

Poor economics of poor times : A case study on the life and livelihood mechanisms of the Kumartuli craftsmen of Kolkata

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Abstract

The present study attempts to foreground the disastrous effect of the CORONA rife among the craftsmen of an unorganised sector, a sector that is the epitome of employment for a developing country like India. The economic activities of craftsmen of Kumartuli in Kolkata are dependent on the festive economy of the state of West Bengal, India. The present study highlights the significance of Kumartuli as a geographic space in the heart of the capital city of Kolkata. From the examination and analysis of the situations of all the categories of craftsmen of Kumartuli, it has been observed that the pandemic has greatly affected their

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livelihood and survival mechanisms and that there is a grey area of uncertainties looming in front of them. The present study suggests more inclusive policies and measures from the government to ensure the survival of craftsmen of Kumartuli, which is the heart of creativity of the city of joy, Kolkata.

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Keywords: Affected, Craftsmen, Kumartuli, Livelihood, Unorganised sector.

I. Introduction and Literature Review

Creativity is one of the most important facets of human existence, which reflects the adaptation of human beings to nature and their surroundings. It is noteworthy that most of the creative activities and creative spaces belong to the unorganised sector. Creativity influences the development of human beings in complex systems [1]. Creativity must reflect something new or different or innovative and must also be apt to the work at hand [2]. Creativity requires a combination of six essential characteristics they are knowledge, intellectual abilities, personality, styles of thinking, environment and motivation [3]. Creativity usually leads to the development of original ideas, which are essential for the development of society in general [4].

According to the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector [5], the workers in the unorganised informal sector comprise 92% of the total workforce of India. It includes over 290 million working population out of the approximately 317 million working population of India [6]. Therefore, despite the large and substantial share, it remains a neglected sector in the context of public policymaking and academic discourse [7]. It should be noted that a very large amount of growth of the Indian economy over the last two decades has been due to increments in the process of informalization [8]. Therefore, it can be said that India has a preponderance of unorganised sectors consisting of informal workers. This report by the National Statistics Commission, 2012, defined the unorganised sector or the informal sector as a sector comprising workers who are not having work security, proper security of employment and social spheres [8]. In most cases, it is found that the terms unorganised sector and informal sector are used interchangeably.

The craftsmen of Kumartuli are comprised of the idol makers, the decoration craftsmen and the sculpturists. The idol makers are engaged in the making of idols of deities, demanded by customers during puja or festive seasons in the state. The decoration craftsmen are involved in the

making of decoration artefacts or the “saj” artefacts, essential for the idol makers and people during festive seasons for the decoration of finished idols. While sculpturists signify those categories of craftsmen who make statues, sculptures of deities, eminent personalities like Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru and so on. It should be noted that the activities of the decoration craftsmen are directly related to the idol makers in light of the puja economy of the state. The finished products of the decoration craftsmen like “that”, “alto”, “kanpashas”, “tin kolkar mukuts” and so on are used by the idol makers and customers to decorate the figures of gods and goddesses. The nexus between urbanisation and the growth of the informal sector is very complex and intricate [9]. Cities generate agglomeration benefits for the informal sectors [9]. The heritage work of the Kumartuli craftsmen is a classic example of how an unorganised sector has established itself historically at the heart of the city of Kolkata. These craftsmen are famous worldwide for magnificent creations, “the Durga Pratima,” and idols of many other Gods and Goddesses. These majestic creations of idols are very important, especially in the context of the grand mega-event of the Durga Puja festival, which has been very recently declared in the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO on December 15, 2021. This is very important from the point of view of the development of tourist attractions in Kumartuli and also for the long-term sustainability of the Kumartuli craftsmen in self-sufficient and self-enriching ways. The forms of the pratimas have undergone a remarkable transformation from the pre-Zamindari to the post-Zamindari systems [10]. Many works of literature have studied the diverse aspects of the artisan’s profile. Paul et.al in 2018 have studied the technical aspects of the idol-making activities of the karigars (craftsmen), both traditional and modern, in a comparative framework [11]. There are differences in wage rates depending upon the season of the sale in a year [11]. The karigars or the craftsmen of Kumartuli are also known as “Kumbhakars”. The craftsmen of Kumartuli work under stressful conditions characterised by a lack of space, dearth of storage space for idols, and small-sized studios. One of the principal objectives of the present study is, examine regarding impact of the CORONA pandemic on the lives of Kumartuli craftsmen. The findings of the present study reveal that there has been a significant fall in the annual turnovers of all three afore-mentioned artisan categories after the CORONA stage (2020 and 2021) compared with or before the CORONA stage.

II. Objectives

The objectives of the present study are described below:

Firstly, an examination of the geographic locational significance and potential of the study area of Kumartuli shall be performed based on the SWOT analysis.

Secondly, an examination of the disastrous effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of the Kumartuli craftsmen shall be made based on ground-based observations and reflections.

III. Study Area

The area of study of the current investigation is the Kumartuli area under Ward number 9 of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) of Kolkata city. As per the pieces of literature, Raja Krishnachandra hired craftsmen from Bangladesh in the Krishnanagar area. These craftsmen slowly started living in Ghurni, a small village of Krishnanagar city in Nadia district and started making clay dolls and other artefacts since then [12]. It is said that these craftsmen migrated later to Kolkata, which finally led to the formation of a colony mainly of potters in Kumartuli during the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century [13]. As noted above, the Kumartuli area consists of three artisan categories, i.e. the idol makers, decoration craftsmen and sculpturists. These craftsmen are approximately 400 in number, as per information received from the KMC office and are mostly concentrated in Kumartuli, while some craftsmen are located in scattered ways in the Bagbazar and Kalighat area of Kolkata. The ensuing investigation aims to investigate the impact of Corona on the lives of the craftsmen at Kumartuli. For this, the current study has taken 97 idol makers, 37 decoration craftsmen and 17 sculpturists, i.e. a total artisan sample of 151 craftsmen into consideration. It is to be noted that the Kumartuli area forms a market for these craftsmen, is located in a geographically advantageous location in the heart of North Kolkata. The geographic advantages of the place of Kumartuli are described by SWOT analysis in Table 1.

IV. Methodology

The ground information regarding the disastrous effects of the COVID-19 pandemic among the Kumartuli craftsmen has been obtained from the field visits and regular field investigations by semi-structured questionnaire, focus group discussion, interview, and in-depth interview

methods. The pieces of information and data were collected from individual artisans of all three artisan categories in both the individual level as well as in group settings to gather a collective, common opinion. The dates of data collection are 21/06/2021, 15/11/2021, 12/08/2022, 19/11/2022, 10/12/2023, 12/9/2024, 15/10/2024, 18/12/2024 and so on.

Firstly, a SWOT analysis has been made to comprehend the geographic potential of the Kumartuli area and its craftsmen. The SWOT analysis is a method used to study and comprehend the 'strengths', 'weaknesses', 'opportunities' and 'threats' involved in a project, plan, organisation, or particular business activities [14]. Here, the SWOT analysis helps us to visualise and examine the strengths and weaknesses of Kumartuli as a whole that affect the business of the craftsmen of the concerned area. Secondly, dependent samples t-test or repeated samples t-test has been done over mean-yearly-turnovers of the pre or before-CORONA phase (2018 and 2019) and mean yearly turnovers of the post or after-CORONA (2020 and 2021) for all 3 groups of craftsmen of decoration craftsmen, idol makers and the sculpturists in IBM SPSS software platform of version 23. This helps in visualising the onerous effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the livelihood mechanisms of the craftsmen. The analysis has been performed on a sample size of 97 idol makers, 37 decoration craftsmen and 17 sculpturists. Lastly, word cloud analysis and its examination have been done on the inputs, information and data obtained from all three above-mentioned artisan categories in QSR NVIVO 12 PLUS software. The word clouds are a significant method for conceptualisation of public opinions and texts, incorporating a formative assessment and analysis of contexts [15]. Thus, the word cloud analysis helps in the formative examination of the problem at hand and therefore, the disastrous effect of the COVID-19 pandemic is well reflected and analysed by a systematic visualisation of the words that appeared with the highest frequency used by the craftsmen during the interview. The present study uses a concurrent triangulation research approach where both the qualitative and quantitative research techniques are used.

V. Analysis

A. The SWOT Analysis

To comprehend the geographic potentials and the locational attributes of the Kumartuli area, a SWOT analysis has been performed as reflected in Table 1.

Table 1
SWOT analysis for the place of Kumartuli and its craftsmen

SWOT Analysis for Kumartuli and its craftsmen	
Strength	Kumartuli area is situated in a geographically advantageous location in the heart of the city of Kolkata. It lies in the proximity of the airport of Kolkata. Moreover, Kolkata is well connected by the railways of two important divisions, i.e. Sealdah and Howrah. Moreover, the Kumartuli area is well connected by Kolkata Metro rail facilities. It lies in the proximity of the Sovabazar metro rail station. Moreover, Kumartuli is located in the proximity of the Burrabazar area. This is an important area from which the decoration craftsmen purchase their decoration artefacts in bulk for the market.
Weakness	The place of Kumartuli is very congested, and there is a dearth of space and proper storage facilities for idol-makers, sculptors, and decoration craftsmen.
Opportunity	Kumartuli is in itself a distribution market of idols, decorative artefacts and sculptures. Kolkata, being the capital city of the state of West Bengal, attracts tourists from far and wide. The raw material includes straws, mud, and bamboo used by the idol makers come from the nearby villages of Uluberia through road transport by lorries and vans. These materials are available from the Burra Bazar market of Kolkata.
Threat	Owing to congestion, fire outbreaks due to short circuits or accidents greatly affected the craftsmen over the years. Their congested shops get destroyed. These shops easily catch fire due to high congestion. The occurrences of rain and floods greatly affect the idol makers and mostly the decoration craftsmen, who suffer owing to the lack of proper storage facilities.

B. Statistical analysis performed by the paired-sample t-test

In this section, a paired sample t-test has been performed to analyse the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the livelihood mechanisms of the Kumartuli craftsmen. The present study displays the mean yearly turnovers in the pre- or before and post- or after CORONA phases in lakh rupees for 97 idol makers as reflected in figure 1, 37 decoration craftsmen in figure 2 and 17 sculpturists in figure 3.

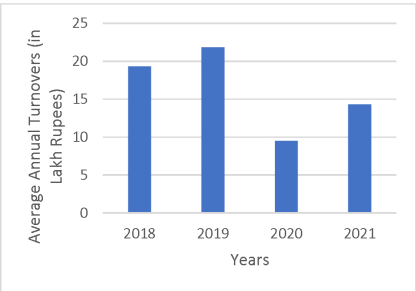


Figure 1
Mean yearly turnovers (measured in lakh rupees) of all the sample idol makers in the respective years.

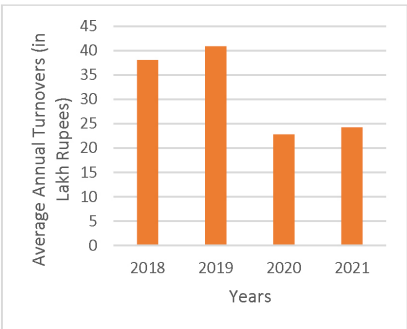


Figure 2
Average annual turnovers (measured in lakh rupees) of all sample decoration craftsmen in the respective years.

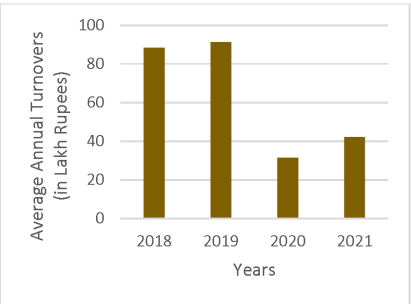


Figure 3
Average annual turnovers (measured in lakh rupees) of all sample sculpturists in the respective years.

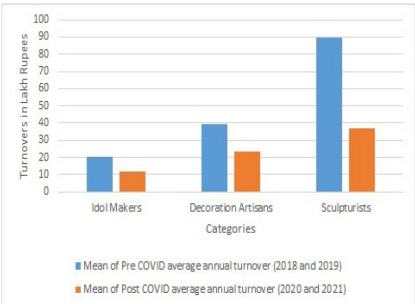


Figure 4
Mean of before and after COVID or Corona average-annual-turnovers for all groups of craftsmen

Finally, an average of all mean annual turnovers of all idol makers, decoration craftsmen and sculpturists has been calculated and computed for the pre-Corona stage of 2018 and 2019 and the after-Corona stage of 2020 and 2021 as revealed by figure 4.

The main hypothesis for the current study for analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of the above-mentioned three artisan categories of Kumartuli is described below:

Table 2
Results of the analysis of Paired Sample T-Test.

Categories	Differences which are Paired (before COVID average-annual-turnover and after COVID average-annual-turnover)						t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	ln(Sig)	Decision
	Size of Sample	Mean	Standard Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference						
					Lower	Upper					
Idol Makers	97	8.6856	3.5269	0.3581	7.9747	9.3964	24.254	96	1.00*10 ⁻⁴²	-96.71	The Null hypothesis is rejected
Decoration Craftsmen	37	15.9730	17.2365	2.8337	10.2260	21.7199	5.637	36	0.000002	-13.12	The Null hypothesis is rejected
Sculpturists	17	53.0588	16.9373	4.1079	44.3505	61.7672	12.916	16	7.03*10 ⁻¹⁰	-21.07	The Null hypothesis is rejected
Summation (Σ)	151									-130.9	
Combining of Tests (-2*Σln(sig))										261.8	The main Null hypothesis stands rejected

H_0 : There is an insignificant or no significant difference between the mean yearly turnovers of the before-CORONA stage (2018-2019) and after-CORONA stage (2020-2021).

H_1 : There is a significant difference between the mean yearly turnover of the pre-CORONA stage (2018-2019) and the after-CORONA stage (2020-2021).

It should be noted that the above-mentioned hypothesis test has been performed over the annual turnovers of all three artisan categories. It has been noted that the null hypothesis for all three categories of craftsmen has been rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis. In other words, there has been a significant difference between the mean yearly turnovers between before-CORONA phase and the after-CORONA stage for all 3 abovementioned groups of craftsmen. Therefore, it can also be reflected that the fall in the mean annual turnover in the post-CORONA phase has been significant owing to the onerous effect of the CORONA pandemic (Table 2). The combination of test results also rejects the null hypothesis of the present study and confirms the fact that the effect of the CORONA

C. Word Cloud Analysis

Finally, the study conducted a word cloud investigation over information obtained from the ground-based survey information from the Kumartuli craftsmen of all three aforementioned categories. The word cloud diagrams display the words that appeared with the highest frequency during the interview. These word clouds are shown in figures 5, 6 and 7 for the responses received from the idol makers, decoration craftsmen and sculpturists, respectively.



Word Cloud Analysis for a group of Idol makers



Word Cloud Analysis for a group of decoration craftsmen



Word Cloud Analysis for a group of sculptors

VI. Discussion



Figure 8

Craftsmen of Kumartuli

A. Geographic locational characteristics affecting the lives of Kumartuli craftsmen

The SWOT analysis in Table 1 reveals that the Kumartuli area of Kolkata is situated in a geographically advantageous location beside the banks of the river Hooghly. Kolkata, being the state capital, helps in the prosperity of the market and business mechanisms of the Kumartuli craftsmen. Moreover, the proximity of the Kolkata Airport helps in the arrival of both domestic tourists from outside states and foreign tourists from foreign countries at Kumartuli. The presence of the Burrabazar market nearby to the Kumartuli area also facilitates the availability of the basic raw materials for the decoration craftsmen, which usually comes from Surat, Kalyan and New Delhi. However, the place of Kumartuli suffers from a dearth of space, therefore, congestion affects the productivity and the health of the craftsmen at Kumartuli, adding to its weaknesses and threats. Moreover, as there is congestion, there is a lack of proper storage facilities for idols, decoration artefacts and sculptures [16]. Therefore, the artefacts of the craftsmen are largely affected by cyclones and storms and also by occasional fires caused by short circuits and accidents. The place of Kumartuli represents the ambience of typical north Kolkata in terms of both culture and architecture. Moreover, during the

puja occasions, there are acute shortages of space. The craftsmen live, eat and make the artefacts in the same congested, unhealthy places. This can severely affect the health and well-being of the Kumartuli craftsmen in the long run. The dearth of adequate space and the nature of temporary workshops of the artisans result in accidental short circuits and deaths resulting from it. Moreover, owing to congestion, there have been several recorded cases of severe health hazards and diseases like Cholera, Malaria, Diarrhoea and so on.

B. Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the livelihood of Kumartuli craftsmen

It is noteworthy that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted and deeply affected the craftsmen of Kumartuli. The ensuing investigation has revealed that the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has been significant for all artisan groups. It is noteworthy that the pandemic has accelerated the already existing problems and challenges of the artisans, like a rise in prices of raw materials, reduced returns, a lack of interest among the artisans to remain in the heritage activities, a rise in labour costs and overall cost of production. For example, the prices of raw materials like ropes, nails, glues, papers, inks, colours, beads and so on have increased thrice or even five times after the onset of the pandemic. This is alarming indeed.

The statistical analysis portrays the onerous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon the survival mechanisms of the Kumartuli craftsmen. Their incomes have fallen considerably in 2020 and 2021 compared with the previous years, like 2018 and 2019. Therefore, the post-CORONA phase reveals that the effect of the pandemic has been severe in the case of the Kumartuli craftsmen. Due to the shortages of money and capital, many craftsmen have started to take different occupations like the opening of tea shops, grocery shops, selling vegetables, selling cosmetics and so on.

C. Opinion of the Kumartuli craftsmen regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Our word cloud analysis of 3 craftsmen groups of decoration craftsmen, idol-makers, and statue-makers reflects the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the lives of these craftsmen. Figure 5 shows the word cloud diagram of the idol makers revealing the most frequently used words during the interview. The words like “pandemic”, “affected”, “fallen”, “orders”, “COVID”, “idols”, “current situation”, “considerably” and so on were mostly used by the idol makers. On similar lines, in figure

6, the words like “pandemic”, “shaj”, “decoration”, “affected”, “many”, “COVID”, “situation”, “business”, “orders”, “government” and so on were frequently used by decoration craftsmen. Similarly, in figure 7, the words like “pandemic”, “COVID”, “situation”, “many”, “statues”, “customers”, “increased”, “government”, etc. were mostly said by sculpturists. It is clear that the words “pandemic” and “COVID” appeared with the highest frequency among all three artisan categories. The young generation is disinterested in carrying forward the heritage occupations owing to low returns from production, rise in cost of raw materials, fear of future pandemics, aspirations for better living and so on. The government has not taken any satisfactory measures towards the welfare of the craftsmen.

Conclusion

Finally, the present investigation and study conclude that the impact of the CORONA has been severe among all three artisan groups. Their incomes and profits have greatly declined. Their business, demand and supply chain mechanisms got severely affected by the pandemic. It should be noted that the heritage economic activities of Kumartuli craftsmen are informal or unorganised. Therefore, more comprehensive and inclusive planning must be undertaken by the government to revive the business of these craftsmen. The government may provide direct financial assistance in the hands of the craftsmen. It can also provide loans and credit facilities at minimal interest rates, like DRIs to craftsmen. The NGOs and the corporations must assist the craftsmen in these trying times, just like several NGOs have assisted other unorganised sectors like the Tant artisans of Phulia, Silk artisans of Bishnupur and so on. Their artisans were also granted DRIs by the banks. Such initiatives can greatly promote the well-being of the Kumartuli artisans in these trying times. The government must look forward to more inclusive planning for a more sustainable future for all the craftsmen of Kumartuli, as our Earth might face many more epidemics, pandemics and shocks soon, keeping in mind the wisdom of Sustainable Development Goals in the long run.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The present study declares no conflict of interest with any person, institute or stakeholder.

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