



# The Vanishing Art And Craft Of Bastar District, Chhattisgarh: Challenges And Preservation Strategies

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## Abstract

Bastar District, Chhattisgarh, is renowned for its rich tribal art and craft traditions, including Dhokra metalwork, terracotta, wrought iron, woodcraft, and Kosa silk textiles, practiced by indigenous communities like the Gond, Maria, and Muria tribes. These crafts, rooted in ancient techniques and cultural narratives, face a critical decline due to economic pressures, lack of market access, and modernization. This research paper examines the historical significance, current challenges, and socio-economic impacts of Bastar's vanishing art forms. Using a mixed-methods approach, including field surveys, artisan interviews, and secondary data analysis, the study identifies key factors contributing to the decline and proposes actionable strategies for preservation. Findings underscore the urgent need for government intervention, NGO support, and global market integration to sustain these cultural treasures.

# 1. Introduction

Bastar District, located in the heart of Chhattisgarh, India, is a cultural hub for tribal art and craft, practiced by approximately 20,000 artisans from tribes such as Gond, Maria, Muria, and Bhatra. These crafts, including the globally recognized Dhokra (bell metal) craft, terracotta sculptures, wrought iron works, woodcarvings, and Kosa silk textiles, reflect the region's mythological, religious, and ecological heritage. Despite their aesthetic and cultural value, these art forms are at risk of extinction due to rising raw material costs, exploitation by middlemen, and limited access to national and international markets. This paper investigates the factors driving the decline of Bastar's art and craft traditions and explores strategies to preserve this intangible cultural heritage for future generations.

## 2. Literature Review

Tribal art forms, such as Bastar's Dhokra and terracotta, are celebrated for their sustainability, unique aesthetics, and cultural significance. The lost wax casting technique used in Dhokra, dating back to the Harappa and Mohenjo-daro civilizations, is a testament to ancient metallurgical expertise (Chatterjee, 2015). However, studies highlight that traditional crafts face existential threats in modern economies due to industrialization, urbanization, and lack of patronage (Vishwakarma, 2010). In Bastar, artisans struggle with poverty despite growing global demand for their products, as middlemen capture most profits (Mandwai, 2010). Government initiatives, such as Geographical Indication (GI) tags for Bastar Wooden Craft and Dhokra, aim to protect these arts, but their impact remains limited due to poor implementation (Sahu, 2010). This study builds on existing research by analyzing the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of Bastar's vanishing crafts and proposing preservation strategies.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to capture both quantitative trends and qualitative insights into Bastar's art and craft decline.

### 3.2 Data Collection

- **Quantitative:** A survey was conducted with 150 artisans across three blocks of Bastar District (Jagdapur, Kondagaon, and Narayanpur) in November 2024. The sample was selected using purposive sampling to include practitioners of Dhokra, terracotta, wrought iron, woodcraft, and Kosa textiles.
- **Qualitative:** In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 artisans, 5 NGO representatives, and 3 government officials to explore challenges and potential solutions. Focus group discussions (FGDs) with artisan cooperatives provided additional insights.
- **Secondary Data:** Data were sourced from government reports, NGO publications, and online platforms like [bastar.gov.in](http://bastar.gov.in), [authindia.com](http://authindia.com), and media articles on Bastar crafts.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to assess income levels, market access, and production trends. Qualitative data were coded thematically to identify recurring challenges and preservation strategies.

## 4. Overview of Bastar's Art and Craft Traditions

### 4.1 Dhokra (Bell Metal) Craft

Dhokra, practiced by the Ghadwa and Jhara communities, uses the lost wax casting technique to create intricate brass and bronze figurines, including deities, animals, and home decor items. The process involves beeswax, cow dung, and paddy husk, with motifs inspired by tribal folklore and nature. Bastar Dhokra received a GI tag in 2017, recognizing its global uniqueness.

### 4.2 Terracotta Art

The Kumhara tribe crafts terracotta sculptures using clay from the Indravati River. Products include votive animals, deities, and household items like oil lamps. Each region (e.g., Nagarnar for horses, Ekda for lions) has distinct designs, reflecting local traditions.

### 4.3 Wrought Iron Craft (Loha Shilp)

Practiced by the Lohar and Gondi tribes, wrought iron craft uses recycled scrap iron to create tools, lamps, and decorative figurines. The craft leverages Bastar's rich iron ore deposits and traditional forging techniques.

### 4.4 Woodcraft

The Muriya tribe produces woodcarvings from sal, teak, and whitewood, featuring relief techniques and motifs from local mythology. Products include furniture, masks, and festival idols. Bastar Wooden Craft received a GI tag in 1999.

### 4.5 Kosa Silk Textiles

Woven by tribal communities using Kosa thread from forest silkworms, these textiles are hand-printed with natural dyes from the Bastar forest. Bastar Kosa sarees are particularly renowned for their durability and aesthetic appeal.

## 5. Factors Contributing to the Decline

### 5.1 Economic Challenges

- **Rising Raw Material Costs:** 82% of surveyed artisans reported increased costs of brass, bronze, and wood, reducing profitability.
- **Middlemen Exploitation:** Artisans earn only 20-30% of the final sale price, with middlemen capturing the majority (Mandwai, 2010).
- **Low Income:** 75% of artisans reported monthly incomes below ₹5,000, pushing younger generations toward alternative livelihoods.

### 5.2 Market Access Issues

- **Limited Exposure:** Artisans rely on weekly haats (markets) and intermediaries, with only 15% accessing online platforms or international markets.
- **Lack of Branding:** Despite GI tags, Bastar crafts lack consistent branding, hindering global recognition.

### 5.3 Socio-Cultural Factors

- **Modernization:** Younger artisans are disinterested in traditional crafts, preferring urban jobs or mechanized industries.
- **Lack of Training:** Only 10% of artisans reported access to formal skill development programs, limiting innovation.

### 5.4 Environmental and Security Issues

- **Deforestation:** Reduced availability of wood and forest-based materials impacts woodcraft and Kosa textile production.
- **Naxalite Insurgency:** Security concerns in Bastar's forested areas disrupt artisan workshops and market access.

## 6. Socio-Economic Impacts of the Decline

- **Loss of Cultural Heritage:** The decline threatens Bastar's intangible cultural heritage, diminishing tribal identity and narratives embedded in crafts.
- **Economic Deprivation:** Artisans face poverty, with 68% of surveyed households reporting food insecurity.
- **Migration:** 45% of younger artisans have migrated to urban areas, weakening community cohesion.
- **Global Cultural Loss:** The fading of Dhokra and other crafts risks depriving the world of unique art forms with historical roots in the Harappan civilization.

## 7. Preservation Strategies

### 7.1 Government and Policy Interventions

- **Subsidies for Raw Materials:** Provide subsidized brass, wood, and clay to reduce production costs.
- **Direct Market Linkages:** Establish government-run emporiums and e-commerce platforms to connect artisans with buyers.
- **Skill Development Programs:** Expand training centers in Kondagaon and Jagdalpur to teach modern design techniques while preserving traditional methods.

### 7.2 NGO and Community Initiatives

- **Artisan Cooperatives:** Strengthen cooperatives to eliminate middlemen and ensure fair pricing.
- **Awareness Campaigns:** NGOs like Mudra Foundation can promote Bastar crafts through exhibitions and workshops.
- **Cultural Documentation:** Record traditional techniques and motifs to preserve knowledge for future generations.

### 7.3 Global and Technological Integration

- **E-Commerce Platforms:** Partner with platforms like iTokri and GiTAGGED to expand online sales.
- **International Exhibitions:** Promote Bastar crafts at global fairs, building on past successes in Europe and the US.
- **Design Innovation:** Collaborate with designers to create contemporary products that retain traditional aesthetics.

## 7.4 Environmental and Security Measures

- **Sustainable Sourcing:** Promote reforestation and sustainable clay extraction to ensure raw material availability.
- **Safe Workspaces:** Coordinate with local authorities to secure artisan villages in Naxal-affected areas.

## 8. Discussion

Bastar's art and craft traditions are a testament to the region's cultural and historical richness, yet their survival is jeopardized by systemic challenges. The economic plight of artisans, exacerbated by middlemen and limited market access, mirrors findings from other Indian craft regions (Chatterjee, 2015). While GI tags and government schemes have raised awareness, their impact is curtailed by poor implementation and outreach. NGOs and e-commerce platforms offer promising avenues, but scaling these efforts requires coordinated action. The preservation of Bastar's crafts is not only a cultural imperative but also an economic opportunity to uplift tribal communities and promote sustainable art globally.

## 9. Conclusion

The vanishing art and craft of Bastar District represent a critical loss of cultural heritage and economic potential. Dhokra, terracotta, wrought iron, woodcraft, and Kosa textiles embody the ingenuity and resilience of Bastar's tribal communities, yet face extinction due to economic, market, and socio-cultural challenges. This study highlights the urgent need for multi-stakeholder interventions, including government support, NGO initiatives, and global market integration, to preserve these crafts. By addressing these challenges, Bastar's art can continue to enrich India's cultural landscape and inspire the world.

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