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Role of Traditional Crafts in Sustainable Development and Building Community Resilience: Case Stories from India

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Abstract
Concepts of sustainability build on slow fashion, local production, recycling, and reuse. These principles are quite inherent in traditional crafts. The paper shares examples of how traditional crafts can support the transition into a more sustainable and resilient way of living. It shares how a quilting tradition called Kantha has been developed, refined, and transmitted to rehabilitate women refugees and has over a span of a few decades led to women's empowerment and the promotion of sustainable fashion. It also examines the potential of developing a traditional craft-based green economy for fostering inclusive, resilient, and sustainable development. Natural fiber-based crafts for making mats and basketry based on locally sourced raw materials reflect the long-term relationships between people and their environments. The paper shares how strategies for safeguarding a fine mat weaving tradition based on a kind of water reed called Madurkathi contributed to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords
sustainable fashion; rehabilitation; rural development; creative economy; safeguarding.

Introduction

As global warming, climate change, and depletion of natural resources are threatening our habitats and lifestyle, it is widely recognized that the requirement today is to adopt a lifestyle that highlights sustainability (Cohen, 2017). This calls for the modification of human habits in our daily life. United Nations (UNESCO, 2015) has earmarked seventeen sustainable development goals to achieve a sustainable future for all. These goals address global challenges such as poverty, inequality, health, nutrition, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice. Communities across the world are thinking of ways to conserve our biosphere by addressing serious environmental concerns and formulating policies that highlight sustainable development (IRCI, 2018). The framework of sustainable development goals proposes a change in thinking about our actions concerning human relations with nature. We must be cautious and well aware of the products we are using in the sense that it does not harm nature and communities in particular. When it comes to choosing what to wear and how to decorate our houses, we need to be responsible toward the future generation and ensure products that promote better living (ILO, 2017).In this regard, the paper explores how handicrafts can play important role in protecting the natural and social balances and offer ways of sustainable living in the 21st century.

Handicraft is characterized by the use of simple tools and traditional techniques with very low impact on the environment. Hand-crafted products can be reused and recycled for years, without harming the natural environment. Urban “conscious consumers”, who are shoppers and are increasingly choosing to make conscious buying decisions, by purchasing local, ethical, and environmentally friendly products, are particularly showing interest in purchasing handcrafted, environment-friendly products that add ethical, environmental, and sociocultural value to crafts (Wood, 2011). As Fillis (2012)

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notes there still exists competition in the market between mass-produced machine-made products and hand-made products. Keeping in mind the reusability component, it becomes essential to safeguard our traditional craft sector despite the general mass preference for procuring commercialized machine-made products.

Rural crafts stand for uniqueness, innovation, and creativity, having a positive impact on the development of the rural economy (Fuller-Love et al., 2006). Zhan & Walker (2019) studies the process of developing a hand-made product that involves human energy, and manual skills and that imbibes traditional designs, bringing in the component of preserving or safeguarding our tradition. These handicrafts are a medium of story-telling that disseminates traditional-local knowledge to the urban consumer. This highlights a sense of timelessness in its appearance making craft products extremely relevant for many generations to come (Nugraha, 2012). New emerging businesses in art and craft must learn to develop a more responsible and sustainable business by contributing to the knowledge economy and stressing more about creating a cultural and aesthetic experience for its consumers (Cox & Bebbington, 2014).

UNESCO has recognized traditional knowledge of craftsmanship as an intangible heritage that needs to be safeguarded (UNESCO, 2017). The 2003 UNESCO Convention points out the need to uphold our living expressions and traditions that we have imbibed or inherited from our ancestors and that we too are passing on to our descendants. This is a responsible way of transferring knowledge, culture, behaviors, and art and craft practices of our community, and locality to the next generation with the promise of its preservation. These practices are passed through social practices, rituals, festive events, skills, etc. Hartley (2005) and Hesmondhalgh (2007) appreciate that the craft sector should be considered part of the cultural and creative industries. Though the SDGs recognize opportunities for sustainable livelihood through cultural tourism, the role of traditional craft sectors in achieving SDGs related to women empowerment, reducing inequality, increasing access to decent work, and strengthening sustainable ways of production and consumption is not in discourse.

This paper shares case stories of two traditional crafts from West Bengal, a state in eastern India which have contributed to sustainable development. Kantha is an age-old tradition of Bengali women and is a living heritage of West Bengal and Bangladesh. This region also has diverse natural fiber-based mat-making and basketry traditions based on locally available grass, weeds, and plants. Madur is a mat-weaving tradition in the Medinipur region in the southern part of West Bengal.

Sustainable living through craft practices

Our lifestyle and our choices have a huge impact on the planet. It affects everything starting from the economy to the environment. Policies, planning, meetings, and conferences around sustainable development encourage and push society to think responsibly about the environment and how our activities can put the community at risk. In this regard quality of life must be improved by incorporating sustainable lifestyles. It is both the collective and individual choice that ensures positive implementation of the policies on sustainable living. As per the COP21 Paris Agreement, patterns of consumption and production processes must be sustainable enough to fight against climate change (UNEP, 2016). It is the responsibility of each human being to be more responsible towards the society we live in.

Recommended approaches for sustainable fashion in apparel and homeware include: (i) not using microfibers, (ii) improving the durability of the product by focusing on reusability and recycling, (iii) effectively using resources and moving to renewable inputs, (iv)focusing on better and safer employment conditions for the artisans/ producers (Thackara, 2014). This approach provides a sustainable direction for the lifestyle or garment industry and gives way to the circular economy. In the circular economy, clothes, textiles, and fibers are kept or stored in such a manner that they can

be reused and never end up as waste. With a specific emphasis on innovation towards a sustainable system, a new textile circular economy presents an opportunity to deliver substantially better societal and environmental as well as economic outcomes. Better social outcomes for workers will involve more focus on their universal human rights (Rouch, 2021).

Traditional craft practices can be explored and analyzed from their linkage to the local, their relationship with the self, and their attribute to the ecology. Bamford (2012) studies the comparatively new concept of sustainable crafts. Sustainable craft and craft practices are designed and conceptualized in such a manner that it directly contests products that cannot be re-used and, therefore, aligned to "throw-away" consumerism. Craft products are designed and produced in such a way that is sustainable and, consequently, called "sustainable designs". Sustainable crafts are unique in conceptualization and also practice owing to their unique craft designs and sustainability. Thus craft can act as a catalyst for the transformation toward a more sustainable future (Väänänen & Pöllänen, 2020). Each of the craft produce disseminates knowledge and values of a specific community it represents making a positive transformation in the society as a whole. For craft practices to have an element of sustainability, we need to ensure the reorientation of consumer mindsets, lifestyles, and values they behold in life (Ferraro et al., 2011).

Kantha: Vocabulary of Bengali women

Across the world, quilt-making traditions are reusing and recycling old cloth. Kantha is a quilting tradition of women living in erstwhile Bengal (West Bengal in India and Bangladesh). Kantha in Bengal is equated with nostalgia, evoking many memories and meanings in the people (Mason, 2009). The word Kantha in Sanskrit refers to the category of garments that have been made out of many patches or small clothes. In the olden days, travelers and ascetics carried bags that are made of Kantha. Gurusaday Dutt, a civil servant, and folklorist from India took interest in Kantha and studied the craft form in the 1930s (Dutt, 1939; 1954, p. 5; 1990, p. 41). He mentioned that Kantha originally comprised of appliqué work that was done on quilts which later got replaced by embroidery work. Traditionally the older women of the household have the habit of not discarding old and worn-out clothes. It is a common practice in many Bengali households to keep worn-out clothes and reuse them for some other purpose. Kantha epitomizes recycling and sustainable fashion in today's day and age. More than recycling or reusing clothes, the value of keeping something that has traveled through generations and signifies family heritage becomes important. However, worn-out clothes need to be restored in such a manner that they can be reused by the next generation. The older women engage themselves in putting together layers of old clothes and stitching them together with a simple run stitch. Often women sit together and make Kantha, making it a collective affair (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Rural women working on Kantha

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The women create beautiful motifs that speak stories of the family, the community, and the dreams and aspirations of the women on the clothes. When the husbands left home in search of work and did not return for many days or even months, the wives spent their days weaving rugs or quilts with Kantha embroidery. They embroidered stories of loss, pain, grief, and love through Kantha. Passing these embroidered clothes to the next generation meant that these stories are also getting transmitted or passed on. Thus Kantha became the vocabulary of the women, especially rural women of Bengal. The knowledge of the Kantha embroidery is transmitted and shared by the mothers to their daughters, making the craft a family affair (Chattopadhyay, 1977). At the most fundamental level, clothes with Kantha embroidery work are used regularly, to wrap around the body, to keep babies warm and comfortable. Often beautiful embroidered Kantha quilts are gifted to close family members on occasions such as the birth of a child and as wedding trousseau etc. In the older days when buying warm clothes at a high price was a problem, quilted Kanthas with several layers of clothes came in handy. During winter Kanthas were draped to protect against the cold. Kantha helped them to reuse the old clothes and thus save on extra expenses, restore the family tradition, and also become a medium of expression (Mason, 2009).

There was always a probability of wear and tear on the embroidered quilts as it was used multiple times by stitching together several patches of clothes. However, the Kantha remained soft and pliable, conveying a sense of warmth that went beyond the actual physical warmth it imparted. Till the early 20th century Kantha was not much prevailed as an object of trade or source of income. It signified the affection and warmth of the women who created it. Kantha was part of the wedding trousseau - a gift of love. The motifs and symbols that were used in the Kantha, the size of the Kantha, its color, and others reflected the closeness between the maker and the recipient of the product. Many of the traditional Kantha works had written messages in them that communicate stories of pain, loss, and love between the maker and the recipient. These written words using the Kantha stitch provide a glimpse into the lives of women in the late nineteenth and twentieth-century India and Bangladesh. These words on Kantha planted the seeds of emancipation, education, and literacy during that time. Palanquins carrying the bride, Gods with their carriage, and trains chugging their way through the countryside were some of the motifs used on Kantha. Images of the nineteenth and twentieth-century Bengal (undivided) such as the anglicized Bengali educated men (also called 'Babu') sporting European jackets and boots as well as dapper English soldiers on the march found a place on the Kantha too. These motifs signified changes that were happening at that time. The embroideries that relate to and reflect on the changes perceived in the world outside the home reveal a developing consciousness of a cultural renaissance expressed through motifs of economic and political development and progress, intermingling effortlessly with traditional auspicious symbols.

It was in the twentieth century that the value of Kantha was recognized and attracted scholarly interest (Sethi, 2012). It was a time when Kantha began to be systematically collected, documented, and written about. Civil servant Gurusaday Dutt and famed Indologist Stella Kamrisch collected Kantha works to safeguard the tradition for the future generation (Mukherjee, 1993; Dutt, 1990). Repurposing of Kantha meant transmitting love and memories between the owner or the user and the recipient. Stella Kramrisch collected over sixtyKanthas (now housed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art) as well as published various essays exploring the motifs and meanings embedded in them. Gurusaday Dutt established a significant collection of Bengal arts and crafts, in which the Kanthas enjoy a prominent place (the collection is now on display at the Gurusaday Museum at Thakurpukur in Kolkata). As a part of the unified vision of Bengal, the poet and Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore instituted the learning and practice of decorative arts and crafts, including the Kantha, as a part of his unique educational experiment in Shantiniketan (Subramanyam, 1982; Dasgupta, 2022).

Kantha as a livelihood

The most dramatic transformation of the journey of Kantha happened in alignment with the struggle for India's freedom. Kantha revival happened in lines of usability and purpose. Kantha revival epitomized economic and social rehabilitation of refugees and underprivileged women in both rural and urban areas. In both Bangladesh and West Bengal, the Kantha has evolved from being a traditional embroidery form drawing on a large repertoire of symbols and motifs and the spontaneous introduction of singular contemporary elements, into a marketable object of consumption. Traditionally the women of undivided Bengal made Kantha and used them to serve domestic purposes and also use personally. The commercial viability of Kantha was not explored previously. Gradually the craft ventured into the domains of economics, livelihood, and business, creating monetary value attached to the end product. The utility value of Kantha has brought in the angle of commercial viability, making it open to be sold in the market. In this present scenario, women do continue making Kantha for personal usage, but the need to earn for a livelihood is much more observed (Sethi, 2012).

Visionary Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, in the early 1900s, initiated the search for indigenous roots of Bengali culture through the revitalization and revival of traditional craft skills. In this regard, Kala Bhavan (House of Art) was established in Santiniketan under Tagore's patronage. The focus was on the cultivation of artistic skills and personal creativity among students (Tagore, 1961; Subramanyam 1982; Basu, 1999; Marsh, n.d.).

In the environment of political uncertainty and economic hardship during the partition of Bengal and later during the war of independence of Bangladesh, the Kantha of Bengal came to be invested with new significance as a means of resilience and rehabilitation, through commercialization. Kantha has a history of providing women in vulnerable situations employment, livelihood opportunities, and rehabilitation. The story of rehabilitation using Kantha originates from the partition of India during independence and also the war of independence in Bangladesh. Many women became widowed, separated from their families, or were seeking refuge and were in abject poverty. They needed to be rehabilitated and given a livelihood. "Kantha" became a means to earn money for destitute women (Sethi, 2012).

The movement of Kantha revival was headed by stalwarts like freedom fighter Dr. Phulrenu Guha, Tagore's daughter-in-law Pratima Devi in Shantiniketan, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, and others. The usage of colors, designs, and different kinds of fabrics was explored as part of the revival strategy for Kanthas in the 20th and 21st centuries (Padmaja, 2009, p. 67). At Santiniketan in West Bengal, artists and designers started experimenting with Kantha and new product ranges like apparel with Kantha embroidery were offered to the market. Kantha gained commercial success primarily in West Bengal with associations such as the Crafts Council of West Bengal that worked towards leveraging the art form and the artist. Thousands of women in both West Bengal and Bangladesh are now involved in the making of Kantha and are practicing this form for generations.

Both in West Bengal and Bangladesh in the 1970s and 1980s attempts were taken to revive the Kantha as a practice as well as infuse it with a modern sensibility that allows it to become a sustainable source of livelihood. Training programs were established for women and production centers were opened with trained embroiderers. The objective was to support skilled but economically marginalized women. Several organizations such as Crafts Council of Bengal, SASHA, Amar Kutir Cooperative, Karu Sangha Women's Association Shantiniketan, Kamarpara Training Centre, Shibon Udyog Mahamaya Shikdar's Workshop, Stri Shakti Prakalpa NGO at Katna village, Dakshin Nabagram Kantha Cluster in Birbhum, etc. recognized the urgency and importance of starting an organized support system for the revival and sustenance of this traditional folk art of Bengal. SASHA (Sarba Shanti Ayog and the SASHA Association of Crafts Producers), a

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not-for-profit organization, started working for the development of the craft communities, especially Kantha (Kohli, 1986). The primary concern was to explore income-generating sources for the Kantha weavers. Gradually, the national and international markets became available for Kantha. Different Kantha products started getting displayed in exhibitions and museums. Scholarly interventions also started to take place. The effort was to restore Kantha as a traditional craft through several workshops and experiments. Some organizations chose to focus on the design vocabulary of the basic Kantha while others worked on marketing channels (Majumdar, 1986).

While the practice of Kantha in its purest form is now rare, restricted to Kanthas made for private use or to niche products, the efforts of several organizations have benefitted thousands of women who otherwise might not have been gainfully employed. By generating and sustaining a market for the Kantha, these organizations have also called attention to the value of the unpaid work that the women of this region performed in their leisure hours (Figure 2 and Figure 3). As in West Bengal, in regions such as Rajshahi, Kushtia, Jessore, and Faridpur in Bangladesh, Kantha making became a popular activity that helped generate income (Sethi, 2012). These regions also became at the forefront of many development projects, setting up cottage industries through which Kantha began to be marketed (Zaman, 1981). Fashion designers in the 21st century have started showing curiosity and interest in working with Kantha embroidery work, experimenting with the craft form by applying it to different kinds of utility items.

Figure 2. Traditional Kantha

Figure 3. Saree with Kantha embroidery

Kantha in today's age stands as one of the best examples of a reusable product. Like other handicrafts, the production of Kantha is a collective effort wherein women of a community or group are engaged in creating products made of Kantha embroidery

works. As mentioned already the designs and motifs keep on changing, bringing in contemporary designs. The weavers are influenced by the rich culture and heritage of their community which gets reflected in their work. The entire process of weaving many sarees together in Kantha stitch is usually done with many women, working together, collaborating, and collectively producing a single product. The Kantha legacy is one of an extraordinary means of recycling old and frayed fragments of cloth through quilting, "*of frugality, of saving and sewing together every little bit, big or small, worn, torn or stained to create a stronger, warmer whole that lasts for generations*" (Padmaja, 2009, p. 61). The unpaid labor of women in the household was challenged by the organizations that started working on the revival of handicrafts. These women started getting paid for their Kantha work. Revival also meant the restoration of cultural and regional values.

Through the initiative, Rural Craft Hub, developed by the Department of Micro, Small, Medium Enterprise & Textiles (MSME&T), Government of West Bengal, and UNESCO (2013 to 2016), around 600 women were mobilized by helping them connect with the market for Kantha. Contact Base, a social organization based out of Kolkata was the implementation partner. In 2013 most of the women who practiced Kantha were not aware of the demand side of the market. They had limited ideas of modern design and quality of the product. Owing to monopoly by the intermediaries, often it was observed that the women received very low payment against their products. The social structure was not supportive towards these women artisans, resulting in restricted mobility of women, and increasing domination of women by their families. These restrictions became obstacles in their path to earning a living on Kantha production. Through capacity-building programs and assistance towards direct market linkage, the women artisans learned about the demand side of the market. Interestingly the process also led to a revival of the Nakshi Kantha tradition of embroidering layered old clothes as the women started showcasing their tradition to the market.

Apart from the economic empowerment of the Kantha artisans and a change in the social structure, there has been an effort in sustaining the art and moving forward toward revivalism. Today the wielding of the needle symbolizes independence, financial security, and self-fulfillment for many women at Nanoor, Birbhum. Through support and proper forms of advocacy, these women have transitioned from wage-based embroidery workers to rural micro-entrepreneurs. The women have formed small collectives. The leaders procure orders, distribute work and deliver finished products to leading retailers. The women have their stock of products. They source raw materials, draw designs, and price aptly as per the quality of raw material and intensity of work. The women have learned to design for making diversified products. They work together and competition is healthy. With the change in income, their lifestyle including food consumption, clothing, and access to amenities are improving. Women now have a better say in their families and community. These women now stand strong and negotiate their entitlements. Women who had never left their homes have traveled all across the country to attend fairs, festivals, and exhibitions. Their increased self-awareness and self-confidence have inspired others.

Kantha which was originally woven for simple functional wrap purposes now holds strong meaning in empowering women. Kantha is increasingly becoming relevant to women's lives as a marker of progress and change. At one point in time Kantha represented women's hopes, fears, joys, and aspirations, it now symbolizes independence, financial security, and self-fulfillment amongst 21st-century women. The women of Nanoor are now giving leadership to develop community-based and women-led Kantha collectives covering 3000 women in Birbhum and PurbaBardhaman region of West Bengal under the Rural Craft and Cultural Hub Project of the MSME&T Department (www.rcchbengal.com). In 2022, the Rural Craft and Cultural Hub Project was scaled up covering 50000 tradition bearers in performing art and craft. Several natural fiber-based craft traditions like Sitalpati or mats made of cane slips, Dhokra or jute mat making, Madur or mats made of a water reed, Sabai or basketry made from a local grass are being developed to provide a livelihood to rural men and women under this program. In the

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next section, the paper aims to share how Madur weaving is providing recognition and livelihood to rural families. Madur grows mostly in the alluvial tracts of the Medinipur region in the southern part of the state of West Bengal. The land and climate of Medinipur are suitable for the cultivation of Madur.

Role of Madur to safeguard tradition, economy, and natural environment

Madur is a type of natural fiber that does not entail any chemical or pesticide (Figure 4). The attempt worldwide has been to raise the demand for products that are ecologically friendly or that are made of natural fibers (Bhuyan & Gogoi, 2020). Products that are made of natural fibers are non-hazardous, do not affect the physical health of living beings, are low cost and also their production does not involve much money. Being a renewable resource, natural fibers are biodegradable and non-carcinogenic and therefore can be utilized in the fashion world to serve several purposes such as being cost-effective, fashionable, and also non-hazardous; making it best suited for sustainable fashion (Satyanarayan et al., 1990). Natural fibers are of many advantages primarily when we compare their uses with synthetic fibers. The most important factor is their availability. Natural fibers are available in abundance, are very cost-effective, and have low density making the weight of their product much lighter (Thyavihalli Girijappa et al., 2019).

Since the late 20th century with globalization and economic liberalization, there has been a sudden influx in the international market and an increase in demand for goods and services from both within the nation and also across the world. This resulted in the commercialization of products, pushing producers to increase the supply of different kinds of products. When it came to selling lifestyle products, synthetic mass-produced mats led to a decline in demand for handmade and more expensive mats.

Figure 4. Madurkanthia herbaceous plant

Increased domestic and international demand and supply imbalance resulted in increased use of synthetic. Commercialization resulted in shorter product life cycles, and also a lesser focus on long-term benefits for the weaver and the handicraft industry as a whole. The market started focusing more on the use and sale of products made out of plastic (Das, 2018). This way of production and consumption is called the make-buy-dispose model and has a major negative environmental and societal impact. Plastic and synthetic components affect the health of the workers/ producers and the consumers/ buyers who use the product. Moreover, these kinds of plastic products have a huge negative impact on the environment. In addition, when washed these plastic/ synthetic products release microfibers, of which around half a million tones every year contribute to ocean pollution, increasing the risk of damage to marine organisms. The mat industry has huge demand and the development and promotion of natural fiber-based mats can lead to a sustainable lifestyle.

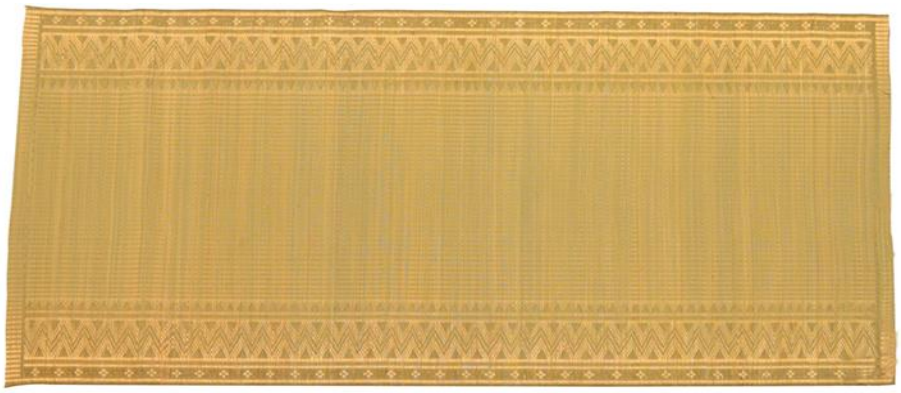

Figure 5. Madur

The word "madur" comes from Sanskrit "mandara". Madur as a natural fiber is used to weave floor mats that are used for sitting or lying down in common Bengali households. Production and sale of Madurare are very common in West Bengal. It has a long history dating back to the Mughal period when fine quality Madur also called 'masland' (Figure 5) was used by the Royalty. The mention of Madur or Masland in Mughal literature and also in Sanskritic texts implies the age-old existence of the natural fiber.

Traditionally the craft practice of weaving Madur mats is primarily done by the women of the family during their leisure. Mat sticks (Madurkathi) are cultivated and eco-friendly. Craftsmen cut Madurkathi into various shapes, both small and big considering their purposes. Madurkathi weaving is a traditional craft in several areas of rural Bengal, such asBhagwanpur, Patashpur, Ramnagar, and Sabang in the district of Medinipur in West Bengal. The weaving process is initiated by preparing the basic raw material, the arrangement of soft reeds and cotton or jute threads on a bamboo frame, and then weaving the thread with help from two persons.

Moreover, the crafts persons have practiced dyeing the Madur sticks with natural and vegetable dyes. They use Azo-free dyes to color the weave. The process consists in cutting sticks, making appropriate bunches, mixing colors and adding to boiling water, soaking the sticks in boiling water with dye, and then drying them in the sun. There are different kinds of mats such as "Ekh-rokha" or single mats, "Do-rokhe" or double mats, and the fine quality Madur called the Masland. "Do-rokhe" is thicker than the "Ekh-rokha" and is more suitable and comfortable when compared to "Ekh-rokha". The Masland mat is very fine textured and made of carefully selected reeds with beautiful geometric designs woven on it.

In a rural household, each family has a loom to weave Madur. However, the women are mostly involved in weaving madur mats along with taking care of the family and doing the household chores. Every household has a 'madur shaal' (the place where Madur weaving is done) which is used by the women to weave mats in between everyday work at home. Most of the families were poverty-stricken with very less earnings to support the family. 'Mahajans' or middlemen visiting the villages placed orders to the Madur weavers at a very low price. Though the amount paid by the Mahajans was very low the weavers had no option but to accept the same on account of their dire economic situation. Keeping this in mind, an eminent Madur weaver of the community thought of a technique to produce large quantities and also good quality Madur products in home-based looms. These home-based looms have allowed women to produce a large number of mats in lesser time and also produce good quality. They are now earning more and finding ways to be independent.

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Figures 5 & 6. Types of loom

To address the threat posed by competition with synthetic products, West Bengal Government invested between 2015 and 2018 in strengthening infrastructure, direct market linkage, and revival of the fine and expensive traditions of mat weaving which were getting lost. The initiative involved around 6000 Madur weavers across the districts of Purba and Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal (UNESCO & MSME&T, n.d.). Around 74% of the weavers make hand-woven mats and the remaining develop loom-based products. Few of the traditional mat-making families with the knowledge of weaving a fine variety of exclusive mats locally known as Masland or Mataranchi try to impart the knowledge to the younger generation of mat weavers. The loom-based weavers have been organized into units by local entrepreneurs (Figures 5 & 6). There are around 40 of these small units across Purba (East) and Paschim (West) Medinipur in comparison to less than 10 production units a decade back (Contact Base, n.d.). Besides making folding mats, the production diversified including other utility items and accessories such as bags, folders, table mats, runners, coasters, boxes, etc. All these utility items hold great significance in Bengal's lifestyle and culture.

The intervention helped enhance the capacities of the individual units on one hand and on the other equip traditional and loom-based Madur weavers to develop market-worthy quality products and get linked to the markets. They improved the socio-economic conditions of the people by leveraging the art form and empowering the weavers with the ability to make diverse products, the artist and ultimately leading to the socio-economic upliftment of the entire community. The intervention focused on not only safeguarding the tradition of making Madur products but also enhancing market linkage. Artisans were selected as per their skills and only those whose products are marketable were promoted for further market linkage. There are 15 large units in Sabang where around 40-80 weavers are working presently which was 5-10 when the project started in 2015. Most of the Madur weavers with excellent skills have traveled across the country to different fairs selling products. This indicates the utility and demand of such products that do not harm the ecology but rather promote sustainability.

The art of fine weaving of the Madur, the Masland was practically lost. The interventions helped in the revival and market outreach of these fine mats. Training in the use of Azo-free color opened up both national and international market opportunities. The rejuvenation of Madur created a brand for the product in the eco-friendly lifestyle market and helped overcome competition from cheap synthetic or low-cost alternatives. "Madur of Bengal" has been accredited with the Geographical Indication (GI) in 2018 and many of the Madur artists have GI registration. (Geographical Indications Registry, n.d)To keep up with the changing times after Covid-19, the artists have been selling their products on different online selling platforms like Amazon Karigar, Flipkart, Jaypore, etc. Retail, wholesale, boutiques, fairs, and festivals are regular selling channels. Several producer collectives and micro enterprises have been formed by the artists at the district level. West Bengal Khadi and Village Industries Board have developed a Madur demonstration and resource center at Sabang. Most of the weavers are women. They have received national awards for their fine skills and have traveled abroad.
(Singh, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, clusters making Kantha and Madur were affected due to disruption in the value chain. Sourcing raw materials were difficult and also accessing markets as shops and platforms to sell like fairs and exhibitions were closed. The tradition bearers started showcasing and selling their products on social media and online craft retail platforms such as GoCoop, and iTokri, (https://gocoop.com/, https://www.itokri.com/). This corroborates the importance of building capacity in the use of digital technology for resilience.

Conclusions

Kantha, Madur, and many other similar craft practices offer a solution to the hazardous practices that are going on in the lifestyle and clothing industries. Handicrafts can improve the lifestyle and well-being of people in a community. We are now entering into an era of "slow fashion" where sustainability is the key term. Within the concept of slow fashion, consumers are more aware of the entire process of production, whether the company that is selling the particular product is using any hazardous element in the production process, and also whether there has been any exploitation by the company owners on the artisans or producers. This calls for a reduction in environmental footprint and also more focus on ethical fashion. Kantha is an excellent example where the lifecycle of a piece of clothing could be between 100-200 wears. In this regard, the effort must be given to aware as many consumers to extend the life of clothing and in doing so reduce the environmental footprint of the clothing industry (Chalmers University of Technology, 2017). Kantha shows how the life of clothes can be extended by upcycling and innovation. Apart from these properties of reusability, Kantha, Madur, and other handicrafts have an important role in safeguarding the culture. Previously the exclusive variety of Kantha such as the NakshiKantha and Masland variety of Madurwhich was previously kept reserved as family heirloom are now available in the market for a niche section of consumers, making the fine quality crafts accessible. This calls for the revival of handicrafts by designers and producers of craft.

Both case studies show how traditional crafts contribute to sustainable development goals (SDGs). The initiatives of the revival of Kantha and Madur have led to socio-economic empowerment and poverty alleviation (SDG 1 and 8), women empowerment (SDG 5), and improved processes of production and consumption (SDG 12). They have offered resilient livelihoods to destitute and marginalized families. By making the digital shift, families making Kantha and Madur survived the despair caused by the disruption of market channels during the pandemic. The overall process also led to the rejuvenation of lost traditions of the craft. Policymakers and planners need to recognize the important role of traditional craft in fostering sustainable development. The SDGs at present do not take cognition of opportunities offered by traditional crafts as a resilient and sustainable livelihood.

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