

Weaving Stories, Art and Expression: Exploring "Sabala Mela" as a Space of Women's Artistic Empowerment

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Abstract:

Contemporary capitalist systems predominantly conceal the neoliberal doctrine of the 'invisible hand' of the market (evoking Marx's "false consciousness"), while systematically overlooking the significant economic contributions of women despite their crucial role in market, their labor, particularly within the domestic sphere. This exclusion perpetuates a system that fails to recognize the true value of women's work and its contribution to overall societal well-being, both in urban and rural set-up. Women are usually discouraged from pursuing entrepreneurship despite being highly skilled, since this would mean stepping out of the familiar, domestic space. Eventually, when women run out of choices and turn to craft, they are often relegated to the sidelines, both by the family and society at large. The prevalence of deeply ingrained patriarchal social norms significantly impedes women's agency, mobility, and access to employment opportunities. Central to this understanding, craft-based work enables women artisans to get the taste of financial independence and self-autonomy, facilitating their entry to a different creative workplace. My paper will primarily examine the rich cultural essence of the "Sabala Mela", a state-sponsored annual event in Kolkata designed to encourage self-help groups from various districts of rural Bengal to participate in an artistic treasure trove. This initiative aims to revitalize and safeguard the rich traditions of Bengal's ethos from extinction, with a significant emphasis on empowering women to continue their skillful legacies. This "Mela" exhibits a diverse range of artistic expressions, stretching from the exquisite handwoven Bengal taant saris and the intricate artistry of Shantiniketan dokra to the extravagant dramatic Purulia's chhau masks. It also features handmade souvenirs and ornaments crafted from clay, ceramic, and shells, terracotta figurines of Bankura, and patachitra scroll paintings adorning home items, clothing, and accessories -- thus, showcasing the remarkable talent of women from marginalized communities. This offers not merely a vibrant tapestry of artistic expressions, but a poignant reflection on the life trajectory of women artisans who have been woven into a fabric of poverty, social stigma, and marginalization. The emergence of skilled women, now earning a decent income independently, empowers them to support their families and secure a brighter future. The objective of the paper is to trace the genealogy of feminism, understood as a complex, heterogeneous, and diverse movement, through a qualitative ethnographic research framework by analyzing how women's employment and

empowerment have evolved through the diachronic changes of regional fairs, especially “Sabala Mela”. Focusing on these skilled women artisans, regardless of their class, creed, race, or geographical locations, my study will fundamentally observe how they forge intimate companionship with fellow sellers during the “Mela” days. This interaction, mediated through an immersive interview process, serves to dismantle exclusionist, hegemonic, and hierarchical structures while building a 'global sisterhood' that truly empowers women. As the name 'Sabala' aptly translates to 'empowered' or 'self-reliant,' the Mela (fair)—besides symbolizing economic prosperity and cultural flourishing—challenges established gender roles substantially.

Keywords: Sabala Mela, empowerment, artistry, economic freedom, global sisterhood, gender roles.

Introduction

West Bengal possesses a rich heritage of rural art and crafts, significantly showcasing the diverse skills, embodied cultural practices and intergenerational transmission of traditional artisanal knowledge. Rooted in Bengal's folk culture, this craft tradition is characterized by both ancestral transmission of knowledge and the acquisition of self-taught skills, both of which are essential for navigating economic hardship. It is deeply intertwined with the ethnicity of specific craft communities, often defined by caste, religion, and ritual. Historically, village self-sufficiency ensured consistent demand for locally produced goods. However, the introduction of cheaper, often foreign-made products has posed a significant challenge to traditional crafts. British colonial policies and migration driven by the pursuit of urban employment opportunities further disrupted these age-old customs. Despite these socio-economic upheavals, and the often-miserable conditions faced by craft-based families, these tangible cultural heritage persist due to the resilience of some artisans, even those producing for export markets. Importantly, craft production sustains over 550,000 individuals, primarily women, who are largely recognized as self-employed. This sector, therefore, represents a significant, though often precarious, source of livelihoods for women in rural West Bengal; this facilitates them to grasp the real meaning of employment and empowerment through the taste of financial independence and self-autonomy, amidst a creative space. Further research is needed to explore the specific challenges and opportunities for women's economic empowerment within these traditional craft business, particularly in relation to fair trade practices, access to credit, and the preservation of traditional skills in the face of globalization. Analyzing the gendered division of labor within craft production and the extent to which women control the means of production and the revenue generated is crucial in understanding the potential for craft to contribute to women's empowerment.

Preserving Bengal's Ethos: The Sabala Mela and Artisanal Tradition

Winter in Kolkata is synonymous with the proliferation of handicraft fairs, which serve as crucial platforms for women artisans to exhibit their inherent talents and skills, reflecting the traditional artisanal practices deeply embedded in the rural ethos of Bengal. Among these, the Sabala Mela, an annual state-sponsored event organized by the West Bengal Swarojkar Corporation Limited at New Town Mela Pragyan, plays a pivotal role. This initiative is designed to foster the participation of self-help groups (SHGs) from diverse rural districts, creating an artistic repository that aims to revitalize and preserve Bengal's rich cultural heritage, with a particular emphasis on empowering women to sustain their creative legacies. One of the primary objectives of the Sabala Mela include facilitating market access for self-employed entrepreneurs and establishing linkages with potential buyers. Beyond direct sales, the Mela functions as a platform for publicizing and disseminating knowledge regarding the quality, pricing, and utility of products produced by SHG and other self-employed women members. The success of the SHGs in achieving significant merchandise sales is paralleled by their ability to forge connections with business houses, wholesalers, and marketing professionals, thereby securing avenues for year-round product distribution. Furthermore, the Mela contributes to the dissemination of knowledge among the general populace concerning SHGs, craftsperson, and their products, enhancing their exposure both in domestic and international markets.

The Sabala Mela showcases a diverse array of artistic expressions, encompassing handwoven Bengal Taant saris, Shantiniketan Dokra metalwork, Purulia Chhau masks, handmade souvenirs and ornaments crafted from clay, ceramics, and shells, Bankura terracotta figurines, and Pattachitra scroll paintings. This Mela-exhibition not only offers a vibrant tapestry of artistic endeavor but also provides a poignant lens through which to examine the life trajectories of women artisans who have historically faced socioeconomic exclusion. The emergence of skilled women artisans, achieving economic independence in their own right and contributing to household income, signifies a crucial step towards self-empowerment and the securing of a more stable future. This initiative, therefore, serves as a significant intervention in addressing the intersectional challenges faced by women in marginalized communities, promoting both cultural preservation and financial wellbeing. Thus, the *mela* transcends mere commercial exchange, while serving a dynamic creative space that facilitates interaction, expands horizons, and enables women to cultivate a strong, distinct sense of identity through self-actualization. To enhance public engagement and provide cultural enrichment, the Mela incorporated cultural programs, featuring performances by women artists from diverse regional backgrounds. Furthermore, throughout the duration of the event, the organizing ministry conducted a series of targeted workshops designed to augment the participants' competencies in areas such as soft product development, packaging efficacy, and consumer relations. These initiatives aimed to provide both cultural stimuli and practical skill enhancement, thereby contributing to the holistic development of the women artisans involved.

This research paper employs a qualitative research framework to trace the genealogical evolution of feminism, conceptualized as a multifaceted and heterogeneous social movement. Specifically, it examines the diachronic transformations in women's employment and empowerment through the lens of regional fairs, with a particular focus on the "Sabala Mela." By analyzing the experiences of skilled women artisans, irrespective of their socio-economic class, religious affiliation, racial identity, or geographical origin, this study investigates the formation of intimate social bonds and collaborative networks during the "Mela" period. It posits that these interactions serve to dismantle exclusionary, hegemonic, and hierarchical power structures, thereby fostering a sense of collective female solidarity, or "global sisterhood," contributing to their empowerment. The "Sabala Mela," whose name translates to "empowered" or "self-reliant," is assessed not only for its economic and cultural contributions but also for its potential to challenge and redefine traditional gender roles.

Methodology

For this study, five women artisans, each possessing distinct artistic expertise and hailing from diverse districts of West Bengal, were interviewed, which predominantly aimed to explore how these women have redefined and perceive the concept of "empowerment" for themselves. Their adept skill in transforming locally sourced materials into aesthetically refined handcrafted products has been cultivated and sustained over the past few decades. Despite their skillful expertise, women are frequently discouraged from entrepreneurial pursuits due to societal expectations that confine them to the domestic sphere. When economic necessity compels women to engage in craft production, they are often marginalized by both family and broader societal structures. Deeply ingrained patriarchal social norms significantly restrict their agency, mobility, and access to equitable employment opportunities. The interviewees narrated their individual life trajectories, highlighting their struggles to establish, nurture and flourish their independent spaces for artistic and cultural expression. Drawing upon ancestral legacies, they have successfully adapted their skills to meet the evolving tastes of contemporary markets. These women emphasized the diachronic transformation in the reception of handcrafted artistry, noting a significant surge in demand in recent times. Notably, the artisans reported experiencing considerable respect, financial compensation, and autonomy compared to previous generations, when folk traditions were often undervalued, except art enthusiasts. The heightened awareness and recognition of their skills and creative labor, facilitated by the digital age, allow them to leverage social media platforms to expand market reach, enhance production, and further cultivate their artistic creativity.

Research Question:

1. To what extent has the Sabala Mela facilitated changes in the market accessibility and economic empowerment of women artisans compared to prior times?
2. How do women artisans envision their future roles and contributions to the craft sector, and what factors influence their perceptions of future success and sustainability?

3. What are the subjective interpretations of empowerment held by women artisans participating in the Sabala Mela, and how do these interpretations align with or diverge from broader feminist discourses on empowerment?

4. How do the interpersonal relationships among fellow women artisans at the Sabala Mela, specifically the formation of collaborative networks and 'sisterhood,' contribute to their perceived sense of empowerment?

Discussion.

First Interviewee

Name- Siddhika Khatun

Address – Sian, Bolpur.

This artisan's craft centers on handcrafted jewelry, utilizing diverse materials such as metals, beads, gamcha cloth, and clay. While she inherited the craft from her ancestral lineage, her current entrepreneurial endeavor is self-initiated, representing a profound innate passion. Despite familial support, she initially encountered financial constraints, rather than family oppression as her primary challenge. Her current income, estimated between 40,000 to 50,000, decent enough to provide a sustainable livelihood. When asked about her idea of "Sabala" (empowerment/ self-reliance), she articulated it as the pride derived from independent economic concerns, fostering a sense of confidence and satisfaction. She even observed a significant diachronic shift in the market receptivity. Starting her business in 2006, she noted a lack of consumer interest in her craft back at that time. Currently, however, there is a marked increase in demand, with women expressing a keen obsession in these jewelry pieces as accessories for varied attires. The success of her business has enabled her to travel extensively across India, including visits to Chandigarh, Uttar Pradesh and Nagaland. Her future aspirations involve expanding her business significantly, realizing her long-held personal ambition. Khatun described her collaborative relationship with fellow artisans within the mela environment as one of a shared sense of mutual support and friendship.

Second Interviewee

Name- Aspiya Bibi

Address- Nanoor, Birbhum

Aspiya Bibi's craft is deeply rooted in Bengal's esteemed textile tradition of "kantha stitch", a technique that intricately weaves narratives of folktales, nature and floral motifs. This craft has been her family's legacy for over five decades. While she initially faced financial challenges pertaining to labour and production costs, her self-regulated business has achieved significant growth through participation in regional fairs across West Bengal. Her approximate income, which fluctuates based on customer demand and fair location, is 30,000 per mela. For Bibi, "Sabala" (empowerment/self-reliance) is intrinsically linked to her pride in economic independence and the unique kantha threadwork that defines her life and artistic journey. Her involvement with the Sabala Mela spans approximately 25-30 years, and along these years she has witnessed a significant increase in state-sponsored fair opportunities, income levels and public awareness of her craft. The adaptation to

contemporary market demands is evident in her online sales, supplementing her wholesale business. Furthermore, her business has facilitated the employment of other women, whom she trains in weaving kantha stitches, thereby expanding her team and contributing to their sustenance. Looking ahead, Bibi aspires to expand her business further, exploring new markets and impart the essence of Bengal's kantha weaving fabrics to faraway lands. This expansion, she believes, will reaffirm rural bengal's rich artistic heritage and the invaluable talent it harbours. Lastly, her perception of sisterhood among fellow artisans is characterized by genuine camaraderie, as demonstrated by the supportive atmosphere by her co-sellers during her interview and photography session. In her concluding remarks, Bibi emphasized the importance of shared prosperity, expressing a desire for her fellow women artisans to achieve success in both financial and social terms, alongside her. This sentiment, she asserted, embodies the true essence of empowerment.

Third Interviewee

Name – Joba Chitrakar

Address – Nayapota, Paschim Medinipur

Joba Chitrakar is an artisan specialized in Pattachitra paintings, a form widely acclaimed as a vibrant expression of Indian cultural heritage, representing historical myths and demonstrating the legacy of generational artistic traditions. The motifs in her paintings, rendered with natural colours, convey the essence of a culture rich in mythology and folklore. Pattachitra narratives encompass a range of subjects, including mythological epics such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Krishnaleela, Manasha, and Durga anecdotes, alongside contemporary social issues like reforestation ("Brikkhoropon"), fish weddings ("macher biye"), and global events such as the Tsunami and 9/11.

Chitrakar's artistic inspiration stems from her family's hereditary legacy, which has been instrumental in preserving and promoting this art form, thereby fostering public awareness. Despite facing financial challenges initially, particularly concerning travel expenses to distant fairs during a period when cultural artifacts received limited public recognition barring the high brow intelligentsia, her work has gained substantial popularity within social and academic spheres in recent times. Pattachitra paintings are now recognized as valuable assets for research and academic endeavors, widening horizons in social science and performance studies domain. Interestingly, Chitrakar integrates oral traditions into her practice, singing narratives corresponding to the visual depictions on the cloth. Her approximate income, ranging from 30,000 to 35,000 INR, provides her with financial stability, ensuring basic sustenance. She has also participated in international exhibitions in Paris, Japan, Sweden, and Australia, facilitated by organizing committees, thereby showcasing her rural art form and skills on a global realm.

When asked about her interpretation of "sabala" (empowered) as a woman, Chitrakar emphasized the pragmatic aspect of financial independence as a survival imperative, rather than a theoretical construct. She views empowerment as a necessity for her daily existence,

and the phrase she used is “পেটের দায়ে এবং সংসার চালানোর জন্য আমায় লড়ে যেতেই হবে” i.e, “to feed myself and my family, I must fight on”. Reflecting on her career since 1980, she acknowledges significant progress in her financial stability and product demand. Chitrakar aspires to ensure the transmission of this hereditary form to her future progeny, thereby preserving the tradition by infusing life into paintings. Her ethos of sisterhood and collaborative understanding with fellow artisans underscores her belief in the importance of collective progress, recognizing the fundamental struggle and suffering of their artistic journeys in varied forms and degrees.

Fourth Interviewee

Name – Pheku Byadh

Address – Railkamdevpur, Uttar 24 Parganas

Pheku Byadh is an artisan associated in the creation of products from bamboo ("baansh"), a craft demonstrating exceptional skill and ingenuity. Her repertoire includes a diverse range of items, such as baskets, bottles, lampshades, hats, flower vases, and bags, among others. Byadh acquired her expertise from her in-laws and subsequently developed and expanded the craft independently. Currently, she is assisted by her daughter-in-law and two unmarried daughters in managing her enterprise. Despite their collaborative efforts, the family continues to face financial instability and challenges related to their residential proximity to railway tracks- significantly highlighting the precarious reality of existence and the need for proper space to execute their craft production. Byadh's approximate monthly income is 20,000 INR, with fluctuations depending on market conditions.

When questioned about her understanding of "sabala" (empoweredness), Byadh expressed a strong desire for self-regulated works, emphasizing the universal aspiration for personal ownership, which one may claim their own. Her assertion, "নারী বড়ো হতে চায়" (women desire to grow), underscores the inherent aspirations and free spirit of women. Her reiteration, "আমরা সব জানি, সব পারি" (we know everything, we can do everything), is particularly poignant, reflecting her resilience and belief in self-efficacy amidst socioeconomic challenges that life mercilessly throws at her. Byadh's three decades of participation in the Mela have provided her with a platform to witness the enduring impact of handicrafts on contemporary audiences, more so in the digital age. Her future aspirations include acquiring dedicated space for material storage and production. Byadh's conception of sisterhood emphasizes collective growth and oneness, as she experiences during her participation during the span of the Mela. These networks, as evidenced by the celebration of traditional artisanal practices, cultivate joy and pride among women in marginalized contexts.

Fifth Interviewee

Name – Anjali Roy

Address – Hatpara, Uttar Dinajpur

Anjali Roy is a practitioner of terracotta pottery, whose expertise encompasses a variety of handcrafted items, namely- human and animal statuary, household decorative elements, and ornamental figures. The terracotta craft, believed to have originated during the Malla dynasty in the late 7th century AD, subsequently flourished in the temple architecture of Bishnupur, achieving international recognition and a Geographical Indication (GI) for its cultural heritage. Among the most popular terracotta artifacts are the traditional long-necked Bankura horses, symbolizing the Malla kingdom's royalty, which command considerable market demand. These artifacts possess both tangible and intangible cultural value, serving as decorative and symbolic representations of traditional Indian folk art. Beyond their spiritual and religious applications in idol making, terracotta crafts are now integral to interior design, adorning domestic and commercial spaces aesthetically.

Roy inherited this craft from her paternal family, continuing a four-generation tradition. She enriched her inherited knowledge through participation in local training workshops, further refining her skills and expertise. She originating from a stable socioeconomic background, acknowledges the substantial support she received from her family and in-laws. She emphasizes the craft as her primary source of income and expresses gratitude towards her trainers for their role in her professional development. Due to personal preferences, she chose not to disclose her precise income. Roy's interpretation of "sabala" centers on self-reliance and the ability to sustain her livelihood, thereby contributing to familial needs. She has been a consistent participant in the Mela for over three decades and observes a heightened appreciation for handicrafts within urban settings. Roy's future aspirations involve the pursuit of artistic excellence, not solely for commercial gain, but also for personal fulfillment. She even articulated a desire for fair compensation for the labor invested in her craft. Her perspective on sisterhood emphasizes individual agency and resilience, advocating for self-sufficiency in the absence of collaborative support. She invoked Tagore's " যদি তোর ডাক শুনে কেও না আসে , তবে একলা চলো রে" (If no one responds to your call, then go your own way), underscoring the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of life come what may.

Results

All interviewees, particularly Khatun, Bibi, and Roy, reported a significant increase in market accessibility and consumer demand compared to previous years. This diachronic shift suggests that the Sabala Mela has played a crucial role in enhancing market visibility for women artisans. The artist's ability to travel across India (Khatun) and even internationally (Chitrakar) demonstrates an expansion of market reach, facilitated by the Mela and related networks. The study also highlights the need for continued support and infrastructure development to address the challenges faced by women artisans, such as financial instability and lack of dedicated workspace. The women of Sabala Mela, as subjects of their own lived experiences, contribute to a nuanced understanding of feminist discourse. By solidifying their position, they challenge traditional structures and enrich both their

personal lives and the broader socio-economic landscape. The artisans' demand for fair compensation and recognition of their labor is a crucial aspect of achieving true empowerment.

Conclusion

The findings pertaining to the interviews collected align with feminist modalities that emphasize the importance of economic independence, self-reliance, and collaborative networks in achieving gender equality. The artisans' subjective interpretations of empowerment, rooted in their lived realities, challenge theoretical constructs and highlight the pragmatic realities of women in marginalized contexts. The varied interpretations of "sisterhood" suggest that individual agency and collective support are not mutually exclusive. The artisans' future aspirations, encompassing business expansion, preservation of tradition, and the pursuit of artistic excellence, demonstrate a commitment to both personal fulfillment and the sustainability of their craft, dismantling exclusionist, hegemonic, phallogocentric structures. Future research should explore the long-term impact of the Sabala Mela or any such regional fairs per se, on the economic and social well-being of women artisans, as well as the intersectionality of their experiences with other forms of marginalization. Acting as a catalyst for employment, the Sabala Mela brought a shift away from patriarchal frameworks, enabling women to become active agents of change. These women, by utilizing their artistic skills for economic empowerment, moved beyond the margins of subaltern periphery, by reclaiming a space of their own through weaving stories, art, and expression of Bengal.

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