REVISITING THE ROOTS

POTPURRI

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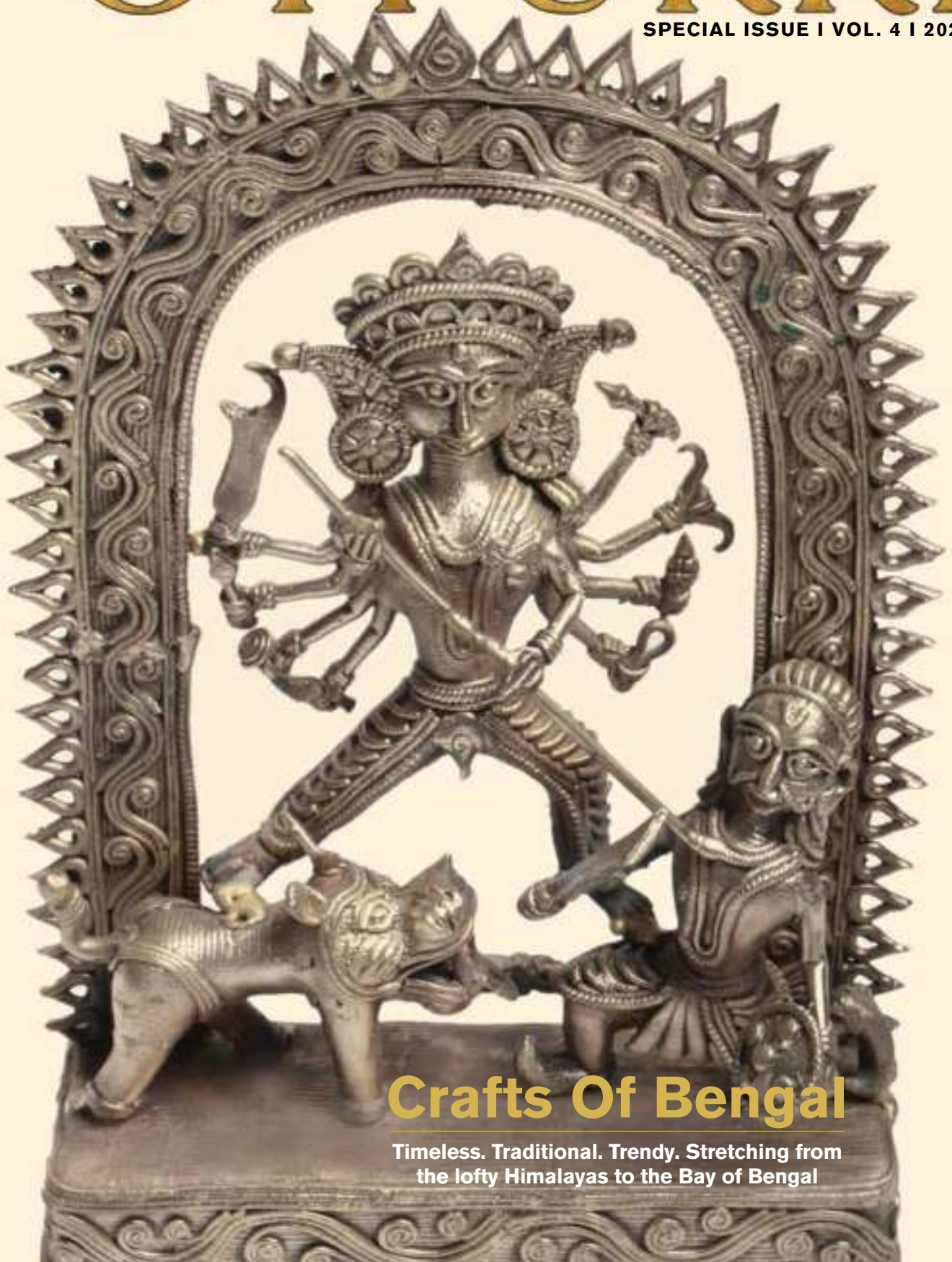

Crafts Of Bengal

Timeless. Traditional. Trendy. Stretching from the lofty Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal

“It is not enough to know your craft; you have to have feeling. Science is all very well, but for us imagination is worth far more”

Edouard Manet

CHAIRMAN’S NOTE

Harshavardhan Neotia
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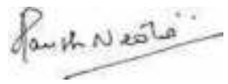
India’s craft history goes back to the times of the Indus Valley Civilization. From intricate frescoes on stone and wood to metal making, weaving, and fashioning reed mats and pottery, the purpose of crafts and their manufacturing process were as varied as the cultures that produced them. West Bengal’s wonderful range of indigenous crafts has not only caught the imagination and attention of a global audience, but also renewed interest in its variety and vitality, making many of them sustainable and worthy of support. Be it the Bankura Horse, the Dokra figurines or the array of textile, craft in West Bengal is often an integral part of our village life, steeped in its ancient mores.

Every craft has a connection to a particular region and depicts the enormous skill of the craftsperson. The nexus between the maker and the user is vital to the flourishing of any living tradition. The arts and crafts industry is no different and remains a dynamic space where innovation and inventiveness constantly mingle to ensure economic sustainability. Our indigenous crafts not only provide income but are also a great impetus to the imagination and dignity of the rural artists.

The annals of tradition reflected in our crafts give us a glimpse of civilizations and times across centuries infused with diverse experiences. They enable us to reflect on customs and traditions that link the past with the present. Handicrafts are a mirror of the cultural identity of our ethnic people who make it. And, without doubt, they carry the magnificent appeal of age-old artistic tastes that give them their exclusive identity.



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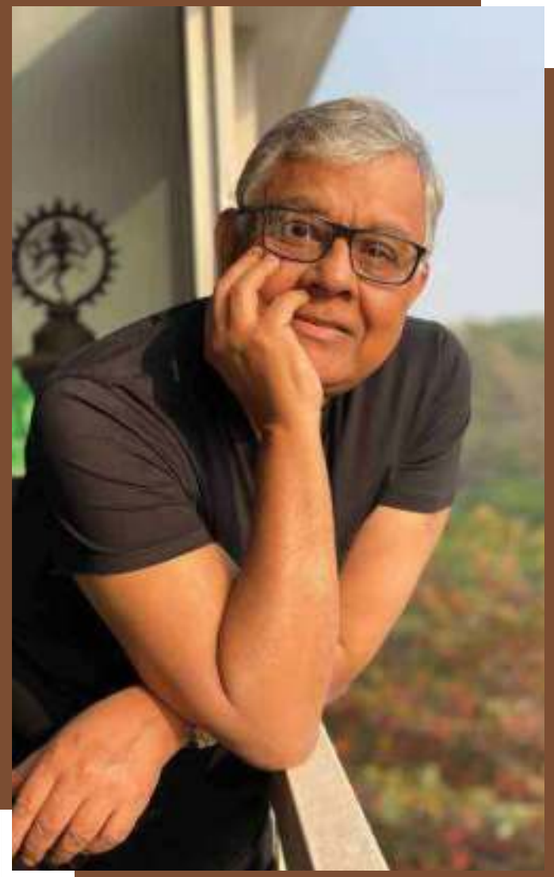
(FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION ONLY)

Potpourri is traditionally a mixture of dried petals and spices often placed in beautiful bowls to perfume a room. When the fragrance spreads, it encompasses, most magically, a medley of emotions. We have given this name our special twist and believe that the pages of Potpurri will bring for our readers interesting and diverse reading material with aplomb.

EDITOR'S NOTE



Jayabrato Chatterjee
Managing Editor

In the daily rush of our lives, scattered with uncertainty, understanding how craft items are made or why they retain an unspoken charm is more vital to modern life than ever. Craft is a language of material, provenance and making. It is learning the value of things invested not only with money but also with resourcefulness, creativity and dreams. They exude a unique, aesthetic pleasure to become intertwined with a whole bundle of different values, be they anti-consumerist, 'localist', green, or even just plain-old fashionable! As soon as we widen our gaze beyond glitzy malls, we see craft appearing in the most unanticipated places.

These skills are cross-disciplinary, neither pure art nor complicated science, but always hard-won and valuable. So perhaps part of any craft's worth is locked up in its confusion and in the tedium of manufacture that goes well beyond monotony. In fact, is it possible to have craftspeople who don't use their hands at all to make things? Is burgeoning digital technology, like 3D printing, just another tool in the toolbox or is it a game-changer?

Even though the vast majority of our economy is not built on making things by hand, the cultural drive to fall back on tradition has intense political and social currency, tugging at our heartstrings. What is important is nurturing and educating our craftspeople who think with their limbs and aspire with their ingenuity, ensuring young people can discover their own talents and retain skills passed down from one generation to the next.

All it needs from us is a little patience and appreciation.

He who works with his hands is a labourer
He who works with his hands and his head is a craftsman
He who works with his hands and his head and his heart is an artist

Francis of Assisi

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‘I am still under the impression that there is nothing alive quite so beautiful as a horse’

John Galsworthy

Terracotta figurines that are used for decorative purposes

Bankura's Elegant Pottery

For many years, civilizations have been dated and assessed by the degree of skill and beauty displayed by the earthenware found in excavations

Pottery is one of the oldest human inventions, originating before the Neolithic period. The potter's wheel was invented in Mesopotamia sometime between 6,000 and 4,000 BC and revolutionised pottery production. Moulds were used to a limited extent as early as the 5th and 6th century BC by the Etruscans and more extensively by the Romans. Nearer home, the Indus Valley Civilization also had an ancient tradition of pottery making though the origin of pottery in India can be traced back to the much earlier Mesolithic Age, with coarse handmade pottery like bowls, jars and vessels in various colours such as red, orange, brown, black and cream.

"For many years, civilizations have been dated and assessed by the degree of skill and beauty displayed by the earthenware found in excavations... Pottery has often been termed as the lyric of handicrafts"

Terracotta or clay craft has been the symbol of man's first attempt at craftsmanship, just as the potter's wheel was the first machine invented to use the power of motion for a productive purpose. For many years, civilizations have been dated and assessed by the degree of skill and beauty displayed by the earthenware found in excavations. Because of its universal appeal pottery has often been termed as the lyric of handicrafts. However, its association with religious rituals has infused it with deeper significance. In India, terracotta traditions are

Women play an important role in crafting terracotta items in villages in and around Bankura

A terracotta fresco in one of Birbhum's holy shrines

found from the earliest times. They are symbols of fulfilment of aspirations of our simple village folk. In order to cater to the commercial requirements of the modern global market, the village potter is often combining the conventional rural abstractions with refined urban tastes to showcase pieces of terracotta art.

Terracotta craft in Bengal has played an integral part in the life of our village folk. The brick and terracotta temples of Bishnupur and those scattered in Birbhum were built during the 17th and 18th centuries and several of their plaques and medallions depict animals, birds and humans, along with floral and geometric patterns as part of the temple façade scattered with narratives from our epics like the *Puranas* and tales about Radha and Krishna's celestial love, as well as everyday scenes that reflect the expertise of the artists and the refined taste of the patrons.

However, the terracotta Bankura horse has become an iconic symbol of Bengal art together with the terracotta shrines. The Government of India uses the Bankura horse in its logo for All-India Handicrafts and such is its magic

An interesting decor piece crafted from terracotta

that it has found a pride of place at many homes across India and abroad, adorning fashionable living rooms and verdant gardens. Made of terracotta or burnt clay, the horse is either mud-brown or black in colour and has been praised for 'its elegant stance and unique abstraction of basic values.'

Our ancient scriptures describe the horse as an animal representing energy and movement, known to mankind for several ages for its loyalty and speed. It is a companion animal used for various purposes and has been employed extensively to drive chariots, carts and as the cavalry force along with its rider in historic battles. Swift and reliable, the horse is revered for its devotion and there have been many famous steeds known to have saved their riders from harm.

In Bankura district of West Bengal the horse is depicted as an art object with some ornamentation. Its history is interesting and chequered but it has withstood the

Durga in her terracotta avatar slaying the demon Asura

vagaries of time and tide. Initially used in village rituals as a tool for symbolic sacrifice, done to appease local gods and goddesses for fulfilment of wishes, these horses made for worship are usually solid in built and taller than the usual steeds that are sold in markets and village fairs. Today the ever-popular terracotta steeds stand erect and perky, with lively long ears and a slender neck. They wear the *chandmala* on the forehead and Dharma Thakur, who is also believed to be a form of Lord Surya, rides a seven-horse chariot.

The village of Panchmura in Bankura district is famous for its traditional terracotta craft. The nearest railway station to Panchmura is Bishnupur, from where it takes nearly forty-five minutes by road to reach the village. From Kolkata, one can also reach the place by car in about five hours. Around five hundred craftspersons in the villages of Panchmura, Bibardha and Sendra carry forward their trade in a family-based tradition. Belonging to the Kumbhakar caste, making terracotta items is the primary source of their livelihood. Other centres where terracotta horses and elephants are produced are Rajagram, Sonamukhi and Hamirpur, Kamaridha, Bishnupur, Jaikrishnapur, Nakaijuri and Keyaboti. Each place has its particular local style. However, the Panchmura-style of pottery is considered the best and the finest.

Different parts of the hollow terracotta horses are turned out separately on the potter's wheel. The four legs, the full

The eternal potter's wheel harking back to the beginning of civilization

neck in two parts and the face – seven pieces in all – are crafted independently on the wheel and then joined together. Additional clay is used for rectifying defects that may remain in the shape of the body. The leaf-like ears and tails, done in specialised moulds, are later inserted in grooves that are left on the horse's head and torso. The clay figures are then allowed to dry in the sun before they are finally fired in a kiln. Turned out in two different colours, the normal terracotta red is obtained by letting out the smoke through the vents of the kiln after firing, and the black colour is obtained by sealing the vents and not letting out the smoke.

Besides the well-known horses and elephants, lamps and terracotta figurines are also made by the craftsmen but the steed has garnered the most popularity. This has led to the icon being replicated also in metal and wood. Yet it is the terracotta variety of the regal stallion that remains unchallenged 'as a thing of beauty that is a joy forever.' ❋

Elephants are also part of the Bankura terracotta repertoire

Mats From Midnapore

'A mat was set down on the floor, and you may feel sorry for it, getting walked on or trampled,
But I think it sees the world from there, and the paths people have tread; the wear and tear on their souls,
And maybe a humble mat has more compassion than you and I'

Mat-weaving in India dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization and is also reflected in Indian folklore, in which the saints were offered grass mats to sit upon. Its socio-cultural relevance is evidenced by references in ancient literature, including the *Atharva Veda*, the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, and the *Mahabharata*. Records from the Medieval Period provide the first information about mat-weaving in the region of Bengal, with both ordinary and fine quality mats produced in the district of Midnapore.

The premium mat, the *masland*, derives its name from the Persian word *'masnad,'* which means 'throne.' These mats originated in the Muslim period of Indian history as the best floor-coverings, produced in Midnapore with a silk weft under the patronage of the royal community of that time. The Midnapore district village of Maslandpur, located close to Tamluk subdivision, probably takes its name from the masland mat. Mats were collected as revenue under the Jagirdari system. In 1744, Nawab Alibardi Khan issued a charter to the *jagirdaars* in this regard. As a result, it was obligatory to supply *masland* mats for use to the collectorate. Soon, permanent markets for mats were established and Kasijora, Raghunathbari and Narajol became the most important centres of fine *masland* mat-weaving. Government officials in the British period observed that a large number of masland mats, manufactured in Midnapore, became popular all over Bengal. According to a census report of 1872, there were 618 skilled workers engaged in mat-making. Records of the British Raj show that at the beginning of the 20th century the price of *masland* mats were a phenomenal Rs 100/- or more, the finest quality *maadurs* being even dearer.

Today, mat-weaving is the primary source of income for 77% craftpersons who either make hand-woven mats or develop loom based products in and around Midnapore. Few traditional mat-making families still retain the knowledge of weaving the fine *masland* or *mataranchi*. But the loom-based weavers have been organised into units by local entrepreneurs. There are around 50 of these small units across east and west Midnapore. Besides making folding mats, these units have diversified into making various utility items and accessories such as bags, folders, table mats, runners, coasters and boxes to suit contemporary lifestyles.

Mahishyas, the weavers of Midnapore, are skilled at creating the most popular mats known as *maadur*. They weave these on uncomplicated looms made of bamboo. The warp uses cotton thread while the weft is a thin soft reed known as maadur-kaathi.

Preparing the maadur-kaathis before they are woven into mats

Midnapore craftsmen design these *ek-rokha* and *do-rokha* mats with great skill and dexterity. The word *'maadur'* is a generic term for floor mats in Bengal. The *do-rokha* is thicker than the *ek-rokha* mats, more suitable for use as impromptu carpets. *Masland,* on the other hand, is a textured mat on which the craftsperson designs geometrical designs on both the borders. These designs are self coloured but sometimes get painted in shades of magenta. *Masland* mats are used to honour important guests and relatives, spread with pride for them to sit on and perhaps partake of a meal.

Maadurs are sold in the local markets for day to day use and also transported to adjoining states to be expended for ritualistic purposes. With the shift in

Table mats for contemporary style

Maadurs or mats for floor covering are now woven in bright colours

market needs, the weaves are now also used for making decorative and utilitarian items. Today, Bhagabanpur is the hub of Maadur-kaathi weaving in East Midnapore. Barbasudevpur, which is the main centre, is located between Mecheda and Digha. The place is well connected with Kolkata. Sabang is the largest concentration of *maadur* weavers in West Midnapore. Other areas that ply this craft are Pingla and Narayangarh. *Maadur* artists of the district regularly visit craft fairs and art events.

Maadur-kaathi, the backbone of the mats, is a rhizome-based plant found abundantly in the alluvial tracts of Midnapore. The land and climate are very conducive for cultivating these reeds. The sticks can be reaped within a period of a year or two once the rhizomes are sown. The main seasons for cutting the sticks are April-July and September-November. Once the soft inner tissue is discarded, the stalks are ready for dyeing and weaving after they have been soaked in water to make them pliable and soft.

“Maadur-kaathi, the backbone of the mats, is a rhizome-based plant found abundantly in the alluvial tracts of Midnapore. The land and climate are very conducive for cultivating these reeds”

Maadur sticks were initially dyed with vegetable colours. However, nowadays chemical-free dyes are used to get more variety. The loom is usually operated by a single person. A length of a mat is produced which is then tailored according to the size of the product. The setting process is tedious and complicated but the end result is always artistically satisfying. Weaving *masland* mats is, however, more complicated and at least two persons are required to complete the process. The popular design on *masland* mats are flowers, honeycombs and various geometrical patterns, and the process of weaving is very much like the weaving of cotton saris.

Palmyra leaves, shaped like fans, are also made into mats locally called *chataais*. Palm leaf mats are very beautifully designed at Ilambazaar in Birbhum district by women belonging to the Muslim community. These mats are colourful and sport geometrical designs in shades of green, blue and magenta.

The traditional *maadur* mat nevertheless continues to remain a permanent fixture in several Bengali households. They linger on to adorn numerous homes with an ethnic décor instead of woollen carpets. And in our rural outposts, these mats can be easily spread out almost anywhere dry to sleep upon and, perchance, to dream. ❋

Women at work weaving the mats

Stitching borders on the mats to ensure a neat finish to the product

Women working on large looms

The original maadur spreads without any frills

Picture Courtesy: Golden Rays Craft (pickyourcraft.in)

A smart table runner fashioned from maadur

‘A doll is a witness who cannot die,
With a doll you are never alone’

Margaret Atwood

Burdwan's Wood Craft

'A wise old owl lived in an oak
The more he saw the less he spoke
The less he spoke the more he heard
Why can't we all be like that wise old bird?'

Unknown

Burdwan district is rich with historical legacies. Its antiquity is known from about 5000 BC and belonging to the Mesolithic Age. The name 'Burdwan' is an Anglicized form of the Sanskrit word 'Vardhamana.' Burdwan also has a connection with the Mughal Empire through Nur Jahan. Born Mehr-un-Nissa, the daughter of a Grand Vizier who served under Akbar, she was married at the age of seventeen to a Persian soldier, Sher Afgan, who was appointed *Faujdaar* of Burdwan. Prince Salim, the future Emperor Jahangir, Akbar's eldest son, fell in love with her. Two years after Akbar died and Salim became Emperor, Sher Afgan met with a very mysterious death. However, three more years were to pass before a grieving Nur Jahan consented to marrying Jahangir. Decades later, Burdwan was chosen by a merchant family from Punjab, based on a *farmaan* or edict issued by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, as its administrative headquarters. And the family's descendants, the Mahtabs, ruled it until 1955, much revered by the village folk.

Natungram is an hour's drive from Burdwan station. This small village is the hub of wooden doll makers also known as *sutradhars* or narrators or storytellers. This wood carving tradition is so deeply rooted in their culture that even their family names reflect their profession! The last name 'Bhaskar' which means 'sculptor' indicates their heritage.

Carved out of a single piece of wood, these dolls are characterized by their vibrant colours and distinctive ethnic style. Their origins may have been in the famous stone carvings of the nineteenth century, but with floods and famine that followed the chequered history of Burdwan, along with the rise and fall of empires, this tradition came to a standstill. Thus, from stone, the craftsmen moved to wood. Soon, they were making a living with the help of

The famous king and queen dolls from Burdwan

Lord Ganesha fashioned in wood

The ever-endearing Radha-Krishna dolls

these wooden dolls that they had been able to retain for centuries, adapting to the needs of the hour but plying their trade with renewed enthusiasm.

The dolls are mostly made from white teak wood. But, mango, *gaamar*, *shimul, aata* and *chaatim* wood are also used. This exclusive doll-making tradition, in vogue for centuries, is the primary source of livelihood for several families involved in the creative process, including men, women, children and senior members of the clan. Separate sets of work are earmarked for the artisans. Once the figurines are carved by the village men, the women and children get to work. Here one can see sudden bursts of creativity as the women rely on their imagination and a riot of colours under their control. Myriad intricate motifs and designs in multi-hues are painted to adorn the creations. Bright basic colours like yellow, red, black and green made with paint and a mix of glue that comes from tamarind seeds are used to decorate the dolls. The older generation then helps to see that the pigment dries out properly by placing the dolls in the sun and watching over them.

There are three to four distinct varieties of dolls found at Natungram once they have been chiseled from a piece of

Women colour the dolls once they are carved by the men from the village

The iconic owl getting its eyes painted

Wooden dolls displayed at a village fair

Setting the Gour-Nitaai dolls to dry in the sun

seasoned wood cut to the required length. Then the face and attire are painted. But with changing times and the influx of metal and plastic, machine-made goods have proved to be the nemesis of traditional woodcraft. Previously, the art of making wooden dolls and toys was prevalent over many districts in West Bengal but now it has been kept alive in only a few places.

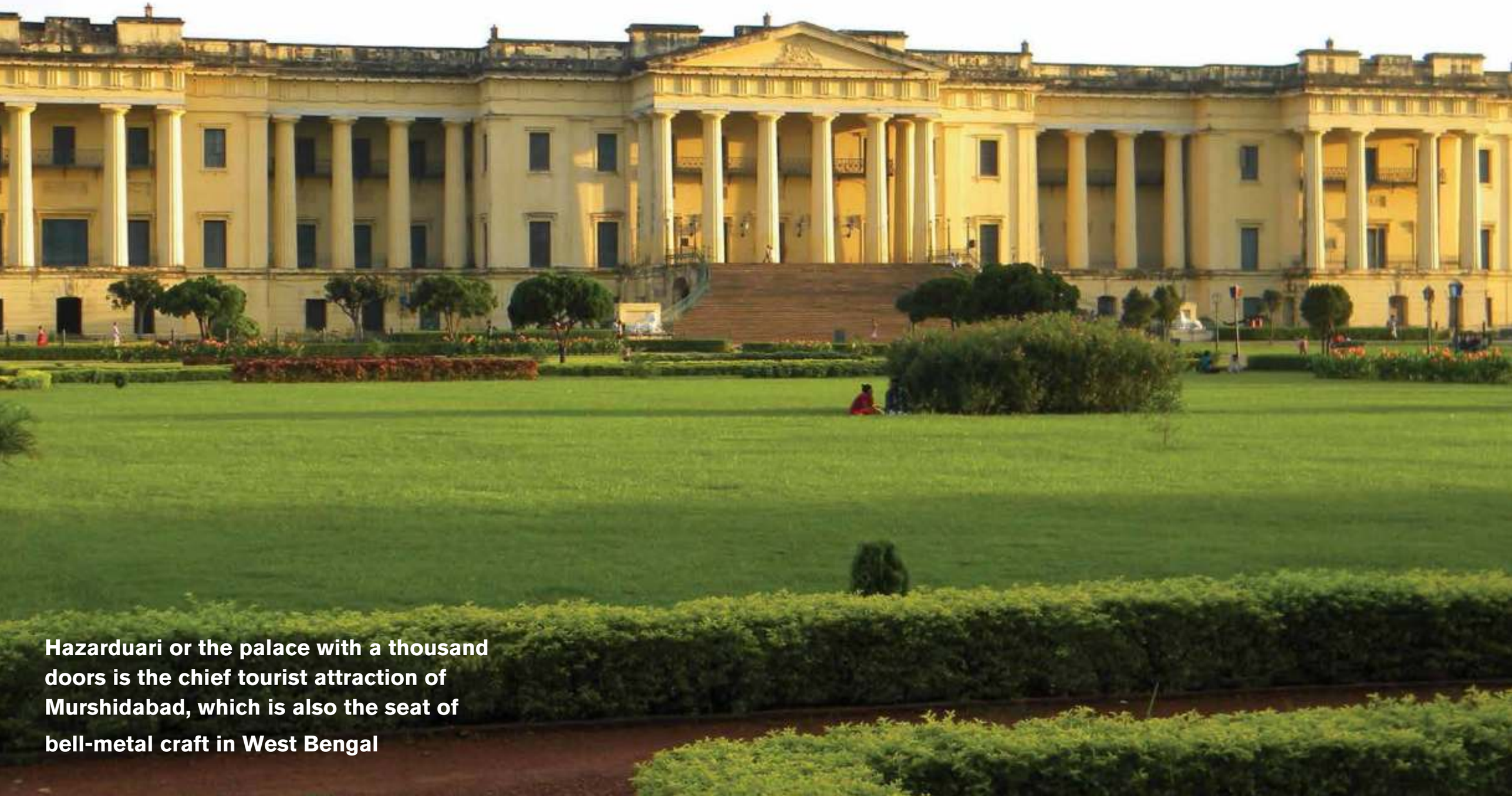
The unsurpassed wave of the Bhakti Movement in Bengal in the late 15th and early 16th centuries introduced the much-revered Gour-Nitaai dolls – a pair of male figures with hands outstretched over their heads, singing, as it were, the passionate *keertans* dedicated to Lord Krishna. These dolls represent Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, also affectionately known as Gour, and his close disciple, Nityananda or Nitaai. Besides the Gour-Nitaai dolls, another divine figurine is that of Gopinath, the guardian deity of Agradwip, a town on the Burdwan-Nadia border. Then there are dolls that are folk replicas of Krishna, Shiva, Kaali, Durga, a majestic couple and even a lone bride, so typical in this particular repertoire.

“The wood owl and several other wooden dolls from Burdwan make wonderful gifts”

Perhaps it was the royal influence (Burdwan is a former royal kingdom of Bengal) that introduced the making of soldier dolls. But it is the wooden owl that stands out as a special offering, traditionally used to worship Goddess Lakshmi, and enjoys an iconic status among Bengal’s handicrafts. There are many traditional Hindu families in Bengal who still worship a pair of painted wooden owls to seek the blessings of the Goddess of Wealth. They are believed to represent real owls that had helped a poor mother and her son earn fortunes by recommending the feathered creatures to the Goddess. 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. And so legend and myth mixed over time to make these wooden owls famous.

Earlier, the owls would be decorated with the traditional red, green and yellow paints on a white base, with black used to emphasize the eyes and other features. But now varied colours are applied as a base and its worth as an exclusive and artistic room décor has replaced its religious appeal. Thus, the wood owl and several other wooden dolls from Burdwan make wonderful gifts and keep alive an ancient craft that needs our appreciation and support. ❋

Wooden dolls continue to be attractive gift items



Hazarduari or the palace with a thousand doors is the chief tourist attraction of Murshidabad, which is also the seat of bell-metal craft in West Bengal

Bell Metal Art Of Bahrampur

'When a man makes utensils out of a metal which has been thoroughly cleansed of dross, the utensils will be excellent. You monks, who wish to follow the Way, make your own hearts clean from the dirt of evil passion, and your conduct will be unimpeachable'

Gautama Buddha

Metal crafts exhibit a very ancient lineage in India and their origin can be traced way back to the Indus Valley Civilization. The discovery of the small bronze statue – the Dancing Girl created over 4,500 years ago, a rare masterpiece – at the ancient site of Mohenjo-Daro testifies the antiquity of Indian metal crafts all those years ago – a complicated craft that witnessed many artisans rise and fall during different ruling dynasties and went on to receive its highest perfection during the Gupta Period, which is considered as the Golden Age of Indian art. The process of making, shaping, and treating metal objects was perfected in this era. The use of different types of alloys indicates the awareness that artisans had of the characteristics of the metal. And the wide varieties in tools specify the responsiveness of the smiths to different needs.

Every middle-class home displays kaansa thaalis and bowls during special occasions

A kaansa rekaabi and serving spoons mainly used for consuming milk products

There was also a profusion of brass and bell metal utensil production from the medieval times, probably under the influence of Islamic court and an elite lifestyle, for a number of new forms of shapes with new uses came into vogue. New forms like the *paan-daan, itr-daan, masaala-daan* and *gulaab-daan,* emerged for regular use in a syncretic society, while special items like flags for royal processions, brass and bronze fitted weaponry and furniture were part of court life.

> **"Bell metal is a hard alloy that was originally used to make prayer bells and related musical instruments such as cymbals"**

Khagra, a neighbourhood of Baharampur in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal, is renowned for its manufacture of bell-metal and brass utensils by the Kaansa Banik community. The beautiful products have a rich sheen and a fine finish. In Bankura, Ghatal and Purulia, artisans are noted for moulding bigger items in an exquisite fashion. The poor artisans of Chandrapur also display an admirable skill of engraving the heads of goddesses and gods, whose idols are made with bell-metal.

Locally known as *kaansa*, bell-metal utensils like bowls, tumblers, serving dishes and *thaalis* are still used in many middle-class Bengali households. Important guests are served full-fledged meals on bell-metal dishes and there is a tradition of giving bell-metal utensils as gifts to a bride during her wedding, as it is considered auspicious. *Kaansa* utensils occupied a special place in several 18th century kitchens where the family was seen participating in meals, sitting on mats on the floor.

Besides Khagra, bell-metal utensils are also a source of livelihood for craftspeople in Baharampur, Kandi, Baranagar and Jangipur in and around the Nadia district of West Bengal. Locks and betel-nut cutters of a superior quality are made at Dhulian and iron chests at Jangipur. The methods or techniques that are generally used in bell-metal craft are chasing, delicate engraving, *repousse* and embossing, etching, incising, inlaying, pierced work, and filigree.

Bell-metal is a hard alloy that was originally used to make prayer bells and related musical instruments such as cymbals. It is a form of bronze with a higher tin content that increases the rigidity of the metal and also its resonance. In Russia, church bells are commonly cast with a unique mixture of copper and tin, often with added silver, to produce their unique sonority mastered early in Russian Christian history. In the esoteric sect of Vajrayana Buddhism, hand bells and singing bells are cast with a special five-metal alloy similar to *kaansa*. Each of the metals represents one of the five Buddhas. A parallel alloy is employed for gongs, chimes,

For whom the bells toll when it's eventide!

Craftsmen working in a bell-metal workshop

The shaping of bell-metal utensils is a long-drawn process

xylophones and numerous other instruments that are struck with wooden sticks to produce a reverberation that echoes through Indonesian gamelan ensembles. Similarly, in the Nadia district – being home to several Vaishnavite cults – good use was made of all the prayer and percussion paraphernalia manufactured locally in an alloy of *kaansa*.

Several colonial records reflect that in Bengal images of gods and goddesses, along with prayer lamps, were principally made in Nabadwip, Krishnanagar and Kolkata. These images were mainly used for worship in Hindu homes. Although they are now mostly made of brass, earlier they were made of *ashta-dhaatu,* an alloy of eight metals. This genre represents the more classic metal works in Bengal. The case of *ashta-dhaatu* had to be resolved through chemical analysis of the relevant artefact. The current practise in case of specially ordered images for religious purposes is to pierce a hole on the right chest of the semi-completed image and pour down some mercury. A small piece each of silver and gold are later added to the main ingredients of copper and zinc to which sometimes a little tin is added. But to get away from complications, bell-metal idols are easier to manufacture and cheaper on the pockets of devotees.

Metal craft reflects human skill and ingenuity rather than the use of power devices, and they manifest the tastes and demands of diverse social and economic classes. In the past, metal craft was resorted to for making objects for rulers and nobles as well as for their subjects, for both spiritual and secular purposes. Today, objects are made for wealthy citizens, the upper middle class and humble households. While religious and secular demands remain constant, objects in bell-metal have become disparate in use and form to meet diverse needs. ❋

Frankincense holders in bell-metal used for prayers

Making the bell-metal pliable by heating in an open furnace

Popular cooking ladles that adorn many Indian kitchens

‘Weavers weaving at break of day,
Why do you weave a garment so gay?
Blue as the wing of a halcyon wild?
We weave the robes of a new-born child’

Sarojini Naidu

Weaving Dreams With Thread

'Destiny itself is like a wonderful wide tapestry in which every thread is guided by an unspeakably tender hand, placed beside another thread and held and carried by a hundred others'

Rainer Maria Rilke

When you think of Bengal cotton handlooms or *taant*, you immediately recall their light, airy texture ideally suited for the warm and humid summers of this region. *Taant* sarees are characterized by a thick border, a decorative *pallav* and are woven with a variety of floral, paisley and other artistic motifs. The main weaving centres are concentrated around Shantipur and Fulia.

Under royal patronage in the Mughal era, once the *taant jaamdaani* and muslin sarees became famous, the British government tried to destroy this art to protect the textile industry of Manchester. There was a strong sense of identity among Shantipur weavers. They united to agitate against the stranglehold of the Dadni system of the British East India Company and even took their grievances to colonial courts during the19th century. The *taant* weaves managed to survive though the demographics of the Shantipur region went through a sea-change after Partition in 1947. Hindu weavers fleeing the erstwhile East Pakistan atrocities settled in large numbers in a concentrated area on either side of the Ganga in Nadia and Burdwan districts. A considerable number among them also put down their roots in Fulia and the neighbouring village of Shantipur. Fulia is now uttered in the same breath as Shantipur. Weavers here trace their lineage to the great Bengal handloom saree-weaving centre of Tangail near Dhaka in Bangladesh but, reconciling to their new circumstances, they have now evolved their own weaving style called 'Fulia Tangail.'

There are records of handloom saree-weaving activity in Shantipur, a centre of Vaishnavite culture and Bhakti Movement, as early as the 15th century. Weaving flourished throughout the medieval and Mughal eras, and the famed indigo-dyed Neelaambari made the Shantipur saree a household name. This unique indigo dyed, midnight blue cotton handloom saree was so alluring that it was called 'an enemy of modesty' by the conservative majority! The characteristic attribute of the Neelaambari lay in the fineness of the yarn and dyeing quality. Very translucent hand-spun yarn was used for weaving, resulting in a powdery texture. A heady mix of delicate weaving and subtlety of design, the Neelaambari was the last word in sophistication.

Cotton weaving also received extensive royal patronage along with muslin and jamdani weaving. While the fine muslins adorned the royal class, cotton or taant sarees and dhotis were used for draping the common folk. This weaving tradition continued during the British rule, despite disturbances and disruptions, and the decades prior to independence witnessed an inflow of modern weaving techniques.

Today, every *taant* saree is characterized by the design on its border, *pallav* and body, using a variety of floral, paisley and other artistic motifs. Some of the popular traditional decorations are the *bhomra* or the bumble bee, the *tabeej* or the amulet, the *ardha-chandra* or the half moon, the *chaand-maala* or a garland of moons, the *aansh* or the fish scale, the *haathi* or the elephant, the *ratan-chokh* or the gem-eyed, the *taara* or the star, the *kalka* or the paisley, and of course, the all-time favourite *phool* or an elegant spray of flower motifs.

In the history of textiles in Bengal, we cannot neglect the Baaluchari that came much after the introduction of the muslin. Two hundred years ago, Baaluchari sarees were woven in a small village called Baaluchar in the Murshidabad district. At the height of the 18th century, Murshidquali Khan, Nawab of Bengal, patronised its rich weaving tradition, imported the craft from Dhaka and encouraged the industry to flourish. However, after an unfortunate flood the industry moved to Bishnupur in the Bankura district. Here, it prospered in its new environs during the reign of the Malla dynasty. But this flourishing trend later declined, especially during British rule, due to political and financial setbacks, and it became a dying craft as most of the weavers were compelled to give up the profession. Nevertheless, all these years later, this weaving tradition has gained new ground and Baaluchari sarees are treated as exclusive heirlooms where stylised forms of human and animal figures are most interestingly integrated with floral, foliage and geometrical motifs in the elaborate *pallavs* and thin, elegant borders.

The flower motif in all its splendour

An intricate pallav of a Baaluchari saree

A floral spray on a Tangail saree

Women at work in a loom in Fulia

Another glimpse of a taant saree from Fulia

Known for their intricate designs, no other saree uses as many mythological patterns as the Baaluchari. They are dominated by characters from epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. These characters give a royal look to the fabric. Sarees depicting the story of Lord Krishna explaining the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna is, perhaps, one of the most popular designs. And yet there are other motifs that are fashioned from everyday life in the Muslim courts and harems. This seamless straddling of two cultures is amazing. You can glimpse princess Sita with her maids, or a regal queen riding a horse holding a rose, or – most dramatically – seated on a chair, her legs stylishly crossed, a bibi or courtesan enjoying her hookah! ❋

A Baaluchari saree pallav with a motif from the Ramayana

‘Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop away from you like the leaves of autumn’

John Muir

The Call Of The Hills

There is something about the Himalayas not possessed by the Alps; something unseen and unknown, a charm that pervades every hour spent among them and their craftspeople, a mystery intriguing and disturbing in their art. Confronted by them, a man loses his grasp of ordinary things, perceiving himself as immortal; an entity capable of outdistancing all changes, all decay. And all life and death...

The culture of Darjeeling and the surrounding hills, including the state of Sikkim, is both diverse and unique. The two predominant religions, Hinduism and Vajrayana Buddhism, play a large part in influencing the crafts of this area peopled by the Lepchas, Bhutias, Sherpas, Yolmos, Gurungs, Rais and Tamangs. Thus their handicrafts are quite different from those existing in the rest of West Bengal. They express a deep-seated cultural heritage in age-old traditions prevailing in these mountainous regions to preach peace, pluralism and plenty.

Several Bhutia villages have skilled musicians, painters and authentic artists who take pride in representing the folk cultures of the hill people. These traditional craftspersons are renowned for carpet-weaving, painting Thankas and preparing sculptural models in bronze and brass depicting gods and goddesses from Buddhist mythology, including the Sakyamuni himself in his avatars as Maitreya, Avalokiteshvara, Manjusri and Mahakala. Also replicas of female deities like Tara and Palden Lhamo are very popular.

Village folk living in the foothills of West Bengal practise bamboo and cane craft, skilled at making beautiful cane baskets in various designs and shapes. These baskets have multi-uses. Craftspersons also prepare ceremonial cane hampers, cages and fishing traps which are made with great dexterity and skilled technique. Bamboo dowry boxes are intricately woven and play a significant role in marriage ceremonies.

In several Bhutia dwellings in the higher regions, traditional scroll paintings known as Thankas are fabricated, depicting scenes from the Buddhist Jataka tales and similar Buddhist folklore and scriptures. These traditional paintings use paper from Tibet or Nepal. Pounded stones and natural dyes are used to colour the Thankas. Lapis-lazuli – a particular shade of blue that is a favourite hue of the local craftspeople – is obtained by grinding semi-precious stones. Powdered gold is also used to beautify the Thanka and enhance its value. Several Thanka paintings, bordered with Buddhists motifs in fine brocade and considered sacred, adorn not only private homes but also the elaborate walls of shrines and monasteries scattered all over the hills. The technique used is a closely guarded secret.

A typical mask depicting an Asura from Sikkim

Kalimpong, another hill station tucked in the vicinity of Darjeeling, is famous for its carpet-weaving by the Tibetan community who constitute a major part of the population and celebrate the Losar Festival in these regions with great flare. The origins of the hand-knotted carpet can be traced back to more than 2000 years, imported from Persia. In India, they appeared in the 15th century, attaining a high degree of perfection in Kashmir and other regions, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries, under the patronage of the Mughal emperors.

The carpets of Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Sikkim are made of pure sheep wool and sport glowing colours. The wool is spun by the Tibetan and Bhutia women on traditional spinning wheels known as the *Chassba*. Generally, bold colours and geometric patterns are used to embellish these carpets. The most common is the small bedside rug which has up to sixty knots to a square inch. However, bigger carpets are also woven to cover greater floor areas.

The predominant motifs are those of the dragon, snow-lion and the lotus. Patterns are also taken from other favourite Buddhist iconography, including the *dhwajaa* or the royal flag, the *kalash* or the sacred water-vessel and the mythical twin fish. Carpets from these regions are based on skills that are as distinct and richly piled as their imaginative decorations. Essentially Central Asian in tradition, for over 2500 years the patterns reproduced were those of floral arabesques and rhomboids, with an occasional animal design. These designs have never become outmoded. Some motifs have a profound meaning – the circle signifies eternity, the zigzag denotes water and light, the Swastika implies darkness. Along with the Tree of Happiness and Goodness, these patterns have endeared themselves to clients all over the globe.

Darjeeling and the nearby hills, along with Sikkim, also produce exquisite jewellery and souvenirs, Lepcha woven bags and other bric-a-brac. Displayed in several curio shops, there is a great variety to choose from. Popular

An array of papier mache boxes in different shapes and sizes

among tourists are choksees or small wooden tables with vivid Tibetan designs on their sides. They are collapsible and can be easily transported.

The exquisitely carved dragon sets of silver with gold inlay and studded with precious stones are also part of the jewellery collection of this region. These consist of finely designed dragons on earrings, pendants, finger-rings and can be ordered either in silver or gold. Other souvenirs are prayer wheels, papier mache boxes and, of course, the *khukri* or the Nepalese knife made in Ghum. With an inwardly curved blade, similar to a machete, it is used as a decorative item, a tool and a weapon. Traditionally it remains the basic utility knife of the Nepalese people. But avant-garde hostesses display *khukris* in their fashionable parlours to keep evil and ardent admirers at bay!

Trinkets and handlooms are also worth mentioning, as well as woodwork and bamboo fretwork. While the principal utility products are blankets, woollen knitted garments and woven fabrics, the artistic products include wall panels, fire screens, folding partitions, Bhutan paintings and cotton shoulder bags. Beautiful curios on copper plates studded with red and blue stones with engravings and replicas of deities and Bhutia *chaddars* in beautiful textures can also steal your heart. Wooden masks remain a connoisseur's delight, bold and demonic in expression and often the focal point of animated conversations and plush living rooms. ❋

An ornate Tibetan necklace with a beautiful pendant

A roadside stall in Darjeeling selling trinkets and wind chimes

Woollen carpets from the hills have their own, unique designs and can be used as bedside rugs or in larger spaces to display their intricate patterns

Om Mani Padme Hum: prayer wheels that symbolize the Buddhist mantra

A variety of masks and prayer beads that are popular with tourists

‘Crafts make us feel rooted, give us a sense of belonging and connect us with our history. Our ancestors used to create these crafts out of necessity, and now we do them for fun, to make money and to express ourselves’

Phyllis George

Kantha Of Birbhum

'Take your needle, my child, and work at your pattern; it will come out a rose by and by. Life is like that – one stitch at a time taken patiently and the pattern will come out all right like the embroidery'

Oliver Wendell Holmes

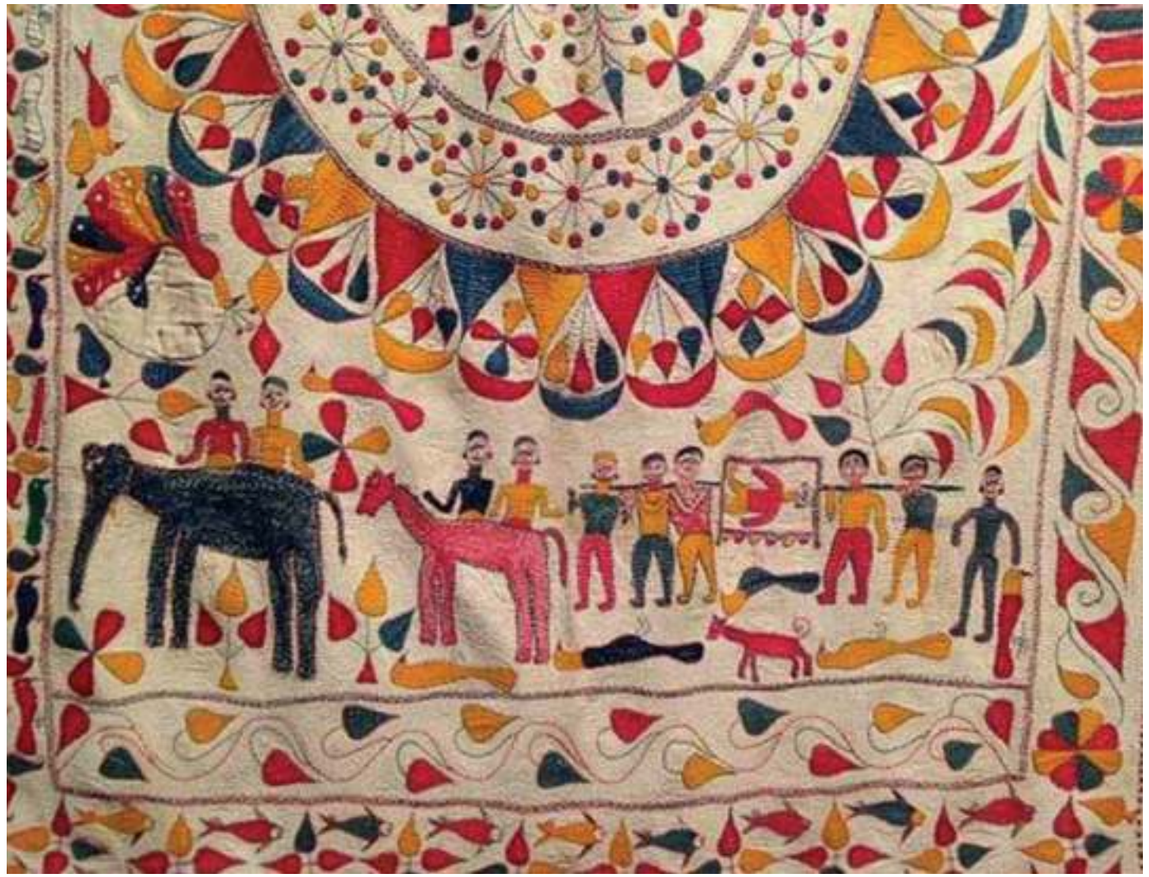
The art of the *kantha* stitch has been passed down from mothers to daughters in Bengali households for centuries. In recent times, the realisation of this cultural heritage intertwined with entrepreneurship skills has brought a new dawn to the village of Nanoor in West Bengal's Birbhum district. Even though Bolpur, Ilambazar, Labhpur and Mangalkot nearby are also renowned for their traditional *kantha*, it is Nanoor that is leading the way.

Nanoor, located between two rivers, Ajay and Mayurakshi, is known for the old terracotta temples of Pala and Sena Dynasty. The nearest railway station is Bolpur from where Nanoor is 18 kms away. Here, around 2,000 women are engaged in *kantha* embroidery which has provided them an important income option. A number of women acknowledge that they have been able to overcome poverty and young girls can now pursue their education.

Stories and myth behind the origin of *kantha* trace their history to a period no less than a thousand years. Its images reach back to even earlier sources of pre and post-Vedic period. Originating as an art form where stories or *kathaa* in all their bucolic splendour were woven onto cloth, it is believed to have also had religious importance. This unique art has been passed down through generations, involving an utmost labour-intensive process as each individual needs to use his or her bare hands to weave the intricate stitches.

"Stories and myth behind the origin of kantha trace their history to a period no less than a thousand years. Its images reach back to even earlier sources"

Etymologically, the word *'kantha'* originally suggests a light quilt used during mild winters and cool monsoon nights. Though the concept exists in almost all parts of the world, this particular form of quilting is peculiar to Bengal, unique in its power of imagination and functional in its use, representing the cultural identity and folk art of this land. It is essentially a women's art since the development of *kantha* emerged out of the creative expressions of rural women as gifts for babies or their loved ones. Several layers of used or worn out material



A typical Nakshi-Kantha from Birbhum

such as sarees, lungis and dhotis are stitched together to make a single *kantha.* The colourful patterns and designs that are embroidered on these articles resulted in the name *'Nakshi-Kantha,'* derived from the word *'naksha'* which refers to inventive patterns. Each of these *kanthas* represents the contents of a woman's mind and is filled with romance, sentiment and philosophy. Five hundred years ago, the earliest reference of *kantha* in Bengal was found in *Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita* by Krishandas Kabiraj.

Some symbols such as the Tree Of Life, the swirling cosmos and the sun are taken from primitive art. It was the Bengali housewife who helped the virtuosity of embroidery to evolve. From embellishing her husband's initials on his handkerchief to sewing pieces of discarded cloth with colourful thread to make *kantha* duvets, the lady of the house busied herself with needle and yarn as soon as her domestic chores were over and she could work at leisure. It became a symbolic enactment of the cycle of life and its affirmation of rebirth and revival.

Something as simple and basic as a running stitch at the hand of skilled artists create a magical artwork and a wonderful means of self-expression by our rural women. And their artistic brilliance keeps finding new expression in a range of lifestyle products. However, it is important to note that *kantha* embroidery is not the primary source of revenue for these women. Like most places in rural Bengal, their basic income comes from agriculture. But they devote a significant amount of their spare time daily to *kantha* embroidery to augment their earnings. Like any other folk art, *kantha*-making is influenced by several factors that include availability of materials, daily needs, climate, geography and economic requirements. From the earliest forms of this stitch art that relied on patch-work *kantha* and decorative appliqué sewn with great skill, today it commands huge respect in the international couture market.

When the Portuguese arrived on the eastern coast of India all those years ago, they were astonished by the simple elegance of *kantha* quilts, which reminded them of their needle-craft back home in the 17th century when their ship, the *Frol-de-la-Mar* carried Bengal *kantha* all the way to the ports of Lisbon. *Kantha* stitched shawls exported from Bengal in early 17th century were worn by the queens of Portugal. The traditional designs had a central motif,

Women artisans on with their artistic prowess aided by their trusted needle

An intricately designed Nakshi-Kantha that relies on its design on rural folk-tales

A stitch in time saves nine!

such as *Satadal Padma*, the hundred-petaled lotus, or a large spiral of the energetic sun. The Tree Of Life would be placed in four corners with free flowing *jaals*.

The indigenous art form of *kantha* would have died had it not for the efforts of a few individuals who were keen to revive and sustain it. In early 1940s, a resuscitation of *kantha* was spearheaded by Pratima Devi, daughter-in-law of Rabindranath Tagore, as a part of a comprehensive rural reconstruction programme among the local Santhal women who were trained to produce fresh motifs under the tutelage of artists from Kala Bhavana. Her prime focus was to give *kantha* a new look and a new identity, popularising it nationally and internationally.

Kantha comprises the simplest running stitch in the language of embroidery. Yet it is making a mark in the international market. Anyone who works on a quilt, who devotes her time, energy, creativity, and passion to that art, learns to value the work of her hands. And as any quilter will tell you, a quilter's quilting friends are some of the dearest, most generous, and most supportive people she knows.

"Kantha comprises the simplest running stitch in the language of embroidery. Yet it is making a mark in the international market"

Today, *Nakshi-Kantha* can be viewed it its new avatar with its roots in the traditional form of folk art but catering to top designers for their urban *haute-couture* creations. *Nakshi-Kantha* has become a steady, thriving business and its revival is based on the art and craft trends, with high international demand for genuine hand fashioned work.

The effect is certainly very pleasing to the discerning eyes that appreciates an easy elegance, a sense of grace and a taste for finesse in life amid the chaos of bling and braggadocio. ❋

A detail from a kantha saree tempered with contemporary design and colour sensibility

Shelling Out For Sea Shells

'Like seashells, we are beautiful and unique, each with a story to tell'

Unknown

Conch-shell craft refers to the art of engraving beautiful images on natural shells obtained from the sea. It is the shell of a large predatory sea snail – the *Turbinella Pyrum* – found in the Indian Ocean. The overall shape of the main body of the shell is oblong or conical. In the oblong form, it has a protuberance in the middle but tapers at each end. The upper portion – the siphonal canal – is corkscrew-shaped, while the lower end – the spire – remains twisted and tapering. Its colour is dull and the surface is hard, brittle and translucent. Like all sea shells, the interior is hollow. The inner surfaces are very shiny, but the outer surface exhibits high tuberculation. In Hinduism, the shiny white, soft *shankh* with pointed ends is the most sought after for religious purposes.

Conch shell craft is, indeed, one of the oldest folk crafts of West Bengal. The craftsmen, known as *Shankhari* or *Sankhakar*, belong to the ancient *'Nabasakha,'* which is one of the so-called nine important communities of craftspeople blessed by the Divine. The carvings on the conch shell reflect their social, mythological and historical expressions, rendered with the help of traditional folklore and technology. The beauty and uniqueness of this craft is difficult to describe. As one of the most exclusive and beautiful forms of art practised in West Bengal, conch shell craft is an extremely sophisticated and delicate skill considered to be exceptionally auspicious. This craft form is also very expensive and cannot be afforded by everybody.

Each conch shell artisan has his own unique pattern of carving and while some draw the image of Lord Shiva over the shell, others create entire episodes from the *Mahabharata* on its surface. Then, the stories of Lord Krishna also serve as popular themes for engraving the smaller shells to give them a unique individuality. It is very difficult to carve a conch shell, taking a minimum of two to three months to design a single shell item. The conch shell craft is not a new art in Bengal. Due to the state's proximity to the sea, this skill has being practised here for ages.

The newly wed bride in Bengal wears bangles crafted from conch shells intermingled with those fashioned in lac for the first time on her wedding day. The craftspersons design many different patterns and shapes on these bangles. Similar to the *chooda* of Punjab, these wristlets reflect a woman's marital status. Traditional images of Goddess Durga are adorned with pretty conch shell bangles to indicate that she is the consort of Lord Shiva. The craftspersons also design brooches, pendants, finger rings and earrings for other gods and goddesses and also for mere mortals!

Conch shells are blown in numerous homes and temples, especially at dawn and at dusk, to protect people from evil spirits. The blowing of the conch or *shankh* needs tremendous power and respiratory capacity. Hence, propelling it daily helps keep the lungs healthy. Used as an important ritual object for sacred ceremonies, it was also operated as a ceremonial trumpet, announcing important messages in war fields. Some of us may know about the fabled *Panchjanya*, the conch shell blown by Lord Krishna to begin the Battle of Kurukshetra. But interestingly, each Pandava brother also used his own conch shell in that combat that had fascinating names. Arjuna used the *Debdutta*, Bhim relied on the *Paundra*, Yudhishthir blew the *Anant Vijay*, Nakul employed the *Sughosh* and Sahadev manipulated the *Manipushpak*.

In Hindu mythology, the *shankh* is a sacred emblem of the Supreme Preserver, Lord Vishnu. The reverberation of the *shankh* symbolises the sacred Om sound and is praised in our scriptures as a giver of fame, longevity and prosperity, the cleanser of sin and the abode of goddess Lakshmi, who is the deity of wealth and consort of Vishnu. The *shankh* is also one of the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism – the *Ashtamangala* – and represents the all-pervasive vibration of Buddhist prayers.

Conch shell craft, a family profession, has everyone in the household taking an active interest. The traditions, skills and techniques needed are confined to family members only and are transferred

Learning early in life to blow the conch shell!

A wedding thaali includes conch shell bangles for the bride

Blowing the conch shell during religious rituals is considered auspicious

Typical conch shell bangles worn by married women in Bengal

A courtyard of a conch-shell factory in Nadia

Engraving a conch shell is a tedious task

within the clan through practical demonstration. Because the conch shell surface is very hard, it is difficult to work on it or cut it. Today the slicing is done largely by electric disc saws that are fitted with diamond teeth. The traditional method of cutting is very laborious. It is done with a special type of semicircular saw with a sharp edge called *Sankher Karaat*. The process involves collecting the raw material, handling the shells, shaping them with the help of tools, engraving or embossing various designs and then polishing and completing the product for sale.

Today, conch shells are used in a variety of ways – from spiritual ceremonies to creating items of home décor. With beautiful engravings etched on its crust, these seashells are renowned not only in Bengal but all over the world. Apart from engraved shells, other conch shell crafts include making items like table lamps, incense holders, ashtrays, vermilion containers, spoons and forks from the crusts. In West Bengal, conch shells are also used for crafting jewellery items like fashionable armlets, designer lockets, and delicate buttons, hairpins and clips. Some of the popular spots to buy conch shell articles are Bishnupur, Murshidabad, Malda and Nadia. Though the craft is getting rarer, the shell industry still plays an important role in generating livelihood for several families, blessed by the gods. ❋

The eternal beauty of engraved conch shell bangles!

Dokra of Bengal

Dokra, an age-old craft, uses lost-wax casting technique to create artefacts from non-ferrous metals like bronze and copper-based alloys. The ancient Mohenjo-Daro figurine of the Dancing Girl from the days of the Indus Valley Civilization is one of the glowing testimonials to this form of art which dates back to over 2500 BC. With her hand on her hip, a multi-pendant necklace around her neck and twenty-five bangles on one arm, the Dancing Girl, a tiny bronze statuette in Delhi's National Museum, embodies our love for accessorising. The bronze maiden, interestingly enough, is a result of early Dokra craft, which is still alive in several villages of West Bengal and a few other parts of the country. Burdwan's Dariyapur near Guskara is one such village where everyone is a Dokra artiste. The village has around 133 families and their finesse and precision with the designs of an art so steeped in antiquity has earned them the prestigious AIACA Craftmark.

An ancient method of making metal *objet d'art*, Dokra artefacts are singular in their appeal. This tribal art form, done by traditional metalsmiths – the Dokra Damar tribes – has survived the test of time and is still in use today. But the sheen is slowly fading as the Dokra process is not only time-consuming but also expensive because of the raw materials used. The artisans of Dariyapur have struggled to continue their livelihood for generations as the expense, coupled with the overall decline in consumer demands, has taken a toll.

A pair of Dokra figurines

The journey of this metal art from the heartlands of Bengal to the rest of the world is interesting. Essentially, metal figurines fashioned from bronze and copper-based alloys use the lost-wax casting technique, known as *cire perdue* in French. This lost-wax procedure for the casting of copper based alloys has also been found in China, Egypt, Malaysia, Nigeria, Central America and several other places in Asia, Africa and South America.

The process involved is tedious and hence a single piece could take up to a month or two to be created. It is essentially a complicated method, using a clay core and a wax coating placed in a mould. The wax is melted in the mould and drained out, and bronze poured into the space left, producing a hollow bronze figure when the core is discarded. To start the process, at first a clay sample – roughly resembling the final image – is fabricated and left to dry in the sun. This clay core is then layered with beeswax, nut oil and resin from the *damara orientalis* tree to the desired thickness of the artefact. Soon after, the wax layer is carved with intricate designs and finer details. Next, a sheet of clay is smeared over the wax coating, covering the gaps in between the intricate etchings, forming the final mould for the metal alloy that gets tipped inside the artefact under fabrication.

When the metal alloy cools down, the clay and

A craftsperson and his creation being finished for the market

A Dokra artisan in his smithy

Goddess Kali in her Dokra avatar

wax moulds are broken off and the metal artefact is revealed. The artist has to ensure that the mould retains its shape until the final step of the process. The procedure is certainly extremely elaborate and arduous and requires many years of practise to master. The final artefact can be created perfectly only when the artist has grasped the skill of working with clay as well as metal. This metallurgical form of crafting beautiful figurines and art objects is not just one of the oldest but is also considered the most advanced in its field. Because the mould is irrevocably broken once the finished product is ready, no two Dokra art pieces can look the same. What is more surprising is that these figurines have not a single joint in them!

While Dokra art originated in West Bengal among tribals who are the main traditional metalsmiths, over time they moved to Jharkhand, Orissa and Chhattisgarh as well as villages in Kerala and Rajasthan. Hence, the art has now spread all over India. Most Dokra artefacts are human or animal figurines like horses, peacocks, owls and elephants. But the craftspeople are also known for making measuring bowls, religious deities and lamps, even if the themes are quite limited, given the fact that the metalsmiths do not have much exposure beyond their personal rural lives. However, the technique that was once used only for creating articles for the tribesmen's private use has now evolved and is employed to make jewellery boxes, tableware and even interesting mirror frames and furniture for an urban market.

A Dokra camel as a decoration piece

A finely crafted Dokra bull

It is unfortunate, therefore, that this beautiful craft is facing an obvious decline. The steady increase in the cost of raw material makes the end products way too expensive to attract enough buyers. As a result, artisans have been showing less interest and a lack of inspiration, encouragement and knowledge of new designs. Their inability to adapt to modern times has also contributed to the decline of Dokra. It is true that there is still a demand for these artefacts in international markets like the cities of Milan, Paris and London where they are highly appreciated by connoisseurs, but the primitive technique of manufacture and lack of access to modern technology causes a delay in production. Hopefully, young interior designers and architects will put Dokra to fresh use in the future. ❋

Goddess Durga and her progeny created in Dokra

The popular Dokra musicians are often sold at village fairs

The laborious process of creating Dokra art

Krishna playing his celestial flute to call attention to a dying craft

“Crafts make us feel rooted, give us a sense of belonging and connect us with our history. Our ancestors used to create these crafts out of necessity, and now we do them to express ourselves”

Phyllis George

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