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A STUDY ON THE CHALLENGE FOR ARTISANS OF CONCH SHELL INDUSTRY IN WEST BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

The beauty and charm of crafts has always been a source of attraction to many Indian and foreign tourists. The gifted artisan could produce wonderful objects of craft from conch shell materials. Their rare artistic skill has been streamlined in the manufacture of exquisite household pieces. The present article focuses on identifying the present challenges faced by the artisans for marketing and continuing their handicrafts. The present research paper is based on primary survey conducted on conch shell industry in West Bengal. The sample survey comprises of 240 household units selected from four districts in West Bengal. The weakness of conch shell industry are like lack of infrastructure and communication facilities, unawareness about international requirements and market, lack of co-ordination between government bodies and private players, inadequate information of new technology, inadequate information of current market trends, less interest of young people in craft industry, lack of skilled labor, still confined to rural areas and small cities and untapped market, lack of promotion of products. The survey reveals that irregularity in the supply of raw materials caused frustration to many household entrepreneurs.


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KEYWORDS

Artisan, Conch shell, Cultural.

1. INTRODUCTION

 *shankha*¹ is a conch shell which is of ritual and religious importance in both Hinduism and Buddhism. The shankha is the shell of a species of large predatory sea snail, *Turbinella pyrum*, which lives in the Indian Ocean and surrounding seas. *Shankh*² this instrument has a strong association with the Hindu religion. The conch shell³ is a major Hindu article of prayer, used as a trumpet and in order to get rid of negative energy and evil spirits. It is also used as a container for holy water (*shankha teertham*). The *shankha* (conch shell) mudra is also used during various tantric rituals and meditation. "*shankha*" is considered to be one of the most auspicious objects that emerged from the sea during the Ksheera Sagara Samudra Manthan. In Indian mythology, the *shankha* is regarded sacred and very auspicious. To initiate religious ceremonies, a *shankha* (conch shell) is blown. God Vishnu, the God of Preservation, is shown with a *shankha* in one hand and a disc or a chakra in the other. It is said that when it is blown it announces the victory of good over evil. Conch, or conque, is a musical instrument⁴, a wind instrument that is made from a seashell, the shell of one of several different kinds of very large seasnail. These instruments are sometimes referred to as "shell trumpets".

Conch Shell decorating can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization⁵. West Bengal is famous for the unique form of its arts and crafts. One of the most exclusive and most beautiful forms of art practiced in West Bengal comprises of the conch shell craft. It is an extremely sophisticated and delicate craft of West Bengal. Conch fashioning i.e. cutting and polishing of conch to make bangles, to make shells suitable for blowing purpose etc is a main business in Orissa and West Bengal. There are about 3, 00,000 conch shell artists and traders in West Bengal and Orissa⁶. The *sankha* industry is profitable considering high demand for *sankhas* not only in Bengal but also in Odisha, Bihar. Conch shells are used in two significant ways in Bengali tradition. One is in the form of the bangles worn by married women, and the other is using the whole shell to blow into it, during religious ceremonies. The conch shell bangles suggest the marital status of a woman. The craftsmen belong to the *Sankhakar* community. These products have aesthetic, cultural, creative and religious values. In addition to these, this industry can play a great role in generating employment and income.

In spite of these the conch shell industry is facing problems both in demand and supply side. In supply side the major problem is to getting the raw conch regularly. In the demand side there is diversion of demand to the low quality bangles (*sankha*). The craft form is also very expensive and cannot be afforded by everybody. In this context it is important to study the problems of this handicraft industry. The present study attempts to look at the current problems faced by the industry in West Bengal and find out survival factor of this industry.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is very limited study on the economics of conch shell industry in West Bengal. Hunter (1875) discussed the importance and the process of production of conch shell in the earlier time. Hornel (1914) wrote about the *chank* (*conch*) in Hindu life and various aspects of folklore and ethnology. Haque (1984) pointed out the designs of different *Sankha* products like bracelets. Sen (1935) noted the use of conch bracelets by Bengali woman in ancient Bengali literature and he pointed out that conch craft developed independently in Dhaka. Sen and Sinha (1961) discussed economic behavior of craftsman and production process of conch shell industry of West Bengal and Sikkim. Gosh (1999) highlighted the scenario of conch shell industry in Bankura district of West Bengal. *Heppell* (2001), discussed about the chank shell industry in modern India. Biswas (2003), analyses the pattern and basis of rural industrialisation in West Bengal. He discussed about technological change and the forms of production organization conch shell product industries. *Dutta* (2011) noted that Conch shell craft is neither unique,

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shankha>² http://chandrakantha.com/articles/indian_music/shankh.html viewed as Shankh³ <http://www.religiousportal.com/SacredShankha.html> viewed as Sacred Shankha (Conch Shell)⁴ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conch_\(musical_instrument\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conch_(musical_instrument)) viewed as Conch (instrument)⁵ <http://www.india9.com/i9show/Conch-Shell-Craft-41314.htm> viewed as Conch Shell Craft⁶ [http://envfor.nic.in/legis/wildlife/so665\(e\).htm](http://envfor.nic.in/legis/wildlife/so665(e).htm)

nor a new practice in India for creating marvels in decorative yet artistic pieces of utility items. Sonali (2012) highlights about conch shell craft of West Bengal and noted that the tradition of conch shell preparing and working is an ancient one. They have been used in India since Vedic times. Priests use them to drive away evil spirits, at the beginning of weddings, sacrifices, or at other Hindu rites. Buddhists also blow conch shells as a sound offering. This is why they are so common in India and Tibet. Tulsyan S. (2013) pointed out that while not many Bengali women in urban settings can be seen wearing sankha (conch bangles), it is easier to find women-generally from lower class-from Bihar, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh sporting it. From the brief review of the existing literature it appears that problems and future of conch shell industry in West Bengal have not been adequately addressed.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES, DATA SOURCE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The conch shell industry is one of the oldest and artistic traditional industries in India. Conch shell products have a good demand in India for their unique colour combinations and attractive designs. The need for the study arises due to the importance of the conch shell industry in respect of male, female employment generation in regional economy of India and inadequacy of existing literature on present scenario of conch shell industry especially in respect of West Bengal. The specific objectives of the study are to analyze challenges faced by the artisans for continuing their work of conch shell industry. Secondary data relating to conch shell industries are not adequately available. On account of limitations to the secondary data to serve the present study a detailed primary survey was conducted. We have selected for our study four Districts of West Bengal namely North 24-Paraganas, Purba Medinipur, Paschim Medinipur and Bankura selected on the basis of concentration of conch shell handicraft units. The sample comprises of 240 household units selected from 4 districts and 8 blocks with 60 household units selected randomly from each district. The basis of selection of the sample was multistage stratified random sampling method. There are two types of production organization in conch shell industry namely independent units and tied units. Tied units have been linked up with big independent units either by raw materials purchasing or by sale of their products. They have no bargaining power for purchase of raw materials. Total sample 240 household units include 22.50 percent independent units, 77.50 percent tied units (Table 3.1). To compare per capita income, dependency ratio, challenges and problems faced by artisans among independent and tied units mean test, percentage method used.

TABLE 3.1: TYPES OF PRODUCTION ORGANIZATION IN SAMPLE DISTRICTS

Items		Sample Districts				Total
		Paschim Medinipur	Purba Medinipur	Bankura	North 24 Paragnas	
Type of Unit	Independent	11 (18.33)	13 (21.67)	10 (16.67)	20 (33.33)	54 (22.50)
	Tied	49 (81.67)	47 (78.33)	50 (83.33)	40 (66.67)	186 (77.50)

Source: Field survey; Note: parentheses indicate the percentage shares.

We give below some relevant information of the selected districts. According to Census, 2011, the percentage of rural population in sample districts was in Paschim Medinipur 87.78% , in Purba Medinipur 88.37%, in Bankura 91.67 % , in North Twenty Four Paraganas 42.73 %. Table 3.2 gives the breakup of Socio economic Characteristics of the surveyed area in 2011.

TABLE 3.2: SOCIOECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE DISTRICTS IN 2011

Sample district	Paschim Medinipur	Purba Medinipur	Bankura	North 24 Paragnas
Actual Population	5,913,457	5,095,875	3,596,674	10,009,781
Proportion to West Bengal Population	6.48%	5.58%	3.94%	10.97%
Rural Population (%)	87.78 %	88.37 %	91.67 %	42.73 %
Average Literacy	78.00	87.02	70.26	84.06
Male Literacy	85.26	92.32	80.05	87.61
Female Literacy	70.50	81.37	60.05	80.34

Source: <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/18-paschim-medinipur.html>

4. HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY AREA

This section deals with household details such as their socio-economic background. The descriptive statistics of some selected parameters have been calculated for a better understanding of the household profile. General information of 240 household, especially about the head of the household reveals that the ages of the heads of the surveyed households ranged from 21 to 80 years with a mean 40.75 and 12.57 standard deviation. It is recorded that literacy rate of selected household units varies between 0-100 per cent age with a mean 69.66 and standard deviation 15.94. It is observed from sample household units that total number of family members varies between 3 and 12 with a mean 6 and total number of adult family members varies between 2 and 9 with a mean 5 (Table 4.1).

TABLE 4.1: HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY AREA

Items	Sample Districts				Total
	Paschim Medinipur	Purba Medinipur	Bankura	North 24 Paragnas	
Age of respondent	21-64 (38)	21-80 (46)	23-65 (40)	21-80 (39)	21-80 (41)
Literacy rate of family (%)	33.33-100 (69.63)	50-100 (73.75)	0-100 (63.93)	33.33-100 (71.33)	0-100 (69.66)
Total number of family members in each household unit	3-10 (6)	4-12 (6)	3-11 (6)	3-11 (6)	3-12 (6)
Total number of adult family members in each household unit	2-8 (4)	3-9 (5)	2-9 (5)	2-9 (5)	2-9 (5)

Source: Field survey; Note: parentheses indicate the mean.

5. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

5.1 HEREDITARY PROSPECT

Shankha Banik or Shankharis claim this craft as their traditional occupation. Artisans in conch shell activities known as *sankari*. Sankari (dealing with conch manufacturing) are usually engaged in conch shell works belongs to O.B.C.-B category constitute 92.5 per cent. Kumbhakar also belongs to O.B.C.-B category constitute 5 per cent and general category artisans constitute 2.5 per cent are engaged in conch shell works (Table 5.1).

TABLE 5.1: CASTE DOMINANCE ON CONCH SHELL INDUSTRIES IN SAMPLE SURVEYED AREA

Items	Total
Type of Category	
O.B.C.-B (Sankhari)	222 (92.5)
O.B.C.-B (Kumbhakar)	12 (5)
General	6 (2.5)

Source: Field survey; Note: parentheses indicate the percentage shares.

It is observed from sample household units that duration of engagement years varies between 2 and 53 for male workers with a mean 29 and for female workers varies between 1 and 34 with a mean 7 (Table 5.2).

TABLE 5.2: DURATION OF ENGAGEMENT IN CONCH SHELL INDUSTRY IN SAMPLE SURVEYED AREA

Items	Total	
Duration of engagement Years	Male workers	2-53 (29)
	Female workers	1-34 (7)

Source: Field survey; Note: parentheses indicate the mean.

5.2 EMPLOYMENT PATTERN OF CONCH SHELL INDUSTRY

It is observed that per household unit number of family worker size varies between 1-6 with a mean 3 and standard deviation 1.15 and number of hired worker size varies between 0-10 with a mean 0.75 and standard deviation 1.41. Per unit yearly number of working days varies between 252-360 per cent age with a mean 323 and standard deviation 19.48. Per day number of man days by assuming one man days is equal to eight (8) work hour of per household unit by household & hired conch shell industrial worker varies between 1.25-15 per cent age with a mean 4.25 and standard deviation 2.34 (Table 5.3).

TABLE 5.3: DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSEHOLD UNITS BY FAMILY WORKERS, HIRED WORKERS, WORKING DAYS & MAN DAYS IN SAMPLE SURVEYED AREA

Items	Total	
Per Unit Worker Size	Number of family Workers	1-6 (3)
	Number of Hired Workers	0-10 (0.75)
Per Unit Yearly Working Days	252-360 (323)	
Per Day Number of Man Days of per Household Unit	1.25-15 (4.25)	

Source: Field survey; Note: parentheses indicate the mean.

Table 5.4 shows that the distribution of industrial units by number of workers. In conch shell industries 52.50 percent of total 240 sample units employ very small number of worker, ranging from between 3 and 5 size of class which recorded highest followed by between 1 and 2 size of class (35.83 percent) and 10.83 percent of the units between 6 and 9 size of class . A small percentage of independent units (0.83 per cent) employ relatively large number of workers between 10 and 20 size of class.

TABLE 5.4: FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF SAMPLE CRAFT UNITS BY NUMBER OF WORKERS AND PRODUCTION ORGANIZATION IN SAMPLE SURVEYED AREA

No. of workers/ Organization	Number of Units by Worker Size			
	1 to 2	3 to 5	6 to 9	10 to 20
Independent	0 (0.00)	30 (55.56)	22 (40.74)	2 (3.70)
Tied	86 (46.24)	96 (51.61)	4 (2.15)	0 (0.00)
Total	86 (35.83)	126 (52.50)	26 (10.83)	2 (0.83)

Source: Field survey; Note: parentheses indicate the percentage shares.

5.3 CHALLENGES/ EXISTING PROBLEMS FACED BY THE CRAFTSMEN OR CONCH SHELL UNITS

Indian is known for its rich and diverse culture. The tradition of women wearing bangles dates back to ancient times when bangles were considered as symbol of marriage; they still hold the same significance but the trend has changed over the years. Traditionally the bangles worn by brides at weddings vary depending on the religion the bride follows and the region she originates from. Modern brides don't go with the conventional colours and patterns and neither do they believe in wearing dozens of bangles to symbolize their wedding. Modern brides are opting for more contemporary designs and are experimenting with styles; they choose bangles which would complement their outfit. Raw materials for conch shell industry come from coastal town of southern part of India and traders of different town buy and take the final product. As a consequence, none of the artisans was able to import raw materials directly from abroad (Srilanka, Tamilnadu) of his own due to scarcity of funds and import market was eventually captured by the big merchants and traders (mahajanas). The craftsmen depend on master craftsmen, dealer for the raw materials or for marketing of their produce. The intervention of mahajanas in this industry and persistent dependence on them by the artisans has forced them to work on bani (making charge) system. The weakness of conch shell industry are like lack of infrastructure and communication facilities, unawareness about international requirements and market, lack of co-ordination between government bodies and private players, inadequate information of new technology, inadequate information of current market trends, less interest of young people in craft industry, lack of skilled labor, still confined to rural areas and small cities and untapped market, lack of promotion of products.

In spite of high profit margin of all types of organizations in this industry, due to lack of capital, inability to purchase intact conch raw materials at high price from merchant traders through cash payment system, some tiny tied units also forced to shut down their business and continue their traditional work on bani system. In conch shell industries producers at remote rural areas have been linked with important cities and towns directly or through traders or formal producers. This trade is highly depends on several layers of agents and middlemen. Multilevel Marketing is present in distribution of finished *sankha* or conch product. The major marketing channels constitute door-to door sales, sales in hatt, bazaar etc., supplying the product to fixed sellers, sales through own counter, contract with local trader; or middlemen of traders, contract with master artisans, or wholesale traders, through advertisement, contracts with cooperative society, marketing societies, fairs, Department Stores, Jewellery shop, stationary store. Moreover, small independent artisans suffering from dearth /scarcity of working capital and proper information about the market carry on sales within the local level (vendor and local retailer). The marketing systems and organization existing in the conch shell industry in the State are not without their defects. They have, thus, hampered the growth of a wide market for conch shell products to a very great extent both inside and outside the country.

The main shortcomings may be summarized as below:

ABSENCE OF COMMON MARKETING ORGANIZATION

The conch shell producers of the State have no separate marketing organization of their own and are unaware of the modern methods of sales promotion. Hence, they face great difficulty in selling their products. The conch shell units adopt such particular marketing system as they deem fit and desirable on any particular occasion. When the conch shell producers stand in need of money, they do not hesitate to sell their products even at lower prices. They sometimes sell their products partly on credit which is seldom realized in full. Their knowledge about their markets is utterly limited. The existing systems are adopted individually and involve comparatively higher expenditure in cartage and freight. While booking their goods through railways they have to undergo several formalities which prove to be very cumbersome and perplexing to the potters. A suitable common marketing organization could easily overcome these shortcomings.

INADEQUATE ADVERTISEMENT AND PUBLICITY

Another glaring defect in the existing marketing systems of conch shell products is that barring a few exceptions, the conch shell producers are quite indifferent to the advertisement and publicity of their products. Small size of units, limited production, inadequate finances and lack of awareness of its utility, come in the way of effective advertisement and publicity efforts on the part of producers in the industry. Needless to say, advertisement of goods is impersonal selling and creates demand. It tends to expand the market as a result of which production increases. This, in turn, goes to lower the manufacturing costs.

LACK OF SHOW ROOMS AND DISPLAYING ARRANGEMENTS

Lack of show rooms and displaying facilities is another important defect. Most of the conch shell units are indifferent to the benefits of show rooms and displaying arrangements. Small conch shell units sell all their products just after finishing their products and do not stock them. Only 6 per cent of the units in the State maintain show rooms to display their products either in a portion of their dwellings or in the unit premises in a heterogeneous manner but as a matter of fact, they are not strictly rooms in real sense of the term.

UNSATISFACTORY STANDARDIZATION AND GRADING

Standardization implies establishment of certain standards based upon intrinsic physical properties or qualities of commodity with a view to further sub-dividing it into several grades and classes, while grading simply means dividing the products of varying quality and size into lots conforming to certain standard. In conch

shell industry in West Bengal, there is no scale to measure the quality of a fixed standard and grade of the conch shell products. There is no gradation but a medley of different qualities. Only big conch shell units in the industry do carry out proper grading of their products. Hence, they are able to fetch higher prices, while others who do not do grading suffer considerable loss by selling their goods in mixed bulks at cheaper rates.

COMPETITION IN MARKETING

Conch shell producers in competition do not care for quality; they concentrate only on quantity and reduction in costs. They compete with each other in manufacturing larger quantities and in selling them at lower rates. The big conch shell units produce different types of high quality products and do not offer any competition to the small conch shell units and face no effective competition in the market.

From Table 5.5 it is discussing that which type of problems have been facing by household units. Overall all selected sample tied and independent units faced the major problem of continuously price increase of raw materials and Cost of production increase. 96.67 per cent sample household shows the problem of raw materials non-availability, 83.33 per cent sample household finds the problem of monopoly behavior of raw material supplier, 77.08 per cent sample household observes the problem of lack of capital.

TABLE 5.5: PERCENTAGE SHARE OF INDUSTRIES BY PROBLEMS FACED BY CONCH SHELL INDUSTRIAL UNITS IN SAMPLE SURVEYED AREA

No. of Units/ Organization	Lack Of Capital	Raw Materials Non-Availability	Continuously Price Increase of Raw Materials	Cost of Production Increase	Monopoly Behavior of Raw Material Supplier	Decrease of Quality of Raw Materials
Independent	39 (72.22)	51 (94.44)	54 (100.00)	54 (100.00)	44 (81.48)	40 (74.07)
Tied	146 (78.49)	181 (97.31)	186 (100.00)	186 (100.00)	156 (83.87)	136 (73.12)
Total	185 (77.08)	232 (96.67)	240 (100.00)	240 (100.00)	200 (83.33)	176 (73.33)

TABLE 5.5 (CONTINUED)

No. of Units/ Organization	Electric Problem	Delay In Payment of Businessman	Substitute Product	Competition Among Industrial Units	Change of Value System	Health Hazards
Independent	38 (70.37)	37 (68.52)	34 (62.96)	32 (59.26)	30 (55.56)	14 (25.93)
Tied	140 (75.27)	119 (63.98)	119 (63.98)	111 (59.68)	118 (63.44)	41 (22.04)
Total	178 (74.17)	156 (65.00)	153 (63.75)	143 (59.58)	148 (61.67)	55 (22.92)

Source: Field survey; Note: parentheses indicate the percentage shares.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

For the growth and survival of conch shell industry state government has a vital role. Firstly, government should take immediate action for reduction of high increase of price of intact conch shell which is the main barrier for growth of this industry. Government's work will be to play as a mediator in the following way that government's authority should always be getting in touch with Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka government, who collect raw materials from there and distribute raw materials at a reasonable price timely. Government's agency like Manjusha has a great role to show the growth way of rural small household units. Secondly, Marketing was still largely left to private trades. Since there were no focused efforts to service craftsmen in terms of raw materials, credit, marketing, etc., no discernible impact was felt on their earnings and standard of living. Hence government's have to do to introduce an attractive package, and services offered for implementation of protectional, promotional and developmental schemes of conch shell industry in crucial areas such as design production technology and marketing.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The conch shell craft is not a new art in Bengal, this art has been practiced here for ages. The caste based occupations prevail to a large extent in modern society. Members of a particular *sankhari* community family are inclined to working with family occupation from the childhood and have hereditary skill. The present trend speaks of the lack of confidence of the craftsman in the future of the trade. The elderly artisans do not want their children to take up the craft. In this traditional handicraft, there is involvement of both the male and female labourers. The craftsperson's kept the interest of entire country and design many different patterns and shapes of bangles. For survival, they are now manufacturing various sorts of other conch shell products of novelty artistic specimens. Apart from engraved shells, other conch shell crafts include making items like table lamps, brooches, pendants, incense holders, ashtrays, vermilion containers, spoons and forks from the shells. In West Bengal, craftsperson's also design conch shells which are used to make jewelry items, like bangles, armllets, finger rings and ear rings, lockets, buttons, hairpins and clips.

Socio-economic, cultural and environmental factors sustain conch shell industries, not economic factor alone. Irregularity in the supply of raw materials caused frustration to many. Despite the poor conditions of some of the proprietor but tied artisans who incur loss they continue their production work because i) they can employ their family labour including female who does not like to work in other's firm. ii) the annual income from this industry constitutes a high percentage of their family income. From the discussion it is observed that despite some major problems conch shell industry will survive and sustain because economic and cultural factors sustain and promote it.

8. SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The present work suffers from some limitations. An in-depth study of the labour, raw materials, capital and product markets could be in future.

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