

Dhokra Art and Artists of Bikna: Problems and Prospects

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The wax technique of metal casting is a primitive technique which can be traced back to the Indus valley civilization almost 4500 years ago. The bronze cast dancing girl model from the ruins of Mohenjodaro still evokes wonder for the aesthetic appeal and advanced technical knowledge as well. Dokra artisans who were considered to be groups of wanderers are still practicing the art of metal craft through this age-old process. This nomadic group of people finally settled in the different tribal parts of Indian provinces like Andhrapradesh, Orissa, Chattishgarh, Jharkhand, and West Bengal. In Bengal the groups are



Picture 1: Goddess Durga



Picture 2

found in the tribal regions of Purulia, Bankura, Birbhum, Bardhaman and Medinipur.

Dokra, the term though represents today a fascinating group of metal articles, but originally the name was derived from the Dokra community of metalsmiths who used to follow this primitive metal casting process with none other alteration. Today Dokra metal craft refers to a non-ferrous metal object accomplished following the same technique, and in Bankura it is largely



Picture 3

practiced in executing enchanting brassware. Initially the Dokra craftsmen of Bankura settled in the Rampur suburb on the fringes of the district. Later they shifted to other villages for their convenience, and a large portion of them shifted to the village of Bikna of the same district.

The Technique

The lost wax casting process follows a simple route, but it seems wearisome to be wholly carried out. At first a clay core is formed at a slightly smaller measure than the desired object. The core is then left to dry either in sunlight or burnt to be backed. Then a wax layer is coated on this core to the thickness of the intended article. The wax model is then coated with another thin layer of clay and every detail of the intricacies is minutely imprinted on this clay layer. After the clay gets dry more layers of clay



Picture 4

are added to the remaining mould to make it much thicker and harder. Then the entire mould is preheated to melt the wax and consequently extracted it to leave the mould with a cavity with single or multiple channels. A molten metal is poured into the cavity through the channels there after which subsequently takes the shape of the aimed article. Then the entire mould is left to cool in shade and finally the clay cores are broken to reveal the original artifact. The traces of the clay are then removed and defects are repaired. These simple steps are being followed since the very primitive age with unflinching success for generating the rare and precious art pieces.



Picture 5



Picture 6: A dokra artisan proudly displaying his finished work. Bikna Dokra Village, Bankura, West Bengal, India

State of the Art

A remarkable aspect of this craft is no two articles seem alike. Every article holds its unique and distinct identity. The

Bankura metalsmiths generally emphasise on producing lamps, chains, caskets, measuring bowls, human and animal figurines, images of deities like Goddess Durga, Laxmi, Saraswati and Lord Sri Krishna, Shiva, Kartik, Ganesh etc.

But unfortunately this highly prized craft is propably facing an obvious decline due to the reasons mentioned below.

1. The increasing price of raw material is forcing the artisans to be less interested in creating these articles with same vigour.

2. Rising price of the end product is attracting less buyers which is a disappointing matter for these artisans.

3. Following the same primitive techniques and having no access to modern technology and infrastructure, is causing a delay in production which is unmatched with this fast moving age.

4. Lack of knowledge about the new designs that are being experimented all over the world, lack of inspiration to work with something new, lack of encouragement to work with innovative ideas are great hindrance to adapting modernizations and keeping pace with contemporary demand.

5. Indifference of the Government has been a major reason behind their remaining in poor status and losing the zeal to survive with this age old precious tradition.

The Dokra craftsmen of Bengal are probably facing the most wretched condition among all of the



Picture 8: Women gathered to watch the evening film show on television. Bikna Dokra Village, Bankura, West Bengal, India



Picture 7: Artisan pasting clay over the (black) wax replica. Bikna Dokra Village, Bankura, West Bengal, India

Dokra artisans of the country. Though they

cultivate a valuable treasure of art, they are least recognized as honourable persons among all the other communities of craftsmen. These socially outcast people are also the poorest among the whole metal smith communities. They are the most technologically backward section among all of them. They are so poor that they cannot even manage a one square meal of food every day for themselves. Even for their abject caste status they suffer a lot of humiliation and

rebuke which force them to leave this job and many of them have diverted to other

occupations to get relieved from this eternal shame. Thus this craft is probably loosing the master craftsmen forever and is approaching a sure decay and death.

To Hope or not to Hope

But there is also emerging a new hope for them. There is emerging a new global market in United States and UK. The fashion stores of Milan, Paris, London are looking for these unique Dhokra articles which can be a new boon for this unfortunate practitioners. The people get mesmerized with its simple yet unique appearance. The People like this rustic and primitive appearance with the original tribal flavor in these artifacts. So it is a great time and a good opportunity to expand the market to an international level.

But few steps still have to be taken as measures to revive this exquisite practice:

1. A constant effort to develop new designs and try out new innovations will be beneficial for the production catalogue.
2. Suitable technological adjustments are to be introduced to keep pace with the fast changing scenario of the craft market.
3. There must be a youth training centre to teach them the new techniques and methods and create an awareness about the contemporary and an approximate future trend of the global market.
4. The product detailing and finishing still must be taken care of in spite of putting greater detailing and choosing awe inspiring motifs.
5. Above all, modern marketing strategies need to be adopted for management and publicity.



Picture 9. Ganesh ji with innovative concept. It is to be noted that finishing can be improved for selling in high prices. The crafts people have no exposure to the prices of their products in metro cities. They should be made aware of the prices.

Acknowledgements:

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