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RESEARCH ARTICLE

TRADITIONAL ARTS AND HANDICRAFTS IN TELANGANA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Traditional arts and handicrafts of Telangana have a rich cultural heritage. Handicrafts have been important in the socio-economic and cultural life of the region since the ancient times and during the medieval era. The artists of Telangana mastered exceptional techniques in weaving, metal craft, sculpture, woodcraft, toy-making, leather work, carpet weaving and painting. The significance of these crafts went beyond their utilitarian purpose; they were a statement of aesthetic creativity and of cultural identity. The present paper reviews the evolution of traditional arts and handicrafts in Telangana particularly in the medieval era (14th- 17th century) with the focus on artisan community, technology, socio-economic status and state patronage. The study also throws light on the role played by different artisans castes and that of political families like Kakatiya and Qutbshahi in the development of handicrafts.

Keywords: Telangana Handicrafts, Traditional Crafts, Artisan Caste, State Patronage, Socio- Economic History.

Introduction

Handicrafts are goods crafted by craftsmen using traditional techniques, hand skills and native tools. The artisans were mainly reliant on the skills and knowledge that they inherited from previous generations and passed down amongst their families. Handicrafts have been the hallmark of Telangana, with textiles, carpets, metal ware, wood carving, toys,

jewelry and painting being the most popular ones. These crafts helped to make the region economically prosperous and also showed the cultural/artistic excellence of the people.

The delicate and beautiful handicrafts made in Andhradesa were famous in the world from ancient times and are still produced in the present day in Telangana. Weaving of textile started gaining

popularity in some areas like Pochampally and Gadwal, particularly with tie and dye and Ikat traditions. Carpets of Warangal, Bidri metal articles of Hyderabad, Pembarthi brass articles and Nirmal toys became national and international famous. Handicraft is significant second to agriculture and was the source of livelihood to many artisans.

During medieval times, there was a significant upsurge in the production of handicrafts, patronage was given by rulers like Kakatiya, Reddi, Vijayanagara rulers and Qutbshahis etc. These dynasties promoted arts and crafts by providing grants, tax privileges and trade promotion. The growth of towns and markets further developed the craft production and trade.

Historical Background of Handicrafts in Telangana

The involvement in handicrafts in Telangana has been in prehistoric and early historic times. Pottery making, metallurgy, bead making, weaving, and carpentry are all evidenced by archaeology. Handicrafts prospered during the medieval period particularly following the demise of the Kakatiya dynasty, under the regional kingdoms and the Qutbshahi rulers.

The Kakatiya rulers fostered the development of temple architecture, sculpture, weaving and metalwork. Artisans and craftsmen gained importance at the temples. The Qutbshahi rulers of Golconda in turn promoted the handicrafts by building up the urban market and promoting foreign trade. Textile designs, Bidri ware and metal crafts were influenced by Persian and Arabic designs and crafts.

In the 17th century, European trading companies also had an impact on the handicraft industry by providing export markets for textiles, carpets and decorative crafts.

Major Traditional Arts and Handicrafts of Telangana

Textile Weaving

It is one of the oldest handicrafts of Telangana known as textile weaving. Ikat weaving in Pochampally and “Telia Rumals” became a popular specialty and handloom weaving in Gadwal and Narayanpet was famous. Siddipet was also developed into a significant weaving center, along with Siricilla.

The weaving communities like Padmasalis, Devangas and Sales maintained the hereditary tradition of weaving. The production of cotton and silk textiles in Telangana was of high quality and had unique designs which appealed to foreign merchants.

Carpet Weaving

Warangal became an important center for carpet weaving and cotton durries. Carpets were the objects of admiration for their complex knotting methods and the adequate colour schemes. A lot of families of artisans were employed in the carpet industry and it was also an important trade.

Metal Crafts

Metal crafts played an important role in Telangana crafts. Pembarthi were known for brassware and metal sheet work, while Hyderabad's Bidri ware and filigree work was in silver. The Bidri craft was an intricately worked piece of silver inlay on zinc alloy surfaces and was imbued with Persian artistry.

Wooden Toys and Woodcraft

Nirmal and Kondapalli became famous in the world for handmade toys and decorative items from wood. Nirmal craftsmen created toys and paintings with the softwood and vegetable dyes along with lacquer finishes. The toy industry was also a family enterprise with women and children playing a significant part in painting and shaping the toys.

Cherial Scroll Paintings

Cherial paintings are one of the oldest tradition of storytelling in Telangana. Subjects of these scroll paintings included Ramayana, Mahabharata and local folklore. Storytellers used the

paintings as pictorial props to use during storytelling. Cherial art is characterized by its use of bright colors, narrative style and folk expressions.

Sculpture and Stone Carving

It is there that Ramadugu district of Karimnagar gained fame in the field of sculptural art and stone carving. Sculptors made idols and sculptures of the temples based on the Agama and Silpa Sastras. These were the sculptors who were hereditary and upheld the old art of Kakatiya period.

Artisan Castes and Occupational Communities

The artisans played an important role in the medieval society of Telangana. Most of the crafts were hereditary and based on caste. Blacksmiths, carpenters, sculptors, metal workers and goldsmiths were part of the Panchanamvaru or Viswakarma community. They believed to be the descendants of the divine architect Viswakarma and were called Viswa Brahmins.

The weaving communities of Padmasalis, Pattusalis and Devangas took their origin from Bhavanamuni and Manu. Other groups of people with significant occupations included potters (Kummaras), bamboo workers (Medaras), leather workers (Madigas), washermen (Rajakas) and dyers.

The artisan castes would often form associations or guilds to protect the technical knowledge, control production and ensure the interests of the community. They were recognised as state organisations and sometimes even had legal powers in their area.

Socio-Economic Position of Artisans

The handicraft industry served as a source of livelihood for many artisan families and served as the productive foundation of the economy following agriculture. Weavers, smiths and goldsmiths were men and women who were well respected in society. They donated to the temples, owned land and had some social privileges.

But the lower artisans like potters, leather workers and agricultural workers were socially discriminated against and faced economic hardship. Untouchables like Malas, Madigas were kept out of villages. Although they play important role in rural society in leather goods, weaving and agricultural works, they were a social outcast.

The housing of the artisans was simple, made of mud with thatched roofs. Families engaged in production activities as a whole. Women were actively involved in spinning, dyeing, painting and finishing. Craftsmen were subjected to low wages and exploitation by the middlemen.

Technology and Craft Techniques

Traditional crafts of Telangana are very technologically advanced and artistically creative. The dyeing, tie and dye and the Ikat technique used in textile weaving were highly advanced. In the weaving of carpets, very complicated knotting methods were used. Bidri craft used the advanced metal inlay technique that was used in Persia.

It showed the indigenous brilliance in the field of Iron and Steel production in Telangana including the technology of making wootz steel. Leather processing, toy making, sculpture and woodcraft also exhibited highly specialized skills that had been accumulated over centuries.

Handicrafts technology has developed due to the contact with Persian, Arabic and European traditions. However, local craftsmen were able to maintain their native unity and incorporate foreign elements.

Patronage and Trade

Medieval rulers of Telangana actively supported the handicrafts. Institutional support, tax exemptions and grants were given to artisans by Kakatiya, Vijayanagara rulers & Qutbshahis. Artisans concentrated their activities in temples and royal courts.

There is trade network linking Telangana crafts with the markets both within the country and metalwork and decorative items. Trading and handicraft manufacturing grew up in urban hubs.

In the seventeenth century European trading companies came to trade in India, which led to the growing demand for Indian textiles and handicrafts in the world. Towards the end of the colonial era, however, traditional industries and artisan living were negatively impacted by colonial economic policies.

Conclusion

Traditional arts and handicrafts of Telangana is a treasure of cultural heritage and has been rooted in centuries of creativity and artistry, skill and organization of the society. During the medieval era, the crafts experienced significant development, with patronage from local dynasties and the development of trade routes. Handicrafts were not only economic undertakings, but also a form of cultural identity and aesthetic values.

The artisan communities maintained their antecedent skills and played a significant part in the economy and cultural activities of Telangana. These communities maintained traditional craft activities over the years despite the inequalities in society and its economy.

There are a number of traditional crafts which are still in existence today but are seriously threatened by modernization and industrialization. These traditions are very valuable and need to be preserved, promoted and supported by institution to enhance the socio-economic status of artisans in the country. Hence the study of the Telangana handicrafts can be useful to understand the region's historical, social, economic and cultural development.

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