



ROLE OF KOUNA CRAFT IN PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS IN RURAL AREAS OF MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

This research study will critically examines the role of Kauna craft in promoting sustainable livelihoods in rural areas of Manipur. Kauna craft, a traditional handicraft of Manipur, has been an integral part of the state's cultural heritage and economy. The study aims to assess the impact of Kauna craft on rural livelihoods, income generation, and poverty reduction. It will also explores the potential of Kauna craft to promote sustainable development, environmental conservation, and social empowerment. In Manipur, unemployment is one of the big challenges as there is very less organized private industry that can generates employment and government jobs are very limited. According to Directorate of Employment, Manipur, the number of job-seekers registered with the Employment Exchanges in Manipur as of March 31, 2024, was 4,52,090. Here, Kouna Crafts which are also eco-friendly product are the great source of income for the artisans particularly living in rural areas of Manipur. On average, a women artisan belonging to skill and semi-skilled group can earn an average Rs.8000 – 12000 per month. In addition, in view of its health-friendly nature, Kouna crafts never harm the health of artisans. For this study, reports published by Department of Commerce and Industries, government of Manipur and also reports, articles published in journals, Newspapers are also used.

KEYWORDS : Kouna, Handicraft, Eco-friendly, Flora and Fauna.

INTRODUCTION

Handloom and Handicrafts are important industry in the state of Manipur. Handicrafts industry of Manipur may be mentioned with special accounts for contributing to the economic structure and development of the state. And Kouna, which is locally called, is a class of reed – a firm- stemmed water or marsh plant especially of genus - Phragmites. The plants grow wildly in the marshy land, ponds, canals, along the river and lake beaches. From time immemorial, these stalks, locally called Kouna, after drying have been being used in making mats/mattresses by the people living mostly in the valley areas of the Manipur State. Tulle's stems (known as Kouna locally) are now used in a wide array of artistic production of decorative and household items made like jewellery boxes, stools, bags. Various kouna products, artistic weaving, wood carving etc., have a distinct place of their own. Kouna craft making mats/mattresses in different sizes, short and long is taken up by traditional artisans for economic earnings. The craft has now been taken up as a gainful economic activity by artisans/entrepreneurs in some areas in the State due to having high market demands. The plants are planted especially for economic utilisation in the marshy paddy fields, canals, along the submerged river and lake shores (North East India, 2002).

In Manipur, among the variety of crafts available, Kauna (*Scripus leucostriis*) craft is most widespread throughout the State because of availability of abundant raw materials and demands from both domestic as well as International buyers.

This particular craft has the potential for large scale plantation, production and marketing. Cities like New Delhi and Mumbai and foreign countries, like, UK, Netherlands, Germany, France, UAE and Switzerland are major buyers (North East India, 2002).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this research study, both exploratory and descriptive research methods are used. Both primary and secondary data are used. For primary data, related information is collected through informal interviews with Indira Oinam, Founder of the Woman Income Generation Centre (WIGC), Thoubal, Manipur. Researchers also used the secondary data from government official websites and other relevant non-government official websites. Besides, researcher also used the secondary data collected from different research articles, papers, journals, books, etc.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this study are:

- 1) To analyse the potential of Kouna Craft Industry particularly in Rural Areas in Manipur.
- 2) To analyse the successful stories of Entrepreneurships in Kouna Craft Industry particularly in Rural Areas in Manipur. .
- 3) To find out the challenges faced by the Kouna Craft Industry particularly in Rural Areas in Manipur

Significance Of The Proposed Research Study

The proposed research study on "Role of Kauna Craft in Promoting Sustainable Livelihoods in Rural Areas of Manipur" holds significant importance for several reasons:

Economic Empowerment: Kauna craft, a traditional handicraft in Manipur, provides a means of economic empowerment for rural women, enhancing their economic and social status.

Sustainable Livelihoods: By promoting Kauna craft, the study aims to contribute to sustainable livelihoods in rural areas, aligning with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Cultural Preservation: The study highlights the cultural significance of Kauna craft, preserving Manipur's rich cultural heritage and traditional practices.

Rural Development: The research has implications for rural development, demonstrating how traditional crafts can be leveraged to improve socio-economic conditions in rural areas.

Skill Development: The study's findings can inform skill development programs, enhancing the capacity of rural artisans to create sustainable livelihoods through Kauna craft.

SUCCESSFUL ENTREPRENEURS OF THE KOUNA CRAFT INDUSTRY OF MANIPUR:

Angom Ongbi Kamala Devi (47): A successful kouna crafts person, Angom Ongbi Kamala Devi (47), the wife of Angom Dilip from Kongba Nandeibam Leikai, received the state award for master crafts person in 2012, conferred by the State Commerce and Industries department for her kouna craft "Phingarook." She stated that she has trained over 20 individuals in this craft and is currently providing employment

to at least 10 people in her community. "Kouna craft has proven to be a lucrative business for me, allowing me to earn more than Rs. 10,000 each month. The primary raw material for creating various craft items, kouna, is mainly sourced from Nongpok Sekmai," Kamala remarked (Rabi Takhellambam, 2015).

Irenbam Surbala and Renubala Devi: Two industrious artisans, Irenbam Surbala and Renubala Devi who are also known as The Kouna Sisters can be mentioned. They have earned a name for their artistic production of decorative and household items made from Tulle's stems (known as Kouna). The untimely demise of their elder brother, Somen, who was a National Awardee conferred by Ministry of Textile Industries in 1999 for his contributions in the field of kouna crafts in 2009 brought the responsibility of running the family business on the shoulders of these two brave and hardworking sisters. They have more than 30 artisans working in their work-shed producing a wide array of items like jewellery boxes, stools, bags and mats. (giskaaTM, 2017).

Irengbam Rebati Devi: Irengbam Rebati Devi, aged 28, daughter of Sanatombi, is from Kwakeithel Moirangpurel Leikai in Imphal West. For the past decade, she has been supporting her family by selling her handmade kouna (reed) products. She experienced the hardships of poverty during her early years, a situation that worsened with the unexpected passing of her father, who was the family's sole provider. In January 2006, she participated in a two-month training course on handicrafts organized by the Kasturba Gandhi Institute of Development at Konjeng Leikai. After completing this training in kouna craft, she began creating various items. Initially, her products did not yield significant returns as they were not well-received at that time. As a kouna craft instructor, she has taught numerous students in various training programs organized by different NGOs, earning some income from this endeavor. Currently, many students are learning kouna craft under her mentorship, and the items are produced with the assistance of her students (Amukhomba Ngangbam, 2013).

"For a poor State like Manipur where Government cannot afford jobs to many unemployed youths, we need to seek the ways that would provide us self employment by hook or by crook. Encouraging the entrepreneurs by the Government with some funding or loans is the need of the hour as many successful entrepreneurs can provide jobs to many jobless and it is a panacea for economic growth of the State", Rebati said (Amukhomba Ngangbam, 2013).

PROBLEMS

Transportation subsidy: Transportation charges are a major problem for Kouna crafts. It acts as a barrier to the development of this flourishing craft industry. Since Manipur does not have a railhead in its state capital, Imphal, Kouna items are exported out of the state by air cargo and speed post, and sometimes through inter-state bus services for customers in adjoining states like Nagaland and Assam. However, the growing demand for Kouna products surpasses the prevailing production capacity in the state, and the prevailing transport costs might discourage customers from purchasing in bulk due to the associated high costs. This has a direct or indirect influence on the Kouna craft industry, particularly hitting the women practicing Kouna crafts, as they depend on this craft for their livelihood.

GST On Handicrafts Products Especially On Kouna Adding GST to handicrafts might lead to significant transportation costs. The demand and supply chain for handcrafted goods would be severely impacted. Due to the abrupt decline in demand for handicrafts, it will directly penalize low-income craftsmen and independent contractors. In a nutshell, the right to life of artisans who reside in the landlocked state of

Manipur is seriously threatened by the GST imposed on handicrafts made in the state.

SUGGESTIONS

Transportation Subsidy On The Spot: "In order to maximize the supply volume of Kouna products to domestic and global markets, the transportation subsidy on Kouna crafts should be availed of on the spot where the products are booked for dispatch. Long process to get transportation subsidy being provided at present is of no use to the people with Kouna crafts since it takes time at the cost of working time/production time. As a result, most people in handicrafts sector are always away from such time-consuming subsidies" as suggested by Indira Oinam, Founder of the Woman Income Generation Centre (WIGC), Thoubal, Manipur.

Relaxation of GST on handicrafts products especially on Kouna: Charging GST on handicrafts products can be oil to fire of high transportation expense. It will have a disastrous impact on demand and supply chain of crafts products. It will directly punish poor artisans and self-employed business people due to sudden fall in demand of handicrafts products. Briefly speaking, levying GST on Manipur handicrafts products is a serious menace to the right to life of artisans who are dwelling in a land-locked state of Manipur as mentioned by Mayanglambam Manoranjan (Sale Manager, Woman Income Generation Centre (WIGC), Thoubal, Manipur).

CONCLUSION

Particularly for those living in Manipur's rural areas, the Kouna crafts sector plays a significant role in the state's economic structure and development. It has the ability to give young people without jobs—mostly women—work possibilities, increasing their families' income. Environmentally friendly products from Kouna Crafts are crucial for environmental preservation. It is imperative that the general public be made aware of the benefits of Kouna Crafts products and encouraged to use the eco-friendly items. It is imperative that the government give the Kouna craft industry more consideration by offering infrastructure and financial support.

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