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COMMERCIALIZATION OF A CRAFT TRADITION: A STUDY ON DOKRA ARTISANS LIVING IN DARIAPUR REGION IN WEST BENGAL

Abstract

Ethnographic studies on the dokraartisans of West Bengal have been rare. Most of the studies because of their over-reliance on numeric data have failed to explain the process of commercialization among these artisans in an in-depth manner. This study thus by looking at how life and livelihood activities of these artisans revolve around production and marketing tries to project an understanding of how these artisans are living and coping with the onslaught of commodification and capitalism. The study shows the process of commercialization within the dokraartisan community has been multifaceted which eventually reinstated the basis for inequality and exploitation.

Keywords: *Commercialization, Dokra-Artisans, Inequality, Capitalist System of Production.*

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Introduction

Lives and livelihood activities of *dokra* makers are quite different from some of the contemporary craftsmen in India. Use of *dokra* items in everyday life is limited compared to some of the vastly produced craft items. But no one could deny the fact that the taste and demand of the consumers of *dokra* items have also increased along with the change in the economy, culture and lifestyle. It certainly has pushed these craftsmen to take some adaptive measures who otherwise remained confined within their own private lives.

The term *dokra* carries some historical significance. The root of this non-ferrous lost-wax metal casting technique, also known as 'cireperdue' in French (Agrawal 1971) can be traced back to the time of Indus valley civilization.

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It was found all over the world, especially in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and Greece. This technique flourished in Aztecs civilization in Mexico during 14th-16th centuries AD and in the Benin kingdom in south-central Nigeria during 14th-19th centuries AD (Kochhar 2001). Some of the oldest Dokra artefacts found are either human or animal figurines. The legendary dancing girl of MohenjoDaro is one the most prominent examples of earliest known lost-wax casting. The bronze cast dancing girl model from the ruins of Mohenjodaro still evokes wonder for the aesthetic appeal and advanced technical knowledge (Bhattacharya 2011).

However, the mechanism through which the lost-wax technique spread across our country is still unknown. It could have occurred through communication — which increased along with the settling down of Chitraghasi, GhasiandDokraDamars communities who were well acquainted with this particular metal casting technique outside the agricultural villages in different tribal zones of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal and parts of Andhra Pradesh(Horne1987). The technique spread further as these groups moved from one place to another based on the changing market demand. Or it might have happened through independent parallel inventions. Most astonishingly, even with the age-old lost-wax technique, *dokra* makers are still maintaining their existence in the era of globalization, neoliberal economy and mechanized mass production.

Background studies

Despite so many important dimensions, not much ethnographic study has been carried out on the *Dokra* workers in West Bengal. Ruth Reeves was the first who carried out a detailed study of *cireperdue* work in the Bankura District in the early 1960s. Her work *Cire Perdue Casting in India* (1962) has been the primary source for many subsequent reports and academic theses (e.g. Krishnan1976; Pal 1978) which prove documentation of the process of *cireperdue* casting. Art historical studies (e.g. Welch 1986:103-113) also provided fine illustrations of *cireperdue* *dokra* work of ‘tribal’ origin dating back as far as the 18th Century Purulia in West Bengal, Maharashtra, Orissa, Bastar (Madhya Pradesh), Himachal Pradesh, Punjab and Bihar.

Studies carried out from sociological (e.g. Chatterjee 2013, 2015), geographical (e.g. Samanta 2015; Sinha, Chakraborty and Sinha 2015; Kundu 2016; Mondal and Shit 2018), ecological (e.g. Guin 2013), ethnoarchaeological (e.g. Miller 2001; Hoffman and Miller 2009; Mukherjee 2014), applied (e.g. ThakoreForam 2010) and popular (e.g. Welch 1986; Bhattacharya 2011; Kochhar 2011) perspectives have tried to cover a wide variety of issues such as “depiction and analysis of the socio-economic condition of the present-day population associated with this metal casting technique”, “issues surrounding the marketing of *Dokra* items”, “identification of basic problems of the craftsmen”, “need assessment”, “understanding the historical aspect of this

non-ferrous metal casting technique”, “relation and differences in practices of metal casting of ancient to modern day’s metal casting” etc.

But, except few (e.g. Smith 2002; Krishnan 1976; Pal 1978; Sinha 2020), most of the aforementioned studies, due to their over-reliance on quantitative methods, failed to explain how the process of commercialization and capitalist development is making an impact within the community of *dokra* makers in an in-depth manner.

Objective and methods

The present study attempts to understand the effect of commercialization within the community of *dokra* artisans. The study is rooted within “craft-as-industry perspective”(Mohlman 1999:113) – which tries to see handicraft producers and production in connection with the larger narrative of commercialization and industrial development affecting craftsmen.

But gauging these effects is quite problematic, as crafts, on one hand, exposes the process of commodification and offers resistance to it on the other hand (Varma 2013:749). The “socio-technical ensemble” (Pfaffenberger 1992) within the craft community makes the job even more difficult as it involves “seamless webs” of manual labour, skills, artistic imagination, precision and entrepreneurial skills, along with the successful mediation of several actors. Thus, instead of using “craft-as-culture approach”— which often emphasize upon the importance of craft objects only, whose value is gauged according to a set of criteria beauty, originality, formal perfection and elegance, this study tries to see the interconnection between craft objects and different stakeholders of the “craft world” (Fabian and Szombati-Fabian 1980; Venkatesan 2009:38). By using Appadurai’s (1986) concept of “arenas” this study critically examines how lives and livelihood of these artisans revolve around the processes of production and marketing and tries to project an understanding of how *dokra* makers are living and coping with the onslaught of commodification and capitalism.

Data for this study has been collected using mixed methods (Creswell 2007) as part of an undergraduate level ethnographic training programme. For which all the authors — first two being the supervising teachers and rest being the trainees — stayed and carried out fieldwork at Dariapur in December 2018 for 12 consecutive days. Socio-demographic information like age, sex, occupation, education, and the household expenditure of 242 individuals have been collected with the help of well-tested ‘household census schedules’. This numeric data were then analysed based on socio-economic parameters like, ‘household size’, ‘house-type’, ‘toilet-facility’, ‘sources of drinking water’, ‘per-capita family expenditure’, ‘number of living rooms’ etc (Bhattacharya et al. 1987; Mozumdar and Roy 2010). In-depth information on tools, technicalities and tacit body of knowledge associated with different stages of *dokra* production

have been collected through 'unstructured interviewing', 'observation' and 'photographic technique'. Information on the relationship between different groups participating in *dokra* production has collected using 'case-study' technique. Similarly, information on the market network and profit have been collected through 'in-depth interviews' of different stakeholders. The organization of this article is as following.

This article first provides a brief account of the study area, people their ethnicity and the history of their migration. Then the study provides a socio-economic overview of the *dokra* artisans living in Dariapur. The study then provides a thorough account of knowledge, skill and practices of *dokra* making followed by a description of organizational structure and relations in production. The study then provides a description of the market and network through which *dokra* items are sold. Finally, the study grounds some of its findings within the relevant literature to show how these *dokra* artisans are coping with commercialization and capitalist development.

Study area: People, ethnicity and migration

The study has been carried out among the artisans living at village Dariapur located at Dariapur 2 Panchayat under Ausgram-I block in the Purba Bardhaman District of West Bengal. Majority of the population in the district depend on agriculture apart from industry, trade and service. Dariapur is situated at a distance of around 1.2 kilometres from Guskara railway station. One gets to see huge areas of agricultural plots and open spaces between the village and railway station. To suit the agricultural needs many rice mills have emerged in the region.

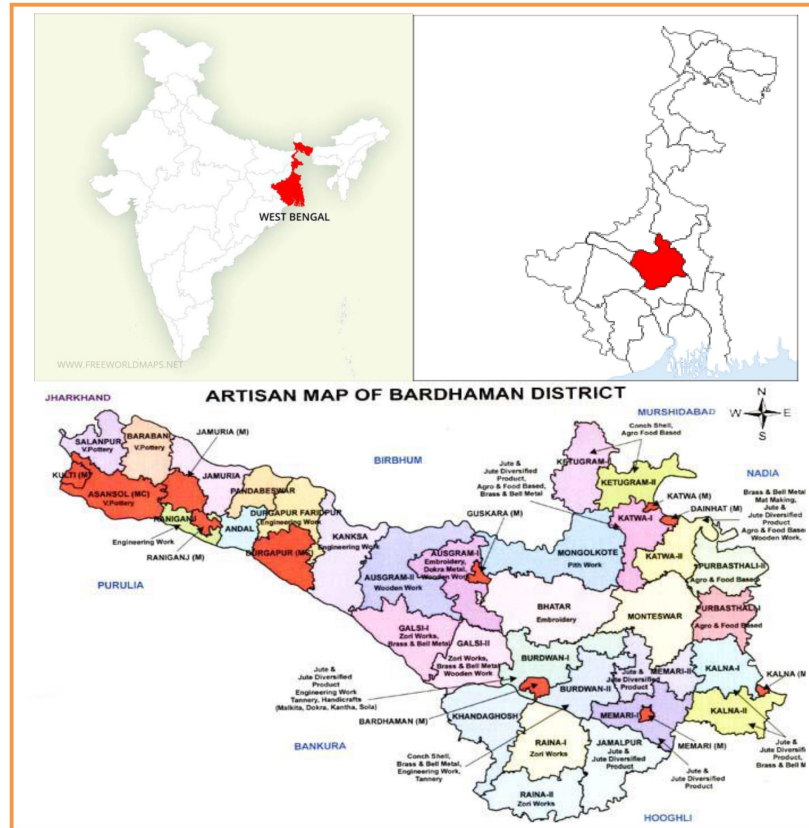


Fig 1—Map of study area

Dariapur is one of the major *dokra* making centres in West Bengal apart from Bikna in Bankura district. The area has been chosen based on relative lack of academic work compared to Bikna in Bankura District in West Bengal. The ethnic origin of these *dokra* artisans has been subject to a fair bit of confusion. Risley's (1891) claim of *dokra* artisans belonging to a sub-caste of *Kamars* (blacksmiths) which was part of *Nabashakha*¹ or the nine caste groups commonly found in Bengal has been the most popular one.

Others have referred to them as *Kankuiye Mal* (Reeves 1962). These people call themselves with the variants of the same name like Mal, Malar, Maral, Malhor or Mahuli; all of whom share a common area of origin in the tribal area of Chota Nagpur plateau (Horne 1987). Currently, most of the artisans in Dariapur use the surname *Karmakar* which has been listed under other backward classes (OBC) category both by the state and the central government. Though OBC as a category is quite ill-defined, but there has been a consensus about them belonging to a slightly higher status than the untouchables in the caste order (Sujatha 2002), based on which they receive special treatment from the state.

Today, this seminomadic group of craftsmen are found scattered over Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Kerala and tribal zones of Bankura and Burdwan districts in West Bengal (Mukherjee 2014). In 1962, places like Dariapur and Eklakshmi (in Burdwan), Rampur, Netkamla and Bindajam (in Bankura), Nachensa (in Birbhum), Belia and Amda (in Midnapore) Pabra-Pahari, Ankro, Kenda (in Purulia) in West Bengal had scattered population of *Dokra* artisans. Migration to Dariapur reported to have occurred for the non-availability of suitable places to live and to work (Mitra 1968). Several artisan families of Dariapur claim that initially a few of families migrated to Dariapur more than 100 years ago. Looking at their innate skills and craftsmanship a landholder farmer of the village provided them land. These artisans used to produce the cereal-measuring-bowl (*Pai*) for local farmers. They came to their present settlement (land provided by the state government) just at the outskirts of the village during the early 1960s just as other families joined them looking at the growing demand for *dokra* items such as tribal figures, animals, deities and jewellery.

Socio-economic overview of *dokra* artisan living in Dariapur village

Table 1 and figure 2 show age group-wise distribution of studied population in Dariapur region. The highest concentration of individuals (16.94%) is found in the age-group of 5-9 years and the least concentration (2.89%) is found in the age-group of 60 years and above. It indicates that the population is relatively young and growing in nature. Age-group wise distribution of male and female population show quite similar trends. Age-group of 5-9 years shows the highest concentration of males (19.01%) and females (14.88%). Meanwhile, the least concentration of males (1.65%) and females (4.13%) are respectively found in the age groups of “60 years and above” and “40-44 years”.

Table 1—Age-group wise distribution of the total studied population in Dariapur

Age Group	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
0-4	13	10.74	8	6.61	21	8.68
05-09	23	19.01	18	14.88	41	16.94
10-14	15	12.4	14	11.57	29	11.98
15-19	7	5.79	12	9.92	19	7.85
20-24	16	13.22	9	7.44	25	10.33
25-29	13	10.74	18	14.88	31	12.81
30-34	9	7.44	6	4.96	15	6.20
35-39	7	5.79	10	8.26	17	7.02
40-44	5	4.13	5	4.13	10	4.13
45-49	4	3.31	6	4.96	10	4.13
50-54	3	2.48	5	4.13	8	3.31
55-59	4	3.31	5	4.13	9	3.72
60+	2	1.65	5	4.13	7	2.89
Total	121	100	121	100	242	100.00

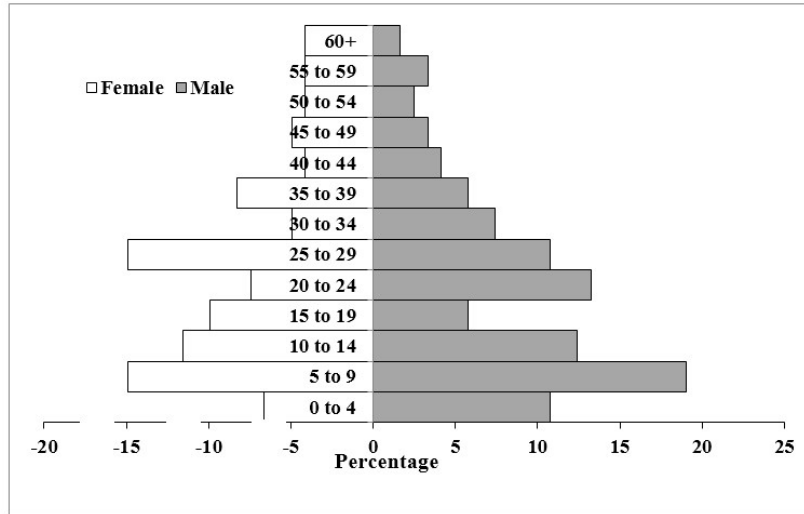


Figure 2— Population pyramid of the studied population in Dariapur Region

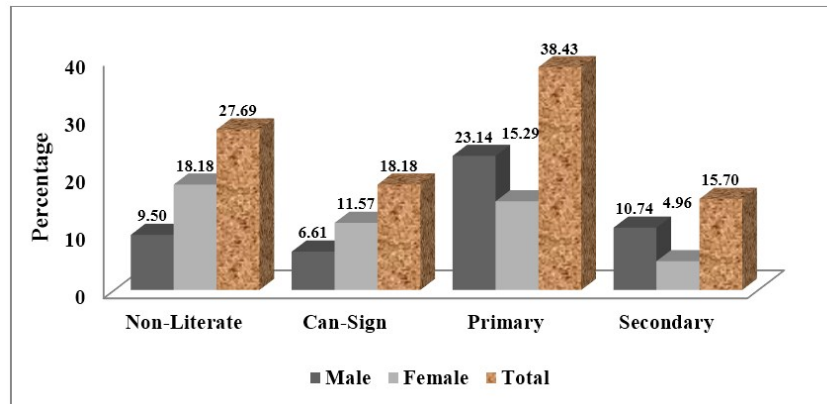


Figure 3—Distribution of the total population in terms of educational status

Artisans are well aware of the necessity of primary education, especially for their children. Today, almost all the children in the community go to school for education. The adult members of the community in comparison, however, are not so much educated. 27.69 per cent of them are non-literate, 18.18 per cent can sign only, 38.43 per cent attained primary education, only 15.7 per cent have studied up to secondary level (10th standard) and very few have passed higher secondary education (12th) (as shown in Figure 3). The literacy rate among females (81.82%) is much lower compared to males (90.05%). Poverty plays a crucial role in this regard. Most of the aged persons of the community can write their names only. Formal education is completely absent among aged persons.

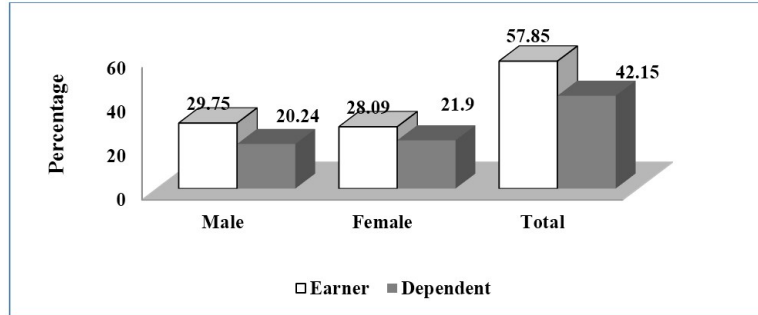


Figure 4— Distribution of the total population in terms of earner and dependent status

Table 3—Distribution of total earner population in terms of age and sex

Age Groups (in Years)	Dokra			Masson			Agricultural labourer			Tin-toka			Total Earner		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
0-4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5-9		2	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	2
		(1.43)	(1.43)											(1.43)	(1.43)
10-14	75	12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	5	12	
	(5.00)	(3.57)	(8.57)										(5.00)	(3.57)	(8.57)
15-19	5	9	14	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	5	10	15
	(3.57)	(6.43)	(10.00)				(0.71)	(0.71)					(3.57)	(7.14)	(10.71)
20-24	14	5	19	2	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	16	5	21
	(10.00)	(3.57)	(13.57)	(1.43)		(1.43)							(11.43)	(3.57)	(15.00)
25-29	13	13	26	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13	13	26
	(9.29)	(9.29)	(18.57)										(9.29)	(9.29)	(18.57)
30-34	8	1	9	-	1	1	-	1	1	-	1	1	8	4	12
	(5.71)	(0.71)	(6.43)		(0.71)	(0.71)		(0.71)	(0.71)		(0.71)	(0.71)	(5.71)	(2.86)	(8.57)
35-39	4	6	10	1	-	1	1	3	4	1	-	1	7	9	16
	(2.86)	(4.29)	(7.14)	(0.71)		(0.71)	(0.71)	(2.14)	(2.86)	(0.71)		(0.71)	(5.00)	(6.43)	(6.43)
40-44	3	3	6	1	-	1	1	-	1	-	-	-	5	3	8
	(2.14)	(2.14)	(4.29)	(0.71)		(0.71)	(0.71)		(0.71)				(3.57)	(2.14)	(5.71)
45-49	4	5	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	5	9
	(2.86)	(3.57)	(6.43)										(2.86)	(3.57)	(6.43)
50-54	2	4	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	4	6
	(1.43)	(2.86)	(4.29)										(1.43)	(2.86)	(4.29)
55-59	4	5	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	5	9
	(2.86)	(3.57)	(6.43)										(2.86)	(3.57)	(6.43)
60+	1	3	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	3	4
	(0.71)	(2.14)	(2.86)										(0.71)	(2.14)	(2.86)
Total	65	61	126	4	1	5	2	5	7	1	1	2	72	68	140
	(46.43)	(43.57)	(90.00)	(2.86)	(0.71)	(3.57)	(1.43)	(3.57)	(5.00)	(0.71)	(0.71)	(1.43)	(51.43)	(48.57)	(100.00)

M= Male, F= Female and T= Total, Values in the parenthesis indicate percentage

Of the total 242 individuals of the studied population 140 (57.85%) are earners. And out of these 140 earner individuals, 72 (51.43%) are males and 68 (48.57%) are females. 126 (90.0%) of these total 140 earner individuals earn their living through manufacturing of *dokra* products, out of which 65 (46.43%)

are males and 61 (43.57%) are females. 5 (3.57%) individuals are involved with masonry, out of which 4 (2.86%) are males and 1 (0.71%) is females. 7 individuals (5.00%) work as agricultural labourers, out of which 2 (1.43%) are males and 5 (3.57%) are females. Only 2 individuals (1.43%) is associated with *tin-toka* work one from each sex.

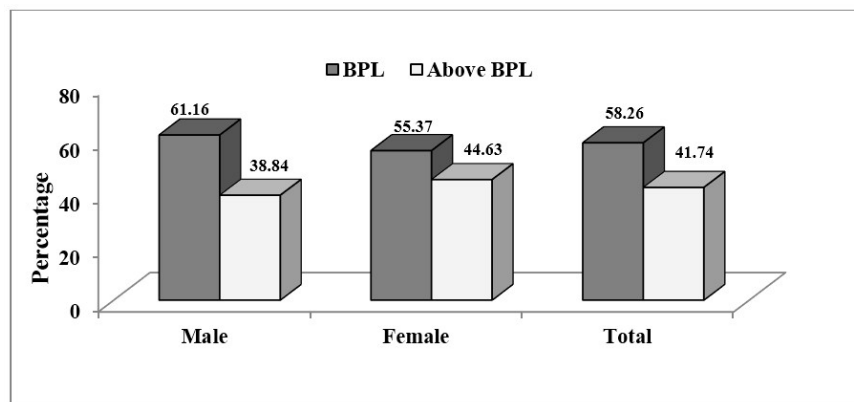


Figure 5—Economic condition (in terms of Per-Capita monthly expenditure) wise distribution of dokramakers of Dariapur
BPL \leq INR. 972.00/- and Above BPL $>$ 972.00/-, the Poverty line in rural areas of India is INR 972.00/- (Planning Commission of India 2014)

Table 4— Other socio-economic traits of the dokra makers of Dariapur

Socio-Economic Traits	n	%	
Household size group(no. of individuals)	≤ 4	26	53.06
	5+	23	46.94
House type	Kuccha	7	14.29
	Semi-pucca	40	81.63
	Pucca	2	4.08
Toilet facility	No	47	95.92
	Yes	2	4.08
Sources of drinking water	Tube-well	35	71.43
	Well	4	8.16
	Others*	10	20.41
Economic group#(i.e. number of living room in the household/ household size)	Low (≤ 0.25)	19	38.78
	Middle (0.26-0.50)	25	51.02
	High (> 0.50)	5	10.20

(*Kuccha*= mud wall and tile roof, *Semi-pucca*= mud wall and concrete roof and *Pucca*= concrete wall and roof), *Others= tap water and water sources from pond (see, #Mozumdar and Roy 2010)

Most of the households belong to the 'middle economic group' (51.02%) followed by 'low economic group' (38.78%) and 'high economic group' (10.20%). In terms of guidelines provided by the Planning Commission of India (2014) more than 60 per cent of males and 55 per cent of females of the studied population fall under the below poverty level (BPL) category, while around

38% of males and 44% of females fall above the BPL category (as shown in Figure 5). In terms of other socio-economic traits, 53.06 per cent and 46.94 per cent of households of the studied population has 'd'4' and '5+' family members respectively (as shown in table 4). Most of the households were 'Semi-pucca' (81.63%) followed by 'Kuccha' (14.29%) and 'pucca' (4.08%). Most of the household (95.92%) don't have toilet facility attached to their households. They use a common toilet facility located at the centre of their settlement. Only 4.08 per cent of the households have attached toilet. In most of the households 'tubewell' (71.43%) is common sources of drinking water followed by 'others' (20.41%) and 'well' (8.16%).

Knowledge, skill and practices: Raw materials, implements and division of labour in dokra production

Stages of *dokra* production in Dariapur show hardly any difference with the six stages— i) core-making, ii) modelling, iii) moulding, iv) de-waxing, v) casting and vi) finishing— which is commonly used in lost-wax techniques found elsewhere in the country (Postel and Cooper 1999: 81-97).

The chronological sequence of *dokra* production in Dariapur are as following; i) making of a model or cast with mud, ii) preparation of mixture with wax, resin and mustard oil, (iii) *design* or formation of the figure with wax, (iv) formation of design over the model or wax, v) *thesa* or process of layering or covering the designed model or wax figure, vi) *chong-kora* or attachment of funnel-like structure over the clay-covered models, vii) putting raw brass metal over the funnel-like structure and covering, viii) *bhanti* or melting of the metal and moulding within the furnace, ix) taking out the moulded items from the mud-cover, x) *palis* or grinding and polishing. A slight variation concerning "making of the model cast with mud" has been found, as sometimes artisans directly start with the preparation of the wax-resin-mustard-oil mixture. The growing demand for *dokra* items compels them to take such measures to save time and labour.



Figure 6 and 7—Formation of the mud structure

The activities of *dokra* making are also highly gendered. The basis of such a gendered division of labour can be associated with relative suitability and non-suitability of certain stages for female and children. Due to which one doesn't get to see women and children performing physically strenuous jobs like "melting of metal" or "taking out of moulded items". All these jobs are performed exclusively by adult male artisans. Women and children instead help the male individuals in the preparation of the mixture from wax, resin and pitch. The women especially take part in the layering of the designed moulds, preparation of funnel-like structure which is attached to the layered designed moulds and measuring and providing brass metal within this funnel-like structure before melting.

Firstly, to prepare the outer structure of the figurines artisans prepare a mixture using wax (*mom*), resin (*dhuno*) and mustered oil (*sarisar tel*) which they buy from Guskara market. They use two different varieties of wax, one of them is a normal type and the other type which is also known as *Madhumukhi-mom* is much expensive. The price of normal one kilogram of wax is 350 rupees. Price of one-kilogram *Madhumakhi-mom* is 450 rupees. One kilogram of resin costs around 200 rupees. One litre mustered oil costs rupees 100. By applying heat, they melt the wax in a container (*dechki*). Then to bring the temperature down they store the melted wax in another container (*gumla*) filled with water. After a while when the wax becomes somewhat soft, the artisans mix the resin and a few drops of mustard oil with the cooled wax. Then the wax-resin-mustered oil mixture is smeared for some time to prepare a pulp which is used for preparing the outline of the animal and human figurines and multiple forms of design.



Figure 8 and 9—Preparation of wax-resin-mustered oil mixture

The artisans then apply a little bit of heat so prepared pulp becomes slightly softer. Then they use their dexterity to produce desired animal and human figurines. Here a small horizontal metal plate (*ketni*) is used for cutting out the extra portion of wax during designing. They produce tribal man and

women dancing together, different kinds of objects such as a boat, horses, owl, idols of Hindu god and goddesses. With the completion of the outline, the artisans leave the outline so that they become firm.



Figure 10 and 11—Formation of the figure with wax, resin and mustard oil preparation



Figure 12 and 13—Formation of design over the mud structure

For designing the artisans use resin (*dhuno*) mostly. They usually prepare another mixture from resin (*dhuno*), pitch and mustard oil which they buy from Guskara market. One kilogram of *pitch* costs around 45 rupees. The artisans prepare the mixture using a similar method of applying heat and storing it in a container filled with cold water. After some time, the artisans mix and smear the melted resin, mustered oil and the pitch to prepare a pulp which is softer compared to the one used for forming the outer structure.

Then they take small pieces of this pulp and roll it in their hand and make long tiny thread-like strings which they use for design formation over the already prepared structure (as shown in figure 12 and 13). Finally, the artisans drown the designed outline or casts or the moulds into the water so that it became hard.



Figure 14 (on the left)—Preparation of soil, ash, sand and clay and Figure 15 (on the right)—First stage of layering

Then the female-folks, usually family members of these artisans, cover the designed outline with three soil layers one after another. Three different kinds of soil, i.e. '*chalamati*', '*belemati*' and '*chetaymati*' are used during layering which artisans collect from the nearby forest just beside their settlement. Sequentially these layers are known as the first layer, second layer, and third layer. The proportion of clay and sand ratio used in the soil covering for these three subsequent layers make them different from one another. *Chalamati* which is light brown in colour and used for the first layer contain a mixture of 70% clay and 30% sand. The clay content in this layer intentionally kept higher because it helps in binding the first layer together at the time of moulding. Then these female-folks keep these covered structures in open sunlight for over thirty minutes for drying. *Belemati*, which is reddish-brown in colour and used for second layering contains 60 per cent clay and 40 per cent sand. With the completion of the second layering, the covered structures are again kept in open sunlight for drying. *Chetaymati* is used for the third layering in which the colour and proportion of clay and sand content in the soil are similar to the second one. Sometimes an additional coat of clay is applied over this third layer so that the covered structures don't crack during pouring of melted metal. Then they are kept in open sunlight for drying.



Figure 16 (on the left)—Second stage of layering and Figure 17 (on the right)—Moulds drying after third stage of layering



Figure 18 (on the left)—Attachment of funnel-like structure and Figure 19 (on the right)—Covering of funnel-like structure

With the completion of three layers, female-folks of artisan families attach a funnel-like structure (*chong*) over the small opening within the mud layers, which they intentionally make with an iron stick (*sik*) as the entry point of the melted metal. *Chong* is attached with the covered structure with help of clay. Then these female-folks measures and put broken pieces of brass metal within the *chong* which artisans buy from Guskara market. One kilogram of brass metal cost around 450 rupees. Depending upon the furnace (*bhanti*) or place of smelting metal, *chong* is either kept open or covered with clay. It is kept open in the case of a round-shaped furnace and covered with clay for the square-shaped furnace. The covered moulds are then kept in open sunlight for drying.

Of the two types of furnaces (*bhantis*) that artisans of Dariapur region use (as shown in 20 and 21) the square-shaped *bhantis* are not permanent ones. The outer structure of this type of *bhanti* is prepared by bricks placed side by side. But round-shaped *bhantis* are permanent and have fixed place for them usually located at the end of the settlement. Artisans use the round-shaped *bhantis* when they get huge order. Respectively they use square-shaped *bhantis* in case of less number of products. In both the cases cow dung cakes, coal and firewood are used as fuel. Artisans buy coal from Guskara market one quintal of which cost them around 1200 rupees. They also purchase cow dung cakes from neighbouring agricultural communities 100 pieces of which cost them around 25 rupees and collect firewood from a nearby forest.



Figure: 20 (on the left)—Square-shaped furnace Figure 21 (on the right)—Round-shaped furnace

Moulds with covered *chongs* are provided to square-shaped *bhatis* along with fuels. Then they are kept in the *bhati* for 2 or 3 hours. With time the wax present in the covered models evaporate and the melted brass enters through the small opening and fills in the empty space within the covered moulds. Fire flame becoming yellowish-green and the emergence of gas at the same point of time indicates about the completion of the entire procedure. The artisans then take the models out of the *bhati* and keep them in a separate place for cooling with the help of a pincer (*sarashi*). In the case of round-shaped *bhati* the process is little bit different. Here the brass metal is melted separately in the furnace with help of a ladle (*dabu*). Then the melted metal is poured through the opening in the *chong* (as shown in figure 22). The wax within the model evaporates and the melted metal enters the model in the same manner. The amount of melted metal to be given is decided by mare eye estimation and technical expertise of smelter. After completion, the models are kept in a separate place for cooling.



Figure 22 (on the left)—Pouring of melted metal through *chong* Figure 23 (on the right)—Mould filled with melted metal kept for cooling



Figure 24 (on the left)—Grinding machine Figure 25 (on the right)—Buffing machine

The cooled and firm moulded figurines are brought out of mud cover through following steps. Artisans first dissociate the burnt clay especially the outer and mid-layer and the funnel-like structure from the figurines with a hammer (*haturi*). Then they separate the remaining clay content sticking with the figurines with a fine chisel (*cheni*) and hammer. In case of breakage within the figurine, artisans correct them through welding. They don't do it on their own, rather take the products to the Guskara market for the purpose.



Figure 26— Finishing touch before the sale

Finally, artisans provide finishing touch to these figurines through a grinding machine. It removes small particles of burnt clays from the metal surface. The artisans then polish the figurines with a buffing machine. It removes the dull outlook of the metal surface and gives it a polished smooth shiny outlook. Use of the buffing machine is relatively a new phenomenon. Polishing in the yesteryears used to be done using hands only. The dull outlook is considered to be one of the most authentic aspects of the *dokra* items. But the growing demand of customers for the polished item has pushed artisans to adopt such a measure.

Organizational structure: Hierarchy and relations in production

For providing a settled life to these nomadic artisans of and Cottage and Small-Scale Industries Directorate, Government of West Bengal took the initiative and established DariapurDokra Artisan Cooperative Society in 1962 (Mitra 1968). An office for the purpose was built within 4.5 bighas of land which the government bought for building the residence of these artisans. Along with artisan members the cooperative had a manager whose primary job was to bring order and allocate it among the artisan members and with the completion of production supply those products to their customers. Orders used to come from both government and non-government sectors. Dokra artisans gain much popularity when military officers from Panagarh started frequently visiting the Dariapur during late 1970s. During this period, order from government institutions used to come via District Industries Centre (DIC), block-level executive officer. The cooperative manager used to report to the block-level executive officer, who used to take important decisions regarding the finance and administration. And at times the familiarity gained through the government orders helped DariapurDokra Artisan Cooperative to get the order from “individual parties”.

However, with time, several factors affected the proper functioning of cooperative society. “Gradual withdrawal of support from the government”,

“saturation of the market” and “lack of repeat orders” are most important of them. The situation at times became impossible to manage for cooperative society with increasing prices of raw materials like coal, wood, brass etc. The stagnancy in the price of *dokra* items affected the profit margin, eventual affecting the lives of all concerned with the production and marketing of these exquisite items. As a result, a number of these artisan members broke away started their independent entrepreneurship. Since then the balance has shifted towards individual entrepreneurship as most of the productive activities are carried out in informal terms.

Today, the middleman (*phore*), “capitalist *dokra* artisans”, “skilled small-scale investors” and the “wage earner artisans” hierarchically form the organization of production (as shown in Figure 27). Except for the middleman, all these categories of people belong to *karmakar* sub-caste. Middlemen, who are few in number don’t belong to the community of *dokra* artisans and enjoys a relatively higher position in the caste hierarchy.

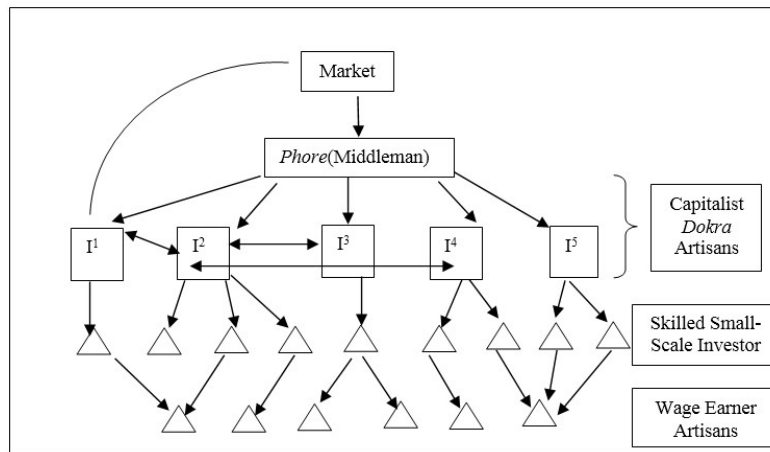


Figure 27—Organizational structure of *dokra* production in Dariapur

It’s the middlemen who run the entire business in Dariapur. These people bring orders and re-allocate among a number of the “capitalist *dokra* artisans”. However, there are exceptions as well a few of the “capitalist *dokra* artisans” have their link to the market. At times they go out of their community and bring order on their own. Usually, the “capitalist *dokra* artisans” carry out the productive process in two ways. One of them is “carrying out the job on their own”. And the other is “allocation of these assignments among the skilled small-scale investors” who they hire to complete the job. The second one is more frequent because the “capitalist *dokra* artisans” often face the challenge of providing a huge number of *dokra* items within a short period.

The relationship between the “skilled small-scale investors” and the “capitalist *dokra* artisans” is not simple. These relationships are often formed

based on the share of profit to be given after the completion of such assignments. The relationship between “wage earner artisans” and the rest of the classes, on the other hand, are fixed based on the predetermined amount to be given after the completion of the assignments.

The “capitalist *dokra* artisans” firstly make an advance payment to these “skilled small-scale investors”. These “skilled small-scale investors” then buy raw materials and provide them to the “wage earner artisans” who belong to the bottom of this hierarchy and participate in the productive process in exchange for a fixed wage. Then, together “skilled small-scale investors” along with several “wage earner artisans” carry out different activities of *dokra* making right up to layering of moulds. These “skilled small-scale investors” then go to the “capitalist *dokra* artisans” to get the additional amount of money required for buying of pieces of brass metal. The “capitalist *dokra* artisans” then check the progress of these “skilled small-scale investors” and make a further payment required for completion of assignments. The “skilled small-scale investors” get share of profit depending on the number of items they produce and the number of items they outsource to “wage earner artisans”.

The products its market and sharing of profit

Currently, *dokra* artisans produce different kinds of items. Some of most popular of them being, idols of Hindu gods and goddesses such as *Durga*, *Kali*, *Saraswati*, *Ganesh*, animal figurines of horse, elephant, deer-head tortoise, owl, models of a boat, chariot, palanquin, rickshaw, bullock-cart, and figures of tribal man and woman. However, due to public demand, these artisans have started producing various ornaments such as bangles, earrings, hairpin, pendant and objects of daily use such as door-handle, candlestick, *panchpradip* (a kind of lamp used in Hindu ritual), pen-stand, towel-hanger. Price of these items is determined based on size, design and labour. In case of smaller items such as earrings, rings, nose-pin where the lesser amount brass metal and labour is used cost around rupees 50 to 100. Bigger items like the horse, boat or chariot depending upon the size cost up to 10000 rupees.

Products are sold to four types of customers—i) government organizations like *Manjusha*, *Bishwa Bangla* and ii) non-government organization like *Bangla natak.com* iii) individual parties and iv) floating customers. Second and third of which is the most frequent case. The attitude of a number of these government organizations has changed due to several instances of misappropriation of funds where artisans have taken loans for *dokra* production and couldn't able to repay in time due to their alcoholism and absenteeism from work. Due to which government agencies now have started curtailing their order. Moreover, as the order from these government organization mostly come in the form written agreements and understanding each of the clauses of which at times becomes quite tough for these meagrely educated artisans, they prefer the oral contract which they get from “individual parties” and non-

government organization. These artisans are also quite fearful of embarrassment on their part where they may not be able to answer the questions asked by the visitors properly. As a result, most of them restrain themselves from participating in exhibitions. Only a few of these artisans participate in the exhibition in SilpokolaBhavan and fairs like Poush-Mela in Shantiniketan, HastosilpoMela in Kolkata to sell their products. Many local shopkeepers at times buy *dokra* items from these artisans at a wholesale rate which they supply to Bangalore, Mumbai and Goa. But such instances are very rare and are not part of their regular business. Depending on the floating customers also become difficult as they come during the winter season between September-February.

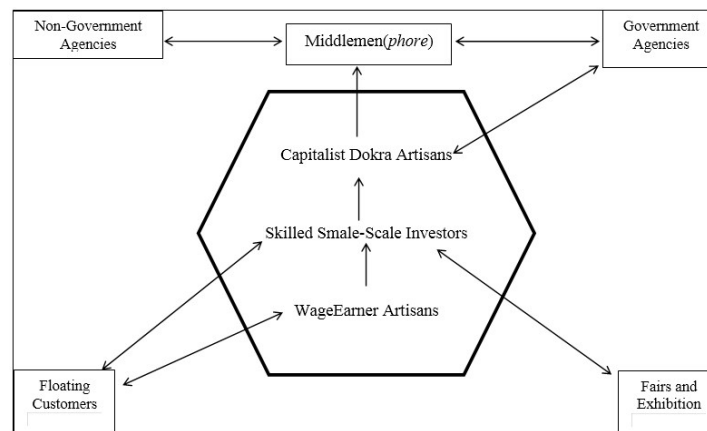


Figure 28—Forms of contract and network of distribution in Dariapur

Middlemen have grabbed this opportunity with both hands. They have snatched the role of being the negotiator between these artisans and the world outside. It's them who fetch orders from government and semi-government organizations like '*Bangasree*', '*Manjusha*', '*Amarkuthi*', '*Basundhara*', '*Bishwa Bangla*' etc. They bear the burden of signing the written contract which the artisans are apathetic to. And then make the work done by engaging these three categories of artisans such as "capitalist *dokra* artisans", "skilled small-scale investors" and "wage earner artisans" in oral contracts. Usually, they keep a profit margin of rupees 50 to 100 for each product. The higher number of products often ensures a higher amount of profit, which at times crosses the mark of 20000 to 22000 rupees for one production venture. The profit margin of "capitalist *dokra* artisans" increases or decreases depending on whether they are supplying items to directly to these organization or they are selling it through a middleman. In the second case, it comes down to 5000 to 10000 rupees for a production assignment. Similarly "skilled small-scale investors" get a profit 3000 to 4000 rupees for one such venture and "wage earner artisan" get only the wage of rupees 50 for an item of 150 rupees.

Conclusion

This particular case of *dokra* artisans may apparently look like as mere juxtaposition between “going for modernity” or “keeping alive tradition” that members of many industries across the globe have witnessed in course of industrial development (Parry 2005; Mamidipudi 2019). Increasing inclination towards mechanized mass production has taken away the artistic liberty from the artisans producing indigenous crafts goods as they no longer remained free under the market regime (Goody 1982). But at the same time, the process of commercialization has put many of these indigenous craft objects on the global map more specifically within “global praxis” (Greenhalgh 1997: 21; Bhattacharya 2011). And owing to this increasing influence of the market or more specifically the global nature of industrial capitalism artisans have taken adaptive measures and adjusted accordingly (Liebl and Roy 2004; Roy 2010). There have been multiple instances where the change in taste and culture spearheading commercialization and modernisation of craft tradition (Maskiell 2002; Sinha2020;). Diversification of products, use of buffing machine and golden polish by the artisans in Dariapur is not much different, which in the long-run has the potency of eradicating the identity and authenticity of *dokra* items.

The study shows that the effect of commercialization within the community of *dokra* artisans living at Dariapur village in West Bengal is multifaceted which requires a holistic understanding. And if we pitch this particular case within the broader narrative of commercialization of crafts in India and across the world (e.g. Chen 1984; Cohen 1989; Stromberg-Pellizi 1993; Maskiell 2002; Malik 2011; Chutia and Sharma 2016) things become much more illuminating.

This study much like (e.g. Cohen 1989; Stephen 1991; Moreno and Littrell 2001) shows that the artisans in Dariapur went through both “spontaneous” and “sponsored” phases of commercialization. The initial phase of commercialization has been “spontaneous” as these artisans were trying to adapt according to different ecological niches as they continuously migrated with the changing demand of their products. The phenomenon of “sponsored” commercialization came to fore as the government and other sponsoring agencies have taken up the role of becoming the link between these *dokra* artisans and customers in distant places. This shift from being an object produced for the need of people coming to the traditional market to becoming an object with global recognition which are produced according to the consumer demand for factory-made products has opened the avenue for the encroachment of capitalist system within the *dokra* artisan community. And that has led to other associated problems such as sturdy inequality, poverty and massive reduction of jobs which can also be seen in many other craft traditions (Roy 1993; Murshed 2004: 312).

It shows that the *dokra* artisan’s effort to adapt themselves according to market demand which complements the model of mechanized mass production

has affected both the labour configuration within their community and the trade-relations outside. The competitive environment and motive of making more profit have led to polarization within their own community —where “capitalist *dokra* artisans” dominate, “skilled small-scale investors” act accordingly and the “wage earner artisans” languish at the bottom of the hierarchic system of production and marketing. All the stakeholders have become mere instruments which reinstate the exploitative basis of the capitalist system. The “skilled small-scale investors” and “wage earner artisans” are exploited by “capitalist *dokra* artisans” who play the role of intermediary between these two categories and the middlemen. And the more educated middlemen who don’t belong to the artisan community and enjoys relatively higher caste status exploit all these *dokra* craftsmen because of being the link between these artisans and their customers.

Government and non-government organizations have tried to take *dokra* artisans out of the vicious cycle of “poor profits”, “low production” and the “eventual dispersion” by providing creating opportunities of education, financial assistance and establishment of artisan’s cooperative which look after the affairs of marketing. But most of this effort failed due to the ‘absenteeism from work’, and ‘alcoholism’ of *dokra* artisans. Some of these artisans failed to repay the loan. It created a doubt in the mind of the investors, government institutions, and non-profit organization that have aggravated the situation further. Perhaps more sustained effort is required especially concerning “eradication of the middlemen”, “providing control of supply chain in hands of these artisans” apart from creating awareness regarding these craftsmen who are maintaining their meagre existence within the world of craft.

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Notes

1. *Nabashakh* include the nine caste groups namely *modaks*, (confectioners) *telis*, (oilmen) *malis*, (gardeners) *kumbhars*, (potters) *napits*, (barbers) *tantis*, (weavers) *kamars*(ironsmith) *baruis*, (makers of betel leaf) and *gopes*(herdsmen).

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