

Conch Shell Craft of Bankura

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Conch shell craft is neither unique, nor a new practice in India for creating marvels in decorative yet artistic pieces of utility items. The affinity for conch has been eternally in craze since the remote Vedic age when human psyche realized an utter zeal for a philosophical and psychological uplift. The Conch shell is regarded as an inevitable instrument for performing the religious rites in many of the countries and occasionally it is blown to drive away evil spirits ensuing many of the religions.



Image 1: Traditional Sankha and hair clip

In West Bengal, the conch shell is



Image 2: Lord Krishna with his consort Sri Radhika

mainly used for two functions. The conch itself is to be blown for driving away evil spirits, to commence something new and auspicious, to accomplish an entire puja process or ritual, and sometimes celebrating victories by blowing it. Secondly 'sankha' or the conch bangles are the must-adorable for the married Bengali Hindu ladies. But the conch craft of Bengal is not only confined to these quintessential purposes to be carried out, rather there lies a greater variety of articles derived from this mere marine organism.

Bankura, with a treasure of an extreme passion for beauty and elegance, holds a distinct position in conch shell craft among all the conch carver communities all over India. These conch carving devotees have spent the whole of their lives creating astonishing designs on the shells. Either they have played up fabulous images of deities like Durga, Laxmi, Sri Krishna on each and every shell or they have put down an entire episode from an epic or a mythological story instead of a single motif. They also introduce floral or ornamental patterns for ornamentation with same dexterity. Besides

working with the entire piece of a conch they also bring forth artistic specimens of hair clips, bangles, brooches, earrings, necklaces, pendants, paperweights, boxes, agarbati stand, buttons, vermillion container, cup, spoon, fork, door hangings etc.

The conch shells are generally purchased from Chennai, which are collected from the beach of Tuticorin. The empty and dry shells are sent to Kolkata and the conch carvers buy them in bulk as their main ingredient or raw material.

The conch shells are divided into groups according to their thickness. The thinner shells are generally used to be blown and the thickers are chosen to carve out.

After acquiring the crude shells from market the craftsmen wash them thoroughly to wipe out all the dirt and debris brought from the sea. Then they are put to a grinding machine to remove remaining impurities of the shell surface. Then it is again washed with hydrochloric acid



Image 4: Goddess Durga

which leaves it fairer and

whitish and leaves ready to be carved. Filing and polishing impose an ultimate lustre which makes it ready to be sold out to the customer.

The equipments used for conch carvings are very simple like file, chisels, hammer, grinder etc. The chisels are used in different sizes depending on the detailing and intricacies of the pattern.

These conch carvers of Bankura belong to Saankhari community and mostly reside in Bishnupur, Saaspur, Hatgram and Rampur.

This craft is undeniably a precious one and conveys Bengal's eternal uniqueness for its perception of beauty. Many of these craftsmen have enriched the treasure of Bengal's craft corner by being awarded for their creative excellence. But after facing a scarcity of supply from 1980s from Chennai the production of conch craft has inevitably

declined. The people with their utmost spirit for creating these opulent art pieces have



Image 3: Lord Ganesha

chosen the coconut and wood apple shell as their raw material instead of the required conch shells. They even choose the pumpkin shell and the fish scale too to keep anyhow the tradition alive. Though the production rate of conches has decreased yet the few amounts of conch those are still being carved out arousing wonder.

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Subhomay Dutta is a Freelancer.
