

Colonial Marginality and Artisans' Contribution to the Economic and Cultural Development of Eighteenth & Nineteenth Century Nadia

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Abstract: *Undivided Nadia was a treasure trove of handicrafts production since ancient times. In fact Nadia's economic stability in the eighteenth century owed much to its thriving cottage industries, which constituted more than 40 per cent of its economy, second only to agricultural output of the region. While this prosperity of Nadia's cottage industry should be attributed to favourable natural climate, supply of labour and raw material and strict adherence to hereditary occupation by its people, Raj patronization in favour of cottage industry also played a significant role behind this boom in handicrafts production. The article traces the contribution of artisans of Nadia district in the economic and cultural development of the region in the 18th and 19th centuries.*

Keywords: *Marginality, Economic, Cultural Development, Nabasakh, Artisans, Nadia.*

Introduction

Nadia registered a significant progress in handicrafts production in the 18th century under the patronization of the Raj family of Nadia. Particularly, the period of Raja Krishna Chandra's era (1727-1782), had turned out to be a golden period for the development of Nadia's cottage industry and also for the artisans engaged in different crafts. Pottery, one of the most important forms of Indian folk art and a household implement for use since the Harappan civilization attained a high degree of manufacturing excellence in Krishnagar and in other parts of Nadia at the time of Raja Krishna Chandra. Among other handicrafts production, mention should be made of fine dhoti and saree designs of Shantipur and bronze, brass, and shola pith industries of Nabadwip and in adjoining areas of Krishnagar that attained worldwide recognition in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The economic condition of the artisans therefore registered a significant progress in Nadia alongside the growth of different crafts since the

second half of the eighteenth century. But unfortunately, the socio-economic status of these people mostly belonging to under-privileged 'Nabosakh' castes often stood in sharp contrast to the facilities and privileges enjoyed by the upper caste people of Nadia. The artisans of Nadia, despite being engaged in a rare variety of craft productions that accounted for the cultural recognition of the region, still remained a neglected lot in the society. Their marginality in terms of demography and economic status, however, could not undermine their role in developing the economic and cultural status of the region. This paper aims at addressing the issue of intersection between marginality and regionality from the perspective of occupational diversification of the artisans of Nadia whose contribution to the economic and cultural enrichment of the region far outweighed their marginal status in the society.

Theoretical Projection

Following the recent trend of projection of 'mainstream' and 'marginal' people through the use of such categories as the 'Self' and the 'Other,' it can be said that the 'marginalized' artisan groups of Nadia constituted the 'disprivileged class' in the society in the eighteenth century.¹ Despite rendering valuable service to the society and contributing to the economic development of the region for centuries, their life, livelihood and income could hardly break the shackles of indebtedness, injustice and exploitation. They kept on reeling under poverty as they had to live at the mercy of upper caste people and had to depend on them for every aspect of their survival in the society. Caste hierarchy and Brahmanical domination pushed them at the receiving end of their life and despite hard work from dawn to dusk there was no change in their status, economic or social, as they had to remain under perpetual bondage of poverty and indebtedness. However, with the advent of the raj family in Nadia, society began to change and opportunities of occupational diversification for subaltern and marginal people became open. The Vaishnav movement² further hit the caste hierarchy and Brahmanical domination in the society. In this milieu, royal patronage and support turned out to be the only lifeline for the artisans of Nadia to survive and prosper in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Preliminary Information

Nadia district actually emerged in 1787 after Raja Krishna Chandra's era (1727-1782). During the British period, the Governor General's Council of Bengal, in its meeting on 21 March 1787, decided to create a separate district named Nadia and the post of Collector for the purpose of collecting revenue.³ The period was marked by the colonial efforts to re-structure the districts of undivided Bengal for the purpose of collection of revenue leading to the enactment of the Permanent Settlement in Bengal in 1793. The Rajas of Nadia were in power at that time. Raja Krishna Chandra, one of the famous kings of Nadia Raj ruled between 1727 and 1787 under whose reign art, culture, economy

and Vaisnab religion including handicrafts productions flourished immensely and attained international acclaim.

Krishna Chandra's era was a golden period in the history of Nadia in more than one way. This era witnessed a historic period of political upheaval. It was during Krishna Chandra's reign that the English Company extended its political and financial power in Bengal by winning the Battle of Plassey (1757) through deceit. It was again during his reign that the sun of Bengal's independence eclipsed and colonial domination began. The greatest famine in Bengal also occurred during his reign in 1770 AD. Raja Krishna Chandra was particularly skilled in languages such as Sanskrit, Urdu, Persian, etc., commonly known as Oriental languages. Nadia emerged as the cultural hub of Bengal as art, education, religion and culture flourished profusely during his time. Along with education and culture, certain cottage industries also flourished in Nadia during Krishna Chandra's reign. Nadia earned a special fame both within the country and abroad in handicrafts productions particularly in manufacturing pottery, brass utensils and weaving and also in Sholapith production.

Occupational Status of the Marginal Groups of Nadia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

The society of Nadia in the eighteenth century had witnessed a tremendous resurgence of many subaltern castes and artisanal groups also known as service groups in the society. In Mukundaram's writing we get reference to the rise of nine artisanal groups known as Nabasakh groups comprising of Sankhakar (Conch shell maker), Potter, Subarna Banik (Goldsmith) Karmakar (Ironsmith), Tili, Tambuli, Gowala (Milkmen), Tanti (Weaver) and cobbler. In addition to them there were other service groups engaged in different capacities to provide service to the members of the society. This resurgence was possible not only because of the rise in population and occupational diversification taking place in a large measure in the society but also because of considerable relaxation in caste rigidity that surfaced in the eighteenth century owing to the emergence of Nabasakh castes. In Nadia, further the rise of Vaishnavism was a factor to reckon with in breaking the shackles of caste rigidity and hierarchy. Vaishnavism had thrown open numerous employment opportunities as well as space for occupational diversifications for the artisans and other lower caste people of Nadia.

As mentioned, there existed several artisanal groups with marginal status in Nadia in the eighteenth century. The Census return gives a total of 26,429 as persons of unknown or odd unspecified castes, or of persons enumerated by nationality only or of persons of Hindu origin not recognising caste (beside native Christians) making a strictly Hindu population of 642,704 souls. However nothing is known that throws any light on the history of the first settlement of these races or castes in the District.

The Census of 1872 enlists the following subaltern groups as well as artisan castes.⁴

Table No -1

SI No	Name of the caste	Occupation
1	Goala	Cattle keepers of cattle, milk and butter seller
2.	Gareri	Cattle tender
3.	Koeri	Cultivators / 8702 in number
4.	Kurmi	Cultivators
5.	Kaibartta	Chasa Das, land holder, merchants, cultivators
6.	Chasa Dhopa	Cultivators
7.	Subarnabanik	Dealers in gold and silver ornaments (66,28)
8.	Sekera or Swarnakar	Gold and silver smith (5027)
9.	Vaishnav	Vishnuvite religious mendicants
10.	Chhutor of Sutradhar	Carpenters (9126)
11.	Tanti	Weavers (9418)

Table No -2

The following Thirteen are low castes and are despised⁵

SI No	Name of Caste	Occupation	Numbers of
1.	Sunri	Spirit makers and sellers	10,118
2.	Dhoba	Washer man	4,815
3.	Jogi	Weavers	15,368
4.	Kalu	Oil pressers and sellers	17,162
5.	Kapali	Cultivators and manufacturers of gunny bags	12,961
6.	Pura	Growers and sellers of vegetables	2,188
7.	Jalia	Fisherman and boat man	20,398
8.	Mala	Fisherman and boat man	74
9.	Patni	Boatman and generally in charge of ferries on the river	3,564
10.	Rajbansi	Fisherman and cultivators	1,530
11.	Pod	Fisherman and cultivators	4,250
12.	Tior	Fisherman	12,433
13.	Behara	Labourers and palanquin bearers	8,796
14.	Rawani Kahar	Palanquin bearers	2583
15.	Dhanuk	Day labourers	308
16.	Laheri or Nuri	Makers of Iac bracelets	30
17.	Chunari	Lime burners	830
18.	Kan	Day labours, cultivators and musicians	
19.	Chandal	Cultivators, fisherman, village watchman and hired labourers	42,062
20.	Beldar	Day labourers	65
21.	Kora	Cultivators and hired labourers	3
22.	Baiti	Mat makers and musicians	1789

23. Bagdi	Fisherman, village watchman and palanquin bearers	35,576
24. Bahelia	Labourers and cultivators	1270
25. Bauri	Fisherman and cultivators	2016
26. Dom	Makers of bamboo baskets	2937
27. Bhuiya	Cultivators	786
28. Bind	Labourers	1017
29. Chain	Labourers and cultivators	655
30. Dosadh	Cultivators and labourers	87
31. Chamar and muchhi	Shoe makers and leather dealers	57,375
32. Bhuimali	Builders of mud walls, gardeners and cultivators	1866
33. Mal	Snake charmers	4407
34. Turi	Basket makers	336
35. Pasi	Only one in district	1
36. Mahili	Labourers	18
37. Malo	Labourers	2567
38. Buna	Labourers principally employed in indigo manufacture	16,028
39. Bediyas	A semi aboriginal tribe (tending cattle, begging and committing thefts and robberies)	434
40. Karanga	Day labourers	310
41. Shikari	Hunters	48
42. Kaora	Swine herds	2312
43. Hari	Swine herds	4113

The above tables represent the demographic composition of lower class people including artisan groups in Nadia. These groups strictly adhered to their hereditary caste-based professions fixed for them and were in a state of perpetual servitude for generations without much scope for economic improvement. Their social status and security was also dwindling as they had to depend heavily on the good will of their employers, namely the jajmans who in most cases belonged to the upper caste category in the society. In Nadia however the scope for economic diversification for artisanal groups was not wide until efforts for their amelioration had been enforced by no other than the Nadia raj itself.

Pottery: Nadia's pottery flourished under the patronage of the royal family of Nadia, especially during the reign of Maharaja Krishna Chandra. The fame of Nadia's pottery is entirely centred on Ghurni, a rural hamlet located in the suburbs of Krishnagar, some four kilometres away from the main Krishnagar town. Apart from Ghurni, potters can also be seen living in some places of

Krishnagar like Kumorpara, SashtiTola and Nutan Bazar. All these potters gave full expression to their aesthetic sense and artistic skill in making beautiful idols and images with the help of their mastery over clay



Fig. 2: Clay models of ghurni

craft, the necessary raw material, mud, having been collected from the banks of river Jalangi. Nadia district of West Bengal has three famous towns - Nabadwip, Santipur and Krishnagar. All these three places are famous for their religious and social celebrations and also for being important administrative and cultural centres of the district. Krishnagar is the most modern town among the two. Krishnagar town particularly rose to prominence with its emergence as the seat of royal power during the middle of the eighteenth century. In 1787, the British East India Company established an administrative centre at Krishnagar while carving out the district of Nadia.

The pottery tradition of Krishnagar is believed to be roughly 200 years old. However, one important feature of the potters of Krishnagar is that they have also excelled in making idols, deities and other real images of everyday life. Artiste's mastery over the craft is often found expression in their efforts to combine scriptural knowledge with modern art tradition and in inculcating meditative image in designing the statue. Some of the most notable of these are the Shakti idols, like Shadasiva, Bhadrakali, Chinnamasta, Elanokali, Ranakali, Nrityakali, Krishnakali, Gaurangini, Ranachandi, Dumureswari, Vishvajnani, etc.). Krishnagar pottery actually thrived and prospered under the royal patronage of Nadia Raj. The kings of Nadia dynasty were staunch supporters of Brahmanical culture. They used to make idols of Shakti for the enrichment of their culture. Potters of this place were skilled in making most of the Shakti idols. Prafulla Kumar Sarkar wrote in the journal 'Bharatvarsha', that the clay doll of Krishnagar was started under the royal patronage of Krishnagar with the creation of a group of nine female dolls from Naranarikunja by Gopal Pal, the ancestor of the famous potter Jadunath Pal.⁶

Potters' Community in Nadia: In Bengal, people from communities other than the potters also made earthenware. The book *Crafts and Craftsmen of West Bengal* (1978), reveals that in different parts of West Bengal, besides

pottery, artists of other handicraft productions are also involved in making dolls and idols.⁷ For example, in places like Nadia, 24 Parganas and Murshidabad, the Palas, an artisan class, also made pottery. The Rajbongshis also made pottery in West Dinajpur, Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri. Krishnagar in Nadia is mainly known for the pottery of Ghurni because the clay idols of Ghurni look realistic. Apart from Ghurni, the clay idols are also made in Kumorpara, Sashtitola and Natunpara which are a little less attractive for the art lovers. So it is not the same pottery all over Krishnagar. The idols made by the potters of Kumorpara and Sashti Tola areas are relatively smaller in size and different types of dolls that feature during Jhulan Yatra and Janmashtami are made here. However, the distinctive feature of the potters of Krishnagar is their delicate artistic work that they imprint on their artifacts and these make their products qualitatively different from others. Needless to say, these handicrafts have gained international recognition and craftsmen have been honored with many national and international awards and accolades.

In Kaliprasanna Bandopadhyay's book *Madhyajuge Bangla* we get reference to the skill of Nadia's potters, as the author admitted that the beautiful dolls, animals and toys made by them, sometimes even in the presence of customers, was unbelievable. He also mentioned that the names of Ramlal Pal, Jadunath Pal and other craftsmen of Nadia in making idols and deities including realistic art pieces should be written in gold in the cultural history of the region.⁸ "At Ghurni, a suburb of Krishnagar, clay figures of remarkable excellence are manufactured; they find a ready sale wherever offered, and have received medals at European exhibitions."⁹ "In 1888, Trailokyanath Mukherjee, assistant curator of the Indian Museum, said, "Krishnagar modellers belong to the Hindu caste of Kumars, or potters, one of the nine artisan classes of Bengal, whose ranks stand just below the Brahmins and writers. From time immemorial the occupation of this caste has been to make earthen vessels, and the figurative representations of divine manifestation as found in sacred books'.¹⁰ Fortunately, this tradition of manufacturing art pieces has continued to exist even today.

This statement is corroborated by other evidence. Trailakyanath was instrumental in introducing the art of pottery in Krishnagar and in other parts of Nadia and some say, also in the whole of India. He studied in a school during the first half of the nineteenth century. Later, he served as the Sub-Inspector of Police in Cuttack, Odisha. At one point of time, he was also the Chief Director of the Indian Exhibition Department. As Director, he met several craftsmen and artists of different places, collected their artifacts and also arranged for these artifacts to be shown in exhibitions. One such international exhibition was held at Calcutta in 1883-1884. During this time he became well acquainted with various artists of Krishnagar. He was the assistant curator of the Calcutta Museum from 1887 to 1895. In his book, *Art Manufactures of India*, he gave a detailed account of the potters of Krishnagar. The skill and effort of these potters, when aided and abetted by the organizational help of Trailokyanath

earned them world renown as their art pieces found place in the court of kings and in royal families of Europe. Specimens of these clay figures have been sent to London and Paris for exhibition and much praise and accolades followed in recognition of the skill of Nadia craftsmen.¹¹

Jadunath Pal, another notable craftsman of Nadia shot to fame in the nineteenth century. In 1898, Sir Edward Buck wrote:

“Jadunath was the prince of modellers in the 1880-90 decade and I believe just as loud now. He made life size models for the 1886 exhibition, some of which have found place in the Paris ethnological museum. The rare art pieces created by him also found a place of pride at the Calcutta Museum and in other international museums. According to Buck they were so good that he hoped Jadunath Pal might continue to receive official encouragement”.¹²

It is said that the-then Viceroy Lord Lytton, met Jadunath Pal at an international art exhibition held at Krishnagar. Other craftsmen of the period like Shriram Pal and his successor Shri Rakhhal Das Pal, were also popular for their mastery over the craft. Shri Rakhhal Das was reported to have sent in exhibitions held in Europe some rare art pieces depicting scenes of zamindar's kachari, a wedding procession, scenes of sacrifice in Durga Puja, Rath Yatra and a tea garden in Assam. It is evident from this fact that the development of pottery took place in Krishnagar in the last half of the nineteenth century. It was during this period that the pottery of Nadia established itself in the court of the world beyond the boundaries of regionalism. Some of the big names in pottery manufacturing craft of Krishnagar were Jiban Krishna Pal, Paran Chandra Pal, Jadunath Pal, Kartick Chandra Pal, Rakhhal Das, etc. Few other names like Sudhir Krishna, Gautam Pal, Shambhu Pal hailing from Nadia also deserve a mention in this context. They carved a place for themselves in the world of pottery and had earned international fame. The bronze Rabindra Murti in front of Rabindra Sadan, made by Kartick Chandra, and the statue of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, made of white stone are some of the rare specimen of artistic work that indicate the height of excellence scaled by the craftsmen of Nadia.

Textile Industry: Among the Nabosakh communities weavers always enjoyed a prime position in the society of Nadia. The weavers of Shantipur and Phulia were world famous. Although there is no exact information about the antiquity of the handloom industry of Shantipur, the weavers of Shantipur found reference in the folklore of Nadia. King Ganesh was also reported to have been fascinated by the weavers of Shantipur and Phulia. It is said that the tradition of the loom industry in Shantipur-Phulia emerged in the eighteenth century under the patronage of the Raj family of Nadia and had attained international recognition. Traditional weaving has been regarded as one of the best forms of folk practices in Bengal.

In 1766, historian Hall wrote that Shantipur, one of the main towns of



Fig. 3: Weaving Loom

Maharaja Krishna Chandra's zamindari, was famous for its cotton, muslin and other fine textiles. But there was not much yarn available for export to the European market. And the cotton crop was also not produced in sufficient quantities. He mentioned the damage caused to the textile industry in Shantipur due to the Bargi riots.¹³ According to many historians, the handloom industry of Shantipur flourished under the patronage of Raja Krishna Chandra. The fine fabric produced by designer and finisher on Sarees during this time attained unparalleled height during his time. However, there is no data on this. The fine fabrics, which were in great demand both within the country and abroad, had been first worn by the weavers of Shantipur. It was also very much popular among the elites of Calcutta. During the era of Krishna Chandra Shantipur was the seat of fashionable clothes much sought after by rich people of the country and had also turned into an industry which resembles the fashion industry of modern times.

The main material for the textile industry was cotton, which was produced in large quantities in Shantipur for the benefit of the British. However, large quantities of cotton were imported from neighboring Burdwan district to meet the huge raw material demand of Santipur. The weavers of Bengal produced coarse fabrics. Once upon a time, there was a teacher in Bengal whose name was Tantripadi. The fact that the word handloom is associated with his name suggests that he was a weaver. Tamralipta Port was the best port for the export of Bengal's handloom products as found in Hu-en-Sang's account. Even during the Mughal period, the clothes of Shantipur were very similar. From Shantipur, textiles were first sent to Delhi and from there they went to Kabul, Balochistan, Iran, Arabia, Turkey, Greece, Italy etc. and were sold at high prices.¹⁴ During the

time of Maharaja Krishna Chandra, some enterprising youths of the Mallik families of Ranaghat started collecting fine muslin from different villages of Dhaka, Shantipur, etc. and exporting it to Europe.¹⁵ One of Shantipur's textile industries was the fine dhoti and nakshapada, which reached its zenith during the time of Krishna Chandra. Shantipur was also a famous textile centre during the time of Nadiraj Rudra Rai (1676-1693). In the seventies of the eighteenth century, the commercial resident of Shantipur was Mr. Babe, the manager was Mr. Beuland and the master was Kishore Sanyal.¹⁶ The English East India Company arrived at Shantipur in Nadia in the early 18th century. The English East India Company established a trading post in the Baigachi neighborhood of Shantipur as Shantipur was located on the banks of the river Ganges.

During the time of Alivardi there was full competition of the traders of English, Dutch, French, American and Indians. How much the indigenous sarees were better than the imported mill sarees of England is proved by this statement - 'The fine yarn prepared by the uneducated women of the weaving class from the asana yarn according to the native cannot stand even a very good yarn prepared in the English yarn. How much money the English have spent to learn it, how many years they have tried to test it, how much they have tried to learn about it by comparing it with various types of fine yarns during the big fairs, how fine it is, how thin it is, etc., but all their efforts have failed. Till today, the English handloom has not been able to defeat the handloom of this country.'¹⁷ Bolts writes, "There is a gentleman now in England who in the time of Nabob has purchased in the Dacca province in one morning eight hundred pieces of muslin at his own door as brought to him by weavers of their own accord".¹⁸ Like most cottage industries, women were also equally involved in weaving as men in Nadia. In Nadia district women were involved in spinning yarn, drying and developing designs.

The English East India Company introduced the dadni system to promote the Company's trade in Bengal. But it turned out to be a failed experiment. The Dadni merchants were replaced by Gomasthas.¹⁹ Padri Long Sahib has written that before and after the battle of Plassey, arrangements were made to bring people from Shantipur, Dhaka etc. to Kolkata by the company's Gomostas.²⁰ From 1757, the gomastas and wholesalers kept a close watch on the production of the weavers so much so that the weavers handed over their entire production to them. As a result, local traders were losing out on competition. From 1763 onwards, the French withdrew their trade from Shantipur. The monopoly of the English East India Company became rampant thereafter. The authorities of the Company arranged pensions for the employees of the cotton textile industry. These were called factories or Kuthi. Some notable pensioners of Shantipur Kuthi were Gaura Govinda Khan, Becharam Bhattacharya, Ramhari Pramanik, Braja Kishore Bidyanta and Mahesh Chandra Bandyopadhyay.²¹ In many cases, the employees of the company established pathshalas at Kuthis in Shantipur. This shows how profitable the cloth kuthi of Shantipur was for them. After

1757, every governor of Bengal wanted to increase the export of Bengal goods to Europe. And they invested accordingly. Despite this, the weavers of Bengal were not willing to sell their fabrics to the company. This is because the weavers used to get more profit by selling clothes to the Dutch and the French. However, it is noteworthy that in the 1760s, 1770s and 1780s, the entire economy of Bengal was regulated according to the needs of the European market.²² Apart from the illegal exploitation of the company's employees, the weaving industry in the district was also affected by the famine of 1770. The weavers of Bengal were particularly affected by the famine. About 25% of the weavers of Shantipur died in this famine. After the famine, the price of yarn increased, but the company kept the price of cloth the same. In such a situation, 'Freedom of Trade' as envisaged in 1773 gave some hope to the weavers. It states that any weaver of Bengal and Bihar will have full freedom to trade with any person and they cannot be forced in any way by giving advance.²³ However, this happiness of the weavers did not last long. The company resumed contractual investment soon. Particularly because of the high costs of the war of 1781, the company greatly reduced the weavers' advance payments. At this time, the weavers of Shantipur protested against the policy of the company. Indeed since the end of Raja Krishna Chandra's rule, the export of cotton textiles from Bengal has been on the decline. England was a strong base for the Industrial Revolution and the textile industry. The competition of Indian muslin with British muslin started in 1781. However, even though the domestic weavers began to compete with foreign weavers from this time, the domestic industry was still not destroyed. According to Narendra Krishna Sinha, in Dacca, Santipore and other places where the company's investment was exposed to the full competition of European and Asiatic rivals and private traders, the condition of weavers was not bad on the whole upto 1778".²⁴ By 1757, the English company's investment in Santipur amounted to Rs 1,68,500, but it increased further in the 1770s.²⁵

Brass and Bronze: Nabadwip in Nadia district is famous for its tradition of brass craft since ancient times. In the poem 'Tirtha Mangal' written by Vijayram Visharad in 1770 AD, there is a clear mention of the gold industry of Nabadwip, the conch industry as well as the brass industry.

"Subarna Banik koto Shakhari Kanshari
Bazar Sarake Koto Mudi Sarisari"²⁶

Nabadwip is famous for its brass throne, kalsi, ghoti, beautiful boats decorated with brass and floral decorations, etc. This bronze and brass industry was so popular in Nabadwip that a colony here emerged known as Kansaripara, comprising only the artisans of brass and bell metal craft. But today most of the Kansari craftsmen have spread out from this neighborhood to other places. According to Hunter, in the cottage industry of Nadia, brass and bronze



Fig. 4 - Brass metal craftsman

industry was second only to cotton weaving. Nabadwip and Meherpur of undivided Nadia were the main centres of the bronze and brass industry. It is said that Maharaja Krishna Chandra of Nadia used to encourage the Kansaris by bringing bronze plates and bowls from Nabadwip for regular worship and daily use. Specimens of these bronze utensils and implements are preserved in the royal household of Nadia even today. The songs of Ramprasad also refer to such extensive use of brass utensils.

“Ghore Kansar Thala Kansar Bati Maa
Pai Jeno Tai Duto Khete”

The name of Gurudas Das as an artisan of the brass metal industry of Nabadwip in the 19th century deserves mention in this context.

Shola Art: The Shola art of Nadia has its origin in the hands of the artists of Ula or Bir Nagar. Krishna Chandra brought the ancestors of Kanailal and Neelmani Acharya of Palitpara, the old artists of Shola craft from Birnagar to Krishnagar.²⁷ Earlier, all the idols of the royal family of Krishnagar used to be decorated with clay. With the encouragement of Krishna Chandra, the use of shola decorative elements on clay figures became widespread. Shola artists mostly live in Anandamayeetala, Chowrasta and other areas of Krishnagar. Shola grows in plenty on its own in the marshy lands of rural Bengal. Its botanical name is *Aeschynomene aspera* and its English name is sponge or sholapith. The white part of shola is obtained by cutting and removing the thick upper coat green peel obtained by cutting the shola tree into small pieces. These pieces are called *pati* in the local language. These are combined together to create outstanding art pieces. All the pieces that are made by cutting shola are - *guna*, *pati*, and *charan*. Two artistic methods are followed in the work of Shola, the first is the drawing of idols, toys, crowns, flowers, fruits, birds, animal masks etc. The second is the drawing of images of gods and goddesses etc.²⁸ The main

and only tool for the Shola work is a straight knife, 10 inches long 2 inches wide called a kait or kaat, which is sometimes curved.²⁹ Newspaper, bamboo, stickers, paint and brushes are mainly used to make these Shola products. Just like in Bengali there are thirteen festivals in twelve months, (Baro mase tero parbon) in Nadia and the whole of Bengal there are various programs throughout the year and sholas are used for the decoration of those social and secular programs.³⁰ Sholapith is used for making beautiful art pieces such as Chandmala, Dharmachata, garland of shola flowers etc. It is said that Raja Krishna Chandra used to send dak and sholashilpi from Krishnagar to decorate the Durga idol of Sovabazar Raj Nabakrishna Deb. Even the decoration of the Durga idol in the house of the famous Sanskrit Scholar of Tribeni Jagannath Tarkapanchanan was done by the artists of Krishnagar.



Fig. 5: Wedding topor and mukut of shola

Sholashilpi community: Shola artists mostly hail from the Malakar caste belonging to the Navsakh community. Generally, people belonging to the Malakar caste are known as Shola artists. In places like Tehatta, Ranaghat, Shantipur, Nabadwip of Nadia, the people of the Malakar community are continuing the tradition of Shola art. However, people of the Bagdi community also play a special role in Shola art in this district. Apart from this, the Acharya Brahmins of Birnagar and even some Muslim Shola artists of Krishnagar also work in Shola art. In addition to Malakars, other communities are also found to have engaged themselves as Shola artistes. This simple art form is prepared by cutting down the Shola trees growing in the lowlands. Among the materials made of shola - wedding topor, garland, idol decoration, etc. The reverse is seen in Jaynagar in South 24 Parganas, where Acharya Brahmins are also found to act as shola artisans. The malakar community in Rarh Bengal, like much of West Bengal are traditional artists skilled in making crafts from Sholapith or sponge wood. Historically they are a Hindu Community, often considered part of the artisan class and have mythological origins traced to deities like Vishwakarma and Ghritachi or from a Brahmin father and Vaisya mother through modern

classification may vary. The Malas in particular are believed to have emerged as the present-day Malakar caste under the influence of Vaishnavism. With their simple and impeccable skills, they make various items like flowers, elephants, valance, boats, dolls, etc. from shola, thread glue, paper and paint and sell them in villages, haat-bazaars and fairs. Shola caps made by them became quite popular among the British, especially during the colonial period.³¹

The existence of the Malakar people in other provinces, including Assam and Orissa, beyond the borders of Bengal, is quite noticeable. The Bagdi community of fish traders live on the northern bank of the Anjana River in Krishnagar. They tie the shola to their clay pots and use the shola to float in the water. This is how one day the community of Bagdi Jalia accepted shola as a means of livelihood for themselves, who are now the famous shola artists of Nadia district. Every year in Krishnagar, about 150 Jagaddhatri idols are worshipped in the houses and baroari where people from far and wide come and gather in the mandap. Basically to see the work of Shola, in the idol mandap of Bagpara, a crowd gathers to see the work of Shola.³²

In conclusion it can be said that the artisans of Nadia district by sheer dint of their skill and expertise had taken the handicrafts productions of the district to a new height of excellence in the 18th and 19th centuries. Of course, external stimulus in the form of royal patronage, favourable climate and availability of raw material had helped them to a great extent. But with the advent of colonial rule in the eighteenth century unlike the world of the peasants, the internal world of the artisans did not register a change. In the famous historical debate of 18th century India this theory has been put forward in no uncertain terms by the revisionist scholars.³³ The artisans of Nadia too had their world almost going the same traditional way as in other parts of the country. Even the familiar theory of de-industrialization hardly hit the handicrafts productions in Nadia. From the Middle Ages to the Krishnachandriya period, the prosperity of Shantipur in the production of cotton goods continued unabated. The Company's government took note of this fact and continued to invest in the looms of Shantipur. They even provided pensions to the loom workers. This shows that compared to other districts of Bengal, the handloom textile industry of Nadia was quite profitable for the Company. Also, the innovative new style of pottery that originated in Ghurni under the patronage of Raja Krishna Chandra was also a factor to reckon with in this context. The international fame of pottery produced in Krishna Nagar was thus a result of the skill and competence of the artisans of Nadia, aided and abetted suitably by the Nadia raj. Thus the role of the marginalized artisanal class of Nadia had proved to be significant in bringing new heights to crafts productions in the district in the 18th and 19th centuries. Despite being the most neglected segments of society, they were the real architects of the economic and cultural fortune of Nadia during the colonial period.

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