

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Selling Sustainability within a Capitalist Framework: The Sabai Craft Cluster of Nayagram, West Bengal

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Abstract

The present paper examines the prospect of the brand 'Sabai Art & Craft' as a sustainable enterprise that has thrived in Raisol village, Nayagram, Jhargram. This craft cluster involves about 50 families with a total of about 200 skilled artisans, who earn their livelihood from the production of Sabai crafts, made from the durable and renewable Babui or Sabai grass (*Eulaliopsis Binata*). The process starts from scratch with producing and processing this grass into ropes and finally shaping it into some ornamental or utility products. The whole process surely conforms to the concept of Triple Bottom Line (Elkington, 1997), which mainstreams the idea of sustainability as including three Ps – People, Planet, Profit. Sustainability is indeed ensured as the whole process is an eco-friendly one, at the same time providing livelihood to the local community. Gaining insights from Focus Group Discussions with the artisans, the paper reveals a complex reality.

The craft has become popular only since 2010, when it was rediscovered by capitalist interests, and the property of sustainability was recognised as its unique selling point. Since then, the designing, branding and marketing at high prices are done by external actors, while artisans function mainly as suppliers, often without formal recognition. Hinging upon the Marxist perspective, the theory of the Culture Industry, and the unique concepts of symbolic and cultural capital given by Pierre Bourdieu, the paper aims at decoding the contradiction that exists in commodifying and selling the property of sustainability within a capitalist framework.

1 INTRODUCTION

The present study focuses on the Sabai Craft Cluster, located in Raisole village in Nayagram Block of Jhargram district, West Bengal. The village houses about 70 families, out of which 50 families, forming a community of over 200 skilled artisans, are engaged in the production of Sabai craft. This community of artisans form the Traditional Craft Cluster. Environmental sustainability is the sole basis of this livelihood that is transmitted through generations. The skill of the future artisans is not gained from any outside source, but it is learned in a spontaneous manner, as the children are used to seeing the whole process since their birth. Sabai Grass (*Eulaliopsis Binata*) is a durable grass that thrives naturally in the low hills and forested areas of West Bengal and Orissa. Locally known as *Babui Ghas*, this grass can sustain itself in sandy and loamy red soils and does not require much care and protection. It responds in a positive manner to the local climate characterised by plenty of sunshine and little rain. Though the growth of sabai does not demand much labour, the processing is labour-intensive, which often involves entire families. The grass is cut with sickles by men, following which the women, and often children, engage in bundling the harvest into neat sticks. The bundles are kept in the sun for several days with the aim of reducing their moisture content and also to make them more durable and flexible. This step is followed by another step, that is cleaning the grass, and removing all the impurities by hand-combing the grass meticulously. The cleaned and dried grass is then soaked in water for about an hour or two, and then dried again till the time that assures that the grass has retained some moisture to be flexible enough to mould it into ropes. A point to be noted here is that no tools are used for measuring the ideal moisture content. It is solely

based on the traditional knowledge of the locals. The grass is then twisted into ropes that resemble hair braids, and then various utility and ornamental products are made from it. The whole endeavour aptly underscores the ability of Traditional Knowledge to bridge the gap between earning a living and environmental sustainability.

Till 2010, the artisans in Raisole were engaged in making babui ropes (for sale), and the only utility item they made was the charpoy, primarily for subsistence, with some made for sale in the local weekly market (*haat*). The year 2010 saw a new beginning when this cluster was located by some capitalist interests, and the sustainable enterprise known as 'Sabai Art & Craft' came into being gradually. The concept of 'Sustainable Enterprise' connotes an entrepreneurship that focuses on creating businesses that are environmentally friendly, socially responsible, and economically viable for future generations. The principles of this type of enterprise is strongly aligned with the framework of Triple Bottom Line (TBL) Theory, developed by John Elkington (1997). This approach does not measure the profit of a company only based on its financial gains, but evaluates its performance in terms of its ability to balance the three Ps - People, Planet, Profit. It thus brings together three elements - social responsibility (commitment of a company in uplifting a community), environmental responsibility (ecological impact), and financial performance (economic gains).

However, field visits and discussions with the artisans have raised questions regarding the transformation and the dynamics between the external forces and the property of sustainability. This calls for a critical analysis of the new production relations that have come into being. The whole cycle

is still heavily dependent on the skills and traditional expertise of the local artisans and ecology, but the process of production has been reorganised. The 'market value' of sustainability complicates the relationship further. These developments hint at some contradictions and paradoxes. The significance of the study lies in decoding these dynamics, examining the forces at play, and the implications these forces have in the contemporary capitalist society, which, on the one hand, aims at maximising profit, and on the other hand, is marked by strong discourses on environmental sustainability.

2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Satpathy and Sahu (2010) conducted a study among sabai grass workers in Mayurbhanj district of Orissa. Using the term 'money plant' for sabai grass, the study has shown how this business has benefited the tribal communities residing there in terms of the supply of raw material, as well as the growth of entrepreneurship. The role of existing agencies like NGOs, banks, and co-operative societies has also been examined. Overall, the researchers are very optimistic regarding the prospect of the sabai grass industry in Orissa. The concept of Triple Bottom Line has been defined, and its relevance in the context of sustainable development has been discussed in detail by Hammer & Pivo in an article (2016). They have defined the concept as the economic, environmental and social value of an investment. Noticing that TBL themes are missing from training and accreditation programs, the authors recommend using this largely marginalised concept of TBL in research to reduce the gap between theory and practice.

Paik, Jana and Chattopadhyay (2016) have analysed the problems and prospects of livelihood

from sabai grass in Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal. The researchers have remarked that development in sabai craft making can prove to be fruitful for the indigenous and backward communities residing in this region. Mohapatra and Saha (2021) studied how sustainable livelihoods can open up entrepreneurial opportunities among sabai grass artisans in Guhaldihi village of Baripada block in Mayurbhanj district in Orissa. It is a comprehensive study covering different aspects of capital - human, physical, social, financial and natural. The study observed that all the forms of capital have developed significantly in the women's producers' group, which can be an example of women's entrepreneurship. As a result, there has been a holistic development of the community under study. However, the authors recommend that the Government should come forward with some projects, and the satisfaction index of the artisans should be measured to promote future development.

Rout et al. (2023) have analysed the cycle of production, processing and marketing of *Babui* grass among Tamudia community of Nuhamalia village in Mayurbhanj district, Orissa. The income of each stratum of farmers associated with the production of *Babui* grass has been examined. The researchers have observed that there is a lack of training in craft-making, and if done so, a new source of livelihood shall open up for them.

The role of TBL in sustainable enterprise, along with the advantages and disadvantages of the approach have been discussed by Abraham, Chako and Sruthi S (2025).

3 RESEARCH GAP

Existing literature on the topic is mainly from a purely economic perspective. When the Sabai farmers, per se, have been studied, it has been done mostly in Orissa (concentrated in the Mayurbhanj district). Only a single study has been made in West Bengal, but a micro-analysis of the particular pocket with which the present paper is dealing has not been made. Not a single study has been engaged with the inherent contradictions lying within the interaction of sustainability with the capitalist mode of commodification. These factors have prompted the researcher to look at the issue through a sociological lens.

4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are as follows -

- To examine the credibility of Sabai Art and Craft as a sustainable enterprise
- To explore the process of transformation of the production process after 2010
- To analyse the role of external actors in shaping the whole process
- To probe into the effect of branding of the craft
- To examine the position of the artisans with reference to recognition of their labour, their control over the production process and the economic benefits that they gain from it.
- To critically analyse the sustainability of the craft in the context of capitalism and the culture of consumption

5 METHODOLOGY

Area of the study:

Sabai Craft artisans in Raisole village of Nayagram block, Jhargram district

The study takes on a Qualitative approach. The research has used the technique of Purposive

sampling, which includes artisans from different households of Raisole. As the research aims not at any statistical generalisation, but at an in-depth understanding of a specific process, the above-mentioned sampling strategy has been opted for. A purposeful (purposive) sampling has been chosen as it is a qualitative method for selecting information-rich cases to study in-depth, focusing on understanding central themes rather than generalising across a population (Patton,2002). Thus, the sampling strategy is absolutely consistent with the research design that tries to capture the details of the phenomenon, which is concentrated in a particular region among a specific group of people. The sample size taken is more than 10 % of the total population engaged in the process. The sample included 17 female artisans and 7 male artisans. And data have also been collected from the cluster leader (male) and the account holder (female). So, the total sample size is 26.

A look at the demographic profile of the participants shall be relevant at this point.

- In terms of gender, 18 females and 8 males have participated. As women form the majority of this enterprise, the research calls for such a selection.
- The age of the participants ranged from 23 to 55 years of age, representing both the younger sections and the older ones with immense expertise.
- Most of the participants have primary or upper primary education, while only a few of them have managed to go to high school. However, none of the participants had received any formal training in sabai craft-making till 2010.
- In terms of experience, the older ones could not recall when they had been engaged in craft production, while the younger section also

reported growing up with this generationally transmitted skill only.

- All the participants, along with their family members, are dependent on this livelihood presently. Only a few of them have a supplementary income from paddy cultivation (once in a year).

For the collection of primary data, the researcher has relied on fieldwork. The fieldwork is based on Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and in-depth interviews with the artisans while they were at work. FGD has been taken as a method, as it is an effective tool to explore relatively unknown territory. Moreover, as the researcher aimed to elicit spontaneous responses and their views on the changes that their livelihood has been undergoing since 2010, the respondents were encouraged to do so through this method, a method that takes interaction as its basis. Two such discussions have been conducted (13 participants in the first one, 11 of them in the second FGD). Each session has lasted for about 70 – 90 minutes. 6 in-depth interviews (each with a duration of about 1 hour) have been conducted with the cluster leader (male) and the account holder (female). The researcher has taken utmost care not to disturb their natural settings during the data collection process. That is why the cluster members were simultaneously weaving and giving shape to the final products during the data collection sessions. This actually has given the researcher an opportunity to probe into the minute details of the craft-making process and gain sociological insights from it.

While these are the sources of primary data, secondary data have been collected from academic literature on sustainable enterprise, traditional craft

clusters, sabai craft clusters of Odisha and rural livelihoods. Articles and reports on craft industries and the websites where the crafts made by the artisans of this cluster are displayed for sale have also been examined with a purpose. The researcher has come to know about the websites from the artisans, who time and again mentioned these platforms and organisations. Each of the sections of the websites has been studied, and patterns have been noted.

Responses have been audio-recorded with the prior consent of the participants. Minute observations and details were immediately noted in the field diary by the researcher after leaving the field each day.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher has been cautious to abide by the research ethics. The respondents have been made aware of the purpose of the study. Prior verbal consent was taken before the responses were audio-recorded. Confidentiality of participants' identities has also been maintained by using pseudonyms (wherever needed) to uphold the ethics of anonymity. Moreover, the researcher has taken immense care not to disrupt their craft-making activity during data collection.

6 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Data Analysis

The first phase of analysis consisted of transcription of the data collected and reading it, thoroughly keeping an eye out for responses implying recurrent patterns, to generate codes. Codes such as the use of sabai grass for crafting a product, the non-use of machinery, and intergenerational knowledge have together developed the theme of sustainable livelihood. The first theme is demonstrated by the responses of the

artisans, such as “*babui ghas theke purota amrai kori, kono machine byabohar kori na*”¹, “*chemical rang byabohar kora hoy na*”² or “*amra to jonme thekei eta korte dekhchi barir boro’der*”³. An analysis of the first theme brings home the point that sustainability is a lived practice, but not an imposed environmental model.

Codes like NGO activism, IIT training, the transition from making only utility items to also crafting luxury products and participation in fairs post 2010 have together generated the theme of intervention by external actors. The participants explained, “*2010 sal er por thekei amader training dewa hoy, aar amra khatiya ba dori toiri na kore nanarokom jinish toiri kori*”⁴. The cluster leader remarked, “*akhon amader jinish baireo jay, banglanatok e sab byabostha kore diyeche*”⁵. Codes like flexible working hours, remarkable participation of womenfolk, and female bank account holder-cum-spokesperson have been clustered under the theme of empowerment of women. The women participants acknowledged the fact that they are in a better position now and given the fact that it has room for flexible working hours, they can participate actively. They have said “*ghare boshe korte pari bole songsarer kaj taratari kore serei boshe jai eta korte*.”⁶

The codes like designs provided by some external actors, capitalist brand logos of the final products and no knowledge of the artisans regarding the final price have directed the researcher toward the theme of lack of agency of the artisans. Finally, exorbitant MRP, demand of the crafts among affluent urban consumers, and homogenization of designs constitute the theme of commodification of sustainability. These facts emerge from a content analysis of the websites mentioned.

Data Interpretation

Sabai craft-making hinges solely on indigenous knowledge systems that are transmitted through generations. However, the intervention by external actors has led the Sabai artisans to realise the potential of the craft that was a part of their everyday life. The artisans were trained by Kharagpur IIT and also by Khadi and Village Industries Board, in an initiative by an NGO known as 'Banglanatak'. They started participating in festivals and fairs catering to individual customers. Gradually, a team of artisans (mostly women), has gathered together under the leadership of Manilal Mahato, and they are engaged in supplying orders to concerns like Biswa Bangla, Kadam haats, Flourish, Mayurshilpa (Odisha). The brand called 'Sabai Art & Craft' has come into existence, which has been built on a legacy of ethical manufacturing and generational craftsmanship. The livelihood of these artisans is close to their hearts as they have nurtured their family traditions since childhood.

Committed to preserving the environment, the brand is guided by values of heritage, handwork and harmony, and hence can be an example of sustainable enterprise. The key components of a sustainable enterprise include: a) Material and Resource Efficiency that focuses on reducing material consumption and maximising output from input, b) Cyclical Business Models, that emphasise recycling and remanufacturing products rather than linear consumption, c) Functionality and Value that prioritises product functionality and true value over mere ownership or branding, d) Environmental Responsibility that ensures the business processes do not harm nature.

The functioning of a sustainable enterprise follows the principle of the Triple Bottom Line propounded by Elkington in the year 1997. This

framework hinges on three Ps (People, Planet and Profit), encouraging organisations to measure their success not only by financial profitability, but also by their environmental impacts. Now let's have a look at how each of these three Ps exists in this case. The first P refers to 'People', or the social impact of the enterprise. Sabai Art and Craft, as an enterprise, acknowledges its commitment to the local community of artisans by assuring continuity of the business. The artisans have also pointed out that while accepting orders, they can exercise their bargaining power regarding the price they shall charge for the finished products. Another very important change to be noted is the empowerment of women. Women in the community have gained independence and dignity as they have been included in the whole process, and because of flexible arrangements, they have been able to balance domestic chores with this income-generating exercise. In fact, women outnumber men in this endeavour. Manilal Mahato and his sister-in-law, Sarala Mahato, are the faces of this enterprise. Another significant aspect is that the account holder of the enterprise is Sarala Mahato, and she is in charge of interacting with the external actors.

The enterprise is committed to the second P, that is, Planet (environment). Using a renewable, eco-friendly raw material and making utility and lifestyle items that are biodegradable and low impact, the production process emphasises mindful resource use, minimising waste and revering nature at every stage. Economic implications of the transition are immense. A shift from subsistence to business has definitely brought in the element of profit (third P) into the scenario. Both the enterprise and the external actors at play have been gainers in

economic terms. However, information from both the primary and the secondary sources reveals some underlying layers of the story. 'Sabai Art and Craft' as an enterprise has not been allowed to interact with the customers as a standalone enterprise, but it has been subsumed under digital brands called 'FLOURISH' and 'Naturally Bengal'. Kadamhaat, Mayurshilpa and Banglanatak are other online brands that sell the crafts at exorbitant prices. However, the artisans themselves are not given any share of the profits accruing from such sales.

This calls for a Marxist interpretation of the situation. Sabai crafts, which were mainly known for their use-value, have acquired exchange-value only against the backdrop of capitalism. The production relations have been reorganised, which has relegated the artisans to the backstage. They are alienated from the beautiful products made by virtue of their own skills and expertise, once the products get the brand logo of some other companies. In fact, they themselves are assigned the task of embossing the logos. The cluster leader himself narrated with disappointment – *'Amader bole dewa hoy kontay kon stamp dite habe.'* Not only the final product, but also the design and colours of the products to be made are also decided by some famous designers, and the artisans are just supposed to follow the instructions. They have thus been alienated from the production process itself. It is only in the fairs held across India where they get a chance to exercise their discretion. Moreover, if the websites mentioned earlier are scrolled thoroughly, it will be found that not even a single section is dedicated to the artisans. Only 'FLOURISH' and 'Naturally Bengal' have acknowledged the contribution of the artisans. However, the fact remains that all the brands have

upheld their success stories as being able to cater to the needs of a rural community sustainably. Sustainability has thus become a commodity, and Sabai Craft has gained its USP due to this. A craft, which has thrived through generations, has captured the attention of the people only after its basic feature of sustainability has been commodified, thus reiterating the relevance of Marx's notion of 'commodity fetishism' (Marx, 1867).

The post-2010 era has marketed the culture of sustainability in a new package. A craft that was so much down-to-earth and sustainable throughout has been made a lifestyle commodity that has targeted urban and global consumers. The branding process has harped on its sustainable feature and stylish appearance, thus creating a new culture that is standardised. Though each of the products is upheld as unique, the crux of the matter is somewhat different. The designs of the products are homogenised, and a culture of ethical consumption has been created by market forces. Thus, the culture industry (Adorno, 1947) has been reincarnated, where the culture of sustainability and ethical consumption has been created as a new fashion statement, and the craft itself, which was embedded in rural lifestyles, has acquired a new dimension as a cultural commodity.

Another very interesting factor at play here is the target consumers chosen by capitalism. Given the exorbitant price of the finished products, only the affluent section of the population can afford them. Here again lies a paradox. Is it really the eco-conscious mindset of these people, who otherwise indulge in such lifestyles that drain the environment in a consistent manner, that has made them customers of sustainable crafts? Or is it just their desire to stand apart from others? A critical analysis would suggest that the increasing demand for sabai

crafts among urban upper and upper-middle classes signifies that they like to acquire the prestige associated with using some exotic and eco-friendly stuff, which shall demonstrate their fine taste, environmental awareness and morality. It is one of the many means to accumulate cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and an image that is necessary for acquiring symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

The Sabai Craft Cluster of Raisole needs to be studied from a plurality of perspectives. It shall be a sociological blunder if the layers of its operations are not viewed critically. While the Triple Bottom Line Theory is necessary to assess the sustainability of the enterprise, the whole cycle deserves to be understood separately so that the position and intention of each of the stakeholders becomes transparent. By placing the operations of the enterprise within a capitalist framework, a comprehensive understanding can be arrived at with the aid of several theoretical lens that have been used to view the status of the artisans, to decode the intention of the capitalist interests and their customers, to examine the role of branding in marketing the element of 'sustainability', to highlight the significance of 'sustainability' in this new age of consumption culture.

CONCLUSION

Nayagram Community Development Block has two sabai craft clusters - one in Raisol, and another in Jugisol. Time constraints have limited the study to one of the clusters only. Sabai Art and Craft is surely an enterprise that has hinged on indigenous knowledge to sustain families with zero impact on the environment. It is certainly a sustainable way to income generation. Moreover, it is undeniable that the entry of external actors has provided a large market to the artisans. Women in this cluster have also been impacted positively. Nevertheless, the

inner contradictions have been revealed by the study.

The transformation of the craft from 'subsistence' to 'commercial' due to the play of external forces, has resulted in an uneven distribution of control and monetary benefits. It is the local community that has kept the green craft alive through generations, but their role in decision-making process has been curtailed to a great extent. Even if they have bargaining power regarding the price of the products that they are selling, the MRP is beyond their imagination, and no benefits from such sale trickle down to them. While they are the engines of the whole endeavour, the brands have not felt the urge to uphold them. On the contrary, the brand promos celebrate their own distinction as standing by rural artisans with a pledge to preserve the environment. Another very notable dimension is how the notion of 'sustainability' is marketed by

capitalism, without even giving the engineers of this feature their due recognition.

The paper finally recommends with humility that a balance be struck between the potentials and the problems. This can be achieved not outside the system, but by introducing some changes within the system itself. Agency of the artisans should be ensured, and they should be given direct access to markets. Instead of an attitude that the brands are the messiah of the artisans, the symbiotic relationship should be acknowledged on the websites and social media. The profits gained from the sale of the products should be distributed among the real producers to bring equity. Finally, the price of the green products must be revised so that they do not remain confined to the affluent classes as luxury items, but all sections of the population can get access, ensuring sustainable living in a true sense.

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