

Lost Dhokra artisans find hope

A skill development project is helping the community in Kankheri village of Odisha enhance their knowledge of Dhokra art and bring it to the mainstream, writes **Sneha Bhattacharjee**

Thirty-eight-year-old Butra Kansari long aspired to purchase a motorcycle while working in Kerala as a wage labourer. Nobody in his native village ever owned a motorcycle. Kansari belongs to Kankheri village, a nondescript habitat situated in the remote parts of Kalahandi district in Odisha. Today, Kansari owns a motorcycle that he bought with the money he “earned” on his own.

The Census 2011 shows the population of Kankheri to be at approximately 3,800. Cut off from any form of civilisation and steeped in abject poverty, the villagers had originally depended on agriculture to meet their livelihood. However, with time and advancement in technology, it has become difficult for them to make a proper living without the right machineries. Consequently, they have been forced to seek menial jobs outside their homes. While most of them left for Kerala to earn a living, the uncertainty of jobs was too much to bear for many.

In 2018, while working on the Lanjigarh plant with the community there, a team from Vedanta came to learn of Dhokra art — an ancient technique of wax and metal casting that originated in Odisha and Bengal from the community of traditional metal-smiths called ‘Dhokra Damar’ — and of

Kankeri, where the almost extinct craft holds on to a sliver of life.

Soon a daily visit to the village 30 kms away from the plant led to the evaluation of opportunities. The idea was to revive the form and merge it with mainstream art, and enable the community to earn a sustainable livelihood out of it. In 2018, trainers were hired from Mayurbhanj, Odisha, who have already made a mark and worked regularly with the government. One trainer would put up in the village for four months at a stretch, teaching the artisans daily, helping them develop their skill and attain a level of professional quality that would enable them to present their works in national art and crafts fora. The company got them new tools necessary for artwork and essential raw materials like bee wax and brass.

“Most villagers do not want to leave their home, and travel to far-off places to earn a living. They did it out of necessity. So, when we shared the idea of making a living from the art which they have acquired from their forefathers and a skill they honed through generations of practice, they were excited. The support was there from the very first day”, said Rakesh Mohan, COO, Vedanta Aluminium, Lanjigarh Unit.

As efforts started bearing fruit, the next strategy was to help the artisan community



Butra Kansari showcasing his dhokra products at a state exhibition

create a raw material bank that would enable them to work seamlessly; open a self-help group bank account to provide adequate financial support; assist each of the 35 households to open a bank account where they can keep their hard-earned money and earn an interest on their deposit; organise an artisan’s card in collaboration with the government of Odisha that would give the artisans of Kankeri public recognition and access to government-held exhibitions to participate, demonstrate and commercialise their works.

“The artisans are very dedicated and their willingness to learn makes me happy. The

practise of this art form, though ancient, requires intricate skill sets which cannot be honed without tools, equipment, and more importantly, a proper source of electricity. That is how we have been able to hone them well,” says Sondhar Baghel, one of the trainers of Dhokra art.

The community is currently sitting on an order pipeline of well over ₹70,000. Four to five artists have reached a professional level and are ready to take off independently. Two artisans have already received ₹50,000 each from the government’s Mudra loan scheme to bankroll their artwork. “When we first started, there were considerable challenges before us. There was no communication network, no road for commercial vehicles to ply. But the main challenge was to make them find faith in the value of their art form”, adds Baghel.

Though the village has been provided with solar-generated electricity. “We are looking to increase the solar capacity to feed enough electricity that will be able to power the large cleaning and polishing and other machineries. These equipments are essential to give the art its much-required sheen,” says Baghel adding that she is hopeful the government will take note of the artisan’s work and help aid the much-needed electricity requirement to the village.

Meanwhile, the likes of Butra Kansari are happy to earn a living, receive pension from the government and also logistical support to showcase their work across the state.



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