

# Dokra, the traditional art : A journey from 'margin' to 'centre' [A field study of Bikna Shilpadanga, Bankura, West Bengal]

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## ARTICLE DETAILS

### Article History

Published Online: 05 July 2018

### Keywords

Art & Craft, Tradition, Lost wax, Hardships, Development

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## ABSTRACT

The name 'Dokra' was used to indicate a group of crafts persons of nomadic type scattered over eastern and central India and was identified by their beautifully shaped and decorated metal products which are characterized by its primitive simplicity, charming folk motifs, rustic beauty and imaginative designs and patterns. It is one of the earliest known methods of non-ferrous metal casting known to human civilization as the 'lost wax casting (cire oerdue) process. But despite a high demand of the products of Dokra for its medieval simplicity, enhancing folk motifs and vitality of form in the local and the global market where fashion and luxury industries take maximum share in trading market, it seems difficult for sustenance of Dokra art and craft and the artisans at Bikna Shilpadanga, Bankura have been undergoing many hardships in carrying on with this traditional & age old craft of India. The present paper is, therefore, a modest attempt to provide an account of dokra craft of Bikna with an objective of highlighting the current socio economic status of 'Dokra' and its artisans and also the benevolent measures already taken up for the upliftment of the craft and the people attached to it.

## 1. Introduction

The name 'Dokra' was used to indicate a group of crafts persons of nomadic type scattered over eastern and central India and was identified by their beautifully shaped and decorated metal products which are characterized by its primitive simplicity, charming folk motifs, rustic beauty and imaginative designs and patterns. It is one of the earliest methods of non-ferrous metal casting known to human civilization. The lost or vanishing wax casting method (*cire perdue*) of metal casting, popularly known as Dokra, is a primitive technique, which can be traced back to the Indus valley civilization. Dokra statues are revered all over the world for its primeval simplicity and enthralling folk motifs. These figures have a rustic and antique finish which adds to its appeal.

## 2. Dokra as a Traditional Art

It is said that about three thousand years ago the king of Bastar, which is in the state of Chattisgarh, was gifted a Dokra necklace for his wife. He was charmed on seeing the necklace and thus honoured the craftsmen with the title, 'Ghadwa'. The name Ghadwa has been derived from the word 'Ghalna' meaning melting and working with wax. They are also known as Vishwakarma, Ghasia, Mangan and Kansara in some regions of India. Thus, the process of 'lost wax' (*cire perdue*) is very traditional and primitive and the famous bronze 'dancing girl' found in Mohenjo-Daro in the Indus Valley is believed to have followed the same process, i.e; the 'lost wax' method. Moreover, regarding its primitiveness three old Sanskrit texts namely (i) *Manasara* (ii) *Silparatna* and (iii) *Manasollasa* where there are documentary evidences of its antiquity may also be alluded to justify the point. A few hundred years ago the Dokra makers of Central and eastern India travelled as far as Andhra Pradesh in the south and Rajasthan in the north and thus the art form is now practised all over India. The main pockets practicing Dokra are Bastar in Chattisgarh, Ushegaon and Chittabori in Adilabad

district of Andhra Pradesh, Puri, Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj and Khurda in Orissa, Purulia, Bardhaman, Bankura and Midnapore in West Bengal and semi-tribal communities living at the mountain ranges of Vindhya in Madhya Pradesh.



Fig.1 A piece of Dokra art



Fig. 2 Hindu Goddess Durga

### 3. The Lost Wax Casting Method

**The Lost Wax Casting Method:** Nomadic communities scattered across the Chhotanagpur and Central India plateau traditionally make Dokra measures and other artifacts by the 'lost wax casting' (*cire perdue*) process. A small amount of coating of delicately readied clay paste is applied over the wax replica and dried out in the shadow. It is then covered with a thick layer of clay keeping a hole on top. Molten metal is poured into the mould to replace wax layer. The caste is then taken out to give finishing touches and perfected with immense love, care and creativity.

**The Raw Materials:** Brass and bell metal scrap, resin, wood, gum, tar, wax, mustard oil, coal and soil of a particular type locally known as *Nena*, are the various raw materials. Crafts persons procure the raw materials from the local market.

**The Tools:** Tongs, hammer, drill machine, buffing machines, gas welding machine, crucible are the tools used by the artists.

#### The Process :

The lost or vanishing wax hollow casting method (*cire-perdue*) of metal casting is used for making Dokra products.

There are six stages in the process. These stages are - :

**Stage 1 :** A clay core is modelled in the shape of the desired product. Generally, it is smaller than the desired size of the final product.

**Stage 2 :** Clay core is covered by a layer of wax and tar or tar and rasin wood gum.

**Stage 3 :** The outer layer is shaped and carved in all its finest details.

**Stage 4 :** Clay covering is done to form a mould for pouring in metal. Drain ducts are left for the wax, which melts away when the clay is baked. The wax is replaced by the molten metal. The liquid metal poured in hardness between the core and the inner surface of the mould.

**Stage 5 :** Moulded product is baked. The metal fills the mould and takes the same shape as the wax.

**Stage 6 :** Outer layer of clay is chipped off and the metal figure is polished and finished.



Fig. 3 & 4 : Different stages in Dokra



Fig. 4 Dokra process ( Moulding )

### 4. A Gallery of Dokra Crafts

Initially crafts persons used to make traditional items like measuring bowls, bells of different kinds, lamps and simple jewellery for their family members and lamps. But at present the crafts persons make a wide range of decorative items. Dokra products like bullock cart, horse, elephant, peacock, owl, Nandi (bull), idols of Durga, Saraswati, Ganesh and Lakshmi Narayan, lamp, candle stand, incense stick holder, ash tray, soap case, mobile holder, door knob, figurines of women, mother and child, tribal couple, wall panels with stories of Krishna Leela and other designs and so on are made. Traditionally, the crafts persons made jewellery for their own family members while now a variety of modern jewellery products like necklace with beads and Dokra lockets, ear rings, bangles are made. Creative pieces like Krishna on chariot, tribal figures etc. are also produced.

### 5. A brief introduction of Bikna Shilpadanga, Bankura

The history of Dokra artisans in Bikna is about 150 years old. The crafts persons at that time migrated from Chhotanagpur region to Rampur, beside Bikna. From there the crafts persons settled in Bikna which later became the hub. Bikna Shilpadanga is, thus, actually a close-knit community or a concentration of nearly 70-75 families and the total number of people residing there is 300-315 ( male – 165, female 150). It is situated near village Bikna just beside NH- 60 under Block – II, Bankura, West Bengal and under Burdwan Division. It is surrounded by Bankura Block - 1 towards west, Onda Block towards south, Gangajalghati Block towards north. Most of the family, nearly 70 in number consists of 1-4 persons and rest 5 family comprises of 5-8 persons. People inhabiting here are all 'Karmakar' by sub caste meaning metal workers. But it is a pity that they remain deprived of all the benefits of being OBC by caste since most of them have no valid certificate in their favour. Among 315 persons here, 280 members passed their primary level of education, 20 persons passed class VIII, 4 members passed Secondary exam from local high school and 3 other are yet to sit for HS exam and have been reading in class XII . Rest 8 persons are nearly illiterate. The craft by nature and function to coin a phrase is actually 'learned by being'. Children in Bikna grow up in an environment where the dokra craft is everywhere around them. Every spare corner of the village is taken up by drying moulds or artifacts in various stages of preparation. Small children learn soon to imitate their elders, playing with clay making cares and eventually graduating to detailed

modelling in 'Dhuno'. It is difficult to make a living at all unless the family is fully engaged in the craft. This militates against extended education. Most children manage two or three year of schooling. But, the appeal of joining the adult is very alluring and social pressures to contribute are great.

## 6. Socio-Economic Status of Dokra and the Artisans : A Marginal Art

Dokra is sometimes considered to be a marginal art. It may be because that the art and its artists' entity are so interlinked to each other and each of their identity are so inter fused that people very often look into Dokra art from the frames of marginality. Truly speaking, no art can ever be marginal; but the very circumstances and the infrastructural background only make it so. Here too, the artisans attached to Dokra have been suffering under dire poverty, from mal nutrition, lack of education, unhygienic sanitation and poor drinking system and proneness to various addictions. Apart from these, the highly prized craft has been facing so many socio-economic problems that contribute to its marginal identity to the world at large. We can allude to some of these problems here :

1. It is a common belief that most of the Dokra artisans belong to the very poor strata of the society and devoid of any sort of education they are destined to be the poor craftsmen and so to pass their lives under such a distressing state.
2. The Dokra artists are getting discouraged and less interested in showing same vigour and energy for displaying best in them with the constant price rise of the raw materials of Dokra.
3. Lack of standard education, employment and sanitary system in the area is a great hurdle for the proper development of this traditional craft.
4. Ineffective infrastructure of the co-operatives fund at Bikna gather low profit margin for the artisans. Naturally, they remain deprived of any kind of monetary resource from outside.
5. Advertisements of the products may bring fruitful result. But since it needs money, the Dora artists can not avail this type of facility.
6. Since there is no assistance of the marketability of their products, nor their any marketing network system, often the Dokra products remain unsold at their houses. In result, the supply is getting lower due to the lack of a proper marketing system.
7. No separate employability is found in the area. So all people without any choice of their own have to remain satisfied with this art.
8. Education is a process by which one can understand his and her position in the society. It is not a process of learning for living best but a leading process of socialization for future adjustment. In the area, under discussion, literacy rate though not very discouraging,

still most of the people are still away from the desired level of education that can contribute to the up liftment of their social status by virtue of marketability and profitable development in the craft .

9. Lack of education lead them to so many social evils and vices like addiction to liquor, gambling that may ruin their families and hurl them into the abysmal gulf of poverty ultimately resulting in the total ruin of the family.
10. Due to lack of weather shade they are to face hardships working during the rainy season.
11. Since the village is situated in the outskirts of the town it becomes very difficult for the artists living there to be very up to date with the current developments of the society in every aspects, be it regarding developed technology, loan facility from the banks, free housing scheme from the Govt., marketability of their products and many more.
12. With their very birth and growing a little the children in the family of the Dokra artists come to know that Dokra is going to be their all source of livelihood. So, it is in their blood. Hence, they lack any formal training / course on the subject which may add to the level of efficiency in their skill.
13. Another big issue of cultural identity has been threatening their entity in recent past. They are to compete with the industries that are producing similar kind of products with much developed technical support which these artists of Dokra lack in though they are the original.
14. Dependence on local money lenders owing to lot of problems in getting loans from banks and their consequent loss of interest in this sector, they are trapped in debt with huge interest rate.
15. Often the original artists remain deprived of the profit and the intermediaries enjoy the margin of profit to their heart's content.

## 7. Benevolent Measures in regard to Dokra : A Journey to 'Centre'

English Romantic poet Shelley says, "If winter comes / Can spring be far behind?". Really, as there are problems, inadequacies and hardships regarding Dokra and its artisans, there must be some solutions for a new dawn. Accordingly, many benevolent and welfare measures have been taken up for its promotion and up liftment in the national and the global world at large. With the passage of time and due to certain beneficial and healthy measures and good intention on the part of the govt, there is a kind of sea change in the status of Dokra and its artisans in the recent past.

Rabindranath Tagore long back perceived that the craft items would not only be recognised by their artistic excellence. But will also be effectively self sustained and Ban Ki Moon,

Secretary-General, United Nations years later has referred to the new models of participation and full ownership of development strategies through the full integration of culture. With these end in view, Govt. of West Bengal (Dept. of Micro Small & Medium Enterprises and Textiles) in Sep. 2013 signed a partnership agreement with UNESCO, New Delhi to develop 10 rural craft hubs in the state covering 3000 families traditionally skilled in craft traditions. Dokra is one of them. In December same year UNESCO engaged its partner Contact Base to facilitate designing and implementation of the project. The project is aimed at strengthening creative entrepreneurship at grassroots, helping the rural artists to reach out to global market, strengthening livelihood of the handicraft artists and making the craft villages as cultural tourism destinations. To maximise the benefit, the Dept. has also engaged WB Khadi & Village Industries Board to provide the necessary hard interventions including common facility centre, marketing outlets & equipments to the artists' clusters as per community expectations and requirements.

Capacity building of Dokra artists providing direct market linkage access and creating exchange – collaboration opportunities with State, National and International artists are key components of this soft intervention. Capacity building of Dokra artists' communities have strengthened technical, business and life skills. National and international market linkage have helped them to achieve growth and sustainability of business and exchange and collaboration have contributed in developing exposure leading to innovations.

Some of the other favourable initiatives for the promotion of Dokra crafts are :

1. The people no longer remain ignorant of the various economic advantages as forwarded by the govt to them. Their society is provided with Rs. 5 lakh without any interest by the govt as only the working capital.
2. For maintenance of all the infrastructure as provided by the govt for their betterment, the salary scheme for the manager and sweeper have already been introduced. A sum of Rs. 1 lakh is granted every year only for this purpose.
3. A well furnished museum is built for the Dokra arts and crafts to be displayed along with the exposure of the President award winner eminent Dokra artist Late Juddha Karmakar and his various achievements.
4. The museum is well furnished and equipped with all kinds of modern electronic gazettes like computer, printer, scanner, LED TV and what not. From the visitor's diary the frequency of the foreigners' visit from America, Australia and many more countries every week in the area can easily be guessed.
5. A well furnished Guest house with a minimum rent per night Rs. 200/- for the outsiders is also built and till now Rs. 20000/- is collected from its rent as per the account provided by Sri Somnath Karmakar, the

manager of the Bikna Hastajata Dokra Kutir shilpa Kalyan Samity.

6. In the outside of the village outlets (showrooms) have been inaugurated by the Hon'ble CM of West Bengal few months back.
7. Every year just after / before Durga puja a Dokra festival just beside the Shilpa danga is being held for the marketability of their goods. Its promotion has helped the villagers to get 'identity' and evolve as destinations. These festivals have created local 'recognition', attracted outsiders to the place, developed new partnerships including media and also benefited the larger communities around the Dokra village. Other than improved socio economic status of the direct beneficiaries, this initiative is expected to create rural growth poles with increased involvement of local youth and women in development process and reduce out migration. The aim is to create increased awareness on the handicraft hubs (Dokra) in the global market.
8. By the good effort of Somnath Karmakar, the manager they have already attached themselves with Face Book, Twitter, Skype, You Tube; they have a created a FB page of their own and thus people now all over the world can have access to the Dokra world even not coming over here.
9. The Dokra artists are now a days very frequent sellers in the various festivals be it rural or urban.
10. The manager is very active in attending various workshops and orientations held in places like Shillong, American Centre, Kolkata, Hyderabad to cope themselves up with latest method and technology.
11. So many people have been working on Dokra and the students of the colleges & University remain actively busy with this age old traditional art with the projects on it.
12. The CFCH team visited the Dokra (metal craft) hub at Bikna. There they met young artist Somnath Karmakar who took them around the village and they showed interest in the art for future promotion.
13. Leading artists like Gita Karmakar and Harendranath Rana have represented their community at UK and France respectively. Amar Karmakar, Dhiren karmakar, Nitai Karmakar are state awardees. Late Juddha Karmakar was a President award winner. The craft persons as already stated are organized under Bankura Bikna Hastajata Dokra Kutir Shilpa Kalyan Samity which was set up in 2013.
14. Common Facility Centres have been built in Bikna with the support of West Bengal khadi and Village

Industries Board. The buildings have common work space along with accommodation facilities for guests.

15. As we see, imagination, variety and technique, all three have come together in this rural traditional craft from Bengal. Hence, we can call it the advanced art form of the indigenous people which now has won a permanent place in the living rooms of the elites. It is no longer considered to be a marginal art.



Fig.5 Dokra Festival



Fig.6 Visitor from abroad in the Dokra museum

## 8. Conclusions

Handicrafts of Bengal like Dokra and others embody our rich cultural heritage of aesthetics, creativity and artistry. In today's globalised world, the growing retail industry, fashion and luxury markets, demand for green production and potential for e-commerce have created new opportunities for developing a vibrant craft economy thereby providing increased income opportunities to the artisanal communities. Besides, its high potential for employment, the craft sector is economically important from the point of low capital investment, high ratio of value addition, high potential for export and foreign exchange earnings for the country. The Govt. of West Bengal thus aims to unleash the potential of the sector in terms of employment, enterprises, export and growth. Overall, we expect these handicraft hubs to evolve as 'water source' for development through its identity, generate relevant input for policy development and help the Govt. to strengthen the schemes for craft sector. Thus we may conclude, the journey of Dokra craft has already begun and is on its way from the 'margin' to 'centre'.

## Acknowledgment

Somnath Karmakar, Manager, The Bikna Hastajata Dokra Kutir shilpa Kalyan Samity and the villagers of Bikna Shilpadanga, Bikna, Bankura.

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