

FLEXIBLE BRASS CRAFT TRADITION OF BELLAGUNTHA, DISTRICT GANJAM, ODISHA: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Samir Maharana, Manu Naik & Basanta Kumar Mohanta

Abstract: This is one of the centuries old traditional brass craft of the Kansari community of Bellaguntha, Odisha where a distinct form of bronze products like fish, snakes and prawns etc are prepared from the metal sheet with and traditional processes. Because of its fascinating way of creating new products, it is different from the Dhokra craft. The product of this craft carries a great cultural and ritual value as it is used to develop artefacts for many local festivals, weddings and religious processions. Chisels, hammers and hand drills as well as brass sheets and tin-zinc alloy are used in this traditional fabrication techniques. The division of labour in the craft is similarly gendered, with men predominating in the manufacturing aspect of the craft, while women primarily do the finishing aspect of the craft. Presently, these craftsmen are facing challenges relating to documentation, marketing, sustenance. Efforts are also being made towards getting a Geographical Indication (GI) marking for this skill which would allow for market recognition and benefits as well as recognition. The study addressed the urgency for systematic approaches to reviving and sustaining this craft for future generations. The objectives of the paper are to assess flexible brass crafts, the symbolic and cultural meanings of tools and practice, and the community's socioeconomic issues.

Keywords: Brass Craft, Kansari, Bellaguntha, metalwork

Introduction

Brass working is an important component of Indian traditional crafts and is a representation of cultural heritage, creative art, and social and economic identity. This study looked at flexible brass craft as carried out by the Kansari (traditional bell metal utensil makers) in Bellaguntha village, located in the Ganjam district of Odisha. Historically, the Kansari are known as metal workers and have sustained this ancient craft over generations along with their livelihoods and the cultural (ritual) needs of the region. In Bellaguntha, this flexible brass craft (*Chalachanchala Pitala Karukarya*) becomes more than just a craft; it is an identity and a sense of belonging. The flexible brass craft, which involves crafting numerous brass items, also has functional use, and ceremonial use during festivals, marriage, and religious rituals. Based on the available ethnographic data this craft tradition was brought to the region by the king Ramchandra Bhanj in the period from 1688 CE to 1711 CE (Jha 2016a, 2016b). Within the handicrafts sector, this flexible brass craft is known for its rare, flexible brass items, such as fish, snakes, and lobsters, are produced in complicated sheet metal working methods. Presently, this metal craft is struggling

Samir Maharana, Manu Naik, Dr. Basanta Kumar Mohanta (Corresponding Author) Department of Anthropology and Tribal Studies, MSCB University, Baripada, Mayurbhanj, Odisha-757003. E. mail: bkmohnata.msbcu@gmail.com / drmohantabk@gmail.com

with various issues, like lack of documentation, lack of profit, decrease in number of artisans, and thus it is critical that research, technological development and market access is provided to sustain the craft (Jha, 2016b). The methods utilised in this craft tradition demonstrate an understanding of metallurgy, that was passed down from one generation to the next through oral tradition and through the job training in the community. Scholars such as Bhattacharya (2011), Chatterjee (2015), and Mohanty (2010) examined the heritage, aesthetics, and socio-economic concerns of different crafts, such as Dhokra, Patta painting, or tribal metal craft in Eastern India, but many of these scholars tend to discuss issues related to crafts in general or focus on more well-known crafts. Bhattacharya (2011) explores the lost-wax casting technique utilized to create Dhokra. This practice has been around for many centuries. Dhokra is located in the regions of India, like Odisha and West Bengal. The research provides important information about the development and history of the craft, its tribal iconography and significance, and its socio-cultural and economic meanings and aspects. Bhattacharya wants to show the significance of the Dhokra metal craft to the people who practice it, as well as the economic importance it holds for artisan communities. Bhattacharya also demonstrated the challenge that artisan communities face when attempting to retain the practice of Dhokra metal craft work. Mahalik and Mohapatra (2010) pays attention to the important role of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge (IK) in tribal and rural communities across Odisha and argues that IK is crucial for sustainable livelihoods and maintaining cultural integrity. The article calls for dependable documentation and digital archiving of IK; and for the use of rural libraries, as a mechanism to preserve and transmit IK for posterity. The research underscores the traditional, cultural richness of the Dokra craft in tribal areas of Eastern India (Bikna and Dariapur) and its increasing global market demand for a unique aesthetic. However, craftspeople's experience poverty, inadequate access to markets, persistent techniques, and middlemen exploitation. Researchers make a strong case for the government's and NGOs' involvement to conserve both the craft and the cultural identity of the craftspeople (Chatterjee, 2015). Mohanty in 2010 discussing the variety and cultural significance of the handicrafts of Ganjam district Odisha, we spoke about Patta paintings, Dhokra metal items, stone and wood carvings and the toys. While craft is often regarded as purely aesthetic or heritage; in many cases, the structures that would typically develop and support craft as a permanent form of cultural expression, are crumbling. Like Ganjam handicrafts, many craftspeople are experiencing a decline in production (supply) and patronage (demand), due to a lack of local contemporary patrons, oversized competition from modern products and inadequate government support. The document reviews existing disconnected documentation of the flexible brass craft from Bellaguntha, Odisha. It serves to comment on the inconsistencies that authors have illustrated in depicting this flexible brass craft. The paper aims to provide an argument for the importance of systematic and participatory research to correct interpretations,

and preserve this unique craft tradition, with the community involved and a clear delineated identity of the craft. (Craft and Artisans, 2010). Oguamanam (2009) stresses the importance of documenting and digitizing traditional knowledge and intangible cultural heritage to protect it from erosion and appropriation. His work examines the difficulties and the opportunities that exist in this process, particularly in the context of globalization and intellectual property rights.

This present research differs from the previous reviewed literature for the reason that this research provides a specific focus on the anthropological analysis of a singular, under-documented kind of craft - flexible brass craft. It examined an anthropological perspective on the craft and has aimed to explore the historical origins of the craft, the social realities which had allowed its continuance, and the changing means through which it is operating in a rapidly modernising society. The aim is to explore how the Kansari people contends with tradition and modernity while maintaining their cultural practises through a limited economy and an ever-changing market. The research also analyses the challenges faced by this art tradition due to industrialisation, the reduction in demand for handmade objects, and the movement of youth towards other livelihoods that may no longer depend on the craft. In focussing on the daily experiences of the Kansaris, and their relationship to their brass craft, the research provides an important contribution to the debate about tradition, identity and resilience in relation to sociocultural change. On the other hand, it also addresses the misidentification, geographic misattribution, and misunderstanding relating to this tradition. Further, it also address the other issues relating to advocating for its documentation, cultural recognition, and preservation of the distinctive legacy that the brass craft is built upon through its fusion of fieldwork, artisans' stories, and publications of documents for comparison. Instead of the embedding theoretical framework as shown by Oguamanam (2009) surrounding digitization of intangible heritage, this study provided pragmatic and community-specific knowledge deliberations as well as expressed the importance of the continued participation of practitioners in the processes of documentation and identity correction. Overall, this case study showed that it is a significant contribution for preservation of marginalized craft traditions from deletion.

Area and People

Bellaguntha (19°52'35" - 19°53'25" NL, 84°37'43" - 84°38'45" EL; 59 MSL) is a NAC located in the Bhanja Nagar subdivision of the Ganjam district in Odisha, eastern India. Other towns nearby include Dharakot, Aska, Bhanjanagar, Berhampur, and Jaganathprasad. According to the 2011 Census, Bellaguntha has 11,297 residents, with 49% males and 51% females. The literacy rate in this location is 80.8% (Census 2011). Bellaguntha is well-known for its temples, teachers, and tanks (3T). More than twenty temples may be found within the town, and approximately twenty-five tanks are located on its outskirts. Bellaguntha also serves as the region's

educational hub. Previously, it was the main grocery marketplace. The Bhanja dynasty built Nrusinghanatha temple in the 18th century AD, making it one of the most notable temples. Most of the houses in this place are very colourful, clean, and *pakka*. Usually, the houses consist of 04 rooms and one puja ghar (place of worship); the toilet is separate from the house. Bellaguntha people have eaten ample food; especially, they eat *Jau* (made with ragi and rice), *kanji*, *khata*, *saga*, etc. For their breakfast, they take Puri, Upama, Idli, and Dosa due to the influence of the people of Andhra Pradesh. They wear normal clothes. Earlier, this Bellaguntha was the business hub in the region. The place is well-known for its art and culture, as evidenced by the story of the brass fish, where various materials such as brass, silver, copper, and wood are manufactured. The world-famous brass fish remains the city's principal attraction. According to mythology, this brass fish once swam in the sea for several minutes to entertain the king and queen.

The Maharana family follows a distinct hierarchical system rooted in traditional occupations and craftsmanship. At the top of the occupational hierarchy are the Badhai (woodworkers), who further distinguish themselves into Atrasya, Bachasya, Olasya, and Nagasya; showcasing a more specific division of labor and specialization in woodcraft. The Badhai are followed by Kamara, who specialize in metal and iron work, and which establishes the metalworking basis of the community in manufacturing tools and functional items. The third level is comprised of Kansari, who specialize in bell metal work. Kansari responsible for producing useful and ceremonial items. Anthropologists justify tiered divisions of labor in occupations in societies reflective of the socio-economic organization of the Maharana community, plus the interdependence that indicates the adaptability in resource use and trading of products. In addition, the Maharana community is partitioned into three majors Bansa (lineages) namely, Golmara, Pathara, and Surya, which encapsulates specific lime and cultural significations or possibly ritual significations within each lineage. The Bansa, which operate in unison with the occupational hierarchy, demonstrate linkages domestically of kinship, craftsmanship, and heritage, which provides perspectives on collective identity and continuity. The comparative structured labor system and occupational divisions preserved traditional knowledge while also reinforced social cohesion and cultural identity through the Maharana community.

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Figure 1-Map of the Study Area (After Google Earth Map)

Objectives

These are the main objectives of this paper.

1. To study the instruments, techniques, and cultural symbolism of flexible brass craft by the Kansari community of Bellaguntha.
2. To evaluate the socioeconomic challenges faced by artisans and recommend strategies for sustainable preservation, including obtaining a GI tag.

Methodology

This study employs ethnographic research methods, including participant observation, interviews with Kansari artisans, and documentation of the brass-making process. Secondary data from historical records, census data, and prior studies are analyzed to contextualize the craft's evolution. The integration of qualitative insights and quantitative data provides a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and economic dynamics of this traditional craft.

Findings

The findings include the origin history of this metal craft, tools and artifacts, raw materials, the process of making, division of labour, cultural significance, current

situation and market value, the question of survival and attempts to preserve, etc.

A. Historical Background

The history of brass craft goes back to the 17th century. The oral history narrates the beginning of brass craft in this place, which goes like this. Once upon a time, during the Dsahara festival, the Bindhani (metal craftsmen) were assembled at the place of the Bhanja king to exhibit their talent. During that time, a bindhani (craftsman) from Bengal bought a wooden pigeon to that place who ate wheat, mung, black gram and all the foodstuffs present in that location. The King Ramchandra Bhanja was pleased to see it and rewarded the craftsmen with prizes. To know the similar talents among the local craftsmen, the king wanted to know about the presence of any similar talents in his locality. In his response, Mr. Bhikari Maharana, a local artisan, informed about the presence of similar talent in the region and requested three to four months to exhibit it. The king allowed him to find out its solution and assured him that he would do the work with all the expenses. After that, Bhikari Maharana started his work and prepared a brass cat. Subsequently after a few days, the king called another similar kind of meeting where the craftsmen from Bengal were also present. Like earlier, the Bengal craftsmen were present, along with wooden pigeons. At that time, the craftsman Bhikari Maharana of Bellaguntha released his cat made of brass and showed that the cat ran towards the pigeon and attacked it by gripping its neck. All the present members were surprised to see it and clapped. By seeing the talents of the craftsmen, the king rewarded that artisan with land, a pond, and a mango grove along with the title of Maharana. Since that time, the craftsmen of this village have been known as Maharana and the tradition of preparing different types of products, including fish, snake, and lobster from brass metal along with silver work in this village became a tradition. In 1971, these craft products were supplied to Victoria Technical Institute / Victoria Company at Madras for trading purposes, but the company was closed in 1974. The closing of the company caused the opening of a new channel of trading of their products, and because of this, the villagers started a society having the members of a president, secretary, treasurer, and other members.

B. The Making Procedure of Brass Craft

The process of making this craft product includes the following types of tools, equipment, and raw materials.

Tools and Raw Materials

Craftsmen use many kinds of tools to make flexible brass fish. They are mentioned below

1. *Matha Sabala* (Chisel)- Used for shaping and refining the edges of each segment.
2. *Katikata Pagara* (scissors)- This tool mainly helps with cutting and trimming.

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3. *Doria Pagara* (File)- The File is mainly used to rub and scrape.
4. *Kansa Hatudi* (Hammer)- It is made of bronze and mainly helps to give shape to bell metal or bronze items.
5. *Bikhyani Katha* (Wooden T)- It looks like a Capital T-like structure made up of wood (Akasia, Sagan, Kakapoi) etc.
6. *Bandhani / Tarpana (Hand Drill)*- It's a small chisel-like tool used to make holes in brass material.
7. *Chota Hatudi* (Small Hammer) - It is primarily used to hammer and shape brass sheets into desired forms.
8. *Drilling Machine*- A manual drilling machine is utilized to create holes as needed. A hand-powered machine is preferred over an electric one to avoid damaging these delicate artefacts.
9. *Pakada* (Forceps)- Used for carefully lifting and handling hot artifact parts directly from the furnace.
10. *Hacksaw Blade*- It is used to cut small metal sheets.
11. *Furnace*- The furnace is utilized for soldering joints using a zinc-tin alloy, effectively bonding the parts together.
12. *Hand-Powered Air Blower*-This tool supplies oxygen to the furnace by blowing air into it, facilitating a controlled burning process.
13. *Divider*- Ensures accurate measurements for cutting brass sheets into equal segments.



Figure 2- Instruments used for manufacturing of Brass Craft: (a) *Hatudi Munda* (Hammer Head); (b) *Doria Pagara* (U- Shaped File); (c) *Bikhyani Katha* (Wooden T); (d) *Matha Sabala* (Chisel); (e) *Pakada* (Forceps); (f) *Choto Hatudi* (Small Hammer); (g) *Ugha* (File); (h) *Bolta* (Bolt).



Figure 3- Manufacturing of Brass Craft

A traditional brass artisan (Fig: 3) engaged in the age-old process of manufacturing brass craft items, a practice deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the study area. The artisan is seated in a squatting position, working on shaping or refining a brass object using hand tools. A furnace made from locally available materials, including a rectangular metal enclosure filled with coal or charcoal, is there, which serves as the primary heat source for melting or tempering brass. The fire is properly maintained to reach the high temperatures required for manipulating brass. Traditional tools, such as tongs, hammers, chisels, and mould are used to shape the heated brass into desired forms. The artisan's minimal attire and focused posture reflect the manual intensity and precision demanded by this craft. The manufacturing process not just a moment of labour but a representation of an enduring artisanal tradition, where skill, experience, and indigenous techniques combine to create intricate brass artifacts that hold both functional and cultural value.

Raw Materials

1. *Brass Sheets*- The primary material used to create individual segments and parts of the fish, crafted from thin strips.
2. *Brass Wire*- Used to connect and join the separate segments of the fish together.
3. *Tin-Zinc Alloy*- A mixture of tin and zinc is utilized to solder brass pieces together, taking advantage of its lower melting point.



Figure 4- Raw materials for brass craft making (a. Copper sheet and b. Copper wire).

The social and economic issues around Bellaguntha are now a threat to the brass craft. The data from the field survey show the worries of the industry leading to wavering prices of raw materials. A 32-gauge brass sheet's price (typically, 15 inches x 36 inches), is nestled between approximately ₹ 1,000 - ₹ 1,200. For example, for a sheet of 24 gauge is about ₹ 800 - ₹ 1,000 and relatively higher for a 28-gauge sheet which is about ₹ 900 - ₹ 1,000. The brass wire, which is also used by the artisans for the brass craft, ranges its price between ₹ 800 to ₹ 1,000 per kg. A major problem in this case includes a growing lack of skilled labour and, embedded with old and slow transition of community level artistic skill transfer. As because when an older with skilled artisans retire, without an apprentice or proper channels for skills transitions, the traditional brass- making knowledge being lost.

The Brass Craft of Fish Making

1. *Gadisha macha (Snakehead murrel) / Sohala macha*

For making this *Gadisha macha (Snakehead murrel) / Sohala macha*, a brass sheet of 24 or 26-gauge was brought. The head of fish was cut-off from that sheet and hung on a brass ladder and is wrapped. Then, there are about 06 to 07 small pieces of brass are used to make the mouth and eyes of the fish. After that, a 32- or 34-gauge brass sheet was cut and shaped to the head, burned again, and cooled to give its final shape which is wrapped with a cloth and pressed through the brass step. Then, it is kept in a shawl and slowly beaten with a brass hammer to give its shape. Subsequently, it is kneaded with the help of a wooden stick and the tail part is prepared and jointed (Fig. 5).

2. *Rohi Fish and Bhakura Fish*

Rohi fish (Fig:7) and Bhakura fish were made according to the above-mentioned procedure/method.

3. Prawn (*Chingudi Macha*)

The head, body and tail of the prawn (Fig: 6) are made separately. For preparing small pieces of metal sheet were prepared and about and wrapped with a cloth, and about 22 or 24 pieces of metals wires are knotted properly to complete the process. After that, it is placed on a and polished with a sandalwood and saffron (fruit).

Procedure of Making Flexible Brass Craft

According to the investigators classification the following steps are follows for making this flexible brass craft items;

Stage 1: *Prastuti Pranali* (Preparation of Raw Materials)

A 24- or 26-gauge brass sheets are chosen as the main material. Then 22- or 24-gauge brass wire is kept apart for connecting segments. After that soldering Tin-Zinc Alloy is mixed before use.

Stage 2: *Chitrana o Khanda Kariba* (Designing and Segment Cutting)

A divider is used to obtain accurate measures for equal segments of the body. The craftsmen cut the shapes they designed from brass sheet using *Katikata Pagara* (scissors), which consists of the head, body segments, and tail. The craftsmen use a Hacksaw Blade for cutting intricate cuts or tougher metals.

Stage 3: *Akruti ebong Bibarani pradan Kariba* (Shaping and Detailing)

Each piece is placed on a *Bikhyani Katha* (a T-shaped block made of local wood: Akasia, Saguana, Kakapoi) and the edges and smooth curves are shaped by using the *Matha Sabala* (Chisel). The *Doria Pagara* (file) is used for smoothening, rubbing and smoothing rough areas. Then, to give a realistic shapes (*i.e.*, scale textures, patterns in fins), it is beaten in a controlled manner with a *Chota Hatudi* and *Kansa Hatudi* (small hammers, bronze hammers).

Stage 4: *Sandhi o kana kama Kariba* (Making Articulations and Joints)

The holes are necessary for inserting brass wires that create the fish's joints, giving it articulation and flexibility as a piece of art. To make these small holes, the segments are drilled into at the edges with *Bandhani / Tarpana* (hand drill) and Manual Drilling Machine. When the wires are inserted, they are knotted on the underside of all the holes, making the fish articulated.

Stage 5: *Jhalei Kariba* (Soldering and Joining)

After making articulations and joints the pieces are jointed in a traditional way. A hand-powered air blower is used to control the flame of the traditional furnace during this joining process. After that joining with tin-zinc alloy it is ensured a clean fit with minor details that allow a strong joint. A *pakada* (forceps) is used to remove the hot brass piece from the furnace.

Stage 6: *Sesa Akruti Pradan o Prahar* (Final Shaping and Beating)

The assembled parts are wrapped in cloth and the fish are gently beaten again

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with a *hatudi*. After that all the parts of the fishes are fitted and stretched with slight heat. Then, this fishes are placed on the brass step/shawl (a firm metal base) and beaten gently to achieve its original look. The artisans always use a flat wooden stick to knead the last crease lines out and create the correct polisher look.

Stage 7. *Sesa Sparsha* (Finishing Touches)

Lastly, the tail section is formed, attached and knotted. For preparing the surface texture of these items, like *Chingudi Macha* (Prawn), *Gadisha macha* / *Sohala macha* (Snake-head murrel), *Rohi* and *Bhakura* fishes it is polished with a sandalwood and saffron fruit paste.



Figure 5- *Gadisha macha* (Snakehead murrel) / *Sohala macha*



Figure 6-*Chingudi Macha* (Prawn fish)



Figure 7-Rohi macha (Rohu Fish) and Bhakura macha



Figure 8-Different parts of Fish (a & b: Head, c & d: Body, e & f Tail)

Division of Labour

The division of labour within the Kansari brass craft community reflects a deeply ingrained gender-based differentiation in the production process. The craft's complex production task is fragmented into multiple specialized sub-tasks, with a clear gendered division of labour. Men dominate nearly the entire process, comprising 90-100% of the workforce engaged in the production stages, such as shaping, moulding, and assembling intricate brass pieces. This is largely due to the physical demands of the craft, which involves heavy work with metal, the use

of tools like hammers, chisels, and furnaces, as well as handling the intricate, hands-on production of metal objects. Women, on the other hand, have a limited yet crucial role, primarily contributing in the final stages of the craft, specifically in the polishing and finishing stages. Their involvement is typically about 10-20% of the labour force. This division reflects broader societal gender norms, where women are often entrusted with tasks that require more precision and delicacy, such as polishing and applying decorative finishes to brass products. The gendered nature of labour division is not just a reflection of physical capacity but also a cultural practice rooted in traditional gender roles, where men are seen as the primary producers and women as facilitators of refinement. This division of labour also reveals deeper insights into how work is distributed in a traditional craft-based community. It illustrates how tasks are not only specialized based on skill but also segregated along gender lines, highlighting the intersection of labour, culture, and gender in the maintenance of artisanal traditions. The marginalization of women in the productive stages of the craft could also be indicative of the socio-cultural hierarchies within the community, with men's labour considered more central to the identity and continuation of the craft, while women's roles, though essential, are seen as supplementary.

The women have a major but underappreciated role in this flexible brass craft tradition of Bellaguntha. Men normally do manual work (cutting brass, shaping brass, etc.) or tool assembly and hammering. But, women are also engaged in deeper and more delicate work with the help of their hands. These include polishing brass, wrapping brass, tying fine wires, decorating brass, etc. These require patience and precision. The ladies also participate in the preparation of tools, tidying the place of business and giving knowledge to young generations to come. There is a gendered division of labour as such, but it is flexible as women can enter key positions during high demand or need of family.

Cultural Significance

The brass metal craft holds deep cultural and symbolic significance in traditional communities, often embodying spiritual beliefs and mythological narratives. The depiction of Bishnu Avatar and scenes from *Samudra Manthana* (the churning of the ocean) in brass craft reflects the sacred connection between divine interventions and cosmic balance, emphasizing Vishnu's role in sustaining life and dharma. Similarly, the *Kachua* (tortoise) motif, central to the *Samudra Manthana* tale, symbolizes stability, endurance, and the foundation of creation. The *Chingudi*

(crab) imagery, associated with the 22 *Pokhari Chasa* represents the harmonious coexistence of nature and human livelihood, highlighting the ecological wisdom ingrained in local traditions.

Furthermore, the *Sapa* (snake) motif, prominently used in Shiva temples, signifies fertility, protection, and the cyclical nature of life, often associated with Lord Shiva's cosmic power and his role as the destroyer of evil. These motifs, crafted in brass, not only serve as decorative and functional items but also act as vessels for storytelling, ritualistic practices, and the preservation of cultural heritage. Brass, as a medium, enhances the sacred feeling of these symbols, embodying resilience and purity, making it a vital aspect of spiritual and cultural expression.

It is also seen that in Oriya marriage traditions, the ritual of *Saga Macha* holds deep cultural significance, especially centred around the symbolic role of fish. *Saga Macha* is a post-wedding ceremony that highlights the integration of the bride into her new family, and fish, being an auspicious element in Oriya culture, plays a pivotal role. In this context, fish symbolizes prosperity, fertility, and harmony, making it an integral part of the celebration. During the ritual, fish is often exchanged between the families or served as a significant dish in the feast, signifying the blessings of abundance and good fortune for the couple.

This ritual reflects the coastal state's deep connection to its natural resources and culinary heritage, where fish is not just a dietary staple but also a cultural emblem of unity and goodwill. Sharing fish during *Saga Macha* underscores the importance of familial bonds and the hope for a harmonious marital life. The ritual also acts as a way to honour tradition and invoke blessings from the elders and deities. Overall, *Saga Macha* celebrates the richness of Oriya culture through the symbolic and practical inclusion of fish, fostering joy, prosperity, and togetherness in the sacred journey of marriage.

The village, consisting of 22 ponds, proximity to the Rushikulya River, and a coastal location near Gopalpur Sea Beach, showcases a deep cultural and economic connection to fish. This geographical setting has made fish an integral part of the community's livelihood, cuisine, and traditions. The abundance of water bodies ensures a thriving fishing culture, which not only sustains the local economy but also influences the social and cultural fabric of the region. The importance of fish is further reflected in the local art and craftsmanship, particularly in metalwork. Artisans often craft intricate metal designs representing various types of fish, symbolizing prosperity, fertility, and harmony. These metal fish artifacts are not only decorative but also serve as cultural symbols, embodying the region's dependence on aquatic life. The influence of fish extends to rituals, feasts, and daily life, marking its significance in both sustenance and spirituality. The proximity to the Rushikulya River and the Gopalpur coast also connects the village to larger ecological and cultural networks, reinforcing the vital role fish play in the identity of the area. This harmonious relationship between the people and their natural

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surroundings is beautifully captured in their art and traditions, celebrating the region's aquatic abundance.

| Sl no. | Name of the product | Size | Amount@ inch | Total price |
|--------|------------------------------|----------|--------------|-------------|
| 1. | <i>Chingudi macha</i> | 10inch | 80x10 | 800 |
| 2. | <i>Bhakura macha</i> | 10inch | 100x10 | 1000 |
| 3. | <i>Sohala macha</i> | 10inch | 80x10 | 800 |
| 4. | <i>Sagada</i> (Bullock Cart) | 5-7 inch | - | 5000 |
| 5. | <i>Sapa</i> (Snake) | 1 Kg | - | 1500 |

Table 1: Details of the products, size, and cost of the metal craft

The brass craft tradition includes a diverse range of intricately designed products, each reflecting cultural and symbolic significance. Among these, the *Chingudi macha*, crafted in a 10-inch size, is priced at ₹ 800, emphasizing its role as a representation of aquatic life and ecological harmony. Similarly, the *Bhakura macha*, another 10-inch creation, is priced at ₹ 1,000, showcasing its importance in cultural narratives and daily life. The *Sohala Fish*, also 10 inches and priced at ₹ 800, adds to the collection with its delicate craftsmanship and aesthetic appeal.

One of the standout items is the *Sagada* (Bullock Cart), an iconic symbol of rural life and agricultural heritage. This piece, ranging between five to seven inches in size, demonstrates exceptional detail and artistry, priced at ₹ 5,000. Another notable product is the *Sapa*, a one kg brass representation, priced at ₹ 1,500. This item holds significant religious and cultural symbolism, often associated with Lord Shiva and fertility rituals. Together, these products highlight the richness of brass craft traditions, combining artistic excellence with deep-rooted cultural narratives.

The brass craft tradition of Bellaguntha in the Ganjam district faces serious socio-economic hurdles: market fluctuations in raw material prices, such as the cost of 32-gauge sheets ranges between ₹ 1,000 - ₹ 1,200 and similarly the cost of brass wire ranges between ₹ 800 - ₹ 1,000 per kg.

The artisans produce culturally important items such as *Chingudi macha*, *Bhakura macha* and *Sagada* but they do not receive any institutional support and cannot access to their local markets. The high transportation costs, lack of skilled labour, and the loss of intergenerational knowledge are also the other responsible factors making obstacles in preserving these cultural practices. To preserve this tradition and to increase awareness and to understand the craftsmanship in a sustainable way, the government assistance in the form of financial assistance, skill development, and GI tag are required.

The Challenges for the Craftsmen

The Kansari artisans in Bellaguntha village face significant socio-economic challenges despite their dedication and skill in the brass craft. One of the key issues

is their reluctance to extend their craft to people outside their community, a practice deeply rooted in traditional boundaries and cultural segregation. This self-imposed isolation has led to dissatisfaction and frustration among the Kansari people. They feel trapped within the confines of caste-based limitations, unable to expand their market reach or gain recognition beyond their immediate community. Despite their tireless and physically demanding work, which involves intricate metalwork and the management of various production stages, they often do not receive the appropriate compensation for their labour.

Moreover, even though their crafted brass items are available in the market, they struggle with low sales and an unwillingness from external buyers to pay a fair price. This issue is exacerbated by contractors who fail to provide adequate remuneration for the goods produced. The artisans are left feeling undervalued, their hard work not reflected in the economic returns. The poor economic situation of the Kansari people is compounded by a lack of opportunities to showcase their craft to broader markets or to access more lucrative avenues for selling their products. This imbalance in the distribution of profits further deepens the divide between the work they put into preserving this ancient craft and the financial recognition they receive.

The impact of these socio-economic struggles on the preservation of the flexible brass craft in Bellaguntha is profound. The artisans' dissatisfaction with their economic situation threatens the sustainability of the craft, as young generations may become disillusioned with the prospect of continuing the tradition under such unfavorable conditions. The lack of financial incentives, combined with the rigid caste-based segregation and exploitation by contractors, puts the entire craft at risk of fading away. In this context, the preservation of the brass craft is not just an issue of cultural heritage, but also of economic justice and social equity. To ensure the survival of this craft, there needs to be a fundamental shift in both the economic structure that supports it and the social attitudes towards caste-based barriers in the marketplace.

Since this traditional craftsmanship required more time, labour to produce a finish product and as compared to the labour and metal cost, the market value of these materials is not attractive. Besides, the people of the young generation of this brass-making community try to get government jobs, they do not like this traditional craft work. Due to a lesser number of trainers, the new generation doesn't put their interest and moving towards nearby urban centres / metropolitan cities in search of a job in the industries and other organizations for a better life.

Attempt to get a GI Tag

Ganjam district is famous for its arts and crafts. Murals, stone, and wood carvings of this district have become known all over the world. Starting from wood carvings, Lakhamurti, paper sculptures, and cow dung sculptures

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have gained popularity everywhere. In the handicraft industry of the district, the fish of Bellaguntha has created its special place. Steps have been taken to give special status to this unique handicraft of Bellaguntha, Ganjam district, in the Global Market. It is expected to get a GI tag soon. The State Handicrafts Directorate has started efforts to grant a GI tag to some handicrafts of the state. Till now, only three handicrafts have gotten their GI tags from this state, which include Chandua (applique work) of Pipili, stone carvings (Konark), and Odisha Pattachitra. Now, the Directorate of Handicrafts has applied for GI tags for different handicrafts, including the brass craft of this village.

The claim behind getting a GI tag for this metal craft includes various justifications. Giving gifts of Manglika (auspicious) work as gifts is a unique manifestation of the tradition and culture of the Ganjam district. Over the years, the artisans of Bellaguntha have successfully showcased their unique craftsmanship in this manner. The talented son of Belaguntha, Maharana, made the British government work by making brass fish that floated in the Ganga water. Generations of Beliguntha Maharanas' talent have been able to bring fame to the state in the country and abroad. The villagers collect all the raw materials like wire, coal, nails, black paint, lead, lacquer, nitre, and ithaphala and make them like living fish. So far, this brass craft of Belaguntha does not have a GI tag. The application for this GI tag was made in 2022 by the state handicraft department is to protect the identity and authenticity of brass articles and is still in process. If granted a GI tag to this flexible brass craft, it would be benefited. Firstly, the GI tag would provide formal legal protection to the artisans to be able to use the name and prevents financial exploitation by someone else who illegally imitate the product restricting the artisan's ability to utilize the craftsmanship for income. The GI tag will assist by making option in developing market demands for the product at national and international levels. The GI tag may allow government and private sector involvement into providing support for skill development, training for artisans, marketing for value, and improve infrastructure. The recognition provides avenues to expand tourism and bolster the cultural identity for local communities and their ability to engage youth in recognizing and continuing crafts.

There are several government schemes and initiatives aimed at supporting artisans across India, including those involved in traditional crafts, such as the Flexible Brass Craft of Bellaguntha in the Ganjam district, Odisha. This unique craft tradition, which involves the intricate hand-working of brass into flexible and decorative forms, holds both cultural and economic significance. However, despite its rich heritage, this craft faces challenges such as dwindling numbers of skilled artisans, a lack of proper marketing, and inadequate financial support. To address these issues, both the Central

and State Governments have initiated schemes and support systems. One of the primary support systems at the district level is the District Industries Centre (DIC), Ganjam, Berhampur. This centre plays a vital role in promoting and facilitating the growth of traditional crafts and small-scale industries. It assists in the form of skill development programs, raw material supply, marketing support, and credit linkage through various schemes like PMEGP (Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme) and MUDRA loans. Additionally, artisans can benefit from certifications and recognition that boost their credibility and access to markets. Organizations such as the Orissa Rural and Urban Producers Association (ORUPA) offer support by providing artisan certificates, which help craftspeople gain access to exhibitions, government subsidies, and training opportunities.

Moreover, the Office of the Assistant Director (Handicrafts), Ganjam, Berhampur, under the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, also supports the preservation and promotion of crafts like flexible brass work. This office works through schemes like Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojana, Guru Shishya Parampara, and Marketing and Service Extension Centres, offering training, financial aid, and platforms for marketing the products of artisans at regional and national levels. While the flexible brass craft of Bellagantha faces several modern challenges, the efforts by institutions like the DIC, ORUPA, and the Office of the Assistant Director (Handicrafts) serve as critical lifelines for its revival and sustainability. A strengthened network of these initiatives, coupled with greater awareness and accessibility for the artisans, is essential for the future of this valuable cultural tradition. Recently there are about 25 women from village Palaksandha have formed a WSHG group (Jay Ganesh Pitala Macha WSHG) and undergone training under master artisan Sushant Kumar Sahu (Panigrahy 2024).

However, due to a lack of government encouragement, this unique art form has been struggling for a few years to establish itself. Due to economic hardship, the artisans have left their original homes and gone to other states to become workers. Although there have been many attempts to give Bellahuntha the status of a handicraft village in the Raghurajpur model, it has not been possible due to the lack of government support. No concrete steps have been taken towards the marketing of the products produced. But unfortunately, Bellagantha, the village of traditional brass fish, is neglected today.

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a



b



c



d

Figure- 9: Some Finished Brass Crafts

Conclusion

Bellaguntha's flexible brass craft tradition in Ganjam district, Odisha, is an exemplifying case of India's traditional knowledge system, balancing aesthetic beauty with cultural and religious symbolism. The craft, well known for its elegant representations of fishes as well as rural motifs like the Sagada, is indicative of the close relationship between the community, aquatic environment, and cultural ecology. Unfortunately, although the craft has strong roots and economic potential,

it is under threat from increasing costs of raw materials for example, 32-gauge brass sheets costing ₹1000-₹1200; brass wire costing ₹800-₹1000/kg; and high transportation costs from distant markets like Barabazar and Sanabazar in Berhampur. Additionally, the artisans lacked institutional support or marketing, and also the transfer of knowledge and skills is diminishing amongst the younger generation. Additionally, cheap machine-made alternative products have seen this once live tradition become downgraded. Nonetheless, initiatives to obtain a GI tag, or the government's 'vocal for local' agenda will offer new hope for the economic development, and securing cultural capital. In order to promote this craft sustainably requires a multi-stakeholder approach supporting artisan livelihoods means financial support for existing artisans, skill development, supporting artisans in developing markets, and formal recognition. Once it is done, it can promote the sustainability for this craft which is needed to maintain this cultural and economic tradition, especially with growing challenges that face the craft.

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