

Reviving Heritage and Empowering Communities: Inclusive Regeneration Practices in the Temple Towns of Bishnupur and Kalna, India

Nandini MUKHOPADHYAY, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, India

Shreyas P BHARULE, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, India

Joy SEN, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, India

Abstract

Temple towns in West Bengal, such as Bishnupur and Kalna, comprise a rich cultural heritage, including terracotta-ornamented temples and intangible artisan craftsmanship and the town's economy thrives on the temple-related activities. The traditional knowledge of temple building and Sthapatis is on the verge of getting lost. Still, the craftsmanship associated with the ornamentation in these temple towns continues, with changed uses and traditional ones in the memories of the elderly. This research aims to preserve these traditions while encouraging community empowerment and social inclusion through innovative regeneration practices. The research uses a qualitative methodology, including a review of existing literature on the domain area, site visits including visual surveys, interviews with artisans and photographic documentation, and analysis of existing terracotta craftworks and saree weaving designs. The research focuses on inclusive practices, including training and resources for the artisan and craftspersons, while recommending community participation. It suggests that this method can enhance community ties and social harmony, and develop policy in heritage conservation and regeneration of temple towns. Integrating traditional crafts into the modern creative economy can be a sustainable strategy for preserving urban memories and reinventing invisible cities.

Keywords

Heritage revival, regeneration, craftsmanship, temple town, community

1. Introduction

1.1. Temple Towns and its Economy

The planning and development of a historic town/city is from within and temples are placed at the center or multiple nuclei of temples and termed temple towns. The system of temple towns revolves around the temple precincts, the associated local community and their rituals and cultural practices, and the intangible cultural heritage. The town's economy thrives on the temple-related activities (Ayyar, 1916). A creative economy is still a developing concept that resorts to creative resources to drive economic growth and development. It encompasses economic, cultural, social, technological, intellectual property, and tourism objectives, with a diverse impact on the economy of the town (Gibson and Kong, 2005), (Nations United, 2024). The creative clusters in historic towns focus on intangible practices, rituals beliefs, and traditions. The case of terracotta artisans' village Panchmura near the temple town of Bishnupur, the Raghurajpur village near the temple town of Puri, pottery communities near Sukhothai World Heritage site in Thailand (Arkarapoti Wong & Chindapo, 2023) are a few examples. The knowledge of the local community in historic

towns holds considerable value in driving the economy of the region. In terms of income generation, employment creation, and revenue from exports, the creative economy is one of the rapidly rising sectors of the global economy. The main driving force of these businesses is artisans' unique skillset and creativity, both on an individual and group level. Such an economic system is firmly embedded in the environment in which it develops and thrives and the communities in which it engages. (Saha & Sen, 2016). It serves a key function in the context of these towns, the core creative field comes in the centre, followed by the cultural practices which include the mass production of items that are required for the functioning of the temple, then the people and the cultural practices. All these functions come together for the growth and economic development of these towns.

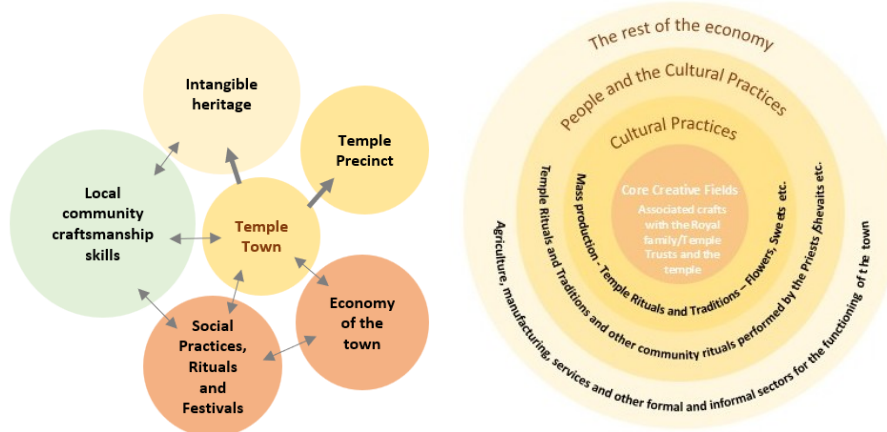


Figure 1. System of Temple Towns and its Creative Economy; Source - Author

1.2. Overview of existing research and background

India has a rich cultural heritage, architecture, historic past, traditional knowledge systems, and practices that highlight the civilization that lived in this geographic entity and which is unique in every state. *'Built heritage within a larger framework of Indian civilizational studies. It confines itself to historical architecture and cities as cultural resources. This approach, which I shall refer to as the Architectural Knowledge Systems approach, is based on the premise that problems with our heritage today can be solved if we understand traditional knowledge systems'* (Thakur, 2002). The temple towns of India are unique, suitable measures should be taken for the conservation and protection of these entities from the glorious past and take them to future generations. These city centres now face issues of congestion, and loss of identity/ character due to the pressure of urbanization and population explosion (Shastri and Subrahmanian, 2021), (Singh and Rana, 2021), (Kaur and Bhandari, 2022). There is the absence of national, state, or local recognition or protection for specific categories, such as cultural landscapes, routes, and historic cities, along with their associated intangibles, although they are included in both the World Heritage List and the Tentative List of India (DRONAH and Niti Ayog, 2021), (Kiruthiga and Thirumaran, 2019), (Kumar Paul, Roy and Kr Paul, 2021). Because of the less organized Craft sector, the implementation of integrated programs for strengthening artisan cooperatives, and organizations becomes difficult while market exploitation continues to marginalize artisans (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2018). The development and protection of identified context-specific cultural heritage values in various historic urban systems are the complex goals of development projects and studies that are looking for a new methodological approach to research, planning, and implementation of sustainable urban development in historic towns. In this framework, sustainable urban economics, preservation of the urban environment, social context, and good governance procedures are viewed as significant parts of the growth of historic towns (Božić, Dumbović Bilušić, & Kranjčević, 2019). There is a lack of adequate cultural resource information and hence policy framework

for conserving the Living Heritage of India needs to be framed in different contexts to ensure the "historic living city" adapts and evolves (Swensen, 2012), (Ragheb, Aly and Ahmed, 2021), (Yawer, Bakr and Fathi, 2022).

The review of the existing literature identifies the need to study the unprotected historic temple towns of India and their associated craft-making communities. The paper is divided into sections comprising the methodology of research, followed by the case studies of the two temple towns of Bishnupur and Kalna in West Bengal, India, and then the research outcomes. It comprises the comparison of survey results between the two temple towns followed by the broader impact of the project and ends with the future development strategies and conclusions.

2. Methodology

Heritage protection initiatives in India frequently concentrate on heritage assets as separate entities, overlooking interdependent areas and communities. Not abiding by the UNESCO's initiatives on Culture 2030 indicators, countries struggle with integrating cultural conservation into conventional development planning (Sridharan, Sharma and Shiva Ji, 2023). The loss of traditional knowledge systems can result in environmental deterioration, biodiversity reduction, cultural heritage diminishment, and resource depletion, compromising the sustainability of religious tourism and the preservation of cultural heritage (Tater *et al.*, 2023).

Temple building community is gradually disappearing. And the associated traditional crafts face a lot of hardships. Due to inadequate income to sustain the household, the new generations are migrating to other jobs (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2018). Hence the crafts and the skill set, the intangible cultural heritage are on the verge of getting lost. Therefore, the research is based on establishing a link between traditional craftsmanship and the contemporary needs of society to ensure its continuity and revival of creative economies. The central question is "How can the preservation of cultural heritage and inclusive regeneration practices promote economic empowerment and social inclusion in these towns?"

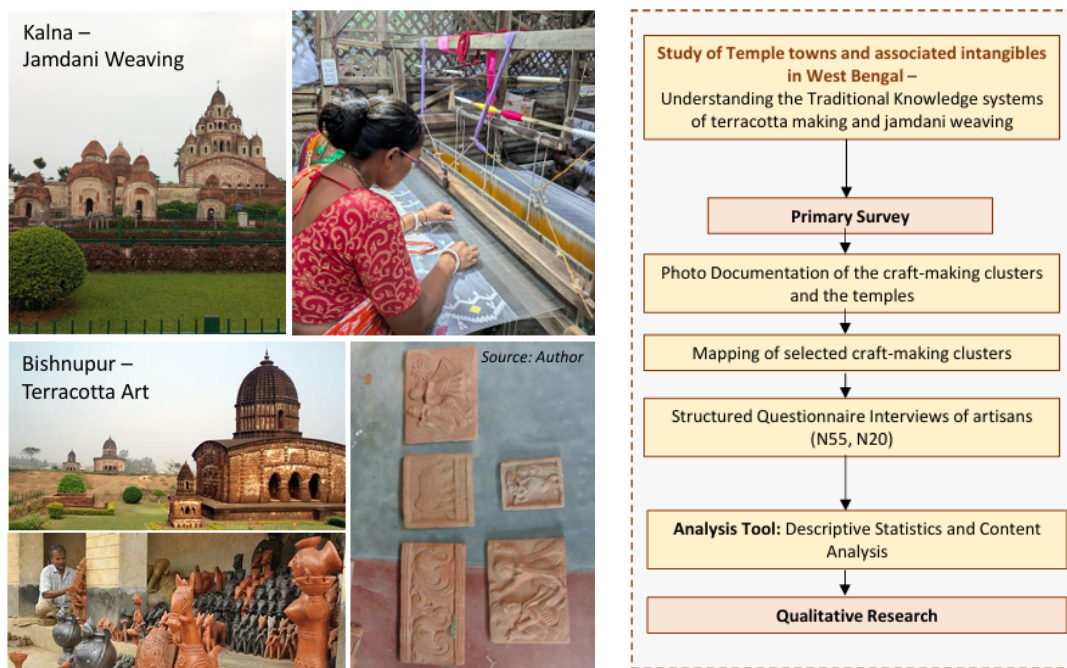


Figure 2. Pictures of Case Studies; Research Method Diagram

A qualitative research study on the temple towns of Bishnupur and Kalna in West Bengal seeks to investigate traditional knowledge systems related to terracotta-making and Jamdani weaving. Qualitative research intentionally selects participants or sites to understand the problem and research question, rather than random sampling. The setting, actors, events, and process of the research are considered, along with the actors' evolving nature within the setting (Creswell and Creswell, 2023).

This research integrates field surveys and observations, photographic documentation, and interviews to examine the intangible cultural history of these crafts and their connection to local temple architecture and rituals. The primary survey involves mapping designated craft-making clusters inside these communities, and photographic documentation of the creative processes of terracotta and Jamdani craftspeople. The study used structured questionnaires to directly engage artisans, with sample sizes of N=20 in Bishnupur and N=55 in Kalna, to collate their reflections, skills, and perceptions regarding the continuity of these crafts. The interviews revealed first-person inquiries of the difficulties and benefits of preserving old craft techniques in a contemporary setting, providing insight into how craftspeople integrate traditional knowledge systems with changing design requirements. Descriptive statistics and content analysis use a systematic method to identify the data patterns and different themes, explaining the cyclic relationship between the temple architecture – the tangible cultural heritage, and the craftsmanship of artisans – the intangible cultural heritage. This research stresses on socio-cultural significance of craft traditions in temple towns and their role in defining the identity of the artisan community and preserving the unique artisan history during the present challenges of modernization and globalization.

3. Case Studies

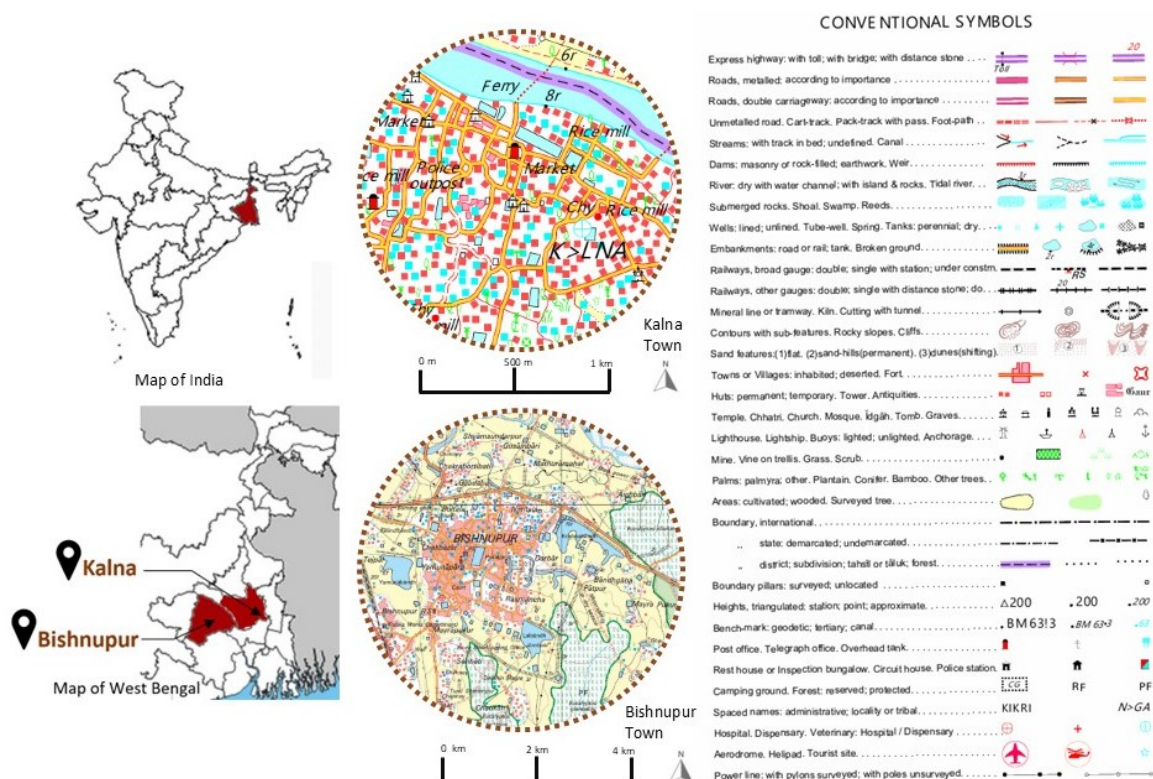


Figure 3. Location of Bishnupur and Kalna in the map of India and the Bankura and Purba Bardhaman district of the state of West Bengal; Survey of India Toposheet 1967

3.1. Case Study 1 – Kalna, West Bengal, India

Kalna is a temple town near the Hooghly River in the Purba Bardhaman district of West Bengal in India with a population of 56,722 (Government of India, 2011) and a town size of 4.7 square kilometers renowned for its unique terracotta temple complex in Bengal and Jamdani sarees. Kalna town has several unprotected temples dedicated to Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the torch bearer of Vaishnavite culture. The Kalna Rajbari complex has 108 Shiv temples arranged in two concentric circles and 12 more living temples under the protection of the Archaeological Survey of India. The Kalna Rajbari/ Place needs urgent conservation and is under the ownership of the descendants of the Bardhaman Kings. The Jamdani saree artisans and their clusters are present in and around the town (Sarkar, 2017). Samudragarh is a Jamdani saree weavers village located at 17 kilometres from the Kalna town. Photographic documentation and mapping of one unit settlement of artisans after understanding the Jamdani saree weaving process as a part of the Primary survey.

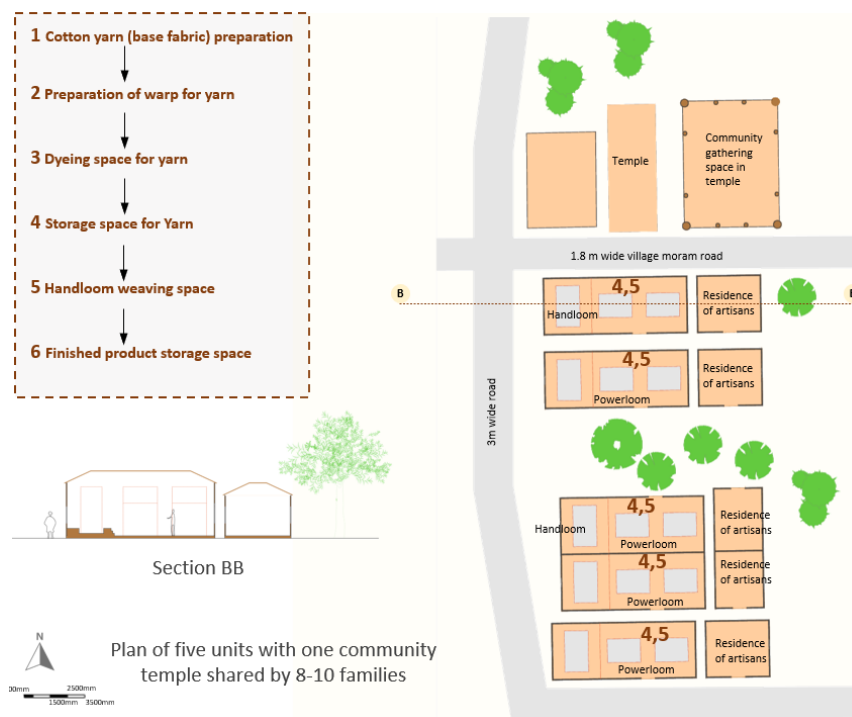


Figure 4. Mapping of one unit in a Saree Weaving Cluster in Samudragarh Village near Temple town of Kalna

The Jamdani saree weaving process is sequential and embodies both craftsmanship and tradition (Yasmin and Agrawal, 2023). The first step is the preparation of cotton yarn of good quality, which acts as the base fabric on which the ornamented design patterns are crafted with detail. Subsequently, the warp, or the longitudinal threads on the loom, is prepared, a crucial step that guarantees the strength of the fabric. In the Dyeing Space, weavers tint the yarn with natural dyes that provide the saree its distinguishing and variety of colors. In contemporary times the dyeing is done by a separate group of artisans who specialize in it and others purchase from them. After dyeing, the yarn is stored in a dedicated place to be readily used for weaving. The weaving process is carried out in the Handloom Weaving Space, where weavers use handlooms to interlace yarns, producing ornamented patterns and motifs that make each saree unique. Presently each family has one handloom and the rest are power-looms for increasing the quantity of production to meet the market demands. The finished Jamdani sarees are housed in a designated Finished Product Storage Area, prepared for market distribution. Every phase of this technique, from yarn preparation to the finished product, depicts the traditional Jamdani saree weaving. The cluster has

residences and workspaces nearby with a community temple and gathering space for rituals and practices (Figure 4).

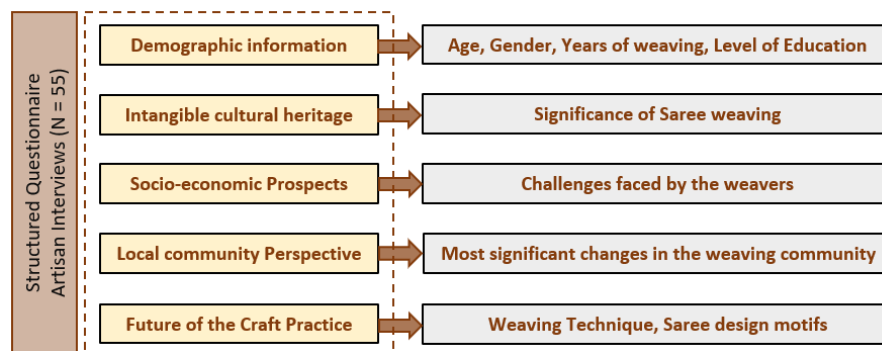


Figure 5. Sections of the Structured Interview Questionnaire for weavers in Kalna

Fifty-five Jamdani weavers from Samudragarh village are surveyed with a structured questionnaire (Figure 5) divided into five sections comprising demographic information, intangible cultural heritage, socio-economic prospects, local community perspective, and the future of the craft practice. The observations from the survey results are mentioned. From the demographic information (Figure 6), it can be noted that the formal education of most weavers is till the fifth standard, the female artisans are 44% of the respondents and they are involved in the handloom sarees due to lower wages and the age group (<5) with years of craft is 15% due to migration to other occupation.

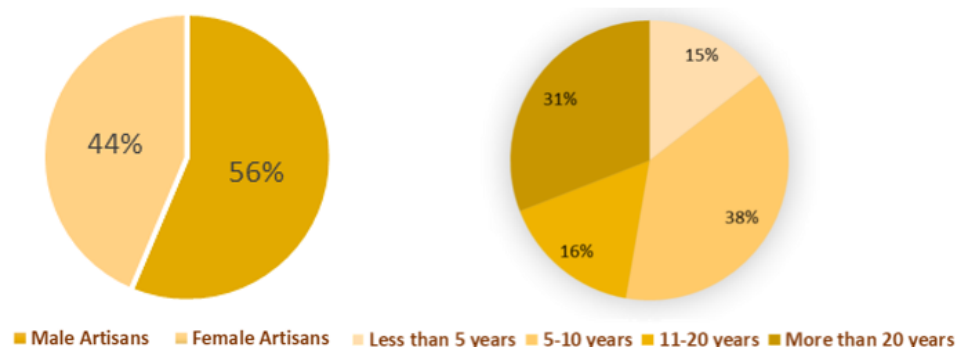


Figure 6. Survey Results Depicting Demographic Information in Kalna

The intangible cultural heritage (Figure 7) of Jamdani weaving and its significance, it can be noted that 40% of the total respondents learned the craft as a part of family tradition and 60% of them feel that the tradition is not being passed on, as the younger generation is not ready to take it up as their primary occupation. 55% of the respondents feel that more support from the government is required for the preservation of the craft as post-covid due to the financial crisis artisans have shifted to powerlooms.

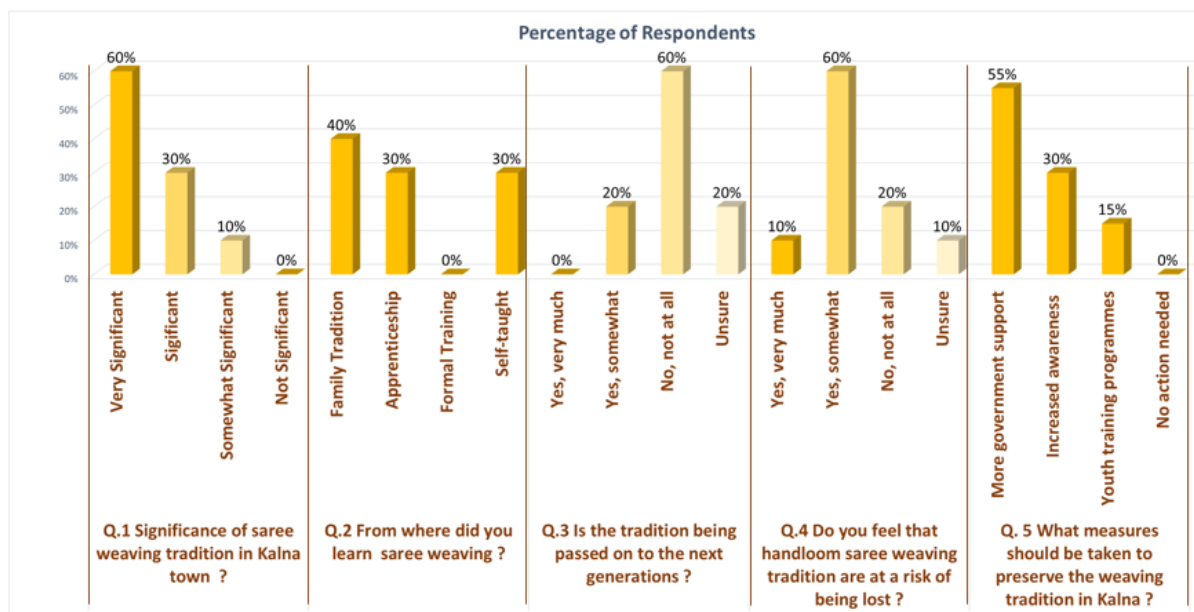


Figure 7. Survey Results Depicting the significance of intangible cultural heritage in Kalna

The challenges faced by weavers (Figure 8) is the comparison with power loom sarees as mentioned by 38% of respondents, as they are cheaper and in high demand. The most significant changes in the weaving community were a shift in Demand and Market Preferences as mentioned by 33% of respondents. Saree Design Motifs – Stories from Ancient Texts (Ramayana and Mahabharata) in the memories of the elderly and not practiced now as mentioned by 5% of respondents.

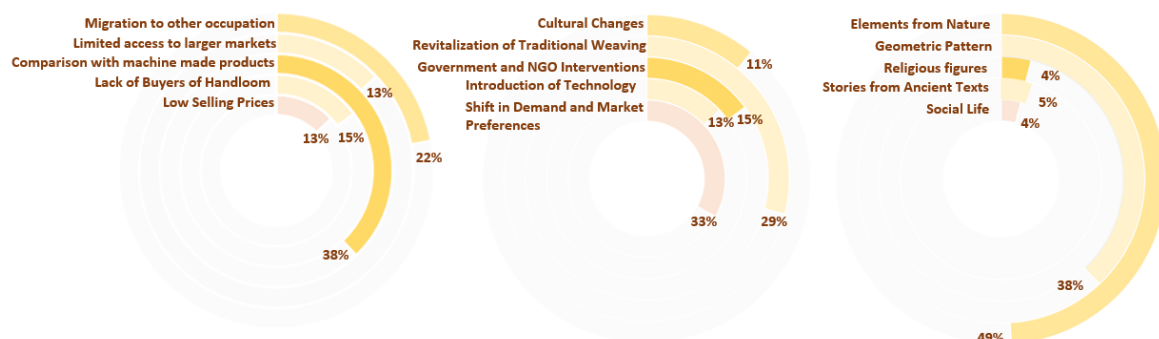


Figure 8. Survey results depicted through 3 charts - Challenges faced by weavers; Significant changes in the weaver's community; Saree Design Motifs in Kalna

3.2. Case Study 2 - Bishnupur, West Bengal, India

Bishnupur is a fortified temple town near Dwarkeshwar river in the Bankura district of West Bengal in India with a population of 67,783 (Government of India, 2011) and a town size of 22 square kilometers renowned for its unique terracotta temple architecture in Bengal and Baluchari sarees. Bishnupur has seven man-made water embankments/ bandhs a source of water supply to the town constructed by the Malla Kings of Bengal (Kumar Bain, 2016). The fortification walls are in remains while the gateways still stand bearing the testimony of time. The town has 20 temples and structures protected under Archaeological Survey of India. The terracotta artisans and their clusters are present in and around the town (Mangaonkar, 2011), (Basu, 2021). Panchmura is a terracotta artisan village located at 24 kilometres from the Bishnupur town.

Photographic documentation and mapping of one unit settlement of terracotta artisans after understanding the terracotta artifact-making process as a part of the Primary survey.

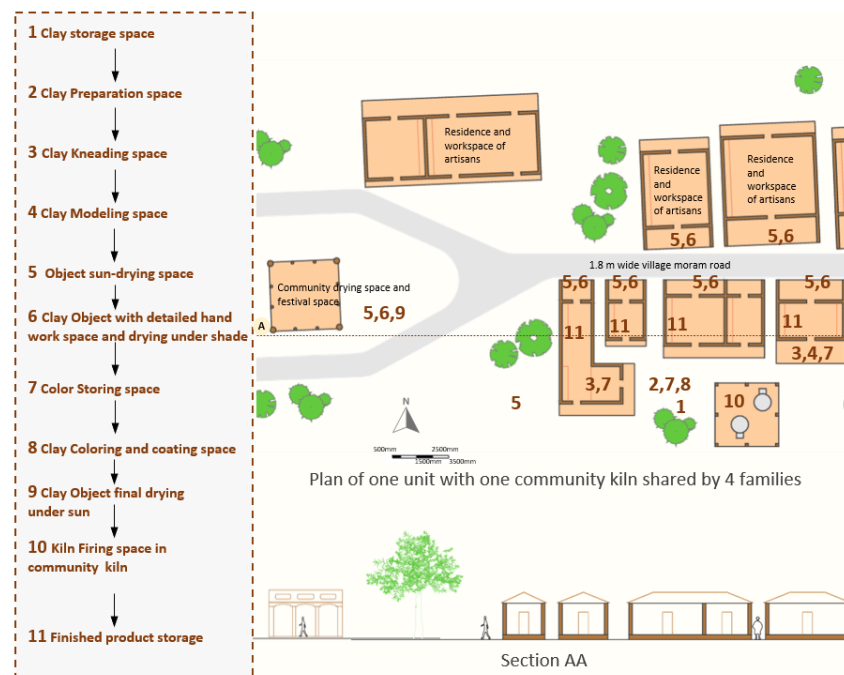


Figure 9. Mapping of one unit in a Terracotta Craft Making Cluster in Panchmura Village

The making of terracotta artifacts comprises multiple steps, each designated to certain locations in the cluster unit (Dutta, 2013). In the first step, clay is preserved in a Clay Storage Space near the artisan's residence to maintain its purity. In the Clay Preparation Space, artisans eliminate impurities from the clay to a refined consistency suitable for clay modeling. Then the clay was kneaded in the Clay Kneading Space, an essential process to improve its texture. Then artisans meticulously mould the clay in the Clay Modelling Space, handcrafting each item. The newly formed objects are then sun-dried in an open area common space shared by artisan families of the village. Artisans do meticulous handwork on delicate pieces, ensuring they are dried in the shade to prevent cracking. Color pigments are housed in a designated location (Colour Storing Space), where female artisans carry out the Clay Colouring and Coating using natural. Subsequently, the objects are positioned outdoors for a final sun-drying procedure. After complete drying, they are transported to the Kiln Firing Space, usually a communal kiln, where high temperatures consolidate the clay. The completed products are stored in a designated Finished Product Storage area, prepared for distribution (Figure 9). The sharing of spaces for the terracotta artifact-making process instills a sense of belongingness in the community both for the peers and the craft practice.

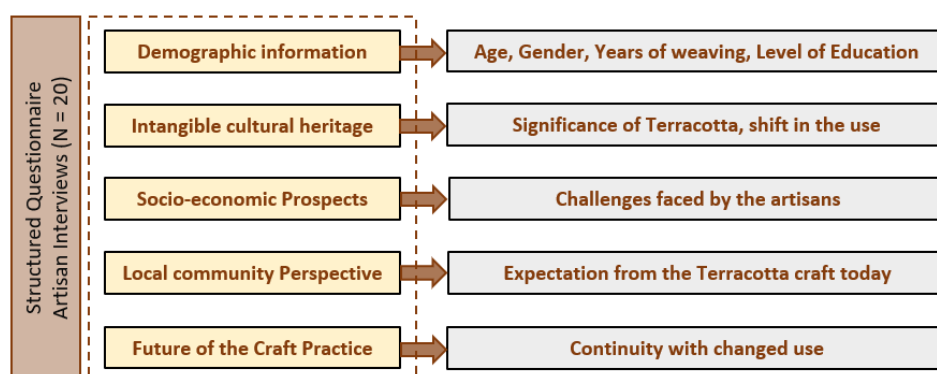


Figure 10. Sections of the Structured Interview Questionnaire for Terracotta Artisans in Bishnupur

Twenty terracotta artisans from Panchmura village are surveyed with a structured questionnaire (Figure 10) divided into five sections comprising demographic information, intangible cultural heritage, socio-economic prospects, local community perspective, and the future of the craft practice. The observations from the survey results are mentioned. From the demographic information (Figure 11), it can be noted that the formal education of the majority of artisans is till fifth standard, only 10% of the total respondents are the young artisan's group and the female artisans are 40% of the total respondents and they are mainly involved in the coloring of terracotta, the designs, and intricate details are done by males.

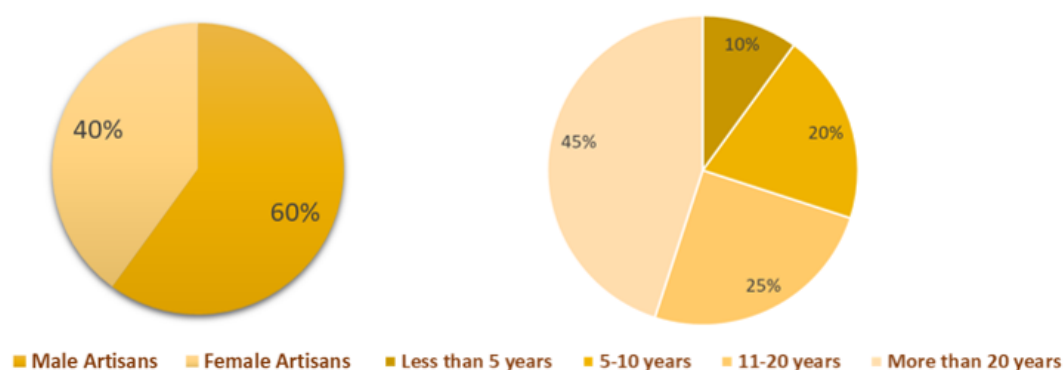


Figure 11. Survey Results Depicting Demographic Information in Bishnupur

The intangible cultural heritage (Figure 12) of terracotta artifact-making and its significance, it can be noted that 75% of the total respondents learned the craft as a part of family tradition and 40% consider the shift in materials of construction as the reason for the shift in the use of terracotta from a building material used in temple ornamentation to present day uses. And 75% of them feel that the tradition is not being passed on, as the younger generation is not ready to take it up as their primary occupation. The temple-building community – Sutradhars and Sthapatis are in the memories of the elderly.

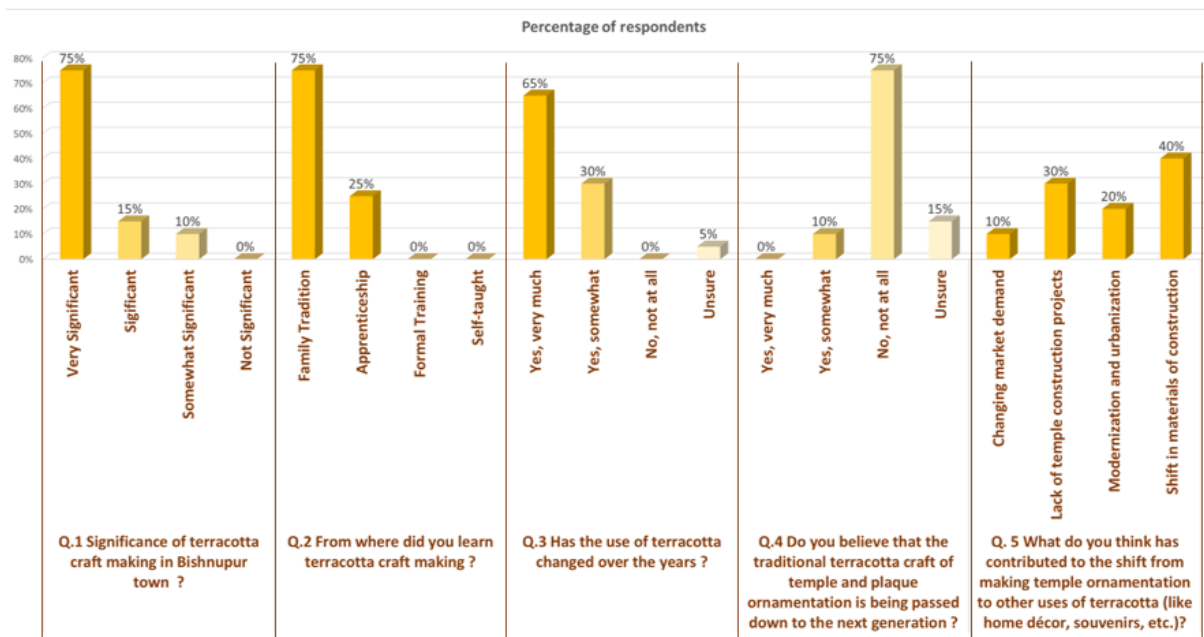


Figure 12. Survey Results Depicting the significance of intangible cultural heritage in Bishnupur

The Challenges faced by most artisans (Figure 13) —40% of total respondents—are the changing cultural relevance of terracotta from temple ornamentation plaques depicting social life to plaques used for interior decoration. The Expectations from the Terracotta craft today (Figure 13) stated by 50% of respondents the changing use, balancing traditional art, and meeting modern requirements. The continuity with changed use (Figure 13); can be noted that the making of terracotta plaques for temple ornamentation is not practiced anymore by the artisan community.

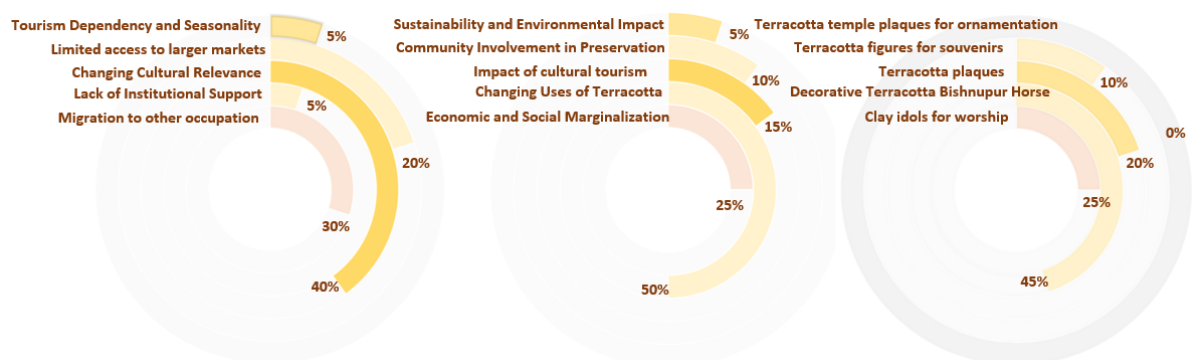


Figure 13. Survey results depicted through 3 charts - Challenges faced by artisans; Expectations from the Terracotta craft today; Continuity with changed use in Bishnupur

4. Research Outcomes

4.1. Comparison between two temple towns

The comparison of the two Case Studies (Table 1) of Kalna and Bishnupur is based on several factors like demographic information, significance of intangible cultural heritage, socio-economic prospects, local community perspective, and future of crafts practice from the primary survey results. It can be noted that terracotta exemplifies architectural craftsmanship, whilst Jamdani Saree fuses tradition with contemporary

fashion. The larger market adaptability of Jamdani promotes economic sustainability whereas the distinctive cultural character of terracotta necessitates a tourism-driven revival for economic advancement.

Table 1. Comparison between Survey results of two temple towns

Factors	Kalna	Bishnupur
 Demographic Information	Due to lack of formal education, the artisans could not adapt to the modern technology. The designs once done by the artisans are now done by designers in power loom.	The use of terracotta has evolved from a building material, idol worship to a decorative element with new design forms preserving the craft techniques.
 Intangible cultural heritage	The traditional handloom technique is on the verge of getting lost, very few artisans practice it now.	The temple-building community of sutradhars are losing its identity but the kumbharkars the terracotta artisans are practicing the traditional craft.
 Socio-economic Prospects	The artisans receive a meagre amount on the finished product, as the larger market is mainly accessed through middlemen.	The creative economy of the temple town from the terracotta crafts and the Baluchari saree weaving can be revived with the use of modern technology.
 Local community Perspective	The steps of making a saree are now divided into several groups, yarn making by one group, dyeing by one, likewise.	Every year, Cultural fairs and festivals celebrate the artisans and make global outreach and promotion.
 Future of the Craft Practice	The artisans have a positive attitude that the demand for handloom sarees will return, as the power loom saree has very little longevity. The traditional design motifs to be revived.	The artisans are trying to balance the traditional craft and modern aesthetic designs and needs of society.

Therefore, the survey in temple towns depicts several factors impacting craft traditions: first, market demand and commercial feasibility ensure craft making, and second, the transmission of skills to younger generations guarantees the continuation of the tradition. Blending technology in traditional craft-making modernizes the process, while sustainable practices and access to raw materials maintain environmental balance. Additionally, the preservation of craftsmanship, along with global recognition and promotion, collectively sustains these traditions and practices.

4.2. Broader Project Impact

In temple towns, the temple precinct serves as the town's spiritual and cultural centre. Situated in a natural setting near a river, the temple's unique terracotta architecture complements nature, its aesthetic and spiritual importance. A craft cluster flourishes around the temple, where craftsmen practice traditional crafts, the intangible heritage; becomes the spirit of the place. The local community cultivates a sense of belongingness and collective bond(Kato, 2006). Hence the conservation of skill, the conservation of craft,

and the continuity of rituals are significant in these towns (UNESCO, 2022). The skills are acquired orally or in hands-on sessions from a person who shares the knowledge. The traditional knowledge systems have to be passed on. The craft is the practical implementation of skills through any method. For the conservation of craft, continuity is significant. The conservation of skill can be achieved through digital documentation (Isa *et al.*, 2018), use of technology, and a cultural heritage status. The conservation of craft is done through the organization of apprenticeships and workshops, site-based workshops, and the generation of funding opportunities. The continuity of temple rituals can be maintained through digital documentation, community participation in temple activities, and monetary support from government and religious institutions. This can make the craftspersons relevant in contemporary times with future generations genuinely interested in learning this skill set making it their primary occupation and reviving the creative economy.

4.3. Future Development and Conclusion

This research answers the central question and delves into the identification of techniques for the preservation of cultural heritage and inclusive regeneration practices to promote economic empowerment and social inclusion in the temple towns of Bishnupur and Kalna. It can be noted that the craftsmanship associated with the ornamentation in the temple is continuing, but the use has changed in Bishnupur. Similarly in Kalna, the design motifs have evolved, but the craftsmanship of saree weaving is continuing. Therefore it highlights the importance of the conservation of the skill of craftsmanship, the craft itself as evidence, and the continuity of the rituals in these temples, which are long-standing evidence of the traditional knowledge. This explains a cyclic relationship between the craftsperson and the cultural heritage of temple towns which ensures its sustainability while reviving the creative economies. Hence the measures mentioned can instill collective bonds and social harmony in the community and implementation of the policies related to the conservation of cultural heritage including the tangible and the intangible are crucial for the continuity of these temple towns in the twenty-first century

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