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Arts and crafts of Chhattisgarh and its socio legal impact

Sanskriti Mishra

Research Scholar, MLS, Mats University, Raipur

Dr. Om Prakash Kannaujia

Assistant Professor, MLS, Mats University, Raipur

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Abstract

This article delves into the vibrant cultural heritage of Bastar art and craft, tracing its roots back to ancient times and showcasing the profound influence of indigenous tribal communities such as the Gond, Maria, and Muria. Bastar has historical significance, largely due to its ties with ancient Indian rulers and dynasties that supported and celebrated artistic expression. The indigenous tribes of Bastar possess a deep, intrinsic connection to nature, a relationship that is embodied in their artistic practices. The renowned caves of Kailash, Kutumsar stand as remarkable monuments to this connection, housing ancient paintings and geological formations that are not only visually stunning but also rich in local history and mythology. The region's art is a dynamic reflection of various religious and mythological beliefs. However, the colonial period brought with it a wave of disruption, imposing restrictive policies that threatened traditional practices and livelihoods. Despite these challenges, it also opened doors to new economic opportunities. In response to the urgent need for preservation, the government launched a series of initiatives aimed at reviving and promoting Bastar's unique art and craft, encouraging artisans to continue the legacy of their ancestral skills. Today, Bastar art stands as a vital pillar of India's rich cultural landscape, playing an essential role in empowering local communities and enhancing their livelihoods. This article emphasizes the preservation of not only rich culture of Bastar but also its artistic traditions, highlighting their significance to outside world.

Keywords: *socio-economic, region, handicraft, artifacts, tribes, traditions*

INTRODCUTION

The rich cultural heritage of Bastar art & craft dates back to ancient times with evidence of human occupancy in the region tracing back to Old Stone Age. The tribal communities of the region i.e Gond, Maria & Muria tribes have contributed to the development of unique artistic tradition & culture. The region is referred as Dakshin Kaushal. It holds an important significant place in ancient Indian history. After Lord Ram, his kingdom was ruled by Lava & Kusha in North Kaushala & South Kaushala respectively.ⁱ The rulers of Panduvanshi, Somvanshi and Kalchuri dynasty made significant attempts as they encouraged art and culture in Dakshin Kaushal which laid the foundation of today's Bastar's art and crafts, which now is famous throughout the World for its uniqueness i.e. Bastar's Dhokra Art, Wooden Craft, and Wrought Iron craft etc.

Ancient Roots

I. Tribal Traditions:

Bastar's culture and traditions are vital features of the region's identity. The tradition is essential for maintaining the area's distinctive cultural heritage and fostering social harmony. Through their creations of art and craft, the native people of Bastar demonstrate their deep connection with the surroundings and nature.

II. Formation & painting of caves:

Kailash Cave:

The cave's stalagmites and stalagmites create a miniature version of Kailash. It is regarded as one of the oldest in the area and is situated inside Kanger Valley National Park. It is well-known for the production of stalactites and stalagmites. The name of the cave comes from a shivlinga- shaped rock. Every Shivratri, people from various communities gather here to worship the Shivlinga.

Kutumsar Cave:

The cave is made of limestone. There are blind wells and five chambers in the cave. The

"Dance Hall" is one of the most striking areas, with its intricate ceiling pattern resembling delicate lacework. The cave is home to a variety of living things, including reptiles, bats, spiders, and crickets. Genetically blind fishes live in the underground river of cave.

III. Influence of external factors:

Bastar's art and craft were developed as a result of cultural exchange with nearby regions. Hinduism and Tribal animism are two examples of the religious and mythical traditions that have impacted the region's Tribal communities.

IV) Documentation & Recognition:

iv.a Colonial Era:

The colonial era had a long-lasting impact on Bastar art, disrupting traditional practices & forcing tribal communities to adapt to new economic & social regime.

iv.b Disruption of Traditional Practices:

Chhattisgarh's forest sector is governed by a combination of National and State-level laws and policies, including the Indian Forest Act, 1927, and the Chhattisgarh Forest Policy, 2001. The Forest Rights Act, 2006, is also crucial, recognizing the rights of forest-dwelling communities. The State has also amended the Indian Forest Act, 2014 aimed at regulating the movement of forest produce & duty was levied on forest produce. The penalties & procedures given in this Act aimed at extending not only state's control over forests but also diminishing the status of people's fights to forest use.

iv.c Change in livelihood:

Forest products like wood are used for tools & bees wax was used for the lost wax casting process. The restricted forest use adversely affected the artisans. They were deprived of their livelihood.

iv.d Emergence of New economic opportunities:

Although colonial policies created new opportunities and preserved forest produce but also exploited resource & disrupted traditional systems.

iv.e Resistance & Rebellion:

The oppressive colonial policies fueled up various tribal revolts, including Bastar Rebellion which didn't accept the colonial Rules.

iv.f Complex Impact on Art:

In Bastar, some forms of art found new commercial prospects, while others suffered from changes in livelihood and resources. All things considered, the colonial era brought both opportunities and difficulties.

iv.g Post- Independence:

After independence efforts were made by the Govt. to preserve Bastar's art & craft through establishment of Boards & by initializing various schemes for improving conditions of artisans.

iv.h Contemporary significance:

Bastar art & craft are integral part of India's heritage depicting rich culture & tradition. Promotion of Bastar

art & craft will lead to economic development of the region and will empower local communities too.

Art and Craft of Chhattisgarh

Bell Metal

The art of Dhokra, originating from the "Dhokra Damar" tribe, is nearly 4,000 years old, showcasing an ancient legacy of craftsmanship. One of the most iconic examples of this technique is the exquisite "Dancing Girl" figurine, unearthed from the archaeological site of Mohenjo-Daro. In the Bastar and Raigarh districts of Chhattisgarh, skilled artisans meticulously craft beautiful dull gold figurines and artistic objects from bell metal, brass, and bronze. This process is upheld by the Gadwas of Bastar and the Jharas of Raigarh, who employ the intricate lost-wax technique, also known as hollow casting. This begins with embedding intricately patterned clay cores with wax ribbons, which are then coated with a mixture of clay and hay to create a protective layer. Through a delicate process of melting the wax, a cavity is formed, filled with molten metal that solidifies into stunning sculptures. As the outer clay shell is broken away, unique creations emerge, each depicting a unique story in itself.

The craftsmen draw inspiration from their rich natural surroundings, which include the vibrant village Ghotul, an abundance of trees, birds, and various fauna, with the region's mythology and rituals. Beyond decorative pieces, artisans create functional items such as combs, lamps, bowls, and cups for daily use, alongside sacred mythological icons like Buddha Deo, Karma Jharr, and Mata Jhula spiritual significance. Every created piece exhibits meticulous attention to detail, from elaborate jewellery depicting Maria-Muria faces to the intricate geometric patterns on pots, revealing a profound respect for nature that is the beauty of Dhokra art.^{iv}

Wrought Iron Craft

The wrought iron artefacts of Chhattisgarh bear a raw elegance, showcasing the imagination and expertise of their creators. The deep, symbiotic relationship between the tribal artisans and the natural world empowers them to extract materials from the ore-rich mines of the Chirandonigiri region or creatively recycle old metals. Using basic tools like hammers and tongs, blacksmiths skillfully forge their creations, ensuring that no unsightly joints disrupt the aesthetic of their work. The final touch of varnish sets the charm of each piece, many of which encapsulate strong elements of ritualistic significance. The product range includes elegant candle stands, joyous musicians playing a variety of instruments, and figurines of deities. Crafted primarily in the villages of Nagarnar, Jondrapadar, and Kondagaon, blacksmiths elegantly sculpt items such as adivasi musicians playing the Muhri (Trumpet), Dhapra (Daphil), and Tudbudi

(Nagada), enhanced by figures of peacocks, monkeys, and lions, embodying themes of wedding celebrations and the divine nature of the bundi goddess. The laman diya stands out as one of the most sought-after pieces in wrought iron.^v

Wooden Craft

The Bastar region, abundant in forests of sheshum and shivna, offers a serene landscape, allowing tribes to initially rely on timber for their fundamental needs, like firewood and shelter. Over time, this reliance evolved into a celebrated tradition of woodcraft, nurturing the emergence of the Badhais, a community particularly skilled in woodworking. These artisans diversified their trade, forming two distinct groups: one focused on agricultural tools and the other on creating decorative and totemic pillars. Using simple yet effective tools made from wood or bamboo, the Badhais employ the kaarigars to carefully strip bark from trees and scrape the wood's surface. For more intricate tasks like carving and shaping, chisels and smaller implements come into play.

One notable showcase of the Badhais' craftsmanship is observed in the Ghotul, the traditional youth dormitories of the Muria tribe, which once held large carved drums and intricate wooden headgear used in their vibrant dances. In contemporary traditions, young men present delicately carved wooden combs to young women as tokens of affection. The ghotul's spirit is captured in beautifully carved doors and pillars adorned with elaborate representations of romantic couples, alongside motifs symbolizing merriment, such as intricate designs of suns, moons, flowers, and geometric patterns.^{vi}

Bamboo Craft

The bamboo craftsmanship of the tribes in Chhattisgarh is a testament to their utilitarian artistry. This region showcases attractive furniture, mats, and kitchenware, including expertly crafted baskets, all reflecting the remarkable skills of the artisans involved. The bamboo craft stands as a unique representation of the long-standing traditions upheld by Chhattisgarh's tribal women. The process is demanding, starting from the collection of bamboo and transforming it into exquisite works of art. Shaping the bamboo into alluring forms requires a great deal of skill and patience. Both the outer layer and thinner remnants of bamboo are meticulously prepared for various products, resulting in stunning wall hangings, table lamps, and mats that are not only visually appealing but also functional.^{vii}

Bhitti Chitra

In the Lakhanpur area of Surguja district, the walls adorned with vibrant representations of nature and animals are a hallmark of local artistry. Villages like Sirkotanga, Puhputra, and Udaipurdhab are well-

known for this craft. Late Sona Bai Rajwar pioneered this clay art form, reviving the tradition of clay relief work for decorating mud houses. This art vividly portrays the lifestyle and nature of the local tribes, extending even to wooden boards.

Tumba Craft

Tumba craft, while lesser-known, is actively practiced in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh. Its origins are linked to the tribes' use of hollow gourd shells as practical containers for water and salfi. Over time, these vessels were transformed into decorative pieces, giving rise to tumba craft. The gourds, locally referred to as lauki, are sun-dried for days before the insides are cleaned and embellished with intricate patterns. Tumba craft is a distinguished art form that showcases the uniqueness of Bastar, utilizing gourd shells as compartments for storage. The resulting Tumba hangings create a stunning interplay of light and shade, marking a significant expression of artistry.

Sisal Craft

Sisal plants flourish in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, yielding fine white fibers when processed. This exceptionally smooth fiber possesses impressive strength, making it ideal for numerous utility products. Durable and moisture-resistant, sisal fiber is favored for household items. The raw fibers are skillfully plaited into ropes, often dyed in vibrant colors or left dye-less to create striking contrasts in sisal artifacts. The resulting products, embellished with sequins, pearls, and beads, include bottle holders, key rings, key chains, and ropes for boats and ships. These items, alongside decorative wall hangings and mats, have found a rapidly growing market, affirming the demand for sisal craft.^{viii}

Government and departmental schemes for local artisans:

Chhattisgarh Handicraft Development Board (CGHDB), established by Government of Chhattisgarh in 2001. It offers training programs to create employment for artisans and operates a network of emporium called "Shabari" to showcase & market artisanal products of Chhattisgarh throughout the state and beyond. CGHDB is the principal agency for developing and marketing handicrafts & handlooms, connecting artisans with customers through exhibition and emporium. The Chhattisgarh Handicraft Development Board (Or Chhattisgarh Hastshilp Vikas Board) which is an undertaking of the Government of Chhattisgarh was established in the year 2001. The Chhattisgarh Handicraft Development Board (Or Chhattisgarh Hastshilp Vikas Board) which is an undertaking of the Government of Chhattisgarh was established in the year 2001. The Chhattisgarh Handicraft Development Board operates 18 outlets throughout state and beyond, including 1 in New Delhi and another in Ahmedabad.

i) Workshop for artisans:

Handicrafts development board provides with training and workshop to:

- a) traditional as well as non- traditional artisans;
- b) unemployed or underemployed labourer of agriculture sector;
- c) educated unemployed men and women;

According to new policies of Chhattisgarh government the training should be such that would enable the local artisans to compete in national as well as global market.

ii) Registration of artisans: artisans are eligible for various benefits after registration under this scheme, Handicraft Development Board provides for training and workshop to:

- Traditional as well as non- traditional artisans
- Unemployed or underemployed labor of Agricultural sector
- Educated unemployed men and women,

According to new policies of government, the training should be such that would enable the local artisans to compete in National as well as global market.

iii) Level of training:

1st level - Basic training - 6 months

2nd level - Advanced training- 6 months

3rd level - Most advanced training- 6 months

4th level- Specialized training- 6 months 5th level- craft workshop-15-30days

iv) Equipment workshop scheme

- Traditional and trained artisans are to be to provide with 5000/- for instrument and equipment
- 10000/-for construction of workshop;
- Grant up to 75% is available to general category artisans;
- grant up to 100% is available to SC/ST artisans.

v) State Award Scheme:

Till date, 79 artisans have received state award for Bell Metal, wooden Craft, Iron Craft, Bamboo Craft, Cowrie Craft, Godna Craft, Bhatti Chitra, Awardees receive 25000/- cash along with award.

v) Scheme for co-operative societies:

Subsidy of 25000/- are to be provided to co- operative societies and Trust for the purpose of:

- Investment
- Workshop
- Inventing advanced equipment
- Raw materials and other requirements.

Significance of e- commerce for Bastar's art & craft:

Digital tools have emerged as a powerful catalyst for revitalizing traditional crafts, offering artisans new avenues to enhance their work with minimal effort. As the demand for authentic Indian handicrafts continues to rise in markets such as USA and Europe, it becomes increasingly attractive for investors to support craft oriented digital platforms. This growing interest not only helps in preserving traditional craft but also encourages innovation while ensuring artisans can thrive in the digital age.^x In this process of digitalization and commercialization state government of Chhattisgarh together with department of Rural Industries and Chhattisgarh Handicraft Development Board has started online platform for selling handicrafts and handlooms throughout India and abroad. The online Shabari platform is available since 1st November 2021. Categories of the item sold are Sarees, Apparel, Decor accessories, home furnishing utility, yardage etc.^{xi}

Initiatives by Central Government:

“One District One Product “initiative aims to achieve balanced regional development in India by promoting a unique product from each district. Key objectives include:

- Improving standard of living in local communities through sustainable development.
- Encouraging domestic and international investment to boost manufacturing and exports.
- Generating job opportunities to reduce unemployment rates.
- Enhancing the competitiveness of local products using modern solutions. Overall, the initiative focuses on empowering districts and fostering economic growth.

The department of commerce & other government agencies are working closely with states & districts to implement “One District One Product”

Some notable initiatives by State:

- **Jhitku Mitki Artisan Producer Company Ltd.:** An initiative of the District Administration Kondagaon, this company provides support to artisans, including working capital and market linkage.
- **Craft City Kondagaon:** A hub for artisans to showcase and sell their products, providing infrastructure support and promoting the region's crafts.
- **Amazon Partnership:** The District Administration Kondagaon has partnered with Amazon to list artifacts on Amazon Kaarigar providing a wider market reach for artisans.

These initiatives demonstrate the Chhattisgarh Government's commitment to support Bastar artisans through training, mentorship, and market linkage programs.

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