

**AN ETHNO-REGIONAL STUDY OF THE “SHANKHARI”
ARTISANS OF BANKURA - BISHNUPUR AREA
FROM THE PRE-COLONIAL TO THE
PRESENT TIMES.**

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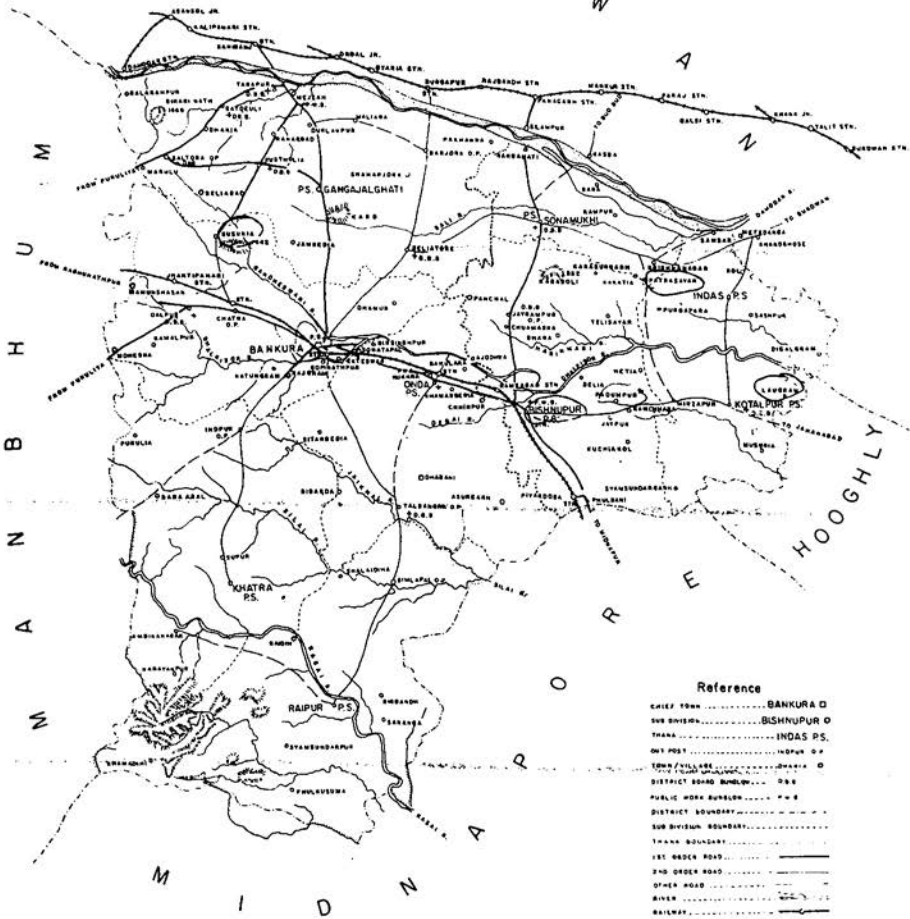
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District BANKURA

Scale 1 inch = 8 Miles.



Reference

CHIEF TOWN	BANKURA D
SUB DIVISION	BISHNUPUR D
THANA	INDAS P.S.
POST OFFICE	INDAPUR D
TOWN/VILLAGE	INDAPUR D
DISTRICT ROAD	D.R.
PUBLIC WORKS ROUTE	P.W.
DISTRICT BOUNDARY	---
SUB DIVISION BOUNDARY	---
THANA BOUNDARY	---
1ST ORDER ROAD	---
2ND ORDER ROAD	---
OTHER ROAD	---
RIVER	---
RAILWAY	---

The genesis of the idea of the present project can be traced way back to 1985 when I first visited Bishnupur. The presence of a large Shankhari community in a totally land-locked region raised my curiosity regarding the origin of this maritime craft. How did this craft community begin its life, so far away from the sea-coast? What factors propelled the settlement of these artisans? How did they live down the centuries? I have, in the following chapters, tried to address these crucial queries and have attempted to explore and map out the history, origin and their socio-economic status vis-a-vis other artisan communities, from the pre-colonial to the present times. I have dwelt at length also on some of the mythological and literary representations of the Shankhari craftsmen and thereby establish their unique status in the social context of ancient and pre-modern Bengal. Their migratory movements were frequent till they eventually settled down in different parts of south-western Bengal. Their constant travels in search of new homes, first from the land beyond the Vindhyas, and then within Rahr Bengal itself, gave them a kind of adaptability and resilience of spirit that can be seen even today.

For my findings I have depended on oral historiography in a major way that include recorded interviews of the artisans, their family histories and extensive and in-depth field-work in many Shankhari settlements of Bishnupur region.



Libation vessels found at Harappa, ca. 3000 BCE

CHAPTER 1

Conch –shell craft in Legends and Literature

Like many other craft traditions of India, the history of conch-shell craft flows in an unbroken continuity from the pre-historic times. Although, at present this artisan industry is limited only to West Bengal, it was originally located in the coastal regions of Western India from where it migrated to the South and following the vast coast line of Bay of Bengal from the South- east, eventually reached Bengal. This ancient migratory craft that followed the long horse-shoe route from the coastal areas of the west and through the Indian peninsula to the coastal regions of the east resulted in the growth of a distinct craft community in the Bengal society that was engaged in both the manufacture and trade of conch shell products. In the Rarh (south-western Bengal) region, the Shankharis first settled down in Medinipur which was a thriving centre of trade, thus making a turning point in the artisanal history of the province.

The *Shankhabanik* and the *Shankharis* who combined the work of the merchant and the artisans that formed the Shankhari caste came to occupy an integral part of the Hindu social system.

The use of conch-shell bangles (*shankhaas*) and conch-shell horns(*badya –shankha*) is an ancient custom among not only the Hindus, but Buddhists and Jains also.¹ The shankhari's craft therefore has clearly a religious and a ritualistic aspect, giving the entire task of producing conch-shell products a sacrosanct character.

The earliest use of conch-shell products can be traced back to the Harappan civilisation. Sea shells in plenty for decorative purposes were sent from Saurashtra and the Deccan to Harappa. The excavations of Mohenjodaro and Indus Valley have unearthed many objects of shell, of which broken conch-shell bangles form an interesting finding. Shell bracelets

roughly cut from large conch-shells and shell armlets presumably worn by dancing girls are other items.. Excavation reports refer to the room of Block D overlooking second street as being a shell worker's shop with many pieces of cut shells found in it . 2

In the Vedic period also, the Aryans made extensive use of conch shell products. The *Atharva Veda* refers to shell amulets. In the Buddhist literature namely the *Jatakas* , guilds of shell workers are mentioned, and the *Vinaya Pitaka* also gives evidence of the craft during the Buddhist period. There is mention of the duties of the Superintendent of Ocean Mines that include the collection of conch-shell products and the regulation of conch shell commerce.

Megasthenes' Indica also refers to the craft during the Mauryan period. 3. Ancient Tamil classics and literature of the Sangam age refer to the widespread use of ornamental conch shell bangles among *Pandyan* women and the large conch shell fisheries that existed during 2nd C. AD. The travelogues of foreigners who visited India during different periods also refer to the use of conch-shell products.

Cosmos Indico – Pleustes , an Egyptian traveller who came to India in the 6th C. AD and *Abu Zaid*, an Arab writer who wrote in the 9thc AD refer to the production and export of conch-shells from the Tamil coasts to Bengal.

From the writings of the Italian traveller *Barbosa* (early 16th c) we know there was conch-shell trade in Kalyal in south India from where conch-shells were sent directly to the workshops in Dhaka. There is a very interesting account given by the Portugese missionary, *Padre Maestro Fray Sebastian Manrique* who visited India in the beginning of the 17th c. He describes how the ship that he was travelling in got stuck in the shallow waters in the Bay of Bengal near the Sunderban regions. The ship was overladen with millions of conch-shells that were brought from the coastal regions of Tuticorin. Manrique writes that these were

important items of Bengal trade, and were used for making rings and bangles for the 'heathen' women. He also gives a very strange piece of information that conch-shell ornaments were used in Bengal to beautify the dead-bodies before their cremation!. Obviously Manrique's observation like that of many other foreigners suffers from gross prejudice and misconception of the Indian social customs.⁴

The ritualistic aspect of conch-shell products is further supported by the rich heritage of mythical and legendary tales connected with the beginning of this craft. One such tale is about Lord Shiva known for his absent mindedness and his devoted wife Durga, who invariably fell into predicaments of many sorts because of the absent mindedness of her husband. There was a grand 'yagna' in the celestial land where all the gods and goddesses were invited to, but Shiva, as was his characteristic, forgot to tell Uma about it. It was an occasion of grand outing and no lady divine lost the opportunity of dressing up and displaying their gorgeous jewellery. Poor Uma, indifferent as her husband was to material objects had nothing to wear. But Shiva was most understanding, and took her to the God of Wealth, Kuber who had a vast collection of the most exquisite jewels. But alas! The other goddesses were smarter. Every piece of jewellery had been taken by them. It was a moment of agony for Shiva, as he felt guilty. Just then they saw that Muni Agastya was passing that way with a huge conch-shell. Why not use that to make ornaments for the beautiful Goddess Durga? The dazzling white conch-shell would just glow on her. So Vishwakarma the engineer amongst the Gods was summoned to come with his tool kit to chisel out neatly a pair of bangles which now the Goddess could wear at the ceremony. But Vishwakarma failed to manufacture the tool that could cut the conch-shell. Eventually, Agastya Muni also designed the saw (the most essential tool of the shankhari clan till the introduction of the electrical saw in 1962) with the stem of a 'Kusha' plant. The beautiful bangles could at last

be made, and Durga now suitably bejewelled, became the cynosure of all eyes. A divine moon-like radiance emanated from her bangles and that started the trend among all married women to wear conch-shell bangles. This is the story that most Shankharis related and the most popular and suitably explains their reverence for Agastya Rishi.⁵

Another story is about the mighty demon Shankhachura who created endless trouble for the Gods in heaven. It was becoming almost impossible to crush his power. Shankhachura's power had been further strengthened by the fact that his wife Tulsi was a truly virtuous woman. As long as she remained chaste it would not be possible to kill the demon. At last however it was Krishna who devised a ploy. Disguised as her husband Shankhachura, he affronted her chastity, at a time when the demon was locked in a battle against the Gods. His strength gradually waned as Tulsi lost her chastity and eventually Shankhachura was killed. When Tulsi learnt of this treachery, she accused Lord Krishna, prophesying that as his punishment he would turn into stone. Krishna repented for his action and accepted Tulsi's curse with humility. Krishna said that he would be transformed to stone as Narayan (Shalgram Shila) and for his worship tulsi or basil leaves would be required. He further said that he knew that he had treacherously killed Shankhachura, so he willed that Shankhachura would be born again in the ocean as a conch-shell or 'shankha.' Krishna would always carry this conch-shell, his foremost adornment and out of the conch-shell would be created bangles which as symbol of chastity would adorn the hands of all virtuous women. In this way the Shankhari group of people was created for making bangles out of conch-shells. According to a different version it was Agastya who actually rid the world of this mighty demon with the semi-circular saw used by the shankharis.⁶

Myths connected with the origin of the Shankhari caste indicate and corroborate some important points about their geographical and racial origins. Rishi Agastya who journeyed



The plaque shows 'Vishnu', four-armed, seated on Garuda, in flying attitude.

The panel is damaged, the two-right arms of Vishnu and the right wing of Garuda, are broken away. In the lower left arm Vishnu holds the 'Panchajanya' Conch.



Durga slaying 'Mahishasura' (9-10th C). She holds a Conch-shell in one of her hands.

from the North to the South, never to return, and whose worship is held on the day of ~~of~~ Agastya- yatra (last day of Bhadra, i.e. 17th September) is one such clear indication. The Aryan sage's last and final journey from the north (Aryabharta) to the south (Dakshinapatha) asserts the Dravidian roots of the Shankhari caste. Again the story of demon Shankhachura and his ultimate deification through the association of Vishnu's conch-shell lends enough basis to the Dravidian and the maritime origin of this community. In another myth, Sage Agastya swallows up Batapi Rakhshas, signifying again the suppression of Dravidian culture by an Aryan sage.

The South Indian origin is further corroborated by the traditional belief that the Shankhari caste originated from *Srikanta*, the third son of *Dhanapati Saudagar* of Kamata. And Agastya was also revered by Dhanapati Saudagar as his guru or spiritual guide. 7 Infact the mythological representations regarding Shankhari origin only confirm the rapid Aryanisisation and Sanskritisation of the Dravidian culture.

Interestingly enough, Shiva and Durga are always the principal characters in all Shankhari myths. There are also many stories where different goddesses like *Sanaka* of Goaltora district in Medinipur, *Mahamaya* of Raipur and *Sarbamangala* of Laarchay village in Bankura, all representations of Durga and all of whom bought conch-shell bangles from different Shankharis.

These stories however have significant overtones. The fact that the Goddesses revealed themselves to the Shankharis may be seen as an attempt on the part of the Shankhari craftsman to rise high in caste-status. As a caste they had a major role to play in the religious lives of the people. Again, the theme of these stories might have been created by the Shankhari traders themselves of Rarh-Bangla region in order to advertise their products. The economic motive might have been the chief factor behind these myths. The same theme of

the Shankhari vendor selling his wares to the Goddess is also found in the long narrative poem, '*Jagadhya Bandana*' by the famous poet of Rarh-Bangla, *Kalichandra*. The Shiv-Durga theme was repeated even in the mid 18th c by *Rameswar Bhattacharya* in *Shivayan* in the episode called *Shankha Paridhan*. Specially mentioned should be the following verse that extolls the virtue of conch-shell bangles.

Shankha thaakiley haatay sansaray karay bhoy

Rog shoke santaap tilek naahi roy.

(With conchshell in your hand you have nothing to fear

Diseases, woes, illnesses-all instantly disappear.) 8

This immensely rich treasure of myths, tales and verses and the frequent references to the conchshell craft in accounts left behind by the foreigners in different periods of history therefore testify to the great importance that this craft has always enjoyed in our society.

CHAPTER 2

Medieval Bishnupur- Home of the Shankharis

The Sankhari settlement of Bishnupur can be traced back to the Bishnupur Raj which was founded in the 8th c A..D. Its founder, **Adi Malla** was born in 715 A .D and he ruled over the aboriginal peoples (Bagdis and Mals) of Mallabhum, an area that included the regions of Bankura, Onda, Bishnupur , Kotalpur and Indas.. After the death of **Sasanka**, i.e from the middle of the 7th c A .D till the arrival of Gopala in the middle of the 8th c, Bengal was in a state of political anarchy. In the absence of a strong ruler, smaller feudatory kingdoms, ruled by powerful chieftains rapidly emerged. The rise of Malla kings can be seen against this background. Surrounded by forests and therefore inaccessible from outside , the Mallabhum became a politically strong and culturally a rich feudatory kingdom in the Rarh region or South western part of Bengal.

Adi Malla, the founder of the dynasty had his centre of power at a place called **Laugram** (now in Kotalpur police station, about 25 kms from Bishnupur proper). Laugram was initially under another such small kingdom called **Pradyumnapur** or Padampur (West of Laugram and in close proximity to Bishnupur). In course of time however, Padampur was taken over by the subsequent Malla rulers. Mallabhum literally means the land of wrestlers. Adi Malla (original wrestler) received his title from his skill in wrestling. There is an etymological controversy regarding the name a Mallabhum. Malla might also refer to the aboriginal tribe **Mals** who along with the **Bagdis** inhabited this region. The first fifty rulers of this dynasty spanning the period from the 8th to the 16th c were known by the title of

Malla or Mallabinath. These kings were also designated as *Bagdi Rajas* which indicates that the region was inhabited by aboriginal races.

In all probability the capital of the Malla Rajas was shifted to Bishnupur during the reign of *Jagatmalla* in the late 10th or 11th c. Gradually extending their power from the western to the eastern frontier, they slowly spread their sway over a greater part of what now falls under Bankura and Medinipur region. The reason for this shift of capital is explained by the gradual intrusion of Malla rule in the interior of present Bankura district. Bishnupur, then a tiny insignificant village was in the process transformed into a beautiful, populous town. *Bishnupur was the most renowned city in the world, and more beautiful than the beautiful house of Indra in heaven. 1*

The city was fortified, temples were constructed, gardens were laid out and a large number of craftsmen, artisans and traders came and settled down here. Bishnupur was already beginning to develop into a centre of culture and busy commerce.

Archaeological evidences suggest that Jagatmal's contemporary, *Samanta Sen* of Sen dynasty from Kamataka in the Deccan came and settled down in South-western (Rarh region), around this time. This was the earliest contact between the Bishnupur Malla rulers and a south Indian ruling dynasty. It may be conjectured that the Shankhari community of Bishnupur-Bankura region which has strong links with the trans- Vindhyan civilisation ,as indicated both by the mythological tales of their origin and their genealogical history came along with this Sena ruler.² This would fix the date of their migration into South western Bengal in the early 11th c. The subsequent period saw further encounter between southern Bengal and the southern regions of India through invasions made by the Chola ruler *Rajendra1* (1022-1044) and there was in all probability a constant inflow of conch-shell craftsman from this period onwards.

In course of time however this migratory craft came to be concentrated only in Bengal. From the early colonial period the manufacture of conch-shell bangles began to decline in the southern part of India, which now only supplied raw-materials for production. The reason for this decline in the demand for conch-shell bangles in the South is not very clear. It was probably due to the invention of glass-bangles during this time and glass bangles proved to be much cheaper in price than conch-shell bangles.³ The shankhari craftsmen who first flourished in Medinipur, due to its proximity to the sea and its coastal trade gradually evolved into a community and spread elsewhere in Bengal.

Bishnupur-Raj, with its rising political and economic importance during the medieval period became the home of these migratory craftsmen under the active patronage of its kings. The comparatively secluded existence of the region, protected by extensive jungle areas, strong fortifications and the non-interference of the Mughal rulers must have also allowed this region to grow and prosper from within, resulting in the proliferation of different artisanal industries. Apart from conch-shell manufacture there emerged Handloom Silk manufacture (*Baluchari* saris now have a global reputation), lac industry, *Kansa* (bell metal) utensils, *Dhokra* artefacts made of brass, Terracota artefacts and wood carving. These artisanal products are not only for utility but they testify to the great artistic talents of the craftsmen of this region.

Apart from the active patronage of the Bishnupur –Raj, the proliferation of so many folk crafts might also be explained by another factor. The dearth of cultivable lands and alluvial soil in this region compelled many families to look for alternative sources of livelihood. Artisanal industries of so many different kinds could develop only because there was not enough land to cultivate.

The remarkable fact about these crafts is that these survived down the ages. The Maratha raids of the 18th c (1742-1751) leading to the decline of the Bishnupur Raj, to some extent, dislocated the artisan communities in Bishnupur. ...*the Marathas fell with their heaviest weight upon the border principalities of Birbhum and Bishnupur. Tribute, forced services, exactions of a hundred sorts reduced the once powerful frontier houses to poverty; and their tenantry fled from a country in which the peasant had become a mere machine for growing food for the soldier. The Marathas spent their energy in plundering the intervening frontier tracts of Birbhum and Bishnupur, where the dry soil and fine undulating surface afforded precisely the riding ground which their cavalry loved. There they could ^{harass} the villages exhaustively....*⁴

There was a large scale exodus of the Shankhari families now to the eastern part of Bengal, specially in the region of Dacca, which now began to develop as a prime centre of conch-shell craft.

The famine of 1770 and the Chuar Rebellion of 1798-99 as also the outbreak of an epidemic fever in Burdwan, further impoverished the province. The artisan communities along with the peasantry were adversely affected in the Bishnupur region. *J. Mukherjee*, Deputy Magistrate on Special Duty in connection with Famine Enquiry observed; *It may be said with tolerable accuracy that the well-to-do cultivators, agricultural labourers, weavers, braziers, Sankharis, potters...died without number.* ⁵

However, this setback appeared to be temporary and with the rapid spread of urbanization from 19th c onwards, cities like Gaur, Dacca, Murshidabad and Dinajpur along with Bishnupur emerged as thriving centres of conch-shell industry. It was by nature an urban craft and it naturally came to be localized in towns and business-places. In fact, the high

profitable value of this trade was already realized by the Dutch traders who imposed a monopoly on the supply of raw materials from South India as early as the 17th c.

Unlike other craft industries like handloom-weaving for instance, the conch-shell craft steadily expanded even during the colonial period. From the Rarh region it expanded all over East Bengal. Dacca's growth in this respect was phenomenal. Emerging as the foremost centre of conch-shell industry, the number of Shankhari artisans increased nearly four times between 1830 and 1924. The Swadeshi Movement especially gave a boost to the industry.⁶ New Sankhari settlements cropped up in Chittagong, Rangpur and Faridpur. Rangpur owed its emergence as a shell manufacturing centre to the growing trade with the sub-Himalayan regions during the early British rule. Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim previously dependent on Dacca and Pabna, now turned to Rangpur for these supplies. However, in all these developments it can be seen that the primary position so long enjoyed by the Rarh-region had now shifted to Eastern Bengal.

This phenomenal growth of the craft of the Shankharis during the colonial period can be explained by various factors. For ritualistic reasons there was an on-going market demand for conch-shell bangles and conch-shell horns in the Hindu society. Besides, unlike the handloom weaving industry, the conch-shell craft did not face any competition from the large-scale sector whether Indian or foreign, it was essentially an indigenous craft geared for meeting Hindu ritualistic needs and it also could not be produced by mechanical devices. The easy availability of raw-materials required for manufacturing process also kept the craft alive. Infact, in the 19th c, prices of different kinds of conch-shells went down considerably due to increased trade between Sri Lanka and the South. This led to increased production of shell-bangles and wide use among not only women of higher castes but also among poor tribal women of Chittagong and Tripura. *Titkaudi* (colloquial term for shells from

Tuticorin) shells which was qualitatively the best and the costliest, could now be bought at a much cheaper rate. The *Jaffna* shells, known as *Pati* (inferior) to the Shankharis in Bengal, too went down in price, which facilitated the manufacture of cheaper and stronger bangles of simple designs. The following table will explain explain the situation. 7

<u>Year</u>	<u>Price of Titkaudi Shells in Madras</u>
1773	Rs. 70 per thousand shells
1876	Rs. 71 per thousand shells
1903	Rs. 63 per thousand shells

The steady growth of conch-shell industry at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th c received further impetus during the Swadeshi Movement with its emphasis on traditional artisan crafts. The indigenous handicrafts were glorified by the leaders of the Swadeshi Movement and *Satishchandra Mukherjee* of Dawn Society suggested emphatically the proliferation of small-scale industries based on the individual family organisation that would be run on a caste basis. 8. The Swadeshi ideology however could not create a permanent change in the existing market situation. But the boost it received was phenomenal and the shankhari craft continued to thrive till the end of the world war II.

CHAPTER 3

Evolution and Expansion of the Caste and Craft

Of all the craft communities of Rarh region (S.W Bengal), the conch-shell craftsmen are the oldest. They are known as both *Shankhakar* and *Shankhabanik*, that is they are both artisan and merchant at the same time. Caste-wise they claim to be Vaishyas, even though they have Brahminical gotras and observe the rules and rites of the high castes. 1

The Shankhakers and Sankhabaniks belong to the *Naba Shakha* group. The earliest reference to the community is to be found in *Vaikhanasadharmasutra* (2nd or 3rd c B.C) that mentions the word *Shankhavalayakanina* meaning makers of conch-shell bangles. According to *Brahmavaivarta Purana, Prakritikhanda*, the Shankhakers along with eight other castes (Malakar, Karmakar, Kundirbak or tanti, Kumbhakar, Kangsakar, Sutradhar, Chitrakar and Swarnakar) were born of *Vishwakarma* (Engineer of the Gods) and *Ghrītachi*, a celestial nymph born as a Gopa girl by *Indra's* curse.

In the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, the *Shankhavalaya –Kaninas* are named as *Shankhikas*, in *Shavda Ratnabali* as *Kambojakas* and in *Jatadhara* as *Shambikas*. According to *Brihad Dharma Purana* (approx. 13th c, written after Turkish invasion in Rarh Bangla), the Shankhabaniks are the off-springs of a Brahman father and a Vaishya mother. 2

Among the Shankhakers of Rarh region (S. W. Bengal) there are four sub-castes or *Thaks* which emerged out of attempts to cut down competitions among the artisans. These are *Panka*, (mural designs made with lime or conch-shell powder), *Shikhara* (inhabitants of Shikhar or upper regions), *Bardhamena* (ancient Sankhari inhabitants of Bardhamaan), and *Rajhati* (Sankhari inhabitants of Rajhat-Birsinghapur village in the Police station of Onda, beside Dwarakeshwar river). Among these four sub-castes the first explains the occupational

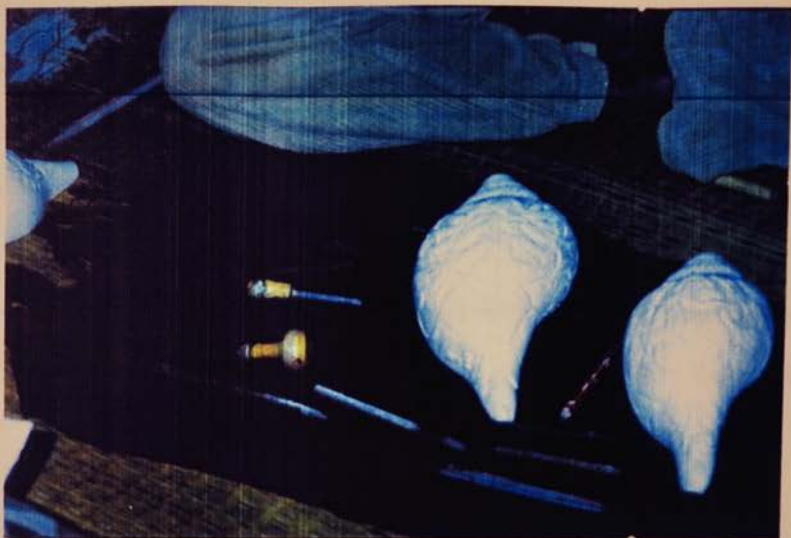
origin where as the rest three are determined by their territorial routes 3 The Panka sub-caste might also indicate a link with another ancient craft community of Bankura region namely the *Chunaru*, who produced lime for the construction of temples and other buildings in Bishnupur. They also made edible lime by burning shells that is taken with betel leaves. The Malla rulers patronised them with grants of land and forest regions and the *Chunaru* craftsmen who required conch-shell pieces for manufacturing lime must have lived within close proximity to the Shankhari families.

The earliest specimens of conch-shell products in the Rarh region has been located at a place called *Dihor*, close to Rajhat and on the banks of Dwarakeshwar river. A number of conch-shell bangles and horns belonging to the Mauryan, Shunga and Kushana period have been unearthed here. This would indicate that in the ancient period conch-shell products were not unknown here even though there was no organised or structured conch-shell community in this region.

Rawmaterials and their procurement.

The primary raw material required for conch-shell trade is *Turbinella Pyrum Linnaeus* which is a large, thick shelled gastropod, abundant in the shallow waters of Palk Bay and Gulf Of Mannar, between India and Sri Lanka, where it feeds on marine worms. Conch-shells are collected in the sea coasts of Ramanathapuram or Rameshwaram, Tuticorin in Tirunvelly and Thanjavur districts of Tamil Nadu from the Bay of Bengal under authority of the government of Tamil Nadu. Conch shells of different quality and size are made available to the artisans through the West Bengal handicrafts development corporation. There are primarily four kinds of conch-shells.

1. *Titkutti*- full sized with the diameter of 2.75 mm and above from Tuticorin



Tools used for Conch-shell carving.



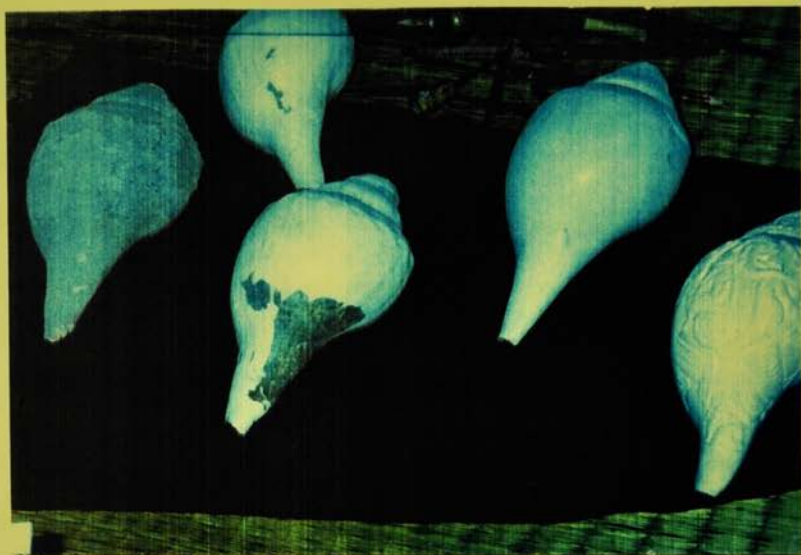
A young Bishnupur artisan at work.

2. **Rameshwari**- full sized with diameters of 2.50 to 2.75 mm from Rameshwaram
3. **Pati**- undersized and of inferior quality from Debipattanam
4. **Damaged**- worm eaten conch-shells from every region in Tamil Nadu.

Subsidiary raw materials that are required for the craft are two kinds of Lac (**Jua** and **Gala**), Stick Lac (**Lata**), Cinnabar (**Hingool**), Orpiment (**Harital**), red dye, green dye and charcoal. Other ingredients necessary are nitric acid, zinc oxide powder, adhesives, resins and wire. These are sold by weight and are available in the open market.

Tools and Equipments:

The tools and equipments used by the artisans during the production of various articles are very simple in nature. The traditional **Shankher Karat** (hand saw) has been replaced with the electrically operated machine-saw since 1962. Besides there are **Haturi** (hammer), **Sil** (a slab of flat sandstone), **Dara** (mandrel), **Batali** (chisel), **Uga** (file), **Kalam** (pen), **Jau Kathi** or **Karat** (lac stick), **Bhramar** (hand drill), **Dokhna Bari** (tripod stand), electrical polishing machine and other smaller items. The point to be noted is that no complicated or heavy machinery is needed for conch-shell craft and all the equipments are simple in design and function. They have not been much changed in these tools over the years except in the introduction of electrical saws instead of hand saws. Besides, the demand for the quantity of conch-shell bangles and conch-shell horns remains more or less constant in a locality. Because of the religious and ritualistic nature of the craft, it is confined only to a fixed clientele. No need for innovation to speed up the volume of production in a major way therefore, has been felt. The easily portable nature of the tools made the Shankhari community migratory and more mobile than other artisan classes.



Different stages in the Conch-shell. The one on the extreme left shows Conch-shell in its original form with the skin intact. The one on the extreme right is the final finished form, beautifully sculpted.



'Shankher Karat' (Hand-saw) held by Tarapad Nandy of Raibaghini. It is a family heirloom, long since replaced by the electric machine. But it is still venerated as the vermilion marks on it show.

Manufacturing Process:

Conch-shell craft is essentially a household industry with normally, the entire family taking part, and the entire process of manufacture takes place in the domestic area. The work area can be a tiny room, an open courtyard with small shed to protect the machine, or an open verandah. In some cases, poorer artisans work in the premises of more well-to-do artisans running the workshops as *Mahajans* or financiers.

Being basically a household industry restricted to the family, the craft is pursued by the head of the household with help from other family members including women and children.

In the Bankura district which is the scope of the present study, there are seven main craft centres- Bishnupur town, Hatgram, Raibaghini, Shashpur, Kamarsol, Ghutgarya and Patrasayer. Of these however, Bishnupur town and Hatgram have the biggest number of Shankhari craftsmen. In earlier times the craft technique of manufacture was kept as a Shankhari secret. Interestingly enough, the conch-shell craft is not monopolised by the Shankhari community any longer. There are members of other castes also participating in this manufacture process. For example, it is only in Raibaghini, Hatgram, Shashpur and Kamarsol that the Shankhari community is engaged in the craft. On the other hand, in Ghutgarya, a large number of non-Shankhari caste members (including high caste brahmins) dominate, with probably not a single Shankhari family being involved. 4 This indicates that in the past there must have been higher economic prospects of conch-shell manufacture as compared to that of the other caste-groups like Karmakars (makers of iron goods), Subarnabaniks (goldsmiths), Tantubaya (weavers), Kumbhakars (potters) and even Brahmin priests. It may be mentioned here that the growing popularity of the craft and its

lucrative prospects encouraged labourers from the Muslim community also to take to shell-carving in some regions of East Bengal, like Chittagong.

At every stage of manufacture, the craft calls for specialised and technical skills. Proper training in different operations of the craft is necessary for the manufacture of different articles. There is however no organised training centre to learn techniques of production. It is essentially a family craft and the know-how is handed from generation to generation. Every member in the family is expected to put in his or her contribution and women play a very significant part in the manufacturing process. Making of rings, polishing work, colouring of bangles and joining of fragments are usually done by women. They are also experts in engraving designs on conch-shell bangles and making such artistic hand ornaments like *Mina Bauti* bangles, *Nagacchi* (compound bangles) and *Saatgachhi* (seven bangles together), which is a speciality of Hatgram village. Coloured bangles (painted with lac and required for marriage) are usually made by women artisans. The Shankhari women artisans however maintain a very low profile like female members of other artisan communities and in spite of their great artistic talents, they have not yet been publicly acknowledged with any state or national award. Their labour and contribution to family earnings generally go unnoticed.

In the colonial period, however, women workers were totally excluded from the production process. Strangely enough, this was not true of other handicrafts. Probably there was a community decision for not allowing women to take part in the craft even though the reasons are not very clear. As against 3% female participation in Kansari industry, 24% in cotton handloom weaving and 34% in silk and 54% in basketry, according to an estimate in 1921, the women work force is nil in conch-shell industry. This exclusion of Shankhari women was sought to be explained by James Wise, who studied the conch-shell industry of

Dacca in the mid 19th c. He refers to their exquisite beauty and cites that a sa reason for non-participation in the manufacturing process. He writes, *Their good looks often exposed them to the insults and outrages of licentious Muhammadan officials. Even now-a-days, the memories of past indignities rouses the Shankhari to past fury and the greatest abuse that can be cast at him is to call him a son of Abdul Razzaq or of Raja Rajballab, the diwan of Bengal.* 5

Products and Designs:

The conch-shell products include primarily *Shaankhaas* ^{or} plain white bangles, coloured bangles and Badya Shaankhaas or conch-shell horns. Necklaces, rings, ear-rings, brooches and hair-pins are also made. A by-product of the craft is 'Shankha churna' or the chalk-like conch-shell powder which has medicinal value and is used for curing skin eruptions like acne and pimples.

The Shankhari craftsmen experiment with a plethora of designs on their products like conch-shell horns, bangles and rings that have been in existence for a long time. These are of indigenous origin and they essentially reflect the artistic and creative talents of the artisans. The typical designs are naturalistic, based on the motif of a plant, flower or fruit. Sometimes the designs are in stylised geometric motifs involving straight or curved lines. Passing through several generations, such traditional designs like *Banggit*, *Matardana*, *Motidana* and *Khejur Chhari* seem to be the most popular among the artisans.

Like all folk artists, they also borrow themes from popular culture and contemporary social life. Two such designs *Mane-na-Mana* (name of a popular Bengali film) and *Railway Lines* came into vogue in the 1960s at Raibaghini.

Surprisingly, the designs are not borrowed from myths and legends. The secular nature of the designs are probably done deliberately to make these universally acceptable to all the customers belonging to different sects within the Hindu community.

From Banik to Mahajan:

In the late pre-colonial period, the Shankhari community was crystallised into two groups, clearly demarcating the functions of the Shankhari artisan and the Shankharibanik (traders). The earlier form of production organisation where the artisan also acted as the seller of his manufactures, changed in course of time.

Retaining their role as manufacturers, the more resourceful members of the community now came to procure raw-materials in bulk and sell these to their less enterprising fellow artisans. The cost of importing conch-shells from South India (which alone accounted for 60% of the total cost of production) which out of practical necessity had to be bought in bulk was often beyond the means of individual producers. This resulted in the emergence of a dominant group within the community, but it could not exercise unbridled control over the economically less strong artisans. As they were from the same caste, the merchants and the artisans were connected with a sort of vertical loyalty to the social norms of their sub-castes or *Thaks*. Violation of these norms could lead to social ostracism. As the subcastes were endogamous units, caste merchants could hardly face such a situation, in the context of the pre-colonial rigid caste-rules. The merchants could certainly charge higher prices for the material, but he could not force the artisan to sell him, nor could he dictate his price. Besides, unlike other artisan communities like the weavers for example, the Shankhari community would be extremely mobile. The tools that they used for their craft could be easily portable (unlike the weaver's handloom). Like the weavers and similar other artisan

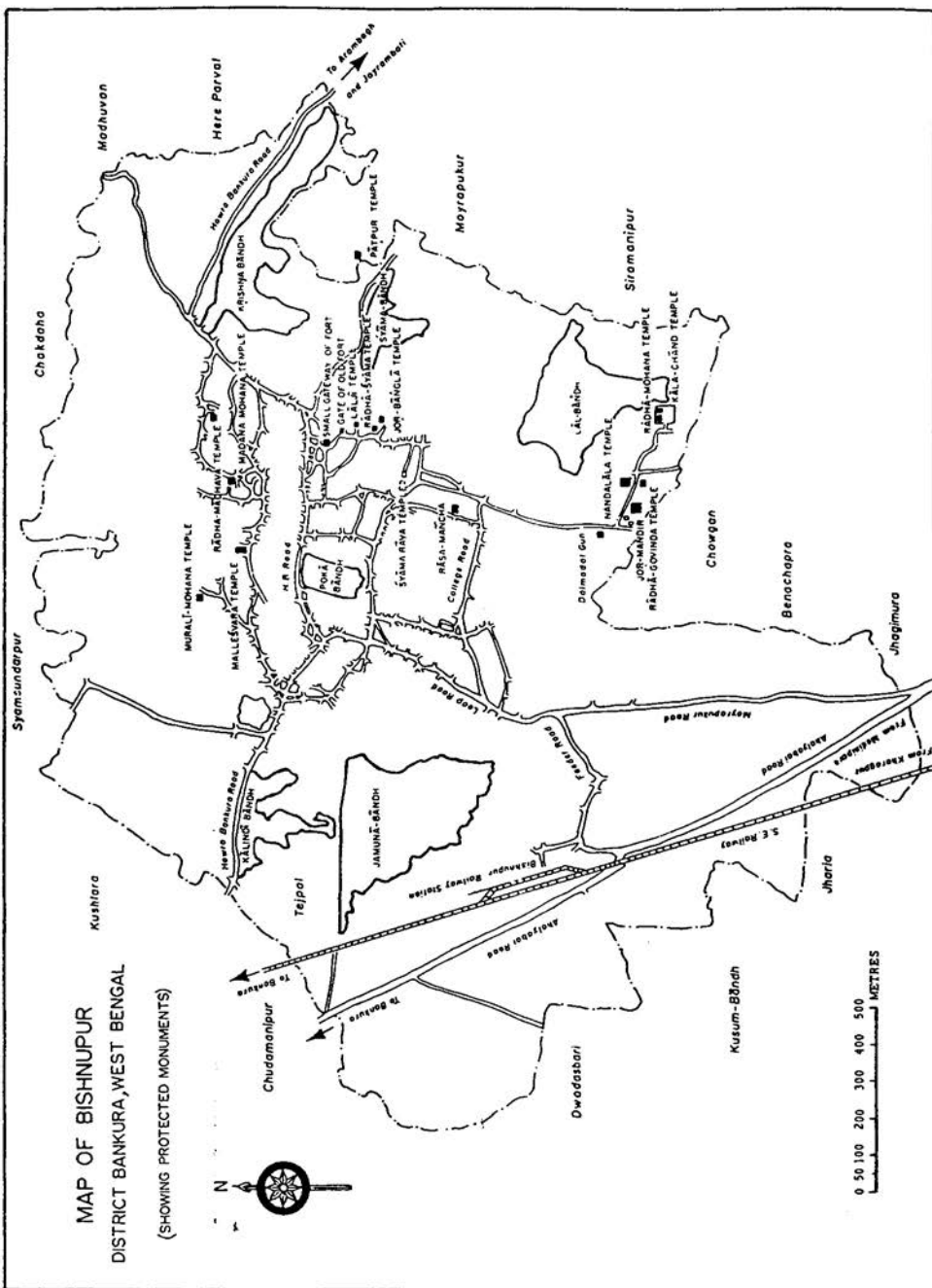
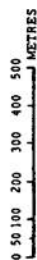
groups, they had no vested interest in land. These factors made them extremely mobile in the pre-colonial period, when Shankhari migration from one region to another was very common. It was always a collective action, enforced by community decision and could be seen as a social protest on many occasions.

From the 19th c onwards, the power of the Shankhabaniks increased to a large extent. Their hold over the artisans gradually strengthened. This could be seen with regards to the *Karatis* or traditional sawyers who were skilled in the art of slicing conch-shells into large rings for making bangles. The system of giving large advances in cash (*dadans*) to the karatis now started as an attempt to keep them and the large number of Shankhari artisans under control. As long as the dadan remained unrepayed, the karati would be completely at the mercy of the Shankhari merchants. Infact it became virtually impossible for the karatis to repay the advance which kept him in a state of permanent indebtedness. In 1910, Hornell described the repayment of advances by the karatis as “a virtual impossibility in the case of such improvident people as these cutters are, unless he takes service with another employer, who is willing to pay up the whole indebtedness and so take over the debt as well as the workman”. . In this way an occasional dependence of the karatis on the Shankhari merchant could turn into a permanent one.

A new feature in the 19th c was the rapid transformation of the pre-colonial Shankharibanik into a *Mahajan*. His quick material gains during this period also gave them an elevated social status. Lured by a higher margin of profit, the Shankhari Mahajans also began to invest more in production. Consequently, the number of *Mahajani* factories increased in a large way.

By offering higher wages to the karatis to join his workshop, the Mahajan practically monopolised the shell-cutting activities. The rest of the finishing works were done in small

domestic units. In this way the proliferation of the Mahajan factories jeopardised the position of the domestic workshops. The Shankhari merchants procured conch-shells from the south in bulk and after having these sawed and sliced, sold them to the artisans through their agents in the districts. Shell-slicing in addition to their trade in conch-shells largely augmented the mahajan's profit. Through their control over the supply of conch-shells and the slicing trade, the Shankhari mahajans succeeded in establishing their stranglehold over the larger community of Shankhari artisans in Bengal who now lost their earlier independence. This situation continued throughout the colonial period, and to some extent it is present till today as the accounts narrated by most of them reveal and is discussed at length in chapter IV.



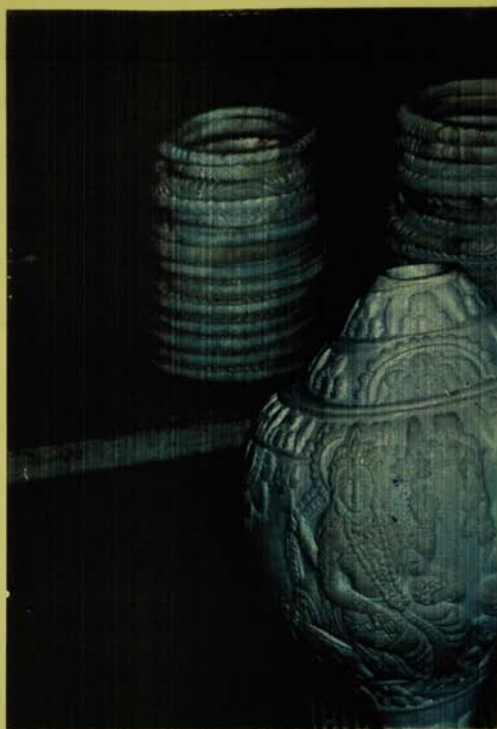
CHAPTER 4

Bishnupur today : Interface with the Artisans

This whole chapter is based on accounts, stories and family histories gathered through audio-taped interviews taken during my field trips in *Bishnupur town*, *Hatgram* and *Raibaghini*. Their changing socio-economic conditions, their hopes and frustrations, their bitterness, sense of despair as also their resilience and undying optimism come out very clearly through their oral testimony.

At the turn of the 21st century, Bishnupur town stands as the mute historian of a glorious past. The exquisitely carved terracota temples, the deserted fort, the seven tanks that surround the town and which were the sources of regular water-supply to the city bear witness to a rich and advanced civilisation that emerged in medieval times. But Bishnupur today is at best a relic of antiquity. Muddy roads, mud houses and open drains proliferate, but vestiges of its fine culture can still be felt in this traditional town. Most of the local families have lived here for generations and there is a deep sense of pride and awareness of their history and traditions among the local people of the town. Shopkeepers or temple priests or even the cycle-rickshaw pullers can effortlessly narrate stories and incidents of the Malla rulers. Myths, legends and folk traditions are etched in their memories. Memories of the past are embedded in their psyche and they are extremely conscious of their glorious past.

The old town plan still remains where different *para*/ localities are demarcated for different caste groups following different professions. There is the *kabiraj – para*, where the Baidyas still dominate and *Bamun para* where Brahmin families live but the members of these two castes do not necessarily follow their traditional professions now. Localities like Kansari



Finished products for sale at a Bishnupur Shankharibazar Shop.

Plain, undecorated 'Shaankhaas' at the same shop.



para, and Shankhari – *para* on the other hand are different as majority of dwellers in these two *paras* still follow their traditional occupations, if not fully at least partly.

Shankhari bazar, situated on the northern part of town is one of the oldest localities in Bishnupur town. Its narrow winding lanes and by lanes with dilapidated ancient one-storey and two-storied houses and equally ancient trees with Dharmavaja shrines at their bases probably have not changed very much in the last 200 years. The use of the term *para* suggests the concept of a communitarian identity. These caste –wise divisions are invisible maybe to the outsider but to the residents of the small town of Bishnupur, these are socially significant. Shankharipara is also called Shankharibazar which means this locality is both a residential area and an outlet for sale of shankha products. The houses are either built with bricks or with mud. Some of these date back to 200 years, like the one where **Sri Rabi Nandy**, the secretary of Shankha Kalyan Sangha lives. Close to the dwelling houses are small shops owned by many of the shankhari families from where their products are sold.

At present there are approximately 200 Sankhari families and only about 45 families among them depend wholly on conch-shell crafts. 1. Extensive interviews held with a number of families brought out significant aspects regarding their social status, life-style, and present economic pressures. Most of these families settled down in Bishnupur in search of better markets. A vast difference in outlook and mindset could be noticed between the elderly Shankhari workers and their younger counterparts.

Sri Gopal Nandi lives with his wife Gita and daughter in his ancestral house situated opposite Madan Mohan temple. The house has thatched roof, an outer – room, and beside this room there is a tiny work area on the left hand side where the conch- shell cutting electric machine is kept. The right side of the house (the 2 parts being separated by a narrow alley) possibly has a small cooking area and another small room. Gopal Nandi is



'Shankhari' woman at work in Bishnupur, Shankharibazar.
Work area measures barely 6' x 6'.



Hatgram 'Shankhari' at work. Unlike in Bishnupur town, Hatgram 'Shankhari' households have work areas in courtyards outside their homes.

actually quite an institution in the Shankhari clan of Bishnupur. An upright, outspoken man in his early seventies (born in 1932), he takes pride in his work and profession. His confidence exuded from his conversations. Winner of the President's Award in 1988, for his exquisite piece of work in coconut shell, Gopal Nandy represents that older generation of Shankharis who can remain truly optimistic even in the face of economic adversity. Like most other Sankhari families, Gopal Nandy's family came from outside Bishnupur. Gopal Nandy's ancestors were originally settled in **Supur**, in **Khatra** district an area from where many other Sankhari families in Bishnupur also settled. Rabi Nandy, belonging to the same generation as Gopal Nandy also traces his origin to the same place. Rabi Nandy, who is the secretary of the local Shankhari Association of Bishnupur, and which is now practically defunct as an organisation, is another such stalwart of the community who believes strongly that the Shankhari craft can never die out. He lives in a house that is 200 years old. Compared to Gopal Nandy's house, it is larger in size. It has two storeys, a courtyard in front and has a stronger structure of cement and brick. Both Gopal Nandy and Rabi Nandy represent the older generation in the community and they took great pride in narrating their ancestral history. Their ancestors had served the Malla Rajas and enjoyed their patronage. Gopal Nandy is positive of their south Indian origin.

The rising cost of conch – shells, lack of government patronage, the depletion of markets and also the decreasing demand for the utility of conch shell bangles have driven many of the traditional craftsmen to look for other sources of livelihood. However, of late, specially in the urban areas, many of these Shankhari families have completely moved out of their traditional practice. Many have found employment as District School teachers, police constables, gram – 'sevaks,' junior clerks in banks (**Mallabhum Gramin Bank**), typists and sub - inspectors in the period between 1980 March to June 2000. 2.

There are attempts to meet the financial crunch through other means also. Very often in a joint family where 2 or 3 brothers live together, they share a common fund. One member usually goes out to work, whereas the family craft is looked after by other members. The family of Dilip Mondol is such a typical example. There are eight members in his family, including his aged parents, sisters, brothers and their wives and children and his own children. Dilip Mondol who is in his early thirties represents the present generation of his clan. He is bitter and critical about the present state of affairs, about governmental apathy and the economic hardships of the shankhari artisans. Interestingly enough, the standard of living in his family is strikingly higher than many of his neighbours and certainly than that of Gopal Nandy's family. His family uses cylinder gas for cooking (he told me that they require 2 cylinders a month to cope with a large family), possesses a colour television set. These are all external signs of upward social mobility. Besides, with so many small children, baby – food like Lactogen and Cerelac, also create pressure on the family budget. Dilip himself is a service holder, and when I met him in January 2001, he told me that his unmarried younger brother who's been trained in fire – fighting would also take up service in Fire Brigade to help meet the rising economic needs of his family.

In this way, rising prices, and rapid urbanisation leading to increased cost of living are pushing the majority of the Shankhari craftsmen in the Bishnupur town to look for alternative employments. To these causes maybe added other factors like lack of governmental patronage, the depletion of markets and also the rising cost of conch – shells and new market forces which are putting economic pressures on these craftsmen and stifling the growth of this craft. A majority of craftsmen interviewed in Bishnupur town were bitter in their criticism of Governmental apathy. The West Bengal Government, according to them, did take some measures in the past to improve their condition. The West Bengal

Government sponsored institution, *Manjusha*, took up the task of procuring raw – materials for the Shankhari craftsmen at a reduced price. But as Gopal Nandy and Rabi kinkar Nandy pointed out even this reduced rate was found to be exorbitant by many of them.³ So this system was stopped from 1997 and from then onwards conch – shells could be purchased from open market and could be directly bought from Madras, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh.

Those who are more affluent among the Shankhari craftsmen, i.e those who can invest greater capital in the trade now procured raw – materials at a large scale and established their agents in different parts of Bengal to sell them to individual artisans. But Gopal Nandy thinks that this removal of Governmental protection for price – control has badly affected the artisan class. It has sharpened the division between the richer and the poorer craftsmen within the Shankhari community, between those who have the capital to invest large sums of money to buy raw – materials and those who are at the mercy of these capitalists. It has deepened the divisions between Mahajans and the ordinary artisans, Nandy lamented. And this is starkly apparent in the different lifestyles, housing conditions and socio – economic status maintained by brothers belonging to the same family. The richer among the Shankharis are now easily identifiable as *Mahajan* and the poorer artisan as *Karigar*.

The difficulty of procuring raw – materials at a reasonable rate after the withdrawal of Manjusha's support was not the only problem. As a few Bishnupur Shankharis like Dilip Mondol and Siddhartha Mondol commented, that after it stopped supplying raw – materials, Manjusha also no longer allowed the finished products of the artisans to be sold through Governmental channels. So the marketing outlets were now also greatly limited. After Manjusha closed down in 1997, the Zilla Parishad of Bankura started a cooperative under the DIC (District Industrial Centre), but this was also shortly discontinued. In the last few



Conchshell artefacts - made by students at a NGO-Conducted workshop in Hatgram, November, 2001

years there have been some attempts by the West Bengal government to alleviate the financial situation of the Shankharis. Through NABARD, they can take loans on a moderate interest to buy tools and cutting – machines. Government – sponsored annual handicrafts fair held in Kolkata in January also provide them with the opportunity of selling their goods at a 20% discount to the buyers. The government reimburses them for 20% rebate. However, the young Shankharis like Dilip and Siddhartha were very critical about this practice. At the handicrafts fair held in 2001, Dilip narrated cases where many artisans took undue advantage of the system and tried to make extra profit by taking recourse to unfair means. Many craftsmen are therefore critical of this rebate system and they feel that they do not really benefit much by and this system should be totally stopped.

The WB government also organises training – centres from time to time. But as Ravikinkar Nandy, a dynamic member of this community complained that these training programmes are not followed up with job opportunities by the government. The trainees are not given any opportunity to sell their products. Besides the government just provides the grant. It does not inspect later on how the money is being utilised, and who are the actual people benefitting from this grant. Infact, as Ravikinkar said, that at the moment, he and a few others of his community were settling the issue with the DIC. They are insisting that the selection of the trainees must be done by them and not by the government. Their argument is that the Govt. is not in any position to decide which artisan – trainees are suitable and who will continue the work later on. Actually, Govt. help and intervention is often influenced by present – day party – politics, and it is clear that there is no cooperation between the artisans and the DIC.

I visited such a Govt. sponsored conch – shell training programme in Hatogram, in November, 2001, which really acted as an eye – opener. It was being organised by an NGO

Abhibyakti. in collaboration with the Govt. The duration of the training programme was 3 months. But the local craftsmen complained that the 2 teachers who were appointed by the organisation were not experts in conch – shell craft. There is lack of raw – materials and there is no outlet for the products. The young trainees, both boys and girls enthusiastically displayed their various products. These were mostly decorative pieces (animal figures, etc) made from cut – pieces of conch –shells. But they were completely in the dark regarding their market situation. Unless the Govt. provides them with ready markets, their entire effort for creating beautiful art objects will be an exercise in futility. A precious lot of time, money and energy is spent on these training programmes but with no fruitful result.

The steady depletion of markets for conch – shell bangles and other products have also affected this craft –community in a major way. Rapid urbanisation and the corresponding secularisation of Hindu religious practices and rituals as also the present prohibitive price of conch-shells have significantly reduced the demand for both conch – shell bangles (orShaankhaas worn by married hindu women) and shell – horns (blowing of shankhas in Bengali hindu households every evening has considerably lessened in the past few decades). Besides, alternative plastic ornaments have flooded the village markets. These are found to be more durable and more affordable. Cheap white plastic or other synthetic bangles are now being substituted for the traditional conch – shell bangles or shaankhaas. This came as a stark revelation when I visited the famous annual fair at *Shnareshwar* (10 kms from Bishnupur) in April, 2001 and discovered to my surprise that there was not a single stall that sold conch – shell items. The fair was,flooded instead ,with plastic goods. The picture is very much the same today in other *Hats* or open – air country markets that are held throughout the year in the different villages of Bankura district.

List of fairs attended by the artisans in BANKURA DISTRICT:

<u>Name of the place</u>	<u>Occasion</u>
<i>Balitha</i>	<i>Chandi puja on the first day of the Bengali month Magha</i>
<i>Baital</i>	<i>Chaitra Sankranti</i>
<i>Haripmr</i>	<i>Pous Sankranti</i>
<i>Naricha</i>	<i>Sarba Mangala Puja</i>
<i>Panchal</i>	<i>Chaitra Sankranti</i>
<i>Raniara</i>	<i>Madan Mohonji Puja</i>
<i>Sambro</i>	<i>First day of Magha</i>
<i>Satani</i>	<i>Manasa Puja</i>
<i>Shior</i>	<i>Chaitra Sankranti</i>
<i>Raibaghini</i>	<i>Ravan Kata Rath during Aswin</i>
<i>Shashpur</i>	<i>Cajjan during Chaitra</i>

In this respect also the efforts of the small – scale industries Directorate of the Govt. of West Bengal is sadly lacking. The task of creating markets can be taken up by some agency of the Government to help the artisans. The West Bengal Handicrafts Development Corporation can also explore foreign markets which could bring better income for the craftsmen. Infact, individual efforts in exploring over – seas markets for sale of conch – shell products have been made in the past. From the sixties of the 20thc when the conch – shell craft was really at its peak, there had been large – scale exports to various countries like Germany, FRG, Italy, Spain, US, UK, Netherlands, Hongkong, Malaysia, Singapore. It reached its peak in 1978 but after that there was a steady decline, as the following table reveals. 3

India's export by commodities and countries through Calcutta Custom Zones

Year	Countries	Quantity in Kgs	Value In Rs.
March 1978	German Frg	80	955
	Italy	1500	4640
	Total	1580	5595
March 1980	Malaysia	150	4909
March 1981	Netherlands	400	16415
	USA	3000	28869
	Total	3400	45284
March 1982	Malaysia	55	1281
	Singapore	460	2487
	Total	515	3768

From this table however it is not clear what was the margin of profit for the individual artisans.

The sixties can be described as a golden period in the history of the craft. There started a new trend. The more skilled among the craftsmen like Rabin Mondol and Bangshi Mondol of Hatgram, Dilip Mondol, Aswini Kumar Mondol, and his sons Rabikinkar and Subhankar Nandy of Bishnupur have been making exquisitely carved conch – shells for decorative purposes. These depict stories from Mahabharat, Ramayana, Radha- Krishna episodes and 'Dasabatars.' Incidentally, the existence of decorated conch – shell bangles in the 17th and 18th centuries can be corroborated by literary sources. In the poetry of Rameswar

Bhattacharya there is ample reference to '*By – Shankhaa*' that have stories and characters from the myths and epics depicted on them. 4.

The niche target clientele for these beautifully designed conchshells is obviously very exclusive. Priced exorbitantly high (Rs. 2000-10,000), these can be bought only by the very rich and the affluent art-lovers and foreign tourists. These have found markets in the exhibitions and handicrafts fairs held in the metropolitan cities, but they cannot bring any steady supply of income to the artisans. Production of this kind of work entails not only deft artistic skills, it is also time-consuming and requires a lot of capital, which prevent the poorer artisans from making decorative conch – shells.

The rising cost of living coupled with a steep increase in the price of raw-materials is probably the highest deterrent today in the proliferation of this craft. In the last 20 years the cost of conch – shells has increased five fold. There are different qualities of conch – shells as there are different shapes and sizes. What cost Rs 40/- in 1992, became Rs 200/- in January 2001. Likewise, subsidiary raw materials and the prices of essential tools required for production of various articles have gone up at least 5 times in the last 20 years .

Besides, the artisans have to bear the cost of transport of raw materials from the godowns in Kolkata or Bankura. Previously, about 20 years back the wholesale dealers were responsible for despatching these to the artisan's workshops. But now it is the artisan's responsibility to bring them to their workshops. This entails further economic hardships.

Most of the members of the Shankhari community whom I met in Bishnupur are bitter and critical of the governmental attitude of apathy. It is clear that they are under severe economic hardships. But the tone of despair was stronger among the younger Shankharis than among the older generations. The older members of the community expressed positive attitudes and strong determination that is indeed remarkable. Gopal Nandy and a few others have not lost

hope. Undeterred by financial constraints, he has diversified into different alternative craft media like coconut shells and wood apple (bael) shells and producing beautiful objects. He is also training others (including his daughter and other neighbourhood women) in this craft. Bablu Nandy of Bishnupur also cannot afford conch – shells but his aesthetic skills find expression through coconut shell productions like small boxes, flower – vases, bowls, dhoop danis, etc.

The Shankhari community of Hatgram , a small quiet village about 60 kms from Bishnupur is not much different from the urbanised Bishnupur Shankharis. Population is sparse here. There are mud roads and mostly mud huts, and vast acres of paddy fields and bullock carts in the interior of the village. There are about 500 Sankhari families here out of which about 300 families pursue conch – shell craft, with supplementary sources of income, mainly from land. A remarkable feature of this village is that the Shankhari community is the dominant caste group here and that determines their higher social status. Compared to the the situation in Bishnupur ,the Shankhari craftsmen of Hatgram appeared to be less bitter and critical even though they seem to enjoy lesser amenities than the Bishnupur Shankharis. The more affluent Shankhari families here have a much higher standard of living than shankharis of any part of Bishnupur sub- division. Their housing conditions are better, even though the interiors of their dwellings are as unkempt and untidy as anywhere else. It is indeed strange that not a bit of artistry that is displayed so magnificently in their products can be seen in their living style. The auspicious and ritualistic aspects connected with their work surprisingly, do not seem to inspire any need for cleanliness in their surroundings. It cannot be linked to poverty, because the same condition was noticed in almost all the families irrespective of their economic situations. The sole exception was probably the family of Shyampada Nandy of Raibaghini, about whom I have written later in this chapter.

The two families of Paresch Bhadra who by profession is a headmaster and had just retired when I met him in March 2001, and Gurupada Bhadra and Durgadas Bhadra who still earn their living from conch – shell crafts, have been settled in Hatgram for generations, and are much respected by the local people. Whereas Paresch Bhadra's family has completely moved out of their traditional craft, (son Nirupam teaches in Jaygaria Junior High school on College Road in Bishnupur), the family Gurupada and Durgadas still to some extent depend on Shankhari craft as their source of livelihood.

Gurupada Bhadra and his brother Durgadas Bhadra have joint – family set up and the two of them along with their wives participate in the production process. Hatgram shankharis specialize in making joint conch – shell bangles (*jora shankhaa*) out of broken conch – shell and red bangles (*Kar shankhaas* required for new brides). These are cheaper than the unjoined ones (approx. Rs.40/- for one pair as against Rs. 120/-, the approx. cost of an unjoint pair). The Bhadra family has a very large workshop, which in recent years has been extended to include larger electric cutting machines. (Infact this is the largest workshop that I saw in Bishnupur sub division). It is the family spirit of loyalty to their traditional means of livelihood that keep the shankhari craft alive in this Bhadra household. But the conch – shell produce alone cannot generate enough funds to keep the production going. The family income is supplemented by salaries drawn from other employments taken up by the younger brothers of Gurupada and Durgadas. A part of the income is used however to expand the family trade. An exemplary practice, whereby this traditional craft can be kept going should inspire other comparatively better-off shankhari families who have completely abandoned the pursuance of this craft.

Comparatively less economically able than the Bhadra family, but producing much more artistic conch – shell horns and bangles is Bangshi Mondol. Like many other artisans of

Sculpted Conch-shells made
by Bishnupur artisans



Ram's 'Haradhanu-bhanga'
scene depicted on Conch-
shell by Hatgram Shankhari.

Sculpted Conch-shell
showing price-tag – from
Hatgram



Bishnupur, Bangshi makes creative designs on conch- shells, borrowing themes not only from Ramayana and Mahabharata but also experimenting with Jamini Roy's drawings. Another such artisan is Haripada Kundu who makes intricate designs on conch – shells, but as they are priced very high they do not have much economic viability. But the love and dedication with which these two artisans pursue their craft prove the point that with a little financial help from outside they would do everything to save this dying art.

A major problem which the Hatgram shankharis were faced with in November 2001 when I visited them, was the power situation. A cluster of shankhari families living in small thatched shacks in the locality close to Gurupada Bhadra's house were being denied electricity for the previous 15 days continuously when I visited them last November 2001. Unable to operate the electric cutting machines, their production process virtually came to a stop. The artisan families here complained that this situation was nothing new and that their work was frequently hampered due to such large scale power cuts. Repeated complaints in the Panchayat had been fruitless and the Rural Electricity Board took no steps to rectify the situation. The already impoverished condition of this marginalised group of artisans living in the interior of this village is thus further aggravated by the hazardous power situation.

Embittered and desperate, their anger was directed not only against the REB but also against their Panchayat representatives, who remained, according to them indifferent to their plight.

What emerged clearly from this study of the Hatgram scenario was that there exist a lamentable lack of communication and cooperation among the members of the artisan community. Also, there is no attempt on the part of the more prosperous members of the shankhari community to protect or help out their less privileged brethren. Quite definitely, this is an area, where the government should intervene decisively. Establishment of large – scale cooperatives, (which has become dysfunctional in Bishnupur) seems imperative in the



Shyamapada Nandy's Family at Raibaghini. Their artistic talents find expression through music also.



On the Steps of "Agastya Muni" Temple at Raibaghini.

Hatgram situation. Loans on easier terms from NABARD should be made available to the needy artisans. An under current of resentment and animosity could be felt among the less fortunate members of the artisan community. A strong sense of rivalry also seems to exist between the 2 *shankhariparas* of this village (*Namopara* and *Uparpara* as they call it), which is greatly similar to the Bishnupur Shankharibazar situation where there is hardly any love lost among the different Shankhari families. Ideally, such differences and animosities should be eased out to tide over the present crises. A spirit of joint venture among the artisans will go a long way in sustaining the craft.

The situation in Raibaghini, a small insignificant village on the eastern side of Bishnupur town in the Kotalpur police station, that lie hidden beyond the Joypur forests is however very different. Caste-wise, the shankhari community is in the minority and in the last 50 years its condition has vastly deteriorated. Makers of exquisitely designed conch-shell bangles of various kinds like *nogachhi*, *satgachhi*, *panchgachhi* with intricate *mina* work, done mostly by womenfolk in the families, the shankhari community now reels acute economic pressures. The individual artisan families interviewed here surprisingly showed neither critical bitterness nor the creative dynamism of the Bishnupur or the Hatgram Shankharis. On the other hand, they really revealed a sense of abject surrender to their irreversible situation. Economically the most deprived of all the Shankhari settlements in this region, most of the families struggle to survive, still clinging desperately to this dying craft. There are 22 Shankhari families who live under severe financial constraints. The craftsmen here can afford to buy only broken pieces of conchshells (*reks and kuchis*).

The different families here can be categorized into three distinct groups. First, there are those households that pursue conchshell craft only as a part-time occupation or as a supplementary source of income, the major income coming from other employments. These

families are marginally better off than others. In the second category falls such families that depend primarily on conch-shell craft, but draw supplementary earnings by working in land. It is the third category of families however who try to make their both ends meet through only their dependence on their traditional occupation as Shankharis. With appallingly meagre resources at their disposal, they just barely manage to survive with whatever little profit that they can get.

In the first category, falls Shyamapada Nandy's family that is clearly the most prosperous among all the other Shankhari households in Raibaghini. His family includes his wife, his three sons, their wives and children and his widowed sister who controls all the household activities. The three sons are all employed in different services. The eldest son works in Block Development Office and the two younger brothers are schoolteachers. Women in the household also contribute to family earnings. For example, the eldest daughter-in-law also teaches in the village primary school and is a member of the Panchayat. The children go to school and even attend music school and drawing classes, indicating thereby the existence of a better quality of life. The family also earns from land. Women of the house and the men in their free time pursue the craft. Rings and beads are the main products. They also make other small artefacts like Shivalingas etc. conch-shell horns and bangle manufacture are totally absent in this village. Not being able to afford intact conch-shells the artisan buys broken pieces of two kinds viz **Reks** with which rings can be manufactured and **Chhats** which are used for making sundry other small objects. The Nandy family is economically better off and this household in the past used to serve as meeting grounds of smaller artisans, who even to some extent enjoyed their patronage. Shyampada Nandy, is an old man and has become inactive now. It was his elder sister Kamala who with her myriad anecdotes and stories from the past guided me through history of the Shankhari artisans in Raibaghini. She

also traced the ancestry of her father's family to Supur in Khattra police station, the same region mentioned by Gopal Nandy and Rabi Nandy of Bishnupur as their ancestral village. On the basis of the data gathered from them and this Raibaghini household, it can be concluded that there was a large-scale migration of Shankhari artisans from Khattra to different villages in the Bishnupur region during the Malla period. The reasons for this migration if discovered, might reveal new facts about Shankhari history. Gopal Nandy's family, had moved to Hatgram from where at a much later date Gopal Nandy and many others had moved out and settled down in Bishnupur which offered better market facilities. Over the years there developed contact between Bishnupur and Hatgram artisans mainly through marriages. Raibaghini Shankharis on the other hand, as revealed from Kamala's oral interview led a more secluded existence. Most marriages take place among the families of the same village. However, his two daughters have been married outside Raibaghini, one in Bankura sadar and the other in Hatgram in April 2001. The 3rd daughter was married next-door in Raibaghini only.

It is to this family of Prabhakar and Nibedita Dutta that I shall now turn. It falls in the second category. They are the son-in-law and daughter of Shyampada. Economically much below her father's family, Nibedita and Prabhakar with 3 small children find it difficult to maintain themselves only from conch-shell craft. Young as they are, in their early thirties, they lack the verve of the young urbanised shankhari merchants of Bishnupur. Living in rural surroundings they lack all the amenities and aspirations of towns people. Their needs and requirements are simple and basic. They merely wait to feed, clothe and educate their children well. But even this they find difficult to achieve. In this household it is Nibedita who is the main artisan. Finishing all her domestic chores by the crack of dawn, she starts her work in the tiny workshop adjacent to her hut and deftly chisels out shell-rings and

beads from the electric machine. This she does throughout the day, in between getting up to cater to children's needs and other household work. Her husband has a piece of land to look after. He also helps his wife in manufacturing work and looks after the marketing of products. The rings are sold for 35 paise each, a ridiculously low price by present market standards. The margin of profit is therefore negligible. These products are sold to merchants in Kolkata and Asansol throughout the year at no fixed time. The income from these products is irregular, uncertain and extremely meagre. The practice of traditional craft is supplemented by income from land which is also not adequate. Consequently the Dutta household makes do with only minimum requirements. The physical strain also shows on Nibedita. Remaining confined to a work area measuring 6 ft by 4, amidst heaps of conch shell powder, Nibedita's health had deteriorated in 6 months when I met her last. Her eyesight had weakened, which is a common ailment among the Shankharis.

Surprisingly however, there was not an iota of complaint in their narratives. Not even any undercurrent of bitterness, anger or resentment could be detected in them. Learning to live with just bare minimum requirements, they have forgotten in their daily struggle for survival even to dream of a new future. Their contentment with the present state of affairs is really startling, and they do not point their finger at anybody for their miserable conditions. Their faith in their traditional craft is unshakable, which they fervently believe will never die.

Three families were encountered under the third category, of which two had identical problems. Dinesh Nandy and Asit Datta are two very old shankharis who live with their wives. The sons of both these men have moved out to the cities in search of better job opportunities. They make bangles and rings from broken conch-shell pieces procured from the locality and travel to a distance of about 10km every week to sell their goods. The practice of door-to-door selling is still prevalent in the rural areas. They market their goods

at the village fairs held thrice a year. Profit earned by them is meagre and it is spent on buying raw-materials for the next lot of products. Leading literally a hand –to- mouth existence, these two septugenarian shankharis carry on their family craft with a dogged tenacity, making them probably the last of the Mohicans. Despair and despondency weigh heavily over them. But strangely enough, they feel optimistic about the continuity of the craft in the future.

Strikingly similar in outlook, but much younger in age is the young shankhari Damodar Das who lives with his wife and three small children. Extremely dynamic and bubbling with confidence and energy, Damodar is an exemplary craftsman. Keenly aware of the decaying condition of the craft, Damodar is determined to lift it out of its present situation. He works for 18 hours a day to produce rings and bangles and in the last few years he has been able to improve his financial situation. His one-storeyed house is spotlessly clean, something unusual for a Shankhari family. He has constructed the house by himself. His children go to school and his wife is also literate. Among all the other Raibaghini craftsmen, Damodar stands out as having a very positive outlook regarding his ancestral craft and he feels very strongly that with hard work and strong will power, every Sankhari householder can prosper. Raibaghini shankharis project a rare quality of resilience and positive outlook in face of greatest odds. Broken in health, reeling under acute economic pressures, they show an undying spirit of courage and tenacity that propel them to move on with their lives. Voiceless, marginalised, ignored by the rest of humanity, they carry on with this ancient traditional craft with a desperate tenacity, unknown to the world outside Raibaghini.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study of the foregoing chapters will reveal that the shankhari craft itself as well the position of the shankhari artisans have undergone great changes from the pre-colonial, till the present times. A point to be noted is that the shankhari industries, like the cotton textile industries for example, did not languish or suffer as a result of the colonial exploitation. On the other hand, the heyday of shankhari artisanship seems to have been the late colonial period itself, when there was a rapid proliferation of conch-shell production centres. The special utility of the products (bangles and conch-shell horns that had a special target audience) gave it an added advantage. Unlike other industries, it did not have to face any competition from any rival organisations. But this also means that this craft could never create an all-India market. Except in Bihar, Orissa and a few other bordering states of Nepal, conchshell products never had any market elsewhere. The Partition dislocated a number of artisans from different parts of East Bengal (specially Dhaka) to mainly Calcutta, where they continued to thrive during the post-independence. The Partition however made no effect on the Bishnupur –Bankura region. Secluded as it had always been because of its physical features, the shankhari community here remained totally unchanged. No new settlement of shankhari artisans grew here after 1947. However, while I was on my field trip, a few Raibaghini artisans told me that there were about 5 to 6 families who had migrated from East Bengal and had settled down in the Krishnabandh region. I personally did not check out on this piece of information which definitely needs to be explored. But on the whole, the shankhari families in the Bishnupur region revealed their indifference to the Partition issue, as they appeared to be completely unaffected by it.

It was only from the 80s of the last century that the industry entered into a critical period. The rising cost of raw materials including conch-shells and electricity throughout the 80s

and 90s threw a great challenge to the artisans. Unable to maintain themselves in this changed economic condition, many of the artisans now turned to cheaper alternative medium of production like coconut shells etc. Dire financial straits also pushed many out of their traditional roles of artisanship. In large numbers, members of shankhari families now joined other professions, like in banks, police service and district schools. It became quite obvious that conch- shell craft alone could no longer be a sufficient source of income. The realisation of this bitter truth actually marks the beginning of the decline of this traditional craft.

Under these circumstances, what the artisans needed was a strong support-system in the form of governmental help, bank loans on easy terms and establishment of cooperatives. But none of these measures were successful. The Manjusha scheme of the West Bengal Govt. could provide only partial help; loans from NABARD are not easily available; the formation of cooperatives has not been possible. Infact, the cooperative spirit or the will to make any collective effort to revive the dying craft was found to be sadly lacking among the artisans. The Shankhashilpa Samabaya Samity that was started by the initiatives of a few craftsmen in Bishnupur town about 20 years back, has now become completely dysfunctional, largely due to lack of unity among the Bishnupur artisans.

It is a matter of regret that whereas other traditional crafts like manufacture of Baluchari sarees and terracotta handicrafts are being revived through active government patronage, conch-shell craft is being allowed to languish in a most pitiable manner. A further threat to the craft comes from the possible decision to declare conch- shell as a rare specie. A news report to this effect appeared in a few Bengali daily newspapers dated Nov1. 2001.. Shankha Shilpa Bachao Samity based in Kolkata voiced its protest against such a measure, but it is unlikely to yield any fruitful result. It seems absurd that in our bid to save and protect the

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various endangered species all over the world, we often tend to overlook the threatened existence of a rare specie among Homo Sapiens called Shankharies , living precariously in one remote corner of the earth.

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