

## Identity, Industry and Integration: Accounting Social Change among the Brass-Casters of Bankura

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### Abstract

The ancient craft of *dokra* metal-casting, which was once widespread in India, has now relegated to a small number of traditional artisans, widely dispersed across the southern and eastern parts of the country. A significant nucleus of this craft exists in the *Bikna* village of Bankura, West Bengal, where a small community of craftsmen still practise this 4000 year old technique of non-ferrous metal casting. Created by the *cire perdue* or lost wax process, traditional themes of these sculptures include casting molten metal to make Hindu or tribal deities and folk motifs such as elephants, horses and rider figures. Despite the growing popularity of this craft, artists from the region have remained at the periphery of India's domestic economy and have been unable to cope with the ever-changing demands of a commercialising sector. This paper, in its rather limited scope, intends to present a carefully compiled body of relevant literature interspersed with selective ethnographic vignettes from May 2019, when I travelled to *Shilpadanga*, the locus of *dokra*-making in *Bikna* to provide a theoretical base for the multi-layered complexities within the community and thereby train my lens on the antiquated process of moulding; modalities of caste relations, impact of globalisation and the overall making of identity.

**KEYWORDS:** artisans, metal casting, globalisation, material culture, folk art, industry

### INTRODUCTION:

The art of *dokra*-making is stylistically distinct from brass-work in classical Indian folk arts, in that samples collected from the eastern states in the 19th and early 20th century exhibit totemic animals, tattooed figures and evidence of tribal patronage. In fact, a magisterial survey of that time dubbed it as "the savage arts of the wild tribes" (Birdwood, 1880) and it is only after a certain degree of proximity to mainstream Hindu society that images of *Lakshmi-Narayan* and *Krishna-Radha* came to be installed. Over the years, state sponsored cultural tourism through *Biswa Bangla*, an initiative by the Government of West Bengal and other development initiatives by organisations such as the National Institute for Science, Technology and Development Studies (NISTADS) have made it possible for artisans to build furnaces and obtain small credit but, in the absence of a detailed study on the state of *dokra* artisans and their working conditions in *Bikna*, one cannot conclusively point to improvement in trade. Furthermore, the socio-dynamics of *Bikna* has been impacted by ideological opposition to the industry from the bulk of the community who derive a sense of identity from the integrity of their craft. *Bikna* then is a site par excellence to not only consider the irreducibility of industrialisation as wholly benign or wholly harmful but also to destabilize the notion of identity as an ontologically fixed concrete whole and locate it in a social temporality constructed by acts performed by individuals.

Ever since these craft communities have become handmade economies, it has also distinguished the commodities made by them as repositories of social distinction in homes and museums. This paper therefore also seeks to probe into the bodily, cognitive and creative aspects of *dokra* making and how the objects so made act as conduits of material memory and shape these artisans into members of a unique cultural world. Material constituents of culture have already been an enduring concern in classical social theory and therefore, it is equally important to draw attention to this, apart from a general focus on the social stratification of this community vis-a-vis caste and the impact of market-mediated spaces on their livelihoods. Colonial penetration into the domestic lives of native Bengal led to a reformulation of aesthetic ideals in folk arts and impacted the indigenous *dokra* artist's identity which was compelled to evolve at the intersection of two epistemologically incongruent frameworks, namely, the excess of tradition and the liminality of capital. I am interested to look at the ways in which the pre-existing solidarities within the socio-cultural imaginary of rural India made sense of the complex topology of community welfare measures, religio-ideological shifts (hinduisation, sanskritisation) and perhaps most importantly, the absorption of industry.

### **WHO IS THE ARTISAN? A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BRASS-CASTERS OF BANKURA**

The term 'artisan' is defined in *Collins' Advanced Illustrated Dictionary* as 'someone whose job requires skill with their hands'. As Koinordos (2001) has pointed out, the term 'artisan' or 'traditional industry' includes industries that exhibit the following three characteristics, namely 'tool-based technology', 'non-corporate organization' and 'pre-colonial origin.' Studying artisans has been a project undertaken largely by practitioners of social and economic history and secondarily by anthropologists. This is only understandable given the community's status as precursors to industrial capitalism as we know it. With respect to disciplines like economics and industrial relations, artisans have been looked at in terms of their relationship with the working class and their participation and role in the establishment of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century workshops and factories. In comparison to this, the novelty of an interdisciplinary approach to studying artisans would perhaps be in the overlapping areas that fall between free market ideologies, expression of identity and categorizations of class (petty bourgeoisie) and caste (SC/ST/OBC etc.) Literature on artisan communities also lends itself easily to the analysis of changing labour processes, socio-political responses to globalisation and policy initiatives.

The Bankura district of West Bengal is part of the state's north-western border and consists largely of villages that are lined by rows of mud-plastered huts, some of which have developed into more permanent dwellings, and an occasional grove of trees. It is one of these villages, namely *Bikna*, that I visited to study the indigenous brass-casters of the region who made a living out of making traditional eastern Indian *dokra* artefacts. More specifically, I visited *Shilpadanga*, which is the heart of this creative process. To give a brief history of the place, *dokra* artisans in this region were primary benefactors of the *zamindari* patronage given to traditional handicrafts but, with a transformation of taste and culture, spearheaded by processes of commercialization and modernisation, the fate of such indigenous industries were doomed. The identity of the artisan has remained somewhat at the margins of Indian

historiography until very recently, with a rapid increase in scholarly work and publications on the traditional industries of Bengal.

In India, the works that do shed light upon the changing image of the craftsmen largely deal with the historical process and structural transformation of the craft within the context of tribal societies of Jharkhand, West Bengal and southern India and provides genealogical accounts of their evolution from pastoral nomadic peoples to settled agriculture. A detailed history of Indian handicrafts would perhaps belong to a different paper altogether but, for the purposes of our present deliberation on *dokra* artisans, it is most important to emphasize that the keepers of our nation's cultural identity often belong to marginalised sections of the society, scheduled castes, tribes and other backward classes and have remained self organised craftspeople with no formal training until a few decades ago. The crisis of livelihood in the crafts sector comes majorly due to the shift from traditional markets that cater to hand-made goods to a new sort of consumer demand for factory made products. This has posed a serious challenge to the artisan community at *Bikna*, where the once ubiquitous *dokra* trade is now caught in a loop of poor profits, low production and the eventual dispersion of those unequipped to tackle heightened market pressures. Many of these artisans were then forced to take up daily wage labour however; most families still continue to practise their hereditary occupation of metal casting.

Before I present an exposition on the context-specific developments within the artisanal community in Bankura, West Bengal, it would be justified to orient myself to the establishing features as well as the disjunctures of Marxist thought, through which an analysis of artisanal classes was first made possible. Any discussion on social class and production ought to be rooted in Marxist analysis. In the book *Capital*, and indeed throughout all his endeavours, Marx's intention was to lay bare the tendencies of modern capitalist modes of production however, in order to understand the transition from pre-capitalist modes of production to a society where production is guided by use value and exchange value, he also analysed the process of simple commodity production. Here, the production of use value for the purpose of exchange is practised by independent producers but, not to access wage labour but, for exchange within community. Thus, ownership and control lie in the hands of the producer and there is a good measure of personal freedom because they are not tied to external relations for sustenance and there is no appropriation of surplus (Marx, 1867.)

For Marx, the primary agents of this simple commodity production were artisans, craftsmen and peasants. He also contends that when petty commodity producers enlarge their scale of transaction, it is one of the first signs that the said community is moving towards a capitalist mode of production. For instance, when an artisan who functions in conjunction with two of his own family members also employs two to four labourers, do we categorise that as simple commodity production or a capitalist enterprise? It is here that his formulation of the petty bourgeoisie becomes a useful tool to understand artisanal classes. Marx brought to attention the existence of a new transitional class of people that neither survives by buying labour power like the bourgeois nor selling their labour power like the proletariat. Instead they may do both or in fact, neither. The term he deployed for them is *petty bourgeoisie* or lower middle classes, who were a *class in itself/class of itself* in terms of ideating their demands and for purposes of political representations.

Interestingly, the economic and social formations in a country like India and indeed most countries of the Global South are markedly different and therefore, although the artisanal class comprised the petty bourgeoisie in Marx's scheme of things, it may only be applicable to Western style enterprises. An orthodox Marxist position in this regard may be countered simply by understanding the impact of industrialisation on indigenous professions. While in the West, this transformation was smooth, the geographically disparate ways in which Indian industrialisation developed left the classes of artisans, potters, weavers and several other craftsmen seriously damaged. Essentially, it endangered their modes of living and brought them to the brink of forced destitution.

This gradual demise of artisan production in India has also been observed quite clearly in Marx's writings on the Indian village. In the article *British Rule In India*, he may have not assessed the Indian handicrafts industry explicitly, nevertheless, his central effort was to highlight how as the country came under colonial control, "factory imports broke up the handloom and destroyed the spinning wheel which, with hand tilling, had served as the economic pillars of India's village communities" (Marx, 1853.) The moral political economy of *dokra* handicraft is still largely sustained by older traditions and although they are entitled to be beneficiaries of government policies and NGO initiatives, it often does not percolate down to the most disprivileged families in *Bikna* and have come at the cost of creative compromises even when it does.

### **FROM THE COLONIAL TO THE CONTEMPORARY: QUESTIONS OF CASTE IN BENGAL**

The overemphasis of religion in Indian social life is central to the study of these metal-casters. More specifically, the pan-Indian applicability of caste and the allied processes of cultural change, namely Sanskritisation, Secularisation etc. during the colonial period also were integral to the study of *dokra* artisans. Bandhyopadhyay (2004) delves into how the Dumontian argument that the construction of Indian society revolves around religion and the convenient binaries of purity and pollution may only be partially true since it misses out the way in which other aspects of caste like endogamy, hereditary occupation and untouchability are found to have existed with varying intensity in different parts of the country, depending on the way colonial rule impacted the people. With reference to Bengal, perhaps, the first theoretical approaches to the study of caste were done by officials of the colony like J.S. Mill and Herbert Risley who carried out ethnographic studies to interpret the Indian society and only much later by Indian scholars themselves, which include Ramakanta Chakrabarti's work on the *Gaudiya Vaishnavas* and Nirmal Kumar Bose's *Hindu Samajer Garan* (The Structure of Hindu Society, translated by Andre Beteille.) Bose's work talked about the more material contexts of caste organisation including the economic relations and competition arising out of colonial rule. At the top of his three fold classification were the Brahmins, Kayasthas and Baidyas, the three higher castes in Bengal, followed by the Class I *usurper castes* who previously lived on taxes and tributes but eventually moved into the class of wealthy landowners, followed by the *producing castes* who belonged to Class II and were largely constituted by self working artisans, peasants etc and lastly the Class III *service castes* of labourers and sharecroppers who found place at the bottom. (Bose, 1975 translated.)

During the nationalist movement too, the Depressed Classes repeatedly organised themselves to articulate their political identities in a discourse that predominantly belonged to the three traditional upper castes of Bengal who continue to make up the *bhadrolok* elite even today. This is how caste identity came to be created in Bengal, in that lower caste people were not necessarily autonomous but were slowly and steadily rising in opposition to the hegemonic upper caste ways of life. As Basu (2003) argues, the *Rajbangshis* and *Namasudras* redefined the dalit-bahujan experience in Bengal through several spirited movements. The *Rajbangshis* fought to establish themselves as Kshatriyas in the first half of the 20th century Bengal and continue to struggle for political recognition in present day North Bengal while the *Namasudras*, also the second largest Hindu caste, fought for better position within the caste order and even called for a general strike against the social boycott that the higher castes practised with respect to them.

At *Bikna*, the artisan community's caste status can be traced back to 1891, when H.H. Risley conducted the first census and identified the *Nabashakha* or the nine caste groups in *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* namely, the *modaks*, (confectioners) *telis*, (oilmen) *malis*, (gardeners) *kumbhars*, (potters) *napits*, (barbers) *tantis*, (weavers) *kamars* (ironsmith) *baruis*, (makers of betel leaf) and *gopes* (herdsmen). With regard to social taxonomy, there is a great deal of confusion about the exact caste origins of the community but, the most popular interpretation remains that of Risley's, who defined the *dokra* artisans as belonging to a subcaste of *Kamars* or blacksmiths in West Bengal. Still others have referred to them as *Kankuiye Mal* (Reeves, 1962) which is a possible association to the Bengali measuring vessel *kunke*. During my visit to the households at *Bikna* however, artisans used the surname *Karmakar* and upon further investigation it became clear that this recent assimilation may be due in part to the process of "sanskritisation" within the community. As per the 2013 *Government of India: List of Other Backward Classes*, the *Karmakars* have been listed under the OBC category but, this is hardly the whole picture. The OBCs or Other Backward Classes in India have remained an ill-defined category which is said to collapse within itself multiple groups of social and economic import. The rough consensus seems to be that it is a group of people who merit special treatment from the State but, are decidedly higher than the untouchables in the caste order (Sujatha, 2002.) Even today, there exists no nation-wide understanding of OBCs although they are repeatedly defined and redefined across local contexts and even at the Central level. An interesting development in this regard, which is of direct relevance to the discussion, is a note of dissent to the 1980 Mandal Commission report, made by the sole Dalit member on the board, L.R. Naik. Naik proposed in his note that owing to the ambiguities within the OBC categorisation, the Commission must reconsider the report in light of the fact that there seemed to be two sub-categories under the OBCs, the land-owning farmers known as *intermediate backward classes* and the poorest of poor artisan communities which he called the *depressed backward classes*. The *depressed backward classes* constitute of traditional service providers that have become increasingly obsolete and are therefore in need of economic stability, political leadership, and intellectual lobbying. Naik also argued that while the peasant class including the likes Yadavs and Jats, control access to wealth and education, the artisanal classes have been rendered completely voiceless with no one to defend their interests. This framework was glossed over by then Prime Minister V.P. Singh and continues to be ignored in the present day classifications of castes.

In fact, much of what Dalits and OBCs have defined as the pursuit of modernity has in fact been their struggle for emancipation, their right to dignity and self determination. While it is true that successive governments have tried, through various welfare policies, to provide opportunities to artisans and peasant classes, these opportunities also have serious limitations. Only recently, interpretations of a reality, that foreground concerns of Dalit and OBC people have begun to occupy a more prominent place in academia as opposed to being given what Sharmila Rege called “little place” (2006.) This, then becomes the crux of a counter-culture which strikes at the base of history-making as choreographed by Brahmins and upper-castes, throwing light on the works of contemporary artists through literary works, handicrafts, food, oral traditions, sartorial choices etc. The archetype of a modernist Dalit or OBC, Guru (2000) adds, would probably be of one who acquires education and moves away to urban regions, away from original families, practises inter-caste marriage etc. These cultural aspirations, typical to the middle-class, might not be visible among the artisans of *Bikna* but, in a way they could be understood as forging a kind modernity as well, by a celebration of their craft, i.e. *dokra* making.

### **THE *DOKRA* HYBRID: ART IN THE TIMES OF GLOBALISATION**

Walter Benjamin wrote about the reproducibility of a work of art that represents something new in the mechanical age (1935.) In this context, how does the *dokra* art and artisans who make it, cope with the ever changing demands of globalisation? Going back to Benjamin, he stated that the ‘aura’ of a certain artefact diminishes as replicas of it are made in the capitalist mode of production to increase saleability. Traditionally, the *dokra* making process involves the casting of finely detailed metal artefacts by a French technique called *cire perdue* or lost wax technique which in turn is a six step method of core-making, modelling, moulding, de-waxing, casting and finishing. Origins of this art form can be traced as far back as *The Dancing Girl* in *Mohenjo Daro* of the Indus Valley Civilization and several places across India throughout the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

While at one point in the recent past, the demand for these artefacts were very less, Jena (2010) in the paper *Indian Handicrafts in Globalisation Times* has argued that “in the modern world, India’s liberalized market allows for a cross-cultural interaction between the ‘local’ and ‘global’ and the much discussed ‘global village’, is now not just a possibility but a reality despite many contradictions.” He further writes and I quote “Indian Handicrafts, which constitutes a significant segment of the decentralized sector of the economy, its export has reached a commendable height. Indian folk art and crafts which are the integral parts of the Indian culture and tradition are in high demand among the western consumers.” Initially, the people of *Bikna* were resistant to this transformation. When the Bengal Engineering College built a furnace in the region, most artisans refused to work with it, despite being told that the said furnace would seriously reduce the consumption of fossil fuels. The one artisan who worked with the furnace was regarded as inferior and his art was not accepted as that of a true *dokra kamar*’s. The artisans of *Bikna* attached a lot of significance to the creative process and all preliminary efforts to make them use the furnace failed. It is only much later, through sustained efforts of the West Bengal Government and the construction of village sheds, tube wells etc. that *dokra kamars* agreed to the mass producing of artefacts.

The problem with this arrangement however is that positive market trends don't necessarily improve occupational conditions for the artisans due to the existence of middlemen or *Mahajans* who buy from the artisans at dirt cheap rates, only to sell it at very high prices in urban markets. Further, the majority of these artisans, having received no formal education, have no training to understand the changing preferences of a largely urban consumer base. This work of art therefore no longer belongs to the aesthetic realm of folk traditions but becomes a consumer good that is sold in the market. This shows how globalization in the Indian handicraft sector has come as both an opportunity for survival and threat to originality in the present times.

### **THE THINGS WE MAKE, IN TURN MAKE US: A NOTE ON MATERIAL CULTURE**

There is no doubt that as members of the oppressed classes, the artisans in *Bikna* have a chequered history and much to struggle for but, as specialised craft producers, the people of *Bikna* also have to negotiate changing conditions of production and distribution and act as reservoirs of wealth, since they inadvertently become responsible for storing and maintaining intrinsically valuable knowledge on group membership, social roles, etc. What's more, the objects made by these artisans, in turn come to have histories of their own and become reflections on the communities itself based on how the objects, *dokra* artefacts in this case, survive from the past. Although material culture studies haven't been a conventional mode of investigation in Indian scholarship, it does hold immense potential, especially for anthropological inquiries. In my brief visit to *Bikna* too, I realised the impact of material/visual cultures engendered by the community on their economic, political and cultural life. Be it the small open-air alters where the *dokra* artefacts were kept for drying or the fact that even the youngest member of each of the forty odd families in *Shilpadanga* knew how to caste metal and make objects out of it, without any formal apprenticeship period, all of it was proof of the innate and meaningful co-constitution of objects and people.

Furthermore, the mutated political circumstances under which the artisan community in *Bikna* survives and the transgenerational trauma of marginality that they navigate are often subverted by the ways in which their contemporary art form become a part of material culture. Minority cultures, like this form of folk art, is given space within the mainstream because "new interpretations of art history and new visual representations in the art world aim at breaking the barriers and binaries between high and low, art and non-art" (Panniker and Achar, 2012.) It also gives international recognition to a few artisans, a privilege previously only reserved for a selective genre of work. Haradhan Karmakar, one of the brass casters in Dariapur, another *dokra*-making village in the adjacent district of Bardhaman, for example, travelled all the way to Philadelphia in 1988 to have his artwork exhibited at the Festival Of India in the Port of History Museum. Although there are no reports of any artisan in *Bikna* exhibiting his work internationally, many of them had spoken of travelling to the metropolitan city of Kolkata and the capital New Delhi, to showcase their work in private as well as government sponsored handicraft fairs with assistance from the Indian Handicrafts Exports Council and Crafts Hub of West Bengal. One of the artisans, Juddha Karmakar, even went on to win the Rashtrapati Award for his sculptures.

Notwithstanding these developments, there is more to the study on materiality of art objects than just invoking it as a repository for the rights of a particular community or viewing them as symbols of universalisation and emancipation. As Appadurai (1986) theorised in his book *The Social Life Of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, the production of objects made with one's own hands is not only about how those objects are carriers of aesthetic and utilitarian value but also encompasses the relationship of the maker to the material, temporal and spatial environment within which the object was made.

### CONCLUSION:

The empirical reference point for social science on artisanal classes has usually been electoral politics, questions of reservation etc hence, looking at an artisan community in the context of a globalising art world gives it a different nuance in that it helps us to gauge India's place in the cultural landscape, knowledge producing economy and overall growth of 21st society. It also helps us build a narrative of "backward" classes that are not simply centred on their experiences of marginality, humiliation and violence but, also understands how they use their imagination to mark their presence and lay claim to their aspirations.

With a rapidly growing tourist population and a revival of interest in research on indigenous craft, the foreseeable future of the *dokra* artisan seems to be reasonably secure but, if they intend to pursue this trade for an even longer period of time and want to grow beyond the niche market, they must come to terms with the impact of industry on their traditional cultures, questions of eradicating the middlemen and becoming more in control of the supply chain through workshops on technological as well as financial literacy and intensive campaigning for their lost art form. While this paper was an exercise in drawing attention to existing literature on artisan communities, future academic endeavours that hope to expand on both the cultural dimensions and the political economy of *dokra*-making must take note of the symbols and rituals associated with the craft, new notions of time and labour brought about by modern developments and transitions in livelihood patterns.

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