

# Convergence of Art Practices in Dhokra Art: An Overview

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India's cultural diversity is represented in regional tribal and folk artforms. It covers a vast range of natural materials in abundance and indigenous methods to create art. As a state Chhattisgarh beholds a plethora of tribal and folk artforms. These have strong regional identity of rural life, culture, belief system and religion. The same is reflected in their lifestyle, dance, music, costume, and even food. Close vicinity to nature drives their creative energies to translate aspects of nature in their representations. Their myths, folklore, symbolism, rituals and celebrations are uniquely designed to be part of life. Bastar is a tribal region of Chhattisgarh, home for Gonds, Maria, Muria, Dandami Maria and many such tribes. Dhokra art originated out of these tribal cultures as symbol of their rituals and belief system.

Dhokra art is practised by the Ghadwa's to serve the tribal communities and it seeped into the urban cultures. This paper aims to provide an overview of Dhokra art as it pertains to the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh. Dhokra, as an art form, encompasses various facets, meanings, and purposes within tribal communities and cultures, while also establishing its presence in urban settings. This analysis refers the works of Jaydev Baghel, Meera Mukherjee, Shiv Verma and Paraag Tandel to examine cross-cultural interpretations and their influencing factors.

**Keywords:** Dhokra, Tribal Art, Art, Culture.

## 1. Introduction

Dhokra or Bell Art Bastar tribal metal art is from Chhattisgarh a state having several natural resources and minerals fuelling the heavy and small-scale industries. It is also defined by thick forests, folk and tribal people, culture, and beliefs. Rural life, religion, and simplicity are reflected in tribal art and craft. Bastar. Historical geographers considered Bastar part of Dandakaranya.

The geographical area referred to as Dandakaranya includes regions in the states of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh. The designation of the region derives from the Dandak Forest, portrayed as the habitat of the wicked figure Dandak in the Hindu epic Ramayana. The region has experienced a series of dominating powers in antiquity, specifically the Nalas, Vakatakas, and Chalukyas. Currently, it functions as the residence of the Gond people. (Dandakaranya | Forest, India, Map, & Facts, 2023).

Dhokra Art reflects tribal culture, traditions, and beliefs while retaining its uniqueness. Ghadwa artisans from Bastar are recognized for their Dhokra work. In a cultural setting,

'Ghadwa' means constructing and sculpting forms and objects. Idolatry sculptures, objects for offerings, functional objects and body ornaments are the primary creations of Dhokra artists. "In this context, functionality transforms into art, and the ordinary becomes valued and delightful. Wall murals, floor adornments where devotees engaged in devotion, conducted rites, or partook in meals, as well as doorstep and entrance decorations, assumed a ceremonial significance." (Chattopadhyay, 1984).

The cultural overlaps of ritual, worship, symbolism and customs created a common path for integrating tribal and folk art with mainstream art. The natural creative force of tribal art fascinated many artists to learn and imbibe them and bring them into their own practice. The interest of urban population in Dhokra art has a lot to do with the collaborative art practices by the artists. The Dhokra art pieces, objects, and goods effortlessly integrated into urban households. Historians, thinkers, artists, artisans, media professionals, and other prominent figures commenced visits to the Bastar region.

## 1. DHOKRA ART

Dhokra or Bell Metal art is an indigenous method of lost wax casting in brass and bronze practised in Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Jharkhand, Bengal, Telangana, and Madhya Pradesh. The Ghasia of Bastar and the Jhara of Raigarh are Chhattisgarh's Dhokra brass casters. Lost wax or Cire Perdue metal casting is used in dhokra art. "The Ghasia craftsmen have created idolatrous icons of nature under animistic belief. These depictions were already in their culture and made utilizing their ancient metal casting method. This art flourished inside tribal religion and society because tribal priests helped define its iconography" (Mahawar, 2011).

Historically many art forms flourished based on the material culture, visual culture, and the interaction within the society between the artist and the audience at large. The purpose of art could be self-expression, recording, religious, political propaganda, and many such concerns. The visual literacy or understanding defines the perception of people within a culture. Early humans perceived animals in their initial visualization because of their dependency for food mainly by hunting and post-settlement as other aspects of nature, including the human form, became part of their visual vocabulary. Quite before the birth of religion, the activities of the natural movement of sun and moon, and natural calamities (earthquakes, floods) were a mystery for humans. The concept of appeasing such natural forces brought visual interpretations of the immediate natural environment around the human habitat. Nature provided them with metaphors in the form of trees, birds, animals, humans, the sun, moon, and so on to create a visual vocabulary. The core of the tribal belief system is animistic where they believe in the presence of soul in all the natural phenomenon. Dhokra artisans created visual imagery for the belief system of the tribes. The reference point for the humanization of abstract and supernatural forces as believed by the tribes was taken from the tribal body types and features.

Local artists assert that Bastar Dhokra art has a history spanning 500 years. Dhokra art has evolved from regional recognition to national and international appreciation. Dhokra artisans originally crafted religious idols, ceremonial objects, functional items, and additional creations for royal families and tribal communities. Only a few of craftspeople engaged in the obscure craft. The rehabilitation initiative for Bangla refugees transformed Bastar in the 1960s, altering Dhokra art. Government officials, lawmakers, and the media addressed tribal culture and art.

Media publicity and official identification of prospects resulted in development. Kondagaon and Jagdalpur established a household bell metal workshop in which all family members produce Dhokra. Several Dhokra painters received state and national accolades during the 1970s and 1980s, while exhibitions in prominent cities enhanced their renown. During the 1980s, Dhokra artist the late Dr. Jaydev Baghel achieved international recognition. The worldwide interest attracted traders and exporters to Bastar, motivating future artists to pursue the craft. Numerous development initiatives have been executed in the past decade with the backing of government and NGOs. Consequently, Dhokra craftsmen engage with many markets, creating more functional items, enhancing their skills, and reaching broader consumers.

## 2. DHOKRA PROCESS

Dhokra art is an intriguing technique that employs natural materials, traditional procedures, and exceptional craftsmanship. Indigenous tribes in India, particularly in Bastar, Chhattisgarh, actively utilize dhokra, a traditional metal casting technique. A comprehensive elucidation of Dhokra casting ensues:

Black field soil and rice husks are sun-dried to create the core. Coat the dry core with cow dung and soil from the riverbed. The core is polished with dried bean leaves. The retentive nature of the core surface prevents the wax from peeling. Apply a layer of beeswax. Wax is melted in one container and transferred to another containing water for cleaning purposes. Fine, elongated strands are produced by filtering purified beeswax. Wrap the thread around the center to maintain its shape. Incorporate wax decorations as required. A slender covering of river dirt, pulverized coal, and bovine excrement envelops the core. Fundamental borehole. The middle contains a mixture of termite mound soil and rice husks. Affix a metal cup to the lower core and let it to sun-dry. Incorporate metal components into the cup and apply a coating to the top when it has dried. The item is positioned in a one-foot diameter oven with uniform depth. Ignite the oven subsequent to its insulation with wood and coal. The appropriate temperature is attained using bellows. Following a two-hour period, the core is extracted, cooled in water, and the clay layers are removed.

## 3. VISUAL LANGUAGE AND EVOLUTION

“Traditional crafts fall under three categories:

- 1) Wealth creation and trade (e.g., agriculture, animal husbandry, carpentry, smithy)
- 2) Rituals, beliefs, and creative desires.
- 3) Lifestyle: textiles, cookware, pottery, recreation, etc” (Kochhar,2011)

The initial visual vocabulary of Dhokra art was derived from tribal culture and mythology, unaffected by other influences. The human figures mirror the anatomical structure and traits of the tribes, providing a direct reference for the craftspeople. Early human figures were small, featuring design motifs and patterns crafted with wax thread that displayed clothes, decorations, and headgear. Several images had hybrid characteristics, such as several hands holding light lamps, platters, swords, plows, and other symbolic elements. In certain sculptures, animal figures are elongated and structured in contrast to human figures, resembling forms carved from materials such as wood and stone. These traits also signify the utilization of a comparable visual language that is adopted from various art forms of Baster.

- In early pieces, the visual language featured broad shoulders, large chest, and small, cylindrical hands and legs. The face has a prominent eyeline, sharp nose, and wax-threaded lips. (Image 1)
- Solid wax is used to manufacture garments, jewellery, headgear, and umbrellas, with the addition of wax thread motifs for extra designs. Equine figures, bull, fish, frog, owl and tortoise figures are totems. Images of animals and creatures are natural, unlike humans. (Image 2)
- Creatures and animals boast designs, themes, and patterns resembling human figures, often with extensive application. Artisans interpret designs differently.
- Containers, bowls, measuring tools, combs, anklets, lights, and more were found in early Dhokra art. Many bowls, containers, and measuring equipment include wax thread patterns. Organic or geometric designs are used. They feature thin or thick registers with patterns and decorations all throughout. Registration of containers and measures recalls Greek clay pots and jars. (Image 3)
- Stylization inherently exists in visual representations of human beings, animals, birds, and other natural forms; nonetheless, the design and patterns on the surface remain remarkably consistent across time.



1.Human Figure and Animal (Dhokra Art) Guru Ghansidas Museum, Raipur (CG)



2. Measures and Containers (Dhokra Art), Guru Ghansidas Museum, Raipur (CG)

#### 4. CONVERGENCE OF ART PRACTICES

“Ritual art traditions, whether sacred, domestic, tribal or village, intersect with fine art traditions in the work of many contemporary Indian artists; today, ritual art is made alongside fine art without the harsh tensions witnessed in the West because both serve different purposes” (Milford-Lutzker, 1999). India as a country has always celebrated the creativity of art and craftsmanship without any prejudice of high or low art. Our approach is broad and comprehensive, emphasizing inclusivity over consistency. The academically trained urban artist, cognizant of the modern landscape, can traverse several art forms and interpret them through hybrid representations. “In a societal context that embraces and values crafts, there exists a mutually beneficial flow of ideas between the realms of fine arts and crafts, wherein both domains draw inspiration and influence from one another” (Chattopadhyay, 1984).

Renowned Indian sculptor Meera Mukherjee had worked with the Dhokra art of Bastar. “Meera Mukherjee's desire to reconnect with Indian folk artists was influenced by her mentor in Munich, Tony Staedler, who encouraged her to seek inspiration for her art within her own country rather than in Europe” (Sunderason, 2020). She travelled across India and made recordings of tribal and folk artforms. Her engagement with Dhokra Art commenced in the early 1950s during a visit to Bastar, Chhattisgarh, where she became fascinated by the diversity and intricacy of the local tribal art forms. She acknowledged the significant artistic potential of Dhokra Art and chose to engage deeply in its practice and study. She learnt the methods and techniques from the artisans itself while engaging with the tribal communities of Bastar. The incorporation of the "folk art" idiom became a notable characteristic within her body of

sculptural works” (Hacker, 2016). Mukherjee understood the need of conserving Dhokra Art's authenticity and traditional legacy while exploring its contemporary artistic possibilities. Mukherjee revived Dhokra Art's lost-wax casting process. She tried various alloys and improved the casting process to improve the sculptures' quality and finish. She successfully adapted Dhokra Art techniques and motifs to her work. Her composition and subject matter differ from Dhokra art. Fluidity, grace, and detail define Mukherjee's Dhokra Art sculptures. Rural life, Indian mythology, human and animal figures in their natural settings are the prominent subjects in the works. She seamlessly integrated Dhokra Art patterns and forms with her artistic sensibilities to establish a unique visual language. (Images 5,6)

Dr. Jaydev Baghel was born in Bhelwapadapara, Kondagaon, to Shri Simranram and Bhukai Bai on October 14, 1950. Jaydev was born to a Maria tribe father and a Ghadwa mother. Jaydev and his older brother Sonaru Ram became Dhokra practitioners after seeing their father's profession. Handicrafts were a source of income for the Ghadwa community, meeting local needs and culture. By reinventing the traditional art Jaidev Baghel created a niche and received acknowledgement. He encouraged artisans to follow community and culture in their work with a stress upon creative exploration and self-expression. “Jaidev is translating lived experiences and ritual practices specific to Bastar into his visual practice and this creative move distinguishes his work” (Hacker, 2016, p. 146). He challenged his expression as a conventional artist. Jaydev Baghel was instrumental in fostering individual originality in tribal art. “Jaidev's narrative reinstates the authentic Adivasi connection and so possesses credibility” (Roopankar, 1987), his visual language comprised exaggerated human forms and tribal imagery (Image, 7). He combined prevalent imagery with tribal symbolism in his portrayal of Hindu deities (Image 8). Participation in exhibitions and fairs and interaction with Meera Mukherjee, Jagdish Swaminathan, Pupul Jaykar, Jasleen Dhameeja and Rajeev Sethi opened pathways of contemporary art.

Shiv Verma is an artisan turned artist from Kondagaon (Bastar). He studied Dhokra art under Shilp Guru Late Dr. Jaydev Baghel and became an artisan. Many artists visited Bastar to experience tribal culture and collaborate with tribal art styles. In one of such occasion Shiv met artist Navtoj Altaf in Kondagaon which encouraged him to pursue fine art education. He trained as a sculptor in both his Bachelors and Masters programme from MS University Baroda. He combined the academic learning with knowledge of tribal art and traditions to create fascinating works. Shiv draws Inspiration from natural forms mixed with microchip like structures casted in Dhokra lost wax method. (Image 9,10)

Paraag Kamal Kashinath Tandel, born in 1978, is an artist and researcher. Parag is from the Kohli fisher community, indigenous people with a strong sea and land culture. He wants to preserve his interactions with people and culture. Parag received creative sculpture training from JJ School and MS University Baroda and employs a variety of materials and techniques to realize his ideas. His stories are based on Koli history, livelihood, and visual and material culture across the centuries. Interestingly, his “Into the Bones 2019” (Image 11,12) sculpture series draws parallels to indigenous groups. He used Quetta fish bones, a staple food for the Koli people, and Bastar Chhattisgarh Dhokra art in this work. The inherent idea here is to bring coastal life and culture of the Kohli tribe with forest life and cultural ecosystem. This joint series symbolizes tribes' environmental awareness. Interestingly Paraag has kept the clay mould surface unremoved in certain parts of the sculpture which gives a sense of flesh remains

on the bones.



5. Meera Mukherjee, Maitreya, Bronze



Meera Mukherjee, Untitled, Bronze

<https://www.akarprakar.com/artists/meera-mukherjee>

<https://www.akarprakar.com/artists/meera-mukherjee>



7. Badha Dev, [www.jamaatart.com](http://www.jamaatart.com)



8. Untitled <https://www.storyltd.com/>



9. Transgenic Cucurbita Maschata (2006), Source: Shiv Verma



10. Stories of my Abode (2018), Source: Nazar Art Gallery



11. Into the Bones, Paraag Tandel with Bhupen Jaidev Baghel, 2019, Source: *Nanotechnology Perceptions* Vol. 20 No. S1 (2024)



<https://www.tarq.in/>



12. Into the Bones, Paraag Tandel with Bhupen Jaidev Baghel, 2019, Source: <https://www.tarq.in/>

## **2. Discussion and Conclusion**

The convergence of urban and indigenous art has consistently had significance. The social positions of both artists and audiences influence comprehension and dissemination. Academically taught urban artists, aware of contemporary global issues, can amalgamate diverse creative styles. Social position maintains its relevance and acceptance in modern art. The urban audience appreciates the material skill of the tribal artist but lacks the understanding of iconography and philosophy. Our societal structure constrains our understanding of tribal art to its physical attributes. “We must acknowledge that craft serves as a manifestation of the human spirit in a tangible form that brings joy to humanity, akin to what are classified as fine arts” (Chattopadhyay, 1985).

The artist's repute and the value of the work are conditional to the hierarchical narrative. “Craft is still largely denoted to practical issue such as material and techniques” (Rissatti, 2007, p. 03). The skill of the artist in handling the material, the technique and expertise is given more importance than his cultural belongingness and identity. It requires considerable effort, gain exposure, be influenced, and engage to achieve mainstream status. Jaydev Baghel positioned himself to be accepted as an artist (sculptor) within the periphery of urban art. National and international recognition assured him that his paintings could endure in contemporary settings. Artist and tinker Jagdish Swaminathan established Bharat Bhawan and Rupankar Museum without any hierarchical notion of art. “At the Bharat Bhavan, individual creativity is prioritized over a positivist view of artisanship. Swaminathan's intervention contests the entrenched institutional habit of categorizing this extensive body as crafts.” (Hacker, 2014).

Artist Shiv Verma introduces a new perspective by incorporating Dhokra art into his  
*Nanotechnology Perceptions* Vol. 20 No. S1 (2024)

sculptures. The convergence of artistic disciplines in his creative endeavours possesses a distinctive quality. In contrast to Meera Mukherjee, an artist with formal training who included Dhokra into her sculptural works. Shiv acquired the artistic form inherent to tribal culture from birth, assimilating its skills, methodologies, and visual language. As an academically trained artist, he consistently explores tribal culture and incorporates Dhokra into his artistic endeavours. Shiv is acknowledged as an urban artist, with his works recognized both domestically and internationally. Paraag Tandel a academically trained artist having an ethnicity of Koli tribe is exploring the Dhokra art medium to draw parallels within tribal cultures using symbols of one the method and materials of another. He is not even shying away from giving due credit to the Dhokra artist's contribution in his artwork.

European art categories have considered minor art as insignificant, impeding tribal art from attaining mainstream recognition. Renowned artist Jaydev Baghel with his innovative concepts transcending cultural identity, making a significant impact. Meera Mukherjee integrated Dhokra into contemporary art. In his contemporary interpretation of tribal art, emerging artist Shiv Verma safeguards historical traditions. Paraag Tandel is cultivating a novel perspective through collaboration with a Dhokra artist from Bastar. Much remains to be acknowledged and valued. The recognition of the artist collaborating and representing Dhokra should also transpire into the acceptance of artisans.

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