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Challenges to Sustainable Growth of the Micro-scale Kuhila Craft Industry of India

Prarthana Majumdar and Sharmistha Banerjee

Abstract The Micro and Small Scale Enterprises (MSMEs) in Handicrafts form an important part of the Indian economy. Yet, in the post liberalization era since 1991, MSMEs have fallen considerably behind the national growth rate. Besides the economic threats from opening up the economy to competing global MNCs, and the government's withdrawal of subsidies, several socio-cultural factors have also stymied the growth of these enterprises. Notable among them are the gradual westernization of culture, rural education, urban immigration and the changing gender and generational relations in artisan families. This paper focuses on one such micro scale handicraft industry in rural North East India (Assam), namely, the Kuhila craft industry and studies the challenges that this industry is facing in economic, social and cultural fronts. It also investigates the effects of environmental changes and its ability to pose as a potential threat to this industry in future.

Keywords Kuhila · Handicraft · Sustainability · Micro and small scale enterprises

1 Introduction

In a developing country like India, craft production, as an occupation, is usually taken up by the poor and marginalized hoping to achieve economic freedom through their skills. Craft production is often perceived as a '*weapon of the weak*', an activity for those living in the fringes of the economy [1]. Since the economic

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reform of India in 1991, the government has withdrawn several protective measures for the MSMEs, exposing them to fierce competition from Large Scale Enterprises (LSEs) and decreasing their profitability [2]. As an aftermath, the growth rates of MSME units and their employment generation has dipped heavily in the post liberalization era [3]. Recognizing the economic importance of MSMEs, the government has started several training and financing programs through area Block¹ offices. However, these programs are far from wholesome. In order to be able to convert the threats of globalization and competition to opportunities, these units have to remodel their business canvasses and focus on making more market oriented products.

The vast universe of handicraft MSMEs in India at various stages of growth provides excellent natural experiments to understand the success of different business models. This paper focuses on one such micro scale handicraft industry in rural North East India, namely, the Kuhila craft industry. We investigate the challenges that this industry faces in not just the changing economy, but also in the face of the degrading environment and the tectonic shifts in the socio-cultural fabric of India. It is barely enough to associate growth with just an *economic bottom-line* today. *Sustainable growth* of a business implies greater wellbeing in four dimensions in the modern definition: *Economic, Environmental, Social and Cultural* [4]. Understanding the challenges that a business faces in each dimensions can aid in tackling such threats in a piecemeal manner. The micro scale of the industry also presents unique strengths and weaknesses that require careful consideration in the business model.

2 Methodology

For this study, we interviewed the small community of Kuhila craftsmen in the Nagaon district of Assam (India) through semi-structured interviews. We investigated about their business models through questions such as: 1. What are your products and who are your consumers? 2. What are your current revenue streams, costs and distribution channels? Our interviews also investigated about their raw materials, tools and production techniques. Furthermore, we probed into the socio-cultural aspects of their lives through questions pertaining to their level of education, their source of inspiration for making new products, their working hours and other activities, their desire to continue with the family trade, the role of women and children in making the crafts, use of internet and cell phones, coordination with other craftsmen in the area, etc. We also interacted with their families to understand the familial social dynamics better.

¹Block is a sub-district level administration in India. For administrative purposes, a district administration is divided into—Taluks, blocks, panchayats and villages.

3 Observations and Discussions

3.1 *The Kuhila Handicraft and the Artisan Community*

The Kuhila craft, though a micro-scale cottage industry, is a famed handicraft of the Batadrava area of Nagaon district in Assam. Its heightened importance stems from its historical attachment with *Vaishnavism*.² Kuhila has been used for centuries for making colorful masks in mythological plays called *Bhaonas*.³ It is also used for making prayer mats, idols, decorative artifacts and toys (Figs. 1, 2 and 3).

Kuhila is a very lightweight, inflammable material obtained from the stem of the two plants (*Aeschynomene aspera*, *Aeschynomene indica*) which grow in swampy areas [5]. This material, once dried, does not absorb water and is immune to fungus attacks. It has very high tensile strength along the direction of the fiber. The glue used during the process is made by boiling fiddlehead fern.

Kuhila cultivation is very similar to rice cultivation. But the manual harvesting process is more challenging since the swamps in which they grow can be several feet deep. It is harvested once a year after the rainy season. The craft material is obtained by drying the portion of the stem that was submerged in water during the growth stage, manually removing the dark colored bark and drying the pith in the sun. The dried Kuhila stems are then stored in overhead rooftop compartments.

The cultivation and harvesting is usually done by Bengali Muslim immigrants in the area whereas, the making of the crafts is done by 4–5 artisan families in the area. Historically, the trade has been confined within lineages, but of late, due to dwindling number of artisans involved in the trade, the senior most artist has trained a few other interested youths in the area. The ability to conveniently store Kuhila makes it possible for the artists to be employed all throughout the year.

Most of these crafts are sold outside temple premises and the more exquisitely designed decorative pieces are sold in exhibitions all across the country. These exhibitions are organized by the government to sustain and promote these craft industries. The state also supports them with artist's allowance and pension. Though the industry has managed to survive for centuries, its growth has been stymied by several socio-cultural and economic factors. The industry is heavily dependent on Vaishnavite patrons for the sale of its bestselling products: the mythological masks and the prayer mats.

²*Vaishnavism*: Major sect in Hinduism that considers Lord Vishnu as the Supreme Lord.

³*Bhaona*: A traditional play in Assamese, always carrying a religious message of Vaishnavism. Such plays were originally creations of Srimanta Sankardev.



Fig. 1 A kuhila craftsman slicing a sheet from the kuhila stem using a knife

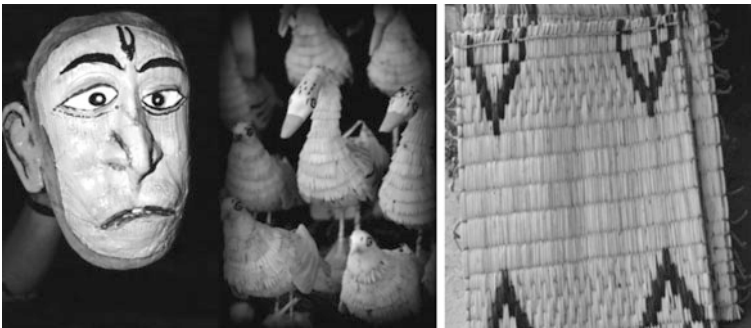


Fig. 2 A kuhila mask, crafted animals and a mat



Fig. 3 Glue made from fiddlehead fern and an overhead compartment storing kuhila stems

3.2 Economy: External and Internal Barriers

For centuries, the Kuhila craft industry has sustained as a small cluster of family businesses making products specifically aligned with the religious and cultural

aspects of Vaishnavism. The craftsmen and their families have lived a marginalized existence in the periphery of an economy that has been growing rapidly for years. Several *internal* and *external* barriers can be identified as causes for lower economic growth among these families compared to the nationwide growth.

3.2.1 Internal Factors

One of the strongest causes of economic backwardness among these artisans is the lack of education. Though financial aid offered by the government is highly insufficient to stimulate growth in such industries, it is argued that the lack of education and managerial skills might be directly responsible for the inability to raise capital by these craftsmen [6]. In the present age, several Indian craft companies like Oxfam and Craftsbridge have taken to successful organic marketing on social media publicizing the stories of the maker communities [7]. The Kuhila craftsmen demonstrated no knowledge of the existence of such avenues and were unaware of sites like Pinterest and Etsy through which they could reach millions of buyers in first world countries. These entrepreneurial deficiencies cannot be traced back solely to the lack of education; the underlying disposition of the craftsmen also contributes in making them less enterprising than optimal [8]. The artisans exhibited a clear sense of pride with their art form with an undertone of resistance towards falling back completely on making commercial crafts for mass consumption. This attitude will potentially save this craft from transforming a valued craft to a mass manufactured commodity. Nevertheless, crafts need not always be commoditized in order to be commercialized. Kenya, for instance, has developed its craft industry to appeal specifically to western ethnic tastes and have frequently used '*Free Trade*' as a means of promoting their crafts in western households [9]. There is another inherent barrier to growth that is commonly faced by small family businesses. While the minimization of organization, accounting and paperwork generates internal economies, this can render it very inconvenient for the business to scale up [10].

3.2.2 External Factors

There are several external factors that impede the growth of a micro scale and geographically isolated industry like the Kuhila craft industry. Most challenging of them is the competition that its quotidian crafts face from synthetic or other substitutes, e.g. Kuhila mats are replaced by PVC mats, Kuhila animals are replaced by plastic toys and Kuhila paper is replaced by A grade paper from bamboo. The industry has also not been able to properly channel its products to an appropriate consumer base. The external factors can be further divided under the following heads.

Lack of access to capital: The industry has few revenue streams and limited reinvestments into the business. The Government aids available are utilized for the subsistence of the artisan families and are barely enough to stimulate growth.

Lack of access to markets: The industry is located in the remote district of Nagaon in India. Besides the lack of physical proximity to the major markets in India, the industry also does not have an online presence. Most of their selling outlets are located outside the famous Vaishnavite shrines or in stalls at Government organized national level expos. These exhibitions have limited reach and do not aid in building a buying community like online campaigns do.

Long supply chains: Nagaon is located about 122 km from the nearest city, Guwahati. The inadequate transport systems of the region have led the industry to have a very long supply chain. Since the craftsmen are not organized as a cluster, they have not realized the economies of transporting in bulk and designing their products for easy transport.

3.3 Ecology: The Dwindling Wetlands

Micro and Small scale enterprises are continually faced with the external problem of living in an economy where government policies favor the LSE's in resource allocation [11]. However, the Kuhila Craft Industry, with no big competitor for raw material, is currently faced with a resource problem of another kind: depleting raw materials due to degradation of the wetlands. Anthropogenic activities like garbage dumping, residential and commercial developments, encroachment and setting up of fisheries are primarily responsible for the shrinkage of the wetlands. Most people in the district depend on these wetlands for their day to day activities like bathing, washing clothes and disposing sanitary waste. Besides the decay in the quality of the wetlands, there is a need for conservation as poaching of aquatic birds and animals have lead to an alarming decrease in flora and fauna [5]. Since the Kuhila Craft Industry is still a micro-scale industry, it has not yet been severely affected by the gradual decrease in raw materials. However, if this industry is to commercialize and scale up in future, it will find itself in a *Catch 22* situation where scaling up will need more raw materials but the over-utilization of resources will in turn limit its growth process.

3.4 The Social Fragility

The Kuhila Craft Industry comprises entirely of small family based production units run from homes. Being a household activity, the industry is structurally underpinned by generational and gender relations at home [12]. Craft industries that are run as family business are as volatile to sociological changes as they are to economic parameters. One notable risk that the Kuhila industry inherently suffers from, is the lack of diversified sources of family income which makes this trade

disproportionately susceptible to market failures [13]. The lure of stable incomes through jobs in cities have already led several young members of the artisan families to leave the family trade in search of greener pastures.

The Kuhila craftsmen expressed great sense of pride for the recognition that the government gives and for the financial independence that they have gained through their art. They expressed a distinct sentiment that is commonly seen in artists, namely, '*Art over Commercialization*'. Nevertheless, it is the same sentiment that might risk losing the new members of their families who may value economic well-being more than their predecessor's sense of pride. The Government of India's 'Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan', which aims for free and compulsory education for children aged between 6–14 years, has been a *silver lining* for these artisan families [14]. The craftsmen also exhibited a sense of fulfillment with the technical training programs that the Government organized through the area Block Office. These programs, however, are far from wholesome as they focus only on skill development. The craftsmen are not educated in crucial aspects like marketing, branding, packaging, supply chain management, negotiations with suppliers and use of the internet. Providing these families with free education and no substantial support henceforth, only leaves the exit door open for this industry.

Another interesting aspect of the Kuhila craft industry is that even though it is a family trade, historically women have not taken an active part in either making the craft, growing and harvesting Kuhila or in the supply chain management. Though, if we look at craft industries across India that do employ women, their commercialization have almost always pushed the less-dominant women down the value chain to become the worker-manufacturers. The case of the famous Lucknow Chikan Embroidery industry can be taken up as an apt example. With the scaling up of the industry, most of the original skilled male embroiders went on to become middle men on the supply end. The industry started employing women to fill in the vacuum left by the male embroiders. However, the system gradually started becoming exploitative for the women employees. They had to work part time at home and earned very low wages for their work. The increasing pressure of market demand due to low prices gradually also led to deterioration in the quality of the craft [15]. Given the micro-scale of this industry and its social fragility, any future efforts to incorporate social sustainability into this industry would require careful consideration of these challenges.

3.5 The Shifting Winds of Cultural Trends

Crafts from all across India have witnessed stiff competition from foreign made goods and commodities associated with western culture. Globalization and the process of economic liberalization, opened up the Indian markets to superior technology from the developed countries and the cheap-factory made goods from developing countries. For instance, with the expiration of the Multi Fiber Agreement (MFA) in 2005, Indian markets found themselves flooded with cheap, 'fast-fashion' clothes made in

China and Bangladesh. However, the decrease in domestic popularity of Indian crafts cannot fully be attributed to the opening up of the Indian markets. The change in ethnic tastes of the consumers also finds its roots in the cultural hegemony of the West. Not long ago, Vaishnavism was a way of life for people in several districts in Assam. Today, with the trickling down of Westernization to rural India, there has been a decline in interest in the religious-cultural aspects of Vaishnavism as well as in the crafts and artefacts associated with it. The only hopeful prospect for craft industries like the Kuhila industry is to look beyond domestic consumers, redefine their value proposition and find new market niches.

The imports of artisanal products are mostly dominated by four countries currently-US, Germany, UK and France [16]. Such markets hold promising prospects for rare and exotic crafts like the Kuhila products. With the renaissance of the 'earthly' and 'natural' forms of interior décor, there has been a surge in interest in crafts from the developing countries. Kuhila artisans can heighten the sense of 'eco-friendliness' in their products to appeal to such consumers. They can also narrate the tales of their community as a marketing tool to connect to shoppers who care to read the labels on handicraft products. Crafts, in fact, serve as an excellent medium of communication between people living profoundly varied lives and the communities who make them in different countries [17]. The only caveat here is that these craftsmen, with their limited schooling and training, are unaware of such avenues.

4 Conclusion

A detailed analysis of the centuries old Kuhila craft industry revealed several economic and socio-cultural challenges and future environmental threats that this industry faces today. Along with the Government, several NGOs have extended help to such MSMEs in an effort to fuel growth in this sector. However, to ensure sustainable growth in such micro scale industries, far more comprehensive planning and implementation is required than the current level of involvement from the Government and NGOs. Besides the conventional growth strategies, any sustainable business model for this industry will require careful social and organizational design and a deep understanding of cultural trends. It is also essential to show such communities the threats arising from a rapidly changing environment. By making forest and water bodies more economically valuable to them, we indirectly sow the seeds of conservation.

5 Future Work

As future work, we plan to explore how design intervention can help this industry to make products with higher commercial value and suitable for new distribution channels. This exercise would include redesigning the current products as well as innovating new products and production techniques with the Kuhila material. We intend to work on such items as a non-slip yoga mat, window blinds, toys for babies, high-end shopping bags and stationery, shop window installations and decorative masks. We also wish to educate these craftsmen on using distribution channels such as Etsy, Pinterest and home décor showrooms. We seek inspiration from projects such as “Dutch Design meets Bamboo as a Replicable Model” that brought out new composites, surface finishes and furniture designs using bamboo [18]. We hope to contribute towards greater commercial use of eco-materials such as Kuhila and also help the craftsmen community to work together as a cluster in the production of the new products.

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