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Preserving Tradition in a Changing World: The Impact of Modern Production on the Rattan Craft Industry in Wewelgoda Village, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The rattan craft industry in Sri Lanka is ancient and traditional dating back more than a thousand years, namely in forest border areas such as Wewelgoda Village of Kamburupitiya. The art is disappearing due to modern production techniques. The socio-economic effects of industrialisation on traditional rattan craft workers in the village Wewelgoda and strategies performers would need to adopt to ensure sustainability of the industry under changing technology, financial and market conditions were analysed by the researchers. The researchers employed a mixed-methods research design and applied qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Qualitative data were obtained via interviews, case analysis and observation; quantitative data were achieved by field survey and observation. The major findings revealed that unjustifiable access to raw material, competition with cheap alternatives and socio-economic factors impairing the younger generation from carrying on the traditional craft are the main causes responsible for declining of rattan craft industry in Wewelgoda. There are legal restrictions on the collection of rattan, and poor government intervention exacerbate the problem. But as rattan emporiums proliferate and the work becomes more difficult and dangerous, the small-scale employees are proving adaptable at sticking to tradition. Yet a lack of efficiency due to the use of outdated methodologies still plagues output and profitability. The research also suggests policy upgrades that will enable the legal and sustainable access to raw materials, introducing suitable technologies that increase efficiency. Increasing the public awareness and social value of rattan craft may encourage intergenerational inheritance. Consequently, this study enhances to varied discourses on the conservation of Sri Lankan Intangible Cultural Heritage and sustainable rural livelihoods.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Economic Sustainability, Modernisation, Rattan Craft, Traditional Industries

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The majority of technology-based practices and industries have remained with the Sri Lankans up to this day and even in the Vijaya-Kuweni era. Iron and steel work, weapons making, architecture, weaving, painting, palmwork, copper and brassy pottery, rattan craft are among the rural crafts. The presence of the necessity in the society and the nature of economic production made such industries the best in the past periods (Delpagoda, 2012; Kumara, 2016). The traditional industries, which are often small-scale, home-based, are also characterised by the fact that they consume large quantities of labour than the power-conscious technology and require low level of capital (Kumara, 2016). When special skills, techniques, and creativity are used besides such traditional processes, the products are referred to as handicrafts. Other crafts have risen up to regional popularity (Fernando, 2010) and they include Matara lace work, Ambalangoda masks, Kalutara reedwork and Galle ebony (Kaluwara wood) carvings.

The physical properties of the primitive societies were limited to the basic needs such as hunting traditions and weaponry. Human beings also evolved, and their needs changed which led to more advanced means of production. It is worth noting that there would be no production in the absence of need. This indigenous knowledge system of these societies cannot be

distinguished by the intangible culture heritage that was transferred to the new generation by the former team to the new one through both mental and physical action (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Abeysinghe, 2008). This is one of the privileges of an epistemology that was transmitted to the Sri Lankan people. These antique traditions and their wisdom and sustainability are taken as an alternative to mainstream development approaches though academics that seek the alternatives (Jayathilaka, 1998). Most of the traditional industries in Sri Lanka are utilising the locally available raw materials therefore assuring that the available natural resources are maximized (Liyanage, 2009). The same industries are now called indigenous creative industries that transform raw materials, in terms of form, utility, and looks like clay to bricks, wood to furniture, and rattan to a variety of woven products (Liyanage, 2009). The Sri Lankan rattan craft industry, whose history can be traced to date back to about 800 years ago, originated in villages located near forests. The rattan creepers which have grown large are commonly cut down into three or four feet and made into an inner and an outer skin. The separated elements are dried, packed, soaked and dried and then made into final products. In the past, it was a household manufacturing process and one of the key products was everyday baskets (Wenerathana, 2012).

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Traditionally, rattan artisans established their crafts in areas bordering forests, and at one time, rattan crafts existed all around the country, for instance in Tihagoda, Deiyandara, Kamburupitiya, Hikkaduwa, Horana, and Kalutara. However, various modern socio-economic transformations have resulted in the decline of the craft in numerous areas (Knox, 1681). Rattan craft, under the earlier privileges of life, in the feudal system, was a craft that played an important role in creating reliance on one another to fulfill the important social and cultural needs for survival of rural communities. Craftsmanship in rattan production is often more complex than the modern machine-based production. For example, rattan artists are able to select raw materials based upon their tangible ability, an instinct that has been developed over many years of handling (Wenerathana, 2012). Rather than simply serving everyday domestic needs, rattan products have also fulfilled ritual and industrial dimensions to fulfill. Offering baskets for Kataragama, gem baskets, pair or double rattan screens, and paddy containers all demonstrate social and economic significance of rattan, embodying the historical Sri Lankan story within a religious framework.

The traditional rattan craft industry is being increasingly affected by contemporary production practices, such as mass production, synthetic alternatives, and market forces

motivated industry (Appadurai, 1996). This production practice weakens traditional craft sustainability as it shapes consumer choice, limits access to resources, and threatens the feasibility of craft as a skilled, time-intensive mode of production. This study seeks to understand how contemporary production practices motivate changes to sustainability of traditional rattan craft industry in Sri Lanka. There are limited existing studies on the rattan craft industry. This study is based on a combination of primary and secondary data from interviews, field studies and data from existing craft organisations, government and online data. This study focuses on the village of Wewelgoda located within the Urapola East Grama Niladhari Division of the Kamburupitiya Divisional Secretariat within the Matara District, where the rattan craft continues as a household industry and a family tradition passed down through generations. This study will identify the social and economic impacts experienced by rattan craftsmen, because they live in tension to retain a sense of craft traditions while also responding to modern production processes.

Research Problem

The rattan craft industry has faced the impact of modernisation to the same extent as many traditional industries such that it almost endangered the industry (Lerner, 1958); that is to say traditional craftwork has been gradually replaced by factory work

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that capitalises on cheaper and more considerable methods of production, making demand for hand-crafted rattan gradually evaporate (Basu, 2013). Along with declining demand, the craftspersons' inability to compete with both cheaper and ample supplies are further enhanced by shifts in market appreciation of traditional craft, and also the lack of support from local, institutional, and government stakeholders. Craftsmen have been left in economic and social distress when compared to industries like tourism or the garment industry because their life chance has remained limited or all but deactivated and it is only getting much more difficult to help traditional craft practitioners with developmental supports in human capital and community.

The framing of the research problem can be contextualised as, "In response to the socio-cultural and technological evolutions of industry-defined modernisation in production and marketplace challenges, why are traditional rattan craft practitioners unable to endure their craft, and challenge rising socio-economic issues?"

Research Objectives

The main objective of this research is to discover how contemporary production practices influence the viability and growth of traditional rattan craft industries and the impacts that enable practitioners to withdraw from the practice. In the case of this

study, contemporary production practices are linked to the decline of traditional rattan craft industries. They assess the technological, economic and policy dynamics which enable change and adaptation of practices, and they understand how the socio-economic living standards of rattan crafters are influenced by modernisation.

Significance and Relevance of the Study

Based on simple observation, it is clear that Wewelgoda Village, located in the Urapola East Grama Niladhari Division, under the Kamburupitiya Divisional Secretariat, is not experiencing upward social mobility, and stays within a low-income economic situation. This reinforces the practical importance of examining the community's social and economic characteristics, and the difficulties they face in sustaining traditional livelihoods, such as rattan craft. This research is important, as it details and provides examples of the impacts of modern systems of production (most notably the incorporation of synthetic materials, such as plastic, aluminum, iron, and fiber, etc.) on the demand for and use of traditional rattan products, as well as the social and economic marginalisation of communities that depended upon these products (Beck & Giddens, 2000).

The research is timely in today's context in researching if the rattan-based craft industry can be re-established, within a contemporary

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economy. There is a need for policy mechanisms and frameworks with regard to local industries when they are left behind in modernisation processes. A conceptual framework of the sociology related theory of development is used in the research. Modernisation theory is the founding sociological theory of development and had also assumed related social theories in some social change in societies and a modern human condition. There are conceptual frameworks that help explain, for example, if and why certain industries, for example garments, tourism and gold will transition and are emerging within a world of modernisation and yet the rattan-based craft industry has remained relatively stagnant. In relation to this research, it delivers both theoretical and practical contributions to the understanding of development and social prospects in traditional industries. While social research on development exists, and emerges from other industries, however, the rattan craft industry is underrepresented in the literature. Thus, this research fills a critical gap in literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rattan crafting industry in Sri Lanka is interwoven with identity, social class structures, and the historical evolution of the economy in Sri Lanka. The goal of this literature review is to discover the historical routes, tensions, and possible futures for crafts, including rattan weaving,

while applying national and international academics, theoretical lenses, and policy papers. As is true for many traditional sectors in Sri Lanka, including rattan weaving, crafts functioned as home economies, the materials were grown and processed at home for generations (Fernando, 2010). Delpagoda (2012) states that the rattan artist functioned under generational regimes of practice, engaging their skills in the home economy, but the craft remained largely unseen within the contemporary economy. The craft has developed within a context of social and political upheaval such as the invasions from South India, the haunting memories of the Baminithiya famine and the demise of craftsperson knowledge. Peiris (1964), Jayathilaka (1998) and Silva (2008) noted caste hierarchy as an important category to understand the social position of the rattan craft for those from the Hena (Kinnara) group, caste hierarchy placed Hena practices at the bottom of the Medieval feudal hierarchy. More recently, rattan craftspersons in Wewelgoda have been positioned within a caste hierarchy, which disempowers them and changes the social nature of their capital (Delpagoda 2012, Wenerathana 2012).

Jayawardena (2016) and Rathnayaka (2019) investigated identity processes and economic sustainability of craft communities as they began documenting the generational shift away from traditional skills, as crafts will be replaced by synthetic products.

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This is viewed as a symptom of transformative change in material culture and consumption. It remains to be seen whether future modifications will prefigure well for social systems, however the generational shift is indicative of change, which parallels the situation across Sri Lanka, where traditional crafts are more-similar to modernisations and do not preserve and enhance community culture, include modernisation because they did not have economic value in those periods (Hastrup, 2005, Coomaraswamy, 1913). Fernando (2020) and Wijesinghe (2016) in particular speculate that in Sri Lanka modernisation has expected and unexpected consequences however have both positive and negative outcomes e.g., modernisation can mean new and dissimilar markets and income for artisans that are able to leap into and keep up with changes, however it can comparably marginalised artisans that are unable to change or chose not to. This mix of positive and adaptive production as well as negative production was observed in Wewelgoda, especially related to knowledge transfer and the craft to younger people who are continuing into migration from Wewelgoda, and across to more stable work opportunities (Jayawardena & Silva, 2019). Movements of an alternative 'hybrid' form of practice and presenting forms of practice introduced by Chandrasiri (2021) and Dayaratne (2010) related to hybrid forms of practice that are traditional as well as

integrating modern tools and designs, create opportunities to enhance the authenticity of forms of practice while also enhancing the contemporary atmosphere. Hybridisation models for example, are also being applied in designs in the international context (Miller & Woodward, 2012; Hollen & Van Den Eynde, 2019) as an example of having sustainable innovation by satisfying artisan perspectives through the use of technology (while developing new techniques) and simultaneously retaining a cultural identify. Ratnayake (2018) reinforces this concept by emphasising the importance of utilising cooperatives to support artisan community networks, collective bargaining and collective resources. Educative practices to teach children rattan weaving include cultural protection and transmission. In addition, recognition from government officials, initiatives, international agreement and initiatives specific to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2003) also provide more protection. Oscar Lewis has been working on the Culture of Poverty theory to provide an explanation for social stasis across generations for people living in poverty who reside in craft communities with some level of economic and social marginality irrespective of their social standing, economic engagement, or social processes. This conceptual framework allows for a discussion of boundary conditions concerning how

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skilled rattan artisans may not be recognized in the same professional space (Evetts, 2003) as a result of structural inequities and cultural positioning in which they are working.

In discussing modernisation, tensions accompany socialisation within unsettling economies (Almond, 1987; Portes, 1980; Rhodes, 1964; Rostow, 1960) and inequity in options as modernization will frequently not recognize or care for traditional crafts in an economy evolving on fast-forward. Inkeles (1974) notes that the urban experience alters occupational values; many youth will have entered, in name only, the modern occupational use. Gamble and Gilmore (2013) asserted that industrialisation diminishes the authenticity of artisans. Craftspeople have to share their craft with mass-produced commodities. Lee (2018) and Kirkham (2017) have written studies of South and East Asia showing that craftsmanship is declining and communities of artisans have been dislocated. Anshory & Sanjatomiko (2023) offer ways for craft industries to dialogue with communities to innovate without compromising cultural integrity. Ghose & Ali (2023) also suggest cultural policy frameworks that operate at a global level, protecting the rights of indigenous craft communities. NamGoong et al. (2010) and Ionica (2022) suggest two policy ways for preserving traditional crafts while emphasising modernisation of traditional crafts to modern industrial and technology-based initiatives.

Traditional crafts of all kinds present opportunities for sustainability, individual and communal identity, and ultimately social connectivity. Ionica (2022) positions crafts as community-level responses to the management of local resources, and longevity of culture, while Blakova & Jenicek (2006) discuss sustainably managed forests, as an example, for raw material products such as rattan. There are merits for ethical consumerism and market niches that provide economic and cultural sustainability (Smith, 2016; Boonzaier & Van der Merwe, 2015).

In summary, Wewelgoda's economy of rattan crafts is at once in decline and revitalisation. Though modernisation threatens authenticity and the transfer of knowledge, new markets simultaneously create opportunities for new practices. Futures of sustainability will rest on hybrid processes of production, development that prioritises community, policies and strategies that connect to ethical markets etc. Despite a rise in literature on modernity and modernism in relation to traditional crafts and their demise, there are not sufficient studies on localised traditional craft communities like Wewelgoda traditional craft community. Most of this literature is framed as a critique of colonialism and modernity creating these dichotomous spaces between critique and romanticism. The literature does not theorise the dialectic processes communities make in concert with the hegemonic power structures

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of modern economies and cultural imperatives. There is a clear gap in ethnographically informed, sociologically oriented studies about marginal self-employed artisans in semi-peripheral fast-urbanising, post-colonial Sri Lanka. The study seeks to fill the gap in the literature with an approachable context, methodological mixed-method cultural sociology, and developmental oriented methodology. Despite Wewelgoda's rattan crafts being framed as economic activity, culturally the organisation of the crafts connects memory, identity, and aspiration to modernity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research on traditional rattan craft livelihoods has been developed as a mixed-methods research, which involved qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure sufficient data collection and analysis. This research has been conducted in the Urapola East Grama Niladhari Division, Kamburupitiya Divisional Secretariat, Matara District. The actual study location referred to in this study is Wewelgoda Village; a pseudonym used to mask the real name of the village. Wewelgoda occupies approximately 1.7 km² and has 70 families living in 67 houses, with an approximate population of 289 individuals. The sample participants contained 35 families through purposive sampling strategy; as the study noted families who participate in rattan craft-related activities. A non-

random sampling approach was utilised drawing on the Grama Niladhari's knowledge of demographic information of this small village as well as socio-economic structure of the village to elicit an appropriate sampling frame. There were some limitations for resources which made it difficult to sample more families; that participated in rattan craft while also trying to assess relevant information related to the rattan craft industry.

Both primary and secondary sources were used for data collection. Initially, 35 families were selected, however, data were obtained through a structured questionnaire from 25 of these families to gather in-depth information on income levels, quantities of production, access to markets, and availability of raw materials. In addition to the questionnaire, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 people who were traditional rattan artisans, small business owners, or were secular community leaders. The interviews focused on their lived experiences, challenges to continuing the craft, and changing ideas of modernity. We also used a participant observer methodology through home visits and at workshop locations to observe production and work processes, as well as their interactions with buyers and suppliers. Secondary data included summaries of reports, academic articles, and material available on the internet. These sources added to the appropriated supports to the primary

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data by supplying contextual background about village demographics, the historical evolution of the traditional industry, employment conditions, and the larger market context of an expanding Sri Lankan rattan industry.

Both qualitative and quantitative data were analysed in a methodical manner during the analytical phase of the research. Quantitative data collected through questionnaires, for example, were analysed using statistics and displayed using tables and graphs because we were interested in observing patterns in income, production volumes and changes to the demand in the marketplace. For qualitative data collected through interviews and observations, analysis was done via descriptive thematic analysis. This approach was employed to explore the complexities of craft practice, knowledge transfer across generations, limitations of economic sufficiency and implications of modernisation for the industry in general. This study also had a number of limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample comprises approximately 50% of the active rattan craft practitioners and practicing within the village, which means the findings may not be as broadly applicable to the village as a whole. The second limitation, related to the first, was the limitation of geographic scope to the Kamburupitiya area. This may also lend limitations potential applicability related to other

areas of Sri Lanka that may have rattan craft traditions. Finally, the study had limitations on access to a breadth of theoretical literature concerning rattan craft industries, and therefore the study drew on broader theoretical frameworks including modernization theory (as a framework for viewing contemporary development) and sociological perspectives on development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Kamburupitiya region includes Wewelgoda, which has a similar agricultural history of growing crops such as cinnamon, pepper, and coconut, and other related livelihoods related to craft work. Wewelgoda was designated a new model village in Hakurukanda in 1983 as a part of the Gam Udawa programme. Presently, the area occupies 1.7 km², populated by 730 residents and a home to 70 families, mainly engaged in the traditional craft of rattan. This craft was traditionally associated with the Hinna caste community, using rattan plants combined with *Inipetta* (*Cyathocalyx zeylanicum*) as a binding material, to make items such as baskets, containers, trays, boxes and items for decoration. The community, mostly living in economically marginalised rural areas such as Wewelgoda suffers from chronic poverty, which can be assessed through limited access to formal employment, poor quality housing, and fragile craft-based income



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(Department of Census and Statistics, 2021; Field observation, 2024).

Although the industry holds a high cultural and traditional importance. The industry has limitations and challenges in attracting craftspeople for various reasons such as, access to raw materials needed to craft the arts, due to regulation aimed at protecting forests, limiting crafters to use cheaper options like Alstonia, Cinnamon and Kenda. The marketing structure further complicates their situation, as craftspeople operate without a fixed income, depending on credit-based sales and irregular payment systems. There are also decreases in youth participation and the whole industry is declining slowly.

Table 1. Respondents Demographic Details of Wewelgoda Village

No. of Respondents	Age Range	Percentage (%)
8	1-10	7
12	10-20	11
10	20-30	9
15	30-40	13
16	40-50	14
13	50-60	12
38	More than 60	34

Source: Field Surveys, 2024

Table 1 depicts the age distribution of the 112 respondents drawn from 35 households in Wewelgoda Village, sampled from Urapola East Grama Niladhari Division in Kamburupitiya. It also indicates potential age disparities between the elder and younger generations. A concerning 34% of respondents were over the age

of 60, while 9% to 13% of the respondents were under 30 years of age. Only 7% were between the ages of one to ten years of age and respondents between ages 40 and 60, the prime earning age group, only represented 12% to 14% of the sample. Thus, the data suggest an overall relatively heavier burden of dependents to income earners.

Although children are not represented within the form, the industry is primarily filled with an older adult population, and thus is not drawing youth and not making substantial connections with the public sector in the community. This is indicative of a decline in the traditional craft of rattan. Older workers will not have a younger generation to pass down meaningful knowledge. Qualitative interviews corroborated this statement as half of the craftspeople spoke of disappointment in their own children or grandchildren not showing interest in learning or participating in the craft; although it was valuable to work with someone who knew what they were doing, many were discouraged by the economic returns, or nature of the work. They are is the barriers to sustainability of the craft, and the growth of craft, and barriers that are most evident. An older workforce presents challenges to knowledge transfer. Additionally, there are barriers to implementing new styles or techniques as it relates to changes in supply strategies to recognise emerging market forces. The workforce



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is continuing to age meanwhile youth participation is diminishing, which limits immediate economic sustainability of the craft.

Table 2. Respondents' Educational Qualifications

Level of Education	No. of Families	Percentage (%)
Degree Holders	6	5
GCE A/L Passed	16	14
GCE O/L Passed	26	24
Grade 08 Passed	51	46
Grade 01-07	8	7
Uneducated	5	4

Source: Field Surveys, 2024

Table 2 depicts the education level of individuals involved in the rattan craft industry within the selected sample. The table depicts this group of individuals as highly undereducated. In the selected sample, a plurality of 46% has an education level of grade 8, with 7% of the sample being even less educated. Acknowledging educational attainment, 4% of the population has no educational experience. A few individuals possess Ordinary Level, Advanced Level and/or even degrees as undergraduate degrees, which indicates individuals who have received some level of education have left the craft for other professions, and traditional rattan craft is slowly disappearing. On the other hand, the groups of individuals that value education the least, still claim traditional ownership of this industry from family lineage, hoping to pass the vocation down from one generation to the next. Younger individuals join

educational institutions as accountable members of society, whilst youth less educated and less likely to be skilled as the prior generation who learned a craft or engaged in a trade are less likely to pursue family, or competent familial ownership of the craft (to honour their predecessors). Younger groups, because of their educational supports, seek social mobility, if not pursue entirely different types of contemporary work altogether outside the traditional craft labour sectors for success with advancement to engage with modern sectors of the economy. One of the participants captured it directly "my son finished A/L's and decided to get a factory job in Colombo said there is no future here with rattan".

This shift also reflects how economic modernisation influences traditional arts regarding the human resources' users since there are dominant modes of human resources that will create more probable, safer income, stability, and upward margin. The consequence here is that the trade is largely limited to people at lower levels of education who are only practising the trade as a family legacy of their cultural heritage and ancestry and almost create elements of nearly prohibitive element to revitalisation. The culture of moving on or advancing the expectation for engaging in better-educated and better-designed traditional crafts, usurp primary or base leadership, or revitalisation levels, for many of the future, while at the same time create barriers to engaging with the ongoing



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layering of education and creative development or reinvention. Grounding our artisans and crafts people will, hopefully, at the very least provide speed market share opportunity for the industry while they are in response, and potentially exemplary leadership position in relation to modern educational curriculum for success in business.

Table 3. Monthly Income Level of the Respondents

No. of Families	Monthly Income (LKR)
15	21,000.00
9	18,000.00
7	12,000.00
4	6,000.00
35	57,000.00

Source: Field Surveys, 2024

Table 3 shows the differences in monthly income for selected community individuals. In addition, it is clear that the majority of households surveyed fall within low-income groups; wages surveyed also included a total of 15 of the 35 households earning Rs. 18,000.00, 9 households earning Rs. 21,000.00, 7 households earning Rs. 12,000.00, and 4 households reporting wages of Rs. 6,000.00. Therefore, all surveyed households reported income of Rs. 21,000.00 and below per month - denoting extreme vulnerability due to insecurity of income. The disparities of income reported captures the impact of modernity to the craft of rattan and the beginning stages of economic marginalisation in rural spaces. Overall, rattan artisans or quoted as "labour production" by consumers, are

unable to be competitive given modernity's introduction of synthetics and mass produced items in the household, therefore undermining the demand for the craft profession of rattan. In turn, the stagnation of income sustainability indicates rural poverty, and structural inequalities of modernity, to forms of traditional livelihoods.

Studies show that this community has a serious purchasing power issue, indicating very low economic power. The income generated from a traditional rattan craft is clearly not sufficient to meet basic everyday needs and many craftspeople are actively seeking work in other sectors. The situation displays the number of reasons for this low-income condition, including diminished sap and materials to (make) product, costs of materials (when available) are very expensive and there is no steady market for trade year-round. In addition, many have their direct trade and marketing interrupted by middlemen preventing craftspeople from obtaining a price for their handiwork that is reasonable, and contributing to their economic position. The low income of this community also contributes to the declining rattan craft sector, all of which reflects the living conditions of traditional craftspeople.

In some households, there may be up to three children in school, raising the overall costs of their household due to expenses arising from education: tuition related to schooling, uniforms, transportation, and



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the costs associated with digital education. The model of modern production and its shift to synthetic materials and machine-made goods has reduced the income-generating possibilities of the traditional craft of rattan with which some families are associated as a source of income. The craft-based families are now in a more difficult position to contend with meeting their children's educational needs, a circumstance that can only reinforce cycles of intergenerational poverty and low mobility.

This can be framed in terms of economic modernization theory, as traditional production-based sectors struggle with market-oriented, more efficient sectors of the modern economy. As families abandon crafts altogether, they are less likely to begin practicing again in the next generation. Those who are unable to secure fair wages and cost-adequate markets for their crafts simultaneously struggle to keep pace with costs; resulting in a disassociation from their craft change suggests a larger shift away from the economic support for traditional livelihoods.

Table 4. Monthly Expenditure Level of the Respondents

No. of Families	Monthly Expenditures (LKR)
15	25,000.00
9	20,000.00
7	15,000.00
4	1,000.00

Source: Field Surveys, 2024

Apart from their low per-capita income, families incur substantial

monthly expenses for basic needs such as food, health care, clothing, water, electricity, and social obligations. In addition, there are considerable expenses for sourcing raw materials for craft and transporting them. These families additionally belong to a marginalised community with heavy reliance upon the welfare system, which could be Janasaviya, Samurdhi, or Aswesuma, for example. As the needs of society increase in complexity, the costs associated with those needs increase dramatically, while for many craft food industries, income does not sustain those needs. Significantly, for many of these families, a general need is to have another job in addition to their craft, which demonstrates either the decline of the industry or extreme poverty of the community.

Poverty is complex, and the Oscar Lewis's "culture of poverty" perspective is still relevant here. Specifically, poverty is not only economically based deprivation but also involves extensive attitudes, values, and behaviours that are handed down through generations. For instance, Wewelgoda exhibits an ongoing low income, ongoing dependence on welfare, and warrants addressing alternative livelihoods reflecting a cyclical nature of poverty. Economic vulnerability restricts investment to modernise the craft or seek educational opportunities that may interrupt this cycle. While economic modernisation in general offers opportunities elsewhere, the



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traditional rattan craft industry have few opportunities for adaptation or generating sufficient income.

Interviews highlight these difficulties. As one artisan expressed, "Sometimes we can't sell anything for weeks. Then how can we feed our families?" Economic necessity forces many into non-rattan work, as shown in Table 4.5, where 69% of families engage in farming, masonry, and carpentry, while 31% depend solely on rattan crafts for income. Although income diversification is necessary for survival, it directs time and effort into those work arenas and adds momentum to the decline of rattan crafts. Demands of contemporary society associated with modernisation counterbalance low-income craft occupations in traditional capacities, exacerbating economic marginalisation that is consistent with theory related to poverty. The inability to financially flourish considering modern-day economic realities pulls artisans away from traditional craft-based work.

Table 5. The proportion engaged in alternative occupations excluding the Rattan Craft industry

Alternative Occupation	No. of Families	Percentage (%)
Mason Works	6	17
Carpentry	4	11
Sweets	2	5
Manufacturing		
Farming	8	22
Cinnamon	5	14
Cultivation		

Source: Field Surveys, 2024

Table 5 provides information about alternative employment for families in this village who have not been employed in the traditional rattan craft industry at certain times. From the sample collected, it is seen the all families-100% are employed at various levels in the rattan craft industry. However, there are 25 families (69%) involved in additional employment and only 10 families (31%) involved exclusively in the rattan craft industry. Since the income generated from crafted items is not enough to support their households, the majority of the families in this community have sought other opportunities for employment - casual wage labor, household labour, petty trading and similar means. The reason for this shift is primarily based on modern production systems and the availability of very cheap rattan-like synthetic commodities. These industrial methods of production are particularly prevalent in local and urban markets where there is a significant lack of demand for handcrafted, individualised, family produced items, thus meaning it is economically impossible to remain within the rattan craft work.

As society evolves towards greater complexity, so too does its way of living. When one compares the traditional rattan craft sector with other sectors, one can see that it is not growing. It is in fact declining even further.



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Table 6. Technology Used by the Villagers

Used Technology	No. of Families	Percentage (%)
Traditional Technology	34	97.14
Modern Technology	1	2.86
Total	35	100

Source: Field Surveys, 2024

In the selected group, 100% use standard technology in the actual production of goods. With government assistance, two carpentry machines will be supplied to process wood types that are minimally used for handles on rattan products. Therefore, there are no other types of technological equipment available to the community to continue to improve efficiency in product development. Though the Arts Council does offer (or has offered) some training workshops on product development (Department of Cultural Affairs, 2022; Field Interview with Craft Cooperative Leader, 2024), there is no evidence that they plan to offer or provide tools or machinery that are modern or practically useful.

Moreover, several customary industries located in Sri Lanka, such as the handloom textile industry, the batik industry, the ceramics and clayware, have subsequently modified into income-generating industries, earning foreign exchanges as a result of developing new machinery, advancing designs and our reliance of new world markets and exports. For example, the Batik industry has embraced a dyeing machine that relies on an automated production process, computerised

designing, and reached international fashion markets (Export Development Board, 2022). However, the rattan craft industry lags behind in both technological assistance and market entry.

Table 7. Alternatives for Rattan Products

Rattan Products	Price per Unit (LKR)	Synthetic (Plastic) Alternatives	Price per Unit (LKR)
Rattan basket	600	Plastic basket	450
Rattan winnowing tray	300	Plastic winnowing tray	150
Rattan flower basket	75	Plastic flower basket	15
Rattan offering tray	175	Plastic offering tray	100
Rattan hopper tray	40	Plastic hopper tray	15

Source: Field Surveys, 2024

Table 7 outlines the traditional rattan goods and their respective price comparisons with competing market substitutes. The table shows that the price of competing market substitutes is cheaper than rattan products. The substitutes are manufactured using modern technologies and machinery, displaying them in nice colors and styles. The demand for rattan products has declined then. Consumers are not taking into account the health benefits and sustainability of buying them and only focus on aesthetics and usability. Easy access to substitute products that are low priced in competing markets is causing rattan artisans to decline into a downward economic cycle.



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Table 8. Labor Contribution Methods

Labor Contribution Method	Number of Families	Percentage (%)
Family Labor	30	87
Hired Wage Labor	1	2
Exchange Labor (According to Attam System)	4	11

Source: Field Surveys, 2024

Table 8 details how producers access labour for rattan product making and demonstrates that 87% of producers draw labour from immediate family units, and 31% from "other" sources, such as helping neighbours. The practice of hiring workers for a daily wage is economically nonviable due to the limited purchasing power in the community. Traditionally, this mutual support took place under an informal labour exchange system known as "Attam", where neighbouring households take it in turns to help one another with the handicraft making process, especially in the context of bamboo and rattan product making. This labour exchange customary system not only reduces labour costs for producers but also helps to bolster social cohesion within the village. However, with the on-going modernisation of production processes and many mass-produced alternative products to handcrafted bamboo and rattan, the demand and profitability of the handmade bamboo and rattan products have diminished. The market is saturated with mass-produced products, providing little economic

attraction for remaining in traditional practices that require hands-on labour, such as the *Attam* system. While these community-based labor exchanges remain an important source of ongoing support, they are increasingly unable to sustain the industry in a manner that allows it to flourish and are contributing to a slow decline. The use of communal labour is a signal of commercial precarity in the industry as well. In addition to signifying resilience, community labour restricts the ability for this industry to upscale the operation and innovate within the existing mode of production (if there was innovation or scalability happening in the first place). Put simply, despite the organic closeness of communities, the craft rattan industry is in decline along with communities that have diminishing capacity and little structural support.

Table 9. Monthly Income Variation and Earning Pattern

Month	Income (LKR)
January	20,000.00
February	10,000.00
March	8,000.00
April	5,000.00
May	30,000.00
June	8,000.00
July	10,000.00
August	9,000.00
September	8,000.00
October	10,000.00
November	15,000.00
December	25,000.00

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 9 illustrates the yearly sales trends and purchasing cycles of a single maker in the traditional rattan craft

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industry. The sales are certainly highest in April when the Sinhala New Year is celebrated because many households will likely replace their kitchen utensils, contributing to the demand for rattan products. However, it is also clear that between the late week of April and the late week of May is the most minimal period of the year in terms of sale and purchasing capacity, thus reflecting times of extreme livelihood need for the artisan. While sales in other months fluctuate erratically from day to day and week to week, no stable sales pattern emerges, indicating high inconsistencies. Overall market instability highlights an already fragile rattan craft sector. Daily instability is further aggravated by production volatility due to the rise of cheap, factory-made plastic and synthetic household items. Consumers' access to inexpensive alternatives has reduced the need for traditional rattan items throughout the year, compromising artisans' ability to generate stable income. Moreover, as modern shopping chains and urban consumers have become integral to the purchasing power that rural craftspeople rely upon, this has further been a significant contributor to marginalising purchasing power away from local goods that utilise industry-based labour. Structural changes in curated or specialised markets for novel or boutique crafts put the industry at risk of steady decline while concurrently impacting the economic precarity of the Wewelgoda Village rattan community.

The observed continuity of relative seasonality indicates a serious lack of income stability, especially in the rattan industry. Interviews with artisans pointed to struggles of artisans and their businesses, and one artisan articulated their plight; "New Year is good but for months we struggle to be able to survive with food, we have to borrow." Artisans' income conditions are identified as seasonal, as they also reveal consistency over the course of each year, but significant structural problems in the marketplace, of which artisans do not necessarily possess agency, hinder vendors from generating patterns of stable income generation through trade. Consequently, rattan handicraft becomes increasingly vulnerable and dependent upon a modern economy which also depends on the relationships to stable income generating and a stable supply of predictable external markets. Moreover, the uncertainty of annual markets, exacerbated within an industry which is already declining in terms of rattan markets, becomes clearly detrimental to youth and adult labourers in the industry, because the observation was made that youth, who may one day be traveling artisans who are working toward a profession of rattan craftsmanship, are now in search of stable income and thanks to modernisation observed in occupational practices, are trying earn a sustainable income each season.



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Table 10. Community Opinions on Minimizing Challenges

Community Opinion	Number of Families	Percentage
Relaxing government-imposed regulations on raw material procurement or introducing suitable mechanisms for accessing rattan and bamboo resources.	25	65%
Providing rattan resources at subsidized prices.	7	20%
Introducing modern technological methods and machinery with full government intervention to develop the industry.	2	6%
Assisting with market access.	2	6%
Providing concessional loan facilities for business expansion.	1	3%

Source: Field Surveys, 2024

This study aims to find out the barriers of Rattan Craft Industry Development and the strategy to overcome socio-economic barriers of the craft makers. The data gathered from 35 family respondents show the 5 areas observed, as shown in table 10, in which five issues are exemplified and fulfilling by the majority of indicators of 65% of respondents, which is the insufficiency of *Inipetta* wood. Broadly expressed by the respondents, especially more often in the focus groups, since rattan production is primarily rooted in forest products; therefore, it would be best if the government could lend a hand or support in order to make accessibility easy. Apart from improving the livelihoods of the makers currently in the direct supply from rattan products, it also makes a readmission opportunity for makers who escaped the rattan craft production process. As well, though one might say that it would be reasonable to introduce *Inipetta* wood at a lower price, there are also merely 20% of the respondents who would like to see a tariff or subsidies implemented to make it available at a lower price, which also

adds to the significance of the raw materials used in the process. Smaller percentages—2% and 1%—called for the provision of modern equipment, improved market access, and access to low-interest loans. Collectively, these suggestions point to the need for comprehensive government intervention to revitalize the industry and potentially transform it into a foreign exchange-earning sector.

The locals are not physically well due to the lack of proper hygiene as well as inadequate access to decent food. This reflects a downward trend in their economic status. Although there were short-term projects like Gam Udawa that assisted in aspects like roads, failure to continually assist houses and utilities eventually resulted in changes not lasting long. The plantations were prioritised over the residents, and illnesses were frequent and neglected when urbanisation progressed. For individuals in those troubled rural regions, improvement is not an opportunity to live better or at least receive some basic assistance, but it makes their lives more difficult.



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Table 11. Housing Conditions in Wewelgoda Village Based on Respondents' Data

Housing Condition	Number of Families
Permanent Houses (Old)	15
Semi-Permanent Houses	10
Houses with Minimum Facilities	8
Temporary Shelters	2

Source: Field Surveys, 2024

The table 11 shows the housing conditions of the rattan craft community in the Wewelgoda Village. Majority of residents reside in dilapidated permanent houses that are distributed under Gam Udawa project that began in 1983 by former President R. Premadasa. These houses are more than 40 years old and have not been modernised or well maintained. Various ones exhibit obvious structural damages, including corroding roofs, and some approximately 15 indicate partial rebuilding. There are other eight houses that do not have basic facilities and two of them are termed as shanties. Such poor living conditions have also led to poor standards of health in society which has been aggravated by low nutrition, sanitation, and inadequate infrastructure. This is a clear indication of the socio-economic downward trend that the community is still going through and the vulnerable living standards of the people in the traditional rattan craft industry.

Besides the questionnaire data, interviews with community members highlighted the pressing need to ensure the government intervention to

improve accessibility to raw materials especially *Inipetta*, which was identified as the lifeline of the industry. Although 65% of the sample thought that the industry had declined due to the lack of *Inipetta* and 20% expressed that it should be provided at subsidised rates, the issues raise a central dilemma concerning the environmental protection policies and the livelihood of the traditional artisans. Craftspeople feel that the living standards of the people would be increased by better availability of raw materials and those who had abandoned the trade would also come back to the trade. Though the need for modern machinery (2% and 1%) and market entry, and concessional loans were only mentioned by a minor percentage (2% and 1), these points are also crucial at the sense of long-term development. The general results indicate that the policy should be thoroughly intervened by regulatory reforms, subsidies on raw materials, technological assistance, and financial assistance to rejuvenate the sector and possibly adopt it to the outer exchange economy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The rattan products made in Wewelgoda Village have at least two barriers. The first is that it is always hard to secure the raw material; *Inipetta*. In addition, it has been found out by research that there are other options available to restore this craft. At this stage, no important development

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can be predictable, as growth remains particularly slow and is unlikely to yield actual results. It has an obstacle of having faith in the necessity of having a better, improved tool and a better system. The industry becomes outdated and it is hard to retain the employment resources, and the industry cost of operations is not being met. The inactivity causes the production to be slowed down, increases the cost of production and the excessive substitutes are almost cheaper in costs. Naturally, the new trends of employment are not beginning to obvious high success levels, and this is a well-established sign that the industry has grown to some biological source of decentralisation.

Individuals who have been working in their jobs over the years continue doing so in the same way. However, individuals who have recently completed the training, and are technologically inclined usually decide on a different profession. The sale of rattan products has gone down the drain because the market is flooded with cheaper plastics, an issue that traditional craft is experiencing globally. The government is of small assistance since there are no loans and programmes to assist artisans. Thus, they are truly suffering. Low income and lack of funds are causing families to have problems with affordability of healthcare. Children are dropping out of school and falling into debt. People are trapped in poverty as Ragnar

Nurkse explained. With low income, individuals are unable to save and invest in the future. As a result, things stay basic. Oscar Lewis observed that these promote the customs and beliefs passed on by one generation to the next that are in an irreversible state of adversity. Such a state of poverty is not easy to get out of without external help. The communities do not lack economic opportunities, and it is a deprivation of the opportunities because of lack of resources.

The study proposes a number of steps that can be taken to reverse these issues and advance the industry. Thereby breaking this vicious circle and leading to sustainable development in line with Modernization Theory. Based on the results of the current study, it is possible to state that the traditional rattan craft industry can be sustainable and prosperous provided that some problems such as raw materials, economy, infrastructure, institutions, etc. are resolved. The government ought to establish a regulation regime of provision of *Inipetta* plants on a licensed and subsidised basis as a measure of ensuring a consistent supply of raw materials at a lower price that is vital in the modernisation of the industry. Establishment of rattan cultivation programmes in government land will provide people with sustainable sources of *Inipetta*, and reduce the pressure on the shrinking wild sources. With the application of updated technology and equipment in the rattan craft, the production process



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can be made more efficient, the number of labourers reduced, and the quality of the item enhanced.

The presence of supportive loans and protection for the local businesses must also create stability where the artisans are encouraged to invest back in their operations without fear. People can expand the opportunities of sales, increasing interest and growth, through events, an online store, and partnerships with international organisations. The other option is to restrict or impose a tariff on cheaper imported plastics which would provide local manufacturers with space in the market. Pensions not only provide an insurance policy but also preserve traditional skills within families. Movements highlighting rattan work, its importance in the cultural and financial sense stimulate demand in the communities. Collaboration among forestry departments, wildlife authorities, timber services, small businesses, local communities, and those directly involved with rattan will generate and develop a concerted strategy to address the issues affecting rattan industry. This could present Sri Lankan rattan work worldwide and could earn money but at the same time it could provide a way out of poverty and preserve their culture in the eyes of the art makers.

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