
SANKHA SHILPA (CONCH SHELL INDUSTRY) IN AN URBAN AREA OF WEST BENGAL: An Ethnographic Study

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Preamble:

Shell craft in India does not have major history behind it, for that it was developed by a team of pioneers and designers constantly in the action of trailing something new and exclusive. The craft involves the making of colorful and fascinating decorative objects by using sea shells.

Shank comes from the two Sanskrit words "**Shum**" which means something good and "**Kham**" meaning water. Hence the meaning of **Shankam** is conch holding the sacred water. It is also said that the word Shankara was been derived from Sankha-kara which means conch-blower (shankha means conch and Kara means blower). Conch is common name for certain marine gastropod mollusks. Conch shell is used as an ornament, in making cameos, or as a horn, as a trumpet. The conch shell has survived as the original horn trumpet since time immemorial.

Ethnography, involves working within a community, learning their culture, and letting the subjects of research. Present their own point of view in their own words. Present study focuses on the socio-cultural aspects of *Sankha Shilpa* (Conch shell) practicing community in the Sankho Banik Colony of West Bengal, India. However, conch shell, the shells of sea snails, generally purchased from Chennai, India, from the beach of Tuticorin. Then empty and dry shells are sent to Kolkata and the conch carvers buy them in bulk as raw material.

Literature Survey: A Brief Outline

A thorough review and survey of related literature forms an important part of research. It deals with the critical examination of various published and unpublished works related to the present study. Knowledge of related research enables the researcher to define the frontiers of his fields; it helps in comparing the efficiency of various procedures and instruments used. Further review of

literature avoids unintentional replication of previous studies and also places the researcher in a better position to interpret the significance of his own results.

There is paucity of studies on the economics of conch shell industry. We mention below some relevant studies. Abraham (1964) highlighted the aesthetic and cultural importance of handicrafts. Man's association with art and craft dates back to the period when human civilization first started. He created stone weapons for safeguarding himself against furious animals in forests. Banerjee (2012) attempts to explore the problems and prospects of conch shell industry in recent times in Bishnupur of Bankura District in West Bengal. She concludes that although this traditional 'conch industry' is facing a lot of problems; still its popularity is worth noticing. According to Basu (1953) the nature of an industry has a great deal to do with the relative proportion between block and working capital required. The more round-about and complex the processes production grow, the greater must be the proportion of fixed to working capital. Biswas (2003) analyses the pattern and basis of rural industrialization in West Bengal. He discussed about technological change and the forms of production organization in conch shell product industry. Dutta (2011) noted that Conch shell craft is neither unique, nor a new practice in India for creating marvels in decorative yet artistic pieces of utility items. Haque (1984) pointed out about designs of Sankha products like chain of fish, dove or series of conch shells boldly carved on the surface of the bracelets. Heppell (2001) discussed about the chank shell industry in modern India. Hornel (1982) pointed out that there is existence of the important Chank cutting industry in the ancient Pandyan Kingdom in the early centuries of the Christian era. Hornel (1914) wrote about the chank in Hindu life, on Indian fisheries, and marine zoology and on various aspects of folklore and ethnology. Hunter (1875) discussed about

production procedure of finished product Sankha from conch shell. The objective of the paper by Marjit and Maiti (2004) is to understand the transforming relationship between the formal and informal sector in a liberalizing open developing economy. They conclude with a discussion of a field based survey on the changing relationship between formal and informal Entrepreneurs in a range of rural industry in India, as these industries gear up for expanded markets and export. Mandal (1997), assess the problems and prospects of folk craft tradition in West Bengal and existing level of socio-economic condition of Shankhari community. Religion cultural aspects and environmental effects of this craft is also the important area of interest. Mudur (2005) suggests that a collection of some 3,000 shells, strewn across a south eastern tip of Dwarka Island, hosted a big shell industry during the late Harappa period. Phadke (2011) mentioned that there are about 3,00,000 conchshell artists and traders in West Bengal and Orissa. Indian Sacred Conch of the species *Turbinellapyrum* (Sinistral) is a rare Pooja item used for different rituals in the Hindu Religion.

Aims and Objectives in the Present Study

Conch shell industry in the present study primarily stands on the dissemination of culture. Therefore, one important objective is to see how this cultural element is being projected to the Global perspective would be studied. To document ethno-history, the local people, their important cultural activities, collection of their views on the economy, market maximization, employment and profit from it Contribution of different agents and groups associated with the total Market –Economy.

Generally a study on industries of this nature requires analysis on production, cost structure and the factors determining output. Hence the first objective is directed towards analyzing production and cost structure of shell craft industry. Economic significance of an industry also lies on the industry's potential in employment generation and its nature. The level of living of workers depends upon their earnings. Accordingly, the second objective is directed towards the analysis on employment pattern and wages. The survival of an industry depends upon the profit earned, which in turn, depends upon marketing of its products. Hence an objective is included to study marketing channels and profit earned.

The present study specifically bears following aims and objectives:-

- ❖ The primary aim of the study is to make an ethnography on the impact of conch shell craft in local area and its adjoining areas.
- ❖ Structural and functional analysis of the Conch Shell industry under study
- ❖ To investigate the Techno-Economic profile of the same.
- ❖ To analyze the effects of Conch shell industry in the rural-urban contexts as studied.
- ❖ To observe and interpret on the socio-cultural milieu of the industry.

Sankho Silpoof Lal Kuthi colony : the production of Sankha Shilpo

Raw materials:

Shell crafts require raw materials like processed and cleaned sea-shells of various varieties, plastic tubes, wires and plates, beads, reed mats, mirrors, card boards and pastes. Out of them, sea-shell is the most important raw material. Big manufacturers procure raw shells from coastal belts like; Turicorin, Rameswaram, Manapadu and Kadalur process them and supply the same to the small manufacturing units. Because of the *increasing* demand for raw-shells, the modus operandi *being* followed by the big *manufacturing* units is to procure lorry-loadsof shells from Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Gujarat, Bombay, *Andaman* and other parts of Tamil Nadu. The main raw material for shell craft industry is shells of land *animals* and water animals. The shells are the calcareous protective coverings of the various land and water animals called Mollusks. After the death of the water animal the shell gets removed and washed ashore by waves. Shells exhibit a wide variety of pattern and coloring that often match the animals that build them.

Processing of Raw

Shells In order to remove the flesh from the shells, first shells are kept burned under clean dry sand for few days. The process is made easier by ants which could use off the flesh for their food. Then the shells are taken out of sand and put into hot water. Washing soda is mixed and shells are washed again and again for a number of times to get them cleaned. Finally shells are put into diluted hydrochloric acid to remove the smell and to give shining. After that shells are used as input in the shell craft industry.

In the production process of shell articles, the most elementary and time consuming work is making holes in the cleaned and polished shells. The tools used by women artisans to make holes are a needle and a piece of stone base. Of course these are the very simple and only tools used in shell crafts. First of all, women shell craft workers insert the needle into the shell in which the hole is to be made and dash it gently against the stone base. Now the hole is made. This part of the work is mostly done by beginners, most probably female child laborers.

In this process stage of raw shells may occur due to wreckage. But these waste shells are not without use. They may be sold to lime-makers, who in turn will use it for lime-making. The next step is to arrange the shells in a proper form by inserting nylon wires into the holes. To give aesthetic value, white plastic tubes and beads are also used at regular intervals in between shells. In this process, door curtains of varying size, lamp shades, pot hangers and vases are being made. As a matter of product diversification, in recent times, certain craft units produce looking mirrors with artistic shell design and shell design rounds. Shells are not varnished or polished. If they look dull wiping them with fine oil could restore the original color. If Shell exposed to direct sunlight the color fades. Processed shells are stored in light proof cabinets.

Bangle is one of the main products which is made from Conch Shell.

There are ten stages or steps through which a conch shell becomes a beautiful bangle.

- i. Bhangra: the front part of the conch shell is not used in bangles. So it is separated from the shell.
- ii. Phura: A hole is made to the inner part.
- iii. Genra: The body of snail is removed from the shell
- iv. Level ling: The knob inside the shell is leveled by machine.
- v. Majar: Cutting of shell. Previously it was done with the help of a saw but now it is done by machine.
- vi. Grinding: The upper layer of the shell is polished.
- viii. Piece cutting: It depends on the size of the conch shell. From one piece of shell 3 to 5 bangles can be made.
- viv. Designing: There is no catalog for designing. The artisans make designs by their own skill. The design may be further modified in jewelry shop.
- ix. Polish: It is a tough work. Bangles and conch shell are polished by heating and application of Nitric Acid.
- x. Finishing: This is the last stage of making bangles. The defects of bangles and conch shell are repaired by wax, coal, wood, lac and zinc oxide. Now it is ready for Marketing.

Implements and Raw Materials used

The tools for cutting, polishing and designing sankha are as follows :-

- Haturi (Hammer):- The Sakhari use two types of iron hammers with iron handle . One of the haturi has pointed head and the other with blunt head. As per the necessity this variety of hammer is used. The haturi is also known as Kura. It is used to break the pointed apex portion to bring out the gnara or collu mella the fleshy portion of the sankha or the conch shell.
- Reck kata machine – It is used to cut the main conch shell into 3 – 4 pieces.
- San machine or motor or grinding machine - Locally called the san machine or (grinding machine) .It works in Electricity. It is used to cut sankha bangle into pieces.

- Ugra or Fire – It is used for designing

The process of preparation

- **Bindh and Cleaning :-**

At first the sankha is cleaned, but before cleaning the pointed apex portion is broken by control hammering. Then the conch shell is dipped into water at least for a few days. The conch shell becomes a little soft and the gnara or the fleshy portion the collumela is taken out of the conch shell. The cutting is done by males and dipping into water by any of the family members. If they want whiteness, diluted Nitric Acid or Muriatic Acid is added in the water.

- **Drying and Selection of sankha :-**

After taking out the sankha from water, it is dried in hot Sun. Now they select the sankha for the preparation of bangles.

- **Malui Daga :-**

Now the sankha is broken into two pieces by the help of machine. The portion, which is used to cut sankha bangles, is known as Malui. It is the portion of sankha from the apex to the rounded middle portion. The other portion is the geri pata. It is the portion after Malui to the end of tail portion. Malui Daga (cutting of Malui) is completely the work of the males. A man can cut 200 sankha daily. The wage for cutting sankha is Rs.15-25 for cutting of 100 sankha. The varies on the size of the sankha. Previously Malui Daga was done by traditional Kush Karat.

- **Rekh kata (Cutting or slicing of Malui into Bangles):-**

The conch shell surface is very hard, it is difficult to work on it or cut it. Today the slicing is done largely by electric disc saws that have diamond teeth. The traditional method of cutting is very laborious. It is done with a special type of semicircular saw with a minute sharp edge called "*Sankher Karat*".

It is done generally by the male members. it is told that in case of broad bangles one can get 2.5 pairs, that is 5 sankha bangles and if it is of thinner variety (medium size) one can get at least 8 sankha bangles from the Malui of conch shell. The wage for a pair of standard bangle (Rekh) cutting is Rs. 2 per piece. The wage for cutting of a pair of bangles of similar size is Rs. 0.70. The larger sized bangles are prepared from the middle portion of the Malui. Gradually it becomes small to smaller size when it is cut nearer to the apex. The Rekhs closer to the apex given bangles of similar size. These are used as offerings in the rituals. One can cut 1000 such pieces daily. A pair of such bangles costs Rs. 1.5 in the market. The lip portion and portion very close to lip of the Malui is used to prepared rings. The portion from which the ring is prepared is known as Kanthi Chhali. It is generally the women's work. As the machine cuts Rekhs it is also known as Rekh Machine.

- **Preparation of Pani Sanha :-**

The naval portion of the sankha is called as Geri. After cutting and separating the portion from the sankha, it becomes Pani Sankha. During Narayan puja water and Tulsi leaves are kept and offered to Narayana.

- **Ghasa (Rubbing):-**

There are at least 3 gnats (nodes) inside the conch shell. After Rekh kata

These are found at the inner portion of the sankha bangles. To cut those and to get the inner portion even and roundish, they rub the inner portion in machine. Previously it was done by danra – a hand implement, which is also known as uga. The outer portion is also rubbed to give it an even look.

Previously it was rubbed in sil (stone slab), now in machine. When it is done in machine it is performed by males and females do it when it is done in uga, sil etc.

- **Naksha Kata (Designing) :-**

Now –a –days, designing, especially of geometrical lines are done in machine. Previously, it was done by hand with the help of uga, file, fine batali etc. Designing is generally done by males. Females do the designing in figure rings

The Economic aspects of Sankha Shilpa

Organization of production and Division of labour:-

Craft making requires specialised and technical skill in every stage of production from selection of raw material to the finishing of products. So, in the total procedure both male and female workers engaged in different types of work. So, division of labor is evident in this craft making industry like all other skilled work. Division of labor is carried according to the age as well as sex of workers. Some operations like polishing and engraving of bangles and other minor works are generally carried by female artisans. On other hand, operations like hammering, sizing, cutting and slicing etc, which requires much physical labor are usually carried by male artisans.

Cost of raw materials includes the cost of various types of intact conch shells. Labour charges constitute an important item of cost of conch shell products. A sizeable number of skilled and unskilled workers have to be employed by each conch shell units in the different process of conch shell manufacture for cutting, grinding, polishing, joining, finishing, designing etc., and have to be paid wages/salaries. Price of cutting machine being high each unit cannot purchase it. This particular machine is generally purchased by limited big units; other small medium units use this machine y rent. The cost of machine charge for cutting the intact conch shell is determined by piece basis. There are own workshops in the industry. As the conch shell units own workshop themselves, they do not have to pay any rent but for purpose of correct estimating the cost of specific conch shell products, a definite amount is assumed to have been paid as rent. Rent of workshop/premises in this study area has been apportioned/distribute on an average of Rs 400 per month. Depreciation is calculated on i) tools, equipment and machinery iii) buildings.

Miscellaneous expenses comprise all indirect costs such as light, water, sanitation, electricity charges, postage, local taxes, mobile bill etc., which are not covered under any of the heads of expenditure enumerated above. There are different types, sizes and quality of sankha. So price of sankha also varies. Number of sankha obtained per an intact conch shell varies according to quality and size. It varies between 2 to 6. In lal kuthi colony most of the *Sankha* is produced from *Lejpata* which is a part of intact conch shell. Side by side the units of Bankura district also prepare Sankha from intact conch shell. The owners of conch shell units of Barrackpur Lal kuthi colony collect this *Lejpata* from those districts. Due to differences in production procedure the cost, profit, value of output structure of Bankura districts units are also different from other sample districts. Conch shell is collected through different level of mediator like sea shore level to village level. The cost of production of *Sankha* varies according to the type, quality of an intact conch shell. Different types of intact conch shells are brought from different places at different rates. They are mixed in different proportions for preparing different types of Sankha. Small conch shell producers usually produce goods in small quantities which is just sufficient to fill a gunny bag of intact conch shell of 50 pieces of low or medium quality. The cost of production in this case is higher than in case of a big gunny bag of intact conch shell of 100 pieces. This is because of the fact that the small gunny bag accommodates proportionately a much less number of articles as compared to a big gunny bag. Moreover, loading, unloading charges do not increase in proportion to the increase in the size of big gunny bag. Therefore in a big unit a large number of big gunny bags of conch shell can be available at a comparatively less cost per unit. If one artisan of a units continue his work 10 hours duty per day, then requirement of intact conch shell is approximately 360 pieces per month. These 360 piece intact conch shell include High quality, Medium Quality, Low Quality intact conch shell. Due to high price of intact conch shell a gunny bag contains obtains 25/30/50/60/100 pieces of different quality intact conch shell. The price rate of mixed quality intact conch shell in a gunny bag varies between Rs150/ Rs 250/ Rs/ Rs 400/ Rs 500/ Rs 700 / Rs 1000. But artisan or owners of conch shell units purchase more gunny bag of *Gouri* species conch shell whose price varies between Rs 250/ Rs 500/ Rs 700. As rates and charges for different cost components differ from centre to centre, though not very materially, average rates and charges, mean value of cost for per pair *sankha* production of sample districts have been taken for calculating cost in the industry.

Socio-Religious Aspects –Some Observations

Shankhari (shell artisan) an occupational group specialized in shell cutting and making ornaments such as bracelets, earrings, rings, etc. They are Hindu by birth and belong to the general category. Marriage pattern is not restricted in this community, they do marriage within and out of this community. But it is highly important to mentioned here as they are self making group by few of the members of this community they are very strict about their work and business, they don't allow any of the outsider of this community to work with them. Although there is a mixed responses from the craft men about their profit from their work but it is said that majority of the people happy with their doing and quite satisfied.

Since the mythological past, the Conch or sankha has remained as integral part of Hindu Socio –Religious ethos. It symbolizes the cosmic space of which the attribute is sabda or sound. Moreover it symbolize the shape or rupa, rhythm and evolves into an elaborate iconography which dates back to its manifestation of divinities in the Vedas. The resounding musical notes of sacred conch rent the air when it is blown during religious ceremonies and thus the devout emotions get expressed. The sacred sankha is found in abundance along the side of Bay of Bengal or Eastern Ghat of Indian peninsula like Puri, Madras, Rameshwaram, and finally at the coast of Sri Lanka where Indian Ocean finds its shore.

Mythologically speaking there are three main types of Sankha. Vamavarta (left side open, it should be counted from the tip), or Uttar mukhi, the second is Dakshinmukhi or Dakshinavarta (one that opens up on right from the tip); and finally the third type is called Ganesh Sankha. The most common amongst them is Vamavarta. Dakshinmukhi and Ganesh fall in the rare category.

According to the puranas Dakshinmukhi Sankha is the weapon or ayudha of Vishnu and thus this sankha often symbolizes as sustainer of the Universe which is the role of Lord Vishnu in the divine trinity of the Hindus.

Shankha has tremendous religious importance among the Bengalis. Conch bangles (Shankha porana) made of conch shell are worn by Bengali Hindu women as ornaments at their weddings as a religious right. During recitation of wedding hymns, the father of the bride gives her a pair of conch bangles. The groom also brings a pair for her. Hindu women wear conch bangles with utmost devotion seeking the well being of their husbands.

Even in Buddhism, the conch shell has been incorporated as one of the eight auspicious symbols, also called **Ashtamangala**. The right-turning white conch shell represents the elegant, deep, melodious, interpenetrating and pervasive sound of the **Buddhadharma**, which awakens disciples from the deep slumber of ignorance and urges them to accomplish their own welfare and the welfare of others.

The people of this community generally belong to the Hindu Religion. They are intense devotee to the god. As they are involves in the machine and technology works they are automatically fond of the god Vishyakarma, as it is known that he is the god of the machinery and skill. At the time of the Vishyakarma puja they even don't touch the sankha or any materials of conch shell. Vishyakarma puja is celebrated for 5 days and the attraction of this puja is as large as the Durga puja. Apart from this they also worships the goddess Manasha during "SAVANA MASH". Besides they also worships goddess Kali and Lord Shiva as well.

Problems faced by Conch Shell industry

In recent times the conch shell industry is suffering from many problems like-. Recently the demands of conch shell items are on rapid decline except in the festive season especially during Durga puja and the season of marriage. As the cost of conch increased after Tsunami. The numbers of conches found at the coast are decreased by changing the global ocean system after Tsunami;

Findings, Interpretations and Concluding remarks:

- Conch shell is a freely available component of Zoological environment and its availability depends on temperature, salinity and depth of the ocean.

- It has socio cultural significance. It has an economic value also. Because of certain social processes (norms, belief, system) it enters into the behavioral environment and fictionalization of conch shell takes place.
- It produces a sound which indicates interface of time, event and make people aware of ominous events.
- It takes place in a specific area away from place of origin.
- Initially conch carving was caste specific but now caste barrier is broken.
- Natural phenomena like Tsunami destroy the species which increases supply of raw material.
- Lack of demand affects the artisans. They become jobless which is hazardous.

Unlike the costing of other industrial products, the economic calculation of conch shell products presents certain peculiar problems which make the ascertainment of accurate, reliable and uniform cost of production of different products in the industry very difficult. Most of the conch shell unit owners in the industry are illiterate and ignorant of maintaining their accounts properly and correctly. As they do not maintain proper records of their expenses on various heads, the ascertainment of correct cost of production remains only a conjecture. The margin of profit in respect of certain important conch shell articles is expressed as a certain percentage on the total cost of production. The margin of profit is subject to the quality of the end product which is greatly determined by quality and species of intact conch. Low or sub-standard quality products are sold at prices ranging between 35 to 50 per cent less of the prices of the high quality or commercial quality products. The paper reveals that there is much potential for this industry in generating livelihood of the rural people.

For the growth and survival of conch shell industry state government has a vital role. Firstly, government should take immediate action for reduction of high increase of price of intact conch shell which is the main barrier for growth of this industry. Government's work will be to play as a mediator in the following way that government's authority should always be getting in touch with Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka government, who collect raw materials from there and distribute raw materials at a reasonable price timely. Government's agency like Manjusha has a great role to show the growth way of rural small household units. Secondly, Marketing was still largely left to private trades. Since there were no focused efforts to service craftsmen in terms of raw materials, credit, marketing, etc., no discernible impact was felt on their earnings and standard of living. Hence Government's have to do to introduce an attractive package, and services offered for implementation of protection, promotional and developmental schemes of conch shell industry in crucial areas such as design production technology and marketing.

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