



RESEARCH ARTICLE

METAL BOWL MAKERS (KANSARI) IN AN EASTRN ODISHA

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ABSTRACT

The Village where anthropological fieldwork was under-taken among the metal bowl makers (Kansari) is a multi-caste, nucleated and a fairly large village consisting of 1787 households of which there are 242 metal bowl maker (Kansari) households. The village still retains several rural features although it is in close proximity to the capital city of Odisha in the district of Bhubaneswar and Puri. Since past, the village has the wide reputation of leading centre for the manufacture and trade of brass, copper and bell metal wares, both inside and outside the state. The several caste groups inhabiting the village were interring dependent economically and otherwise. The inter caste relationship in the village is based more on complementarily than on contradistinctions. Studies on peasantry have been made par excellence, the major concern being with the groups of cultivators. The non cultivator dimension representing an analytically marginal category consisting of crafts based specialist groups and non craft groups have not been studied adequately. Consequent upon the impact of economic modernization a comprehensive understanding of the peasantry needs further consideration in respect of the various craft groups who pursue their pre industrial craft technology for basic subsistence and at the same time maintain intrinsic interrelationship with peasants in economic, political, social and religious and ideological spheres. The artisan groups besides fulfilling the needs of the agricultural sector have advanced in modernizing and reinforcing their mode of production in order to secure better opportunities for survival.

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INTRODUCTION

Metal craft has flourished all over India in different states in their own means of forms and perfections. Metal can be acquired to any form, be it a plate, tumbler, bowl or anything. Metals are transferable from a thin wire to a huge metal sheet, vice versa. Metals are malleable and ductile in nature thus flexibility of usage. Metals are ubiquitous in nature. They are good conductors of electricity. Metals are dug deep from the earth's crust in form of minerals and compounds. Many things have been invented and brought after discovering the metals on earth. Metals have generated enormous employees to work upon them accordingly. Metals play an important role in our lives by being an armature to the building to helping us while eating food without dirtying our hands like a spoon. Likewise it has replaced too many things like earthen pot to metal utensils. These metals are nonferrous in nature with desirable properties which makes this metal more anticipated. Non-ferrous metals are lighter in weight; they are good conductors of electricity and non-magnetic property. These are used in auspicious occasions in most of the households in India.

Most of the artisans belong to a traditional community, which inhabits the practices and customs of brass and bell metal. Bell metal is dominantly used for making cooking ware, which is now supplemented with some decorative items. Odisha is the preserve of the metal bowl makers (*Kansari*) community, experts at this particular craft. The metal is so called because the sound that it generates on hitting is similar to the sound of a bell. This also explains why this metal is used to make 'ghantas' or bells for temples. The reason for traditionally making cooking ware and other kitchen ware from the bell-metal alloy is that this alloy has several medicinal properties, which the food or water kept in them acquires. These medicinal properties are derived from copper and zinc which are dominantly present in the bell-metal alloy. It is believed that regular use of these vessels can have long term effects towards preventing and relieving several ailments like, gastric, diabetics, allergies etc. The artisans who make bell-metal cooking ware also make items of brass and copper, however, bell-metal ware remain their specialty. It is interesting to note that there is strong sense of community among these artisans, they believe in the notion of sharing resources rather than competing for them, the artisans in each village specializes of only a particular item. An artisan who makes bowls is of course equipped to make plates and vice versa. However, they prefer to specialize in one particular item and experiment and innovate with shapes, textures and finishes.

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Figure 1. Metal Bowl Makers (*Kansari*) in their workshop

Historical Significance

In Odisha the metal crafts have been introduced at the time of Ganga Dynasty that is at 11th century till date it has been flourished and successful with lots of developments. Balakati village is situated in Puri district of Odisha that is one among the best traditional manufactures of brass, bell metal utensils and temples articles. It is said that this craft is originated and grew from 1400 AD. Brass and bell metal are purely traditional metals used in making the utensils. Once you enter this village you get to hear metals thumping with craftsmen shrieking while hammering with excitement. Bell-metal has a great craft tradition which can be linked to lord Jagannath residing at Puri. The knowledge of making bell-metal products has been passed down from generation to generations. Bell metal, which is dominantly a combination of copper and zinc, is considered to be a '*shudh*' or pure metal; this explains why utensils used at the Jagannath temple are only bell-metal utensils. The local name for bell-metal is '*kansa*' and the artisans who, before sunrise, give shape to molten bell-metal in order to make attractive utensils by their own hands through exhaustive manual labour are known as '*kansari*'. There is a reason why the metal bowl makers (*kansari*) people start working much before the sunrise. The process of heating and beating the metal to make utensils generates so much heat that it becomes impossible for the craftsmen to carry on the work after mid-morning. Traditionally, metal bowl makers (*kansari*) people stay close to water bodies, as in the earlier days boat seemed the only mode of transportation. Also, there is so much of heat generated that water was needed essentially to cool down. Kantilo is located on the banks of the river 'Mahanadi'. From time immemorial, the metal craft particularly that of brass and bell-metal has been in practice in Kantilo; a place famous by its metal craft and for the temple of lord Neela Madhab, the origin of Lord Jagannath. The *Kansari* people were brought here from 'Kanya Kubaja' by the 'Gajapati Maharaja' of Puri during 1804, as legend says, in order to supply ornamental, durable and mineable brass and bell-metal utensils for lord Jagannath's daily use. It is interesting to note that when a girl is married of this community, bell-metal ware forms an important part of her trousseau.

Socio-Cultural Significance

Metal craft is perhaps the single most important craft in terms of the number of artisans engaged in its practice as in its close links with the daily lives of the people of the State. The craft is practiced by the people of the *Kansari* caste who can be

broadly described as black smiths while a particular variety, dhokra, is practiced mainly by sithulias. The largest concentration of the former is Kantilo in Nyagrah and Balakati in Khordha, Bhuban in Dhekanal district although fairly substantial numbers are also found in Cuttack, Ganjam, Sambalpur, Bolangir, Jajpur & Balasore districts of Odisha. The metal bowl maker (*Kansari*) represents an artisan caste in the socio-cultural region of Odisha state. They are *jala-achala sprushya shudra* and are included in the *chhatisha pataka* (36 service caste series) in coastal Odisha. They render specific ritual services in the temple of Lord Jagannath, the State Deity of Odisha. They are known since past as the makers and sellers of copper, brass and bell metal wares. The *Thatari* and *Tamera*, almost interchangeable terms with the *Kansari* together serve the mainland of Odisha as metal craftsmen; whereas the *Ghantra*, *Tentari (Rana)*, *Rasara*, *Sitala* and *Kharura* are other metal craftsmen who serve the peasants as well as tribals. Majority of them are landless and pursue occupations other than cultivation. In view of their typical technology and economy they are urban-ward looking with rural anchorage. They have guild like organizations for the regulation of crafts and trade. But for the maintenance of internal and external affairs of the caste rules and regulations they have caste-councils. During the post independence period they have reinforced their caste-councils and experienced cooperation in the field of economic development.



Figure 2. The finishing process of metal bowl in workshop



Figure 3. The Primary stage of metal bowl.

There is no sub-caste under the *Kansari* caste of Odisha. It may be due to the elaborate division of labour and the typical techno-complex which require joint handed efforts and cooperation of a large number of craftsmen. Although no sub-

castes exist, there are micro-caste units with definite territorial limits regulating the marriage- circles. Presently, however, the marriage circles are fast losing their importance. They have emulated Brahminical *gotras* which are exogamous and in Southern Odisha the *gotra* and *vansa* occur simultaneously. The marriage is post-pubescent; and the prestigious type is one that is solemnized at groom's house after being negotiated by parents. The kinship is patrilineal and unilineal and the rules of descent, succession and inheritance are in consonance with the above principle. The *Kansari* family is patriarchal and patrilocal and although nuclear families outnumber the joint-families, the latter has not lost its significance in the social realm.

Craftsmanship Process

The metal bowl maker (*Kansari*) techno-complex is such that a manufacturing unit requires the services of a number of artisans-skilled, semiskilled and unskilled. The *garha*-artificer, *kora*, *pasia*, *bhatia*, *hummer-men* engaged in hammering, shaping and scraping, polishing, engraving, finishing etc. perform their specific roles in the process of manufacture. The manual labour with differential skill gives rise to varying wage-rates and also the metals like brass and bell-metal involve different wage-rates. In view of the paucity of space, the workshop constitutes a part of the homestead. The utensils and metal wares manufactured for various purposes show variations in typology in various regions of the state and also in the same region for stratified clientele.

The workshops are operated by the *Kansari* themselves or by non-*Kansari* financiers or through the help of cooperative societies. They have their caste-councils with definite jurisdiction and the area of operation is also subject to alterations from time to time due to inclusion and exclusion of areas. The caste-councils are traditionally headed by *Mahapatra*, *Maharana*, *Thanapati*, *Behera* and *Sardar*. Traditional Artisans and Craftsmen from *Balakati*, *Puri* district, *Odisha* brings an enormous energy and skills in production of the Brass Metal utensils and articles. Ten members work in a studio, were the craftsmen bifurcate themselves in different processes. There are two major different production ways of metal craft one is *Dhokra* casting and other one is *Pita* (locally known). Craftsmen of *Balakati* follow *Pita* work habitually.

There are two types of alloys which make brass and bell metal; those are copper plus zinc and copper plus tin. Any one of these two is mixed in proportion in a crucible in furnace which is locally called *Bhati*. If copper is of one kilograms, zinc is quarterly measured to it that is two fifty to three hundred grams required in making brass metal. The molten metals are put to the small earthen moulds and the metal is acquired into small circular metal casted ingots. The circular cast ingot is pre heated on the open furnace to make the metal soft, malleable and it is hammered repeatedly with big hammers in rhythm by three to four people to get into its desired shape on a stone platform with one person rotating the ingot piece to acquire the even dents. The metal ingot is annealed or heat forged in regular intervals between hammering with the purpose of keeping the metal soft enough for further process. The new metal ingots are placed in between the half hammered ingot in order to produce more bowls within less time and energy.



Figure 4. Brass Metal Bowls



Figure 5&6. Metal Bowl Makers (*Kansari*) at workshop

There can be four to five metal ingots placed one upon one in this process. Once the outer ingot turned bowl is expanded appropriately it is removed with the help of foundry tong or pincers and hammer. The base of the bowl is painted with coal mixed with water because coal observes and endures the heat and helps while shaping the bowl. When the metal ingot turned bowl as acquired the desired shape it is further processed through many finishing process like shaping, scraping, buffing and finishing is made on lathe. In the workshop the shaping in the sense raising the bowl out of flat metal or half raised metal by beating it into depression and maintaining the thickness of the metal equally everywhere with hammer, on the strong metal dome anvil stakes. After shaping the bowl it is processed

to scraping were the bowl is scraped from inside to even and level the surface and the rim of the bowl is filed for the smooth finishing. Subsequently the scraped bowls are given to the master craftsman to attest the bowl and uniformly give finishing on the lathe. The bowl is heated at the base by the ignited coal on the crucible and later the hot melted tar is applied like an adhesive to stick on the faceplate on the lathe. After sticking the bowl on lathe the electrical rotator motor is on where the bowl starts rotating. Brass wire sponge is held in hand and rubbed inside the rotating bowl where the scraped markings are removed. Later scraping knife lathe tool is held in refining and finishing of the bowl by removing the unwanted layers. Sometimes the bowls and other brass articles made are etched and engraved in various designs including floral, ethnical, symmetrical patterns in order to enhance the product more in various chisels.

They always use manual tools and raw materials used for the process of metal craft, *Hatudi* (Hammers are used in beating the metal), *Sandasi* (Pincers are used in picking and holding the hot metal pieces) *Ruha* (File is used in smoothen the edges of the metal utensils) *Lihini* (Craper is used in scraping the metal utensil to even and level the surface), *Kunda* (Lathe is a rotator machine equipped with a motor to generate constant motion for finishing a metal utensil), *Badia Patkar/ - Akarmasila* (Stone Platform is used for as a study surface for the easy process), *Kala Pankha* (Hand Crank Blower is used to blow air to the furnace which helps the coal get ignited and keeps the fire on), *Koi* (Crucibles made out of clay graphite which is used like a container while melting the metal with high temperatures), *Dasta* (Zinc is one of the alloy used in making brass metal), *Tamba* (Copper is one of the alloy used in making brass metal), Brass Wire Sponge It is used for buffing the surface of the scraped metal utensil, *Nihai* (Anvil Stake is a strong stick used like a stand for denting of the metal), *Rala/Alakatara* (Tar is used like an adhesive to stick the metal utensil to a lathe)

Metal Products

The bell metal handicraft objects manufactured by different artisan household under survey are *Thali* (Plate or Tray), *Thalia* (Saucer of quarter plate), *Kansa* or *Bela*, *Tatia* or big *Gina* (Cup), Small *Gina* or Small *Bati* (Small Cup), *Parasa*, Bell, *Ghanta* (Gong), *Jhanja*, *Kubuji* and *Gini* and among the temple accessories, cymbals *Jhanja*, *Gini*, *Ghanta*, *Ghanti*, *Chakra*, *Trisula* etc.

Conclusion

Besides territorial organisation of caste-councils there are State-level umbrella-organisations styled as erstwhile "Sahe-Thana Mahasabha" and "Nikhilokala Kansari Samaj". The caste-councils have always been looking into the social well-being and economic development of the caste. During the pre independence days, the maintenance of ritual purity and of craft fidelity was the attempts at social rise. But in post independence period economic development, educational advancement and political status enhancement were given top priority attention for social climbing. The *Kansari* are caste Hindus with Hindu religious beliefs and practices and prescribed ideologies and codes for conduct. In this analysis this brings us to understand that the *Kansari* who pursue prestige economy based crafts in the rural crafts nexus have retained the traditional wealth and prestige value inspite of inevitable avenues of changes. They are mobile within the *Jati*

frame of identity and do not exercises free choice of getting out of it. Although the middle and lower strata actively participate in mobility movements the upper strata are not indifferent as they believe in the consolidation of the caste. While seeking secular status they are still maintaining the *Jati* status because of several of its merits. The joint-family has still has not lost its significance although the percentage of nuclear family is higher. But In the present era of globalization, liberalization & privatization, the Indian brass and bell metal industry, which is the most important components of the metal craft, is facing tough competition in the emerging manufacturing scenario due to its conventional indigenously developed technology in producing the traditional types of brass and bell metals Products. Finance has been a problem for the craftsmen. Due to the illiteracy, ignorance and poor family background of entrepreneurs they are compelled to work on job work basis for Mahajans who purchases raw material i.e. Brass and Bell metal and give it to the artisans on piecemeal basis. Although some banks are ready to provide the financial assistance but these tiny units are accustomed to work on job work basis and not making efforts to borrow the money from financial institutions. All most all bell metal clusters in Odisha are providing no training facilities to the craftsmen.

The skill and the technique involved in the process of manufacturing and repairing is done through the traditional method. Even R&D institutes and quality testing laboratories are non-existent in this industry. Lack of business development services is also another big problem for the development of craft industry. There is no technical training institutions, no R&D laboratory, no management institutions, no testing facility, no marketing expertise, and no design development institutes available at all most all clusters in Odisha. However, in spite of the various schemes announced by the different agencies, the artisans have not been taken into confidence by the administration. The artisans are unaware of the projects and schemes of the government and hence the benefits are not trickled down to the craftsman. Thus the problems like scarcity of raw material, obsolete technology, and lack of marketing support, poor background of the entrepreneur and their enterprise, lack of financial support and absence of networking among cluster actors are the biggest threats to the development of this industry. As a result, the artisans are opting for alternate employment for survival and the brass and bell metal artisan skills continue to decline and almost appear to be moving towards extinction in some of the clusters/areas and hence it necessitates product diversification, design development, technology up gradation, proper market exploitation etc.

Text Obverse

- '*Kansari*' - metal bowl makers.
- '*Shudh*' - pure metal.
- '*Kansa*'-bell-metal.
- '*Sithulias*' - particular peoples variety practiced mainly dhokra casting.
- '*Jala-Achala*, *Sprushya*, *Shudra*' -they are caste of the metal bowl makers.
- '*Chhatisha pataka*'- 36 service caste series in costal Odisha.
- '*Thatari* and *Tamera*'- the interchangeable terms with the *Kansari* together serve the mainland of Odisha as metal craftsmen.

- *Ghantra, Tentari (Rana), Rasara, Sitala and Kharura* – these are other metal craftsmen who serve the peasants as well as tribals.
- *'Gotras, Vansa'*-They have emulated Brahminical which are exogamous and in Southern Odisha occur simultaneously. The marriage is post-pubescent and the prestigious type is one that is solemnized at groom's house after being negotiated by parents.
- *'Garha-Artificer, Kora, Pasia, Bhatia'*- the peoples who engaged in separate works call like hammer-men in hammering, shaping and scraping, polishing, engraving, finishing etc.
- *'Mahapatra, Maharana, Thanapati, Behera and Sardar'*- these are castes traditionally headed by caste-councils.
- *'Bhati'* – the manual furnace which is locally called.
- *'Hatudi'*- Hammers are used in beating the metal.
- *'Sandasi'*- pincers are used in picking and holding the hot metal pieces.
- *'Ruha'*- file is used in smoothen the edges of the metal utensils.
- *'Lihini'*- craper is used in scraping the metal utensil to even and level the surface.
- *'Kunda'*- lathe is a rotator machine equipped with a motor to generate constant motion for finishing a metal utensil.
- *'Badia Patkar/ - Akarmasila'*- stone Platform is used for as a study surface for the easy process.
- *'Kala Pankha'*- hand Crank Blower is used to blow air to the furnace which helps the coal get ignited and keeps the fire on.
- *'Koi'*- crucibles made out of clay graphite which is used like a container while melting the metal with high temperatures.
- *'Dasta'*- Zinc is one of the alloy used in making brass metal.
- *'Tamba'*- Copper is one of the alloy used in making brass metal.
- *'Nihai'*- anvil stake is a strong stick used like a stand for denting of the metal.
- *'Rala/Alakatar'*- tar is used like an adhesive to stick the metal utensil to a lathe.
- *'Thali'*- plate or tray.
- *'Thalia'*- saucer of quarter plate.
- *'Kansa or Bela, Tatia'*- big *Gina* (cup), small *Gina* (cup) or small *Bati* (Small Cup)
- *'Parasa'*-bell
- *'Ghanta'*- gong
- *'Jhanja, Kubuji, Gini'*- among the temple accessories,
- *'Chakra, Trisula'*- cymbals in temples.
- *'Jati'*- caste.
- *'Pita'*- Make design type with Hammering (locally known).

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