

Arts & Ideas

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MARKETING ● Without proper promotion the traditional crafts of Bengal are languishing, says Kunal Basu

A failure story

Near the end of a desultory interview with a puzzled non-resident academic, a senior West Bengal bureaucrat, with responsibility for crafts, confided: "Bengal, unlike Rajasthan or Tamil Nadu, has no crafts, so to speak."

In a landscape dotted with giants like Heinz Mode, Gurusaday Dutt, Abanindranath, Benoy Ghosh, and Pupal Jayakar, among others, a cultural critique is unnecessary. Archives and museums aside, our personal memories leap to provide the antithesis of such negation. Yet, in an age when the state usurps everything and renders everything mediocre, the challenge is to rekindle the earthen lamp, resurrect the enchantment of *daker saaj*, *Gambhira*, *Chhou* and the clay dolls of *rather mela*.

It is in this context that one is compelled to critique the creative paralysis and market failure in West Bengal. Interestingly enough, the dereliction occurs against the background of a global resurrection of sorts. Indigenous crafts from developing countries constitute a \$ 2 billion industry, in which our South-eastern neighbours are among the biggest players. Trade figures aside, contemporary pundits are increasingly blending the exotic in fashion, furnishings, even high art, as we search for cultural markers in an equilateral world.

The "ethnic-wave" of the homegrown variety has ignored the state's largest craft conglomerate. The current retail status of Manjusha seems to indicate: there are no crafts in Bengal today. So to speak.

Pictures: courtesy, Smriti's Gallery



Dokra (Bikhna settlement, Bankura)

commence outside emporium walls, following the trail of popular lore. There are enough clues in this city that lead to Naya in Midnapore — to *patshilpis* like Gurupada, Dukhushyam, and others, whose portfolio span both the archetypal and the contemporary. Or to Dinajpur for museum-quality tribal jewelry, six-foot tall bamboo totems, and masks of *Mahiraban* with his consort.

From his village home in Dinhat, Coochbehar, Subir Malakar crafts sholapith *Mashans*, Padmadevi, and an entire range of folk creatures, with strange resemblance to the cast of Peking Opera. Replace the shop-worn Bankura horse and insipid ashtrays with the artistry of Buddhadev Kumbhakar and Kalipada Sanyasi, and suddenly Bengal terracotta could become preeminent. Add to these, carved door-panels from Natungram, delightful basketry from north Bengal (with distinctive *Hmong* and *Kachin* features), bone and metal horns from Darjeeling, lacquer dolls, a striking clay head of Dakkhin Roy from South 24 Parganas, the finest of straw mats (*madur*) from Midnapore, ritual accessories from Kalighat, copper and brass from Chitpur, and the *Lak-khir Sara*.

To most craft officials, though, the list would be far from a revelation. While examples are flaunted occasionally (in Delhi, within our "glass-cased culture"), their market creation is rebuffed with dubious management logic. Terracotta, for example, is viewed as "risky" because of packaging and transportation problems, although not-so-new technologies routinely ferry made-to-order pottery from Krishnanagar to Japan. And relying on

A significant failure is in the lack of marketing. Not simply in the front-end activities of display, promotion, and sales, but in that which is fundamental — an appreciation of the creator and the consumer. In the Sixties, Ted Levitt, one of the early gurus, railed against the myopia afflicting marketers.

Let's take Bengal terracotta as an example. While most tourists return from Bishnupur and Bankura with the ubiquitous horse, some search for items that cater to their need for self expression — a need that often reflects attitudes and lifestyles. A set of unicorn-like Dinaipur horses, or a patinated Manasha from Sendra could be cause for jubilation. The lover of antiquity, on the other hand, would look for truly authentic *Bhadu* dolls, while a temple-of-life offering for *Tushu Puja* would indeed be a god-send.

Craft as memory, or self-expression, or antiquity, then, warrants different products, usually different creators, and significantly different modes of delivery. In the true sense, there is no single market for crafts, but several — an idea still beyond the comprehension of our bureaucracy.

Indeed, Manjusha and the state mechanism that vertically integrates the industry, are unwilling to differentiate between the available markets. Not only are their showrooms (in Dhakuria, Esplanade, or Bolpur) singularly identical in merchandise, even display or promotion leave no room for discernment among varying clientele. More disturbing are the strait-jacket systems of "procurement" and distribution. Plastic arts such as *dokra* are actually bought by weight. Hand-in-hand with the haggling and subterfuge goes the ignominy of the patron state favouring the powerless, illiterate client. The antics of the government officials are beyond belief.

While the state is not overtly step-motherly, budgets assigned to production subsidies and training bear the same stamp of an indiscriminate policy. Thus, training camps for artisans, which enjoy periodic official jamborees, are often conducted without sociological consideration for artisanship within specific craft communities. In highly individualised or family-oriented crafts such as the *gol tash* of Bishnupur, formal classes are unnecessary as the children learn through observation.

Similarly, craft cooperatives are often given design advice, whereas advice on market-making is negligible. Perhaps, the most contentious issue of all involves the flow of funds to artisans from the sale of their crafts in government shops. In a system obsessed with challans, records, and the complex-

ty of cheque issuing, the poor artisan usually ends up extending credit to a government that purports to alleviate poverty. So the artisan is often forced to sell directly for cash when a buyer shows interest, evoking official ire and possible disenfranchisement.

But elsewhere in the world, where there are similar problems of underdevelopment, the scenario is different. In Indonesia, for example, wood and stone carvers, scroll painters, silversmiths and puppet makers of Bali have not only defied the pronouncements of naysayers but have added to the island's multifaceted allure. Working closely with customer and creative needs, the systems of financing, material supply, packaging, retail and trade promotions, design and selling advice have accommodated idiosyncracies within each craft form. The only centralisation is in the priority, and commitment aspects.

Like Tenochtitlan pottery of Mexico, the hill crafts of Thailand and rattan ware from the Philippines, our own market success with

Bengal handloom illuminates craft-related woes. In fact, saris represent an advanced market development, where the state has played decisive roles throughout the post-independence decades, assisting weavers and facilitating market access. While its retail presence is limited (Tantuja and Tantusree), it is relatively well defined. That it is capable, if willing, to rejuvenate dying traditions is well documented through the soaring demand for *Balucharis*.

Yet, hardly 30 kilometers from Baishnabpara — home of the magical silk weavers — traditional *dokra* artisans and a nationally acclaimed clay sculptor struggle to survive. This despite the government ledgers which testify to their existence, and expenditures incurred on their behalf.

Arguably, the challenge of crafts is larger today, involving not merely maintenance of existing markets but creation of new ones. A lacklustre private sector — equally near-sighted — is no match for the enterprise one finds in handloom

and garment products. Yet, in many ways the time for take-off is now. While curators and pundits may deride today's ethnic crest, it undoubtedly has created a larger audience where none existed before.

Conspicuous consumption, at least for the crafts, is not to be frowned upon. Understandably, the crafts have been vulgarised; yet what is not realised is that without market acceptance crafts will gradually disappear from the living landscape.

Marketing and aesthetic debasement, however, are not axiomatic. After all, even the traditional artisan survived through sales, and not necessarily by debasing his craft. Adequate consumer studies would surely have stalled the uncalled-for grotesquery that is palmed off at

Manjusha — styrofoam cut-outs of goddesses, the sphinx in terracotta, Christ in batik, and so on.

Additionally, crafts, in a number of developing countries, have tertiary impact as well. In Indonesia for example, the national airline deliberately advertises a craft theme. Tourist hotels in Thailand or Mexico rely heavily on artifacts to achieve distinction. However, the blank walls of the tourist lodges in this state bear testimony to the impoverishment of our *pat silpis*, and indeed of those who might have benefitted from a more holistic vision.

Yet, underneath the callousness and cynical official-speak, like a subterranean spring, Bengal crafts thrive in many splendoured abundance. The chase, of course, should

indigenous solutions, Rajasthanis cart loads of houseware to sell on Calcutta pavements.

Shortage of production is attributed to non-supply, when the importum demands home-delivery to the city warehouse from artisans who cannot afford transportation expenses. An additional complication arises from the appeasement of district coteries who insist on local quotas regardless of aesthetic acceptability. The question is not *what is*, but *what can be*.

Ultimately, it boils down to the issue of leadership, the strength to re-work a system that exists only for itself.

There are at least five museums/repositories for traditional items, more than a dozen central and state agencies and countless autonomous bodies with a craft mandate in Calcutta. However, most of these are top-heavy with administrators zealously protecting their turf with scant regard for programmatic coordination.

The state-sponsored Experimental Workshop Cum Research Centre at Baruipur, in charge of introducing new designs and materials to traditional artisans, is a case in point. Here, artisans are trained under artists, but their creations get nowhere. The same can be said about the exemplary pieces displayed in the districts for artisans to draw ideas or inspiration from. Training, delinked from production at a marketable scale, has led to complete redundancy.

The state's annual craft competition too does not draw an audience. Although artisans vie for honour, there is meagre economic benefit as the event is held in-camera, and the entries are neither exhibited nor sold. Try as one may, it is impossible to buy a competing item, since neither the state nor the absent artisan is in a position to claim ownership.

Besides a failure of vision, Bengal crafts signify a crisis of personnel. There is nobody who is accountable for it. Starting from district magistrates, Zilla parishad heads, to freelancing pundits, advisors our-number entrepreneurs. Ministers and bureaucrats typically belong in the non-consuming segment.

In 1909, Ananda Coomaraswamy wrote: "Museum objects on the whole were not originally treasures made to be seen in glass cases, but rather common objects of the marketplace that could have been bought and used by anyone." It is from such a perspective that the nurturing of Bengal crafts should be viewed. Perhaps, expectations for change are far-fetched, given the present framework. But the artisans themselves should never be blamed for their predicament.

Photographs by Desha Kalyan Chaudhury

Interference by design

Over the past few years there has been a noticeable resurgence of interest in traditional handicrafts. However, the threat of a smugness born out of 'fashionable-activism' looms large. And at stake is the very existence of the village artisan, who, despite the odds, has, till now, managed to survive with considerable dignity.

On the other hand, this interest could mean a fresh lease-of-life for traditional handicrafts. But past performances of marketing and promotional intermediaries have been largely auto-abortive. So the present situation, pregnant with possibilities, may not yield what it seems to promise.

To begin with, the general ignorance about the definition of traditional handicrafts is abysmal. This has contributed to the inclusion of products such as poor imitations of Venus de Milo in ceramic, the Bankura horse in wood (further duplicated by Dokra craftsmen), counterfeit Tibetan carpet, and so on. A wide variety of appropriated imagery and technique foreign to traditional sensibilities has complicated an already difficult situation. This has led many traditional crafts to being almost totally marginalised.

Add to this scenario the practice of providing design inputs to artisans. This is not only insensi-

tive, but also fails to make an impression on the market. Short-sighted bureaucratic concepts lead to nothing but exercises in futility. Changing market needs are supposed to be the reason for such design interferences. But what these agencies fail to realise is that the needs of a consumerist society are in a process of perpetual change far beyond the artisan's comprehension.

The problem stems from the patronising attitude of those who have been led to believe that our traditional aesthetic sensibilities are of an inferior variety. As a consequence, traditional crafts have given way to kitsch. Conscious alteration and organised interference are tantamount to vandalism.

However, change is inevitable. And it is a continuous process. Progress irreversibly alters the fabric of a given society, and handicrafts — a manifestation of socio-cultural and religious mores — cannot remain immune to this syndrome of change. Change as a result of progress affects and alters the form of a given craft in subtle ways, which stem from the artisans' own social and aesthetic compulsions. The pace of such change is slow and is tangible only in retrospect and can be explained with reference to demographic parameters.

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Gamira dance mask (Dinaipur)