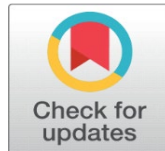


AN OVERVIEW OF DHOKRA ART (BASTAR) PROGRESSION FROM ART TO DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

Tribal Art and Craft, the pluralism of our nation that results from its diverse cultures. Every region possesses a unique artistic aesthetic. Most regions feature tribal arts and crafts in rural and indigenous areas. Chattisgarh is distinguished among the states due to its distinct folk and tribal cultures. Folk and tribal art and craft are manifestations of the pastoral way of life, religious convictions, and unpretentiousness of the people. Baster as a region of Chhattisgarh is characterized by its diverse communities, cultures, and artistic expressions. An area inhabited by numerous tribes that is remote from the progression of human civilization. Tribal lifestyle, caste system, and social rituals are all distinguishing characteristics that set these communities apart from others.

Dhokra as an indigenous art form originated as part of the tribal life, and culture and uniquely reflects their community, rituals, and beliefs. The purpose of this paper is to present an overview on original form of craft, changes over time, and how the craft is being used in the design. The craft originated as part of the life of the tribal culture and reflects their community, rituals, and beliefs, and maintains a unique character. Over time the craft had gone through changes because of various influencing factors e.g., new requirements within their community, source of livelihood, artists and designers became interested in the craft, reach to the market, and support received from the Govt. The changes in the craft can be seen from various perspectives, from form, size, material, subject matter, and technique. The intention is to highlight progressive visual imagery, product design, and impact on the art form.

Keywords: Dhokra, Tribal Art, Folk Art, Culture, Design



1. INTRODUCTION

Dhokra Art, also known as Bell Metal Craft, is a traditional kind of metal casting that originated in India. Metal art is an indigenous form of artistic expression originating in the Bastar area of the Chhattisgarh state. Chhattisgarh was officially established as a distinct state from Madhya Pradesh on November 1, 2000, with Raipur as its capital. Chhattisgarh possesses a plethora of natural resources and minerals, leading to the establishment of both large-scale and small-scale industrial facilities. The state's identity can also be characterized by the extensive presence of dense woods, indigenous communities, cultural practices, and belief systems. The people. Tribal art and craft embody the essence of rural existence, religious convictions, and the uncomplicated nature of individuals. The region of Bastar in Chhattisgarh was established in the 14th century and is renowned for its scenic landscapes, rich tribal heritage, and distinctive cultural traditions. Bastar was historically classified as a component of the Dandakaranya region in geographical studies.

The geographical region known as Dandakaranya encompasses certain territories within the states of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh. The nomenclature of the area originates from the Dandak Forest, which is

depicted as the dwelling place of the malevolent entity known as Dandak, as described in the Hindu epic Ramayana. The region in question has witnessed a succession of ruling powers in ancient times, namely the Nalas, Vakatakas, and Chalukyas. Presently, it serves as the domicile of the Gond people (Dandakaranya | Forest, India, Map, & Facts, 2023).

The origins of Dhokra Art are profoundly intertwined with tribal culture, serving as a mirror of their society, customs, and beliefs, while also safeguarding a unique and unmatched essence. The Ghadwa artisans from Bastar are famous for their involvement in the artistic practice of Dhokra. Ghadwa is a phrase that denotes the process of crafting and molding diverse shapes and items within a specific cultural framework. The Dhokra artist initially gained patronage from the Royal family of Bastar for their artistry in crafting divine statues. Later, they started meeting the demands of tribal communities by creating ceremonial offerings, practical items, adornments, and other associated products.

"Here we see the transformation of merely functional into works of art, the common becoming the cherished, the joy giving. The wall painting, the ornamentation of the floor where one worshiped, performed ceremonies or even took food, the decoration on the doorstep and in front of the house, all became purposeful creations, almost ritualistic" (Chattopadhyay, 1984, p. 06). Unlike western culture, Indian urban culture follows rituals and has a belief system to appease Gods. Decoration and ornamentation of sacred places are also part of rituals. The coexistence of ritual art traditions (sacred, domestic, tribal, or village) with fine art traditions is visible. The intersection of these traditions with modern Indian cultures is prominently present in contemporary art and design. The urban populace developed an interest in Dhokra art due to its recognition beyond tribal society. The art pieces, objects, and products developed in Dhokra seamlessly found space in urban households.

2. TRIBAL ART

"There is a curious silence in Indian art history about the rich mine of tribal art. Their art as part of social rituals has an ephemeral character and is therefore considered to be merely functional and appropriately the preserve of anthropologists" (Mitter, 2001). The common belief that tribal art is a primitive tradition from the past is irrelevant to current and postmodern art forms influenced by Western awareness. Simultaneously, it embodies an extraordinary and innate system of knowledge, deeply ingrained cultural framework, management of human and natural resources, means of subsistence, and sustainable methodologies. Tribal art in contemporary times serves as a reaction aimed at preserving the environment and safeguarding the uniqueness of indigenous cultures. Tribal artisans utilize indigenous natural materials to craft ceremonial artwork and practical domestic items, as well as to adorn the human body, residential temples, masks, cultural offerings, jewellery, utensils, and various other artifacts. The primary objective is to establish a connection with the environment and individuals, by creating visual representations for natural elements such as the sun, water, and moon. Additionally, it aims to establish a connection with the concepts of fertility, power, and protection, while also honouring life and eternity.

3. DHOKRA ART

Dhokra art or Bell Metal art is an indigenous technique of metal casting practiced in Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Jharkhand, Bengal, Telangana, and Madhya Pradesh. The Ghasia community of Bastar and Jhara community of Raigarh are the Dhokra brass casters in Chhattisgarh. Dhokra art uses lost wax or the Cire Perdue method of metal casting which has "The Ghasia craftsmen have developed a collection of idolatrous icons that represent nature under the animistic belief system. Certain representations of this nature were already present within their cultural past and were created using their ancient method of metal casting. The key characteristics of its iconography have been established in collaboration with tribal priests, leading to the flourishing of this art within the context of tribal religion and culture" (Mahawar, 2011).

The Dhokra art of Bastar is an ancient art style that has been practiced for around 500 years, according to the local artisans' estimations. The evolution of Dhokra art illustrates its progression from a local custom to gaining acknowledgement on a national and global scale. During the initial years, Dhokra artisans predominantly served the royal families and tribes of the area, creating statues for worship, artifacts used in ceremonies, and various utility products. The craft was obscure, known only to a handful of artists who practiced it. In the 1960s, the Bastar region experienced transformations because of the Bangla-refugee rehabilitation program. This significant event served as a pivotal moment for the development of Dhokra art. The government authorities, political leaders, and media workers focused their emphasis on tribal culture and artistic traditions. The media's coverage and the discovery of potential by stationed police facilitated subsequent progress. Kondagaon and Jagdalpur have established clusters for household bell

metal workshops, where every family member is engaged in the Dhokra-making process. During the 1970s and 80s, some Dhokra painters gained recognition through state and national level awards. Simultaneously, exhibitions staged in major cities contributed to their fame and appeal. During the 1980s, the internationally acclaimed Dhokra artist, Late Dr. Jaydev Baghel, achieved significant recognition. The international focus drew the interest of traders and exporters to Bastar, motivating a new generation of artists to embrace the traditional art form. Over the past decade, several advancements have been made in various developmental activities with the assistance of government organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Consequently, at present, the Dhokra artisans are being exposed to other markets, producing more practical items, enhancing their talents, and gaining entry to larger markets.

4. VISUAL LANGUAGE AND EVOLUTION

Traditional crafts can be discussed under three distinct categories:

- 1) Production of wealth and trade (agriculture and animal husbandry implements, carpentry or smithy tools, etc.)
- 2) Belief systems, and rituals. creative urges etc.
- 3) Lifestyle (textiles, kitchenware, pottery, recreation, etc.) (Kochhar,2011)

The Dhokra art of Bastar exhibits a unique visual lexicon that draws inspiration from environment, tribal lifestyle, festivals, rituals, and tribal mythology. The expansion of the art form is rooted in a fundamental framework of conventional education within the community. Dhokra art and craft encompasses several categories such as sculptures depicting idols, animal figures, utility objects, and body adornment (pictures 1,2,3,4). Dhokra art is characterized by elongated human forms, exaggerated facial features, geometric artistic patterns created using wax threads, as well as the inclusion of animal creatures, insects, birds, and headgear adorned with horns. The overall visual language remained consistent, however there were alterations in the characteristics of human forms, level of detail, and dimensions of the sculptures. Even the typical animal figures and utilitarian objects are being modified with modest alterations to enhance their practicality for urban consumers.



Figure 1 JhitkuMithki, www.directcreate.com



Figure 2 Bhairava, www.buddhamuseum.com



Figure 3 Statue of deity, author's collection

Figure 4 Grain storage, author's colle

4.1. INTERSECTION WITH MAINSTREAM ART AND DESIGN

“Ritual art traditions, whether sacred, domestic, tribal or village, intersect with fine art traditions in the work of many contemporary Indian artists; today, ritual art is made alongside fine art without the harsh tensions witnessed in the West because both serve different purposes” (Milford-Lutzker, 1999). India as a country has always celebrated the creativity of art and craftsmanship without any prejudice of high or low art. Our approach is characterized by a broad and all-encompassing nature, emphasizing inclusiveness rather than striving for uniformity. Artists in India have constantly incorporated inspirations from cultures and practices beyond the periphery, regardless of their allegiance to pictorial and aesthetic conventions.

“In a societal context that embraces and values crafts, there exists a mutually beneficial flow of ideas between the realms of fine arts and crafts, wherein both domains draw inspiration and influence from one another” (Chattopadhyay, 1984). Renowned Indian sculptor Meera Mukherjee had worked with the Dhokra art of Bastar. “Meera Mukherjee's urge to return to Indian folk artists was inspired by her Munich mentor, Tony Staedler, who advised her to find her art in her own country, not in Europe” (Sunderason, 2020). Her association with Dhokra Art began in the early 1950s when she visited Bastar, Chhattisgarh, and was enthralled by the opulence and complexity of the indigenous art forms present there. She acknowledged the vast artistic capacity of Dhokra Art and made the decision to fully engage in its practice and research. Through her extensive engagement with the tribal inhabitants of Bastar, she acquired firsthand knowledge of the traditional techniques of Dhokra metal casting from the skilled artists. “Mukherjee discovered that the utilization of the wax thread technique was advantageous in her artistic practice as a sculptor. The incorporation of the “folk art” idiom became a notable characteristic within her body of sculptural works” (Hacker, 2016). Her composition and subject matter are distinct from Dhokra art. Fluidity, grace, and detail characterize Mukherjee's Dhokra Art sculptures. Her artworks express tribal culture and spirituality by depicting humans, mythological characters, deities, and animals. She seamlessly integrated Dhokra Art patterns and forms with her artistic sensibilities to create a unique visual language. Her surface treatment incorporates Dhokra artists' subtle wax thread technique and style components, although her sculptures depict rural life, Goddesses, and labor rather than tribal visuals. (Images 5-6)

Dr. Jaidev Baghel, a Shilp Guru, gained prominence by skilfully incorporating traditional elements in innovative ways, ultimately being embraced by the mainstream. Jaydev Baghel promoted the idea of practicing the art form based on community and culture, while also valuing individual expression and exploration. “Jaidev is translating lived experiences and ritual practices specific to Bastar into his visual practice and this creative move distinguishes his work” (Hacker, 2016, p. 146). Being a traditional artist, he stretched himself to the limits of artistic expression. Jaydev Baghel made a significant impact on tribal art by encouraging personal expression in ancient artistic practices. “Jaideo's story re-establishes the original Adivasi link and therefore, carries conviction” (Roopankar, 1987), in addition to possessing extensive technical expertise, Jaydev also shown distinctive artistic traits, such as the incorporation of elongated human figures, the utilization of diverse forms, and the inclusion of tribal iconography (Image, 7). When depicting Hindu deities, the artist maintained his visual language and combined them with the existing iconography and symbols (Image 8). Through his engagement with artists such as Meera Mukherjee and Jagdish Swaminathan, as well as with educationists and intellectuals like Pupil Jaykar, Jasleen Dhameeja, and Rajeev Sethi, and his active involvement in exhibitions and fairs, he gained exposure to the modern art scene.

From craftsman to artist, Shiv Verma, born in 1976 in Kondagaon (Bastar), has an unusual combination of skills. Shiv meets artist Navtoj Altaf in Kondagaon as a child. This encounter inspired him to study fine arts. He earned a Bachelor's and Master's in Fine Arts with a Sculpture specialty from MS University Baroda. His vast experience as a sculptor and knowledge of tribal art and techniques allowed him to create intriguing pieces. The talented Shiv Verma has a deep understanding of principles and creates a compelling pattern with a social undertone. He created a series of sculptures that maximize visual communication by combining natural and technology shapes. Dhokra art now uses elaborate microchip arrangements instead of wax thread wrapping. (Image 9,10)



Figure 5 Meera Mukherjee, Untitled, Bronze, www.jnaf.org **Figure 6** Meera Mukherjee, Spinning Yaran, Bronze, www.akaraart.com

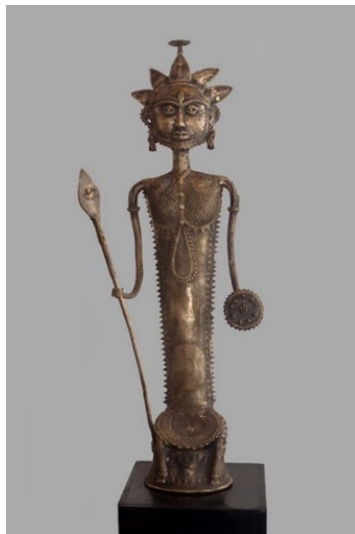


Figure 7 Badha Dev, www.jamaatart.com



Figure 8 Shiv Nandi, www.mutualart.com



Figure 9 Transgenic Cucurbita Maschata (2006), Source: Shiv Verma



Figure 10 Stories of my Abode (2018), Source: Nazart Art Gallery

“The discourse around the interaction and intervention of designers and artisans in the field of design is characterized by a wide range of perspectives and preconceived notions. Undoubtedly, the issue of whether design intervention is a valuable and productive process is made more complex by the fact that majority of craftspeople are not actively involved in leading change or promoting their work” (Designers Meet Artisans, 2005). Independent designers, design institutions, craft enthusiasts, and scholars are engaged to work with tribal art and crafts to provide new designs and design diversification to make them more relevant to urban cultures. The outcome of these interactions between the craftsmen, designers, and other stakeholders are independent interpretations, utilitarian objects, and commercial products (Images 11,12,13,14). Government agencies, in collaboration with sponsoring institutions, run design intervention workshops that combine tribal characteristics with commercially useful forms, targeting the urban audience. Examples of products created in these workshops include door handles, candle stands, pen stands, tabletop accessories, and jewellery. Independent designers create products, sculptures, installations, and other art forms that are influenced by both domestic and international trends. The visible important features of this project are the exploration of different materials and combinations, as well as the incorporation of new forms with subtle tribal influences. Some versions of Dhokra art focus solely on the method and surface quality, specifically the wax thread pattern, to achieve the intended appearance. (Images15,16,17,18,19,20)



Figure 11 Shabri Store, Raipur, Chhatisgarh



Figure 12 Card Holder www.bastararts.com



Figure 13 Pen Stand, www.bastararts.com



Figure 14 Lamp, Shabri Store, Raipur



Figure 15 Memento, Shabri Store, Kondagaon



Figure 16 Jug, Shabri Store, Kondagaon



Figure 17 Tejas Soni Designs



Figure18 Tapanjeet Singh Badesha Designs



Figure 19 Jewellery, www.blog.jaypore.com



Figure 20 Saurabh Kumar Designs

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Intersection of urban art and tribal art as a phenomenon always had relevance. The relatability of the subject, concept, narration, or overall pictorial value of any work of art connects the artist, artwork, and the audience. In all fair terms, the understanding and the dissemination depend upon the social positioning of the artist and the audience. The academically trained urban artist, aware of the contemporary world can travel across the premise of art forms and interpret them in hybrid depictions. The social positioning still allows them to be relevant and accepted in the contemporary art scene. On the other hand, the tribal artist who is trained generationally has complex cultures, unique visual language supported by dialects, symbolic content, and philosophy lack identity in the urban settings. As an audience, the social hierarchy restricts us from looking at tribal art beyond the material aspect. “We must also recognize that craft is as much an expression of the human spirit in a material form which gives delight to mankind, as any of what are termed fine arts” (Chattopadhyay, 1985, p.05).

The hierarchical discourse also plays a vital role in the positioning of the art and artist. The European standards of art paved the way for the classification of art forms and retributed tribal art as minor art. “Craft is still largely denoted to practical issue such as material and techniques” (Rissatti, 2007, p. 03). Material manipulation, indigenous process, and skill were credited or looked upon more than the sensibilities, cultural roots, and distinct social settings of a tribal artist. Artist, writer, and poet Jagdish Swaminathan while establishing Bharat Bhawan and Rupankar Museum brought tribal art and artist into modern art settings. “At the Bharat Bhavan, individual creativity is valued over a positivist perspective of craftsmen. Swaminathan’s intervention challenges the long-standing institutional convention of defining this vast corpus as crafts” (Hacker, 2014)

The presumed notion of placing minor art as unexceptional is based on European classification of arts and prevents tribal art from achieving desired space in mainstream. Exceptional artist like Jaydev Baghel presented his creative envisions as an individual beyond cultural identity and made his presence felt. Meera Mukherjee contributed expansively to Dhokra within her own artistic journey and brought the art form to the folds of modern art. Shiv Verma as a young artist is discovering and rediscovering the tribal art form, keeping the tradition alive with his contemporary approach. Starting from indigenous Dhokra artists, artists from the mainstream, institutional design professionals, and independent designers, subtle and prominent change in visual language is quite evident. Looking at the body of work created by various stakeholders, the influence of tribal culture and tradition, usability and functional aspect of urban culture and trends, the market-based influence of global culture became the catalyst of change in the visual language. Dhokra art is surviving within the coexisting practices and making its presence felt beyond the tribal culture of Bastar. Still there is so much left to be recognized and appreciated.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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