

An Auspicious Thing Befitted As Trading Object: An Empirical Study on the Transformation of Wooden Owl

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ABSTRACT: -Wooden owl is renowned as one of the traditional art forms in a gallery of woodendolls in India. The simple mummy shaped wooden owl is very colourful and it has a long history of traditional and cultural usage. As a product of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), wooden owl manifests production skills, traditional knowledge, cultural values and customs which are transmitted from one generation to the other. This paper is an attempt to understand the transformation in the art work of wooden owl over time and the effects of commercialization on the craft of ICH. This is an explorative qualitative research work involving in-depth interviews of forty three individuals of Sutradhar group, in the village named as Natungram of Bardhaman district, West Bengal. The empirical data have been analysed through narrative analysis to obtain the core impact of wooden owl as well as wooden doll based on socio-economic conditions, religious and cultural usage of these among the artisan groups. In Hinduism, owl is symbolised as a “vahan” (riding animal or mount) of goddess Lakshmi (goddess of wealth and prosperity). There has been lot of transformation in the rituals, customs and social usages and practices involving wooden owl among Bengali Hindu communities. There have been remarkable shift from religious to commercial ones through the passage of almost two centuries. During the intervening years slowly and slowly the size and representation of the craft has changed. Mythological stories and tales involving wooden owl have yielded place to a craft of domestic luxury and amusement. Wooden owl stands as a witness of cultural and religious transformation.

KEYWORDS: -wooden owl, transformation, ritual, ICH.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Doll has its own history across the globe. The first archaeological evidence of doll has been found in Egypt. This was known as “paddle doll”. It was found in Egyptian tombs dating between 2080 – 1990 B.C. The doll was prepared by wooden parts (Fraser, 1973). In ancient periods, dolls were prepared from available material objects like clay, stone, wood, bone, ivory, wax, leather etc. This practice has been carried forward to recent times (Fraser, 1973). In any cultural matrix, doll is considered as an element of amusement (decorative purpose); an agent of the enculturation process (toy) and occasionally used as a trading entity. Wooden doll is one of the well-known traditional art forms in West Bengal and many other parts of India. In India numerous kinds of dolls with different raw materials, forms and motives have been found over time. Different regions of West Bengal are famous for wooden dolls which include Howrah, Krishnanagar, Purulia, Bardhaman, Birbhum and Kalighat. Apart from West Bengal, Kondapalli of Andhra Pradesh is also famous for wooden dolls in India (Majumder, 2016). Wooden doll and a mummy shaped wooden owl are regarded as cultural inventions of high expertise by the Bengali Hindu communities. Wooden owl has been a part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in West Bengal and India. In terms of UNESCO’s declaration, ICH can be any cultural product with unique cultural significance and which is carried forward with its own traditional knowledge through several generations. Wooden owl exhibits excellent work of craftsmanship with a particular oral tradition (UNESCO, 2018). In terms of Intangible Cultural Heritage wooden owl is listed under the heading of wooden doll. However, wooden owl has, in itself, created its own cultural as well as religious impact among the Bengali Hindus.

It is hard to trace the history of wooden owl, but various Hindu mythological documents have pronounced the significance of owl in human life. Owl is denoted as a riding animal or mount, locally called “vahan”, of goddess Lakshmi and goddess Chamunda (Ahmed, 2010). The popular Bengali word “vahan” originated from the Sanskrit word “vahanum”. The etymological meaning of “vahanum” is “vehicle of consciousness” (Collins, 2014). Owl is a most trembling, carnivorous, nocturnal bird. They sleep during the day and take food once only in day time (Ahmed, 2010). Several species of owl can be identified throughout the

globe. In India, thirty two species of owl are widely distributed from the Himalayan range to Andaman and Nicobar islands. These are Spotted owl, Barn owl, Rock eagle owl, Jungle owl, Collared scops-owl, Brown fish owl, Dusky eagle owl, Mottled wood owl, Asian barred owl, Collared owl, Brown wood owl, Oriental scops owl, Eastern grass owl, Oriental bay owl, Andaman scops owl, Mountain scops owl, Pillid scops owl, Nicobar scops owl, Eurasian eagle owl, Buffy fish owl, Tawny owl, Hume's owl, Little owl, Forest owl, Boreal owl, Brown Hawk owl, Andaman Hawk owl, Long eared owl, Short eared owl etc. (Gill and Marshal, 2018; Ahmed, 2010). In the central and north-eastern parts of India, barn owl (*Tyto alba*) is denoted as the mount of goddess Lakshmi (Ahmed, 2010). In ancient Greece, the bird's motifs have been used in various religious texts. The Iliad and the Odyssey witnessed the presence of their mysterious "owl-eyed goddess" (Haarmann, 1995; Swaminathan, 2018; Lewis, 2006). Sometimes, the name of the Greek goddess Athena is pronounced along with her owl in the pages of Greek history. Europeans believed that owl, as a "bird of Athena", is the symbol of learning and wisdom (Lewis, 2006).

From the earlier days, the motifs of owl have been used on Aegean seals at the Bronze Age (Haarmann, 1995). In Hinduism, owl is the symbol of prosperity (Nirmalananda, 2017). It is the symbol of continence and patience. A large section of the people believe that a man needs to control one's greed to obtain money in the same way as owls avoid allurement to take food more than once in a day. In Holy Geeta, Lord Krishna addressed an owl as follows

“यानिशासर्वभूतानां तस्यां जागर्ति संयमी
यस्यां जाग्रति भूतानि सानिशापश्यते मुनेः।

Owl is considered as "ulka" in Rig-Veda. It is believed by many that when an owl cries, it brings ill fortune (Swaminathan, 2018; Tortora, 2013). The goddess Lakshmi is nicknamed as "Ulkavahini" (Tortora, 2013).

The history of wooden owl is closely connected with "patachitra" which is one of the ancient forms of cloth painting. There is mention of "Patachitra" in various Hindu scriptures like 'Purana', 'Manasha Mangal', 'Chandi Mangal' and many other Hindu mythological epics like, The Ramayana and The Mahabharata (Bajpai, 2014).

This form of painting on cloth started from around 10th to 11th century AD in Bengal. Such kinds of Pat painting were also made on flat earthen vessels. In Bengali Hindu community this form of painting was pronounced as "Sara Thakur", which means an image of a deity painted on a flat earthen pot. After the introduction of idolatry forms of Hindu deity, prevalence of "sara Thakur" has diminished (Sen Gupta, 2017). In Hindu households where "sara Thakur" finds place in a worship room even today, the wooden owl occupy the left side of the goddess. (Ghosh, 2013)

The present study has been conducted among the artisan group in a locality inhabited by carpenters, locality called "mistri para" of Natungram village, Bardhaman district, West Bengal. They engage themselves in the creation of different kinds of wooden products. In India, *Sutradhars* are recognized as OBC – B (Other Backward Class, Category – B). The villagers here hold mainly two surnames, 'Bhaskar' and 'Sutradhar' (Thade, 2018). At present there are sixty households at "mistri para" in the village of "Natungram". Out of them forty families are engaged in making wooden dolls. The educational status of the craftsmen primarily vary from fourth standard to Higher Secondary. None is a graduate. Generally they produce different kinds of wooden figurines like owl ('pencha'), king and queen ('raja-rani putul'), Lord Krishna ('keshto thakur') and the saintly duo of Hindu religion 'gour-nitai' etc. (Majumder, 2016).

I.I. Objectives

The objective of the study is to focus on the transformation of manufacturing procedure of wooden owls and the effects of commercialization on the degree of changes in their cultural usage and social acceptance.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is reconnoitring qualitative research work involving in-depth interviews of forty three (twenty two males and twenty one females) individuals on the basis of purposive sampling. The research work has been carried out among the wooden doll makers of the locality mostly inhabited by carpenters ("mistri para") of the village named as "Natungram", under the Katwa subdivision of Bardhaman district of West Bengal (Pal, 2016). Natungram village consists of four separate localities or neighbourhoods which are inhabited by a little above two hundred thirty families.

The doll producers are all settled in the locality of carpenters, locally called "mistri para", with sixty two families. Primary data were collected from the art producers of Natungram village. These empirical data have been used and analysed through literal understanding and narrative analysis to get the underlying impact of wooden dolls among the artisan group.

III. RESULTS

Wooden owl is considered as an entity of intangible cultural heritage of the Hindus. Invarious rituals of Bengali, Hindus like the traditional recitation of verses in appreciation of divinity, locally called “*brato-katha*”, in which there are many references of wooden owl (Majumdar, 1927). However, in recent times wooden owl has become only a cultural object for art and internal decoration (Majumdar, 1927). One of the wooden owl producers commented that the history of mummy shaped wooden dolls dates back about two hundred years. There has been transformation in its cultural usage leading to changes in the design of the product. The study focuses on the changing panorama of product designs based on religious myths and the cultural demands of the modern society.

III.I. Manufacturing procedure:

Traditionally, wood of *Shimul* (silk-cotton plant) and Gambheri (an indigenous decorative tree) are used to make the dolls. These trees are abundantly available surrounding the village. But nowadays, depending on market demand, wood from Mango trees, *Neem* trees (margosa), Guava trees, *Kishnachura* (a kind of red flowering tree), are selected for getting wood. Some huge amount of wood is also brought from outside the village.

In order to make a wooden owl, a craftsman need to select a cylindrical form of hard branch of a tree and to lop it off according to the size of an owl. At the initial stage the bark is kept in the open under the sun. The segmented piece of wood is then drawn over charcoal dust to polish the uneven surface of the cut off parts. The shape of an owl is carved out using saw, chisel and hammer (pic - 2).

After the surface is smoothened out, women workers wash the products with lime water, and leave it for two to three days to dry up. Traditionally, the villagers used glue prepared from tamarind seeds to apply colours on the figurines. However, no glue is used these days. Nowadays, after three days of washing with lime water, white acrylic colour is applied as a primer and the figurines get finishing touches on eyes, beaks and wings with the help of pencil. Traditionally, the craftsmen handle the figurines during the process of their preparation in a manner as if they are working with sacred objects. White wooden owls have yellow coloured eyes, red beak and orange legs with a black border and the art producers use red and green colours in case of wings to make it vibrant. The villagers believe that owl is a holy bird and it is used by Goddess Lakshmi as her personal vehicle for movement. Due to this reason male members prepare the entire products, but the finishing touches are given by women (pic - 3). In Hinduism this perception is in synchronism with the traditional concept of a “*griha-laxmi*”, which means a housewife whose impeccable and judicious dealings bring peace and prosperity to the family (Singh, 2012). The effects of commercialization have influenced sizes, shapes and other designs of the wooden doll. According to the statement of one of the producers, “our grandparents prepared only wooden owls and king-queen figurines, cost of which varied between two to five rupees and their sizes varied between ten inch to one foot. But nowadays, the costs of raw materials have increased considerably. With such escalation of costs large sized dolls could hardly be sold”. This has forced the workmen to reduce the dimensions of almost all wooden products.” (pic-1)

At present, most of the art producers are engaged in the making of different kinds of wooden furniture like chair, table, almirah etc. Apart from all these items they also make various showpieces used for decorative purposes, different wooden statues and numerous attractive wooden ornaments such as bangles, ear rings, pendants and hair pins. According to one of the art producers, “we don’t have any fixed monthly income in a month. It is hard for us to maintain our family. For almost eight months in a year we have to work, under the owner of a furniture store to earn our livelihood”.

III.II. Cultural usage:

The wooden owl is considered as a holy object by the Hindus. Lakshmi is the goddess of prosperity and wealth. Devotees worship Lakshmi for alleviation from poverty and starvation. White owl occupies a very prominent place in the worship of Lakshmi and it is placed at the left side of the goddess. As a riding bird owl is also looked upon as a graceful symbol of prosperity. Generally, married women perform various rituals related to “*laxmi pujo*” as they are the mistresses of their houses.

But nowadays, due to busy and complicated life schedules of people, wooden owl, separately, is scarcely used during Lakshmi-pooja. As a craft, colourful wooden owl attracts people’s vision for decorative purposes beyond any cultural or religious value. Westernization and complex and individualistic life patterns have made deep inroads into the religious faiths of a man. As a result, craftsmen of wooden owl have been compelled to change their designs in such a way that the items are acceptable by the buyers and become marketable. As craftworks of the highest class the products now have got worldwide acceptance. Notwithstanding its loss of objectivity in the cultural and religious perspectives, their global market has widened (Smentek, 2015).

Subsequent to the changes in design, the colour of wooden owl has also changed. Whereas, only white owl had religious impact previously, preferred colours are now red, green, blue, yellow and in some cases black. One of the craftsmen stated that, “generally small sized (3 inch) yellow and green owls have great acceptance rather than blue and red. These owls are marketed in pairs against fifty rupees. Black owls are traded as per demand at the same price.” Bengali Hindus believe that both goddess Lakshmi and goddess Chamunda have owls as their “vahan” (mount). However, goddess Lakshmi uses Barn owl, locally named as “*lakshmi pencha*”, as her mount and goddess Chamunda uses Jungle owl, locally named as “*kaal pencha*”, as her mount. Hindus of West Bengal believe that, “*kaal pencha*” brings death and ill fortune whereas “*Lakshmi pencha*” brings prosperity in a household (Swaminathan, 2018; Ahmed, 2010). (pic- 4)

During village festivals and fairs, they earn a good amount of money by selling their traditional wooden objects in addition to wooden ornaments, statues, showpieces like cow carts, bows and arrows etc. Avillager stated “the actual owl figurines don’t have enough demand as people want different objects like ornaments and it’s easy to sell at high rates. Their prices are higher than the wooden owl figurines.”

IV. DISCUSSION

A rich collection of traditional wooden dolls of Bengal have been well-preserved in the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art, University of Calcutta and Gurusaday Museum in South Kolkata. From the enormous collections of Gurusaday Dutta, the history of wooden dolls could be approximated to sometime around eighteenth century (Sen Gupta, 2017). However, the definite cultural age of wooden dolls or wooden owls is still not very certain. In India, in the making of owls, Dokra and Terracotta designs have also been found.

Historically, owls, particularly white owls, have always been revered as a holy bird. In Europe, many educational Institutions use the image of an owl as a part of the Institution’s logo (Swaminathan, 2018; Lewis, 2006).

The products of Intangible Cultural Heritage reveal how changes in socio-economic conditions have brought consequential changes in the mind set of art producers. In that view of the matter it appears that cultural materials in a particular age help in the establishment of relationship with other people of varying cultures across the globe (Gamble, 2003). The designs of art objects and their uses operate as cultural parameters which undergo transformation in synchronism with the changes in cultural environment over time. Old values and ideas yield places to contemporary values and demands (Tilley, 1996).

The traditional knowledge of a particular art form has been transmitted from one generation to other. Although, with the passage of time, oral traditions and folklores revolving around the uses of wooden owls have also faded away, these cultural products have always acted like a cultural bridge between the past and the present.

V. CONCLUSION

A simple mummy shaped colourful wooden owl is the symbol of highly skilled, sophisticated traditional craft of Bengali Hindu communities. Still now, in some areas it is an essential part of social practices, rituals, and customs. Socio-economic and religious transformations have brought in its wake huge modifications in art forms, usages and conceptions. To-day, Bengali Hindus may not universally accept wooden owl as a symbol of prosperity, but then it is definitely accepted as a colourful art object for amusement and internal decoration. In course of time, the oral histories are disappear, wooden owl become inexpressible. Individuals get sufficient happiness as to purchase a wooden doll.

VI. GALLERY



Picture -1
A doll maker has giving the shape of owl with
A seventy years aged wooden owl with
4 feet height at Natungram.



Picture – 2
wood carving.



Picture - 3 :After lime wash a “griha-laxmi” paint the wooden owl.



Picture – 4
 “Lakshmi pencha” at the left side and Wooden owl used as an ornaments.
 “Kaal pencha” at right side.

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