

Contextualizing the Conch-shell Craft of Bankura in the Colonial Period



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Abstract

The district of Bankura in West Bengal has been famous all over the world for its expertise in arts and crafts since time immemorial. The soil of Bankura once, had the prospect of witnessing a very rich cultural and artistic heritage. Due to the mastery of manifold monarchs belonging to different dynasties in the past, arts and crafts here underwent varied changes delivering an artistic diversity in the forms of traditional handicrafts, carving and painting, dance, music etc. The artisans of Bankura had the mastery of producing different arts and crafts such as pottery, bell-metal products, Baluchari saris, Dokra products and many more of highest quality. The present paper traces the artistic excellence of the Sankharis or the conch shell artisans, raw materials used, means and methods of production, chief products of conch shell industry, challenges posed by the colonial rulers to the industry and many more.

Keywords: Conch-shell, Artisan, Craft, Culture, Skill.

Introduction

Since time immemorial, conch has assumed a social and religious implication in India. It is one of the fundamentals in religious ceremonies and the blowing of conch-shell has been regarded as auspicious at socio-religious functions. Bengal, one may say, is the home of the *shankha*-conch-shell. Hindu women in Bengal sport conch-shell bangles on their wrists to signify their married state. As a bride, a girl sports a pair of conch bangles on her wrists and continues it till her husband lives. If he dies before her, she will symbolically break her conch-shell bangles during the last rites of her husband. The iron bangles known as *Noha*, *Loha* or *Khadu* also stands for the *Sankha*. This tradition must be quite an old one because all the craftsmen who made the conch-shell bangles belonged to the traditional *Sankhakara* caste in the said period. They were also known as *Sanrikha*, *Sankhabanik*. These craftsmen were divided into two groups: *Sankharis*, makers of *sankhas*, and *Sankha-baniks*, traders in shell products. The *baniks* financed groups of *Sankharis* and sold their products and were economically the much better off the two groups. Important centres of conch-shell products were at Vishnupur and Hatgram in Bankura district.

Objective of the Study

The first and foremost objective of the paper is to analyse the socio-cultural milieu of the industry. Secondly, how and in which circumstances, the craft created a job opportunity among a section of the Bengal society. Thirdly, to find out the changes in the concept and in the utilization of resource products as well. And fourthly, to ascertain the reasons behind its gradual unpopularity among the women-folk and its replacement by the plastic type products.

Literature Review

There is a galore of scholarly works on the conch-shell craft of Bengal and its artisans. These scholarly works, which have investigated so far the history of this craft deserve special mention. T. N. Mukharji's *Art-Manufacture of India* (1888) contains the most important art-manufactures of India such as fine arts, decorative art, musical instruments, jewellery, manufactures in metal, wood and stone, pottery, ivory, horn and shell manufactures etc. of the best and purest workmanship.

James Hornell's *The Sacred Chank of India: A Monograph of the Indian Conch* (1914) is a monographic account which describes the conch in its intricate and intimate relationship to almost every phase of Hindu life. It also mentions the antiquity of the chank or conch-shell bangle industry, techniques and methods of manufacture and the role played by the conch-shell in Indian religion and life.

Sudhansu Kumar Ray's *The Artisan Castes of West Bengal and their Craft* (1951) is a small treatise on the indigenous crafts of West Bengal. It also contains various occupational castes in West Bengal and their tradition. It describes the castes in relation to their traditions and how traditions varied with different caste customs in different localities, how tools differed from district to district.

Prabhas Sen's *Crafts of West Bengal* (1994) is a glossary of crafts and craft makers of Bengal through photographic illustrations and text. Topics covered include metal works, pottery, basketry, embroidery, jewellery, stone carving, conch-shell products etc.

Smritikumar Sarkar's *Technology and Rural Change in Eastern India, 1830-1980* (2014), is a social history of technology, which analyses the context and results of technology induction to the villages, such as the railways redrawing the morphology of rural settlement, the new tools leading to the empowerment of artisans such as weavers, braziers, ironsmiths, tanners and conch-shell artisans or their dispossession due to mechanization. But all these works lack the local history of Bankura conch-shell craft and other subject-matter associated with it. Therefore, some integrated and comprehensive work on the conch-shell craft of Bankura and its artisans is most imperative.

Hypothesis

1. To draw the attention of the people towards the status once enjoyed by the conch-shell industry in the pre-colonial period
2. To ascertain the reasons behind the gradual decline of the craft in the colonial period
3. To attract the attention of customers towards this handicraft products
4. To fetch the attention of the government so that it adopts welfare measures for the amelioration of the socio-economic condition of the artisans
5. To inspire the new generation of the conch-shell community towards their own once highly cherished profession

Methodology

The present study needed the author to consult both the primary and secondary sources as source materials. So, considering the demand of the article, primary sources in the form of official records, government publications, district gazetteer, reports, minutes, proceedings etc. have been consulted. Books and articles as secondary sources have also proved of utmost importance in the compilation of the article. The methods used in this study are both empirical and analytical.

Discussion

The history of the conch-shell industry in India is very old. Historians believe that its antiquity goes back to fourth millennium B.C. In Mahabharata, there is a reference of the use of conch shell when Lord Krishna blew '*Panchyajanya* Conch' for the commencement of the Kurukhetra war. There is a reference of Arjun, the third among the Panchapandava of blowing his conch, named 'Devdatta' in *Srimadbhagbad Gita*¹, which was obtained by Agnidev from Varundev before the

burning of Khandava forest. The conches blown by warriors like Yudhistir, Bhima, Nakul, Sahadeva in Mahabharata are famous as Anantavijaya, Paundra, Sughosa and Maniuspaka respectively. The Buddhist scripture, *Vinaya Pitaka* also narrates the familiarity of Indian people with the conch shell craft. The designed conch shell bangles of the third and fourth centuries B. C. are preserved in the Ashutosh Museum of Kolkata.²

Bengal, one may say, is the birth place of the *sankha*-conch (*Turbinella pyrum*) shell and the artisan associated with the manufacturing of conch shell articles particularly bangles are called *sankhari* or *sankhakara*. It is an important ancient craft as they are firmly associated with married Hindu women in Bengal, during the life-time of the husband, since time immemorial. The wearing of shell-bracelets was considered a religious obligation by the Hindus of Bengal, and even now a set is always presented to the bride by her father on the occasion of her marriage.³ The *sankharis* also make those shell bangles which the Hindu warriors of ancient times used on the battle-field, and which are now used only in connection with religious ceremonies.⁴ Shell bracelets were earlier used by women of higher castes and the poor used brass bangles (*kharu*), 16 times cheaper. Further, there is a culture of blowing the conch shells at dusk every day in Hindu homes, particularly in the rural areas. Lighting a ceremonial lamp and blowing the conch shell at dusk is a part of the daily obeisance of the housewife before the household deity. The blowing of the conch shell is a part of the ritual in Hindu religious ceremonies and festivals. In case of any threat of danger or calamity, conches are sounded to raise the alarm. The trade in these shells flourished from the earliest historical times. The 'Chank' was mentioned by Abu Zaid in tenth century. Tavernier stated that the shell bracelets included among the exports of Dacca in 1666, and wrote that, in Patna and Bengal, there were over two thousand persons employed in manufacturing them.⁵

By the 1890s, the nature of the industry had changed, with 70 per cent of its products as 'broad, strong, serviceable bangles used by women of lower classes, while 25 per cent or less than that was medium and the high grade work suitable for ladies in good caste'.⁶ The Swadeshi movement provided a new impetus to the craft but the spread of bangle wearing custom among lower caste and tribal women by means of their acculturation proved a boon to the craft. The artisans of Dacca manufactured the best conch shell products in Bengal with modern taste by turning out delicate bracelets and bangles of different patterns.

The important centres of the conch shell industry in Bankura district in the colonial period were Vishnupur, Bankura, Patrasayer and Hatgram. James Hornell's enquiry in 1914 stated that the craft was practised on a very large scale in the districts of Bankura.⁷ The artisans manufactured here the conch shell ornaments like bangles, rings, head-necklaces etc. The shells used for manufacturing bracelets were imported from the Gulf of Mannar. On some

occasions, expert craftsmen made whole conch shell pieces intricately embellished with embossed decorations but such products did not find a market and were, therefore, rarely produced. The residuals of the sliced out bangles were used for making rings, buttons and small floral designs. Women and the children of the artisan's family polished the bangles and did some other minor works. Expert artisans would do the ornamentation work with simple tools. They followed the same techniques as was used by the artisans at Dacca for centuries. But the finishing was not that much good.⁹ The articles produced in the district of Bankura were crude and they had only a local market. The workers here also suffered for want of regular supply of shells at reasonable price.⁹ Small articles were also made of *Kauri*, conch and tortoise shells, but in very small quantities. In Bengal, small toilet baskets covered on the outside with *Kauri* shells and lined with red cloth were employed by Indian ladies to keep vermilion and other knick-knacks.¹⁰

Various types of bangles were manufactured here. Plain white bangles were cheap and manufactured in bulk. The *Sankhari* women made various types of coloured bangles, such as, *sonamukhi*, golden faced, gaily painted in yellow, green and red with five red drops on the mouth, *jaltarang*, named after a musical instrument and consisted of wave-like patterns, *matardana* had pea-like motif engraved on the periphery with a file, *motidana* had a pearl-like mark within a rectangular area engraved on the outer surface, *bhatia*, an intricate design with three slanting lines followed by a M-like figure done on the periphery. *Maya* was made on the plain surface by drawing delicate designs with a bamboo pen and different colour designs painted on the periphery, and ornamented by embossing with a file. *Mane-na-mane* had different dots on both sides of a line-engraved in the outer surface.¹¹

In course of time, the practice of wearing conch shell bangles as a symbol of married state lost its appeal. It further faced serious competition from cheaper and more durable plastic wares. Even the sentimental value of Hindu orthodox women diminished towards the shell bangles leading the craft to its gradual extinction. In such a situation, the artisans diversified their products and started to make costume jewellery like pendants, figure-rings, earrings, brooches, hairpins etc. They also experimented with new shapes and patterns for their bangles with a view to popularising them as costume jewellery all over the country.

Major Implements and Raw Materials Used by the Artisans

The conch-shell artisans used a crescent-like saw, a few hammers of different sizes and shapes, and some simple aides such as chisels served as his tools.¹² The crescent-like saw was popularly known as the *Sankher-Karat*, which was used for cleaning the conch-shell by filing and producing round rings by transversely slicing the same. Conch-shell or chank was the most important raw material for this industry. But chanks from different areas had different features well known to the dealers of Bengal particularly of Calcutta and Dacca. As a result, of these local

varieties having different physical features, their price varied and the shells from each locality were kept and sold separately during the first series of wholesale transactions. Bangle artisans recognised five grades of shells, which were as follows: *Titkutti* (perfect quality, white coloured, hard and fine grain), *Jadki* (slightly inferior to the *Titkutti* and presence of a worm hole), *Patti* (good quality but less important than *Titkutti*; its products were popular among Santal women), *Dhola* (cut from dead shells and inferior to *Patti*) and *Alabila* (most inferior grade and cut from the smaller sizes of Jaffna dead shells).¹³

Process of Manufacturing

It was very difficult for the artisans to work on or to cut the hard surface of the conch-shells into slices. Therefore the artisans applied the following processes for making the conch-shell products: the apex, tip and edges were first cut off with a hammer and the inner dust was cleaned. Next, tightly wedged between two bamboo stakes, the shell was placed between the right heels and left toe of the artisan and with a saw, the base was cut and from the remaining portion, the ring shapes were sliced by a curved saw. For finishing, holes were sealed with wax and fine coloured drops were painted on the joint. The bangles were then bleached in nitric acid solution and finally polished with a dry cloth. In order to utilise the broken pieces, they were joined together to make them into coloured bangles. The joining was done with the help of a lac stick, a gum from lac, resin and shell powder. The pieces were tied together by an extremely thin tin coil and coloured but because of the ingenuity of the artisans, the joints were invisible.¹⁴

The entire process was a laborious one and required great patience and skill. Two to eight bangles were cut out from a shell while the remainder was utilized for the making of rings, buttons and other trifles.¹⁵ The sawdust was used to prevent the pitting of smallpox, and as an ingredient of a valuable white paint. The remains of the mollusc (*Pitta*) after extracting from the shells were sold to native physicians as a medicine for spleen enlargement. The chips of the shells were used as gravel for garden walks, or sold to agents from Murshidabad, where beads were made of the larger pieces, and a paint, '*Mattiya Sindur*' of the smaller pieces.¹⁶

Findings/Result

1. The concept of conch-shell craft was very much associated with mythology.
2. The industry exhibited its caste and group specific occupation.
3. The indifferent attitude of the royal courts towards the craft was one of the reasons for its decline.
4. Young generation of the artisan society showed little interest in the craft.

Conclusion

Conch-shell carving was, undoubtedly, one of the most attractive and exclusive crafts of Bankura district in Bengal. A good number of artisans sustained their sustenance from this industry. But the disappearance of the native rulers and the introduction of the colonial rule drastically changed their lives and they reached on the verge of quitting their own profession and pursue the path of

agriculture and other works. Lack of interest towards indigenous art and craft among the young generation further proved fatal for them. So, in present scenario, it is the demand of the day that each and every responsible person must come forward to lend mental and moral support to this craft to revive it further, wherein there must be a greater role from the Central and State governments along with non-governmental organizations.

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