

Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Women Kantha Artisans: A Case Study of Birbhum District of West Bengal

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Abstract

Kantha stitch craft is considered as one of the primitive folk arts of undivided Bengal. This intricate art form reflects the self-expression of the artisans, mainly women from generation to generation. The form flourished in few parts of Birbhum district in West Bengal. Low fertility rate of the soil of the agricultural lands led to this art form being one of the main economic resources for the people of this region. It has also been playing a significant role in the empowerment of rural women over the years. Though originally produced in nakshi kantha form, an embroidered quilt, this type of craft is also being used in other products like sarees, dresses, bags, and other accessories following the demand of the age. The Kantha stitch products are not only confined to the local market. Participation in different fairs and exhibitions at national and international levels expands the market of Kantha through different agencies both government and voluntary. Two years long Covid 19 pandemic left a major impact on every sphere of the economy including micro and small-scale industries. Therefore, it takes a toll upon the means of livelihood of the people involved in this industry. In this scenario this study entails field research to look out for the present condition of production and marketing avenues of this art form and livelihood of the women artisans with special reference to Birbhum district, West Bengal.

Key Words

Folk Art, Kantha Stitch, Women Artisan, Covid 19 Pandemic, Economy, Women Empowerment

Introduction

Folk art forms in India were mainly originated as a part of ritualistic practices of diverse traditional communities across the country (Milford-Lutzker, 1999). Rituals are closely interwoven with rites of passage such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death (LaDuke, 1981). Ancient forms of floor paintings like Alpana, Rangoli, Kolam, Mandana and so on emerged in different provinces of India as a ritual or brata. All these folk-art forms were developed to celebrate rites of passage in the human life cycle. Nature, fertility, agricultural productivity, victory of good over evil etc. correspondingly constructed omnipresent facets of traditional folk arts of India. Art historian Partha Mitter (2001) interpreted Kantha stitch or quilt embroidery of Bengal as an extension of traditional floor painting, Alpana. Similar to Alpana, Kantha art was also flourished by women as a domestic art in undivided Bengal. According to the seminal book *The Aesthetics and Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha* written by Perveen Ahmad, Kantha stitch considered as "... multi-layered wrap or spread, stitched with minute needle work to obtain a thickness which reinforces the worn-out cloth of which it is made (Ahmad, 1997, p. iii)."

South Asian art expert Stella Krimrisch first came in Visva Bharati University in invitation of Rabindranath Tagore and later she joined University of Calcutta. Krimrisch in the year 1939 first documented Kantha stitch as a distinct form of Indian traditional art. She explained that the root of Kantha craft was deeply rooted with the history of Portuguese colony of Bengal in sixteenth century. Historians assumed that this form of needle work was initially produced for the market of Portugal. However, the arrival of East India Company marked the beginning of machine-made clothes which occupied the textile industry of Bengal as well as India during the British colonial era (Krimrisch, 1939). Professor at University of Dhaka, Niaz Zaman (1993) analysed the process of revival of Kantha art in post-liberation war period (1971) in East Pakistan or Bangladesh by non-governmental organizations. The initiatives

were taken by the NGOs like Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Kumudini and others played significant role in commercialisation of Kantha stitch of Jessore, Kushtia, Faridpur, Mymensingh, Bogra, Khulna and Rajshahi districts of Bangladesh (Zaman & Stevulak, 2021). In West Bengal, Santiniketan gharana of Kantha stitch was shaped as village art by Hindu and Muslim women of Birbhum and Purba Bardhaman districts.

Nakshi Katha along with Darjeeling Tea, Gobindo Bhog Rice, Wooden Mask of Kushmandi, Madurkathi, Baluchari Saree, Santiniketan Leather Goods received the tag of GI (Geographical Indication) product of West Bengal. In contemporary market condition Nakshi Kantha is mainly popularised for its intricate needle work in cotton, silk, tussar materials on sarees, dupattas, bed covers, bags and various other products. According to the statistics of Birbhum District Rural Development Cell (DRDC), presently over one lakh rural women are engaged in the production of Katha stitch products in different blocks of this district.

The onset of Covid-19 pandemic left a major impact on each and every sphere of Indian socio-economic milieu. According to a report of International Labour Organization (ILO), prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 in India economic growth of the country was already at a slower pace and the pandemic situation increased the severity of the fiscal condition. The report published in the year 2020 speculated that “the number of workers vulnerable to the lockdown could reach 364 million or more, including those in casual work, self-employment and unprotected regular jobs (lacking social protection coverage) (p.1)”. Firstly, nationwide complete lockdown during the first wave; secondly, severe crisis of second wave; and thirdly, the omicron led highly contagious third wave of Covid-19 disease affected the livelihood of Kantha artisans like other traditional folk forms. In this backdrop this study is being undertaken to throw light on the present condition of livelihood of women Kantha artisans of West Bengal.

Literature Review

Kantha Stitch Industry: Economic Empowerment of Rural Artisans

Roy & Biswas (2011) in a study on craftswomen of Kantha stitch analysed the value-chain of Kantha industry with pertinent constraints and opportunities. After an analysis of responses taken from 100 artisans of Santiniketan area researchers emphasised on the need for structured marketing policy of Kantha stitch products. In another article, researchers elucidated the role of Kantha craft in empowering women of West Bengal by comparing two clusters of Birbhum and North 24 Parganas. This form of needle art has flourished through the domestic spectrum and in an intrinsic way it is associated with the of empowerment of rural women workforce (Debnath & Palit, 2017). Ahamed & Karim (2019) in their study showed the socio-economic condition of artisans of Birbhum districts by conducting door to door surveys among 100 artisans on the basis of their income and future aspirations. Research study on collaborative business model of Kantha art pointed out few drawbacks of commercial endeavour of this artwork like lack of innovative design, marketing facility, absence of institutional-designer-brand collaboration and dependency on middleman (Palit, 2021). In all these research articles authors felt the requirement of transformation in marketing strategy and implementation of organised business models of Kantha artwork.

Impact of Global Pandemic on Art & Craft

An American study on the impact of Covid 19 revealed that artistic and cultural forms faced serious economic challenges by the eruption of coronavirus mostly due to restrictions on assembly and rapid changes in consumer behaviour (Guibert & Hyde, 2021). During the pandemic situation, artisans of European countries experienced considerable economic setbacks too. Cancellation and postponement of orders, contracts, events, training programmes caused huge loss of income of artisans in Europe (“Cultural and Creative Sectors,” 2021). Caust (2021) in an article explicated the financial crisis of artisans and the present condition of women artisans in the framework of global pandemic. Hence, the study

finds a ray of hope with the adoption of digital skill by artisans in order to survive. A report jointly prepared by British Council, FICCI and Art X stated that Covid 19 pandemic instigated an absolutely uncertain future for the Indian creative economy and the condition of MSMEs is in its most vulnerable situation (“Impact of Covid 19,” 2021).

Research Gap

According to a nodal agency of Government of India, Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), the handicraft industry of India has 68.86 lakhs artisans; out of which 38.61 lakhs are women. Kantha artwork has developed in India as a significant traditional art form and a considerable number of studies have already been conducted on the basis of marketing strategy and socio-economic condition of rural artisans. The impact of Covid-19 on Kantha art form also needs academic attention and in-depth analysis. The article will focus on the changing socio-economic condition of rural artisans in the pandemic era through field research on a comparative account with the pre-pandemic phase.

Research Objectives

All the art forms throughout the world have suffered from the restraints imposed upon the society, economy, and on human life due to pandemic. An artform is seen in the light of the socio-cultural order of human beings while the potential and intellectual aspects of an artist can also be assessed in its economic valuation. In this scenario, the kantha art form practice of West Bengal is analysed to identify changing tendencies in this particular pandemic situation. The study will go through socio economic conditions and the production & marketing mechanism of Kantha artform along with subsequent impact on the livelihood of women kantha artisans during this time period. Following research questions are framed to specify the objectives of the study.

Research Questions

RQ 1: Which variables had chiefly affected the flow of production of Kantha artifacts during the pandemic situation?

RQ 2: What is the nature of the marketing chain of Kantha Stitch products and its operation during the pandemic situation?

RQ 3: How the livelihood of the kantha artisans is being affected during the pandemic?

RQ 4: What kind of aspirations of kantha artists for the promotion of the Katha artform have been found in this time period?

Research Methodology

Kantha art form has largely flourished in Birbhum and adjacent areas of Purba Bardhaman district of West Bengal. Apart from these two districts, this art form has also been practiced in certain places of North and South Twenty-Four Parganas and Howrah. Birbhum is selected as the study area of this research by the method of purposive sampling as Kantha is the GI product of this district. After the third wave of Covid 19 pandemic this study is undertaken to identify the impact of pandemic on women Kantha artisans. A snowball sampling method is applied for the field survey among 100 women Kantha artisans to acquire required data for the study. A semi-structured questionnaire is used as a research tool for conducting surveys in the marketplaces of kantha artifacts - Sonajhuri Haat, Karmatirtha Haat, and Maharshi Bhavan and in the community area of village Muluk in Bolpur Sriniketan block. Statistical analysis techniques including Yule's coefficient of association are applied in this research study to measure the result.

Results and Discussions

RQ.1: Variables largely affected the flow of production of Kantha artifacts during the pandemic

Kantha art form is a community-based traditional needle work. Primitively it was being practiced on worn out clothes but at the present time it took an extensive commercial shape. Conventionally an artform is being developed within the specific community over the years. In this context 97% of the respondents acquired the artisanal skill of Kantha from their family and community members.

Table 1: Variables affected the flow of production during lockdown

Availability of Raw Materials During Covid 19 Pandemic		Sale of Kantha Artifact by Middleman During Covid 19 Pandemic		Assistance Received from Govt. and NGO During Covid 19 Pandemic for Kantha Artwork	
Available	Not available	Yes	No	Yes	No
14%	86%	14%	86%	0%	100%

Scarcity of Raw Materials

Generally, a common profession of a community or folk induces the creation of an artform reflecting the imagery of the life of the folk people. On the other hand, in modern day economy and globalisation the practice of these very artforms became professions, a means of livelihood for the community people. Raw materials needed for this artifact are mainly clothes and threads. During the Covid 19 pandemic the flow of these materials was largely affected and most of the respondent artisans (86%) could not acquire raw materials required for Kantha craft due to the restrictions imposed in lockdown.

Decreasing demand from intermediaries

Whereas the production of raw materials and Kantha artworks were intensely impacted due to the downward spiral of demand from the distributors, wholesalers, tourists, and boutique owners as the haats, fairs and exhibitions were also prohibited during lockdown period along with recession in the economy.

Middlemen are one of the principal channels in the process of flow of production through promoting the sale of Kantha artifacts. During the pandemic period they did not initiate the sale of Kantha artifacts from the artisans. Only 14% of respondents could sell their work through the intermediaries in the lockdown period.

Zero support from the Govt. and NGOs

Respondents (100%) were also not being provided with any special assistance from both the Govt. and NGOs for continuing their practices including the production process of Kantha during the pandemic. Survey shows that respondents (100%) are also not provided with any concession on EMIs of loans by the governmental bodies.

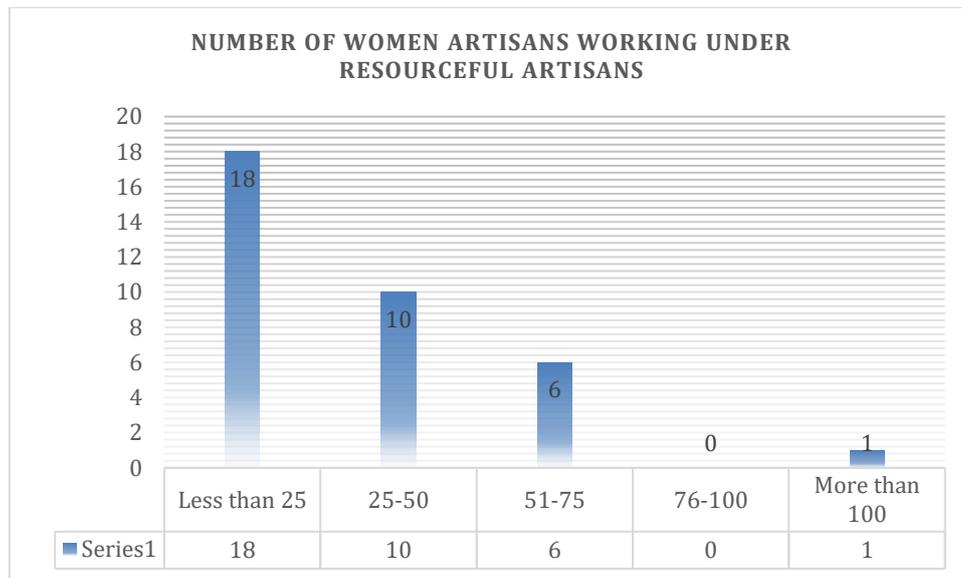
RQ.2: Marketing chain of Kantha Stitch products and its operation during the pandemic

Marketing Chain

The marketing of Kantha artifacts follows a chain process which runs vertically from top to bottom. The grassroot level artisans are being given raw materials along with designs for only stitching purposes directly by the artisans and non-artisans having business venture of kantha products or through the middlemen.

Survey result shows that a significant percentage of respondents (65%) has been working under intermediaries or agents who are mainly resourceful kantha artisans while 35% of respondent artisans are independent in their endeavour.

Fig 1: Women artisans working under resourceful artisans

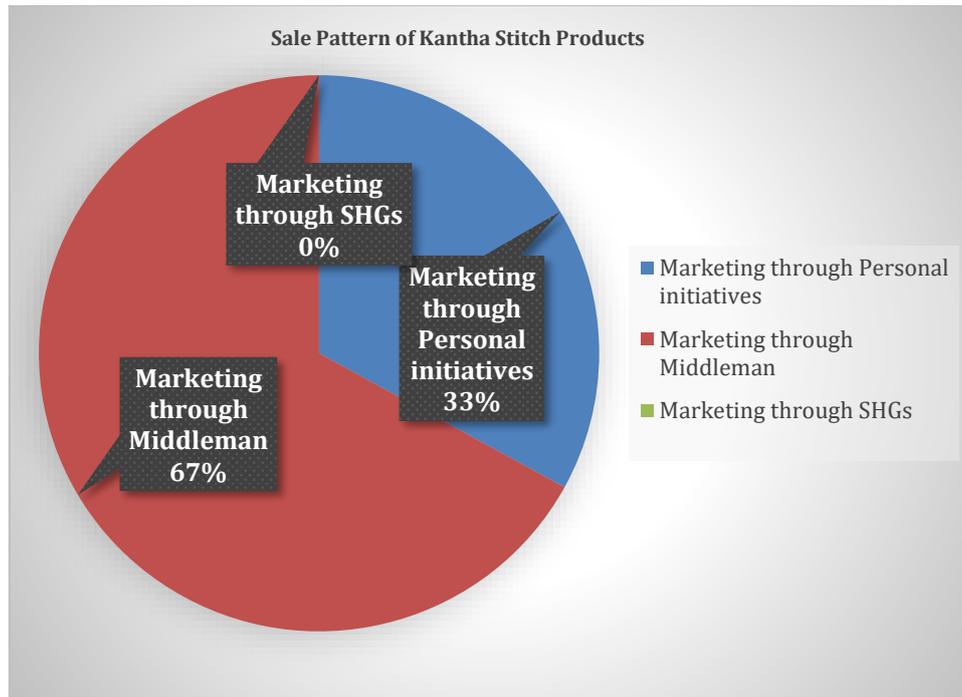


Following the trend 'less than 25' kantha artisans work for each 18 independent resourceful artisans followed by '25-50 artisans', '51-75 artisans' and 'more than 100 artisans' work for each 10, 6, and 1 resourceful respondent kantha artisans respectively.

Sales patterns and mode of transaction

These artisans largely doing the needle work only get a minimum price for each work. The products are largely marketed by independent artisans through Govt. initiated haats, fair, and exhibitions at the local, regional, and national levels. 33% of respondents used to sell their product by personal initiatives. Whilst 67% of respondents sell their artwork through middlemen. Transaction for business is carried out by the respondents in cash largely (78%) distantly followed by banking (15%) and lending (7%).

Fig 2: Pattern of sale by Kantha artisans



Restrictions imposed during the covid-19 pandemic had broken this chain as all the public gatherings were prohibited affecting both production and marketing to a large extent leading to the fall of sales volume.

Status of online marketing

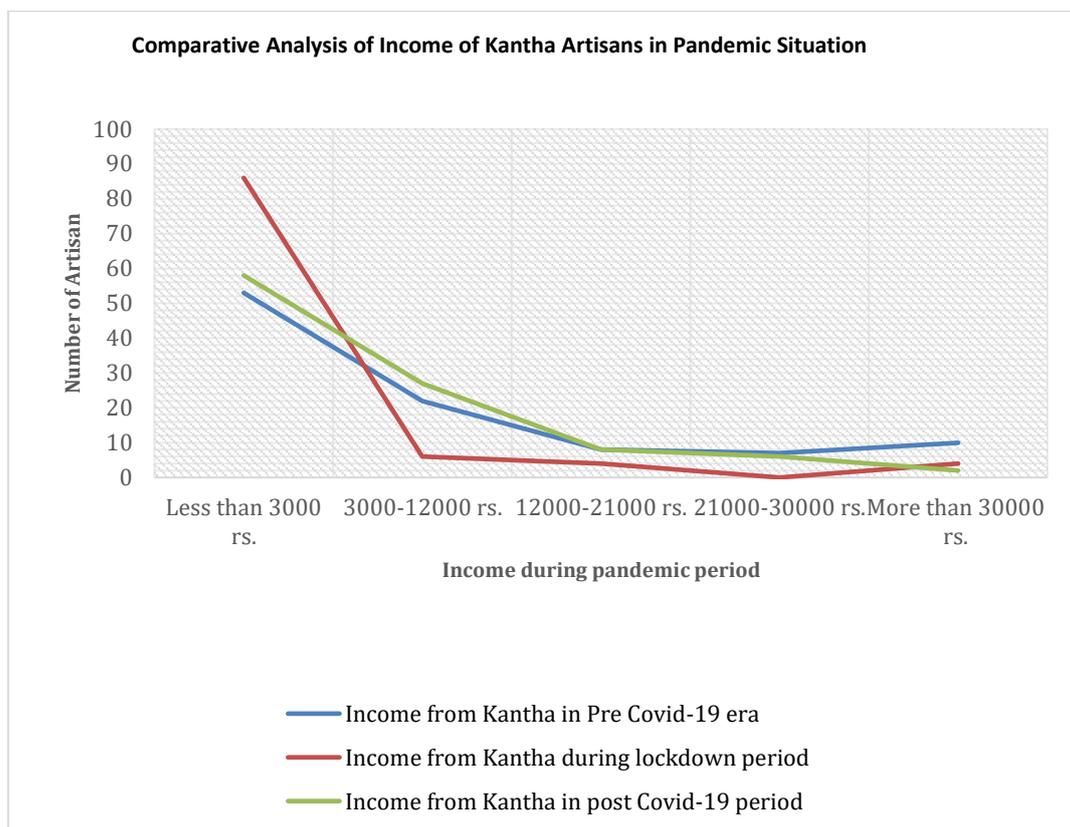
Kantha artisans having recognition for their work and registered with the District Information Centres, Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Ministry of Textile at the state and central levels respectively used to participate in exhibitions giving them a wider platform for marketing their artifacts. These platforms often help in the promotion of online marketing ventures among these artists leading to increasing and consistent sales volume of kantha artworks. Though a significant portion of respondents (36%) are aware of the online marketing process, the extent of online marketing is very limited as there are factors like illiteracy, inadequacy of proper knowledge to use online platforms. However, 29% of all respondents have their social media accounts. Organised training can change the situation and increase sales volume.

RQ.3: Effects on livelihood of the kantha artisans during the pandemic

Effects on income generated from Kantha work due to pandemic

Income generated in the pre-pandemic phase was affected during the complete nationwide lockdown period due to strict restrictive measures. In the following phases of pandemic time income generated from Kantha work saw a positive direction though could not recover wholly like pre pandemic scenarios.

Fig 3: Comparative analysis of monthly income of Kantha artisans in pandemic situation



A significant percentage of respondents (53%) earned 'less than Rs.3000/' per month in the pre- pandemic period. During the pandemic 86% of respondents earned 'less than 3000' per month. A significant percentage among them could not earn at all from Kantha practices during complete lockdown. While in the following phases more artisans (58%) came under the

category of earning 'less than 3000' in comparison to pre pandemic period. Respondents of two categories of monthly income 'less than 3000' and '3000-12000' saw a noteworthy dip in their monthly income during the lockdown period. Effects of the pandemic on the artisans belonging to other three higher categories of monthly income have been limited.

Kantha art as a livelihood resource

According to the majority (78%) of respondents, profit from the kantha art practices is inadequate for fulfilling household expenses. A considerable percentage of respondent artisans (55%) considered joining a new profession during the pandemic period though 26% could not get any such favourable situation during Covid crisis.

Table 2: Kantha art as a livelihood resource – impact of pandemic

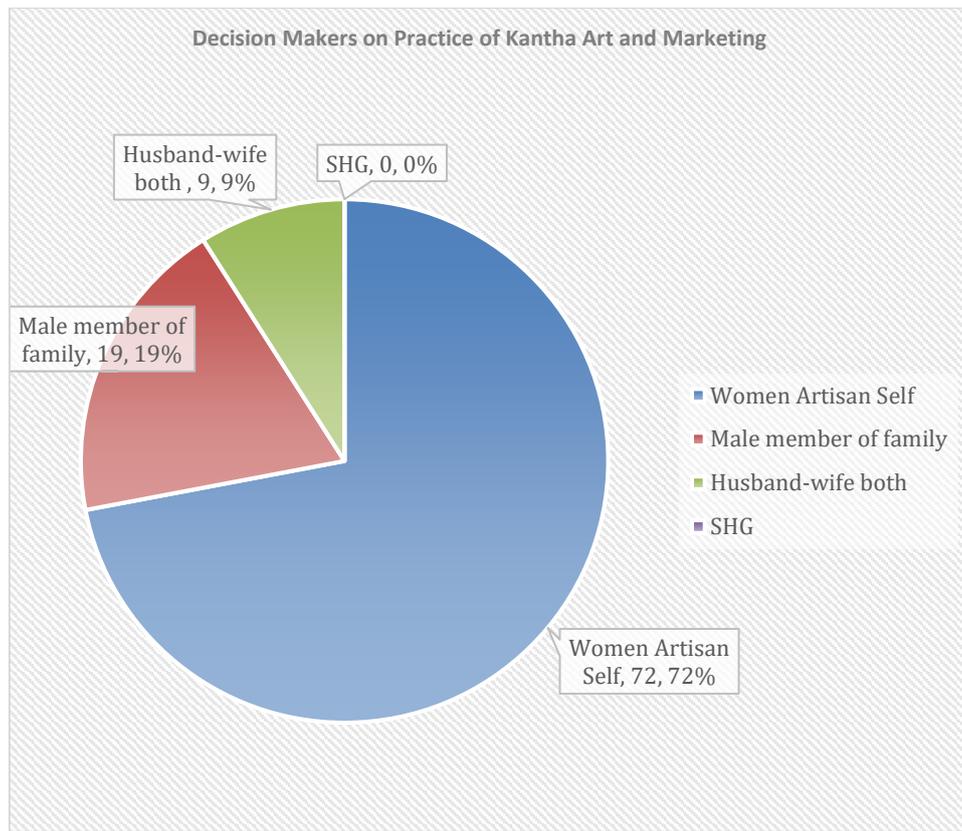
Efficiency of income for household expenses		Did you think of taking up new profession during Covid-19 pandemic?		Involved in new profession during COVID-19	
Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
22	78	55	45	8	26

Women kantha artisans: Decision making and empowerment

Since the early childhood and adolescence female kantha artisans have been honing their skill over the years. Women coming to the community through the bond of marriage also acquired this artform. Most of the respondent artisans (72%) are principal decision makers in this informal economy. Generally, the kantha artisans at the grassroot level do the needlework

in their leisure time to assist in household expenses. These phenomena nurtured the essence of women empowerment in rural Bengal.

Fig 4: Decision Makers on Practice of Kantha Art and Marketing



RQ.4: Aspirations of kantha artists for the promotion of Kantha artform

The kantha stitch artisans look to retain their culture through distinguished artworks and make it their means and measure of livelihood. Kantha is considered as women’s artistic expression through the needle and thread. Women artisans have years of experience in the practice of this artform. 36% of respondent artisans have experience of '5-10 years' closely followed by 25%, 21%, and 13% of respondents having experiences of 'more than 20 years', '11-15 years' and '16-20 years' respectively. While 5% of respondent artisans have an experience of 'less than 5 years'.

Impact of pandemic: Attitude of Kantha artisans on forced occupational change

100 respondents of this study divided into two income groups such as high- and low-income group on the basis of poverty line of rural India. Statistical tool Yule's Coefficient of Association is deployed to find out the nature of relationship between variables in context of taking of new profession in lockdown and aspirations for involvement of the next generation in Kantha artwork.

Table 3: Correlation between income and desire of taking up alternative profession in lockdown

Type of Income Group	Desire of Taking up Other Profession During Lockdown	No Desire to Take up Other Profession During Lockdown
Low-income Group	51	30
High income Group	4	15

The result of Yule's coefficient of association .433 proved that there is strong positive association between low-income earners and the desire to take up alternative profession for better earnings. Table 3 indicates that the majority of members belonging to low-income group tends to quit this practice during the lockdown period due to economic vulnerability. Whereas high income group's trend shows that artisans are not willing to shift their occupation from this art form to any other.

Aspirations on next generation's involvement in Kantha art practices

Then again, another positive Yule's association of aspiration on next generation's involvement in Kantha artwork with income level signifies low-income artisans are reluctant to involve the next generation in this profession.

Table 4: Correlation between income and desire of next generation's involvement in Kantha art tradition

Type of Income Group	Desire of Next Generation's Involvement in Kantha Art as Profession	No Desire of Next Generation's Involvement in Kantha Art as Profession
low-income Group	45	31
High-income Group	14	10

Financial crisis, less prospect, downward business graph during the pandemic has played pivotal role behind this attitude formation in lower economic strata. The result .009 points out that the majority of the members of high-income group are willing their next generation to continue with the traditional Kantha needle work.

Conclusions

In a study on Patua community of West Bengal based on the pandemic situation researchers discussed issues of ingenuity, innovation, resource, and resilience which has constructively nurtured this traditional practice since the inception of Pata Chitra (Zannata & Gera Roy, 2021). For regeneration of the Kantha art form to achieve its previous glory, these above-mentioned factors can efficiently play a decisive role. Original and innovative designs and motifs on Kantha artifacts and its marketability with proper resources can ensure the economic resilience in this informal and creative industry. Study identified that specifically 66% of respondents did not get the opportunity to participate in concerned training programmes. Whereas 47% of artisans of this study did not possess Govt. artisan cards. These become a

constraint in giving Kantha industry an organised, systematic, and structured shape. 64% of respondents are members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in this area which can be efficiently used for the purpose of quality training of kantha artisans at the grassroots level. Utilizing kantha art practices positively within the ambit of the functioning's of SHGs would be of ample help for the unorganized kantha artisans. This type of initiatives can facilitate collaborative and independent decision making based on the scope of acquiring financial assistance with micro credits. Collaboration with designers, brands and any other sort of private entity can also give new dimension in production and marketing avenues.

Online marketing emerged as a viable instrument to directly reach the consumers during the pandemic period. Only 36% of respondents are aware about the online marketing system and a very negligible percentage of women actually adapt online marketing skills during this crisis phase. Study revealed that a significant percentage (18%) of respondent artisans are illiterate, while 52% of respondents could not reach beyond elementary education. 22% of respondents could access secondary education distantly followed by 4% of respondents' reach in both Higher Secondary and graduate levels individually. Lack of education left an intense impact on the ability of artisans to acquire the beneficial facets of digital media for profit maximization.

In the economic empowerment of rural women, Kantha has been making remarkable contributions over a long time. The economic vulnerability due to cheap & underpaid labour force and decline of capital investment in the pandemic becomes detrimental in the context of empowerment of women in socio-economic order at grassroots level. In this situation generating education and awareness among all Kantha artisans; promotion of online marketing mechanisms; providing adequate training and financial assistance; Govt.-NGO collaboration can overcome this economic precarity and construct Kantha artwork as a sustainable practice.

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