
TRIBAL METAL SCULPTURE OF CHHATTISGARH: TRACING HISTORY, ORAL TRADITION AND ETYMOLOGY OF DHOKRA

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Abstract

Chhattisgarh is known for its rich crafting heritage and tribal culture. Crafting traditions such as Wrought iron, Terracotta, Bamboo craft, Bell metal craft, Wall painting, Godna (body tattoo), and Bottle guard craft etc. are renown traditions of state. Among several crafting traditions of Chhattisgarh, metal sculptures created in lost wax casting technique popularly known as Dhokra has become a prominent craft tradition of state. In 2008, bell metal craft/ Dhokra craft from Chhattisgarh was conferred with the Geographical Indication. Bell metal Artisans communities from Chhattisgarh are known as Ghasiya /Ghadwa, Jhara /Jherkha and Malar/ Mailyar. Once the majority members of these communities were nomadic but currently, they have settled. Metal crafting was not their sole occupations; they also practiced farming and collected forest goods for their survival. Currently Bell metal/ Dhokra craft is not only practiced by hereditary artisans but also artisans and artist who have learned the technique in workshop, camps and Art institutions.

Like several other craft tradition of continent this too was at verge of being extinct, but post-independence with the intervention of agencies, it was revived and it is flourishing more than ever. In recent decades, the tribal cultures have gained significant popularity at the national and international levels. Artisans of state have taken their art to world stage, several governments and non-governments agencies have played significant role in this

Bell metal sculpture tradition in the state is known to be an ancient tradition, the evidence of that is available in the oral tradition, but the term Dhokra is not. It not available in written documents, or oral traditions of Chhattisgarh. However, term became very popular in post independent era. This paper tries to trace a chronological history of this tradition and explore the contemporary scenario. And it investigates and explores the usage and popularity of the term Dhokra for Bell metal craft of Chhattisgarh.

Key word- Tribal Art, Chhattisgarh, Contemporary Dhokra, Bell Metal Sculpture, Lost wax technique.

Introduction

Indian Art and craft are worldwide known for its transcendence and metal craft is one among them. There are many varieties of metal craft which are practiced all over India, such as sand casting, lost wax casting, welding, heating and beating, jail cutting, embossing and engraving etc. Among all the techniques of metal craft, lost wax casting is known as one of the oldest techniques. It is now generally applied to a variety of beautifully sculpted, shaped and decorated brassware products created by the metal craftsmen. This technique is also known as “*cire-perdue*” or “Dhokra” process. Chhattisgarh is known for Dhokra metal works, origin and development of metal craft is found in their myth and tales of Chhattisgarh. This research paper is an attempt to trace oral and written history of Dhokra craft tradition of Chhattisgarh. Along with, it will also explore the emergence and popularity of term Dhokra.

Dhokra metal craft is a Tribal/Folk art form of India. It is believed that the origin of this technique is around 4000 BCE. According to the evidences found from the Indus valley site in Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, the “Dancing Girl” is one of the best examples known for Dhokra metal craft. During Vedic Period, we do not have any visual evidence about the progress of this technique, but we do have literally evidence about this craft in many ancient texts like ‘Rigvedaⁱ, Ramayanaⁱⁱ, Mahabharataⁱⁱⁱ, Mansollash^{iv} Shilpratnam^v and Mansaar^{vi}. Dhokra Metal Craft process has been described in ancient text as ‘Madhuachhistdhanam’ (lost wax process). The evidence of this art can be seen in the Mauryan and Gupta Period (Khandalavala, 1988). The Indian bronze sculpture has always attracted the attention of scholars and large amount of work has been done in various region across the continent. However, these scholars have mostly focused on the temple or court art and we do not have the pertinent written material in reference to the regional, tribal and folk art. Below a short introduction of Metal sculpture tradition of

Chhattisgarh is given, though these are generally about the sculptures found in temple or palaces. But it gives a glance of metal sculpture practice since ancient time.

History of metal sculpture

History of metal casting process belong to a very old craft tradition in ancient literature as early as Rig-Veda. There is a brief reference to hollow casting of sculpture in Yajurveda which is a later collection, instructions are given for many metals like tin, Lead and silver etc. with which ornamental bowls were manufactured. Plenty of references are available in the Upanishads and other ancient text also. In the second century BC Patanjali in his Mahabhasya, which is an exposition of Panini's and Katyana's work, gives us a vivid picture of the artisan in the villages, in which craftsmen are depicted as the base of society. The court artisan as well as the gold smiths who manufactured gold and silver coins with punch marked design and executed various metal ornaments were highly respected profession. Ancient text like the Artha sastra of Kautilya and the Buddhist and Jain texts in Pali and Sanskrit, also give reference of metal, metal smiths and Metal technique. Occasional references to the metal arts are found in Ramayana, while in Shanti parva of Mahabharata the duties of a king in relation to the artisans are mentioned and their guilds are enumerated. Manu Samhita, Yajurveda, Samhita and Haivamsa also provide considerable amount of information not only about the craft and craftsmen, but also about the mining operation and the artisan guilds etc. (Bandhopadhyay, 1981).

Though the above references provide enough amount of information in relation to metal work and the craftsmen in a general way, also they contain little information about the actual process of casting of metal figures but these texts are written by writer not by craftsmen so these doesn't contain the detail of variation in technique and material etc. The later text are Agni Purana and Matsya Purana of the Gupta periods where some details have been described, the technique of casting bronze sculpture and also about the selfless concentration with which the sculptor must bring his work to completion etc. The most elaborate treatise on the lost wax process of metal casting is the Silpa Sastra means treatise on sculpture making, which is recorded in the 68th chapter of the Manasara, during Gupta period the treatise was executed by the metal sculptors of south India. They followed the principles prescribed in the Silpa-sastra. Even now Tamil and Malayalam version of that treatise are being used, as technical manuals by the metal icon makers of Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

In the Shilpa-Shastra, elaborate and strict rules are determined regarding the auspicious times to start the work, the composition of the different parts of the body, details of body and their relative proportions, details of the different stages of casting work and their various postures like inclinations of the figure etc. the rules consist of Dhyanas of verses, describing the spiritual character and personality of the deity and the Lakshanas and Sutra means the characteristic and formula, the measurement and suggestion of the pattern and form of the figure in keeping with the Dhyanas etc. (Vinod, 2000)

Mansoullash is another old treatise, the first volume of "Abhilashitarth Chinta Mani" it is considered to be written around 12th century and Raja Bhulokkamal Someshwar is known as writer of this book. This book is not about metal sculpture making process but there are several other topics have been discussed. In 20 Shalok (Shalok 78 to 97) metal sculpture making and casting process has been discussed. According to this book there are four major steps in the process of metal sculpture making- (a) Vartna (modeling), (b) Sancha Nirman (Moulding and investment), (c) Thalai (casting), (d) Parimarjan (finishing) (Vinod, 2000).

- **Vartana** (modeling) - the sculpture is made out of wax, as sculptor wish to.
- **Sancha Nirman** (moulding or investment)- after the modeling of wax sculpture mould is made out of white clay paste along with coconut husk and rice husk and the way is made to pass metal during casting.
- **Thalai** (casting) - casting is divided into many steps. According to the weight of wax metal is melting. Out of many types of metal bronze is made for casting.
- **Parimarjan** (cleaning and finishing)- after the casting of metal sculpture is cleaned and given proper finishing. The large sculpture was casted in pieces and then they were joined. After joining and finishing decoration was done with colour and jewellery.

There are plenty of evidences of metal casting in India such as small bronze statuette of a dancing girl belonging to Indus Valley civilization shows that the process of lost wax was known to India some 5000 years ago which is one of the classic examples of skill and artistry. There bronze and copper pins unearthed at the sites of Chanhudaro, Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa of 2500-1500 BC which were also probably produced by the lost wax solid casting

process. Gold and copper ornaments found from excavations in Taxila, which were made in Hellenistic style, were also produced in the lost wax metal casting method. The group of bronze images found at Kolhapur and the four fragmentary bronze figures of Buddha excavated at Amravati believed to be of the 3rd century AD. The small hollow cast bronze bull from Sahri Bahol, Gandhara of the third- fourth century AD is also a notable example of India's metal icons of the early Christian era. The 67 ½ inch high copper image of Buddha dated 2400AD, is another example of an outstanding specimen of the Indian metal craftsman's skill, imagination and senses of artistic perfection as well as a world land mark in thecire perdue hollow casting technique.

There are number of bronze images of the Buddha have been found in a monastery at Sirpur in Madhya Pradesh dated around ninth eleventh centuries AD. In south India during the Chola period ninth to thirteenth centuries the lost wax solid casting method was generally in vogue. But during this period some certain valuable literary works came which give details of the icon making methods. Among them is the Mansollasa and Abhilasitartha – Chintamani attributed to the king Somesvara Bhulokamalal of Chalukya dynasty in the Karnataka area written in the twelfth century AD has given a very clear account of the icon casting as follows. According to Navatala measurement as mentioned before the experts should first prepare the images complete with all its limbs yellowish in colour, beautiful to look at and with the weapons and arms as prescribed.

Above discussion This is evident that the Indian metal caster had achieved skill and creative aesthetic and perfection as early as the beginning of the Christian era. These are very few handfuls of examples, there unnumerable amount of bronze sculpture are found and those is various museum all over the world, which are testaments of Indian bronze mastery. Below I have discussed the oral narrative related to metal casting and sculpture which prevalent in state.

Oral Narrative of Metal craft tradition from Chhattisgarh

Oral narratives are passed through generation; it is a genre of folklore which exist in every folk group be it a family or community or region. Narratives are told to inform the history, social laws, rules-regulations, traditions and customs etc. Metal crafting tradition is a practice of material culture which transfers from one generation to another. The knowledge of tradition passes orally. The folktales are one of the forms of oral folklore, through which artisans teach the essential elements and process of technique to another generation. There are two tales which are popular among the artisans of Chhattisgarh. Both tales start to progress and end within the domain of the forest. As artisans' communities of Chhattisgarh have their roots in the forest region. Artisans claim that their ancestors were forest dweller and when they were nomadic, they lived mostly in the nearby villages of the forest region. They also consider forest as their mother, the term "Jungle Mai" is prevalent in the state, it is also because the forest is a major source of raw materials; their livelihood depends on the forest. Naturally, they would consider the forest as their "mother goddess" because the forest is their lifeline. Thus, forest is major motif in the tales, below is the origin tale from Jhareka community told by Dhanmati Jhareka. As per the tale-

"Once there was a farmer family in the small village, which had twelve sons. Their father brought up his sons according to his will. As they grew, everyone learned the skill of cultivation from their father. They all followed the path of the father, but the youngest boy was not interested in agriculture. He was not willing to join with his father and brothers in the field. Instead, he used to roam around the nearby forest and village. The family got worried about his future, so they compelled him to join with them. They tried to convince him of the importance of hardworking as there were not many options to earn one's livelihood. Though he felt guilty, he was not able to think of going into the agriculture field. He was disappointed and could not find a way to get out of this pressure. He went to the forest and due to the tension, he went deep into the forest and lost his way back home, so he started crying aloud. As he was crying, tears rolled out of his eyes and it fell down in the mud. The teardrops on the mud created some forms and he began to make that particular form with mud. Thus, with the help of water and clay, the boy created a beautiful artefact. Therefore, he gradually learned the art of making sculpture. His brothers also appreciated and encouraged him.

*Later he realized that the sculpture he had made out of clay and water was easily breakable. So, he needed something to make it a more solid one. He searched for material to make his work into a permanent medium. He was trying to get it from nature. One day when he was sitting near his field, he saw the Gum of Babool tree (*Vachellia nilotica*). Then he imagined applying it on the surface of his sculpture. He applied the gum of Babool tree on his sculpture, but as the sunlight got hotter, the glue began to melt. He became restless and continued his*

search to find a solution. He used to make sculpture in the forest where Babool gum was easily available. He had stored all his sculpture in a tiny cave. One day a wildfire broke out in the jungle. Due to fire sculpture was burnt but the clay part was baked and Babool gum was melted in the fire. During a fire, some of the rocks slightly melted and fell into the sculpture. That melted rock stuck in the sculpture and took the space of Babool gum design. Next day after the fire cooled, the boy went to the forest where he saw the sculpture. Finally, with the help of his research for a solid and unbreakable product, he found out the technique of metal casting.”^{vii}

Ghadwa community has a slightly different tale about how their ancestor learned the metal craft. Though, the tale of Ghadwa too has a similar structure; many master craftsmen tell this tale from Ghadwa community. As per the tale-

“Once, in prehistoric time, one hunter went for hunting to the forest, he went into the jungle. After a while, he started feeling thirsty, so he started searching for water. While searching, he reached nearby one rocky hill. There he could see fire on some dry branches of a tree. As he observed, he saw the melted rock ejected from the crack of a rock. He wondered to see that and waited there for hours. And he saw that the melted rock gradually got cold and finally turned into a solid shining piece. He took the piece and brought it to his cave. He kept it in the corner of his cave and he was thrilled to watch it regularly. As it made him happy, he started searching for some shining object in the forest. He succeeded in his search. Out of curiosity, he sought the place and tried to find out the cause of this phenomenon. Thus, he found out that the process of creating shining rock is the result of melted rock's passage through the clay of termite nest and beehive.

He assumed that when the rock ejected the lava, it might get stick in the beehive and the termite clay. With this knowledge, he started to create a shining rock. He showed the shining object to his neighbours and they asked what that object was, so he introduced it as the Mother Goddess.”^{viii}

Both tales given above have few differences, but the basic elements and structure remain the same. That is because the technique used by both communities for creating craft is similar. Narratives do not only suggest the method but also their dwelling pattern and their livelihood dependency. It is important to point out here that, artisans' communities never used the term Dhokra in their tale or among each other. Verrier Elwin who worked among the tribals of Chhattisgarh too has mentioned as “Ghadwa or Ghasiya art” a name associated with the caste of artisans. Similarly, in the Raigarh, Sarguja and Jashpur District of Chhattisgarh too the craft tradition was known as “Jhara/Jharekha/ Malar work” even the term Art or craft (*Kala/Hastkala*) was not used in the regional language or dialect such as Chhattisgarhi, Gindi, Halbi or Bhathri. These were later inserted with influence of Hindi. In this context further we see the etymology and popularity of term Dhokra.

An Identity and etymology of term “Dhokra”

The name '*Dhokra*' or '*Dokra*' was formerly used to indicate a group of nomadic craftsmen from west Bengal, they say that *Dhokra* crafts origin was in west Bengal and later some crafts men migrated to central part of India and from there they migrated to southern and northern part of India. The crafting communities from central India is their distant cousin. *Dhokra* is derived from the *Dhokra* dammar tribe who traditionally employ the lost wax technique to cast no ferrous metal communities engaged in blacksmith in the Chhota Nagpur area are the Asur Birja tribals.

The term *Dhokra* also pronounced as “*Dokra*” is used for all the folk metal craft technique of country. Specially which are made with lost wax technique and wax threads for creating an artefact. Since the any earlier documents of state written by British anthropologist and administrators does not consist of the term Dhokra. I tried to collect artisans' narrative for the term. Tracing the origin of the word for *Dhokra* leads us to the popular tales and explanations told by artisans for the term *Dhokra*. Below is a tale of Bastar region that tells the story of *Dhokra* artisans, as said by artisan Chamsingh Besra-

“Earlier tribal used to wear jewellery made by Ghadwa artisan; it was trendy among the people. The glory of Ghadwa jewels reached up to the royal court of Dantewada and it is believed that the queen and the courtiers were fond of Ghadwa jewels. Those days only old artisans were allowed to enter into the palace of the queen to take order or delivery order for jewellery. The queens called them *Dokra*, which means older man in Chhattisgarhi and Halbi dialect. (In due course of time the word *Dokra* spelt in English as *Dhokra*) hence those days term *Dokra* was

attributed to the person who made such jewellery; consequently, the craft they produced also was known as Dhokra craft.^{xix}

The artisans of Raigarh region tell another popular saying, according to them, this craft is known as *Dhokra* because of its age-old craft technique. As *Dhokra* means an older man in the Chhattisgarhi, that is the reason this craft is called *Dhokra*.^x

There is another explanation as well for name *Dhokra* as told by a woman artisan Gomti Jhareka-

“Our art is known as Dhokra because we constantly work while sitting near to Gorsis (coal cinder). We don't move even a little bit like older people, that's why it is known as Dhokra art.”^{xi}

Artisans generally tell the above-mentioned narratives of the region. Any written document regarding the name *Dhokra* was not found in any earlier text of metal craft. As per the previous work on *Dhokra*, the word *Dhokra* derived from the *Dokra* and *Dammar* tribe from West Bengal. This tribe are traditionally employed as the lost-wax artisan in West Bengal and Orissa region, who have migrated from the central-east part of the regions (Postel, M. & Cooper, Z., 1999). It is also believed that they are craft maker communities from Chhota Nagpur area, also known as the *Asur Birja* tribal. These tribal craft makers have migrated and spread all over the central and east part of the country.^{xii} Artisans from Bastar and Raigarh region also claim that once their ancestor migrated from Chota Nagpur region to eastern part of the country. Though *Dhokra* artisans from the state say that earlier they had never termed this craft as *Dhokra* or any other name, they used to say “*Peetal Kaam*” or “*Pitar Dharna*” or with their community's name like “*Ghadwa Kala*” or “*Jhara Kala*”. Artisan Sukta Ram recalls his encounter with the term *Dhokra* for this craft as he said.

“Once two official people came to our village, coincidentally I was picking Mahuwa nearby our Para (colony). As they saw me, they stopped their scooter and asked me ‘Dokra buta kartho ka?’ means ‘do you do the Dokra work?’ I didn't understand properly; I thought they are asking about my grandfather. Because ‘Dokra’ means ‘old man’ also my grandfather was a popular man (as he could put his hands on boiling oil. Even Jagdalpur's Raja called him several times, Angrej/Britisher had called and took his photo. He was the first man in our village who had been photographed). So, I replied he died some two-three year back. He understood that I did not understand the question. He asked in his broken Gond language what work we do? I replied ‘peetar dharthan’ means ‘we do brass casting’ he then came to our house and spoke to my father. After one month they came again with train tickets, my father sent me along with them to Bhopal. There everybody called this craft Dhokra, so that is how I came to know that Shahrati/ Urban people call this craft as Dhokra craft.”^{xiii}

Few members of Jhareka community as well say that government officials introduced the term. As Govind Ram Jhara said-

“I heard the name Dhokra when the first time we were called to Bhopal in 1983. There all Sarkari/ Government officials called it Dhokra, and they gave us certificates in that also it is written Dhokra. Now we have to use the same name because if we do not say ‘Dhokra’, urban people do not understand. They call this because it is an age-old craft technique. We always called it as Jhareka Kala because this is ‘art’ of our community and we have been making this, since prehistoric times.”^{xiv}

Above given anecdote reflects that outsiders introduce the term *Dhokra* to the artisans of Chhattisgarh. The *Dhokra* for Brass metal craft of Chhattisgarh had become popular in the late 20th century. This metalcraft was initially known as “*Ghadwa Kala*” (Chattopadhyay, 1963). Meera Mukherjee visited the Bastar during 1965-66 and learned metal Craft from artisan Simran Ram Baghel from Kondagaon.^{xv} She received Senior Research Fellowships for two years from Anthropological Survey of India in 1967 to 69 and documented the metal craft technique. Mukherjee, in her research manuscript, referred to the lost wax casting technique of Bastar as *Dhokra* craft. As in West Bengal, folk artisans make metal craft with similar technology and those Artisans community is known as *Dhokra*, so the craft is also known as *Dhokra* Craft. In 1972 All India Handicraft Board opened a branch office in Jagdalpur and instead of ‘Ghadwa’, the name ‘*Dhokra* craft’ became an official name. Meera Mukherjee's manuscript was published in 1978 “*Metal craftsmen of India*”. Later authors and official followed with the same name for the similar metal craft from other regions of the country. At present *Dhokra* is a general term used by the officials as well as artisans.

Conclusion-

Based on above discussion on written documents and oral narratives, it is evident that lost wax metal crafting technique in the region starts from early civilization and it is continuing till date. However, terminology has been changing in between. Today it is popularly known as Dhokra/Dokra, though Dhokra was not the term used earlier in the state; neither by artisans nor by consumers. Dhokra artisans of state have incorporated the term. People know it today as archaic tradition which is continuing since ancient time without any changes, however that is debatable. As artisans have adopted made changes in visuals and functions, according to demand and requirement of consumer. But they have not changed their ethnic flavor, and distinct style which varies from one district to another. Anyone who is familiar with this tradition can easily find the difference among craft style of different districts such as Bastar, Kondgaon, Raigarh and Jashpur etc. Today Dhokra artisans are representing themselves in the international stages. The state and central government has insured that this traditional metal sculpture is revived and represented in the national and international level. It is constantly evolving and changing as per the time and demand, while maintaining its ethnicity.

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ⁱ “Ayas” is the term frequently used in Rigveda for “Iron”.

ⁱⁱ The golden sculpture of Sita is made for worship. Suggest the metal work during Vedic periods.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the episode of Dhritarastra’s embracing an iron replica of Bhima gives evidence of metal sculpture.

^{iv} This text is believed to be the written during 12th century by Raja Bulokkamal Someshwar. From verse number 78 to 97 metal casting process has been mentioned.

^v This text is believed to be written is 16th century by a Malayali Brahman name Sri Kumar. In the second chapter lost wax casting has been described.

^{vi} In the 118th chapter metal casting has been written and the word “Maddhu Chhistashnam” for the lost wax casting is given in this text.

^{vii} Dhanmati Jhareka, personal interview, November 5th, 2015, Ektal. Similar tale was told by the several Jhareka artisans from different villages of Raigarh district as well.

^{viii} Suktaram Ghadwa, personal interview, March 19th, 2015, Sirmud. Similar tale was told by many Ghadwa artisans from Kondagaon and Jagdalpur district, thus it is confirmed the tale is popularly known and told among the artisan community.

^{ix} Chamsingh Besra, personal interview, October 26th, 2015, Kondagaon.

^x Sampuranchand Induwar, personal interview, May 26th, 2016, Ghoraghati.

^{xi} Gomti Jhareka, personal interview, March 17th, 2015, Baigandihi.

^{xii} According to master craftsman Govindram Jhareka, their ancestor was from the Chhota Nagpur region.

^{xiii} Suktaram Ghadwa, personal interview, March 19th, 2015, Sirmud.

^{xiv} Govindram Jhareka, personal interview, November 3rd, 2015, Ektal.

^{xv} Stree Shakti. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.streeshakti.com/bookM.aspx?author=18>