

The Wooden Arts and Crafts in Natungram: A Sustainable Indigenous Practice of West Bengal

Sibnath Sarkar¹

Abstract : *Handicrafts or folk-art bear witness to the cultural heritage of any country. In agriculture-oriented countries like India, handicrafts are not only significant from a cultural or social point of view, but also very crucial from an economic perspective. India is a country of art and artists. It has a huge legacy in craftwork and the craft tradition established around religious belief, local needs. Among the Indian states, West Bengal is well known for its signature and marvellous craft items and holds a significant position in all Indian handicraft items. It is a unique expression and representation of the culture, tradition, indigenous knowledge, sustainability and heritage of the land, crafting of wood is one of them. The present study has been conducted among the artisan group in Natungram which is a small village of Purba Burdwan district in West Bengal. Some qualitative research techniques have been applied for the findings on this art and craft. The findings reveal that there is a gendered division of labour and that it is a family based labour intensive work.*

Key words: *Wooden doll, Craft, Heritage, West Bengal*

Introduction

Indigenous knowledge is considered as the social capital of the poor. It is their main asset to invest in the struggle for survival, to produce food, to provide shelter and to achieve control on their own lives. Handicrafts are unique expressions and representations of a culture, tradition, indigenous knowledge, sustainability and heritage of any country. Handicrafts are an important component for any community and it adds to the household income and cultural identification of a community but also contributes to the revenues in terms of export. The handicraft sector includes a vast number of people residing in the rural and urban areas employing around seven million people. It also serves as a means of preserving cultural and artisan value (Grobar, 2017). Handicraft is known as ‘craftwork’ or ‘craft’ and is genetically the term that includes different ethnic and traditional items made and designed entirely by hands or by very simple tools (Sarkar, 2021). This sector of economic activity has been a sustainable livelihood opportunity for many communities as it is related to the traditions and culture followed by people of a particular area and community. The evolution of handicrafts, unlike other forms and age-old handicrafts traditions, have still lasted because of the inborn ability of the artisans to adapt and react to their changing

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, Rammohan College, Kolkata
E-mail: sibnathsarkar@gmail.com

forms of life. (National Handicraft Policy Report, Govt. of India, 2017). It is worth noting that professional diversity is shifting from traditional to modern, thus contributing many peoples to the preservation of this handicraft. Wood ware, art metal wares, hand printed fabrics, embroidered products, *zari* goods, imitation jewellery, sculptures, ceramics, glassware, attars, *agarbattis*, and other items are some of the prominent products produced by Indian artisans spread over various states.

Our country has a huge legacy in craftwork and the craft tradition established around religious belief, local needs (Tyagi, 2016). Among the Indian states, West Bengal is well known for its signature and marvellous craft items and holds a significant position in all Indian handicraft items (Economic Census Report, 2013-14). Art and craft of Bengal have always been an inseparable part of people's life and livelihood. Present study explores the artisans of Natungram, of Burdwan district, West Bengal, who create the most fascinating, and colourful wooden craft (locally known as *kathputul*) items and idols. According to Sanskrit tradition, the worker of wood is known as "*sutradhar*" or one who holds the string. This social group is the principal exponent in Bengal of craftsmanship in wood carving and an important village community (Mookherjee, 1996).

Contextual Overview

Important strategies in the field of handicrafts are discussed and covered with an emphasis on their development and focusing on the development of the skill level and labour. (Yadav, et al, 2020). Wooden dolls are prominently produced in many regions of Bengal which includes the regions of Raspur, Howrah, Kalighat, Nabadweep, Natungram, Bardhaman, Birbhum, Bankura, Bishnupur and Purulia. The traditional designs comprise elements from mythological characters and local folklore symbols like *Radha Krishna* (hindu gods and goddesses), *Durga* (hindu goddess), *Gour Nitai* (*ChaitanyaDev*), *Raja Rani* (King and Queen) and the famous Owl figures. All idols are carved from one piece of wood. The artisans first draw the figures on blocks of wood and the figures are chiselled out and are given the shape of the doll. The doll is then given a wash of *Kharimati* (soil), water, adhesive, flour and is left to dry. The colours are applied and the motifs are drawn by hand individually with fine brush strokes and final touch-ups are done before putting them up for display and sale (Majumder, 2016). Earlier there was the use of herbal colours but now synthetic chemical dyes are used as said by the respondents.

The Study Area

The present study has been conducted amongst the artisan group in a Natungram. Natungram is a small village of Purba Burdwan district in West Bengal, India (figure no-1). Purba Burdwan district is agriculturally rich and has a historical legacy. Natungram village is the home of wooden dolls. The locality surveyed purposely is called as *mistri para*. The artisans are engaged in the creation of different types of wooden crafts. The village holds mainly three types of surnames - *Bhaskar*, *Surtradhar* and *Nath*; the surnames are recognized as OBC-B (Other Backward Classes). At present there are sixty one households at '*Mistri Para*' in the village in

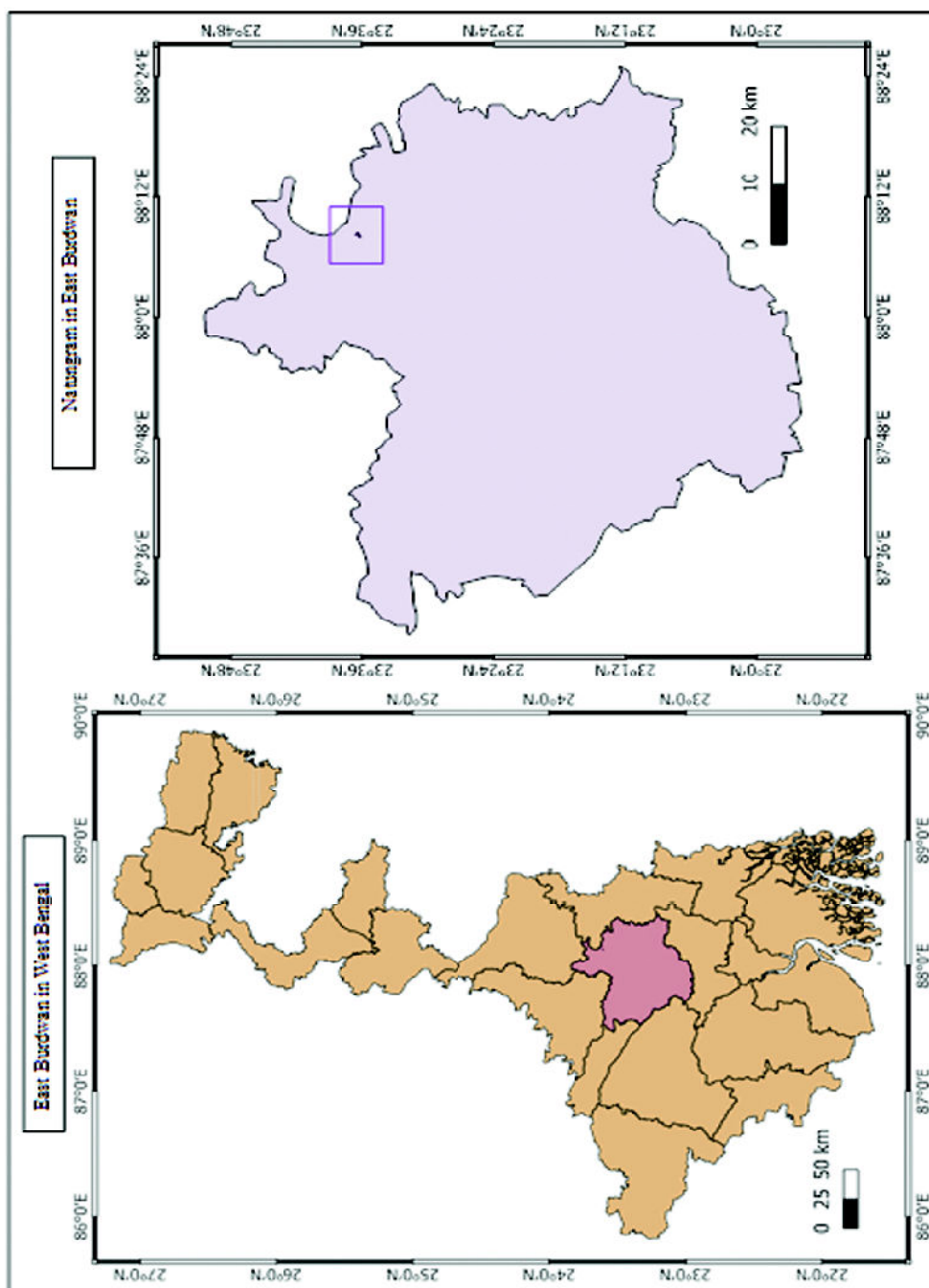
Natungram. Out of them forty four families are engaged in making different types of wooden crafts.

Objectives, Methods and Materials

The objectives of this paper are specified as -

- (i) To understand the art of wooden craft
- (ii) The crafting techniques
- (iii) The challenges faced in the context of urbanisation and
- (iv) The future prospects for the craftsmen of Natungram. Qualitative research methods are more effective in monitoring or investigating the socio-economic perspectives of the people living in any region because it helps in deeper research than quantitative techniques (Walia, 2015). Qualitative research methods focus more on people's belief, experiences, and perceptions rather than quantitative research methods. For this reason in social research, qualitative research techniques are more suitable and acceptable (Brisk, 1993). In the present study semi structured questionnaire, in-depth interviews and participatory observation tools have been applied to collect the primary level data and information. With the help of in-depth interviews primary information about different demographic and socio-economic data has been collected and the information about artistic work, process of crafting, carving, painting etc were gathered by the participatory observation method. Focus group discussion method as a qualitative technique also applied for collecting information from a small group of members of *Swami Janaki Das Natungram Kashtha Shilpa Sambaya Samity*.

The art of wooden craft: Wooden craft is a century-old traditional art form as practised by the artisans of Natungram, West Bengal. The wooden craft of West Bengal is a signature of the marvellous craftwork that has taken a significant position in all Indian handicraft items. It is a unique expression and representation of the culture, tradition, indigenous knowledge, sustainability and heritage of the land. It is an integral part of the life and livelihood of the artisans. Single blocks of wood obtained from the local trees are crafted with intricate designs, vibrant colours and ethnic style. The traditional designs consist of elements from mythological characters and local folklore symbols like *Radha Krishna*, Goddess *Durga*, *Gour Nitai* (*Chaitanya Dev*), *Raja Rani* (King and Queen) and the famous Owl. The surge of *Bhakti* movement in Bengal in the 15th and 16th century has probably introduced the *Gour-Nitai* dolls (a pair of male figures with hands outstretched over their heads), representing Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (*Gour*) and his close disciple *Nityananda*. Lord Krishna in his many forms is also depicted through this work of art. It is believed that the royal influence of the kingdom of Bardhaman was also responsible for the making of soldier dolls (Sarkar and Singha, 2021). The locally available wood from trees like Mango, Neem, Hog Plum, Black wattle, Beech wood, Silk Cotton, Scholar tree etc. are used for crafting. Most of the household members are engaged in this handicraft sector; the male members



Map source: NATMO

Fig. 1: Location Map of the Study Area

of the family do the laborious work and women and younger members of the house do the dyeing and ancillary work (Sengupta, 2012).

Table 1: Classification of artisans according to identity

Title of the Artisans	Number of families surveyed	Percentage share of the family
Bhaskar	25	56.81
Sutradhar	14	31.82
Nath	04	11.37
Total	44	100.00

Source: Primary data collected by the researcher

Table 2: Age-sex composition of the Artisans

Age	Male members		Female members	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Below 20 years	12	13.18	9	13.43
21-30 years	17	18.68	11	16.41
31-40 years	22	24.18	18	26.87
41-50 years	19	20.88	16	23.88
51 and above	21	23.08	13	19.41
Total	91	100.00	67	100.00

Source: Primary data collected by the researcher

The crafting techniques: The wooden craft of Natungram is well known for its unique art and crafting methods. The local artisans create beautiful pieces of crafts from a single block of wood obtained from the local trees. These items are very popular as they are crafted with intricate designs, vibrant colour and ethnic style. The artisans first draw the figures on blocks of wood and the figures are chiselled out and given the shape of the doll, which is then given a smooth touch by rubbing with sandpaper and a wash of limestone (*kharimati*), water, adhesive, flour and are left to dry. The colours like oil paint, fabric colour paints are then applied and the motifs are drawn by hand individually with fine brush strokes. The final touch-ups are done before putting them up for display and sale (recorded by the author's observations). The items lack the modern sophistication but they preserve in themselves a rustic beauty which is the hallmark of ethnic crafts. The craftsmen are today trained to adapt their skills for making modern lifestyle products.

They not only make pieces of traditional dolls but they incorporate those dolls into the making of furniture. Small sitting stools, laptop tables and bigger tables have carved owls or soldier dolls on their stands or are used to make designer cupboards and boxes.

Challenges: In the current age of modern machine civilization this handicraft is facing various problems. This handicraft tradition has been derived by the new generation from this family art practice (Sengupta, 2007). At present artisans of this village are facing many challenges -

- (i) **Inadequate raw materials:** Artisans often face the lack of adequate supply of raw materials and are compelled to buy their required wood at higher prices during the periods of high demand.
- (ii) **The problem of right selling price:** In many cases artisans are compelled to sell the crafted items at the same or previously scheduled price even though they buy raw materials at a higher price as a result of which they do not get the right price for the craft.
- (iii) **Problems of middleman or broker:** Many times big traders or middlemen grab the actual profit; they buy craft items at low price and sell them at higher price in various fairs or exhibitions. As a result artists do not get the actual price and they are financially deprived of their actual dues.
- (iv) **Reluctance of the new generation:** In today's fast paced era, the new generation does not have the endurance with which they can learn this kind of crafting methods. The members from the new generation want to pursue higher education or want to get other jobs rather than taking this handicraft as a source of livelihood.
- (v) **Health problems:** various types of physical problems can also be noticed by the artists. They have to sit in one place for a long time and face a lot of stress on their eyes and body. Artisans often suffer from eye related problems and back pain etc.

Table 3: Analysis of young generation's perspectives

Perspectives of the young generation	Number of respondents	Percentage value
Want to do higher study	12	41.37
Wish for getting job	06	20.69
Willing to start own business	05	17.24
Passionately love this crafting	04	13.79
Other	02	06.91
Total respondents	29	100.00

Source: Primary data collected by the researcher

The researcher interacted with twenty nine young members of the family ageing between eleven to eighteen years to understand their point of view for this traditional craft. Most of them want to pursue higher education instead of engaging in this family based handcrafted sector. Some of them want to stay outside of the village to get a job. (Table -3 and 4)

Out of twenty nine respondents five want to start their own business. Interestingly only four of them express their love and passion for crafting and want to support their elder family members. Out of twenty nine respondents twenty five don't want to be involved in this craft. The researcher probed further to know about their negative perceptions about the age old traditional household industry. This highlights the future of this indigenous art.

Table 4: Perception about the crafting by new generation

Perception about the crafting	Number of respondents	Percentage value
Need huge patience and concentration	12	48.00
Feeling bored and monotonous	06	24.00
Not very profitable	03	12.00
Wish to know about the outer world	02	08.00
No response given	02	08.00
Total respondents	25	100.00

Source: Primary data collected by the researcher

Concluding Remarks

Like other handicrafts of West Bengal, the popularity of the wooden puppet village has spread beyond the borders of India to the entire world today. The artists now are not only making various traditional crafts as well as items according to modern needs. They are at present crafting modern furniture like dining table, sofa set, garden chair, study table, easy chair, bed or cot according to current demand. This is the new strategy they adopted as an alternative survival strategy though; the new generations are somewhat indifferent to this family tradition. The Government of West Bengal, UNESCO and Non Government Organizations (NGO) like Bangla Natak Dot Com, Biswa Bangla are simultaneously working towards their improvement. HERE - An initiative of the Department of MSME & Textiles, Government of West Bengal has been taken by Biswa Bangla since October 2015 in showcasing, reviving and promoting the handicraft products of West Bengal and to address the issues that impact our heritage and the livelihoods of thousands of traditional craftsmen (www.biswabangla.in). West Bengal has a rich and ancient heritage of dolls that were crafted by women from the potter communities. Dolls have been customarily crafted for religious purposes, believed to possess spiritual, magical and ritual value.

Urbanisation has slowed down the pace of doll making but it has not been able to bring it to a halt. From fairgrounds to modern showrooms, the year-round bustle helps in the sustenance of these craftsmen to hold up to the art out of sheer dedication and love. With constant experimentation, the artisan community of Natungram is coming up with utility and home décor products, including these dolls. The attractive wooden Owl is a special attraction of Natungram. Originally used for worshipping Goddess *Lakshmi*, it is now an artefact of global repute.

A folk art centre has been established in the village as a joint initiative of *Swami Janaki Das Natungram Kashtha Shilpa Sambaya Samity* and West Bengal Khadi, Village Industries Board and the people of the village. In this folk art centre, tourists can enjoy observing the craft making processes, lifestyle of the artisans and also the beautiful village landscapes. It is hoped that in the near future this traditional handicraft will conquer all its obstacles and establish itself happily in the midst of the world.

Acknowledgement

Sincere gratitude goes towards the various respondents from the village those have participated in the interaction and also express my gratefulness to the office of *Swami Janaki Das Natungram Kashtha Shilpa Sambaya Samity*, Natungram, Burdwan, West Bengal.

References

- Brisk, H.I.L (1993). Validity and Reliability in quantitative research, *Curationis*, 16 (2), pp35-38.
- Biswabangla (2015). Dolls of Bengal (www.biswabangla.in) Retrieved on 18-04-2023
- Chatterjee, K. (1980). India's Craft Tradition, Publication Division; Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India. pp 1-4.
- Economic Census Report, 2013-14 (sixth). Central Statistics Office, *Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation*, Govt. of India.
- Grober, L. M. (2017). Policies to promote employment and preserve cultural heritage in the handicraft sector, *International Journal of Cultural policy*, 25(4), pp 515-527.
- Majumder, A. (2016), "Wooden Dolls of Bengal: A Descriptive Overview", *International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)*, 2(4), pp. 226-230.
- Mookherjee, A. (1996). 5000 Designs and Motifs from India: *Dover Publication*, INC, Mincola New work.
- National Handicraft Policy Report (2017). Ministry of Textile, *Government of India* (AIACA).
- Sarkar, S. and Singha, T. (2021) Project Rural Craft Hub and Socio-economic Life of Local Artisans - A Case of Wooden Doll Makers in Notungram of Purba Bardhaman District, West Bengal, pp 239-258.
- Sengupta, S. (2007). Tracing the History of Wooden -dolls in Bengal: A study of two specimens from Chandraketurgh Vol-22, pp 215-222.

- Sengupta, S. (2012). Wooden idols of west Bengal: An Aesthetic Approach University of Calcutta, 73(8), pp 117-119.
- Tyagi, A. (2016). Let's Know Handicrafts of India, *IBS Book Pvt. Ltd.* UK 6 (3). pp 24-29.
- Walia, R. (2015). A saga of Qualitative Research, *Social Criminal*. 5(2), 124
- Yadav, G., Kumar, A., Luthra, S., Garza-Reyes, J. A., Kumar, V., & Batista, L. (2020). A framework to achieve sustainability in manufacturing organisations of developing economies using industry 4.0 technologies' enablers. *Computers in industry*, p 122.