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TAKE ON INDIA

Bengal

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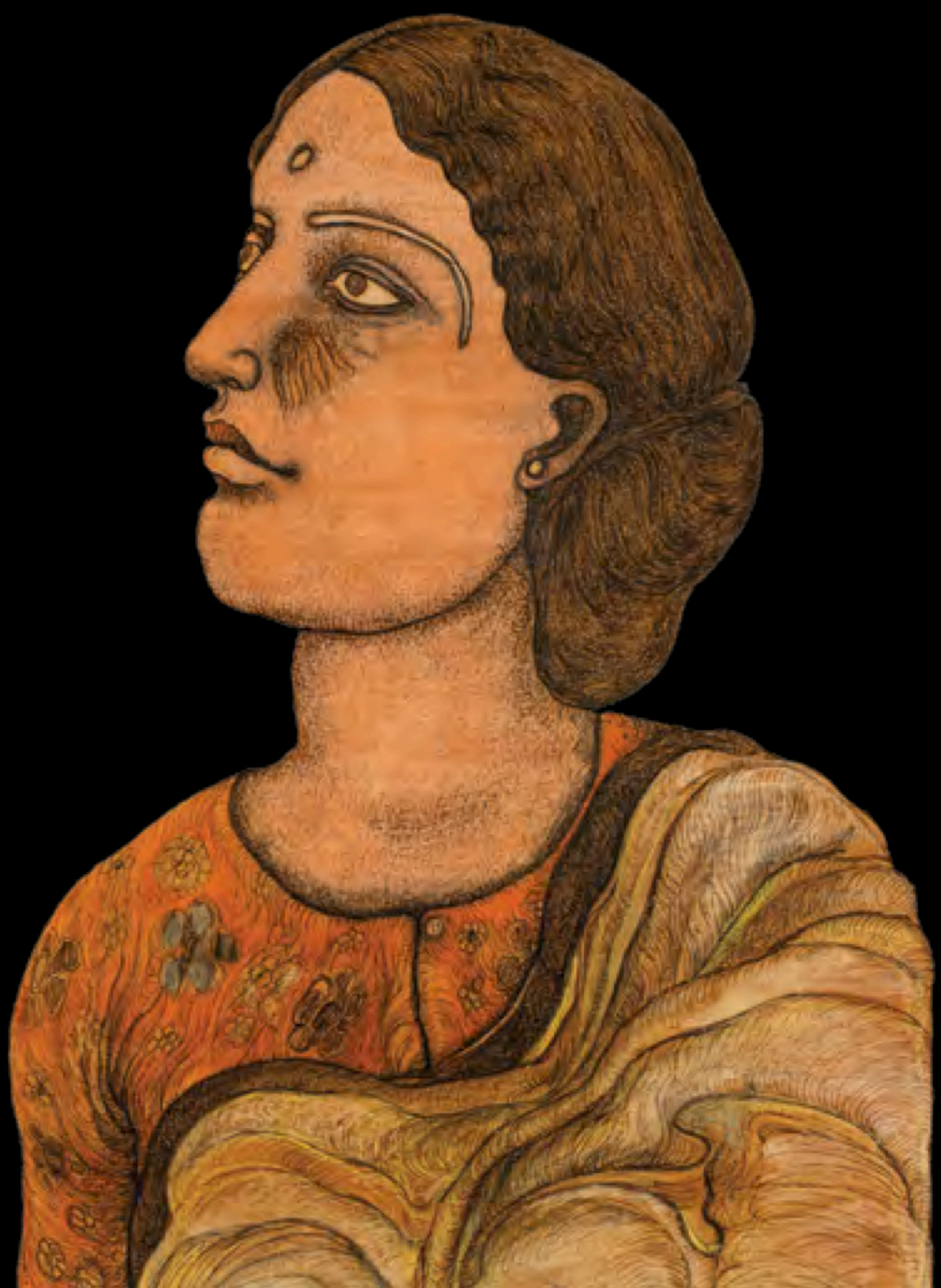
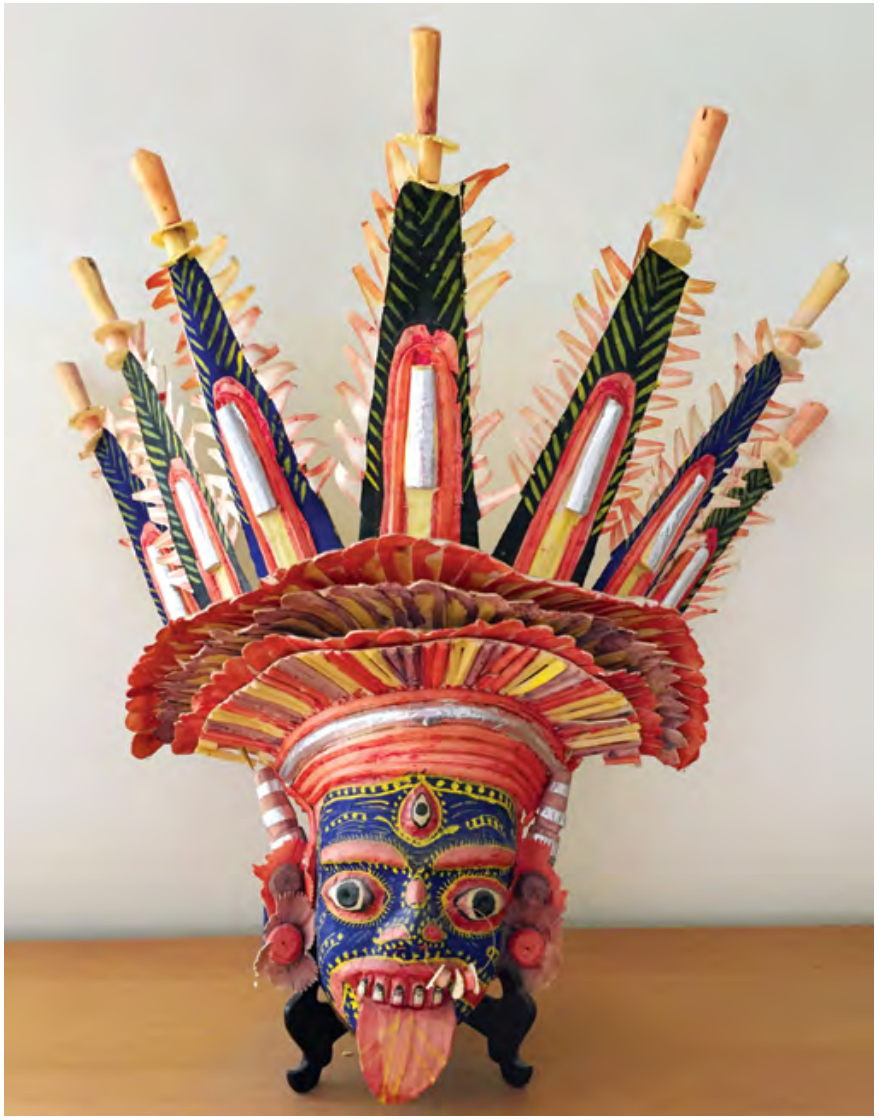


TAKE editions



Kunal Basu

LENS ON CRAFT

Kunal Basu was born in India and educated in India and the United States. He is the author of several acclaimed novels such as *The Miniaturist* and *Kalkatta*, and a collection of stories *The Japanese Wife*, the lead story of which has been made into an award-winning film. His work has been widely translated and nominated for awards. He is also the author of *Intimacies* – a photo essay – and four Bengali novels. The Shakespeare Society has published a volume of essays on his historical novels, *Romancing the Strange: The Fiction of Kunal Basu*. He has acted on stage and on screen, and directed documentary films. Kunal Basu lives in Oxford, UK, where he teaches at the University of Oxford.

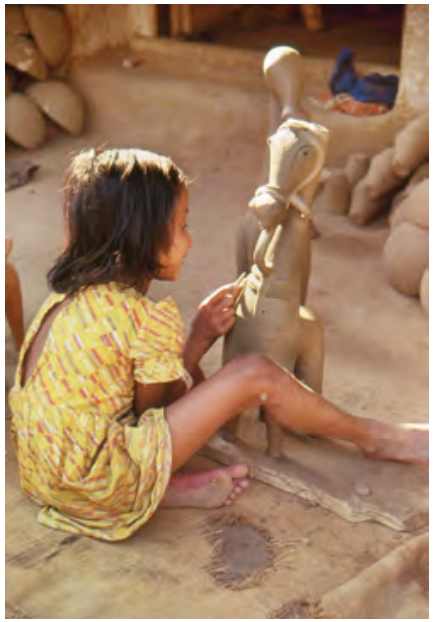
Early Victorian curiosity with regard to subject races had led to a spate of British photographers documenting India and Indians from the mid nineteenth century till the time of Independence. While historical monuments and the varied landscapes of the country held sway among the pioneers (notably: William Armstrong Fallon's *Ajanta and Ellora photographs of 1847*), the princely courts had introduced flesh and blood to their albums. If the commoners were to feature at all, they'd appear as appendages to the highborn, as court servants or nautch girls, unworthy of holding centre stage. Within such a context of discovery and documentation, the artisans of India made rare appearances, with few exceptions such as in the voluminous *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* published in 1872.

Photographing Indian artisans and their crafts has remained a relatively unexplored domain in esthetic photography as well as photojournalism since its early days. In what might be seen as a remarkable counterpoint, Verrier Elwin's *The Tribal Art of Middle India* (Oxford University Press, 1951) serves as a reminder that capturing artisans in their habitat could well hand a lively creative context to photographers, in addition to fulfilling exciting ethnographic missions. Working in the (then) Central Provinces among the Gondhs, Pardhans, Agarias and Baigas, Elwin relied on his British friends and local accomplices for photographs and, significantly, avoided raiding museums as it would then have been 'neither new nor mine', calling his book a 'personal record'.

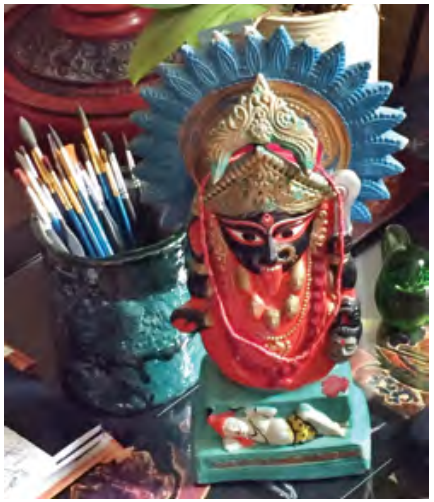
Sadly, Elwin never spent time in Bengal, depriving Bengal crafts of the analytical and photographic scrutiny that marks his book. Faced with a surfeit of existential crises such as famine, riot, poverty and urbanization, post-Independence Indian photographers have rarely ventured out to remote craft centres that are seen perhaps to be low in terms of the novelty quotient. While Raghubir Singh's or Raghu Rai's images of idol makers of Kumartuli could well qualify as examples of craft photography, they represent at best a fragment of the overall fabric of Kolkata much sought after by the photographers, deprived of the singular limelight that they truly deserve as the world's largest community of artisans. Not simply the Kumartuli idol makers, similar neglect has marked the clay-craft villages of Bankura, the birthplace of the Bankura horse that graces the logo of the Central Cottage Industries Emporium. Or for that matter the dokra artisans' communities dotting Bankura and Birbhum; the *patachitra* painters of Medinipur, Dinajpur mask carvers, silk weavers of Bishnupur, makers of papier mache dolls hailing from Cooch Behar, and many more. Absent from colonial albums and ateliers of contemporary photographers, craft photography survives in blogs and travel diaries reposed in the

Bankura village. Photo courtesy: Kunal Basu.

◂ Purulia Sholapith Kali. Photo courtesy: Kunal Basu.



Child artisan in Pachmura, Bankura. Photo courtesy: Kunal Basu.



Kalighat Kali in unfamiliar surroundings. Photo courtesy: Kunal Basu.

internet, imbued with the spirit of discovery and documentation as in the colonial past.

But what might truly account for such an oversight? Undeniably, the quest for discovery has lost steam, ceding space to deconstructing our everyday experience of life and interrogating its many assumptions. More fundamentally, creative photography has come 'closer to home', in part, to avoid the critique of exoticizing the 'other', which includes the rural artisan. Photographing indigenous peoples has come to be viewed as violation of personal/communal space, and the photographs themselves as largely products of Western or external imagination. Like the Masai of Kenya, the clay-artisan of Bengal is seen as somewhat endangered and thus deserving of protection from the marauding camera. Their 'otherness' has relegated artisans and their crafts to oblivion.

Yet, Bengal crafts warrant focus not simply on account of their unique creative contexts but also their journey to destinations of display. The rising popularity of craft items as memory markers, lifestyle enhancers or even as personal treasures, has created a larger world of presentation going beyond museums and making their way into homes. Bengal crafts now, more than ever, coexist with varied items of home décor that include paintings and sculptures, assorted furnishings and indeed other crafts. Unlike the organic settings of their birth, they now inhabit an alien space much like immigrants in a foreign culture, and it is just such a disjunction that I find ripe for photographic examination. No longer the domain of discovery or documentation, this is the domain of encounter. Shorn of an authentic meaning derived from its ritual or functional role in households, each piece must now find a new meaning determined in part by the esthetics of its surroundings. What sort of composite imagery springs to mind when a Bankura horse, for example, finds company among Javanese puppets or African masks? What magic or mischief is sought by the juxtaposition of craft objects that share sparse commonality except the handiwork of artisans? Does displacement eradicate all meanings or create opportunities for emergence of new ones?

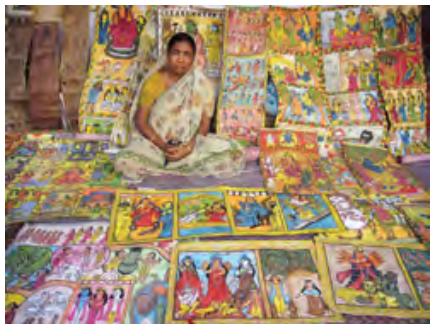
Decontextualisation of craft objects is of course, not without its critics. Cultural anthropologists have argued long and hard about the loss of authenticity that is its inevitable result. The quest for novelty, which is at the heart of display

1 & 2 - Mask. Photo courtesy: Kunal Basu

3 - Dokra owl amidst world crafts. Photo courtesy: Kunal Basu.

in highbrow homes, runs the danger of rendering traditional crafts into commodities, exchangeable at will without the artisan's consent. It is a remnant or reinvigoration of colonial practice – it is argued – detrimental to the creations and their creators.

And yet, migration of objects has spawned new meanings through centuries. In my journey following Bengal artisans and their crafts, I have found the esthetics of display to be both complex and photographically exciting. There are



Patachitra seller. Photo courtesy: Kunal Basu.

moments when a display image evokes sensual parallels between disparate craft objects, or heightens an emotional response to the ensemble. Thematic displays, more than others, create conditions for recognizing a shared sensibility among creators: a Dinajpur stork mask sits comfortably alongside a Borneo hornbill or a Inuit owl, raising fundamental questions about the genesis of esthetics and their similarities across cultures. Images of these composite home displays have the power to break the shackles of sterile museum presentations, and offer an additional actor in the appreciation of crafts. Now, the artisan is joined by the displayer and the photographer in creating the context of viewership, rendering thereby a mélange of sensibilities.

There are those who seek a 'pure' image when it comes to craft, unsullied by external interpretation to the extent possible. Whilst I have sought to portray their protracted journey full of impure contagion, towards unknown destinations. As Verrier Elwin might've said, that has been my 'personal record'.