

## **DECLINE OF NON-FERROUS METAL CRAFT WORK IN THE CITY OF SEVEN GATES: JANDIALA GURU, DISTRICT AMRITSAR, PUNJAB**

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*Many civilizations and people have been wiped off from the global scene probably due to a number of processes like invasions, exploitation, disease, mass annihilation or gradual disappearance. The paper is an attempt to analyze the mechanisms that come into play and promote the gradual decline and disappearance of an occupational group, where, once it had been a flourishing, thriving and most prosperous entity. There are several studies that have been conducted on people bygone. However, our paper is focused on the skill set of the Thathera, their potential for development, prevalent demand and forces that come into play to contribute towards the gradual decline of a particular skill set from the human community skills network, as in this case the Thathera of Jandiala Guru, Punjab. The word Thathera refers to the metal worker who beats utensils of brass, bronze and copper into shape with hand-held mallets and hammer. The objective is to provide anthropological insights into the dynamic yet slow defunction of a skilled community into the oblivion of decadence, dissolution and total disappearance.*

**Key words:** *Thathera, community skills, disappearance, and non-ferrous metal utensils.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Crafts are the indigenous creation of ordinary people of villages and small towns. These have a tradition, which remains unchanged or unaffected over generations. No doubt the dominant culture's influences to a considerable extent modify these works. This art is directly mingled with the actual life of the community. During the drought period or during the long winter months the village folks engage in making articles. Most of them are made with utilitarian motive. They add variety to them by giving different patterns, designs and colors. These handmade articles have a beauty of their own. The machine made goods in many cases fail to satisfy the complete range of human needs. Factory goods are endless uniform reproductions. On the contrary, things molded out of the individual imagination appeal to the senses of buyers (Abraham, 1964: 12).

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A craft is said to be languishing when, although involving large number of artisans in the past, it is practiced by relatively only a very small community of craftspersons whose number is fast dwindling, and the skill might disappear with the few who possess it (Saraf, 1991).

The world of art and craft is immense and over the centuries these art and craft works have contributed a lot to understand about the ways of life, rituals, beliefs and customs of the people. Crafts serve as a language to convey meaning. In order to understand how art and craft developed in any particular area, it is also important to understand the climatic conditions, rituals, beliefs and customary ways of the people in which it developed (Abraham, 1964: 2).

India's handicrafts are almost inexhaustible; their variety so infinite. Here, local village and country traditions have existed through the course of a changing history, giving and taking among themselves. The skilled hand of the Indian craftsman is our most important and yet most invisible resource. It is to be perceived with concern and with a precise understanding of its value. Once lost, nothing can replace it (Saraf, 1991).

Age-old/traditional characteristics are paramount in Indian craftsmanship. Perhaps over hundreds or thousands of years with the transmission of hereditary skills from forefathers to fathers to their children have evolved into refinement or honing of their craft skills (Pal, 1978: 2).

### **Definition**

In its report, the Task Force on Handicrafts for the VIII Five-Year Plan (1990-91 to 1995-96) mentions: It is difficult to give a cut-and-dried definition of handicrafts. An attempt has been made for the purpose of planning, to give a general description of what constitutes handicrafts:

Handicrafts are items made by hand, often with the use of simple tools, and are generally artistic and/or traditional in nature. They indicate objects of utility and objects of decoration (Saraf, 1991: 45-46).

The study of crafts is an essential key to the understanding of a people's culture. It cannot be denied that in man's struggle for existence, artifacts and resources are his greatest assets. In India, the crafts have an importance all their own. They express the great tradition and cultural heritage of our country. As long as the masses of India retain their taste for superb workmanship, as long as they continue to appreciate the value of skilled workmanship, as long as they continue to delight in the really beautiful, so long will the crafts of India survive and forever flourish. The reason for their preservation and development lies in the fact that they are the material symbols of India's unique cultural ethos (Pal, 1978: 1-2).

Anthropologists from the time of Boas onwards have been interested in art and craft as a subject of study because it acts as a mirror to reflect on the people who produce it. It forms one of the main aspects of the culture that is concrete and observable (Maiti, 2004: 2).

### Non-ferrous Metal Usage in Traditional Times

Copper and bronze were probably the earliest non-ferrous metals which man shaped into tools for their lightness and resistance to corrosion. Later copper and tin were mixed to contrive them into a new alloy, bronze. The Matsyapurana, an ancient epic of an early Christian era describes methods of casting bronze images. The use of a large range of alloys obtained by varying the combinations and composition of metals to meet various requirements seems to have been in wide practice (Chattopadhyay, 1975: 72).

सौवर्णाराजतीवापि ताम्री रत्नमयी तथा । शैलीदारुमयीचापि लोहसंघमयी तथा । ॥३३॥

रीतिकाधातुयुक्त्वा ताम्रकांस्यमयी तथा । शुभदारुमयीवापि देवतार्चा प्रशस्यते ॥

(मत्स्यपुराणम्, अध्याय CCL VIII, प. ३ 1116)

An image may be made of gold, silver, copper, gems, precious stones, stone, wood, iron, brass, compound of copper and bell-metal, sandalwood or other beautiful wood (cf. Singh, 1983: 1116).

The statue of the dancing girl unearthed at Mohenjodaro dated around third millennium B.C. with its intricate but elegant carving, shows that the Cire Perdue process was already perfected (Chattopadhyay, 1975: 72).

In ancient times, Indians firmly believed that metals were charged with alchemic properties which could influence the life and health of human beings. Metallurgical study and experimentation were more a part of Ayurveda, the science of life, rather than of pure metallurgical chemistry. It was believed that the *bhasmas* (the ashes) of various metals, when consumed in the right proportion, could increase sexual energy and provide a longer life. Due to this belief in the inherent powers and potentialities of different metals, the scriptures prescribed rules about which metal was suitable for making which kind of cultic image. It was also believed that the food cooked and stored in the container of a particular metal had certain chemical effects on the body. This background of beliefs must be borne in mind while looking at any aspect of Indian metal work (Dhamija, 1985).

### The Area: Jandiala Guru

Jandiala Guru was founded by Bhai Handal a *Jatt* who converted to Islam and then to Sikhism. The word *Guru* comes from *Jatts Guru* and it was named

after Jand, the son of the founder. The municipality was created in 1867 during the Colonial period of British rule and formed part of Amritsar Tehsil. The town was situated on the route of the North-Western railways. Though the population of Jandiala Guru is diverse, it is the original home of Ghangas *Jatt* Sikhs. Other large communities are the Jains (mainly jewellers, grain merchants and businessmen), the Thatthiars (Utensil makers). Large concentration of these skillful artisans makes Jandiala Guru the hub for utensils and jewellery for the surrounding areas.

Previously, it was surrounded by a mud wall and had seven gates. In 1767, Jandiala Guru was invaded by Charat Singh, the grandfather of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, to punish the Niranjania Guru, who had submitted to Ahmad Shah Abdali, and hence had incurred the displeasure of the people (Chopra 1976).

There is a *gurdwara* in the memory of Baba Handal. Another *gurdwara* has been raised at the place where Baba Handal was born. Baba Handal belonged to a *Jatt* family. While grazing cattle at green spaces of Jandiala Guru, he used to get spiritual lessons from a Nath Jogi living in a temple situated near the present *gurdwara* of Baba Handal.

The sudden disappearance of the Nath Jogis from that place one day made Handal extremely distressed. He went to Amritsar and started meditation on the edge of the tank of the Harmandir Sahib. His parents beseeched Guru Arjun Dev to persuade Handal to return home. However, at the *Guru's* insistence, Handal promised to return home after 12 years. All through this period, Handal remained engaged in meditation and finally met the Nath Jogi.

Thereafter, Handal founded the Niranjania sect. It stands for the oneness of God. This sect has composed its own prayer in the memory of Baba Handal. A *gurdwara* and a tank have been built at *Nathan Da Dera*, where Handal had received spiritual lessons from the Nath Jogi. (Walia, 2005).

For a long time Jandiala Guru has been known as the City of Seven Gates. It lies about 16 km. from Amritsar on the Tarn Taran bypass when one comes from the holy city. The seven gates were: Mehsulian Gate, Darshani Darwaja, Sheikh Fateh Gate, Mori Gate, Purana Darwaja, Thatheran Gate, Nathuana Gate.

Out of these seven gates, only three gates are still present there. These three gates are Mehsulian gate, Sheikh Fateh gate and Nathuana gate.



Image 1: Mehsulian Gate

Image 2: Nathuana Gate

Image 3: Sheikh Fateh Gate

Earlier, majority of the population in this city was living within the premises of these seven gates and people were not going out of these seven gates to get land and make houses. But after partition, and due to growing business opportunities, the pressure of population started increasing day by day in this city and people started moving out of these seven gates and started living there. Now there is a large part of the population living outside these seven gates area.

The markets of Jandiala Guru at one time were specialized lanes selling specific goods like *Ghas* in *Ghas Mandi* (grass market for the horses), etc. However, till very recently, most of the purchasing for festivals and marriages was done from Amritsar. Today, however, there are full-fledged and well-stocked markets. Some of the markets existent and flourishing here are: *Bartan Bazar* (utensils market); *Kashmiri Bazar*; *Sabji Mandi / Ghas Mandi* (vegetables and grass markets); *Chaura Bazar* (the wide market); *Darshani Bazar*; *Valmiki Chowk* and the Shaheed Udham Singh Chowk.

Jandiala was a flourishing centre of trade since medieval times, as is evidenced by the presence of a considerable Jain community controlling key business elements. It has a sizeable power loom industry manufacturing *Khes* (thick sheets) and *Dari* (mats). It was also a multi-cultural space and a meeting point for different communities, as can be seen by the dominant presence of the *gurdwara* of Baba Hundal, after whom the town is named, the *Dargah* of Pir Ghore Shah, Jain temple, etc.

The Punjab state, its districts and the field area in district Amritsar are shown in images 4 and 5 respectively.



Image 4: Punjab State map showing district Amritsar

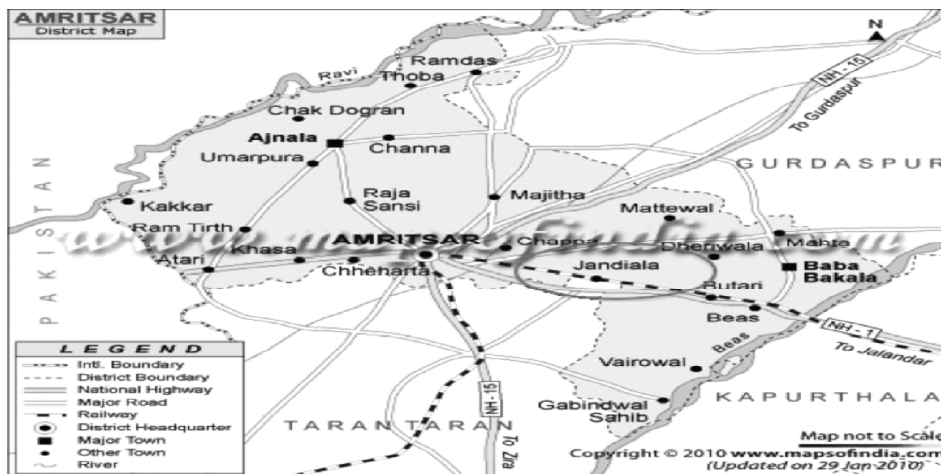


Image 5: The field area in the district of Amritsar map

Source: [www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com)

## RESEARCH METHODS

The data generation for the present research work has been done with the help of qualitative methods. In this research, both primary and secondary data have been used. Secondary research work is done from various national

and international journals, books and other governmental documents. The primary data has been generated using the tools of empirical investigation:

- The personal in-depth interviews with the artisans (the Thathera), Traders (the Kasera) and the key informants with the help of the interview guide.
- Unstructured or partly structured schedule.
- Focus group discussions.
- Empirical observations
- Transact walk.

The two primary stakeholders (artisans and the traders) will be interviewed regarding their backgrounds, socio-economic profiles, the status of their craft and the potential for development.

### **Objectives**

The main objectives of the study are

- To know the skill set of the Thathera and the potential for their development, various challenges faced by the community, and to find out the various push and pull factors that influenced the decline of the Thathera community of Punjab.
- To find out the demand for these traditional utensils in the past as well as in the present time.

### **NON-FERROUS METAL INDUSTRY (UTENSILS) AT JANDIALA GURU**

This is an old and important industry of the district. The important centers are Amritsar and Jandiala Guru. At Amritsar, there is one big unit engaged in utensil manufacturing. Besides, there are small units at Jandiala Guru and Amritsar. The basic requirements of the industry are brass, aluminum and scrap.

Brass casting is done both as a utilitarian industry and for ornamentation. The utensils manufactured by the industry are in great demand in the district and also in other parts of the country. The industry has also produced stainless steel utensils, which are quite popular in these days.

There were 95 units engaged in the industry in the district in 1967-68. These units gave employment to 260 persons and produced goods worth Rs. 13.10 lakhs. During the last few years, the production of the industry has been adversely affected by the inadequate supply of non-ferrous metals (Chopra 1976: 205-06).

### **Metal Craft Workers in Jandiala Guru**

The community of metal workers at Jandiala Guru can be divided into the Thathera (the hand beaten metal workers) and the Kasera (those concerned with the sales of the utensils.)

The word 'Thathera' refers to the metal worker who beats utensils of Brass, Bronze and Copper into shape with hand-held mallets and hammers. From making the alloys of various metals to burning the ingots into red hot readiness and then flattening them into large flat discs, and from there, to alternatively gently and strongly beating the discs into curved, rounded and tapering shapes by hand is the skill set of the Thathera.

Many of these artisans have been relocated from Lahore and nearby areas at the time of partition and settled in Jandiala Guru, continuing their age-old traditional work because Jandiala Guru is very near to India-Pakistan border in Amritsar and the market was already established for this non-ferrous metal work by the already present artisans there.

The Kasera are basically traders and they deal with the outside market. They are also instrumental in obtaining the orders from various parts of the country. They have varied business interests like purchase of scrap, running a foundry for the melting of scrap and making ingots and sheets or it may also be the business end where the finished goods are sold in wholesale or retail.

Education-wise none of the Thathera has gone for studies beyond the matriculation (Class X) level. Almost all of them began learning the craft well before their teens. Many of them accompanied their fathers to the work place and learnt the trade as apprentices. If we trace the history of their work, it can be seen that although their parents could afford to pay the school fee, they could not continue their studies. In order to complete the huge orders from different parts of the country in the mid 1950s and 60s, the children at that time had to join the traditional hereditary work.

However, with the decline of the business in the past two decades, none of the children of the Thathera are interested in following in the footsteps of their fathers. They would rather earn daily wages of work as salesmen or take up apprentice work in mechanic shops. The children of the Thathera too, however, are not inclined towards pursuing higher education. For them, learning accounts at any shop or office after doing their 12<sup>th</sup> class is the best work. Only 2-3% children (Thathera) have continued their education at the graduation level. The main reasons for discontinuing their education are: firstly, they are not well aware of different fields and the subjects to be opted



for higher education and secondly they cannot afford the fee for higher education.

The Kasera are definitely more educated than the Thathera, probably because they could afford the time and the resources for pursuing higher studies. Some of the Kasera have done masters degree and many of them are graduates. The average age of the Kasera is about 50 years of age. There are younger people joining their ranks, but only because they have varied business interests which may be purchase of scrap, running a foundry for the melting of scrap and making ingots and sheets or it may also be the business end where the finished goods are sold in wholesale or retail.

### Product Profile

The Thathera of Jandiala Guru have survived over the years while other similar business outlets in other places in Punjab like Batala have died down or diversified due to fall in market value of the goods and the unavailability of quality scrap. The market fluctuation in the metal prices too has made for a scared group of these utensil manufacturers. Utensils made by the Thathera [of which they still retain the ability and skills for manufacturing] are: *Patilâ* (flat bottomed, high walled bowl); *Karâhî* (gridle); *Divâ* (lamp); *Devgarh*; *Rewari Parât* (flat opened dish for kneading dough); *Parât*; *Surâhi* (urn); *Ghangaur* (utensil to carry and store water); *Delhi ki Toknî*; *Mathura ki Toknî*; *Muradâbâdî Kalsî*; *Punjabî Parât*; *U.P. kâ Gang Sâgar* (large urn); *Teli*; *Thâli* (plate); *Thal* (large plate with upturned edges); Bell; *Duggi*; and *Tablâ* (all musical instruments); *Dudh kâ Dohnâ* (large milk urn in which milking is done and sent for distribution and sale); *Guldastâ* (flower vase); *Gaggar* (round urn); *Kouli* (small bowl); *Gadwâ* (small, round bottomed urn); *Deghbarâ* (large container for making large quantities of food); *Channa* (small, flat bowl); *Chaya pâtar*; *Khandyâl*; *Degor* (large, round-bottomed dish for cooking); and *Bâlti* (bucket) either for storing water or a smaller version for serving food at eateries.

Leach points out, eating is a “practical” action, but saying Grace before meals is “ritual”, as is the consumption of one’s meal according to set manners (Leach, 2002:114-121).

Rituals also determine which dishes are to be set for which set of people in many Indian homes even today. On special days the brass and copper utensils are polished for serving.

Further, Leach suggests, the only thing “rituals” have in common is that they are actions that communicate meanings, or, in some cases create the very meanings they communicate – as in the crowning of a king or the transformation of a man and woman into a husband and wife (ibid).

Thus, the ritual gifting of a '*Ghangaur*' at a daughter's wedding in Rajasthan is probably symbolic of her always having plenty of water and that she may never want for anything.

### **Skills Set of the Thathera**

The Thathera or hand beaten metal workers have specialized themselves into *Parāt* makers, *Deghbarā* makers etc. It is not binding that the one who makes a *Parāt* cannot make a *Deghbarā* or a *Patilā* but it is convenient for the present situation that segregation be adhered to so that any orders received can be speedily taken care of. All the Thathera are aware of the ratios in which the various metals are made e.g. bronze and brass are alloys of tin, copper and zinc. Almost all of them have worked with the various metals and there is no restriction on the kind of metal that a Thathera may work with. But the designs and patterns of these utensils are more the reflection of culture in which they (artisans) were living and where they learnt this craft and it is already known in the earlier literature that age-old/traditional characteristics are paramount in the Indian craftsmanship (Pal, 1978: 1).

There is, nevertheless, a demarcation among the metal workers in steel and aluminum. Few of the Thathera members who work in brass have taken up work with the aluminum workers but their associates look down upon them because most of the workers working with aluminum have come from U.P. (undivided) and Bihar (undivided) and they think it beneath their dignity to work with them or under their supervision and guidance.

The markets of Moradabad (U.P.), Jagadhri (Haryana) and other places have more of machine made utensils unlike Jandiala Guru where all the brass, bronze, copper utensils are handmade only. It is only the aluminum vessels being made here that are machine made.

### **Prevalent Demand**

In the present day and age also, however, there continues to be a traditional demand for certain utensils that are a cultural necessity in certain specific areas. Some of the traditional markets that still continue to be the main markets today for the products of the Thathera are Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and some areas of Punjab.

### **The Specific Challenges Faced by the Thathera**

The furnaces visible in the Thathera shops were of different shapes and sizes, but they are all used mostly for the *Tanka* (joinery work). The reason for the



Image 6: Showing demand in India for these metal utensils in the past



Image 7: Demand for metal utensils in Punjab in the past

bigger furnaces was only that at one time the volume of work was so much that some of the more prosperous of the Thathera could smelt their own metals from scrap besides the raw material they were getting from the foundry at the behest of the Kasera.

- Among the 50 odd Thathera interviewed, there were only 40 per cent who had the skill that enabled them the confidence of saying that they could fabricate anything and about 20 per cent even said that they could replicate anything that had been made by a machine. The others were willing to make the same kinds of utensils i.e. *Parat* (flat, open dish for kneading dough); *Patila* (flat bottomed) and *Deghbara* (large container for making large quantities of food) over and over. They were solely dependent on the Kasera for year round occupation and sustenance; otherwise, they could be reduced to common labour.



Figure 8: Thathera making Parât

- The Kasera give making charges per kilogram of the metal worked upon in a day to the Thathera. The rates differ from metal to metal and the rates are different also for the utensils being shaped; so for the *Parat*, it is as low as Rs.12/- per kg, and for a large copper *Deghbara* it is as much as Rs.40/- per kg. Many of the Thathera said that they are able to finish a large utensil within a day but the Kasera ensure that they are not given the requisite raw material to complete the *Bartan* (utensil) so that it carries over to the next day. There is a rigidly

strong control the Kasera exercise over the Thathera and there are many who are indebted to them for loans they have taken for household expenses, for educating their child, marriages etc. On the other hand, however, the Kasera have the holding capacity for stocking scrap, raw material and finished goods. They have strong networking with major markets and they are also skilled business people unlike a large proportion of the Thathera.



Figure 9: Thathera making *Patilā*



Figure 10: *Degbarā*

- Ownership of the shops by the Thathera is about 50 per cent; most of those who have their own shops maintain their living quarters behind or above the shops. The remaining 50 per cent belong to the Kasera and they have given them to the Thathera for work and also as living quarters. Some charge a minimal rent while others are living there gratis.
- People can give orders for fabricating particular utensils directly to the Thathera and a few may even purchase the raw material and fulfill the order but a large proportion of the Thathera will put the Kasera in the loop so that he can foot the bill for the raw material and then help the Thathera obtain whatever other inputs are required, like coal for the furnace, zinc for the joints and even polish for the finishing of the particular piece. Work needs to be done on both the design development and the capacity building of the Thathera in

consultation with the Kasera, but for big orders, the Kasera are an essential part of the programme.

- The Thathera are open to learning about and making new items, but at present, they are scared that the rising costs may make the design development exercise cost prohibitive. A few of them have in their lifetime made a few new items of which they have kept a sample or two.

## FINDINGS

It is the endeavor of this paper to highlight the plight of this fast disappearing indigenous craft and its craftsmen list they have lost to posterity. The skills and local knowledge systems perpetuated thus far should not be allowed to dwindle into nothingness. If these downward trends are arrested and the Thathera community saved, then it would be worthwhile finding ways of saving other precious skill sets from being lost to the oblivion of ill-informed and irresponsible choice making.

Although they can replicate anything with their hands, the Thathera are very open to upgrading their knowledge through training and design development, and sustain their craft. It is clear to them that organizing themselves into a group will decrease their vulnerability and improve their position. Thus, they are open to any overtimes that would give them a renewed lease on life. Many times it had been argued that the continuance of traditional patterns and designs in this era is the main reason for their decline but truth is that there is a huge demand for these traditional designs and, given an opportunity and raw material, they are ready to make any kind of design/pattern.

The older craftsmen still exist and work there and they are proud of their skills, but they do not feel that younger generations would take up this occupation in future. So these workers do not put their children in this work of metal craft. Most of their dependants are working as salesmen in cloth shops or electric and electronic shops. A few of them are even working as daily wagers or common labour. Therefore, parents are not able to transmit their skills to the next generation, indicating that the skill will die after them.

Education-wise also, the Thathera and their children are not very much educated due to which they are not very confident in dealing with their customers. Only those who can afford to buy raw material and make their own finished products have direct links in the outside market directly with their customers.

It is clear that the Thathera are at a crossroads, having memories of better times when raw material and manufacturing processes were more under their control, but are now on a downward spiral, where the workshop premises and foundry are beyond their control.

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