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Socio-economic profile and production behaviour of club-rush (Kouna) Artisans in Thoubal district of Manipur

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Abstract

This study investigates the socio-economic profile and production behaviour of club-rush (Kouna) artisans in Thoubal district, Manipur, a traditional hub of Kouna craft. The research was conducted from July to November 2024 using a descriptive, ex-post facto design, with 130 artisans selected through proportionate-cum-random sampling from three registered cooperative societies. Artisans, predominantly rural producers, engage in both Kouna cultivation and craft production, relying on skills transmitted across generations. The study analyses key socio-economic variables (age, gender, education, family size, occupation, income, social participation, training exposure and contact with extension agencies) alongside production-related factors (sources of raw material, production frequency, product range, years of involvement, advertisement methods and sales patterns). Results indicate that most artisans are women of economically active age, from large families, with at least high school education and medium income derived from Kouna activities. Production is intensive and daily, largely based on own-farm raw material and focused on bags and baskets with additional value-added items. Marketing integrates traditional word-of-mouth with modern channels such as social media, customized orders and exhibitions. The findings suggest a relatively favourable socio-economic base and dynamic production behaviour, while underscoring the need for enhanced institutional support, market facilitation and enterprise-development interventions.

Keywords: Club rush (Kouna), socio-economic profile, production behavior, rural entrepreneurship, Manipur handicrafts

Introduction

The handicraft sector in India is a key pillar of the rural economy, contributing substantially to employment generation, cultural preservation and sustainable livelihoods, especially among tribal and marginalized communities. It is widely recognized as an instrument for poverty alleviation and a generator of income and jobs (Abisuga-Oyekunle & Fillis, 2017) ^[1]. According to the Handicraft Sector Export Report 2025 by the Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Government of India, India's handicraft exports grew from about ₹ 135.4 billion in 2023 to over ₹ 149.25 billion in 2024, with a further marginal increase to ₹ 149.43 billion in 2025. Within this landscape, Northeast India occupies a distinctive position because of its rich portfolio of eco-friendly, skill-intensive crafts. Manipur, in particular, is renowned for handlooms and indigenous handicrafts based on bamboo, cane and Kouna (club-rush).

Kouna (*Schoenoplectus lacustris* (Linn.) Palla), a perennial aquatic plant of the Cyperaceae family, grows abundantly in the wetlands and clayey soils of Manipur, often in areas unsuitable for paddy. It stabilizes wetland ecosystems and simultaneously serves as the primary raw material for a vibrant cottage industry. Khangabok village in Thoubal district has emerged as the nucleus of Kouna craft, with a

dense concentration of skilled artisans and cooperative societies (Takhellambam *et al.*, 2024) ^[16] engaged in weaving Kouna into eco-friendly, aesthetically appealing products such as mats, cushions, stools, bags and furniture, thereby creating significant opportunities for self-employment and micro-enterprise development (Monsang and Meeyo, 2023) ^[11]. For generations, indigenous communities have cultivated and woven Kouna, integrating traditional ecological knowledge with livelihood practices (Devi, 2013; Rohandinda, 2020; Source For Future, 2022) ^[4, 12, 15]. As global demand for sustainable, handmade products grows, Kouna craft offers a promising avenue for green, rural entrepreneurship in Manipur (Monsang & Meeyo, 2023) ^[11].

Despite the high artistic value and livelihood potential of Indian handicrafts, the largely unorganized nature of the sector exposes artisans to multiple constraints, including low education levels, limited capital, inadequate technology, poor market information and dependence on intermediaries for raw materials, finance and marketing (Datta and Bhattacharyya, 2016; Devi, 2017; Tripathi *et al.*, 2024) ^[3, 5, 17]. Kouna artisans experience similar challenges: restricted access to formal credit, irregular raw material supply, weak institutional backing, insufficient branding, limited market

exposure and very modest access to structured entrepreneurship training (Takhellambam *et al.*, 2024; Sharma, 2025; Singh, 2025) ^[16, 13, 14]. Many continue to operate at subsistence levels, with growth constrained by low innovation, fragile market linkages and inadequate support systems. At the same time, rural areas possess distinct structural and economic features—such as close-knit communities, resource proximity and niche cultural capital—that can favour the emergence of locally rooted entrepreneurial ventures (Barber *et al.*, 2021; Galvao *et al.*, 2020) ^[2, 6].

Entrepreneurship is increasingly viewed as a transformative mechanism for economic development, innovation and social inclusion, particularly in resource-constrained settings (Hessels, 2019) ^[9]. It enables individuals to create and capture value by mobilizing limited resources in novel ways. Within this framework, entrepreneurial behaviour—encompassing traits, attitudes and actions such as opportunity recognition, risk orientation, innovation, leadership, networking and proactive market engagement—is particularly relevant for small-scale artisans and rural producers. In the context of Kouna craft, entrepreneurial behaviour manifests in artisans' ability to identify niche markets, upgrade traditional designs, diversify products, build client relationships and navigate volatile demand and input conditions.

However, there is still a noticeable gap in empirical research on the socio-economic characteristics and entrepreneurial behaviour of Kouna artisans. Existing studies have largely concentrated on production systems, marketing constraints or the functioning of cooperatives, without sufficiently exploring how artisans' backgrounds, motivations, capacities and behaviour shape enterprise outcomes (Hasanah *et al.* 2023) ^[18]. Understanding this human dimension is crucial for designing interventions that foster sustainability, self-reliance and inclusive growth in artisan communities (Guha *et al.*, 2022) ^[7].

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to: (i) characterize the socio-economic profile of Kouna artisans in Thoubal district (in terms of age, education, income, family size, social background, social participation, etc.); and (ii) examine their entrepreneurial and production dynamics, including risk orientation, innovation, leadership, training exposure, marketing practices and other aspects of production behaviour such as raw-material sourcing, product diversification and sales strategies. It further seeks to analyze how these factors are associated with entrepreneurial performance and decision-making. The insights generated are expected to inform evidence-based interventions, support services and policy frameworks for artisan development, with particular emphasis on women-led and eco-based rural enterprises centered on Kouna craft in Manipur.

Materials and Methods

The present study was conducted from July to November 2024 in Khangabok village of Thoubal district, Manipur, India. Khangabok was purposively selected owing to its cultural significance as the birthplace of the Kouna (*Cyperus pangorei*) craft tradition and the high concentration of households engaged in Kouna-based artisanal activities. A descriptive research design with an

ex-post facto approach was employed to examine the socio-economic and psychological determinants of entrepreneurial behaviour among Kouna artisans. A multi-stage purposive sampling procedure was followed. In the first stage, three active artisan societies registered under the State Co-operative Department of Manipur were purposively selected; together, these societies had 254 registered artisans. In the second stage, a 50% sample ($n = 130$) was drawn using a proportionate-cum-random sampling technique, ensuring that the number of respondents from each society was proportional to its membership, and artisans were selected from different localities within Khangabok to capture intra-village variability.

Fourteen socio-economic and psychological variables were identified as independent variables based on literature review and expert consultation. The socio-economic variables were age, gender, educational level, family size, occupation, annual income, training exposure, social participation and contact with extension agencies, while the psychological variables comprised management orientation, achievement motivation, leadership ability, creativity and economic motivation. Production behaviour was assessed through six additional variables: sources of raw material, frequency of production, types of items produced, years of involvement in Kouna crafting, product advertisement and pattern of product sale. Standardized and previously validated scales were used wherever available, and the interview schedule was pre-tested to check clarity and reliability before final data collection.

Results and Discussion

Socio-economic profile of Kouna artisans

Age and gender

The majority of the respondents (62.30%) belonged to the 24-45 year age group, followed by 20.76% in the 16-23 year group and 16.92% in the 46-65 year group. This indicates that Kouna crafting in Khangabok is primarily carried out by individuals in their economically productive years, for whom the craft serves as an important livelihood source. A very small share of older artisans reflects gradual generational transition in the craft.

Regarding gender, three-fourths of the respondents (76.15%) were women, while 23.84% were men. This confirms the commonly observed pattern in Manipur and other regions where weaving and handicrafts are strongly feminized occupations and indicates that Kouna craft plays a crucial role in women's economic participation and empowerment. Women's dominance in the craft may also be linked to the home-based nature of production and the compatibility of craft work with household responsibilities.

Education and family size

In terms of education, 46.15% of respondents had completed high school, 20.00% had studied up to middle school, 15.38% up to higher secondary/pre-university level, 10.76% up to primary level and 3.07% had graduate or diploma qualifications, while only 4.61% were illiterate. This suggests a generally literate artisan population with sufficient educational grounding to interpret written instructions, maintain basic records and engage with market information, although higher technical or managerial

education remains limited.

Family size data show that 53.84% of the respondents belonged to large families (more than five members), while 46.15% had small families (up to five members). Larger families increase the economic pressure to secure regular income but also provide family labour that can be mobilized for Kouna cultivation and craft production, including tasks such as harvesting, drying, splitting, weaving and finishing. Cultural norms, the need for social support and limited access to family-planning services may also contribute to larger family sizes.

Social participation and occupation

All respondents (100%) reported membership in at least one organization, mainly their Kouna co-operative or society, and 5.38% of them held office-bearer positions. Universal membership indicates strong social participation and a collective institutional base for coordinating raw-material procurement, production, training and marketing. The relatively small number of office-bearers is expected, but their presence suggests potential leadership that can be further strengthened through capacity-building.

Occupationally, 51.15% of respondents were Kouna farmers plus Kouna artisans, 24.61% combined paddy farming with Kouna crafting, 19.23% were seasonal vegetable farmers plus Kouna artisans and 4.61% combined wage work with Kouna crafting. This pattern underlines the integrated nature of Kouna cultivation and craft, with many households engaged both in growing the raw material and in producing finished items. The combination with paddy and vegetables indicates diversified livelihood strategies aimed at reducing risk and ensuring year-round income.

Annual income, training exposure and extension contact

Most respondents (80.76%) had annual income in the medium category (₹ 1,80,230-₹ 2,33,587), 11.53% belonged to the lowest income category ($\leq$ ₹ 1,80,229) and 7.69% were in the highest category (₹ 2,33,588-₹ 3,24,000). These figures suggest that Kouna-based activities, coupled with farming, provide a moderate but stable income, with scope for further enhancement through improved product value and market reach.

With respect to training exposure in the last three years, 40.00% of respondents had attended training for three days and above, 23.07% for two days, 16.92% for one day, while 20.00% had not attended any training. The relatively high proportion with longer-duration training indicates strong institutional engagement, possibly through the State Co-operative Department, KVKs and other agencies. This training base can be leveraged for advanced entrepreneurship and design-development programmes [8].

Contact with extension agencies was reported as sometimes by 40.76% of respondents and frequently by 33.84%, while 21.53% had rare contact and 3.84% had no contact. This shows that extension systems are fairly accessible, though the intensity of interaction varies. Strengthening regular and demand-driven extension engagement, including market and enterprise-oriented services, could help artisans to address constraints and exploit emerging opportunities.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to the socio-economic and psychological characteristics

Sl. No.	Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1.	Age (in years)		
	a) 16-23	27	20.76
	b) 24-45	81	62.3
	c) 46-65	22	16.92
2.	Gender		
	a) Male	31	23.84
	b) Female	99	76.15
3.	Educational level		
	a) Illiterate	6	4.61
	b) Can read-only	0	0.00
	c) Primary school level	14	10.76
	d) Middle school level	26	20.00
	e) High school level	60	46.15
	f) Higher Secondary/P.U. level	20	15.38
	g) Graduate/ diploma level	4	3.07
4.	Family size		
	a) Small family (Up to 5 members)	60	46.15
	b) Large family (Above 5 members)	70	53.84
5.	Social participation*		
	a) No membership	0	0.00
	b) Member of one organization	130	100
	c) Member of more than one organization	0	0.00
	d) Officer bearer	7	5.38
6.	Occupation		
	a) Paddy farmers+ kouna crafting	32	24.61
	b) Kouna farmers + kouna crafting	67	51.15
	c) Seasonal vegetable farmers+ kouna crafting	25	19.23
	d) Wage workers + kouna crafting	6	4.61
7.	Annual income (₹)		
	a) $\leq$ 1,80,229	15	11.53
	b) 1,80,230- 2,33,587	105	80.76
	c) 2,33,588-3,24,000	10	7.69
8.	Training exposure		
	a) No training	26	20.00
	b) One day	22	16.92
	c) Two days	30	23.07
	d) Three days and above	52	40.00
9.	Contact with extension agencies		
	a) Frequently	44	33.84
	b) Sometimes	53	40.76
	c) Rarely	28	21.53
	d) Never	5	3.84
10.	Management orientation		
	a) $\leq$ 5.8	26	20.00
	b) 5.9-10.8	70	53.84
	c) $>$ 10.8	34	26.15
11.	Achievement motivation		
	a) $\leq$ 21.73	26	20.00
	b) 21.74-28.32	90	69.23
	c) $>$ 28.32	14	10.76
12.	Leadership ability		
	a) $\leq$ 3.9	21	16.15
	b) 4-8	90	69.23
	c) $>$ 8	19	14.61
13.	Creativity		
	a) $\leq$ 15	23	17.69
	b) 16-26.8	80	61.53
	c) $>$ 26.8	27	20.76
14.	Economic motivation		
	$\leq$ 5.3	28	21.53
	5.4-9.7	74	56.92
	$>$ 9.7	28	21.53

*Multiple response

Production behaviour of Kouna artisans

Raw-material sourcing and frequency of production

More than half of the respondents (51.53%) sourced Kouna raw material from their own farms, while 21.53% each obtained it from relatives and local markets, and 5.38% accessed government-subsidized material. Own-farm sourcing allows artisans to ensure reliable supply, control quality, lower costs and maintain ecological sustainability through appropriate cultivation practices. Access to raw material from relatives and markets indicates social and commercial networks that supplement own production, while subsidized inputs, though limited, point to some level of policy support.

All respondents reported daily production of Kouna items, with none indicating weekly or monthly production. This emphasizes the intensive, labour-absorbing nature of the craft and the regular flow of orders and income needs. Daily production may also be driven by the requirement to meet customer demand, maintain workforce utilization and ensure consistent product supply in physical and online markets.

Product mix and years of involvement

Regarding the product mix, 100% of respondents produced baskets and 100% produced bags, while 34.61% made mats, 5.38% made sofas and stools and 11.5% made other accessories (multiple responses). The universal production of baskets and bags suggests that these are the most popular, market-oriented and possibly the most profitable items. Mats and furniture elements, though produced by fewer artisans, likely represent higher-value or more specialized products requiring greater skill and time. Other accessories may include smaller decorative or utility items that support diversification and appeal to specific customer segments. In terms of experience, 31.53% of respondents had been involved in Kouna crafting for 7-9 years, 30.76% for 10 years and above, 30.00% for 3-6 years and 7.69% for 2-3 years. This distribution reflects a mature craft base with substantial cumulative experience. The presence of many artisans with more than seven years in the craft suggests strong continuity and intergenerational transfer of skills, often facilitated by family-based learning where children observe and gradually participate in various stages of production.

Product advertisement and marketing channels

Multiple responses were recorded for product advertising. All respondents used verbal publicity, distribution of samples in shops and supermarkets (including well-known markets such as the Ima market of Manipur) and social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. Additionally, 38.40% participated in exhibitions and trade fairs, 19.20% used local media channels and 11.50% used print media.

The universal use of social media and sample-based promotion indicates that artisans actively combine traditional word-of-mouth methods with modern digital and display-oriented strategies. Social media enables them to reach customers beyond local markets, showcase designs, receive feedback and secure customized orders. Participation in exhibitions and trade fairs allows direct interaction with buyers, exposure to trends and potential linkages with institutional purchasers, although not all

artisans may have the resources to participate regularly.

As regards pattern of product sale, all respondents sold products through social media and live sessions, accepted orders from stores in town and took customized orders from individual customers. In addition, 38.40% reported exhibition sales, 27.60% sold directly to customers from their own stores or workshops and 7.70% exported products outside the state (multiple responses). This combination of channels demonstrates a flexible and diversified marketing strategy. Social-media-based selling and customized orders reduce dependence on intermediaries and enable better price realization, while sales through town stores and exhibitions provide volume and visibility. Exports, although limited in scale, indicate emerging linkages with wider markets that could be expanded through better logistics, branding and institutional support.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to production variables

Sl.no.	Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1.	Sources of raw material		
	Own farm	67	51.53
	Relatives	28	21.53
	Markets	28	21.53
	Government subsidized materials	7	5.38
2.	Frequency of production		
	Daily	130	100
	Every two-three day	0	0
	Weekly	0	0
	Monthly	0	0
3.	Types of items produced*		
	Baskets	130	100
	Bags	130	100
	Matts	45	34.61
	Sofas and stools	07	5.38
	Other accessories	15	11.5
4.	No. of years being involved		
	2 to 3 years	10	07.69
	3 to 6 years	39	30.00
	7 to 9 years	41	31.53
	10 years and above	40	30.76
5.	Product advertisement*		
	Verbally	130	100
	Social media advertisement	130	100
	Exhibition/ trade fairs	50	38.4
	Local channels	25	19.2
	Print media	15	11.5
	Distribution of samples in shops and supermarkets.	130	100
6.	Pattern of product sale*		
	Direct selling to customers from own stores	36	27.6
	Social media and live sessions	130	100
	Taking orders from stores in town	130	100
	Taking customized orders from customers	130	100
	Exhibition sales	50	38.4
	Exporting products outside the state	10	7.7

*Multiple response

Implications for livelihoods and enterprise development

The socio-economic profile and production behaviour of Kouna artisans in Khangabok depict a relatively strong base

for livelihood enhancement and enterprise development. A predominantly female, economically active, moderately educated and socially organized artisan population engaged in daily production with diversified products and multi-channel marketing is well-positioned to respond to rising demand for eco-friendly, handcrafted products. However, the predominance of medium income levels and the still modest reach into high-value markets suggest that significant potential remains untapped.

Key areas for intervention include

- Strengthening design development and product diversification to move up the value chain.
- Enhancing business skills such as costing, pricing, record-keeping and inventory management.
- Improving access to credit for working capital, tools and infrastructure.
- Developing collective branding and geographical indication (GI) strategies to differentiate Khangabok Kouna products.
- Facilitating better transport, logistics and market linkages to national and international buyers.
- Expanding longer-duration, enterprise-focused training and mentoring programmes based on the existing training and extension contact base.

Conclusion

The study shows that Kouna artisans in Khangabok village, Thoubal district, enjoy a relatively favourable socio-economic base coupled with dynamic production behaviour that sustains a vibrant craft-based livelihood. Most artisans are women aged 24-45 years, from large families, with at least basic schooling and medium annual income derived from Kouna-related activities. They are actively involved in co-operative societies, combine Kouna cultivation with craft production and have notable exposure to training and extension support. Production is intensive and daily, relies largely on farm-grown raw material and focuses on baskets and bags, with some diversification into mats and furniture items. Marketing strategies mix traditional methods such as verbal publicity and sample distribution with modern tools like social media, exhibitions and diverse sales channels, including customized orders and limited exports. These patterns portray artisans as active, adaptive producers, but also highlight the need for stronger, coordinated support in enterprise development, value addition, branding and market integration.

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