

CASTE-ING THE ARTISAN: EXPLORING THE DOKRA KAMARS OF BENGAL

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ABSTRACT:

India's craft culture is immortalized through its artisans and yet, support for their skills has been much too little. Particularly, the sociology of artisanship remains convoluted in narratives on informal work, national heritage and perhaps most importantly, caste. Caste assumes centrality because artisans belong to specialised groups and their craft-skills are inherited rather than acquired. This paper tries to single out these narrative strands and situate it within the everyday empirics of the Dokra Kamars, a traditional community of brass-casters in the village of Bikna in West Bengal. It provides an account of the Dokra Kamars of Bengal and examines the structural conditions that manifests within the life of these artisans. An attempt has been made to understand the historicity of artisanship in India by looking at studies on India's villages in the colonial period, which is followed by an exploration of the complicated matrices of power and patronage within which artisans work in the post-colonial context. This paper hopes to enrich existing theoretical debates on artisanship and also investigates avenues for further research.

I INTRODUCTION:

India's history is replete with stories of royal and aristocratic patronage that craft communities have received. Today, however, artisans appear to be in a quagmire of deep uncertainty due to the changing nature of markets, supposed lack of skill and most surprisingly, a loss of relevance in industrialized India. The craft sector often comes under scrutiny from both government-sponsored endeavours and benevolent private players who seek to improve the socio-economic and environmental conditions of these 'local' communities and teach them how to tap into 'global' markets. In highlighting the sociological contexts within which artisans are embedded, this paper makes an attempt to move away from the art-historical approach, usually adopted to study handicrafts, and focuses on how craft's malleability as a concept raises important questions about its productive and circulatory networks, and at the same time renders the community within which it is practised into a site of immense social churning.

Providing an operational definition of handicrafts and the many millions of artisans who make a living out of producing handcrafted goods is a difficult task because each body includes some occupation that others would not and excludes some that others would insist upon. One of the primary challenges therefore has to do with the multiplicity of definitions used by different sources, for instance, some use the word 'craftsperson' and 'artisan' interchangeably while others make a distinction. In some cases the term 'handicraft' is reserved for objects with clear aesthetic value and export success while in others, it includes any occupation that involves manual labour

[1]. Production within the handicrafts sector, which is generally group-based and hereditary in nature, is, unsurprisingly, also reliant on inter- and intra-group hierarchies specified by caste and other customs. As a result, much of the existing literature on artisans and handicrafts is studied as a subset of the catch-all term ‘informal economy’ where labour is imagined as ‘service’ or ‘duty’ and is predominantly focused on the rural setting, characterised by agrarian and factory work [2].

Coming to artisan economies, this sort of predominantly home-based production system has not garnered enough attention, even within informal labour, and when it has, it often tends to adopt a myopic view of handicrafts and artisans. The endeavour here is to critically engage with existing literature drawing from the disciplines of sociology, anthropology and development studies. This paper is interested in the crucial process that generates craft objects and in the construction of reality within craft-worlds rather than the object itself. Therefore, in the analysis of how these systems of knowledge are produced, emphasis will be given to the meaning-making aspects and an attempt will be made to breach the sacrosanctity of the ‘aesthetic’ paradigm which often presents artisans as people with an ‘inherent talent’ who serve their ‘calling’ in life. With regard to the Indian context, ‘folk art’ was initially framed as a constituent element of the country’s tradition to further nationalist discourse but in Independent India, it was recast as handicrafts, which belonged to the domain of commerce and would foster development through large-scale production. Recently however, scholars have articulated a need to blur these boundaries altogether.

II ARTISANS IN INDIA: LOOKING AT THE VILLAGE BEYOND THE AGRARIAN

Writing on the village community in India, Karl Marx writes about Indian artisans as service members of the community. Through his analysis of the Asiatic Mode of Production, Marx distinguished important features of the village economy in India, he wrote that the generalized propositions included that such societies were i) characterised by the absence of private property in land ii) consisted of self-sustaining village-communities whose internal cohesion was maintained by a unity between agricultural production and manufacturing within the craft industry iii) represented the unity of agriculture and manufacture which further provided the conditions for production and reproduction within the village itself. This gave stability but it also fostered a sense of stagnation for Indian social formation iv) finally, because of the absence of landed property and a system based on economic production, there was a solid foundation for Oriental despotism [3]. He identified groups of artisans like smiths and carpenters who made and repaired agricultural equipment, the potter who made earthenware for the village, blacksmiths, barbers, washermen and other occupations which were maintained at the cost of the entire village. Thus the fundamental principle of Asiatic societies seemed to be that at no point did the individual become independent of the society and due to this economic interdependence, political instability and large-scale disintegration could be resisted. Drawing from these observations, Max Weber noted regarding the village community that it was the caste system combined with a ‘magical traditionalism’ that made these societies stable. He also termed the labour of artisans as ‘demiurgic labour’ where the labourers were not paid for their work in detail but stood at the service of the community in return for a share in the land or harvest. Thus, they were village serfs and production relations in these communities were based on exchange value instead of use value. Artisans were therefore employees in the village who received a fixed share in

exchange for their services to the cultivators. Craft production only existed as a subsidiary to the agricultural mainstream. Weber also believed that the reason why wage labour did not emerge in the East was because it did not satisfy the two prerequisites for the emergence of capital, one was the exchange of free labour against money and the other was the separation of free labour from the conditions of its realisation. This meant that the worker must be separated from the land and there could exist no petty land ownership. It has also been observed by Weber that the 'karigar' or artisan was also unable to progress in his methods because services to the entire village were provided for regularly, even during troubling times. Thus, artisans who were assigned miscellaneous duties of the village could not specialise and the proficiency of the artisan in his craft was not of great value [4].

These views, however, have garnered criticism from scholars like Ronald Inden and Bernard Cohn, who take issue with the Indological construction of India's villages which has been called the 'Orientalist discourse' and explore the possibility that these facts about India's villages and artisans have been produced by a kind of 'episteme' which in turn is predicated upon a hierarchical disbursement of power between the knower and the known, privileging the knowledge of scientists, experts and leaders who make up the former and subjugating the knowledge of the people of the village who comprise the latter. Most Western scholars take for granted, according to Inden, that human nature which consists of a unitary essence, is most fully realized in the West. Thus their academic endeavours limit itself to the task of reconciling the essence of the non-Western Other's civilization to the Euro-American manifestation of human nature [5]. The Indological tradition which Inden points out largely emerged from British empiricism and utilitarianism and it also reifies the state and the market onto a substantialized idea of caste. It builds caste as the most important institution in India and as both the cause as well as the effect of India's low level of political and economic development. In a similar vein, Cohn also identifies texts by Western scholars and their accounts of India as hegemonic and critiques the descriptive, commentative and explanatory aspects of such texts [6]. Orientalist disciplines like Sinology, Indology, Arabic or Islamic studies and the study of 'classical' languages like Sanskrit and Chinese became the subject of his inquiry. The academic reproduction of these disciplines by scholars such as Marx's predecessor Hegel was critiqued in terms of its relations to the central question of power. Taking the Hegelian and Marxist conception of the Asiatic Mode of Production into consideration, these scholars argue how Western thinkers have engaged in a primordialization of the entire continent of Asia and specifically India, where the Brahmanical order of the four varnas undermined the multiplicity of the jatis through castes and sub-castes. As a closing comment it must be added that not all texts on the Indian village have been idealist and romanticist. Some have indeed dissented to this practise of privileging positivistic Western voices and brought about a paradigm shift [7].

III THE DOKRA KAMARS IN THE VILLAGE ECONOMY OF BENGAL

So far, this chapter has looked at the work of colonial anthropologists who studied the Indian village system to visualise the everyday-emperics of inter-caste relationship between non-agrarian castes and land-holding agricultural castes. It also engaged with the work of sociologists who have taken the framework of the village society forward, with specific attention to the way that the artisan economy was understood in India. In light of this, it would only be fair to conclude that the Indian village always had a differentiated economy and not just

within the peasant society but also in the case of artisans, wage labourers and folk artists who practised caste-based occupations. Now, this paper would elaborate further on the artisans of West Bengal, a relatively under-researched area within the discipline of Indian sociology. While historical research tried to provide a comprehensive overview of craft production in India, in sociology, such attempts were largely restricted to caste studies and village studies. As a result, although artisan castes found mention in a lot of sociological work, they never categorically became the ethnographic or theoretical focus of such studies. Further, these contributions took little cognizance of the intersections of art and economy, state recognition and the everyday processes that contribute towards the stability of tradition. In the case of Bengal, the strength and vitality of artisans in the region shaped the character of the political-economy, both in the colonial and post-colonial period. In various Bengali language books, facets of rural crafts from Bengal were explored and comprehensive analyses of the different government policies and initiatives were often undertaken to promote rural crafts.

Crafts in Bengal encompass a wide array of specialities and the emergence of handicraft cooperatives played a crucial role in the economic development of artisans in a post-colonial context. With greater economic benefits, artisans could build on their aesthetic skills and develop entrepreneurial strategies, even though they still faced threats from mal-practitioners and middlemen. In many other folk accounts of crafts found in districts such as Bankura and Purulia, local writers not only wrote on the origins of the district or the genealogy of the craft but also documented the daily delights and despairs of artisan life, technological transformations as well as the problems and prospects of craft. Rangankanti Jana's book *Dhokra Arts of West Bengal* provides one such account of the brass-casters of Bankura, focusing on the multi-step process of lost wax method which is used to make Dokra art objects in the districts of Bankura and Bardhaman. He writes about the origins of the art and the many facets of it, while shedding light on its 'marketing potential' in contemporary times. He writes that in Bengal, such groups are found predominantly in tribal regions and artisans make metal sculptures of both Hindu gods and goddesses as well as figurines of tribal people, animals and other such objects of everyday use, as well as jewellery. Significant craft clusters of Dokra Kamar artisans exist in Bikna (Bankura), Rampur (Bankura) and Dariyapur (near Gushkara in Bardhaman) and even though the artisans traditionally went around the villages repairing broken utensils, they gradually shifted to selling images, deities and then finally to making metal sculptures [8].

IV ARTISANS, STATE AND THE POLITICS OF PATRONAGE

Folk craft forms and prominent writings around the same have been part of a broader discourse on Orientalism, Romanticism and perhaps, most significantly, nationalism. In this section, folk craft as a category will be analysed in relation to the nationalist project in India, which was framed through the constitution of an innately Indian tradition. Swadeshi art and craft was hugely significant to the Indian freedom struggle because it played a crucial role in breaking the cultural hegemony of British rule, rebuilding self-identity and generating pride in an indigenous practise [9]. This paper provides a wealth of detail on the role played by artisans in the colonial period; however, the situation changed in the post colonial moment, as artisans went from being at the crux of the freedom struggle to occupying a peripheral position as beneficiaries of the development discourse. Furthermore, with time, a gradual lack of state patronage has eventually denigrated artisanal skills and led to a

process of stigmatisation in the contemporary moment. It further underscores how the establishment of formally acquired technical training such as engineering education resulted in artisans and their inherited skills becoming obsolete. Anastasia Piliavsky in the essay Patronage as Politics in South Asia brings to our attention the term patronage, commonly associated with art and craft. It is described as an unchanging phenomenon which is at the same time transactional and definitive in nature. It thrives, she writes, not despite but alongside the idea of democratic statehood. In her interpretation however, extant definitions are dismantled as she moves towards a reconfiguring of state-patronage in India, a process which can just as easily become the life-blood of India's political and social vitality. She argues that debates of patronage itself have lost their significance in social sciences. Patronage has, however, more recently been viewed as a political tool for tribals, peasants and the urban poor, to forge links between the government and the social peripheries these groups occupy. In South Asia, Piliavsky points out that studies of kingship and ethnographies of village exchanges have produced a narrative around patronage. In such societies patronage and the hierarchical relations it produced were purported to solidify the internally integrated village system. Across several chapters in the book Piliavsky explores village feasts in Rajasthan, pilgrimages and dance festivals in southern India and election campaigns in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra to show that political giving is never only a matter of redistribution of resources, it is also necessarily a rhetorical act where the politician's largess is posited as virtue. South Asian history is rife with examples of patronage that does not just include warlords, tribal chiefs, merchant princes and gangsters but also 'Chief Ministers, MLAs and policeman, white-clad Gandhians and royalty, British colonial administrators, everyman's politicians and modern India's grandest patron of all — Jawaharlal Nehru' [10].

In the post-colonial setting, the Indian state too, invested in generating more jobs and making the economy less labour-intensive. It vigorously wooed the industries and business, at the cost of ignoring local economies which were sustained by craft practices and employed close to two million artisans. There is no doubt that the flourishing factory floor boosted growth and development in the young democracy but it must be acknowledged that other economic activities too would have paid far richer dividends and would have created sustainable employment if the government had given as much attention or encouragement to it. This becomes the subject of Ajantha Subramanian's scholarly treatise where she presents her field-work on the genealogical origins of technical and scientific education in India, which culminated into the book *The Caste of Merit: Engineering Education in India*. Subramanian posits the argument that technical sciences became the prized measure of intellectual worth and proven means for professional success in India. She then elaborates on the structures, discourses and affiliations that shape the contours of a social stratification system predicated upon this naturalisation [11].

Subramanian argues that India's statesmen and planners were keen on departing from colonial invocation of caste and its relation to skill-building and instead wanted to focus on state-led social progress. Despite arguments being made in favour of a gradualist development path that would take into account the social and cultural fabric of native communities, a model of large-scale development emerged which privileged the professionally trained elite over the untrained, rural subjects of the hinterland. Within this world of post-colonial development, engineering education was purported to achieve its full potential and catapult the young democracy to a position of global relevance. Subramanian's research however stands out for its remarkable

detail on not just postcolonial models of education but even colonial strategies. Going back to the 19th Century, she documents that classroom based technical education started by colonial rulers also marginalized the technical skill of lower caste artisans and craftsmen to favour the newly manufactured expertise of school-goers learning to read and write. In the Madras Presidency, caste stratification was seen in the making of administrative categories of Brahmins and non-Brahmins that were relegated into different tiers of education. As a result upper caste students were overrepresented in colleges, with over seventy percent of students being Tamil Brahmins. With particular reference to the Nehruvian government's impetus towards the establishment of centrally controlled 'world-class' engineering education institutes like the IITs, and IIT- Madras specifically, Subramanian argues that technical education in India was given importance because of the acute need for industrial development. However, this meant that all other educational institutes and training centres, including regional colleges and technical schools for artisans and industrial workers lost significance and vital funding [11, *ibid*]. The IIT-ian engineer was made a key beneficiary of the developmental state which eventually betrayed the patron-state's apathy towards artisans and rural industries.

V MODALITIES OF PATRONAGE FOR DOKRA KAMARS:

To interpret the processes of state patronage afforded to Dokra artisans, one must first understand the phases of development the craft went through. This itself is an arduous task given the fact that Dokra artisans across India have been heterogeneously classified into Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes, depending on the socio-economic parameters of classification prevalent in the region to which they belonged. For Dokra Kamars in Bengal, who are the subject of this study, it should be mentioned that they presently identify as Karmakars who belong to the Other Backward Classes. Five major phases of development can be identified within this craft cluster which shows how state patronage impacts craft traditions. In the initial two phases, artisans in Bikna made figurines of Hindu religious deities like Bhairon and Shiva, along with elephant and horse figurines. However, with the introduction of state patronage, which did not come from the government per se but from social elites like famous Expressionist sculptor Meera Mukherjee and artist Ramkinkar Baij, the group gained recognition in the Kolkata based craft circles. Mukherjee particularly imbibed Dokra art techniques and motifs in much of her work, once she was accepted as an insider and introduced artisans to new forms of sculpting. During this phase, the famous 'Bankura horse', considered a reserve of the Kumbhakars or potters in Bengal was successfully adopted for casting in metal. Originally found in the terracotta temples of Bishnupur in southern Bengal, the strategic importance of learning to incorporate the Bankura horse into the sculptures made by Dokra artisans must also be addressed in this case since the object is considered a quintessential part of Indian handicrafts and was eventually declared to be the logo of the All India Handicrafts Board. This in turn opened Dokra artisans up to increased visibility, where they learned to cater to cheap souvenir markets for tourists from Kolkata and other parts of the country. The transition from making objects of religious significance to making 'novelty' items like horses, miniature boats and umbrellas and the process of describing their creations not in their own words but as interpreted by the vocabulary of the market is itself a function of patronage. While non-governmental sources of patronage kept the artisans going, state

patronage for Dokra artisans was negligible and the sustainability of the craft is despite and not owing to the state government's effort.

VI CONCLUSION

Human society is dynamic and its cultural and socio-economic landscape is consistently in a flux. Such changes in the systems of production, applications of technology, change in market forces, material needs and the aesthetic sense of people lead to a complete refashioning of the total community. This is perhaps especially true for craft communities. So far this paper has endeavoured to provide a nuanced theoretical vignette of a social group, namely artisans, who may be united on the basis of a shared occupation but are fractured through their lived experiences. The rationale for undertaking this study was primarily motivated by the gap in our understanding of the 'social' with regard to artisans in India. Bengal's crafts are particularly valued for its diversity, from Chhau dance, Conch shell carving and weaving crafts to brass and bell metal, stone carving, terracotta and clay modelling to even bamboo craft and the making of fishing hooks [12]. Amidst this, brass-casters known as Dokra Kamars have been able to hold their own in this diverse arena due to their techno-based skill and unique aesthetic sense. Not only have they excelled in making niche objects but have also demonstrated the ability to switch to other craft professions. The traditional brass-casting artisans of Bikna village in Bankura, have been particularly diligent in rendering their invaluable service to India's people while continuing to identify as a subaltern group in one of the most neglected regions of rural Bengal, where support from the state and the free-market has been much too little and much too late. This paper has attempted to tell their story, from the colonial period to the present times and through these contributions, it has tried to consolidate support which would attract government attention towards this vulnerable group. However, an important rejoinder to add would be the fact that these themes were identified for the purposes of drawing conclusions in this paper. Thus, these themes are porous and do not behave as a watertight whole. Instead, they continue to evolve and cross-cut one another, as and when the social and occupational mobility of artisans undergoes transitions. The paper has carefully analysed a wealth of academic and development literature and on the basis of that, it has put together an exhaustive theoretical background which may serve to help future studies undertaken towards the task of arriving at a comprehensive conceptual formulation.

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