

## ARTISANS OF BANGLADESH: THEIR ROLE AND PROSPECTS

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The term “artisan” may be used to denote a distinct social group which depends for livelihood on any handicraft or home-made craft. It has been observed, “The humble artisan is an ancient, useful and respected member of the society and is not to be swept away or aside”.<sup>1</sup>

The civilization that developed in the Gangetic-plains in the south-eastern end of North India from 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. approximately identified as Pundravardhana, Vanga, Gauda, Gauda-Bengal, Subah Bengal, Bengal, Bangladesh etc., was divided into several sub-regions according to these Geographical features.<sup>2</sup>

- i) Varendra in the North;
- ii) Radha in the South-west;
- iii) Samatata in the South-east and
- iv) Vanga in the South.

### Reasons behind the delay of initiation of Sculptural Art in Bangladesh (Plates 25.2 & 25.3):

- i) Coming to the whole of Bangladeshi sculpture evidences initiates from the earlier period to the Gupta reign in Bangladesh.
- ii) The traces of *Maddhyadesian* Aryan culture not noticed (or) established notably in this part of India till 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.<sup>3</sup>
- iii) Due to the prolongation of Aryanization, the practices of arts influenced by the Buddhist-Brahmanya religion also get delayed.
- iv) Much time was taken through maritime trade to import more durable and lasting materials for arts in relation to the artworks. In India as a whole, the extensive use of huge stones was not noticed before Asoka. The trend continued for several centuries. A Paucity of stone in Bangladesh is also one of the possible reasons behind them.
- v) The local artisans got the opportunity to observe the foreign people, mostly the traders, soldiers and travelers, who came to Bangladesh.<sup>4</sup>

### The transition period of Artisans:

In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, apart from the weavers, who constituted the largest section of the artisanal society, carpenters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, potters and oilmen were found in almost every village in Bengal.<sup>5</sup> The 1876 Census of Calcutta, the first to list the population according to occupation, referred to the artisan castes in the city. Water carriers or

*bhistis*, palanquin-bearers, boatmen, artisans like potters, clay-modelers and braziers constituted the variety of occupations among the city's lowest orders.<sup>6</sup>

Recent research on the artisan sector has highlighted the factor of dynamism in artisanal industries (**Plate 25.1**). The changing character of artisan production in colonial India which had largely escaped the attention of earlier scholars in this field has been studied by Smriti Kumar Sarkar.<sup>7</sup> He has concentrated on artisans like *Kansaris* and *Sankharis* of Bengal and tribal blacksmiths of Jharkhand, known as *Asuras*.

As far as Bengal is concerned, except the cotton and silk weavers, the iron smelters, and the artistic pottery of Krishnanagar and Bankura, other sectors of artisanal production of Bengal have not received adequate attention from researchers. The woodworkers, the common potters, blacksmiths, *chamars* and *muchis* of Bengal in particular have not been studied at length. There is yet substantial scope for work on those sectors of artisan economy. In 1905, administrative changes had taken place with the formation of the new Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. There was territorial re-arrangement between Bengal and the new Eastern Province.

#### **Importance of Artisans (Plates 25.4-25.6):**

The importance of artisan production in the economy has been emphasized by eminent scientist P.C. Ray.<sup>8</sup> He writes that till the 1870s artisanal industries used to find employment for the large section of the community. As evident from the census report the *muchis* generally belonged to Bengal, while the *chamars*<sup>9</sup> were more often immigrants from Bihar and further west.<sup>10</sup> The *muchis* were a well known caste in Bengal with synonyms such as *Ruidas*, *Das*, *Chamar*, *Charmakar*, *Rishi* and *Rabidas*. They had four subgroups- *Arisona*, *Darshana* (or) *Ruidas*, *Barohajare* and *Choumu* (or) *Chamarare*. Various legends about their origin are in vogue. One was that Muchiram, the ancestor of the caste was created from the sweat of Narayan. The name of Muchiram as their ancestor was also referred to by Risley.<sup>11</sup>

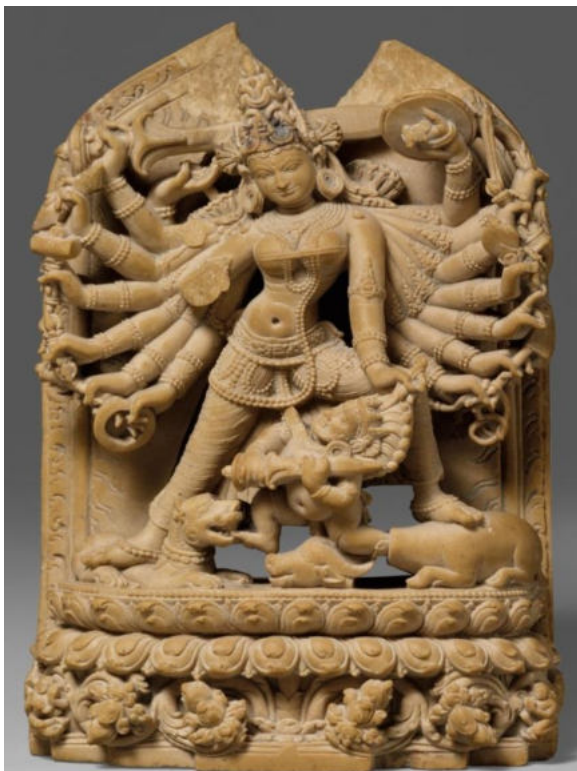
#### **The Role of Wood-Carvers, Boat Builders and Carpenters (Plates 25.7-25.9):**

Generally, the wood-carvers, boat-builders and carpenters, constituted the different categories of Woodworkers in Bengal till the mid-nineteenth century. The wood-carvers were mainly art workers, while the last two categories belonged to the artisan class. The carvings of themes of the *Purana*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and of images of various deities on the pillars of *chandimandaps*, wooden temple doors testify to their craftsmanship. Again, boat-builders were artisans who served one of the primary needs of the people of Bengal for centuries.

Wood-carving or sculpture on wood was one of the finest traditional crafts of Bengal carried on by the wood-carvers known as *Sutradhars*. Among the few specimens which have survived, mention may be made of the carved pillars of some old *chandimandaps* found in the villages of Atpur and Sripur in Hooghly district, Oola-Birnagar in Nadia district and Gopalnagar in the district of 24-Parganas. Wooden temple doors with terra-cotta like carvings on them have been found



**Plate 25.1:** Artisans at work.



**Plate 25.2:** Goddess Durga Slaying the Demon Buffalo Mahisha, 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Bangladesh.



**Plate 25.3:** Vishnu sculpture, Bangladesh.



**Plate 25.4:** Blacksmith hammering the piece of iron.



**Plate 25.5:** Blacksmith melting the iron at 3,000°C.



**Plate 25.6:** Goldsmiths melting the gold in a crucible.



**Plate 25.7:** Boat builders of Bangladesh.



**Plate 25.8:** Boat builders at work.



**Plate 25.9:** Carpenter tools of Bangladesh.



**Plate 25.10:** Clay pottery of Bangladesh.



**Plate 25.11:** These are the tools, today's artisan are using for better craft.

in a few villages in Midnapore district.<sup>12</sup> Some specimens of the glorious tradition of craftsmanship of the *sutradhars* of Bengal have been preserved at Gurusaday Museum in Thakurpukur in the district of 24-Parganas. It has been observed that the craftsmanship of the wood-carvers of Bengal was an invaluable national wealth. They were becoming extinct due to lack of patronage.<sup>13</sup>

As a branch of woodworkers, the boat-builders had an importance of their own. Bengal from its western boundaries to the shores of the sea, was watered by the Ganges, and was intersected in every direction by many navigable streams which fall into that river. Few districts were wholly destitute of internal navigation. Lakes, rivulets and water-courses, communicating with great rivers and becoming passable in the rainy season, conducted boats to the peasant's doors in many districts. The rapid currents of many rivers forbade the use of large vessels, and permitted the passage of none but canoes and small boats.

They also made cartwheels for bullock carts. The ordinary carpenters were not generally men of much skill. There was interrelationship between the works of a blacksmith and that of a carpenter. The wooden handle of the plough, by means of which the peasant pressed the

ploughshare into the earth, made by the carpenter was an example of this. In the villages of Bengal, people used to live in the mud cottages thatched with straw. Both the blacksmiths and the carpenters materially assisted in the work of thatching a hut. The process of thatching a hut required trees, clumps of bamboo and straw. The blacksmith did all the necessary iron work in the shape of nails, hooks etc.

### **The Caste-based Social fabric of India:**

In the caste-based social fabric of India, the woodworkers did not hold a high position. They were less respectable than *kamar*, *kumar* (or) *kansari*. They were however, not despised because their service was indispensable to the society. The *Sutradhars* having the synonyms of *chhutor* (or) *chutar* is a carpenter caste. The name is derived from the Sanskrit *sutra*, the thread, with which the course of the saw is marked. Some argue that *Kulin* and *Moulik* are their two subgroups whereas some mention their subgroups as *Rarhi* and *Barendra*. *Kulin* and *Moulik*, the two divisions were at social level whereas *Rarhi* and *Barendra* divisions were based on territorial distinction. The *sutradhars* claimed themselves to be descendents of Vishvakarma. The legend about their origin was that *sutradhar* (carpenter) was one of the four sons of the Lord Vishvakarma. All the sons had sacred threads, but one *sutradhar* used these sacred threads to mark on timber by using black colour on it. Thus he was degraded and lost the sacred thread. As the *sutradhar* used *suta* he was known as *sutradhar*.<sup>14</sup>

### **Clay pottery (Plate 25.9):**

Clay pottery is an ancient craft in India. The art of Clay Pottery grew along with the Civilization. Thus, the history of clay pottery is as old as the history of human civilization. Pottery has a unique tempting appeal. Bengal archaeological finds in Pandu Rajar Dhipi and elsewhere have proved that a high degree of skill and excellence was achieved by Bengal Potters in those remote past days. Kumbhakars, the traditional potters, have been working on their wheels in the villages of West Bengal and have been turning out numerous items of clay products to cater the domestic and religious needs of the community.<sup>15</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

From the study of artisan production in the sectors of leather, wood, iron and pottery it is evident that commercialization and monetization were gradually taking roots in Bengal. It cannot be denied that earlier there was generally, limited demand for the products of these artisan groups in Bengal. The market for their products widened later due to changing socio-economic conditions. A noticeable feature of the period was the increasing momentum with which this process of transformation affected different groups of artisans. Commercialization had a mixed effect on the leather artisans. As a consequence of increase in prices of leather, many of the tanners of Bengal began to abandon their hereditary profession. The demand for

skins for export coupled with improved means of transport had an adverse impact on the economic position of *chamars* and *muchis*.

The condition of indigenous iron working and workers engaged in this is an interesting subject of study. In the period of our study, iron smelting which had once been practiced by the Bengali *karmakars* was in a state of decline. Blacksmiths started to work with ready-made iron blocks purchased from the market. Blacksmiths operating in the villages continued to cater to the rural demand. They primarily produced articles required for use in agriculture and the household.

Society in Bengal had long been organized mainly on the basis of an inheritance of functions. It is well known that each of the numerous castes into which the Indian society was separated had a traditional occupation or profession assigned to them which was considered to be its monopoly. Artisans can keep alive the culture of a nation. They had an important role to play in the economy of a country. They were an integral part of the society. It was therefore left to an independent nation to seek ways and means to ensure the survival of these traditional crafts.

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