

“Changing Livelihood Patterns and Challenges among Mahali Bamboo Artisans in Bankura District, West Bengal”

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ABSTRACT

The Mahali community, a small artisan Scheduled Tribe of West Bengal, is traditionally engaged in bamboo handicrafts that play an important role in both livelihood and cultural identity, as bamboo-based production provides employment opportunities through the use of locally available resources and skills passed down across generations (Census of India, 2011; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014). This study examines the significance of bamboo handicrafts among Mahali artisans in Bankura district, focusing on products such as baskets, bamboo containers, brooms, and woven bamboo structures, and is based on a qualitative and ethnographic approach involving field observation and interaction with artisan households to understand production techniques, skill transmission, and economic dependence on craft activities. The findings show that bamboo craftsmanship continues to support household subsistence, although artisans face several challenges, including declining demand, competition from plastic goods, rising raw material costs, and limited institutional support, while also highlighting the potential of bamboo handicrafts as an eco- friendly rural industry that requires improved market access and supportive policy measures for its sustainability.

Key Words: Mahali community; bamboo handicrafts; livelihood patterns; rural artisans; Bankura district; socio-economic conditions; traditional crafts; sustainable livelihood; tribal economy; rural development.

INTRODUCTION

Handicrafts have long formed a vital part of rural economies in India, supporting income generation while preserving cultural traditions and community identity. They reflect indigenous knowledge and social practices developed over generations (Dhamija, 1992). In tribal societies, craft activities are closely connected with locally available natural resources and inherited occupational roles, making them an essential component of the rural socio-economic system (Singh, 2008). Bamboo, as a widely available natural resource in eastern India, plays a significant role in rural livelihoods (Singh, 2008; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014).

It is used to produce a variety of items such as household utensils, agricultural tools, storage containers, fencing materials, and construction structures due to its durability, flexibility, and renewable nature. These qualities make bamboo suitable for sustainable livelihood practices and rural development (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014).

The Mahalis are considered a branch of the Santal tribe and are traditionally associated with bamboo craftsmanship; their principal occupation involves making baskets and similar utensils (Risley, 1891). The Mahali community of West Bengal is traditionally known for its association with bamboo handicrafts and is distributed across districts such as Bankura, Purulia, and Birbhum (Census of India, 2011). Their livelihood largely depends on bamboo- based

production, which supports household income and daily needs. However, in recent years, changing socio-economic conditions, declining demand for traditional products, and increasing competition from modern materials have created serious challenges for sustaining this occupation, making it necessary to examine their livelihood patterns in the context of changing socio-economic conditions.

OBJECTIVES

The present study seeks to understand the livelihood patterns and changing socio-economic Bankura district conditions of the Mahali bamboo artisans in Bankura District, West Bengal. It aims to document the traditional bamboo handicrafts produced by the community and to examine the indigenous knowledge and techniques involved in craft production. The study also explores the role of bamboo craftsmanship in sustaining household income and rural livelihood among Mahali families while assessing their existing socio-economic conditions. In addition, attention is given to the major challenges affecting artisans, including declining market demand, competition from industrial products, rising raw material costs, and the impacts of modernization. The study further attempts to consider the possibilities for preservation, promotion, and sustainable development of traditional bamboo handicrafts within the changing rural economy.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative research methodology to understand the socio-cultural life, traditional practices, and changing livelihood patterns of the Mahali community in Bankura district of West Bengal. The research is exploratory and descriptive in nature, aiming to document traditional bamboo handicrafts and examine contemporary transformations in the community's economic and cultural life. An ethnographic approach was followed to understand indigenous knowledge, customs, and artisanal practices through direct interaction with community members and observation of their daily activities. The study was conducted in selected area Rajamela, Handibhanga Bajapathar and other villages of Bankura district, located in the western part of West Bengal, where a significant population of the Mahali community resides and continues traditional bamboo craftsmanship. The area was selected because of the presence of active artisans and the continuity of cultural practices related to bamboo handicrafts.

Both primary and secondary sources of data were used for the research. Primary data were collected through field surveys, participant observation, semi-structured interviews with artisans, elders, and household members, as well as focus group discussions within the community. Informal conversations during field visits also helped in understanding livelihood practices, production processes, and social conditions. Secondary data were gathered from Census reports, government publications, books, academic journals, and research articles related to tribal communities, handicrafts, and rural livelihood studies. A purposive sampling method was adopted to select respondents who possess knowledge about traditional crafts, social customs, and community history. Approximately 58 respondents, including artisans, household heads, and community leaders, participated in the study.

The collected information was analyzed using thematic analysis, where responses were categorized into themes such as livelihood patterns, cultural identity, craftsmanship, and socio-economic challenges. Qualitative interpretation was applied to understand patterns of continuity and change within the community. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process by obtaining prior consent from participants and respecting local customs and cultural values. Although the study provides detailed insights into the Mahali community of selected villages, it is limited by geographical scope and time constraints, and therefore the findings may not represent all

Mahali populations in other regions.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION TYPES OF PRODUCT

A. **BASKET:-** The basket is the main economic product among many bamboo handicraft items produced by artisans. It plays an important role in sustaining household income and serves as a primary source of livelihood for many families. This product is highly significant in daily life as it is widely used for carrying, storing, and transporting agricultural and household materials. Artisans manufacture different types of baskets according to need and demand, including small, medium, and large sizes. Each type of basket is designed for specific purposes such as household use, market activities, and agricultural work, making it an essential and functional handicraft product in rural society.

B. **KULO :-** Kulo is an important traditional bamboo product widely used in daily village life. It is mainly used for cleaning and separating grains such as paddy, rice, and wheat. Through the process of winnowing, the kulo helps separate clean grains from dust, husk, and other unwanted materials. This product plays a significant role in household agricultural activities and reflects traditional indigenous knowledge and craftsmanship. Due to its practical utility and low cost, the kulo remains an essential item in rural communities.

C. **ROUND BAMBOO WALL:-** The round bamboo wall is an important handicraft product made by traditional bamboo artisans. It is mainly used for protecting and supporting young plants and small trees during their early growth stages. These circular bamboo structures act as guards that prevent damage from animals, human disturbance, and environmental factors. Under many government plantation programs, especially along highways and national roads, round bamboo walls are widely used for tree protection. Due to increasing roadside afforestation projects, the demand for round bamboo walls has grown, creating an important source of income and livelihood opportunities for rural bamboo artisans. This product therefore holds both environmental and economic significance in rural areas.

D. **BAMBOO WALL :-**Bamboo walls are very important traditional products used for temporary construction in rural areas. Villagers commonly use bamboo walls to make temporary kitchens, sheds, and household enclosures, especially during festivals, agricultural seasons, or while constructing permanent houses. These walls are lightweight, low-cost, and easy to install and remove. Bamboo walls also provide proper ventilation and natural cooling, making them suitable for rural living conditions. Because of their affordability and availability, bamboo walls remain an essential part of village life and contribute to the livelihood of bamboo artisans.

E. **OTHER BAMBOO HANDICRAFT PRODUCT:-**Apart from baskets, kulo, and bamboo walls, bamboo artisans in rural West Bengal produce a variety of other important handicraft items such as chatai (bamboo mats), mora (bamboo stools), dala (bamboo trays), fishing traps like bansi and khaloi, bamboo fences (bera), bamboo ladders, and bamboo hand fans. These products serve multiple purposes in daily life, including sitting, drying agricultural products, carrying goods, fishing, protecting fields, and household cooling. They are lightweight, eco-friendly, and cost-effective, making them highly useful in rural society. The production of these items reflects traditional skills and indigenous knowledge, while also providing significant livelihood opportunities and supporting the rural economy.

RAW MATERIALS

Bamboo is the primary raw material used in the production of handicraft items in the study area. Artisans generally collect bamboo from nearby villages and local surroundings. Several varieties of bamboo, such as Beseni, Talta, and Muli, grow in this region and are suitable for different types of weaving and craftwork. Bamboo that is approximately two to three years old is considered most suitable for weaving because it possesses adequate strength and flexibility. The price of bamboo varies according to its quality and size, usually ranging between ₹100 and ₹120 per piece. Typically, each household collects one to three bamboo culms at a time, as bamboo cannot be stored for long periods after harvesting. If left unused for many days, it becomes dry and loses its flexibility, making it difficult to use in weaving and handicraft production. Therefore, bamboo plays a crucial role in sustaining both production activities and the livelihood of rural artisans.

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

The income data is based on a field survey conducted in three villages of Bankura district, namely Rajamela, Bajapathar and Hanribhanga, village covering a total of 87 households. The analysis clearly indicates that the majority of families fall within the lower income categories. Out of the total households, 12 families (13.79%) have a monthly income ranging between Rs. 2,000–2,500, while the largest group, 27 families (31.03%), falls within the income range of Rs. 2,500–3,500. Further, 18 families (20.69%) earn between Rs. 4,000–4,500, and 21 families (24.14%) fall within the income group of Rs. 5,000–6,000, whereas only 9 families (10.34%) belong to the comparatively higher income category of Rs. 6,000–7,000 per month, indicating that most households are concentrated in the lower and lower- middle income groups with limited economic stability and dependence on low-paying and irregular sources of livelihood.

The income generated from bamboo handicrafts is relatively low; therefore, the study area has very limited industrial development and a scarcity of alternative employment opportunities. As a result, most households remain dependent on traditional craft-based work for their livelihood. However, despite these economic limitations, bamboo handicrafts continue to play a crucial role in providing a basic level of financial security to the Mahali community. This occupation helps ensure the fulfillment of essential household needs such as food, clothing, and other daily requirements. In many cases, it remains the primary source of income for sustaining rural families. Therefore, although the earnings are modest and unstable, bamboo craftsmanship still serves as an important livelihood support system within the local socio-economic structure.

CHALLENGES

The Mahali community, currently facing several socio-economic and cultural challenges that threaten the sustainability of their occupation. Although bamboo craft has long been an important source of livelihood and cultural identity, changing economic conditions and modernization have created serious difficulties for artisans.

A. Competition from Plastic and Industrial Products

One of the biggest challenges is the rapid spread of plastic and factory-made goods. Plastic baskets, containers, and household items are cheaper, easily available, and more durable according to modern consumers. As a result, the demand for traditional bamboo products has significantly declined, reducing the income of Mahali artisans.

B. Declining Traditional Market Demand

Earlier, bamboo products were essential items in rural households for agriculture and daily use. With lifestyle changes and modernization, many traditional items such as kulo, baskets, and bamboo walls are used less frequently. This decline in traditional demand directly affects production and sales.

C. Dependence on Middlemen and Limited Market Access

Most Mahali artisans lack direct access to organized or urban markets and therefore depend heavily on traders or middlemen to sell their products. In the study area, local markets such as Bankura, Raniganj, Bishnupur, Khatra, and Borjora function as important trading centers. However, only a small number of artisans are able to sell their products directly to customers.

The majority sell their goods to middlemen at comparatively low prices, resulting in minimal profit margins. Field observations indicate that a bamboo basket sold directly in the market can earn an artisan approximately ₹80 per piece, whereas selling the same product to a middleman provides only about ₹50. This price disparity highlights the economic disadvantage faced by artisans due to intermediary control over marketing and distribution. As a result, artisans remain economically dependent and experience unstable income.

D. Rising Cost and Scarcity of Raw Materials

Bamboo, the main raw material, has become costly and sometimes difficult to obtain due to deforestation, restricted forest access, and market price increases. Higher raw material costs reduce profit margins for artisans.

E. Low Income and Labour-Intensive Production

Another major challenge faced by Mahali artisans is the low financial return compared to the labour invested in production. Field observations indicate that a single bamboo pole costs approximately ₹100–₹120 in the local market. From one bamboo, artisans are able to produce around ten baskets, which together are sold for nearly ₹500.

However, the production process is highly labour-intensive. Usually, two artisans work together for about two days to complete the entire process, including cutting, splitting, shaping, weaving, and finishing the baskets. When the total income is divided according to labour and time invested, the daily earning per artisan becomes very low. This imbalance between production cost, labour input, and market return highlights the economic vulnerability of Mahali artisans and makes bamboo handicraft a less sustainable livelihood option.

F. Unavailability of Raw Materials

The unavailability of adequate raw materials is another significant problem faced by Mahali bamboo artisans. Most artisans depend on locally available bamboo, which they collect or purchase from nearby villagers rather than from organized plantations or large-scale suppliers. The study area does not have sufficient bamboo cultivation or large-scale production, resulting in an irregular supply of raw materials.

Due to limited availability, artisans often face delays in production and are unable to maintain continuous work throughout the year. The scarcity of bamboo also increases its market price, further raising production costs and reducing profit margins. This dependence on small local sources makes the livelihood of Mahali artisans highly vulnerable and uncertain.

CONCLUSION

The present study examines the changing livelihood patterns and challenges faced by Mahali bamboo artisans in Bankura District, West Bengal. It highlights the close relationship between traditional craftsmanship, cultural identity, and the rural subsistence economy. The findings show that bamboo handicraft production remains an important source of livelihood, with products such as baskets, kulo, bamboo walls, and round guards reflecting indigenous skills passed down through generations. However, despite its cultural significance, the occupation faces serious challenges. Income from craft production is low and unstable due to labour-intensive work, rising raw material costs, and limited market access. The growing use of plastic and factory-made goods has reduced demand for traditional bamboo products.

The study further reveals that dependence on middlemen, lack of institutional support, and irregular availability of bamboo increase livelihood insecurity. Younger generations are gradually shifting to alternative occupations. Nevertheless, bamboo handicrafts hold strong potential as an eco-friendly and sustainable industry, if supported through better market access, policy initiatives, and skill development programs.

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