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# An Age-old Craft during a New-age Pandemic

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On the morning of May 6, 2020, exactly one month after the announcement of the pandemic lockdown in a Southern district of Kerala in India, I was chatting with my friend Santhoshkumar over a cup of black tea in the front yard of his newly located craft workshop.[1] While talking, he skimmed through his local newspaper checking the number of COVID-19 positive cases in his region, and deaths at the state and national levels. His newspaper has dedicated a column to a discussion of the effects of the sudden lockdown on local people, especially those issues that affect workers.

Santhoshkumar is a master craftsman who runs a bamboo craft workshop (see figure 1). Before the pandemic, he had formulated a plan to start an innovative workshop for architecture students teaching them basketry techniques, a plan supported by one of the leading architects in the region. Originally the project was to start by April 2020. By May though, he was stuck, with no idea how he could move forward. He was

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[1] Kerala is a South West state in the Republic of India that was formed in 1956.

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apprehensive: how could the world of craft producers—themselves and their ways of life, survive the COVID-19 pandemic?


Figure 1. Santhoshkumar (far left) and basketweavers.

Bamboo craftwork is an age-old practice in South India, but today it is entangled with new institutions and actors. Bamboo basketry is an everyday technology in India, easy to overlook. Yet the story of bamboo craftspeople, including their story in the pandemic, has much to tell us about the place of craft in everyday life and in particular the sociotechnical dimensions of the pandemic in India. This essay explores two questions: Can this ancient craft survive the pandemic? And are institutions established before the pandemic equipped to provide the help that is needed?

As our conversation progressed, Santhoshkumar pointed to a news item highlighting the situation of women basket weavers in the region. Lakshmi, a woman basket weaver in the district of Kollam in southern Kerala, described her response to the lockdown and the struggles it produced: “We were shocked, as it was the beginning of the seasonal festival time. We had made many baskets and other objects anticipating a good sale, borrowed money from money lenders to purchase bamboo. We are shocked

and dismayed by the sudden lockdown call."[2] Her anecdote offers a glimpse into the ways that the pandemic has affected the craft sector.

Bamboo basket weaving is an occupation that is not formally organized and generally learned through the family. Santhosh argues that "bamboo baskets and other bamboo objects carry our identity; the artifacts we make represent us to the public. Yet, the baskets and other bamboo objects are not as common as they were; they are less visible in public space now than earlier."

The COVID-19 outbreak and the subsequent lockdown have affected the lives of people around the world. Much media attention was paid to the tragic journeys of Indian workers to their homes during the lockdown. Workers' deaths on road and rail echoed the tragedies of partition. Yet although home-based craft workers may have been locked down at their own places of work (their homes), they too experienced significant economic insecurity.

Despite the severe distress experienced by these craftspeople, both the central and federal governments are keen to cut down social security measures that protect

[2] The story of Lakshmi and her co-workers has appeared in a news item published in the local newspaper, Mathrubhumi daily, in Kollam, 6 May 2020.

workers. As many calls for the increased activity of private capital in the technological system of bamboo craft, from the supply of bamboo to market access, the voice of craft people, especially the less privileged ones such as baskets weavers, is not being heard adequately. Paying attention to ways that basket weaving operates, the sociotechnical organization of basketry in the lives of craftspeople, is a good first step towards understanding the real-world implications of craft policy.

**Basket Weaving as Technology**

Thousands of basket weavers in Kerala make bamboo baskets as part of traditional household-based production. Bamboo is a fast-growing plant, belonging to the grass family, which grows in forests and river beds, in farming and non-farming areas alike. Bamboo is especially widely used in basketweaving. Lakshmi stresses the ubiquity of baskets in everyday life when she points out that “baskets were employed for various purposes in agriculture, fisheries, and food processing. Some are even used as household utensils.” Lakshmi recalls the practices she learned from her parents. Her reflections help us understand how bamboo, the plant, is entangled with a craftsperson’s everyday life. She says, “Traditionally, we the bamboo basket weavers ourselves, identify suitable bamboo varieties for weaving baskets.” Either the weaver or a trusted representative, like a family member who understands what type of basket to be made, chooses the material.

In an agrarian society like south India, people from all walks of life have often used bamboo baskets for both domestic and commercial purposes, making demand for the product predictable. Industries including fisheries and fruit, vegetable, and nut production traditionally relied on these baskets in large numbers as did spice-sellers and others needing storage. In religious life, baskets might be used in certain rituals. For this reason, until recently bamboo baskets were common in the everyday life of Kerala society.

From collecting the bamboo to the process of weaving and selling the finished basket, all tasks were traditionally done in the local area in which the weaver lives. Basket weavers, therefore, had good knowledge of both materials and markets.

Completed baskets were traditionally sold in weekly public markets, although some female weavers from the Adivasi and Dalit communities, as Lakshmi explained, would go door-to-door taking orders for baskets to ensure that production and market were reliably connected.[3] In the calendar year, demand for various bamboo artifacts for domestic, farming, and commercial purposes begins with the *Onam* season, in the months of August-September, followed by intermittent local festivals until May.[4] In June and July there is no work, as bamboo cannot be harvested during the southwest monsoon.

Basketweaving may be a relatively simple technique, but it is also an economic activity that has been deeply embedded in cultural and economic networks that connect

[3] Adivasi and Dalit are political categories that represent ex-untouchables of India. They have been denied access to public amenities and public education as a textual religious practice of *Jathi* Hindu. These communities are classified in the Constitution of India as Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Castes, respectively.

[4] Onam is a festival of Kerala based on a myth that one of the ancient asura rulers of this region, Mahabali, who has been submerged by the Hindu god Vishnu, is revisiting his subjects every year. People celebrate his visit and recollect the memory of prosperity and equality they had during his time. Apparently, this is the season for harvest according to the local almanac.

natural objects, skilled workers, and consumers. The survival of basket weavers is currently predicated on the place of bamboo baskets in everyday life. As the market for these objects has declined, basket weavers have been forced to adapt for their own survival.

Changing practices to adapt to changing markets are evident. Santhosh points out that “although basketweaving may seem to be declining, other avenues are opening up for the bamboo weaving craft. The last couple of decades have witnessed developments in the bamboo sector. Many people, especially youths from the ‘traditional’ basket weaving community, have produced innovative artifacts. A good number of new users of woven bamboo goods have also have emerged.” Institutional support for the weaving industry has helped promote such efforts.

**The Institutional Ensemble**

Several prominent agencies, including the Kerala State Bamboo Corporation Ltd, (KSBC), the Kerala State Bamboo Mission (KSBM), and the Development Commissioner of Handicrafts under the Ministry of Textiles (DC(H) MoT), sponsor programs for the bamboo craft sector. With substantial administrative and factory capacity, KSBC engages in two primary activities: it collects bamboo reeds from the forest, to sell to weavers; and it procures fine quality woven mats from weavers for making bamboo plywood in their factory. They also make flattened bamboo boards. Both products are factory-made. There are roughly 25,000 people employed in this production chain; the majority of them are provided modest protective measures such as access to an employee’s welfare fund. This contrasts with those bamboo craftspeople from traditional sectors who are not protected by the bamboo worker’s welfare board.

KSBM is another agency that is functioning in the industries department of Kerala. As a nodal agency, they coordinate different programs in compliance with the national schemes. Santhosh notes that “since it is an autonomous bureaucratic body in nature, it has the potential to plan and implement various extension services to benefit ‘traditional’ bamboo craft people. But they tend to limit themselves to conducting the Bamboo Festival, an annual expo event, and a few workshops for design training.” They also sponsor a small number of people to participate in exhibitions organized by builders and property agents. The Ministry of Handicrafts conducts skill tests, provides artisans’ identity cards, and encourages craftspeople to participate in various exhibitions. None of these projects, Lakshmi points out, had any projects or action plans to deal with a crisis like the pandemic when routine work became difficult or impossible. As Santhosh notes, only these few agencies regulate policy matters related to bamboo, and they do not necessarily take a truly inclusive approach. Their skill-building focus, similar to colonial approaches to the craft sector in years past, fails to provide even ordinary assistance to Adivasi and Dalit basket weavers, much less the kind of assistance needed during the pandemic.

## Craft in the Context of COVID-19

The history of the human world is entangled with the effort of humans to shape their material world. Historical anthropologists argue that “without stone tools, ven baskets, and other artifacts, human civilization would have been

impossible."[5] Archeological evidence shows that basket weaving may have emerged even before the skill of pottery making. We should not imagine however that their roots in antiquity mean that they are irrelevant to the modern economic and technical world. They exist and even flourish in postindustrial societies too. As David Edgerton argued in his book *The Shock of the Old*, rather than seeing technologies as developing along a linear path, with old technologies simply discarded in the wake of "progress," we need to understand how various forms of technology overlap in time, with some persisting and remaining significant despite the other kinds of technological change societies have experienced.[6] Basketry is one such technology. The persistence of basketweaving has been connected to its value for everyday objects. Recent efforts by national and international agencies to innovate by considering changing markets and potential new uses may help basketry continue as a viable craft in the future.

But the current pandemic has made the vulnerabilities of this way of life evident and could put the survival of bamboo basketry at risk. Thousands of traditional bamboo basket weavers in the region depend entirely for their survival on demand for their products. There is no safety net. Lakshmi notes:

> Most of our people are not covered under the umbrella of any social security scheme formulated by the state agencies exclusively for basket weavers. We have been surviving through our skill; craft is our socio-cultural capital. Situations like long-term lockdown affect our craft skills and life. We are solely dependent on local seasonal sales. The loss of those sales will make the monsoon season a starvation season for us. We are extremely anxious about our everyday livelihood and the education of our children, but above all, the future of craft itself is the gigantic question before us.

[5] Eric Schatzberg, *Technology: Critical History of a Concept* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).
[6] David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900* (London: Profile Books, 2008).

The voices of these vulnerable workers have been submerged in the meta-narratives of COVID-19. They are unheard in post-COVID-19 action plans as well. Basketry is an old craft; the basket weaving technique is knotted together with human skill and knowledge, the plant and its life, and the various policies warped around it. Santhoshkumar asks, can we move ahead, ignoring the views and stories of craft people marginalized and subjected to various injustices while global society seems to transform towards the post-COVID-19 scenarios? I argue we should not.

Bamboo basketry is not a mere legacy, but a modern, dynamic technology. It offers both economic employment and through its use of bamboo a form of climate resilience. The state should recognize and heed the voices of the basketweaving communities in its post-COVID-19 socioeconomic policymaking.

By better understanding the value basket weavers do and could bring to the economy, and seeking constructive ways to address their vulnerabilities, we can facilitate the persistence of an age-old craft whose cultural and economic relevance can lay the foundation for a strong future.

**Suggested Readings**

Edgerton, David. *The Shock of the Old – Technology and Global History since1900*. London: Profile Books, 2008.

Schatzberg, Eric. *Technology: Critical History of a Concept*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.