

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE KARMAKAR: A BRASS WORKING COMMUNITY OF BISHNUPUR IN BANKURA DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL, INDIA

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Introduction

Brass is an alloy of copper and zinc. Eastern India has an early origin of brass metallurgy from Chalcolithic period (Ray et al. 2000). In West Bengal a number of Chalcolithic sites yielded metal objects of copper and its alloy. The tradition of metallurgy flourished first in the Dhalbhum-Singbhum region, where ancient remains of copper has been discovered (Forbes 1950). From this region, the tradition entered in Bengal through Bankura-Purulia-Midnapur tract (Kosambi 1970). Tradition of brass is quite old in the area. The brass objects thus prepared have a very important place in the society. They have intrinsic social and ritual values among the local people. Various brass working communities are distributed in different pockets of West Bengal, India. They make utensils, ritual and decorative objects of brass.

The brass working communities are known by different names, such as, Kansari, Kangshyabanik, Karmkara,

Kamar, Dokra kamar etc (Risley 1891). They constituted different caste groups and are traditionally engaged in manufacturing objects from copper and its alloy. The present work is concentrated in the Bishnupur area of the Bankura district of West Bengal. Bishnupur is one of the historically rich heritage places in West Bengal. It was ruled from Gupta Period by local Hindu Kings. Bishnupur is an important tourist spot and is famous for beautiful terracotta temples and a number of handicrafts e.g. textiles, musical instruments, crafts on shell, wood and metal. A number of craftsmen live around Bishnupur area for the demand of different crafts. Metal working communities of Bishnupur are traditionally known as Karmakar and are engaged in brass work. They cast brass by various methods and produce utensils like pitcher, bowl, glass and some ritual objects.

Objectives

The proposed research had been aimed at understanding the socio economic condition of the brass working communities in Bishnupur in the light of archeo-metallurgical history of the area. There is an attempt to trace the continuity of tradition in the present communities through generations. The socio-economic as well as aesthetic values of the brass objects could be understood through the beliefs and rituals of man associated with the products and their pattern of use.

The study may provide the particular social situation which may unfold important aspects of the slow transformation of the craft. As an anthropological study the present research will be helpful to understand the process of change that takes place within the organizational level and production technology due to modernization and how such changes effect the population for losing its artisanal character.

Material and methods

For the present study anthropological methodologies were largely followed. For getting the basic information about the community census schedule has been used. To know the socio economic condition and technology of brass working people both structured and unstructured schedules were used. Interview method was also applied in the field to know the different aspects of metal work, their marketing, demand etc. Observation methods were used to know the different aspects of the brass technology. The secondary literature sources also were used to know the earlier works and also the changing aspects of the craft and people.

For the present study 129 *karmakar* families were selected. They are traditionally engaged with brass casting. The socio economic data about the community was collected and the data regarding the age, sex, clan, marital status, education, occupation, economy and income was taken. These were analyzed with simple statistical methods.

Result

The brass technology used by the artisan shows the indigenous origin of metallurgy. The smelting and casting is done with very old technology devoid of modern tools. The workshop, kiln, moulds are far from modern in technology. Out of 129 families 24 families are engaged with the craft and only one family is engaged with the business of marketing brass items. Some others took up different occupations including service and business and migrated. Their educational standard is very low and illiteracy is very common. They are also losing their traditional social position due to low income. Demand for their products is reduced day by day and due to less demand of the objects they are leaving the traditional occupation and are losing their artisan qualities. Majority of their products are used for ritual purposes including marriage, first rice eating ceremony to funeral observances. The high price of copper and brass scraps and also of the finished items are reasons for reduced demand for the brass products. Cheaper materials like plastics, aluminum are being used at present instead of high priced metal objects. Others are not much aware of the reselling values of the metal objects. Though the

occupation pattern has been changing but the community is still holding their social position. They practice caste endogamy. Out of caste marriage is rare. Women of the community are also engaged in the craft. They make moulds and cast glasses.

Conclusion

The technology did not change much in respect to market demand and they have been forced by the loss of their natural rural market to diversify their products and now are seeking help from the government and from some non-government voluntary agencies. However the pre-industrial artisan mode of brass technology should be protected otherwise it will disappear within a few years time.

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