

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE UNORGANIZED SECTOR: A CASE STUDY ON THE LIFE AND LIVELIHOOD MECHANISMS OF THE KUMARTULI ARTISANS OF KOLKATA

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Abstract

The present study attempts to foreground the onerous effect of COVID-19 pandemic among the artisans of an unorganized sector, a sector which is the epitome of employment in a developing nation like India. The economic activities of the artisans of Kumartuli in Kolkata are dependent on the puja or the festive economy of the state of West Bengal. The present study highlights the significance of Kumartuli as a geographic space in the heart of capital city of Kolkata. From the examination and analysis of the situations of all the categories of artisans of Kumartuli, it has been observed that the pandemic has greatly affected their 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 artisans of Kumartuli which is the heart of creativity of the city of joy, Kolkata.

Keywords: unorganized sector, artisans, Kumartuli, livelihood, affected.

Introduction

Creativity is one of the most important facets of human existence which reflects the adaptation of human beings to nature and its surroundings. It is noteworthy that most of the creative activities and creative spaces belong to the unorganized sector. Sawyer et.al (2003) has analyzed how creativity influences the development of human beings in complex systems. Creativity must reflect something new or different or innovative and must also be appropriate to the task at hand (Kaufman, 2016). Creativity requires a combination of six essential characteristics, they are knowledge, intellectual abilities, personality, styles of thinking, environment and motivation (Sternberg, 1999). Creativity usually leads to the development of original ideas which are essential for the development of society in general (Paulus and Nijstad, 2003). Alongside creativity and the creative existence of mankind, it is essential to discuss the unorganized sector in the context of creativity.

According to National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (2008), the workers in the unorganized informal sector comprises 92% of the total workforce of India. It includes over 290 million working population out of approximately 317 million working population of India (Jhabvala, 1998). Therefore, despite the large and substantial share of the unorganized sector in the Indian economy, it remains a neglected sector in the context of public policymaking and academic discourse (Kabra, 2003). It is worth noting that a significant

amount of growth of the Indian economy over the last two decades has been due to increments in the process of informalization (National Statistical Commission, 2012). Therefore it can be said that India has a preponderance of unorganized sectors consisting of informal workers. This report by the National Statistics Commission, 2012 defined the unorganized sector or the informal sector as a sector comprising of workers who do not have work security, employment security and social security. In most cases, it is found that the terms unorganized sector and informal sector are used interchangeably. These sectors have units characterized by an insignificant division between labour and capital, organizations at low levels and factors of employment at small scales where the labour relations are mostly casual in nature (National Statistical Commission, 2012). The Kumartuli area of Kolkata reflects an assemblage of heritage artisans who are the epitome and emblem of creativity in a creative landscape and are unorganized in nature depending predominantly upon the puja economy or the festive economy of the state of West Bengal in India.

The artisans of Kumartuli are comprised of the idol makers, the decoration artisans and the sculpturists. The idol makers are engaged in the making of idols and figures of various deities, gods and goddesses demanded by the customers during the puja or the festive seasons in the state. The decoration artisans are involved in the making of decoration artefacts or the “saj” artefacts essential for the idol makers and the customers during the festive seasons for the decoration of the finished idols. While the sculpturists represent those sections of artisans who are involved in the making of statues and sculptures of various deities and eminent personalities like Gandhiji, Subhash Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru and so on. It is worth noting in this regard that the activities of the decoration artisans are directly related to the idol makers in the light of the puja economy of the state. The finished products of the decoration artisans 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 orders for statues and sculptures of the sculpturists comes mostly from the clubs, committees, organizations and various religious institutes and departments from all over India and abroad transcending the geographic boundaries. It is very important to realize that urbanization has multiple facets or dimensions. One such facet is the existence of the unorganized sectors and how urbanization impacts their overall processes of survival and livelihood mechanisms. The nexus between urbanization and the growth of the informal sector is very complex and intricate in nature (Paül and Tonts, 2005). In fact, cities generate agglomeration benefits for the informal sectors (Paül and Tonts, 2005). The heritage work of the Kumartuli craftsmen is a classic example of how an unorganized sector has established itself historically over the heart of the city of Kolkata. These craftsmen are renowned all over the world for their majestic creations, “the Durga Pratima” and idols of many other Gods and Goddesses. These majestic creation of idols are very important especially in the context of the grand mega-event of 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 development of tourist attractions in Kumartuli and also for the long sustainance of the Kumartuli artisans 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 (Das, 2021). Many works of literature have studied the diverse aspects of the artisan’s profile. Paul et.al in 2018 has studied the technical aspects of the idol-making activities of the karigars (artisans), both traditional and modern in a

comparative framework. There are differences in wage rates depending upon the season of the sale in a year (Paul et.al, 2018). The karigars or the artisans of Kumartuli are also known as “Kumbhakars”. The artisans of Kumartuli work under stressful conditions characterized by lack of space, dearth of storage space for idols, small-sized studios. In many studios, the artisans work, eat and sleep in the same place (Banerjee, 2017). Along with all these odds, the artisans are facing the problems of lack of raw materials, rising production costs, low returns, low demand, etc. As per reports, these problems have magnified themselves under the current precarious situation of the pandemic. One of the principal objectives of the present study is the examination of the effect of COVID-19 pandemic in the life and livelihood mechanisms of the Kumartuli artisans. The observations of the present investigation reflect that the COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc in the life of the artisans of Kumartuli. The statistical analysis and the word cloud analysis clearly reflects the onerous and disastrous effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in the lives of the Kumartuli artisans. The findings of the present study reveal that there has been a significant fall in the annual turnovers of all the three afore-mentioned artisan categories in the post-COVID-19 phase (2020 and 2021) compared with the pre-COVID-19 phase. The Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat (SWOT) analysis performed by the present investigations help in analyzing the driving force and the impeding factors for the growth and development of the Kurmatuli artisans in relationship with the urbanization and geographic potentials of the Kolkata city. The basic structure of the present manuscript starts with an abstract followed by an introduction, then it is followed by the objectives, sample, methodology, analysis, discussion and finally the conclusion of the present investigation.

Objectives

The objectives of the present study are described below:

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

Secondly, a study of the onerous effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in the lives of the Kumartuli artisans shall be made on the basis of ground-based observations and reflections.

Sample

The study area of the present investigation is the Kumartuli area of Ward number 9 of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) of Kolkata city. According to historical records, Raja Krishnachandra of Krishnagar hired artists from Natore of present-day Bangladesh in his area and these artisans gradually settled in the Ghurni area of Krishnanagar city in Nadia district and started making clay dolls and other artefacts since then (Hazra, 1991). It is said that these artisans have migrated later in search of better living and livelihood to Kolkata and formed the potter’s colony of Kumartuli from the 19th to the early 20th century (Sen, 2016). As noted above, the Kumartuli area consists of three artisan categories i.e. the idol makers, decoration artisans and sculpturists. These artisans are approximately 400 in number as per information received from the KMC office and are mostly concentrated in Kumartuli, while some artisans are located in scattered ways in the Bagbazar and Kalighat area of Kolkata. The present study aims to investigate the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the livelihood mechanisms of the artisans at Kumartuli. For this, the current study has taken 97 idol makers, 37 decoration artisans and 17 sculpturists i.e. a total artisan sample of 151 artisans into consideration. It is worth noting in this regard that the Kumartuli area forms market for these artisans 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.

Methodology

The ground information regarding the disastrous effect of the COVID-19 pandemic among the Kumartuli artisans has been obtained from the field visits and regular field surveys by interview, questionnaire, focus group discussion and in-depth interview methods. Firstly a SWOT analysis has been made to comprehend the geographic potentials of the Kumartuli area and its artisans. The SWOT analysis is a method used to study and comprehend the ‘strengths’, ‘weaknesses’, ‘opportunities’ and ‘threats’ involved in a project, plan, organization, or particular business activities (GURL, 2017). Here, the SWOT analysis helps us to visualize and examine the strengths and weaknesses of Kumartuli as a whole that affects the business, market including the demand and supply chain mechanisms of the artisans of the concerned area. Secondly, a paired sample t-test has been performed over the average annual turnovers of the pre-COVID-19 phase (2018 and 2019) and the average annual turnovers of the post-COVID-19 (2020 and 2021) for all the three categories of artisans of idol makers, decoration artisans and the sculpturists in IBM SPSS version 23 software platform. This helps to visualize the onerous effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the livelihood mechanisms of the artisans. The analysis has been performed on a sample size of 97 idol makers, 37 decoration artisans and 17 sculpturists. Lastly, a word cloud analysis has been performed over the information received from all the three above-mentioned artisan categories in QSR NVIVO 12 PLUS software. The word cloud analyses are important methods for the proper conceptualization of texts and public opinions incorporating a formative assessment and analysis of contexts (DePaolo and Wilkinson, 2014). 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 analyzed by a systematic visualization of the words that appeared with the highest frequency used by the artisans during the interview.

Analysis

The SWOT Analysis

In order to comprehend the geographic potentials and the locational attributes of the Kumartuli area, a SWOT analysis has been performed as reflected in table 1. This analysis is very important as the demand and supply chain mechanisms and thus the overall livelihood mechanisms of the Kumartuli artisans are largely dependent upon it.

SWOT Analysis for Kumartuli and its artisans	
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 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

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	<p>in the proximity of the Burrabazar area. This is an important area from where the decoration artisans purchase their decoration artefacts in bulk for the market. Furthermore, the Kumartuli area is in itself a distribution market of idols, decoration artefacts and sculptures. It is also worth noting that as Kolkata city is the capital city of the state of West Bengal, it attracts tourists from far and wide places. The close proximity of Kolkata airport also facilitates smooth visits by foreign tourists.</p>
Weakness	<p>The place of Kumartuli is very congested in nature and there is a dearth of place and proper storage facilities for the idol makers, decoration artisans and sculpturists. Almost all the narrow lanes of Kumartuli become occupied by the idols and statues of deities during the puja or the festive seasons. There hardly remains a place for walking. Moreover, the artisans work in dingy conditions. They work, sleep and eat in the same place i.e. in their working studios which are very unhealthy.</p>
Opportunity	<p>Kumartuli is in itself a distribution market of idols, decoration artefacts and sculptures. Kolkata being the capital city of the state of West Bengal attracts tourists from far and wide places. The raw materials like mud, straws, bamboo used by the idol makers come from the nearby villages of Uluberia through road transport by lorries and vans. The raw materials of the decoration artisans come from Krishnanagar city of Nadia. It also comes from Surat, New Delhi, Kalyan of Mumbai and so on. These materials are available from the Burra Bazar market of Kolkata.</p>
Threat	<p>Owing to congestion, fire breakout due to short circuits or accidents greatly affected the artisans over the years. Their congested</p>

	<p>shops get destroyed. These shops easily catch fire due to high congestions. The occurrences of rain and floods greatly affect the idol makers and mostly the decoration artisans who suffer owing to the lack of proper storage facilities.</p> <p>The rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused huge loss and destruction in the lives of the poor artisans.</p>
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Table 1: SWOT analysis for the place of Kumartuli and its artisans

Statistical analysis performed by the paired-sample t-test

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

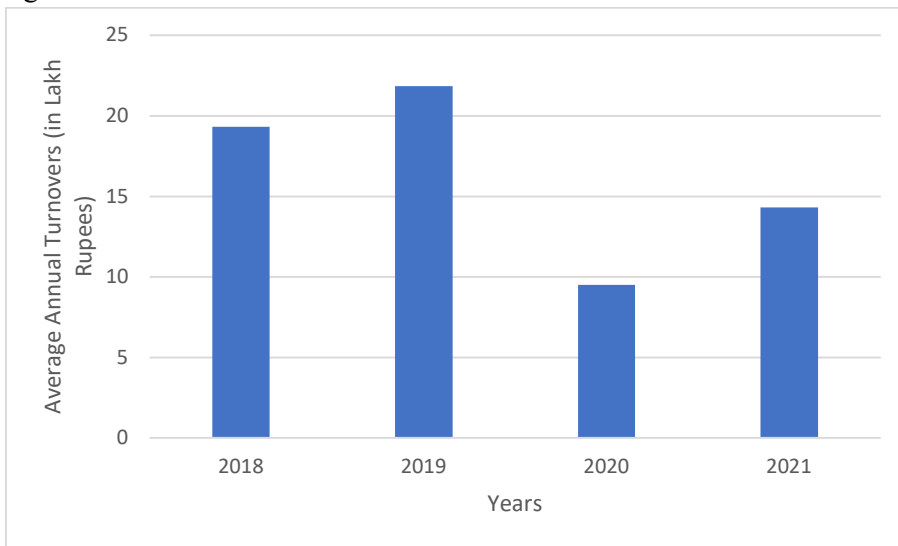


Figure 1: Average annual turnovers (in lakh rupees) of all the sample idol makers in the respective years.

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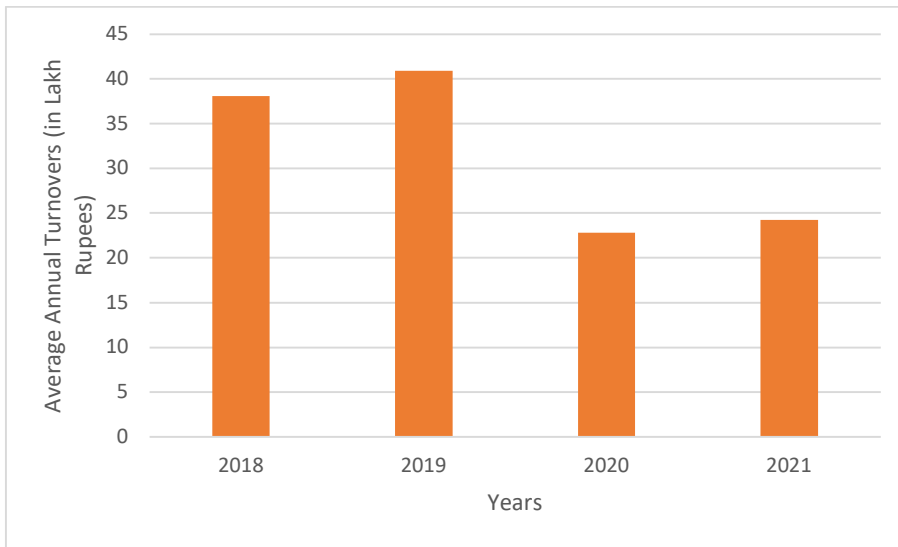


Figure 2: Average annual turnovers (in lakh rupees) of all the sample decoration artisans in the respective years.

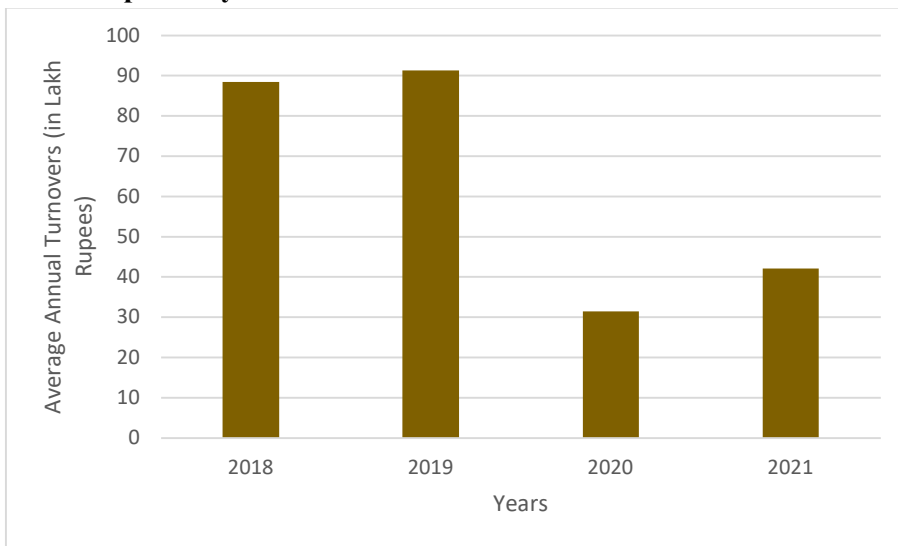


Figure 3: Average annual turnovers (in lakh rupees) of all the sample sculpturists in the respective years.

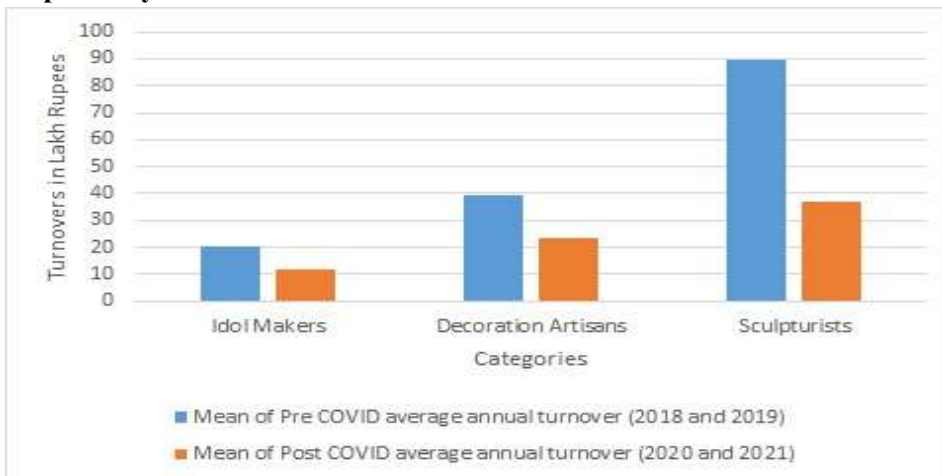


Figure 4: Mean of Pre and Post COVID average annual turnovers for all categories of artisans

Finally, a mean of all the average annual turnovers of all the idol makers, decoration artisans and sculpturists has been computed for the Pre-COVID phase of 2018 and 2019 and the Post-COVID phase of 2020 and 2021 as reflected in figure 4.

Categories	Paired Differences (Pre COVID average annual turnover and Post COVID average annual turnover)						t	d	Sig. (2-tailed)	ln(Sig)	Decision
	Sample Size	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
Decorat ion Artisan s	37	15.9730	17.2365	2.8337	10.2260	21.7199	5.637	36	0.00002	-13.12	The Null hypothesis is rejected
Sculptu rists	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
Summa tion (Σ)	151									-130.9	
Combination of Tests (-2*Σln(sig))										261.8	The Null hypoth

	esis is rejecte d
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Table 2: Results of Paired Sample T-Test with the combination of tests and hypothesis tests.

The main hypothesis for the present study for the analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the lives of the above-mentioned three artisan categories of Kumartuli are described below:

H₀: There is an insignificant or no difference between the average annual turnovers of the pre-COVID-19 phase (2018 and 2019) and the post-COVID-19 phase (2020 and 2021).

H₁: There is a significant difference between the average annual turnovers of the pre-COVID-19 phase (2018 and 2019) and the post-COVID-19 phase (2020 and 2021).

It is to 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 the three categories of artisans has been rejected in favour of the alternate hypothesis. In other words, there has been a significant difference between the average annual turnovers between the pre-COVID-19 phase and the post-COVID-19 phase for all the three abovementioned categories of artisans. Therefore it can also be reflected that the fall in the average annual turnover in the post-COVID-19 phase has been significant owing to the onerous effect of the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 2). The logarithmic values of the significant measurements have been used for the calculation of a combination of the test result to analyze the overall statistical significance of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in the lives of all the three artisan categories of the Kumartuli (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 COVID-19 pandemic in the decrement of the average annual turnovers in the post-COVID-19 phase has been significant and worth noting statistically. In figure 4, the mean of the average annual turnovers of the pre-COVID-19 phase and the post-COVID-19 phase for all the 3 artisan categories have been displayed. Moreover, from table 2 it is also evident that the null hypothesis is most strongly rejected in the category of the idol makers, followed by the sculpturists and the decoration artisans. In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected all the artisan categories of Kumartuli as a whole.

Word Cloud Analysis

Finally, the study conducted a word cloud analysis over the pieces of information received from the ground-based survey information from the Kumartuli artisans of all the three aforementioned categories. The word cloud diagrams display the words which appeared with the highest frequency during the interview. This helps us to analyze the important contexts and issues at hand. In the present investigation, this analysis has been found to be important in the comprehension of the artisan’s sufferings and problems amidst the COVID-19 pandemic situation. These word clouds are shown in figures 5, 6 and 7 for the responses received from the idol makers, decoration artisans and sculpturists respectively.

of the basic raw materials for the decoration artisans which usually comes from Surat, Kalyan and New Delhi. However, the place of Kumartuli suffers from the dearth of place, therefore congestion really affects the productivity and the health of the artisans at Kumartuli. Moreover, as there is congestion, there is a lack of proper storage facilities of idols, decoration artefacts and sculptures. Therefore the artefacts of the artisans are largely affected by cyclones and storms and also by occasional fires caught 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 artisans live, eat and make the artefacts in the same congested unhealthy places. This can severely affect the health and wellbeing of the Kumartuli artisans in the long run.

Effect of COVID-19 pandemic in the life of the Kumartuli artisans

It is very important to realize that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all the categories of artisans of Kumartuli. The present investigation has clearly revealed that the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has been significant over all the artisan categories. The main effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are as follows:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the demand and supply chain mechanisms of the artisans. The raw material price has increased coupled with the thaw of its availability amidst the pandemic times. The lockdowns imposed by the government due to the COVID-19 pandemic has affected both the supply of raw materials and the supply of the finished product to the final customers. The business of the idol makers and the sculpturists were also affected by the pandemic. It is to be noted that the activities of the decoration artisans are directly dependent upon the idols made by the idol makers. Therefore, it is needless to say that when COVID-19 affected the idol makers, the decoration artisans were also affected in the process.
- The statistical analysis clearly portrays the onerous effect of the COVID-19 pandemic upon the livelihood mechanisms of the Kumartuli artisans. Their incomes have fallen considerably in 2020 and 2021 compared with the previous years like 2018 and 2019. Therefore the post-COVID-19 phase reveals that the effect of the pandemic has been severe in the case of the Kumartuli artisans. Due to the shortages of money and capital, many artisans have started to take different other occupations like the opening of tea shops, grocery shops, selling vegetables, selling cosmetics and so on.
- Moreover, owing to the lack of capital and money at hand many artisans have migrated back to their original places of origin or their home towns and are making the artefacts there. This process of reverse migration is being continued even now mostly by those artisans who have migrated in Kumartuli from far and wide places. If this process of reverse migration continues at an unchecked rate, then the heritage activities of idol making, decoration artefacts making and sculpture-making could come under threat in the long run.
- The lockdowns have affected the business mechanisms of all the categories of artisans of Kumartuli alike. The young generations of the artisans of Kumartuli are not interested in carrying forward the heritage occupations of idol making, decoration artefacts making and sculpture-making in the long run due to the fear of financial loss

and challenges of survival. Moreover, they are also apprehensive about more such pandemics and shocks in the long run.

Opinion of the Kumartuli artisans regarding the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic

The word cloud analysis for all the three artisans categories of idol makers, decoration artisans and sculpturists clearly reflects the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in the lives and livelihood of these artisans. 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 the decoration artisans. Similarly, in figure 7, the words like “pandemic”, “COVID”, “situation”, “many”, “statues”, “customers”, “increased”, “government” and so on were frequently used by the sculpturists. It is clear that the words of “pandemic” and “COVID” appeared with the highest frequency among all the three artisan categories. The young generation is absolutely disinterested in carrying forward the heritage occupations. The government has not taken any satisfactory measures towards the welfare of the artisans. Rather, the Kumartuli Mritshilpi Sanskriti Samity has helped the artisans during the trying times of the COVID-19 pandemic. The artisans are dying due to the dearth of financial capital in their hands. The artisans are apprehensive about their near fragile future and not interested to remain in the business of the creation of artefacts. The artisans are now very much frustrated, they opine that the artefacts which they make are items of pleasure but not of necessity. Therefore when the COVID-19 pandemic struck the country in January 2020, their business got severely affected as the customers who buy the artefacts do not have sufficient financial capital in their hands. Therefore the artisans of Kumartuli are suffering great losses and there is a wail of creativity amidst the fear of a fragile future.

Conclusion

Finally, the present investigation and study conclude that the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has been severe among all three artisan categories. Their incomes and profits have greatly declined. Their business, demand and supply chain mechanisms got severely affected by the pandemic. It is also worth noting that the heritage activities of the Kumartuli artisans are unorganized in nature. Therefore more comprehensive and inclusive planning must be taken by the government to revive the business of these artisans. The government may provide direct financial assistances in the hands of the artisans. It can also provide loans and credit facilities at nominal interest rates like the Differential Rates of Interests (DRIs) to the artisans. The NGOs and the corporates must assist the artisans in these trying times. The corporates can assist the artisans of Kumartuli in marketing, storage and distribution of their products in relationship with the market demand and supply chain mechanisms. The government must try to provide sufficient storage facilities for the artisans as their artefacts get damaged by rains during monsoon and cyclones and also by the occasional fires. The government may provide the artisans with alternate works and activities amidst the pandemic time like employing them in the construction industries, saloons, hospitals, but they must be brought back to their heritage activities to preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture. Moreover, the works of the Kumartuli artisans can also be integrated with the art colleges, which would enable the transfer

of technology and skill to the artisans of Kumartuli. Finally, the government must try to encourage the young generation to remain in their original parental occupations like idol making, decoration artefacts making and sculptures making to preserve the rich heritage of our tradition and culture. The government must look forward to more inclusive planning for a more sustainable future for all the artisans of Kumartuli as our mother Earth could face many more pandemics and shocks in the near future keeping in mind the promise of the Millenium Development Goals and the 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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