

Stone Craft of Susunia

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Human association with several aspects of stone's utility is persistent since the remote Paleolithic age. At the first stage of the stone era human beings learned to create weapons to earn his food, protect themselves from ferocious beasts and the other human communities, light fire etc. Gradually as civilizations arose they made urns and utensils, bricks for making a safe home, machines for grinding and rolling purposes.



Image 1: Sculpture by Tarak nath Roy

Besides fulfilling the regular requirements they proceeded to aesthetic creations. Stone idols and architectural buildings were created, which have been praised for long all over the world for conveying the creative excellence of the craft-persons.



Image 2: Sculptures by Tarak nath Roy

Stone Craft of Bankura

Susunia hill of Bankura district in West Bengal is a renowned archaeological site with evidences of multiple stone articles which were made and used for thousands of years. The archaeological weapons like axe, cutter, hammer etc. prove their acute sense perfection of finishing, which is still present in the modern craft making like utensils, ash-tray, agarbati stand, sculptures of gods and goddesses, owl,

horse and numerous patterns with this white sand stone.

Susunia hill, a place of exotic natural beauty bears probably the earliest evidence of Vaishnav cult inscribed in three lines in Brahmi lipi under the reign of Maharaja Chandravarman. The 'Vishnu chakra', a blazing wheel (the wheel of Lord Vishnu) is inscribed here with 14 flames that elucidate a relation with lunar month cycle according to the local intellectuals.

For abundance of stone the village Susunia could produce numerous superb artisans of stone craft. In Pal dynasty the stone craft of Susunia achieved its greatest height owing to the support and inspiration of the Pal rulers to carve out gods and goddesses from Susunia stones and rocks. The trend of imposing divinity to the appearance of idols is still prevalent in the practice of modern sculptures of Hindu gods and goddesses and other human statues. The contemporary craft-persons are simultaneously working on both the traditional and modern art with the abiding perfection with the art inherited from the ancient times.



Image 3: Sculptures by Tarak nath Roy



Image 4: Sculptures by Tarak nath Roy

In spite of having a rich tradition of stone carving in Susunia the craft is probably approaching a gradual extinction. Though the craftsmen of this area are rewarded with prestigious honours in state and country levels, the acute poverty prevents the other artists to take up the stone carving job as a secured profession. Nayan Karmakar, Sanatan

Karmakar, Hiralal Karmakar, are all national awardees. Hiralal

Karmakar who was rewarded by Honourable ex-President Shri Sankar Dayal Sarma, though he has now diverted towards wood carving.



Image 5: Hiralal Karmakar receiving National Award from the former President of India late Sri Sankar Dayal Sharma

majestic stone specimens regrettably. Many of the stone carver families have diverted to other occupations, many have migrated to other states for the lack of proper sponsors and a thorough guidance for a proper marketing procedure.

Mr. Tarak Nath Roy who is a genuine talent in stone carving profession is a discovery of MESH (Maximising Employment to Serve the Handicapped, www.mesh.org.in) His works on one hand hold the traditional structure of Susunia and on the other hand the contemporary and modern structures with elegance.

Without Government's sincere effort to revive this precious craft, encouragement to Susunia village people to create more and more beautiful objects, initiatives to expand a profitable market, arrangement for steady availability of stones, proper advertisements of the artisans and their art works the Susunia stone craft is expecting no more prospect to survive in an impending future.

Many of the craftsmen are eager to create beautiful objects, but often they face several obstacles created by lack of proper infrastructure, lack of inspiration and above all an unbearable poverty. Lack of financial aid and encouragement from Government, a ban on quarrying the rocks and hillocks of Susunia for eco-preservation mission the craftspersons are feeling discouraged to create any more

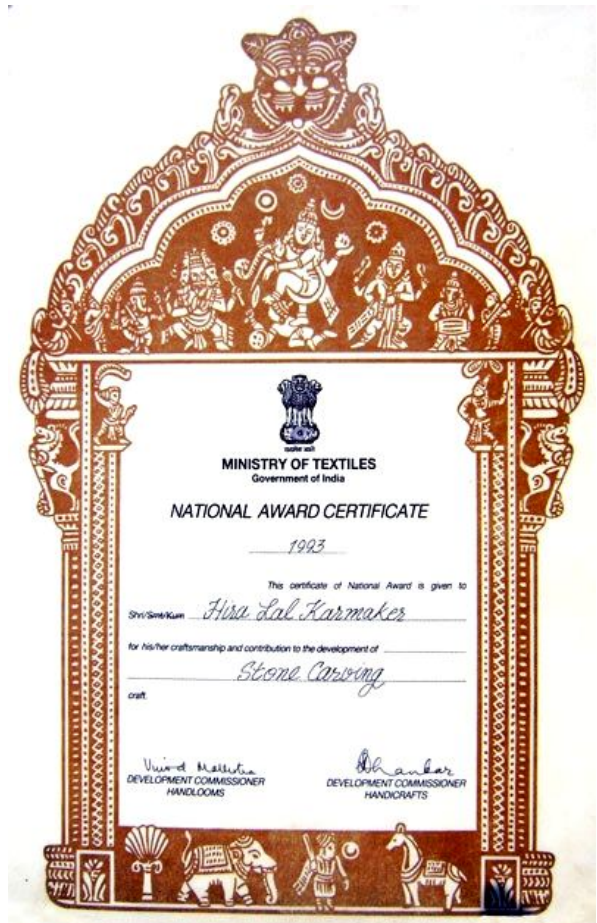


Image 6: Hiralal Karmakar's National Award Certificate

An Interview with Tarak Nath Roy



Tarak Nath Roy is a physically challenged artist working on stone. He can be contacted at 09474450372 and his art works can be purchased from www.mesh.org.in.

Chitrolekha: How did you enter this craft? Was it already in the family?

TNR: Yes, I learnt this art from the older members of my family.

Chitrolekha: Can you give us a history of the craft? We mean how old is it? Is it related in any way to the stone craft of Pala era?

TNR: I don't have clear idea of its history. I don't know whether it is related to Pala era. I think it is about 100 years old.

Chitrolekha: How many families or artisans are working around this craft?

TNR: As far as I know there are 60 families or so and about 200 artisans are involved with stone craft. But all of them don't make art objects. Many of them make traditional household goods.

Chitrolekha: What are the objects of inspiration for your art? Natural objects, scenes from common life or mythology?

TNR: As an artist I can make any sculpture. But depending upon the demand of the market and the anticipating clients' taste I mainly create art-pieces based on the popular Indian and western mythologies.

Chitrolekha: What is the monetary prospect of this craft? Do you have any idea how much an artisan can earn on average?

TNR: (with a sigh) Very bad. It is not at all profitable. An artisan can earn maximum Rs. 100 daily after all the hard works. The middlemen make money and we get deprived.

Chitrolekha: Do you get any help from the governments?

TNR: Not at all. They are indifferent to us. We don't get any monetary support nor any award which would have acted as inspiration for us. But personally I have got much support from MESH. They are doing excellent work for the physically challenged artists from other crafts as well.

Chitrolekha: Younger generation entering this craft?

TNR: Not with a purpose. Young people don't want to enter this unless they are forced to having no alternative. They want them to get educated and seek other employments. I personally applied for some jobs like primary teaching service. But unfortunately in spite of being an 80% handicapped person I have not got anything yet.

Chitrolekha: What are the major problems for this craft?

TNR: The biggest problem is that quarrying in the Susunia hills has been banned for environmental reason. We have to work with either stone scattered on the foothills or imported stones from Orissa. But for poor people like us importing stones is almost impossible as the cost is too much. If this goes on this craft will surely become extinct soon.

Chitrolekha: Other problems?

TNR: We produce the craft in a remote village. People are not that much educated. We lack proper marketing strategies. We don't have patrons also. We don't have cooperative. The artisans lack innovative ideas and designs to cope up with the modern demands. They need training. But who will do it? It needs also proper advertisement on the major print and electronic media. But this is beyond our imagination.

Chitrolekha: How can the problem of the supply of stone be solved?

TNR: The ban on quarrying was necessary. We should not damage environment for our work. But along with the ban an alternative should have been thought as it concerns profession of many people. The government or other organization should arrange for the transport of stone so that it becomes affordable for us.

Chitrolekha: What is the prospect of this craft?

TNR: Bleak. The artisans lack encouragement and honour. Years ago some artists like Sanatan Karmakar, Manik Karmakar, Nayan Karmakar were awarded by the governments. But for over a decade no such initiative is to be seen. If artisans don't get recognition, how can they devote themselves to a profession which brings very little money?

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- Images 1, 3, 4, 7: Courtesy – MESH (www.mesh.org.in)
- Images 5, 6: Courtesy – Hiralal Karmakar (<http://creativehandicrafts.net>)

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