

Revisiting Indigenous Craft of West Bengal, Wooden Doll of Natungram: A Review of Socio Economic Study

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ABSTRACT

Handicrafts in Bengal imply a bold heritage of aesthetic beauty and creativity provides an economic lifeline to the weaker section of rural society. Wooden doll making of Natungram village is such type of activity run by a group of craft persons. Owl sculptures from Natungram in Bardhaman district shares the iconic status in representing Bengal's handicraft. These craft persons are known as "Sutradhar" or story teller as they tell different stories of ancient mythology during making their dolls and reflect it throughout their products. Though they make doll of different god and goddess, also make some products outside of these depends on demand. Some shape of products are traditionally carries out by them through the remote past, while some innovative has also evolved throughout their working skills. Some artisans make wooden mask depicting customary religious sentiments. An Owl with its distinctive nature became an icon of products found each and every household as it carries a symbol of wealth and auspiciousness. Some of important figure like Devi Durga, Lord Ganesha, Radha-Krishna, Gour-Netai, King and Queen are common to all. All activities carried out by these craft persons only to sustain their lives as they don't have any other means of agricultural land and bound to follow the work either by choice or by chance. Here an effort to highlight some aspect of their lives and related socio-economic condition to draw the attention and try to promote their artisanal activities to help them to find out a better means of lives.

Introduction

Wooden doll making through carving is a form of wood working done by using simple carpenter's tools like 'batali', 'cheni' with a specialised hand and perfect eye view. The history of wooden doll making in India dates back to ancient past. People in earlier 'Mahanjadaro' civilization also involved with this work but were truly for domestic needs. Later gradually it starts to take the shape of an art which became a profession of a mass of people to sustain their livelihood and carried the work on due to its enormous demands. Now the modern wood carving has touched the level of unique perfection with a blend flavour of traditional taste. Several places dotted over our country are specialized with this techniques, Natungram village of Bengal in one of such place unique with its crafts products.

About Natungram Village

Natungram is a small village under Purbasthali- II Block of Bardhaman district in West Bengal. Bardhaman is rich with historical legacies and well connected by bus and train from Kolkata. The village is located under Katwa sub-division. More than 200 families reside here in four 'Para' and one of such Para known as 'Mistri Para' holding 82 families with their excellent craftsmanship are continuing to devote their work throughout the recent past. Men usually cut and carve the wood, while the women and children colour the dolls. The doll makers have last name 'Bhaskar', meaning sculptor

or 'Sutradhar', meaning story teller. The doll makers are Hindu and the average age of the artisans are 36 years.

Way to reach

Nearest railway station is Agaradwip, 15 minute walking distance from the station. By bus nearby bus stops are either Patuli or Katwa both are 14-15km. from the village and 2-3 hour driving distance from burdwan and 4 hour from Kolkata.

Demand of the products

It holds its demands through the immemorial times of ancient past due to its own uniqueness and ethnic beauty which give it separate platforms. Nothing deferent in products of this village also now it crosses state as well as its national boundary. Its demand is increasing day by day though mainly for using decorative purposes such as used as ornaments, or as low carved stools for marriages. Some families keep it at entrance of the gate or door or walls to show their status in society. Different toys, dolls, figures which carry the religious sense attract ordinary people to pursuits their common beliefs. Recently in various fare and festivals it helps to decorate pandels and give an aesthetic beauty with some importance.

The stories and myth behind the craft is that which has gained immense popularity under the Bardhaman Maharaja. The traditional designs based on culture and mythology, the richness of ideas, the brilliant combination of pure simplicity

and glamour combined with the master craftsmanship of the artisans, result in an amazing work of art.

Traditionally they are specialized in making the wooden owl of different sizes; considered auspicious for homes as it is the 'vahana' or escort of the goddess Lakshmi. Apart from these, the craft persons used to make 'Rashiputul' (figures of Radha-Krishna on a single block of wood), Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, figures of the king and queen etc.

Materials needed for the products

Figure is curved out by carving or simply making colour on it, and there is no restriction for opting colours. They are free to select any colour of their choice. Two types of wood are used. For coloured figure they use locally soft woods namely 'Pituli', 'Amra', 'Mango' tree etc, and for carving purpose they used hardwood like 'Gamer', 'Mahogany', 'Neem' etc. which are also locally available or sometimes borrowing from nearby villages. Simple carpenter's tools like batali, cheni, saw etc. are using to give the perfect shape.

Method of wooden doll making through carving

This wooden doll making technique is simple to describe but difficult to make perfect. It needs a severe concentration with experienced hand works. Family members obtained this skills and techniques traditionally from their elder one. Both men and women along with their children are involving in this craftsmanship. The whole process takes different time depending on the nature of the products. Here it splits into various steps as follows:

Step-I

At first a block of cylindrical wood is cut off according to size and left it for 2-6 month and allows it to get both water and light to increase its vulnerability, locally termed as, Season Wood.

Step-II

A chunk of wood is then being made from nearby wooden mill and from it prepared different size by using common instrument like chisel, due, axle etc. The size may be vary from 2" to 6ft according to demand. Wooden pieces are left on sun light to draw out all moisture. After that various designs is to be scoop out on it. If the carving is too large several pieces of wood may be laminated to get the required size. Then it cleaned and smoothed by 'sirish' paper.

Step-III

In some weaker woods characterized with several cracks a fine layer of mud is being used. Mud is also used along with small pin to join various parts of a doll.

Step-IV

In case of figures which are being shaped by traced on the piece (especially on hard wood) are not subjected to coloured. Some cases mahogany colour (dye colour mixed with spirit) is to be made to get its extra look. Other figures which are coloured, before go through oil painting or fabric they used some white distemper throughout the model for long lasting the colour. Painting with colour is done by fine brushes ranging size from 0.1 -10 according the situation demand. Generally a product become ready for marked within 3-4 days though it varies depending on the size and nature of designed made on it.

Different types of wooden doll:

Along with a change in lifestyle, the influx of metal and plastic, and machine-made goods, have threatened the traditional woodcraft. Once prevalent over many districts in West Bengal, making of wooden toys and dolls, is now found only in a few places.

The wave of Bhakti movement in Bengal in the 15 and 16th century introduced the Gour-Nitai dolls, a pair of male figures with hands outstretched over their heads. They represent Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (Gour) and his close disciple Nityananda. Lord Krishna in his many forms also became popular. Another divine doll is that of Gopinath, the guardian deity of Agradwip, a town on the Burdwan-Nadia border.

Perhaps it was the royal influence (Burdwan is a former royal kingdom of Bengal) that introduced the making of soldier dolls.

But the most popular is the pair of owlets, with its origin rooted in religion. There are many old Hindu families in Bengal who still worship a pair of painted wooden owls to seek the blessings of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. They are believed to represent the pair of owlets, according to mythology, who had helped a poor mother and son earn fortunes by recommending them to the goddess of wealth. Despite being poor and managing with frugal meals, the little boy never failed to share his food with the birds, which later stood him in good stead.

Earlier, the owls would be painted with red, green and yellow on a white base, with black used to paint the eyes and other features. But now varied colours are used as a base and its worth as artistic room decoration has replaced its religious appeal.

The dolls lack modern sophistication but preserve in themselves a rustic beauty, the hallmark of ethnic crafts. There are three to four distinct varieties of dolls. The sari of bride dolls are painted with such skills that no one can find anything amiss even though the dolls have no limbs.

Earning means of livelihood

They have been making dolls since childhood, having learnt the art from his ancestors.

These are the one and only way to lead their daily life. Presently they also made some products of wood like stool which is partly made of wood and partly through weaving. Men are usually prepared the block, made different designs on it whereas women either make colour on it or netting the nets. Children also help to carve out small figure. Few families hold some agricultural land where rice is the main crop. All the family members from age 5 to 65 years are give their labours in various section of the production.

Incidentally, wooden doll makers of Nutangram got a fresh lease of life under the aegis of collaboration between Banglanatak (a social enterprise), Government of West Bengal and UNESCO, New Delhi. Apart from making traditional dolls as standalone pieces, the craftsmen are now incorporating these dolls into furniture. Small stools, laptop tables and larger tables have owls or soldier dolls for stands. The dolls are also being incorporated into designer cupboards and boxes.

Housing condition

Most of the houses are Pucca and even those who live in katcha houses have a portion of concrete walls or floors. Each and every house located so closely without having any definite boundary or wall helps to make a cluster type settlement. Most of the families have separate kitchen, few of them use gas for that purpose, and others use wooden remnants.

Literacy

Out of 250-300 people 50% are managed to completed secondary education. Though, in present generation all of them are going to school. Eight people become graduate and out of which three are now able to find out a job and working as a school teacher. Though none can find out with M.A/M.Sc but it is not far from their reach. All the children irrespective of boys and girls have good habit to school. Now various scheme like „Kanyashree Prokolpo’ run by state govt. is encouraging the children in general and the girl child in particular to bring them in school arena. Two schools namely Bahara primary school and Janaki Nath Baba Madhyamik School serve within the village and at Agradwip there are so many schools to fulfill their needs.

Problems

It is no doubt that they are well skilled and highly professional in their fields, there is no problem related to their work efficiency but apart from these so many surrounding issues which are affecting their lives are continue to exert its influences over their work which are inevitable in nature and they have to suffer from it. They are now facing lots of problem like supply of good quality of wood at a reliable price. Due to insufficient supply they do not make order confirm in time. Economic constrains is another big issue which become a hinder in the production. Outside source is nothing; they do not manage to get profit from agriculture as a result it become difficult to carry the production cost as they hardly received any substantial and regular supply of sufficient loans from DIC. Somehow, if they able to overcome it, another issue arise in form of marketing the products as there is not fixed and definite place where they can sell it through the year round. They have to wait for various occasions for that purpose. They also do not get orders outside the month of fair-festivals. During ongoing time of festivals from govt. initiative they are representing in various stalls with their products but in some cases of exhibition or in fair during the end of programme either they have to sold their products at low prices or carry the transport cost to way back with their products which become an extra burden for them. Digital illiteracy is another one, they don't have the proper means to get authentic information about what type of facilities they can avail from government and what is the procedure to get it or how will they approach for it. With the advent of time, there have been minor modifications but generally they stick to traditional designs.

Lack of orders

The situation is different this year, with hardly any work. Sutradhar feels that Durga Puja, the main festival of Bengal, will not bring smiles to their faces or fill up their pockets because of dearth of orders this year. Sharing similar sentiments, other artists of Natungram said that just a handful of them have received some orders, with the others remaining

idle. Mainly in the effect of pandemic situation the community is also under pressure and panic.

Suggestion

There are some necessary requirements for smoothly conducting the craftsmanship process. Though problem is a universal and never ending phenomenon but for overcome it and stands back in their own feet it is necessary to provide some facilities or help them to make their ground. Some immediate needs should concern positively like Supply of necessary information through making of their own community centre. Their work should be highlighted through the leaflet, pamphlet or power point presentation in different exhibition outside the state both in regional and state language to attract mass audience. Help them to build up their proposed cluster centre which is still on the way of processing since the last few years. Government should have to take a special care for them to increase their active participation in various fare-festivals and exhibition to market their products and also make the provision for compensate if there any chance of losses. At the same time it should be ensure that they can receive the orders throughout the year. Timely measures facilitate socio-economic revival of artisan community. Government should have to take a special care for them to increase health support and general awareness.

Concluding Remarks

The artisans of Natungram village are now leading their lives with similar to others villagers. There is no other identity except 'sutradhar' or 'bhaskar' on this ground. Situation is like that they are forcing to left their traditionally craft work and adopted other profession and the change is not accepted by elders often make regret that we are going to lost our arts. They don't have any positive attitude towards govt. responses. But the situation become quite changed and developed after the introduction of Bangla natok.com in their social and economical life. It has been working from the year 2014 and helped them to exhibit their products outside or within the state. Though Manjusha and DIC both have tried to work upto the mark of satisfaction, bangla natok.com is throwing a light of hope for their better and prosperous future. For the past few years, Nutangram, under the aegis of Bangalnatak, has been holding an annual fair in winter where people can watch the craftsperson at work, participate in workshops, and buy directly from the artisan.

It is not the one and only responsibility of the government to work for them but it's also our responsibility to make our ancient glorious craft safe with its full forms and originality. The govt. and private organization both should have to work hand in hand to provide a better way of living opportunity and to overcome their barriers.

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