

Economic Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Banaras Metal Repoussé Craft: An Artisanal Case Study

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Abstract

With every major crisis comes great responsibility. During a pandemic, there is an urgent need to maintain physical distancing, follow hygiene protocols, and conduct adequate testing and treatment for those infected. The government of India ensured that no one went hungry during the lockdown; however, this was not achieved at the grassroots level. One such group was the artisans of Banaras's metal repoussé craft. The demand for craft items has fallen sharply, with little to no market for these products. The purchasing power of consumers has declined significantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact across all sectors of society. The primary aim of the study is to identify and analyse the existential threats faced by the Banaras metal repoussé craft artisans during the pandemic. Snowball sampling and secondary data were employed for data collection, while both qualitative and quantitative methods were used for analysis. The study concluded that the economic impact of the lockdown was considerable, causing difficulties not only for the craft artisans but also for the government.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, existential threat, lockdown, metal repoussé, pandemic

Introduction

Humans began leading sedentary lives around 13,000 years ago, which resulted in domestication of animals and the development of agriculture as a means of obtaining food. Humans have started sharing space with

animals in various aspects of their lives (Pueyo, 2020). Consequently, the transmission of diseases, viruses, and bacteria from animals to humans began. About 60%-70% of diseases are zoonotic, meaning they are transmitted from animals to humans,

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and COVID-19 is one of them. Globally, lockdowns were introduced to prevent the spread of the disease (World Health Organisation, 2020). Lockdowns and social distancing measures were implemented to curb the spread of SARS-CoV-2 (Jamal et al., 2023). To combat this highly contagious disease, the Indian government adopted several modern Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Internet of Things (IoT) solutions to contain the coronavirus (Gupta & Suekha, 2020). The lockdown affected all segments of society, but Banaras' metal repoussé artisans were the hardest hit, as they had no alternatives and no support (Jamal & Sen, 2022). They faced an existential threat, as all economic activities apart from the production of essential goods came to a halt due to the nationwide lockdown (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). The coronavirus pandemic devastated the livelihoods of Banaras metal repoussé craft artisans, leaving them with nothing. Approximately 90%-95% of artisans became distressed owing to pandemic-related frustrations. Those employed in the formal sector managed to cover their expenses and fared better than workers in the informal sector (International Labour Organisation, 2020).

Artisans had accepted that the coronavirus was present but failed to understand that a complete lockdown was in place during the initial phase,

when coronavirus cases were in the hundreds or thousands (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2020). Subsequently, the number of SARS-CoV-2 cases exceeded 50,000 daily, and the lockdown was implemented nationwide in phases (Hameed, 2019). Such measures raised serious questions, such as whether the government treasury has sufficient funds or is seeking revenue from the public through taxation without regard for their concerns (Shakeel & Ramay, 2020). Wherever there is a gap in disease control, it should be addressed. Given the origin of these cases, proper monitoring of their spread is essential. The most difficult decisions must be made to control their transmission, as tuberculosis is the world's deadliest infectious disease, killing more than lakhs of people in India alone (Wilson, 2020). However, the strict lockdown in Banaras has led to several positive changes, including improvements in air quality. The enhancement in Ganges water quality during the lockdown, as factories and industries remained closed, was one of the main factors contributing to reduced pollution in the river. People have become more aware of the importance of personal hygiene, including washing hands frequently and refraining from spitting in public places, thereby indirectly helping purify the air around us (Ramakrishnan & Tripathi, 2020).

Contextual Framework

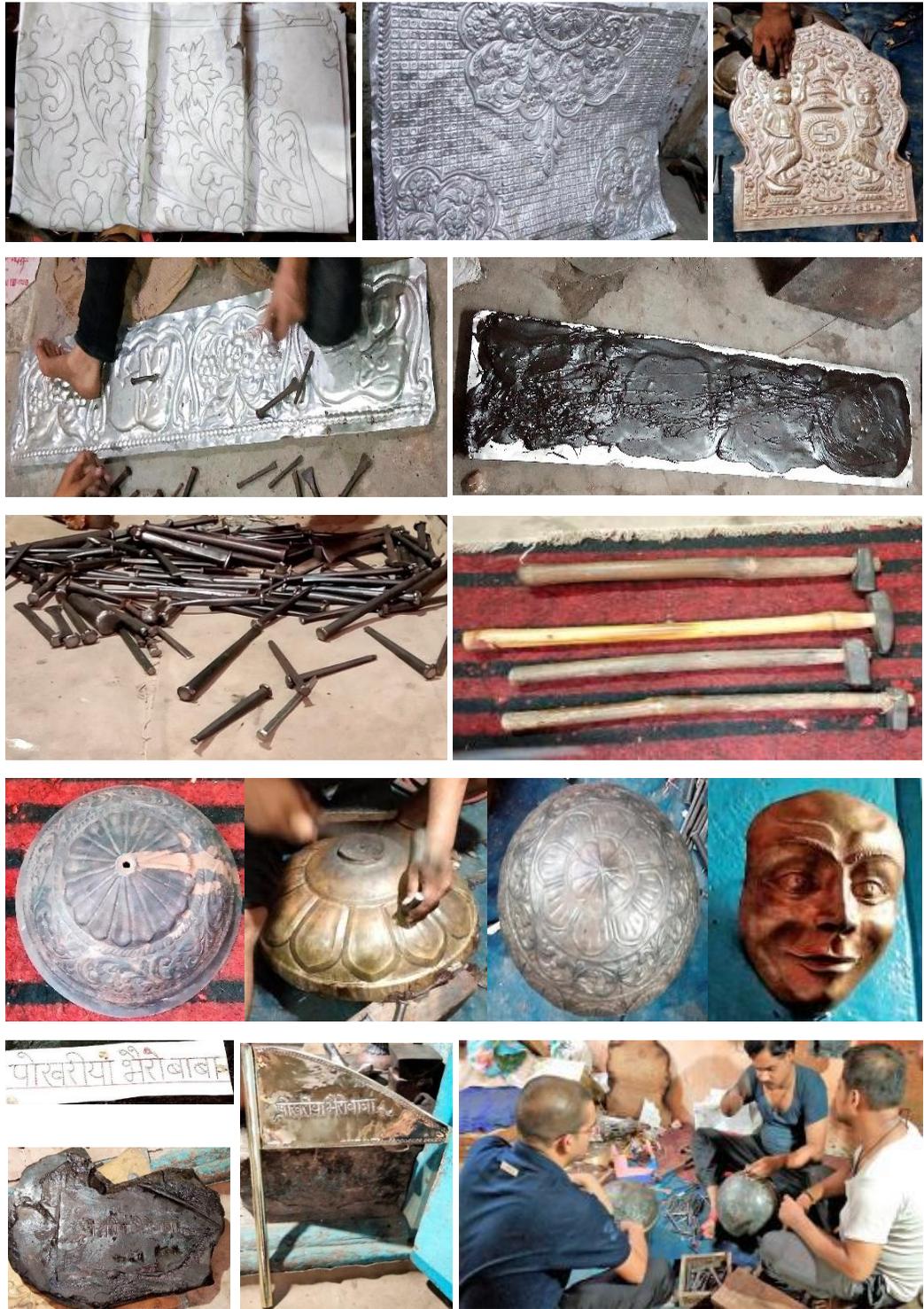
Handicraft products have been a source of pride for India since ancient times (Jamal & Sen, 2018). Metal repoussé is a traditional craft practised in India since Vedic times. The word repoussé is French, meaning to push. Archaeological surveys, based on the discovery of copper tools at ancient Harappan sites in Kalibangan, Rajasthan, and Baluchistan, Pakistan, have revealed evidence of old metal vessels in the Indian subcontinent. In India, metal vessels are broadly classified as sacred and spiritual objects. Many people are involved in metal repoussé artwork, which has been their main livelihood for generations (Fengfan & Yue, 2020). There is no definitive evidence about the origin of the Banaras metal repoussé craft, but some believe it began during the time of Raja Saheb of Kashi. Raja Saheb was fascinated by metal repoussé and interested in developing various metal crafts for religious and royal uses. He also patronised artisans from Varanasi, who had a significant influence on his decisions regarding handicraft welfare. Later, metal repoussé craft gained popularity across India and abroad. It is a vital part of Varanasi's renowned artwork, symbolising purity and sanctity. Built heritage represents the unique and valuable legacy of any region, and Banaras is one such place (Jamal & Hazarika, 2020). Artisans

from Varanasi are specialised in this sacred craft, embodying its holiness.

Repoussé refers to the process of embossing metal from the reverse side by hammering. In the craft of metal repoussé, the nakshaband first prepares designs, or naksha, of the desired product on paper. Then the naksha is drawn on a white sheet of paper, preferably A1 or A2 size. The shopkeeper or customer would bring their naksha and request that it be cast into their metal products. The designs are traced onto metal sheets using a pointed sumbi and a small hammer. Later, they began embossing designs on metal sheets with customised sumbi. Subsequently, they prepare the sheet according to a design using materials such as copper, silver, brass, or other suitable metals. Heat the metal sheet with the design to strengthen it. Afterwards, embossing is carried out at increasing concentrations every minute. Subsequently, Naksheband enlarges the naksha, and then, with the help of Sumbi, they emboss that design from the reverse side (Geographical Indications Journal, 2016). They were unable to understand the government's strategy for preventing the coronavirus. What parameters had the government set for this, and was there a lack of transparency between them? Furthermore, no coronavirus tests had been conducted in their area yet.

Figure 1

Process Involved in the Preparation of Metal Repousse Craft



Source: Field Survey, 2020-2022

The situation in Banaras was extremely alarming because nobody knew when normalcy would return (Singh, 2020). Some artisans sold tea, vegetables, fruits, and betel to support their livelihoods during the pandemic. Markets were closed, and after reopening, there was no demand or customers. Markets reopened on an odd-even basis, as per the government's notification, and violators faced penalties. If shopkeepers followed government guidelines, they would have two days off in one week and three days the next (Hindustan Times, 2020). There was a complete lockdown over the weekend. Even those working from home were severely affected, as there was little to no demand for metal repoussé crafts. Major corporations also paused their operations and cut salaries for their highly skilled employees; imagine then the predicament of metal artisans. Their products are handmade, and they need to go outside to open their shops and sustain their livelihoods (The Hindu, 2020). The extended lockdown, which lasted an exceedingly long period, devastated artisans' livelihoods. The highest levels of government announced the extension. People understood that the subsidy would be extended for the next six months, meaning the economic situation would not improve for half a year. It was further confirmed that no economic activities would be permitted during this period, except for the provision of essential goods and services (World Economic Forum, 2020). Those Girastas/middlemen who dared to continue their work during lockdown 1.0 halted their operations. They withdrew following the Prime Minister of India's announcement of a

six-month extension to the Ujjwala subsidy. This was a clear message to the nation that no economic activity would resume before September 2020. The lockdown has taught the public to maintain social distancing, take daily baths, understand what a virus is, and how infections spread from person to person (Isaifan, 2020).

Study Area

Morphology is critically important because it encompasses the built structure, layout, foundation, and architecture, as highlighted by Jamal et al. (2020). Metal repoussé craft preparation is mainly concentrated in various clusters in Banaras, including Kasi Pura, Bulitan, Piyari, and Thatheri Bazaar, with Piyari being the most renowned (District Census Handbook, 2011). However, rising land prices have made it increasingly costly for artisans to sustain their metalwork activities along the Ganga River (Jamal et al., 2021). This has prompted artisans to move to Kasi Pura and Bulitan. The metal craft area is situated near the coastal outskirts of the Ganga and its environs. The city lies between 25° 15' N and 25° 22' N latitude and 82° 57' E and 83° 01' E longitude (Department of Landscape Architecture, 2014; Figure 2).

Kasi Pura is famous for its metal repoussé craft, named after the Kaseera community traditionally living there. Every family member was usually involved in this craft, working with hammer and kalam on street corners. About 50 years ago, their houses were situated in the main market; today, they have moved to the streets, continuing to flourish in the market for steel and silver vessels and maintaining their role as patrons of this craft in Banaras.

Objective of the Study

Identify and analyse the kind of existential threat Banaras metal repoussé craft artisans faced during the coronavirus pandemic.

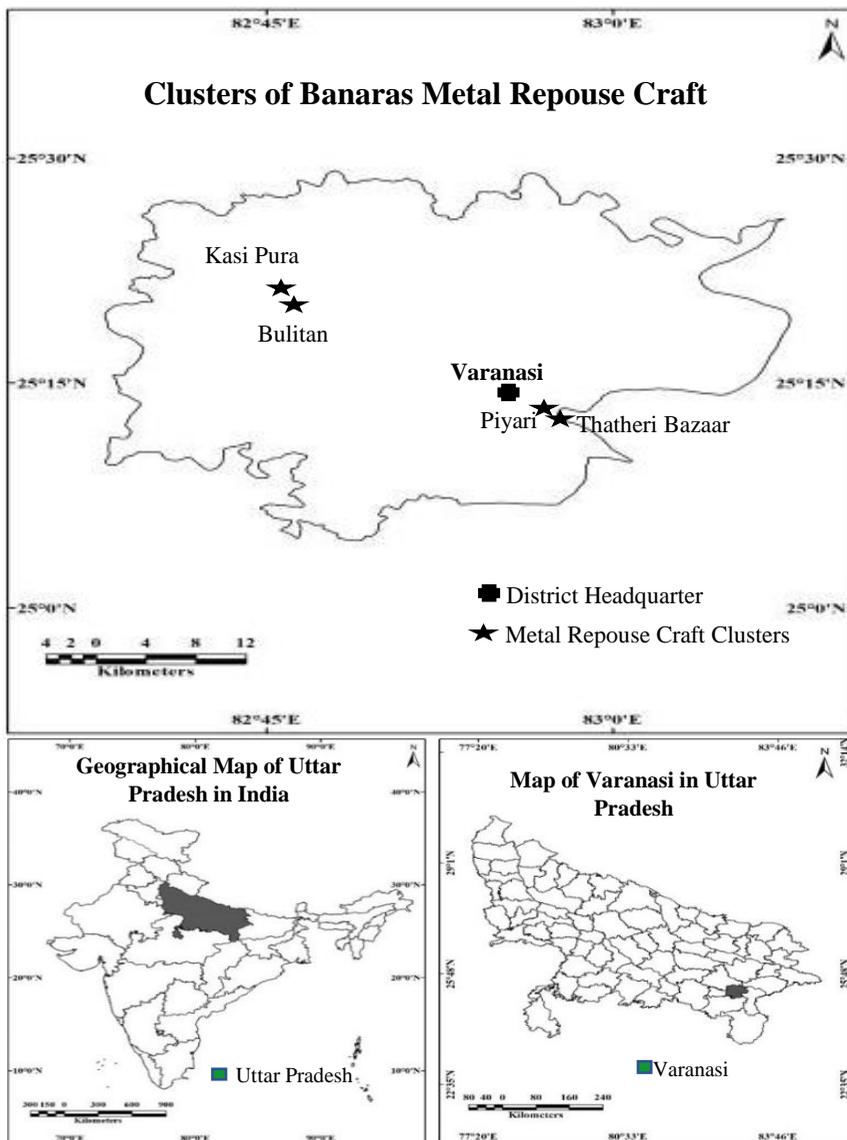
Database and Methodology

Every social science study chooses its database and methodology to achieve specific results. This research

concentrates on Banaras metal repoussé craft clusters: Piyari, Kashi Pura, Thatheri Bazaar, and Bulitan. These clusters were surveyed to understand the adverse conditions artisans faced during the pandemic and the difficulties they encountered under exceptional circumstances. The study uses both primary and secondary data.

Figure 2

Study Area of Banaras Metal Repoussé Craft



Source: Geographical Indications of Goods Act, 2022

A household survey was conducted using purposive sampling in the Banaras district of Uttar Pradesh, India, from 2020 to 2022, with an adequate number of participants from each cluster included in the analysis.

Some of the secondary data sources include the World Health Organisation, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the International Labour Organisation, the District Census Handbook for Varanasi, and the Department of Landscape Architecture, which were incorporated to draw a probable conclusion. Qualitative and quantitative techniques were employed for analysis, and additional empirical and descriptive methods were utilised to achieve the desired result. Different software, such as ArcGIS and MS Office, were used to prepare maps, flowcharts, and bar diagrams.

Major Findings

Repoussé is a metalworking technique where a ductile or soft metal is shaped into various designs by hammering. The artisan's livelihood is at risk due to the lockdown, as they are not allowed to leave their homes for work. If they were prevented from going outside to do metal work, how would they earn money and support their families, who rely on them? The

sector most affected was the informal sector, where artisans work on a daily wage basis, and they faced the most challenging times of their lives during the pandemic.

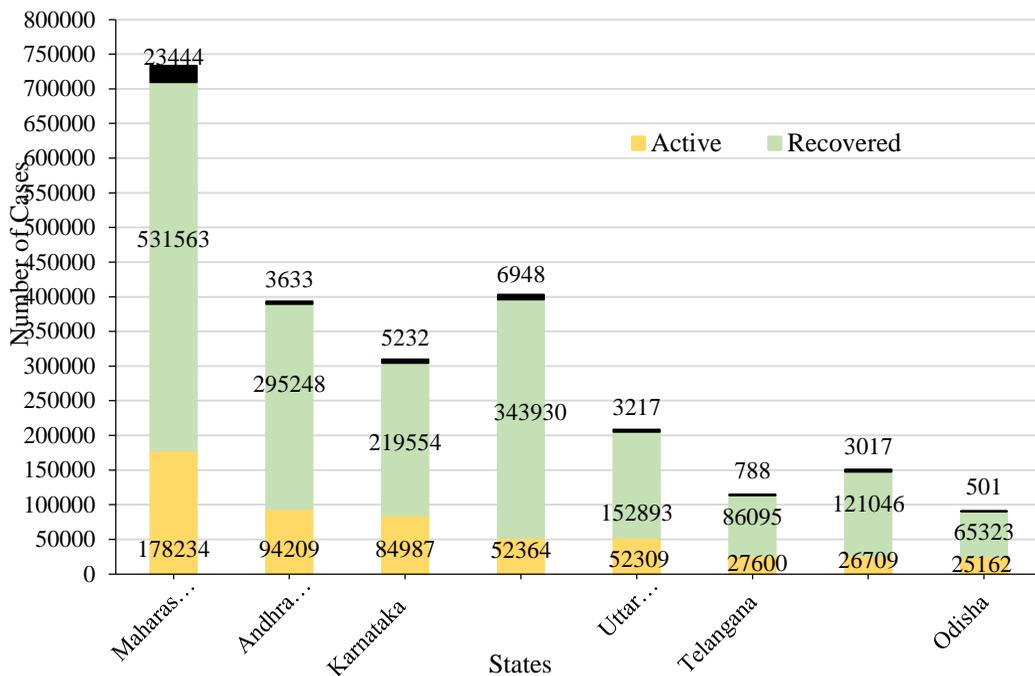
They were fed up with the Indian government's lip service and promises. They were truly facing an existential threat despite compromising Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, which states the right to life with dignity. Artisans were selling their ancestral precious items to eat one meal a day. In a single stroke, the coronavirus has thrown them back into the dark ages, from which it would be challenging for them to sustain their basic needs (Figure 3).

Culture as a Way of Life

The reach of the Kasera community extends beyond the fairs and festivals of Banaras. Many of them travel to Allahabad during the Maha Kumbh Mela, which is celebrated once every 12 years, to earn some extra money. Allahabad is renowned as the Sangam city, Tirth Raj, the abode of God, and Kumbha city. Several artisans, accompanied by their families, travel to Allahabad and stay there for a month or until the culmination of the Maha Kumbh. There are three types of Kumbh Mela: annually, once every 6 years (Ardh Kumbh), and once every 12 years (Maha Kumbh).

Figure 3

Coronavirus Cases Across Top 8 Indian States as of August 2020



Source: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2020

However, artisans preferred to attend the Maha Kumbh at Allahabad and avoided taking part in other Kumbh melas. Before going there, they shipped their metal craft products from Banaras to Allahabad by train. Upon arrival, they temporarily secured a space, set up their shops, and started selling Banaras' intangible cultural heritage through their metal goods. In the world-famous mela, millions of tourists arrive not only from India but also from around the world. Foreign visitors are eager to experience the mela's rich cultural heritage and purchase culturally themed products. Visitors are keen to learn about and inquire how the products are made and how the responses are created. They put on Mukhota masks and shout in a frightening tone to scare

passing tourists. Customers at the mela generally did not bargain much and were willing to pay a fair price. When the mela concludes, they return to Banaras with their belongings. In this way, they take darshan at Allahabad and sell their metal crafts.

Lack of Transparency in the Government's Aid

The government provided 5 kg of food grains per person, which could be either rice or wheat, and 1 kg of gram per family to BPL cardholders through the Public Distribution System (PDS) during the lockdown. If their card covers four or five units, they are eligible for 20 kg or 25 kg of food grains, respectively (Table 1). If an artisan's family consumes 40 kg of rice, then the total government aid is ₹200, while a Mahatma Gandhi

National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) worker's one-day wage is ₹202. Then, on what basis could the government assure the artisan of food grains for a whole month? In truth, the government's aid is ₹200 per month, which is barely enough for survival; however, the announcement was misleading, implying they were providing aid of ₹1 lakh per month. The government was widely promoting the relief package, but in reality, it offered nothing to the informal sector's artisans.

Those who have a Jan Dhan account in their name received ₹500 per month. This ₹500 was transferred only to the female member's account and that amount of money can be used to feed 2 ½ days of their family. What about the remaining 27½ days? Where will they source their food?

Under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, a liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) cylinder was provided in the name of a woman registered as Below Poverty Line (BPL). Under the

scheme, one cylinder per family per month was distributed, which is sufficient for BPL families (Table 1). The yojana was extended to needy families for the next four months (March-July) amid the coronavirus pandemic and nationwide lockdown.

Mockery of Intangible Heritage: Incredible India

Artisans were confused and raised valid questions about the basis on which the government was identifying coronavirus patients. Thermal screening or testing was not being carried out in their locality, known locally as a mohalla, and tests were conducted in only a few clusters. If the body temperature was less than 100°C, the person was considered safe, as the standard is 98.6°C, and a temperature more than 1°C above this is considered a fever. If the temperature exceeds 100°C, the person might experience mild coronavirus symptoms, including cough, breathlessness, body aches, and fatigue.

Table 1
Comparative Analysis

Variables	Value (₹)	Day and Month
Government's Aid		
1. Public Distribution System (PDS) 5 kg grain	₹200	1 Month
2. Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana	₹500 (Female)	1 Month
3. Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana 1 cylinder	₹700 (Female)	1 Month
Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act (MGNREGA)		
1. Wage	₹202	1 Day
Construction Wage		
1. Labour	₹400	1 Day
2. Mistry (Master)	₹600	1 Day
3. Artisan turns Labour	₹200	1 Day

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Artisans were running their furnaces without work, as it was crucial to keep them operational after a few days. If this practice is not maintained at certain intervals, there is a risk of rusting in the metal repousse craft equipment (Figure 4). The demand for Banaras metal repousse craft reached its lowest point during the festival season, and although there was significant demand during weddings, the coronavirus pandemic had decimated the market. The nationwide lockdown lasted from March to September. Several festivals, including Holi, Ram Navami, Mahavir Jayanti, Buddha Jayanti, Good Friday, Eid-ul-Fitr, and Eid-ul-Azha, occurred during this period, which is usually the peak selling time for handicraft products. Artisans had no work and were largely idle throughout the lockdown.

Coronavirus Cases

Varanasi/Banaras was one of the leading districts in Uttar Pradesh,

India, in terms of confirmed COVID-19 cases (Figure 5).

Lucknow has the highest number of confirmed cases in the district, followed by Kanpur Nagar, Gautam Buddha Nagar (GBN), Ghaziabad, and Varanasi, as these are densely populated districts. These districts rank among the highest in the Human Development Index (HDI) in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. The number of active cases was the highest in Lucknow, followed by Kanpur Nagar, Ghaziabad, Allahabad, and GBN (Figure 6). The number of tests in these districts was high because medical facilities were more advanced than those in other districts in Uttar Pradesh, India.

The highest number of deaths was reported from Kanpur Nagar, followed by Lucknow, Agra, Varanasi, and Allahabad. After analysing the data, it was concluded that the local administration reported coronavirus deaths more promptly than other districts.

Figure 4

Focused Group Discussion with Metal Repoussé Craft Artisans



Source: Field Survey, 2021

Figure 5

Number of Confirmed Cases in Top and Bottom 10 Districts of Uttar Pradesh till August 2020

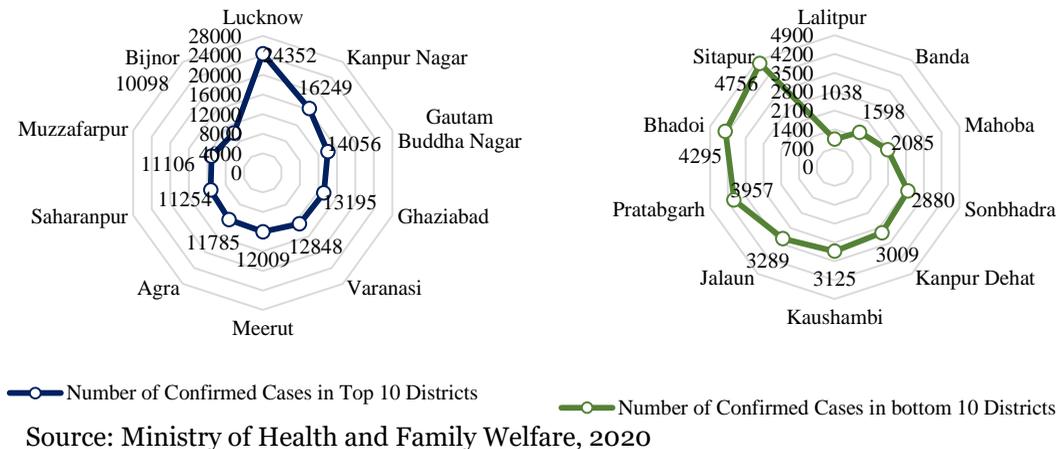


Figure 6

COVID-19 Cases in Varanasi

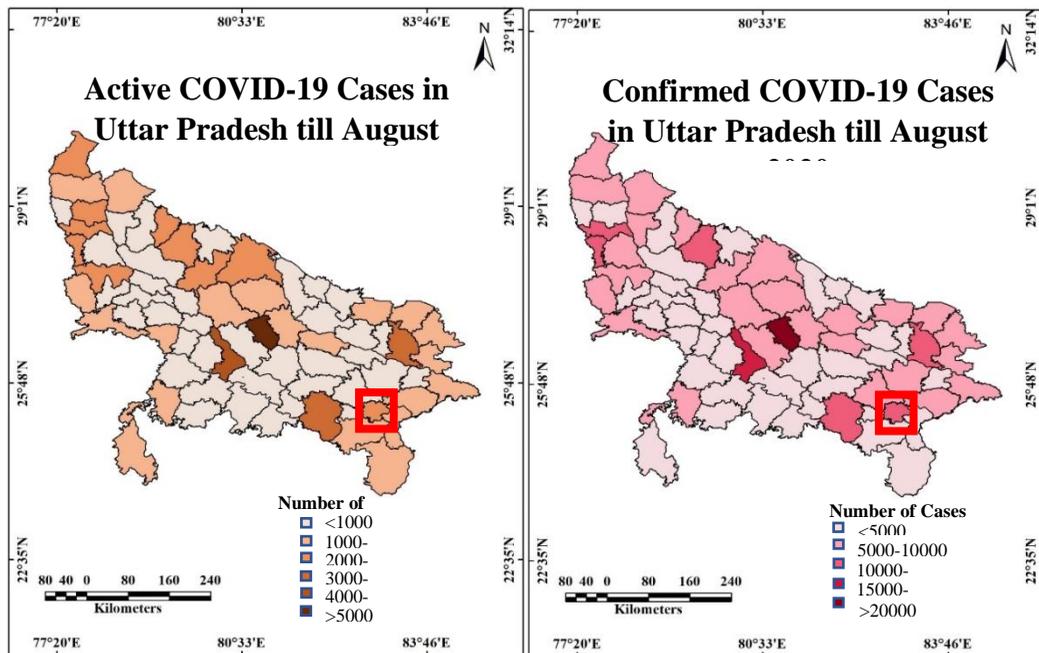
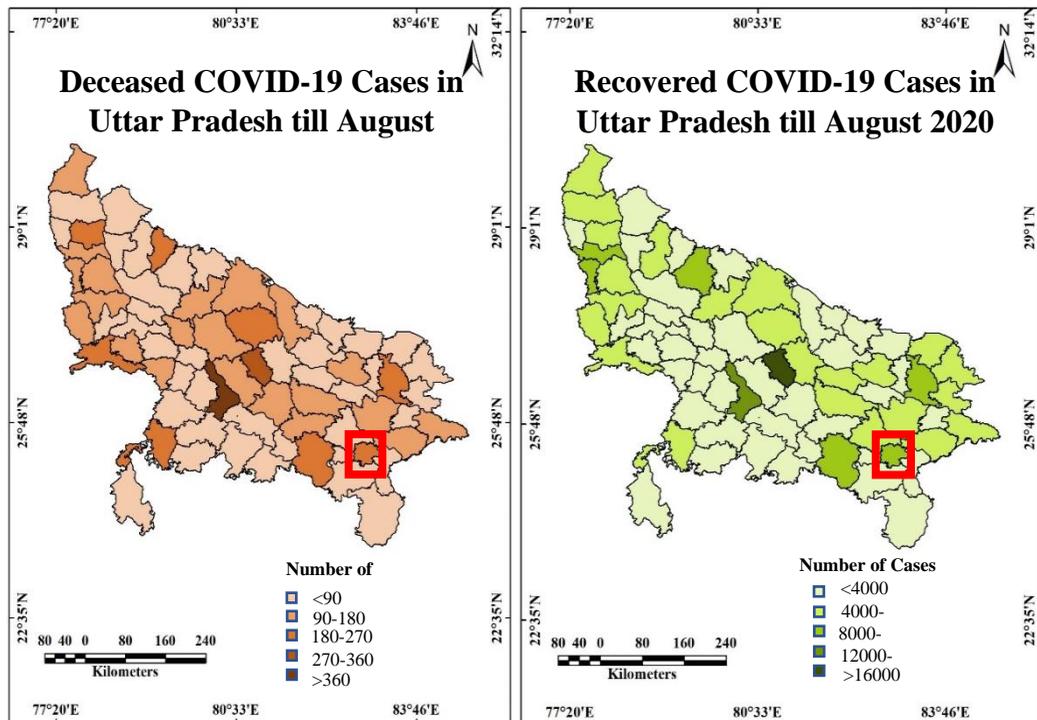


Figure 7

COVID-19 Cases in Varanasi



Source: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2020

The highest number of recoveries was recorded in Lucknow, followed by Kanpur Nagar, Ghaziabad, Gautam Buddha Nagar (GBN), and Varanasi (Figure 7). The analysis further indicated that districts with the highest number of confirmed cases also tend to have the highest recovery rates, and vice versa.

Result and Discussion

The situation persisted for a long time, causing more deaths not only from the coronavirus but also from hunger, poverty, and starvation. While the coronavirus pandemic harmed society, it also brought about several positive changes. It has taught everyone to adopt healthy habits in

daily life, such as washing hands regularly before and after meals and after using the toilet. In this regard, the Government of India's Swachh Bharat Mission played a vital role in promoting hygiene practices among the public. The fight against the coronavirus involves the government's responsibility to care for all sections of society, especially the vulnerable, marginalised, informal, and disadvantaged groups. The government failed to manage the pandemic effectively at various levels. However, it was committed to transforming the healthcare system, recognising that the latest technology could play a crucial role in strengthening it. The right to health is

neither a statutory nor a fundamental right, unlike the right to education. According to the Constitution of India, health is a state subject, and all decisions made by the state government take precedence, just like decisions on law and order.

Incompetent Machinery

There was an urgent need to establish additional COVID-19 hospitals across the entire state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), India, as cases continued to rise daily. The doctor-to-patient ratio in UP is 1:19,962, the second-lowest in India after Bihar at 1:28,391. The national average is 1:11,082, and the WHO ratio is 1:1,000 (Figure 8). Even at the national level, this proportion is ten times higher than the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendation. In this context, COVID-19 hospitals could only treat patients with severe symptoms, not those with mild symptoms. Patients with mild symptoms could quarantine at home, as hospitalisation was not necessary given the limited number of hospital beds. Special war rooms have been established to facilitate easy tracing of COVID-19 patients within a certain radius. Those advised to quarantine also received proper surveillance through Global Positioning System (GPS) chips and mobile phones. The designated authorities were contacted once or twice daily to review the health status of quarantined patients. Whether their condition was improving or

worsening, if worsening, they would be hospitalised; otherwise, they would continue in home quarantine. When the quarantined patient attempted to leave the designated area, they were instructed to stay in their location and return to their original position. The authorities delivered a clear, moral message: if you go out, you not only endanger your own life but also others'.

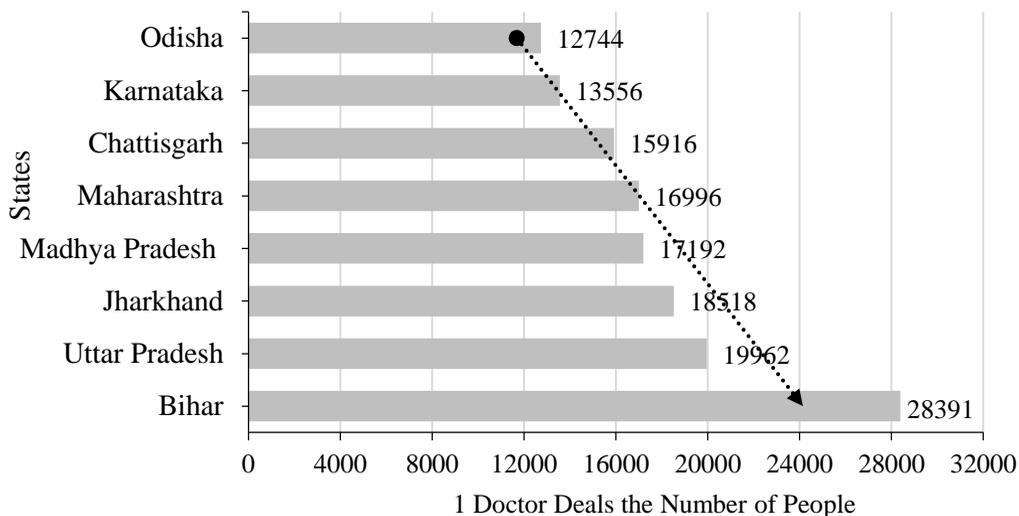
Miserable Economic Condition of Artisans

The coronavirus pandemic has profoundly affected humanity, especially vulnerable groups. Humanity is facing the worst pandemic in history as the virus continues to outrun us. The global community has responded through international partnerships and reliance on science and technology. Although the pandemic has affected everyone, its effects have not been uniform. Both the first and second waves of COVID-19, between 2020 and 2021, worsened artisans' conditions from difficult to dire.

This includes low-budget allocations, poor infrastructure, inadequate logistics, and delayed sector responses. Artisans face considerable stress due to challenges such as rising healthcare costs and the loss of primary earners in their families. The coronavirus has severely disrupted local supply chains, manufacturing, markets, and products.

Figure 8

Number of People Served by a Single Doctor in Different States



Source: Maurya and Goswami, 2020

Artisans' incomes declined during the pandemic. The full extent of the impact on the handloom and handicraft sector remains to be assessed. However, all indicators suggest severe consequences, including artisans being unable to sell their products due to decreased customer demand. Not all factors were affected; some problems pre-existed and worsened during the crisis. Artisans are considered daily wage earners because their daily income supports their families. During the pandemic, a sharp decline in income was observed due to lockdown measures that prevented them from leaving their homes and engaging in economic activities. These unnatural conditions caused numerous difficulties for families in securing bread and butter for their children.

Psychology of an Administrator

Police behaviour during the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic was severe, involving brutal treatment of innocent artisans. They chased every violator, even into their mohallas or localities, warning them that anyone found guilty would face consequences. This pandemic was not a time to neglect the poor artisans, but rather a time to appreciate them. Perhaps they left their homes to feed their children or buy food for their families. Officers should assist by explaining the importance of staying at home during the pandemic and, if possible, delivering essential food items to their homes to prevent outside movement. Beating helpless artisans with sticks would be unjust and only worsen their issues. This process of pursuit and evasion continued for several months, as it was necessary for the welfare of all sections of society. Later, artisans

learnt to avoid unnecessary trips on streets and roads, except to buy essential goods at designated times. During the lockdown, there was no demand for Banaras metal repoussé craft products because people chose to stay at home for their safety and that of others. Consequently, the police recognised the artisans' behaviour, which played a vital role in breaking the chain of coronavirus transmission within society.

Structural Change

The government had an opportunity to implement structural changes whenever such an emergency arose. The lockdown was an ideal chance for the government to take appropriate action without delay. Not only was immediate relief provided to those in need, but a long-term, manageable plan was devised. The government of India should exempt artisans from paying rent, electricity bills, water bills, and other related expenses during the pandemic. It should transfer a substantial amount of money, such as ₹7,000 per family per month, to help them sustain their livelihoods during a global emergency. Those artisans have a Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) cover in their names or their families; the government should pay the premiums during the pandemic. Schools should waive students' fees, and the government should compensate schools for these costs. The pandemic was an appropriate time for the government to step forward and show its gratitude to society. Artisans have a clear idea of when their craft work will return to normal once the Prime Minister of India announces it via

virtual media. Then, the lockdown will end, and everything will revert to normal. It demonstrated that the government was the main stakeholder in declaring the region free of coronavirus, or not, especially when the disease had no impact on artisans' health. They hoped the coronavirus would end soon so they could resume their usual work in metal repoussé craft.

Phase-wise Approach

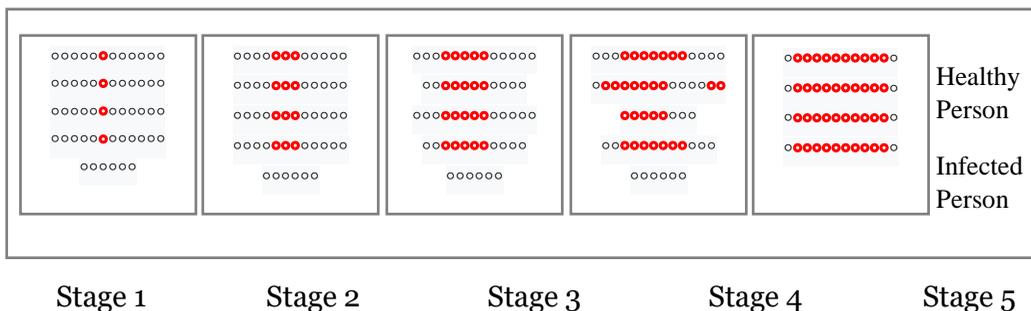
COVID-19 transmission begins with a single person at the initial stage (Figure 9). The coronavirus spreads very quickly as it finds a suitable host cell to reproduce, progressing from stage 2 to stage 5. The coronavirus mainly infects older people and individuals with weakened immune systems. Artisans have adopted the habit of cleaning their hands regularly to break the chain of transmission. Whenever they go outside, they should maintain a minimum distance of at least 2 yards between individuals and wear masks at all times. When they return from outside, they should sanitise themselves, as infections spread easily, and our safety ultimately depends on our own actions. The government had prepared a phased framework to manage the coronavirus pandemic as the number of cases continued to increase daily. If in any region the number of COVID-19 cases showed a decreasing trend, other activities apart from essential ones would be permitted to help the informal sector resume operations. Conversely, if the number of cases indicated a rising trend, an aggressive lockdown would continue. More extensive testing was

required to break the coronavirus transmission chain in districts. Special guidelines, including a more

stringent lockdown targeting hotspots, were followed.

Figure 9

COVID-19's Transmission Process



Source: Prepared by Authors, 2022

Conclusion

Artisans faced existential threats as bankruptcy worsened in the handicraft sector. The right to live with dignity has been sidelined, as artisans had no food to eat due to superficial promises made by the administration. It became very hard to imagine the lives of metal repoussé craft artisans during the pandemic, as few measures were taken to preserve their humanity. Increased expenditure on health and the informal sector is essential, as they form the backbone of the Indian economy. India needs employment, education, and dignity for all, regardless of caste, religion, sex, race, or birthplace. The intangible cultural heritage of Banaras faces an existential threat even after the pandemic, as its glory diminishes because artisans are dying of hunger, poverty, and malnutrition. The government, along with civil society, NGOs, and industry, should work

together to revive heritage during such times. Every crisis offers a chance to show compassion towards the poor, informal, and vulnerable segments of society. We have a heart for the welfare of these unique artisans and will continue supporting them even after the pandemic ends. It is our duty to ease their suffering during uncertain times and remember that compassion should come first, as the wealthy can manage themselves. Artisans are not the only ones facing hardship; the entire country is, too. However, hardship often sparks creativity, which in turn drives the overall progress of human civilisation.

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