing horoscopes on palm leaves attracts good fortune, wisdom, and positive developments, encouraging individuals to progress through thought, effort, and perseverance. In the villages of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, people continue to place deep faith in this tradition, considering palm leaves as symbols of purity, Health and auspiciousness. Beyond writing, palm leaves are also widely used in ceremonial decorations. Wedding arches, pavilions, and other festive structures are often crafted from palm leaves, adding both beauty and cultural significance to the event. This enduring practice highlights the spiritual value and eco-friendly versatility of palm leaves in sustaining cultural heritage.

Nava Bharath Women's Empowerment through Palm Leaf Crafts

During my research visit to a palm craft production area, I was inspired to see nearly 30 to 40 batch wide averagely 2013 year to present above 2000 women actively engaged in creating beautiful handicrafts. Many of them were highly educated and had chosen this path not only to preserve tradition but also to secure their livelihood. Their products reflected both skill and imagination, showing how dreams could take shape through craft. These wom-

en have become self-reliant, earning regular incomes that support their households and daily needs. Beyond the structured production centers, women from nearby villages also participate in their free time, creating palm-based products at home. Some receive training through Bharat Limited, while many continue to develop their skills independently. From weaving palm-leaf fabrics to producing a wide range of innovative items, their work demonstrates creativity, resilience, and empowerment. This initiative has given them dignity, financial stability, and the strength to stand on their own feet (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Nava Bharath Women's Empowerment through Palm Leaf Crafts & created ecofriendly products.

History

In India, palm leaves were widely used as writing materials by poets as early as the 5th century BC. At the time of the advent of the printing press and the use of paper, palm leaf manuscripts were used to write religious and historical records, literature and works written on them, as well as poems and stories. These have always been considered as very important stones and sources for the history of our country. If we want to know more about the history of our ancestors, we can still see them in museums based on manuscripts where palm leaf manuscripts play a key role in preserving religious texts and historical accounts.

a. First palm leaf manuscript museum: Established in the 19th century near Kochi (Malabar), this museum preserves and exhibits palm leaf books, manuscripts, documents, and illustrations. It stands as a cultural archive, safeguarding Kerala's heritage for future generations. (Ref: K.V. Ramakrishna Rao Blog; Indian Express, 2011)

b. Palm leaf stories – Ramayana & Mahabharata: Mythological epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata were visually

depicted on palm leaves as an art form. Notably, an ancient version of Valmiki's Ramayana, handwritten on palm leaves, was recently discovered in Nepal.

c. Before paper – palm leaf stories: Before the invention of paper, knowledge and art were recorded on palm leaves. With paper's arrival in Egypt and China (25–220 AD), palm leaf use declined, though it remains a vital part of cultural heritage.

d. Palm leaf manuscripts in Odisha: King Subhakar Deva of the Bhowmaka dynasty first used palm leaf manuscripts in Odisha, sending a copy of the Avatamsaka Sutra to Emperor Dezang of China in 795 AD. The manuscript, bearing his autograph, was written in a Buddhist script.

Women's Power – Palm Leaf Craft in Bhadradi Kothagudem

In Palvanha, Bhadradi Kothagudem district, Palvanha, Yerra gundhi, sanjay nagar, Molakal palli, Damma peta, seethrama patnam, Bhadradi, kotha gudem palm leaf craft has grown into a powerful example of women's empowerment and rural develop-

ment. Most of the artisans involved come from economically poor backgrounds, yet they have transformed their skills into meaningful livelihoods. Their handmade palm leaf products, once limited to local use, are now reaching metro cities and even international markets, proving that traditional crafts can find a place in the global economy. The Nava Mahila Sahadharat Kendra has played a vital role in this transformation by training women in palm leaf product design, craft innovation, and entrepreneurship.

Women from nearly ten surrounding villages regularly gather at this center to learn and collaborate, creating a supportive community of artisans. To date, nearly 4,000 women have benefitted from this initiative some by establishing home-based enterprises, while others have set up small-scale businesses to support their families. In 2013, Novel Limited, a multi-product international company headquartered in Palvancha, further strengthened this movement by establishing a Women Empowerment Center as part of its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program. By linking skill development with livelihood opportunities, this initiative not only preserves cultural heritage but also demonstrates the collective power of women in building sustainable futures.

a. Objective of the study:

This study explores palm leaves and other sustainable materials in crafts, fostering design innovation, artisan livelihoods, and heritage sustainability.

b. Research methodology:

The article is focused primarily on gathering primary and secondary data, which is then followed by palm craft artisan interviews with craftsmen and documentation of their work on utility goods.

Review of Literature

AB Cunningham Wrote 2013: "Effects of Basket-weaving Industry on Mokola Palm and Dye Plants in Northwestern Botswana". This article describes the basketry industry on the edge of a Wango wetland in the northwest Moksha Vana region. The author explains that, as part of the basketry industry, palm trees are used in large numbers to build houses, which greatly reduce body pain, and the leaves are used to cover the roofs of houses. In addition, the plants used to make baskets from these palm leaves and fronds are becoming very scarce. The reason is that they are used as raw materials for their household needs. Therefore, the income of the artisans is not stable. The raw materials such as tree bark, tree leaves, palm leaves, and palm leaves are very useful for their development [1].

Martarida Bagaihing, wrote 2021: "Lontar Leaves Webbing

Craft as Element of Sustainable Cultural Tourism Case Study on Sasando House in Oebelo Village, Kupang Regency". This includes the creation of handicrafts bucket, baskets etc. made by the local community using palm leaves, which are woven into intricate designs. Many types of products are made from these products and are used in the cultural tourism sector, such as hats, mats, baskets, etc. These handicrafts are traditional artifacts that reflect the locality of many household items. These are closely related to the knowledge, philosophy and cultural values of the community. These lantern leaves are also very attractive to tourists, attracting tourists to produce or produce eco-friendly materials. These are local products that attract tourists and have a high demand [2].

Gamal Elsamanoudy, wrote 2021: "Handwoven interior accessories from palm leaves as sustainable elements". Cultures with the same climate are found here, and they have the same type of cultivation, the same three materials, and the same type of handicrafts. This region is close to the coastal area and the mountains, and in the hot regions, handicrafts such as making products through wooden baskets are very evident in the cultural heritage of these regions. This paper also states that Hand-woven art using palm leaves plays an active role in the lives of the people. It is very useful for protecting farmers from the rains of the weather, such as umbrellas and other tools. It is also very useful for making various types of tools for life. In addition, it is also used to protect them in the dark area [3].

M Srinivasarao said: The Nava Mahila Sahadharat Kendra has played a vital role in this transformation by training women in palm leaf product design, craft innovation, and entrepreneurship. Women from nearly ten surrounding villages regularly gather at this center to learn and collaborate, creating a supportive community of artisans. To date, nearly 4,000 women have benefitted from this initiative some by establishing home-based enterprises, while others have set up small-scale businesses to support their families. In 2013, Novel Limited, a multi-product international company headquartered in Palvancha, further strengthened this movement by establishing a Women Empowerment Center as part of its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program. By linking skill development with livelihood opportunities, this initiative not only preserves cultural heritage but also demonstrates the collective power of women in building sustainable futures.

a. Palm Leaf Products - Making Process

Raw materials: Each one product example small basket size: 10 x10 x 2 inches tray or box pooja basket: 7 x 3.5 x 7 inches creation so that what kind of material required (Table 1-3) (Figure 2 and 3).

Table 1: Materials & Tools.

Sl. N	Raw Materials	Use Purpose
1	Palm leaf	Main raw material for weaving baskets.
2	Cutter	For cutting palm leaves into required sizes.

Current Trends in Fashion Technology & Textile Engineering

3	Palm leaf split machine	To split palm leaves into strips.
4	Card board	Used as a base or support while shaping.
5	Measurement Tape	For accurate measurements.
6	Scissors	For cutting leaves, lace, or cloth
7	Fevicol	For sticking cloth, lace, or decorative parts
8	Coconut oil	To soften and polish palm leaf strips.
9	Lace	For decoration and finishing edges.
10	Cloth	For lining or covering basket inside.
11	Gas stove	For boiling and softening palm leaves.
12	Water	For soaking and boiling leaves.
13	Spoon	For mixing salt or handling boiling water.
14	Salt	Used in boiling to preserve palm leaves.
15	Coconut sticks	For framework or reinforcement.
16	Knife	For shaping and trimming.
17	Cane and bamboo wood peace	For strengthening structure
Raw materials, Natural leaves/strips, Cloth & lace (decoration), Cutting tools, trimming knife, Boiling/drying vessels, Measuring scale, Adhesive/thread.		

Table 2: Sizes (in Inches) - Raw Materials.

SL	Product Example	Size (Inches)	Raw Materials Required
1	Small Basket / Tray / Box	10 × 10 × 2	Palm leaves (4-5 leaves), Cutter, Palm leaf split machine, Cardboard (base), Measuring tape, Scissors, Fevicol, Cloth (lining), Lace (decoration), Knife, Coconut oil (softening), Cane/Bamboo strips (strengthening)
2	Pooja Basket (with handle)	7 × 3.5 × 7	Palm leaves (3-4 leaves), Cutter, Palm leaf split machine, Measuring tape, Scissors, Knife, Coconut sticks (handle support), Cane/Bamboo strips (frame), Fevicol, Cloth, Lace, Coconut oil, Gas stove + Water + Salt (for leaf boiling/softening)
3	Palm Leaf Tray	10 × 10 × 2	Palm leaves (4-5), Cutter, Split machine, Cardboard (base), Measuring tape, Scissors, Fevicol, Cloth lining, Lace, Knife, Coconut oil, Cane/Bamboo strips (frame)
4	Palm Leaf Gift Box	6 × 6 × 4	Palm leaves (3-4), Cutter, Split machine, Cardboard (inside support), Scissors, Fevicol, Cloth, Lace, Knife, Coconut oil
5	Rectangle Box	12 × 8 × 4	Palm leaves (6-7), Cutter, Split machine, Measuring tape, Cardboard, Knife, Cane strips (frame), Fevicol, Cloth, Lace, Scissors, Coconut oil
6	Medical Box (storage type)	14 × 10 × 6	Palm leaves (8-10), Cutter, Split machine, Cardboard (strength), Measuring tape, Scissors, Fevicol, Cloth lining, Cane/Bamboo (handle + frame), Knife, Coconut oil
7	Handle Basket	7 × 3.5 × 7	Palm leaves (3-4), Cutter, Split machine, Knife, Cane/Bamboo + Coconut sticks (handle), Cloth, Lace, Fevicol, Measuring tape, Coconut oil, Gas stove + Water + Salt (leaf boiling)
8	Palm Leaf Box (general)	8 × 8 × 4	Palm leaves (4-5), Cutter, Split machine, Cardboard, Cloth, Lace, Fevicol, Scissors, Knife, Coconut oil
Base: Length × Width, Height: Side wall, Extra: 1-1.5" (folding/finishing allowance)			

Table 3: Time & Wastage.

SL	Name of Product	Size inches	Hours	Wastage	Materials
1	Palm leaf Tray	10 × 10 × 2	2.5	8-10 %	Base: 10" × 10", Side strips: 2" height, Cane edge and Palm leaf.
2	Palm leaf gift box	6 × 6 × 4	7-May	6-8%	Base: 6" × 6", Side walls: 4" height, Lid optional.
3	Rectangle box	12 × 8 × 4	3-Feb	12-Oct	Base: 12" × 8", Height: 4", Frame reinforced with cane and Palm leaf
4	Medical box	14 × 10 × 6	7-May	12-15%	Base: 14" × 10", Height: 6", Divider optional, strong frame and Palm leaf
5	Handle basket	7 × 3.5 × 7	4-Mar	10-12%	Base: 7" × 3.5", Height: 7", Handle: coconut stick/cane, Palm leaf

6	Palm leaf Box	8 × 8 × 4	4-Feb	8-10%	Base: 8" × 8", Height: 4", Palm leaf & lace for finishing
7	Pooja basket:	10 x 10 x 2	4-Feb	42%	Base: 10" × 10", Height: 2", Palm leaf & lace for finishing

Time Duration depends on artisan skill, drying/boiling stage, and decoration (cloth, lace). Wastage % mostly from trimming, leaf breakage, and damaged strips after boiling. Measurements must include: Base length × width Height (side wall), Extra 1-1.5 inches allowance for folding & finishing



Figure 2: Team name: Instructor: Amuda senior artisan, group members: Sitara, Anitha, Padma, Ventana, Divya, Venkataramana, Satya etc. "Nava Bharat Palm Leaf Training: Women Empowerment - Basket Making".



Figure 3: "Primary study & artisan interviews on market, products, raw materials, and making process - Dr. Rambabu Muppidi".

b. Palm Leaf Products - Making Process

Palm leaves, once harvested from the tree, are carefully pro-

cessed before being crafted into products. The process generally involves three key methods of preparation (Chart 1)

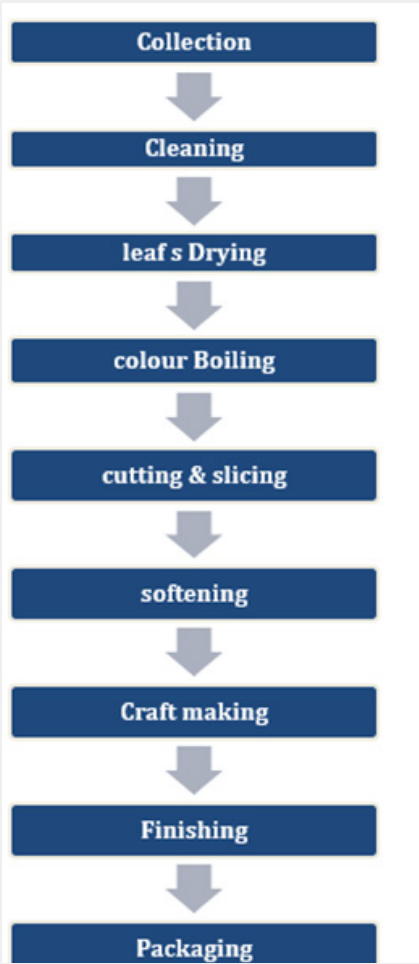


Chart 1: Eco friendly Palm leaf products making process.



Figure 4: Boiling & Coloring (Step-by-Step) - B. Swarupa Rani, Asst. Trainer.

i. Strips and Drying Method:

Fresh palm leaves are cut from the branches, and the sticks

are separated. The leaves are divided into thin strips, which are sun-dried until firm and ready for weaving. This is the most basic method of preparing palm leaves for use (Figure 4 and 5).



Figure 5: Boiling and Coloring Method.

ii. Boiling and Coloring Method:

In this method, dried palm leaves are cut into sections and boiled in a large vessel with natural or synthetic colors. Depending

on the duration of immersion, the strips absorb shades of green, yellow, orange, magenta, or natural tones. Once dried, these colored strips are used to weave mats, clothes, and decorative items (Figure 6).



Figure 6: The strips absorb shades of green, yellow, orange, magenta, or natural tones.

iii. Product Crafting Method:

For making items like baskets, hats, or boxes, palm strips are measured, cut, and woven. For example, a basket begins with a 12x12 inch base. Strips are interlaced at half-centimeter gaps,

layered, and tied step by step until the desired shape is achieved. Handles are added, and finishing touches such as trimming edges or decorating with beads give the product strength and beauty (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Multicolor palm leaf baskets made with natural dyes.

c. Brief

In the field of palm leaf handicrafts, modern technology particularly Computer-Aided Design (CAD) and Computer-Aided Manufacturing (CAM) has opened new possibilities for innovation and precision. Instead of relying only on traditional weaving, product designs can now be created digitally, allowing artisans to explore new forms while maintaining traditional aesthetics. Through CAD,

the color, shape, and pattern of palm leaf products can first be designed on the computer. These designs can be printed on paper and then used as templates for manual crafting. Similarly, using computer-edited manufacturing, patterns can be cut directly from paper, cardboard, jute, cloth, or other materials, and then arranged to replicate the intended product. When completed, such products closely resemble those made by hand, but with greater accuracy and consistency (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Computer-Aided Design (CAD) and Computer-Aided Manufacturing (CAM).

Advanced techniques like 3D modeling further expand creative possibilities, making it possible to design palm leaf products in diverse forms such as triangular, rectangular, elongated shapes, as well as various types of bags, baskets, and hats. With the support of CNC router machines, even complex shapes and color patterns can be cut and produced with precision, greatly enhancing

production efficiency. These innovations not only preserve the artistry of palm leaf craft but also bridge traditional skills with modern technology, enabling scalable production and the creation of artificial prototypes and product samples that serve both as teaching tools and as market-ready products.

d. Preserving Heritage

Training center Nava Women Empowerment Centre said: The products showcased here have been produced both in India and abroad. So far, we have trained over 1,800 women, creating meaningful employment opportunities for them. Additionally, have received advanced training, enabling them not only to develop their artistic skills but also to export their artworks to countries such as

the United States, Sri Lanka, Singapore, and others. Through our efforts, women from Bhadradi Kothagudem district and several other mandals have been empowered to excel in their chosen fields. Our goal is to help women achieve self-reliance and financial independence. The Nava Bharat Sadhikkara Kendra is committed to supporting this vision by offering a wide range of free training courses (Figure 9).



Figure 9: women empowerment Palm leaf products outcome.

A wide range of vocational courses have been specially designed for women, enabling them to gain practical skills and build sustainable careers. Many women are actively learning in areas such as jute bag making, computer embroidery, DTP, palm leaf craft, beautician, and tailoring courses. These programs are conducted under the guidance of expert trainers, who provide hands-on instruction and continuous support. Along with training, women are also provided with accommodation and job placement opportunities to ensure they can apply their skills effectively. It is noteworthy that a significant number of women from this center have already secured skill-based employment, contributing both to their personal empowerment and to the growth of the community.

Mrs. D. Amuda, Master trainer, (Nava Women Empowerment Centre) said: Her innovative methods in crafting palm leaf products have empowered many women through skill development training. Participants have learned to create a variety of products and gained multiple skills that enable them to become self-reliant. Many of these women have successfully set up their own shops, securing sustainable employment. The center also introduces new techniques in weaving colorful baskets using handwork combined with modern technology. Each training batch consists of 20 participants and runs for a period of three months. Upon completion,

trainees receive a stipend as support. Women from surrounding villages such as Erragundi, Sanjay Nagar, Palvancha, Sitarama Town, Dottaygudem, Kothagudem, and other nearby areas regularly attend these programs to acquire skills and build livelihoods.

Mrs. B. Aruna, Instructor, (Nava Women Empowerment Centre) said: we have a specialty of our own. Here, women are proving and proving the truth. Why are their products a testament to the creativity that is within them? Moreover, they weave baskets of various kinds. Mrs. K. Divya Instructor, (Nava Women Empowerment Centre) said: Nava Women Empowerment Centre has prepared many programs for women and provided them with many trainings. This organization also bears the bus and auto charges of Nariki. Apart from these, their great people are also giving them training here women who have completed their intermediate degree are also being trained well in MS Office, Power Point Presentation, Photoshop, Accountant and other subjects. With the aim of achieving this goal for women to grow economically, they complete this training within three months and are given many types of items, such as gift items and sweet box items. During the training, they are given a scholarship and a certificate after completing the training. A batch starts every three months and is very useful for women to learn (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Appendix Author Note: Dr. Rambabu Muppidi, Faculty & Accessories Designer, FDDI. Skill learning guided by Palm Leaf Trainer, Smt. Amuda.

National Handicraft Society – Showcasing Women’s Craft Power

The National Handicraft Society (DC handicrafts) has been instrumental in taking the products of rural women artisans to larger markets through exhibitions in metro cities such as Hyderabad, Visakhapatnam, Bangalore, and Vijayawada, as well as to northern regions of India. Beyond the national market, these women are also receiving international orders, particularly for beautifully crafted baskets, dowry products, hats, gift articles, and other utility and decorative items made from palm leaves and natural raw materials like Jute (Janapa Nara), Palm leaf. Their skill and dedication ensure that every product is of high quality, reflecting both tradition and innovation.

A team of leading industrialists recently visited the Women’s Empowerment Center at Palvancha to witness this remarkable work. They were highly impressed by the creativity and craftsmanship of the women artisans. Supporting this initiative are expert trainers from Hyderabad and various renowned institutions including design institutes, NJB the National Jute Board, JCI, FDDI, NIFT, and other universities. These trainers not only teach technical skills but also encourage the women and share valuable design knowledge. Such collaboration between artisans, trainers, and in-

dustry has created a strong platform for women’s empowerment. The achievements of these women deserve heartfelt appreciation as they continue to preserve tradition while excelling in modern markets.

Lively Wood – Skill Development through Palm Leaf Crafts

Lively Wood, a vocational and free training center located in Palvancha, has emerged as one of the most active hubs for skill development in the region. The center is closely linked with a palm leaf product manufacturing unit, where training is provided in both traditional and modern craft techniques. More than 1,000 participants have been trained here in designing and producing eco-friendly items using palm leaves, paper, cardboard, and other sustainable materials. Regular classes and workshops are conducted to equip trainees with hands-on knowledge of product design, weaving, and craft innovation. The initiative functions under a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program, ensuring that training is accessible to women, youth, and marginalized communities free of cost. By combining livelihood opportunities with creativity, Lively Wood not only supports economic empowerment but also encourages the preservation of cultural crafts through skill development and sustainable product innovation.

Conclusion

Palm leaf artisans are gradually disappearing in today's digital age. Learning and preserving this craft is both beautiful and essential. Livelihoods depend on people, raw materials, transportation, and digital media. However, artisans often struggle due to lack of fair prices for their products. Many women and families are engaged in this art, and it is our responsibility to support their dreams and protect the craft for future generations. Promotion through digital media can create wider awareness and provide sustainable livelihoods. If the government identifies and supports around 200 families in this sector by issuing artisan ID cards and giving them platforms to sell at places like IHGF Delhi Fair, EPCH, and Shilparamam Hyderabad, their reach can expand to cities and metros.

Training artisans in both traditional and digital methods, including computer-aided design and online marketing, can open international opportunities. With guidance from experts and professors in premier institutes like IIT, FDDI, NID, and NIFT, along

with PhD scholars in handicrafts, artisans can gain valuable technical and knowledge support. Such initiatives will ensure knowledge sharing, empowerment, and long-term sustainability of palm leaf crafts. "By documenting the methods and preserving the process of making, we can safeguard this craft for future generations. Moreover, if the products are documented, preserved, and displayed in museums, the art will have a greater chance of survival and recognition."

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DOI: [10.19080/CTFTTE.2025.09.555768](https://doi.org/10.19080/CTFTTE.2025.09.555768)

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