A Historical Study of Craft and Craftsman in Bihar

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ABSTRACT

This paper analysis the development and role of craft and craftsmen in pre-independence Bihar. Today, Bihar is one of states of India. The textile craft formed the core sector of the non-agricultural economy of Bihar. The present article also defines craft in terms of broadly two overlapping categories. First, craft as a form of economic behaviour and activity which involved the physical and highly specialized process of manufacture and exchange. The series of manufacturing and economic activities involved in a craft moved from the craft producing village and the manufacturing town, to market of various types with intermediary agencies of transport, brokerage, middlemen and money merchants. All these groups gained in varying degrees from the enterprise of preparing a craft. Second, craft as a sociological phenomenon in which various social groups performed differentiated functions. The network of relationships involved in craft were that between the political rulers/patrons and merchants, creditors and brokers, peddlers and the craftsman himself. No village could be complete without the craftsmen and in this sense there was a cohesive entity within the society. The craftsmen were catering not only to the needs of the microcosm, the Bihar village, but to the material needs of the provinces and even different countries with which Bihar had commercial and economic contact. The service of craftsmen were indispensable. The villages, town and cities of Bihar had countless artisans. Some of these had been transformed into entire villages of artisans. They represented a milieu of individuals working both for the domestic and export market. The carpenter made ploughs, and other agricultural implements, built houses and even supplied wood for the cremation of the dead. The Chamar was the tanner of leather, made shoes and saddlery, the cart man’s whip and skinned the carcasses of the village cattle; the Kumhar or the potter made earthen pots and bowls which were used for cooking eating and fetching water; the services of the Kamar or the metal worker, the Lohar, the blacksmith were in daily requisition for manufacturing heavy iron tools and implements in the bhatti (furnace); Nunia was he saltpetre manufacturer and did various kind of earth works, the Sonar worked on gold and silver; the tanti, julha or the weaver wove coarse and fine cloth.

Introduction

The crafts of India are diverse, rich in history and religion. The craft of each state in India reflect the influence of different empires. Throughout centuries, crafts have been embedded as a culture and tradition within rural communities. Historically, craftsmen tended to concentrate in urban centres and formed guilds. The skill required by their professions and the need to permanently involve in the exchange of goods also demanded a generally higher level of education, and craftsmen were usually in a more privileged than the peasantry in social hierarchy. The households of craftsmen were not as self-sufficient as those of people engaged in agricultural work and therefore had to rely on the exchange of goods. Bihar is one of the historical and glorious states of India. This state has attained international preconisation through arts and crafts since several centuries.

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Bihar is recognised by its beautiful Madhubani painting, patna school painting or patna qalaam, silk textile work, dyeing work and extra ordinary delicacy of quilting. This paper analyses the development and role of craft and craftsmen in pre-independence Bihar. The textile craft formed the core sector of the non-agricultural economy of Bihar. The present article also defines craft in terms of broadly two overlapping categories. First, craft as a form of economic behaviour and activity which involved the physical and highly specialized process of manufacture and exchange. The series of manufacturing and economic activities involved in a craft moved from the craft producing village and the manufacturing town, to market of various types with intermediary agencies of transport, brokerage, middlemen and money merchants. All these groups gained in varying degrees from the enterprise of preparing a craft. Second, craft as a sociological phenomenon in which various social groups performed differentiated functions. The network of relationships of craft were between the political rulers/patrons and merchants, creditors and brokers, peddlers and the craftsman himself.

There were fundamental variations between the craftsmen according to the craft and within each craft according to their products. Various craft groups could have a common occupational identity in terms of craft. However their social and kinship relationship were necessarily not tied together. Crafts could be operated kinship relationships were necessarily not tied together. Crafts could be a servant of the village community, standing outside the sphere of the commodity production, an independent commodity producer, a credit bound producer and on a very limited scale, a wage labourer in the Karkhanas. Each craft community also had its distinct socio-cultural norms. They had a rather, coherent and articulate world view even though the content of this worldview appears dismaying.

In the world, the work seeks to locate the vision of house; we believe we have no vision at all. A craft is a pastime or a profession that requires particular skills and knowledge of skilled work. In a historical sense, particularly as pertinent to the Middle ages and earlier, the term is usually applied to people occupied in small scale production of goods, or their maintenance, for example, by thinkers. The traditional terms craftsman and craftswomen are now a days often replaced artisan and rarely by craftsperson. Handicraft is the traditional main sector of the crafts, it is a type of work where useful and decorative devices are made completely by hand or by using only simple tools. Usually the term is applied to traditional means of goods. The individual artisanship of the items is a paramount criterion; such items often have cultural and religious significance. Items made by mass production or machines are not handicraft goods. Handicraft goods are made with craft production process.

**History of Indian Crafts**

The history of Indian crafts comes from one of the established civilizations of the globe. Going back to almost 5000 years from present, the first references of Indian handicrafts can be found from the Indus Valley Civilization (3000 BC-1700 BC). The craft tradition in India has whirled around religious values, confirmed needs of the commoners, as well as the special needs of the clientele and royalty, along with an eye for overseas and home trade. Prehistorically Indian handicrafts were basically made for day after day use, the yearning for aesthetic application soon saw development of flooding designs and motifs. The incalculable artistic and ethnic assortment has enabled a fusion of motifs, techniques and crafts to increase on this land.

The beauty of Indian textiles spread far and wide even during the ancient trade. The bandhanis and appliqué works stood apart from the herd. Kashida, kantha and kasuti were very popular for their fine quality and excellent embroidery done on them. The historic literature reveals some interesting facts that Indian crafts were an integral part of religious rituals and ceremonies. The need to propagate Buddhist religion played an important part in the style the stone sculptures were sculpted. It also renewed the enthusiasm in stone sculptures.
These craft ethnunity have withstood the ravages of time and frequent foreign invasions and continue to flourish till date. Create the ethnic Indian aura through the countless home products artistically crafted in different materials.

**Development of Crafts in Bihar**

The study of Crafts and Craftsmen in Bihar has been contextualized in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This was a significant period in providing an impetus to the economy of Bihar. Bihar had always been an important region and link in commodity structure of Indian trade and commercial contact with both Europe and Asia as well as other parts of India. However, the European demand in the 17th and 18th centuries for Bihar cotton textiles, silk, piece goods, raw silk, indigo, saltpetre was a new phenomenon in the regions export trade. Trade was very profitable and we find the Patna factory of the East India Company being withdrawn and reopened more than once inspire of the political upheavals. The activities of the Company had a great share in simulating the industrial and commercial potentiality of Bihar. It might possibly be assumed that the production of the export commodities has definitely and substantially increased during this period. The two centuries saw the growth of vigorous commercial economy in Bihar, with crafts and craftsmen being an intrinsic and integral part of it and not just an extraneous appendage to it.

**Craft and Cultural Linkage**

Culture is an integrated whole and any craft in its form and usage, partakes of the values and symbolism inherent in the culture pattern. Culture gives certain coherence as well as continuity to the system of craft production. Culture as a cognitive system, and organised set of norms and values, governs or shapes the mode of economic actions in various ways. The social world of the craftsmen in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Bihar was a complex one. The craftsmen were organised into a number of distinct hereditary castes (jati). The caste was the first level of community organisation. Each caste usually the functional designing had led to their being called by a common name, but had welded them into a uniform group.

Each caste group of the craftsmen was marked by endogamous divisions and exogamous subdivisions. These subgroups were formed and organised on the basis of territorial origin, or the place of ancestral origin or even specialization in a particular production technique. The craftsmen sought to give a ritual sanction to their status in the caste hierarchy. The social life of the craftsmen was governed and regulated by their cast panchyats. The craftsmen were no longer organised into guilds functioning as corporate bodies. An important component in the social world of the craftsmen was the worship of gods, annual festivals, religious ceremonies, daily ritual observances and customs.

**Crafts and Craftsmen in Bihar**

The occupational pattern of Bihar, in 1891 census showed that the people engaged in production and supply of material substances i.e., silk, cotton. Fur lac tic. Represented 11.8 percent of the total population and that is pasture and agriculture was 61.24 percent. In the complex interrelationships between groups involved in the craft manufacture, this work accords the central position to the craftsman himself. There can be no doubt that the craftsman enjoyed great economic importance in every period of antiquity. By the skilled use of their tools the craftsman changed mater from its raw and virgin state into objects with a well-defined shape, function and beauty. They provided not only the essentials—lasting shelter, durable clothing, shoes that wore well, effective weapons and tools, but all the trappings of the community’s cultural life. A lack of craftsmanship, the absence from the community of the men capable of working according to the highest standards, meant not merely an incidental lack of beautiful objects and luxuries but an overall cultural poverty, and a depression in the quality of life. The services of the craftsman were indispensable. The villages, town and cities of Bihar had countless artisans, some of these had been transformed into entire villages of artisans. They
represented a milieu of individuals working both for the domestic and export market.

The barhai or carpenter made ploughs, and other agricultural implements, built houses and even supplied wood for the cremation of the dead; the chamar was the tanner of leather; made shoes and saddlery, the cartman’s whip and skinned the craft cases of the villages cattle; the kumhar or the potter made earthen pots and bowls which were used for cooking eating and fetching water; the services of the kamar or the metal worker, the lohar or the blacksmith were in daily requisition for manufacturing heavy iron tools and implements in the bhatti. Nunia was the saltpetre manufacturer and did varied kinds of earth works, the sonar worked in gold and silver making; the tanti, Julaha or the weaver wove coarse and fine cloth.

The craftsmen were catering not only to the needs of the microcosm, the Bihar village but to the material needs of the provinces and even different countries with which Bihar had commercial and economic contact. The increasing connection of the artisan with the market did not disturb the socio-economic structure which continued to be woven around the land. Agriculture continued to be the biggest source of livelihood and social surplus. The craftsmen were still a part of an agriculture class structure in which they were largely tenants and labourers also, as their traditional craft occupations themselves party by agricultural output and party from their professional earnings. The tardy weaver, the poor artisan, the patient potter and the diligent handicraftsman were all making their respective contribution, though silently and unostentatiously, to the widespread and varied economic activities in Bihar.

Yet, no matter how useful, essential or beautiful the work of the craftsman for the need of the individual and the community, the craftsman himself was in no way looked upon as admirable or even worthy of any serious regard. The craftsmen seem to have been men who merely exploited the skill of their hands for their living. His activities and the nature of his work were matters of little or no account, simply to be taken for granted as, part of the natural scheme. A craftsman was “a man who was obscure, earning a small wage, low in esteem, classed as worthless by public opinion, men to whom the nature of their employment denied all possibility of moral or political virtue, neither covetted by friends, feared by enemies, nor envied by fellowmen, just a workman, a face in the crowd.”

The response of the craftsmen was further evident in that the weaver adjusted his loom for greater standardization of cloth, which was the primary requirement of the European market. The textile craft depending on local markets had little need for standardized output. Paradoxically, this response to the market stimuli destroyed the creativity of the craftsmen, since the Company’s injunction was to make them work, “to the perfection of the pattern”. The European market highly specialized in terms of quality, texture, prints and measurements deprived the weavers, of their personal initiative. The technical process embodied in the Indian crafts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had reached the asymptotic limits at the end of a logistic growth curve.

**Silk Textile Work in Bihar**

Silk occupies an important place in the textile segment of the craft structure of Bihar in 17th and 18th centuries. Raw silk gradually became an exceedingly important item of trade for the East India Company. A beginning was made with the setting up of a factory at Patna in 1621. In the first half of the seventeenth century, Patna was famous, for being an important trading and production centre of silk cocoons and textiles. The English Factory Records refer to the production in Patna of raw silk known as ‘serbandy’ raw silk was also imported into Patna in large quantities from Orissa and more especially Murshidabad and Saidabad in Bengal.

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tsar silk industry made considerable progress among the craft complexes of Bihar. The manufacturer of cloth wholly of tsar silk or a mixture of tasarand cotton, was concentrated in Bhagalpur, Purnea and Patna.

**Dyeing Work in Bihar**

During the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries, Bihar produced a wide variety of colours and shades on almost all the types of fibres eg. Cotton, silk and wool. The dyeing work was marked by an intense specialization, with dyers working with one colour alone. The process and technique of dyeing in Bihar is illustrated by citing a few instances of dyeing some of the shades. The substances used in dyeing and printing include fruits, flowers, leaves, roots, seed, bark and galls of plants and also insects and earth. The techniques used were mostly simple, and could differ slightly from dyer to dyer or according to the nature of fibre to be dyed.

The dyeing industry of Bihar was concentrated in Bhagalpur and Patna divisions. Buchanan reported that there were 552 dyers or rangrez in the district of Patna- Gaya, of which 156 were in the Patna City, 40 in Gaya, 100 in Daudnagar. Bhagalpur had 94 dyers or rangrez. According to him, the rangrez of Bihar made good wages. The principal dyers were the Muslims, who as a rule belong to the sheikh caste. The principal dyers among the Hindus were the tantis who belonged to the weaver caste and confined dyeing to cloth and thread. Generally males did professional dying. Women would also dye, but they did so for their own houses, and did not work in shops.

**Madhubani Painting of Bihar**

Madhubani painting is also known as Mithila Painting. It is a unique style of painting, practised in the Mithila region in states of Bihar. Painting is done with fingers, twigs, brushes, nib-pens and matchsticks, using natural dyes and pigments and is characterized by eye catching geometrical patterns. The exact time when Mithila art organised is not known. But, according to local mythology, the origin can be traced to the time of the Ramayan, when king Janak of Nepal ordered his kingdom to decorate the town for the wedding of his daughter, Sita to Lord Rama. The ancient tradition of elaborate wall painting or Bhitti-Chitra in Nepal and North Bihar played a major role in the emergence of this new art form.

Madhubani painting, as a domestic ritual activity, was unknown to the outside world until the massive India-Nepal border earthquake of 1934, when the houses and walls tumbled down. Then, William G. Archer, British colonial officer was in Madhubani district of Bihar, while inspecting the damage discovered the paintings on the newly exposed interior walls of Mithila homes. He was struck by reported similarities to the work of modern Western artist like Miro and Picasso. During the 1930s he took black and white photos of some of these paintings, which today are the earliest images of the art. Gradually, women of Mithila had been encouraged by with the help of some social activist and scholars to income to ensure survival. The contribution of foreign scholars, novelist and journalist in promoting the art from internationally has also been immense.

**Patna Qalaam of Bihar**

Patna Qalaam is also known as Patna School of Painting. This is an offshoot of the well-known Mughal Miniature School of Painting flourished in Bihar during early 18th to mid 20th century. The practitioner of this art form were descendants of Hindu artisans of Mughal painting who facing persecution from the Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb found refuge, via Murshidabad, in Patna during late 18th century. They settled in the eastern part of modern Patna, in Patna city, in Lodikatra, Diwan Muhalla and Machharhatti. They found patronage from the landlords(Zemindars) and the British officials. They shared the characteristics of the Mughal painters, but unlike the Patna painters also started painting bazaar scenes. This was not just an artistic expansion, but was indeed a shrewd move. It not only enriched the style of painting, but also brought
commercial success among the common citizens including British officers and their wives.

Conclusion:

In the light of above discussion, we can say that in Bihar the crafts sector had expanded as far as it could by the beginning of the 18th century within the framework of the existing social and economic structure. With the expansion in exports the crafts and weavers had become more cashed oriented. No village could be complete without the craftsmen and in this sense the craftsman was a cohesive entity within the pre-independence society of this state. The craftsmen were catering not only to the needs of the microcosm, the Bihar’s village. Bihar had improved their commercial and economic contact with different countries due to this. ‘Max Weber’ in his analysis of economic change had posed two extremes of pre industrial craft production the ‘price worker’ and the ‘wage worker’. In Bihar both the characteristics were found in the craft and weavers.

The impact of crafts in Bihar represented more a case of ‘urbanization’. Even while the period was one of a buoyant commercial economy, and the craftsmen showed adaptability and capacity to respond to market stimuli, yet the growing ties between the craftsmen with the commercial and money transaction did not manifest itself in urbanism and urbanity. This was perhaps because the crafts of Bihar continued to be basically rural, domestic and diffused in character. The response of the craftsmen to the increasing competition remained an uneven or unequal one. Adaptation did happen but the craftsmen adopted with different degrees of success. They characterized the craft dynamics of Bihar. From generation to generation people are learning from their predecessors and carrying on their culture of craftsmanship. The craftsmen of Bihar have been very skilful in creating articles from local materials. Hence, we can say that Bihar state has rich heritage of crafts.

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