

# A Review on Dokra: The Traditional Craft of Bikna, Bankura and Its Artisan Struggles

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## Abstract

Indian rural industries continue to rely heavily on traditional crafts and skilled artisans. The origins of metallurgy on the Indian subcontinent date back to the with the Harappan and Babylon civilization pioneering advanced metalworking techniques, including the lost-wax casting method known as Dokra. This Dokra art dates back 4,000 years to ancient craftsmanship, as revealed by radiocarbon dating. This non-ferrous metal casting technique is one of the oldest in India and remains an enduring part of the country's cultural heritage.

The term 'Dokra' refers to a community of nomadic metalworkers who historically travelled across regions such as Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and West Bengal, creating intricately designed and ornamented metal artifacts. Today, these some of artisans have settled in specific regions, with notable clusters in Bankura in West Bengal. Dokra art serves as a living testament to ancient Neolithic figurine traditions and pre-Iron Age metal craftsmanship. This research aims to document the rich history of Dokra craft in Bankura, technique of Dokra craft making, raw materials, craft making tools and analyse the socio-economic conditions of artisans in Bikna village. The study also evaluates the challenges faced by these artisans and explores potential solutions to ensure the survival and growth of this traditional craft in the modern era. From my ten-day workshop experience with Dokra artisans, I have come to appreciate that this art is not only visually captivating but also remarkably intricate and requires immense skill and effort to create. And through the work and process, I have come to understand that this art is impossible to create without the craftsmanship and the skilled hands of an artisan.

**Keywords:** Dokra Art, Non-ferrous Metallurgy Art, Bikna Village, Lost Wax Casting, Artisan

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There is some disagreement about the origin of the phrase 'Dokra Kamar' or 'Dhokara Kamar.' Although the words 'Dokra' and 'Dhokara' are common in Bengali, why is traditional metalwork referred to as 'Dokra' in this case? The question remains: how did this craft get its name? The answer lies in the biography and genealogy of the Dokra community. In this context, the chronological practice of art raises the question of whether the Dokra people are native to Bengal. The structure, caste, and social rituals of the Dokra society need to be explored. Undoubtedly, they can be referred to as 'Dokra' - a caste whose genealogical art is known as Dokra.

It is said that the original habitat of the Dokra community was in Chot Nagpur. According to different researchers, they are believed to belong to various tribes. Due to livelihood challenges, Dokra artists became 'nomadic wanderers.' As a result, Dokra artisans settled in regions such as Burdwan, Bankura, Purulia, and Medinipur, establishing communities in these areas. However, according to some researchers, the Bastar region of Madhya Pradesh is the original homeland of the Dokra artists. This Dokra art dates back 4,000 years to ancient craftsmanship, as revealed by radiocarbon dating. Similar Lost Wax Casting Techniques have been found in the Harappan and Babylonian civilizations.

The Dokra artists in Bankura district identify themselves as Hindus by Caste. Some relatives live near the Bankura district; among them, some are Hindus, while others are Muslims. The Dokra artists in Bankura use the surnames 'Mal,' 'Sakra,' and 'Karmakar'.

Especially visible are the Karmakar Class/ Caste people associated with this metal industry. According to legend, 'Lohasur' (the God of iron), a man blessed by Mahadev with a perfect body and mind, was killed in a mysterious way. He is considered the forefather or Adi Purusha of the Karmakar community on Earth.

Dr. Rabindranath Samanta (late), a professor at Bankura Christian College, wrote the research paper titled *Dokra Shilpakala: Bikna*, based on his field research spanning more than a century and a half. 'Bikna' is about 3-4 km from Bankura. On Bankura - Durgapur bus road. It is also called the edge village as it is almost at the end of Bankura, PIN-72215 (Kesiakole), District - Bankura, Lok Sabha constituency - Bishnupur, Vidhan Sabha Constituency -Onda. The village has a population of around 3876 and houses around 790-800.



**FIGURES 01: Google Map of Bikna Village, Bankura, West Bengal**

The Dokra artists of Bikna regularly create various kinds of sculptures, including elephants, horses, owls of different sizes, turtles, fish, and human figures, along with everyday household items such as *Dhupdani* (incense holders), *Diya* (oil lamps), *Panchapradip* (five-wick lamps), and *Sindur kouta* (vermilion containers). They also craft idols of various deities, including Lakshmi-Narayana, Shiva-Parvati, Radha-Krishna, Ganesh, and Devi Durga, as well as a variety of ornaments such as hairpins, necklaces, earrings, pendants, bangles, and many more.

The Dokra artists of Bankura's Bikna village originally migrated from Keshiari in the Medinipur district. They initially specialized in crafting children's waist ornaments, cow neck rings, bells, and various folk jewellery. However, over time, their craftsmanship has evolved, achieving greater precision and refinement. The time required to create each artifact varies based on the artisan's skill and expertise. While

some pieces can be made quickly, others demand meticulous effort. The beauty of Dokra art lies not only in its intricate designs but also in its elegant style.

## 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of this research are:

1. To document the history and craftsmanship of Dokra art in Bikna village.
2. Origin of Dokra Art, Bikna.
3. To analyse the socio-economic conditions of the artisans.
4. To identify current challenges in the craft and suggest solutions for improvement.

## 3. MATERIALS & CONSTRUCTION TECHNIQUES

Several crucial stages contribute to the creation of a remarkable Dokra artifact. The key points include:

**Raw Materials:** Boron metal, Bell Metal, Bees Wax (mom), Clay Bees-Wax Thread, Coal, Mustard Oil, Dhuna (resin extracted from the Sal tree), Steel or aluminium pot.

		
<p>FIGURES 02: Dhuna (Primary Resource)</p>	<p>FIGURES 03: Wax (Primary Resource)</p>	<p>FIGURES 04: Dhunmar making in a steel pot (Primary Resource)</p>

**Tools:** Hammer, Tong (Chimta), Graphite Container to Melt Brass (Kui), Furnace (Bhatti), Small Chisel (Nihan). Big Chisel (Batani), Cheni, Topna (Turpun), Brass Cutting Saw, Iron Soldering (Tatal), Chula (Unan), Coal.

**Technique:** First, a single clay mold is made by mixing a small amount of sand with sticky clay soil, known in their language as *Kutna Mati*. Additionally, various types of moulds are used for different items—for example, an owl mould for making owls, a peacock mould for peacocks, and a glass-shaped mold for pen holders. When crafting deities such as Lakshmi, Ganesha, Kartik, and Saraswati, each figure is made separately. In the case of Goddess Durga, her family members and her crest are moulded separately and then attached.

Before shaping the details, it is essential to prepare the base of the object. Sal gum (*Rajan*) is mixed with *Dhuna* and spread into a hot dish. Once softened, it is blended with an adequate amount of mustard oil, forming a substance known in their language as ‘*Dhunmar*’. The process of *Dhunmar* should be carried out in a steel or aluminium pot or dish. The artisan takes the *Dhunmar* in their palm, pressing and shaping it with their fingers while applying slight heat. Without heat, *Dhunmar* hardens and becomes impossible to bend or shape into intricate designs.

All ornamentation and detailed designs are created using thin, narrow wax strips called *Dhunmar*, similar to noodles. Once the *Dhunmar* mold dries, it is coated with ‘*Poach Mati*’ (a specific type of soil). The clay is powdered, strained through a cloth, and then mixed with water and rice bran as needed. This special type of clay is referred to in their language as ‘*Nunia Mati*’. A layer of this prepared clay is applied, and once dried, a thicker layer known as ‘*Mota Mati*’ is added.

A channel bar is carefully placed over this thick layer. Then, the raw brass material is heated slightly if needed, crushed into a powder, and poured along the channel. Another layer is added to the channel mold, which is then left to dry completely. The mold is then fired at an intense temperature for 2-3 hours, allowing the hot liquid brass to fill the empty spaces inside.

Once the furnace fire is extinguished and the mold has cooled down, the outer clay layer is carefully broken using a hammer to reveal the cast metal artifact inside. The final artwork is then cleaned, polished to a golden shine, and refined into a beautifully crafted masterpiece.



FIGURES 05: *Mould Making (Primary Resource)*



FIGURES 06: *Soak in water to harden (Primary Resource)*



FIGURES 07: *Soil Coating (Primary Resource)*



FIGURES 08: *Channel Making (Primary Resource)*



FIGURES 09: *Drying (Primary Resource)*



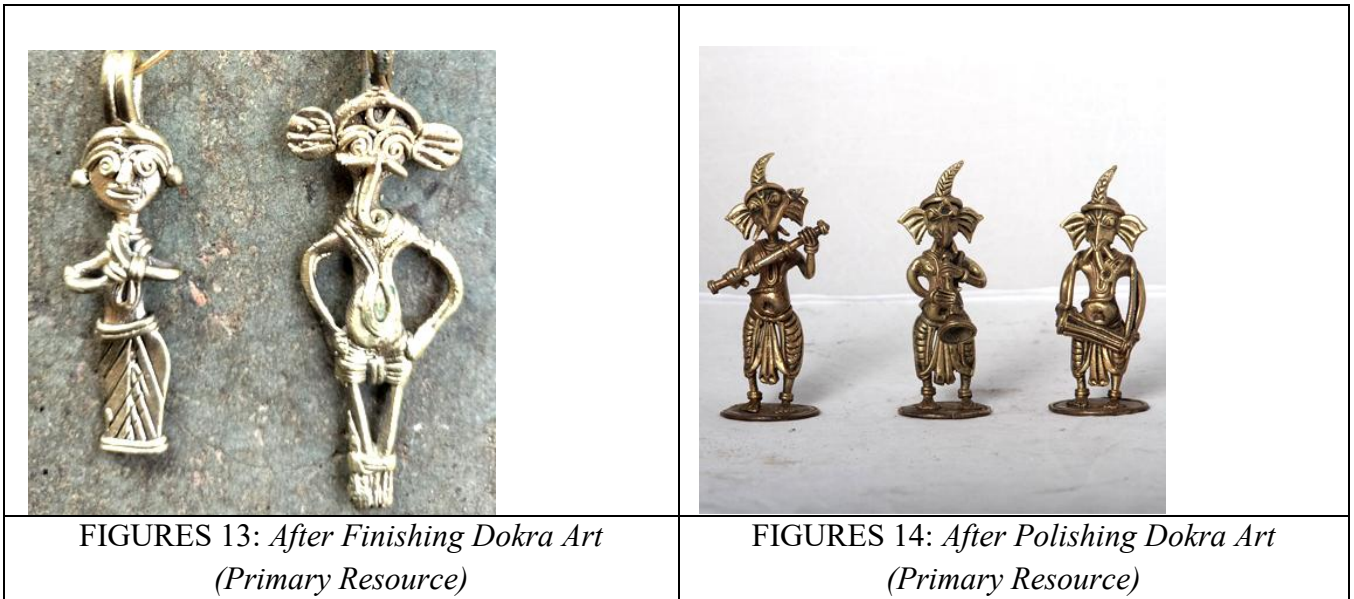
FIGURES 10: *Pouring Brass Metal into the Channel (Primary Resource)*



FIGURES 11: *Ready to go Furnacing (Primary Resource)*



FIGURES 12: *Mould Furnacing (Primary Resource)*



#### 4. METHODOLOGY:

This study is primarily empirical; however, both primary and secondary data have been effectively used. Secondary data were collected from books, journals, old research papers, and web pages. Primary data were gathered from Dokra Village, Bikna, and a 10-day workshop held at Kalyani University, guided by the renowned Dokra artist Subha Karmakar and organised by Professor Vivekananda Mukherjee (HOD of Visual Art Dept.) of Kalyani University, Nadia.

#### 5. CHALLENGES FACED by DOKRA ARTISANAS:

Dokra art is a unique and ancient form of metal casting that has gained global recognition for its primitive simplicity, intricate folk motifs, and distinctive rustic appearance. Each piece is handcrafted, making every artifact one-of-a-kind. While Dokra figurines, statues, and jewellery have become increasingly popular worldwide, especially in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, Australia Dokra artisans continue to struggle with several socio-economic and infrastructural challenges.

Despite the growing international market, including high demand from fashion stores in Milan, Paris, and London, artisans remain economically unstable due to their lack of exposure to changing trends and modern marketing techniques. The following are some of the most significant issues affecting Dokra artisans, particularly at Bikna, West Bengal.

##### Poverty and Social Disgrace

- Many Dokra artisans suffer from extreme poverty, malnutrition, and poor sanitation.
- Alcohol addiction is prevalent within artisan communities.
- Illiteracy further limits their ability to improve their socio-economic status.

##### Rising Raw Material Costs

- The increasing price of essential raw materials such as brass and beeswax discourages artisans from continuing their craft with the same enthusiasm and dedication.

##### Declining Market Demand

- The high cost of handmade Dokra products leads to fewer buyers.
- Competition from mass-produced, machine-made substitutes has resulted in a significant decline in sales.

**Lack of Design Innovation**

- Dokra artisans have limited knowledge of evolving global trends and contemporary designs.
- There is little encouragement for innovation and experimentation, restricting their ability to adapt to modern consumer preferences.

**Weather-Dependent Working Conditions**

- The absence of proper workspaces means that artisans struggle to work during monsoon seasons due to a lack of all-weather shelters. Sunny weather is very important for Dokra making.

**Limited Awareness of Government and NGO Support**

- Many artisans are unaware of financial aid, free tools, and housing schemes provided by the government and NGOs.
- Illiteracy prevents them from accessing resources meant for their development.

**Lack of Training and Apprenticeship System**

- No formal apprenticeship programs exist for training young artisans, making it difficult to pass down traditional skills to the next generation.

**Outdated Technology and Inefficient Production Methods**

- The continued use of traditional furnaces leads to inefficiencies such as excessive fuel consumption and poor temperature control.
- The inability to recover lost wax in the casting process increases production costs.

**Financial Difficulties and Dependence on Middlemen**

- Artisans struggle to secure loans from banks due to bureaucratic hurdles.
- Many turn to local money lenders who charge exorbitant interest rates, trapping them in debt.
- Middlemen exploit artisans by purchasing their work at low prices and selling it at a significant profit.

**Declining Domestic Demand Due to Globalization**

- Changing consumer preferences, influenced by globalization, have led to reduced domestic demand for Dokra products.

**Loss of Craft Authenticity**

- Increasing competition among artisans and pressure to meet market demands have led some to compromise on quality by using low-cost materials.
- The struggle to balance innovation with traditional craftsmanship results in the loss of originality.

**Threat from Commercial Manufacturers**

- Factory-based businesses, often run by non-traditional artisans, are producing similar metal artifacts using modern machinery.
- These commercially produced items directly compete with handmade Dokra pieces, further marginalizing traditional artisans.

**6. CONCLUSION:**

The study highlights that Dokra artisans face significant hurdles, especially in marketing their products. Due to financial constraints, they are unable to advertise their craft effectively. The lack of a structured marketing network further exacerbates their struggles. To address these challenges, government intervention is necessary to provide financial aid, skill development programs, and better infrastructure. NGOs and voluntary associations must also play an active role in improving the working conditions of artisans.

While innovation is essential, it should not come at the cost of losing the originality and cultural significance of Dokra art. Artisans should be trained to embrace modern techniques without compromising their traditional craftsmanship. Awareness campaigns and targeted promotional efforts can help popularize Dokra crafts in domestic and international markets.

With adequate support, the Dokra artisans can look forward to a more sustainable and prosperous future, ensuring the survival of this beautiful and historic craft for generations to come.

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