

Handicrafts in Hyderabad State; a Case Study of Bidri Art Work (1724-1956)

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Abstract—Handicrafts symbolize the fulfillment of the creative urge of the community. The various pieces of handicrafts, whether metal ware or wood work, mats or pottery, toys or textiles, while being of functional utility, also serve as vehicles of self expression of the maker. The excellence of artistry in Indian handicrafts is well recognized. Its survival and growth through centuries are the result of unflinching devotion of the craftsmen to their hereditary vocation. Hyderabad State under Nizam's rule is a fascinating canvas of myriad colours, cultures and customs. The people of Hyderabad State have patronized a host of arts and crafts which not only enriched the milieu but also kept the traditions alive through the ages. The State of Hyderabad is the treasure of fascinating Handicrafts, each unique in their style, concept, form and expression, that has made a name for themselves the world over. The evolution of design, colour and form embodied in handicrafts is a story of experiment and evolution through centuries, perfected through the passage of time. The process of manufacturing Nirmal gold which never tarnishes, the magic blackening of Bidriware, the selection of punki wood for the toys, the Ikat tie and dye and the manufacture of telya rumals of Pochampalli, Silver filigree of Karimnagar, Pambathi Brassware and the manufacture of carpets and rugs of Warangal from sheep-hair, Cherial Scroll paintings and Pearls and Jewel making are emboldening developments in each craft over long periods in its history. The objective of the paper is to trace the history of Bidri Art form and examine how it flourished during the Nizam's patronage

1. INTRODUCTION

Handicrafts symbolize the fulfillment of the creative urge of the community. The various pieces of handicrafts, whether metal ware or wood work, mats or pottery, toys or textiles, while being of functional utility, also serve as vehicles of self expression of the maker. The excellence of artistry in Indian handicrafts is well recognized. Its survival and growth through centuries are the result of unflinching devotion of the craftsmen to their hereditary vocation.¹ Hyderabad State under Nizam's rule is a fascinating canvas of myriad colours, cultures and customs. The people of Hyderabad State have patronized a host of arts and crafts which not only enriched the milieu but also kept the traditions alive through the ages. The State of Hyderabad is the treasure of fascinating Handicrafts, each unique in their style, concept, form and expression, that has made a name for themselves the world over.² The evolution of

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2. ORIGIN OF BIDRI ART

The origin of Bidriware is attributed to the Bahamani sultans who ruled Bidar in the 13th to 15th centuries. King Allauddin Shah of the Behmani dynasty who belonged to 14th Century promoted the Bidri art. When Ahmed Shah Bahmani transferred his capital from Gulberga to Bidar, he invited craftsmen to the capital and bestowed royal patronage. Thus it appears that this craft dates back to 500 years to the Bhamani and Baridi dynasties under whose patronage it was flourished and reached its great perfection and beauty. Bidri has thus a common ancestry with the older art practiced in Arabia and Persia of inlaying gold and silver in steel or copper. It differs from others in the basic material which in place of steel or copper is an alloy of zinc with small proportions of other non-ferrous metals of a dull leaden color. This is the innovation which is peculiar to Bidri and hence the name Bidriware."⁴ Abdullah bin Kaiser, a craftsman from Iran was invited by the Sultan to work on decorating the royal palaces and courts. According to some accounts, Kaiser joined hands with local craftsmen and gave birth to Bidriware. Since then, the craft has been handed down succeeding generations mostly among the local Muslim and Lingayat sects.⁵ According to E.E. Speight, The former Nizam of Hyderabad, Mir Mahaboob Ali, Asaf Jah the VI, was an enthusiastic admirer and the craft was nurtured under royal patronage.⁶

Bidri art is a handicraft by artisans who fix sheets or wires of gold, silver or mother of pearl into metal and wood. This is done just as artisans fix steel frames between rows of tiles on the floor. The skills are passed on from generation to generation in the families of artisans. Artisans make furniture, utensils, boxes, flower pots, ash trays, cuff links, paper cutters, and other household and decorative items using such inlaid metal or wood. The Rangeen Mahal palace inside the Bidar fort has stones inlaid with mother of pearl.⁷ The Royal family of the Hyderabad Nizam had wooden tables inlaid with mother of pearl. The tomb of Behmani King Ahmed Shah Ali Wali is decorated with coloured tiles that are fixed in lime mortar walls using the Bidri inlay technique.⁸ Artisans prepare moulds of zinc and copper and each beautiful design on the surface. Silver wires or plates are hemmed in to the designs and the item is immersed in a chemical solution. This gives the body a distinct black colour to the mould. The shining silver pattern stands out in the black background. The black colour does not fade at all. The Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad has Bidri artifacts that are over 500 year's old.⁹

Mr. Adbey Collins, former Director- General of Commerce and Industries of the Nizam's Government, Hyderabad has described the process of making Bidriware.¹⁰ The Material employed is a combination of zinc and copper in the proportion of 16:1. The object of the small mixture of copper is to make the zinc take a better polish. The first process is to cast the articles to be made in the rough. This is done for the heavier objects by covering the matrix with a mixture of wax and Robsin. The latter is required to harden the Wax. Over this, a further covering of red clay, supported by stops is placed and the wax is then melted and the molten metal poured in. Smaller objects are built up somewhat differently; when the rough cast article is ready, if round is polished on a lathe. Next the design is drawn and cut in with a fine pointed instrument. Pure silver, in sheets or wires, is then hammered into the design and the article is filed and polished. Mohammedan craftsmen in Hyderabad state decorated Hukka stands and plates in their own most inimitable style of work.¹¹

According to Mr. Speight,¹² "the original use of Bidriware was in connection with the smoking of Huqqa, the offering of pan and Supari, water drinking and ablutions; Popular among designs is the lotus motif which, according to Sir Flinders Petrie, is so wide spread that some have seen in it, the source of all ornament. This motif has found its way in Pandans, Surahi and other articles. Gold inlay work is now rare, but was, at one time, as popular as silver. At present, gold inlay is combined with silver inlay work and thus a colorful Bidri creation is possible. The designs are mostly conventional ranging from creepers, flowers and sometimes human figures.¹³ Popular among designs is the lotus motif which, according to Sir Flinders Petrie, is so wide spread that some have seen in it, the source of all ornament. Boxes have adapted themselves for cigars, and cigarettes, trinkets and jewellery and Surahis have evolved into fascinating lamp bases and flower vases. The raw- materials used in the making of

Bidriware are zinc, copper, pure silver and small quantities of salt petre, copper sulphate and salt ammoniac.¹⁴ The traditional designing of Handicrafts is on account of the social and psychological background, a complex amalgam of the influence of religious whim and vanity of rulers and lords and the elemental experience, aesthetic genius and technical competence of the craftsman. As one looks upon the traditional craft products of this country, one comes across patterns of awe inspiring beauty, expressing vision and form and feeling which have few parallels in the art treasures of the world. Here one can have society perhaps even without knowledge. The owner of the factory designated himself as the President or Chairman of the Society and nominated his own Secretary and Treasurer. The factories which thus came up were known as co-operative producer societies in the eyes of the Government.¹⁵ They are private middlemen's units merely converted into co-operatives against the assurance of financial assistance. The Middlemen have now become Presidents. Having provided all the capital, there are no managing committees, the Presidents saw "no need" for them; since all the money had been invested by them and nobody has any information about the nature of co-operative. This is the apt description of the societies even today. It is further found that the Presidents of these societies are absentee Presidents like absentee landlords. The societies at Bidar are managed by the Managers from Hyderabad while they pay visits to Bidar occasionally".¹⁶ At Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, two co-operative societies were formed: these were the Mumtaz Bidri Works,¹⁷ which was registered in 1958 with 34 craftsmen. Since the Co-operative Sector in Bidri has been used as a handle by private Karkhanadars or proprietary concerns, as a means of acquiring financial assistance from Government and not in any spirit of Co-operation, it seems necessary to look into other forms of organization, wherein Handicrafts could make some headway. Gullistan Bidri Works which was also registered on 13th October 1958 with 22 crafts men.¹⁸ The craftsmen/ co-operators in both these societies were from Bidar and the promoters were former karkhanadars at Bidar. The centre produces articles valued at Rs. 40,000 per annum from 1958 to 1961 and most of the articles are marketed, through the Government Handicrafts and Cottage Industries Emporium, Hyderabad. The Centre also executes orders of the All-India Handicrafts Board and the Central Cottage Industries Emporium, New Delhi. Shri Mensinkai's analysis of individual karkhanas being converted into co-operative societies for the purpose of utilizing Government funds and assistance holds good in the case of the Hyderabad societies also. Besides the co-operative societies there are 5 Bidri Centers functioning in the private sector.¹⁹ These are 1. The Bharat Bidri Works Centre, 2. Anees Bidri Works Centre, 3. Basheer Bidri Works Centre 4. Famous Bidri Works Centre and 5. Yakhoob Brothers Bidri Works Centre.

3. WORKING CONDITIONS OF THE ARTISANS

The Household Survey of the craftsmen reveals that most of them are not having proper housing facilities. Many of them are living in rented rooms in which bathing, water, electricity, and other conveniences are not available. Their economic condition also seems to be very poor, particularly when the earnings are not able to provide for bare necessities. Until such time as "Psychological Preparedness" is obtained for sound co-operative institutions, ways and means may have to be devised for providing easy financial assistance to private parties. In most cases it is found that it is the supplier of raw materials or other middleman's who provides such funds, since they have a stake in the business. Once again it has to be noted that the funds supplied by this agency were available at a high cost as shown by the rates of interest which stood at 24 percent while the Government charged only 3 ¼ percent, but provided just 20 percent of the total advance and that too mainly to the producers co-operatives. Thus it is clear that both from the points of view of loans and advances, the smaller establishments of the household type were able to secure insufficient accommodation and that too at a high cost.²⁰

More than 50 percent of the long term financial accommodation was provided by Government and over 41 percent of the loans were supplied by traders or money lenders and a small percentage of funds were supplied partly by friends and relatives and partly by the establishments themselves by way of share capital in the case of co-operative producers societies and by borrowings in the case of others. Thus, the traders or money lenders continue to remain, by far, the most important source of finance next only to Government. However, it is clear that there is a significant difference in the rates of interest charged by the two agencies. The former agency charged 24% while the latter charged only 3 ¼ percent per annum. It is to be noted that neither co-operative banks nor the scheduled banks and insurance companies supplied funds even to the bigger so-called producer's co-operative societies. What is noteworthy is that more than 41 percent of the total loans supplied were available at a high cost and this is the major or the only source of finance insofar as the smaller household type of establishments are concerned, since the funds from Government source are available only to the producers co-operatives. Thus from the point of view of the ability to raise long term funds, the small establishments were found to be at a great disadvantage.²¹

It is thus clear that the smaller establishments who need finance most are also at the greatest disadvantage, in terms of getting financial assistance at reasonable terms. It will be well worth the while for Government, the state Bank of India, the Reserve Bank and other commercial and co-operative Banks or Central and State Financing Agencies to consider practical ways and mean by which easy financial assistance may be made available for smaller establishments. Since the co-

operatives are not yet psychologically prepared to function in the best co-operative traditions and consider the Government as being responsible to market their produce, it may be worthwhile to explore avenues by which facilities made available to co-operatives are also made available to small enterprises of a private nature. It is under these conditions, when identical facilities are available to both co-operative and non-co-operative centers, will the geniuses of forming co-operatives be gauged in the overall context of the evolution of the co-operative movement, in our country. It will be pointless to enforce co-operation on people who may at best look upon the arrangements as one of convenience and not with any regard to the philosophy or principles involved therein.²² Bidri art has gained the Geographical Indication tag to certify that this product cannot be made anywhere else except Bidar. This is because artisans use blackened mud from the caves inside the Bidar fort to prepare the base material. This mud has not been exposed to sunlight for centuries and has some special chemical qualities. Bidriware cannot be made without this mud.²³ Bidar has three national award winning Bidri artisans — Mohammad Rauf, Rashid Khadri and Mohammad Moijuddin. Shah Majeed Khadri is a merit award winner.²⁴ They have formed Black Gold, a federation of Self Help Groups of Bidri artisans. They keep travelling around the country exhibiting and selling their ware. Artisans prepare moulds of zinc and copper and etch beautiful designs on the surface. Silver wires or plates are hemmed in to the designs and the item is immersed in a chemical solution. This gives the body a distinct black colour to the mould.

4. CONCLUSION

The annual production capacity now is estimated to around 100 lakhs with a artisan strength of 250 artisans .While the marketing of these products are done through the network of Government Emphoria are also providing a good market support. The estimated export of this craft is to the tune of around 50 lakhs per annum through various agencies, the rest is going in the domestic market. In view of the innovation of the new products and designs, there is a increasing trend in their production due to its capability of being exported and also in internal markets.²⁵

Evolution of Handicrafts in different parts of the country is conditioned by local factors such as availability of cheap and abundant raw material, existence facilities and proximity to makers. Bulk of the crafts continues to exist and thrive in rural parts, notwithstanding the recent trend towards migration to town and cities. There is general anxiety to arrest this trend and to preserve traditional locations of the industry both in order to strengthen the rural economy and also to provide supplementary employment to the village population. Every possible incentive is sought to be provided in order to make the avocations in villages as meaningful as possible so that the artisans are offered continuity of employment with attractive remuneration and can at the same time avail the benefits of a lower cost of living offered by the village economy.²⁶

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