

Periodic Research

Artisans and artisanal works of Rarh Bengal in the colonial period

Abstract

This article traces the workmanship of some people of a section of the society of Rarh Bengal, i.e. of the artisans during the colonial period. The artisans were identified by their castes corresponding to their inherited skills. In the traditional socio-economic set-up, the artisans were an integral part of the village society. Their manufacturing activity and agricultural production were complimentary to each other. However, in the changed socio-economic conditions under the colonial rulers, complementarity between the manufacturing activity in villages and processes of agricultural production was disrupted. This was followed by occupational mobility and changes in the socio-economic conditions among the artisan castes due to the apathy and adverse attitude of the colonial rulers.



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Introduction

West Bengal has clearly three distinct segments: north, middle and south. In the northern segment, the Himalayan and sub-Himalayan regions comprise the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. In the middle segment, the Barinda or Barendrabhum includes the districts of North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Malda. While the Southern segment consists of two well marked regions, viz. the Rarh and the Delta. The famous Ganga Delta in its West Bengal portion incorporates the districts of Murshidabad (eastern part), Nadia, North 24 Pargana, South 24 Pargana and also the urban district of Calcutta. The Rarh is a composite region including the districts of Birbhum, Murshidabad (West), Burdwan, Purulia, Bankura, and East Midnapore (Medinipur) and Jhargram sub-division of West Midnapore.

The Rarh region historically has been known by many different names and has hosted numerous settlements throughout history. It is suggested that the Rarh region hosted an ancient civilization also called Rarh and though a powerful state, much of its ancient history remains unknown. The etymology of the word Rarh is not clear. However, there are many authors suggesting that it originates from a local language of Austroasiatic family. It could have originated from any of the following words of the Santali language; lar means 'thread', rarh means 'tune' and larh means 'snake'. And according to noted historian, P.R. Sarkar, the word originates from Proto-Austroasiatic 'Rarha' or Rarho, which means 'land of red soil' or 'land of laterite'.

In the traditional socio-economic set up of the Rarh Bengal, the artisans were an integral part of the village society. The artisans of Rarh Bengal belonged to different castes such as Patua, Sutradhar, Kamar, Kumbhakar, Karmakar, Malakar, Sankhari etc. Under the caste system, specialization was hereditary and ritually valid. The specialists in different crafts and arts derived their exclusive right to specialization from the knowledge of the Principle which 'is the source and origin of his calling, and is known by the name of Bramha or Viswakarma, the sum total of creative consciousness'. The Indian craftsmen conceive of his art not as his own, not as the accumulated skill of ages, but as originating in the divine skill of Viswakarma as revealed by him. The knowledge of the Principle, and hence the skill following from the knowledge is sacred. According to the rules of caste and of the guild organizations in which the artists and artisans were organized, the artists preserved the knowledge and the skill within their respective groups and handed them over to their sons and apprentices belonging to the same group. The continuity of 'the means and way by which his professional activity puts into form and practice his knowledge of the principle', constitutes the Tradition of the Indian craftsmen which thus is not only an oral transmission of information and beliefs from ancestors to posterity but also an inherited culture.

One of the important districts of Rarh Bengal, Burdwan was famous for copper and brass utensils. This indigenous Industry did not suffer from foreign competition till the 19th Century. W.E. Collin remarked in the 'Report on the Existing Arts and Industries in Bengal, Calcutta, 1890'. The extent of the Industry may be calculated from the fact that the imports of copper, brass and zinc in the year 1877-1878 valued over 90 lakhs, a very large quantity of which must have been locally worked up into articles of use or ornaments. In almost every town, there are shops of braziers, but more than one fourth of the total number in Bengal are found in Burdwan division. There are over 1300 families of brass workers in the Burdwan district alone, and the chief seats of the Industry are Sahebgunge, Bonpus, Dainhat, Dewangunge, Purbasthali and Kalna. Each town is famous for some particular branch of trade. There are some places which make a speciality of casting, others of making beaten-out articles. At Dainhat and Mutiari in Burdwan, large vessels and cooking pots of beaten metal are made.

The 1929 Report on the Survey of Cottage Industries in Bengal mentions Begunkhola (Katwa Sub-division), Chupi (Kalna Sub-division), Jabui, Sahera Bazar, Dignagar, Kaitara and Kamarpara (Sadar Sub-division) as centres of brass and bell-metal Industry besides those listed by Collins in 1892. At Dainhat, the artisans made utensils from bell-metal plates and brass sheets, while at Begunkhola and Ketugram thanas, they were made by moulding. Bell-metal utensils were made of imported Australian copper and tin from Singapore and Penang and were marketed throughout northern India. Copper dekchis of Dainhat were in heavy demand. Blacksmiths were found in all the large settlements for its manufacture and repair of agricultural implements and other hardware articles of general use. Village blacksmiths were paid in kind, viz. so much grain per harvest for keeping the agricultural implements in repair. Good quality cutlery were made in a few places, especially Kanchannagar which supplied the Stationary Departments of Bengal and Bombay with knives and scissors during the last of the 19th century. The chief firm of cutlery in this suburb was of Premchand Mistri. Cutlery of Premchand was to be found in most of the Swadeshi shops of Bengal. He was self-taught and showed his enterprise by devising some special lathes for polishing and sharpening the blades of knives and scissors. The cutlery works of Kanchannagar was so famous that the place was regarded as Sheffield of Bengal.

Collin reported that pottery was found everywhere in Bengal but the best earthen utensils were made in Burdwan district on the banks of Bhagirathi where the clay was specially suitable for the manufacture of durable earthenware. Weaving of woolen blankets was an old time industry of Asansol. Even during the third decade of the 19th century, a few families of bhediwalas carried on this industry. Besides these artisanal works, mention may be made of weaving industry, brass and bell-metal works, conch-shell manufactures and so on. Weaving occupied an important place in the traditional indigenous cottage industry of Burdwan. This was the oldest industry of Bengal and it enjoyed a world-wide fame for the wonderful perfection and the requisite quality of the products. Silk weaving was carried on at Memari, Radhakantpur, Jagadabad and in some other places

of Burdwan and Katwa sub-division. The district was also famous for the tassar silk weaving. Tassar cloth was regarded as sacred by the Hindus for religious ceremonies and therefore it had a local demand.

Artisanal works and industry grew as an adjunct to agriculture in Birbhum district. Garha cloth (a coarse variety), raw silk, shellac and iron constituted the main manufactures of the artisans of Birbhum. Garha cloth (cotton piece goods) formed by far the most widely manufactured article of the district. Commonly known as the Birbhum garha, it had a market both at home and abroad. Dhuti (men's cloth), sari (women's cloth), chadar (wrapper), ganji (vest) and other coarser varieties were used by the natives within and outside the district. As regards its use and the market demand, a contemporary authority wrote that the Birbhum garha was a kind of cloth which however bad (is) always to be disposed of, from its constant demand either for the export trade of Calcutta for wrappers, or for the clothing's of the natives. It had, indeed, a good market in western India and in the Near East, and so far as the English and the continental markets were concerned, it had been a favourite merchandise there since the early 18th century if not still earlier. The artisans from Birbhum also excelled in silk piece-goods. The raw silk industry involved various classes of people, viz., mulberry cultivators, chasars (silk-worm breeders and cocoon rearers), nacauds (silk winders), moraunders (skein makers), tabedars or tagadeers (silk collectors), pykars (silk dealers) and merchants. The growing of mulberry plants, breeding of silk worms and winding of cocoons were often done by the same cultivator, but the development of the productive forces and deepening of the social division of labour gradually made occupations professional for different groups of people. Besides the yellow silk of mulberry, there was another variety of silk in the district called tasar silk. The tasar silk of the district had acquired a considerable distinction. Tasar silk was extensively collected in the forests of Sarhet-Deoghar and Kundhit-Kuria by the tribal's and semi-tribal's and exported to Bhagalpur. At Tantipara village under Tappeh Haripur (about 11 miles west of Suri), several hundreds of artisans were engaged in collecting and reeling off the Tusser silk for the Calcutta market. Shellac constituted an item, although a minor one, of export under the Commercial Residency of Sonamukhi. It was used for making lacquered articles and manufacturing drugs in England. Messrs Erskine took the most important part in the manufacture of shellac. Erskine constructed a large shellac and lac dye factory at Ilambazar. The lac artisans, called the nuris, worked out a variety of lacquered articles, namely, cups, inkpots, bracelets, and toys of excellent design and workmanship. For their high quality, an envelope box, inkstand, workbox and other ornamental articles of varicoloured lac were sent to the Great Paris Exhibition of 1855.

The dearth of fertile land in Bankura district prompted a section of people here towards the handicraft works as their means of livelihood. According to the statistics obtained at the Census of

1901 ,altogether 60.70 percent of the population were supported by agriculture- a proportion considerably below the general average for Bengal. The same Census indicated that then there were 10,000 cotton weavers,6000 basket makers ,goldsmiths, ironsmiths, workers in brass, potters ,carpenters, silk spinners and necklace makers. One of the chief artisanal works, silk weaving was a fairly prosperous industry. It was carried on at Bishnupur, Bankura, Rajgram, Birsinghpur, Jaypur, and Gopinathpur ; but the chief centre of the industry was Bishnupur, which had a special reputation for the manufacture of prettily embroidered silk scarves, plain and flowered saris or dress pieces for women, and a maroon coloured cloth called dhupchhaya. Though the fabrics were not equal to the Berhampore silk in fineness and evenness of texture, they were in considerable demand in the district and also outside it. One of the types of silk weaving, tusser silk weaving was carried on by the artisans in different centres of Bankura such as Gopinathpur, Bankura, Rajgram, Sonamukhi, Bishnupur and Rajhat-Birsinghpur. The artisans were men of the Tanti castes , who generally prepared the silk themselves from the cocoons. Regarding the prospects of the Tusser silk industry, Mr.N. G. Mukherjii remarked in his monograph on the The Silk Fabrics of Bengal (1903) :

'In Bankura ,the silk weaving industry still holds its own, though cocoon rearing has dwindled down into insignificance'. However in another report entitled 'The State of the Tusser Silk industry' published in 1905, Mr. N.G.Mukherjii had stated that 'tusser weaving industry of Bankura seems to be more famous than of any other place I have yet visited. The saris and dhotis of Sonamukhi and Bishnupur are very famous; even in Dacca and Mymensingh they were prized'.

He also reported that there were at that time 1000 families of tassar weavers at Sonamukhi ,500 to 700 families at Vishnupur ,400 families at Gopinathpur and Bankura town ,200 families at Rajagram and about 400 families at Rajhat-Birsinghpur representing at least 10,000 individuals working or capable of working in tusser .On the other hand, blankets were woven by small colonies of Bherials (the shepherd caste) at Lokpur and Kendudi on the outskirts of Bankura town. Brass (pital) and bell-metal (kansa) utensils were made ,on a fairly large scale, at Bankura, Bishnupur and Patrasayar.

The manufacture of lac is another old-time industry of the Bankura district which was carried on extensively during the later half of the 19th century. W.E.Collin in his Report on the Existing Arts and Industries in Bengal, published in 1890, had stated that 'the chief seat of the industry is Bankura, while at Sonamukhi there are 75 factories employing over five thousand persons for a part of the year'. The principal centres of the conch-shell industry were located at Vishnupur and Bankura town. At the time of Hornell's enquiry in 1914, the industry was practiced on a very extensive scale in the district.

One of the most important industries in the district of Purulia was the collection and manufacture

of lac. Jhalda was the most important centre of manufacture besides Purulia, Balarampur and Manbazar. Tassar silk weaving was carried on at a few centres of which Raghunathpur was the most important besides Purulia and Lohagarh. The total number of artisan families engaged in the industry was about 150 and in 1907-1908, there were reported to be 90 looms. The ordinary iron utensils required for domestic use were made locally throughout the district. In Purulia, Jhalda, Tanasi and one or two other places, however, there were more skilled workers and the two former places had a considerable reputation for the manufacture of agricultural implements, cutlery and firearms. The reputation of Jhalda for guns hardly compared with that of Monghyr and the output is now very limited. The industry was, however, at one time a flourishing one, and the gun makers of both Jhalda and Tanasi were suspected in 1857 of supplying matchlocks and other weapons to the discontented Santhals and others who gave trouble in the neighborhood of Jaipur and Gola.

Silk weaving was formerly an important industry of Ghatal,Tamluk,Daspur in the district of Midnapur (East) but it had been declining for some years. The manufacture of brass and bell-metal utensils such as cups, plates and cooking pots was carried on at Ghatal,Kharar,Midnapore,Chandrakona and Ramjibanpur. But all these artisans faced innumerable difficulties in the period of the British rulers ,because they did not provide required assistance to the artisans .Not only that the colonial rulers promoted the British manufactured goods in the market of India .Even the native rulers did not come forward in order to rescue these artisans.

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