

Bell Metal Craft: Dhokra artefacts as an integral part of the ritualistic practices among the Gonds of Telangana

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Abstract: Brass metal crafts artefacts hold a profound significance in the socio-cultural practices of the Gond society. Raj Gonds belong to the second-largest indigenous group in India. The Dhokra artefacts, traditionally created by the Ojhas, are integral to the local deity worship and indigenous festivals. The present study focuses on understanding the materiality embedded in the sacred artefacts as part of the rituals and ceremonies among the Raj Gonds of Telangana. The data is collected through fieldwork and ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, audio-visual recordings, and semi-structured interviews. The research outcome traces the material aspect of the Dhokra crafts analysed in the study and the significance of the ritualistic artefacts in the Gond society's clan deity worship rituals and festivals. The study closely examines the cultural artefacts and intangible cultural heritage involved in the context and the purpose of brass metal artefacts within the Gond society.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, Ceremonial artefacts, Raj Gonds, Bell Metal craft

Introduction

Traditional crafts are a fundamental aspect of cultural heritage, reflecting local aesthetics and serving practical needs. Each tribe has its distinguished traditions and beliefs; the traditional practices of the community reflect the group's identity. Each community has its colours, patterns, designs, beliefs, and taboos, all of which relate to its traditions of art and crafts (Barrett, 2014). Metalcraft practices are traditionally intertwined with larger socio-cultural contexts of ethnic communities, such as traditional practices, religious rituals, local festivals, and societal norms. Metal objects are symbolic in religious ceremonies and serve utilitarian aspects in mundane life (Jayakar, 1983). Vernacular art and craft practices have their roots in ceremonial rituals and are associated with myths and utility. The arts and skills of the village

society function through the vernacular forms of expression of the artisans and craftsmen communities. These crafts have evolved based on the needs of society by adapting to social and economic changes and technological advancements. Dhokra is one of the traditional techniques of brass metal casting used by artisans in various regions of India. Dhokra refers to a group of nomadic craftsmen travelling across eastern India (Jagatramka & Prasad, 2021).

The regions located on the central southern plateau of the Central province during the colonial times in British India, and presently the regional parts of the states such as Patangraha in Madhya Pradesh, Gadchiroli and Chandrapur in Maharashtra, Part of Odisha, and West Bengal, along with the northern districts of Telangana, have a strong tradition of Dhokra Metal Crafts. The craft has a similar origin and significance in the ethnic society; however, each region's artisans carry distinguished methods and materials as per the availability of the local resources and climatic conditions.

In several Indigenous cultures, worshipping ceremonial artefacts and totems is part of the animism practised widely by Indigenous Groups. Totemism is declining in the majority of areas; however, it exists as an integral part of the ritualistic practices in several Indigenous communities. Nomadic communities such as Banjara, Waghari, and Rabari have a concept of shifting shrines, mainly worshipping sacred artefacts and totems such as *Mata ni Pachedi*, *Kavad* and *Mano Rath*. Totemism exists in the Koitur. ¹(Gond) community in the central southern plateau throughout the Gond kingdoms, though it is not uniform in the various parts of the larger Gond habitat due to its widespread presence over a vast area, starting from Warangal- Adilabad to Mirzapur in Uttar Pradesh and from Pen Ganga in Maharashtra to Sambalpur district in Odisha (Maheta 1984).

The Gonds are one of the largest indigenous groups in India, inhabiting central southern India. The Raj Gonds of Telangana celebrate clan deity worship festivals such as *Jangubai Jatra*, *Bhinmal Jatra*, *Persapen Puja* and *Bada Dev Puja*, which are associated with clan and local deity worship. Bell metal crafts are integral parts of the deity-worshipping rituals and festivals. They also have significant importance in utilitarian and ritualistic aspects of serving local individual families in their mundane and sacred daily practices (Trivedi et al., 2021). Engraved cultural symbols and differences in the shape and form of the bell metal crafts signify their

¹ Koitur – Gonds commonly use the word Koitour to identify themselves. Gond is a name given by outsiders.

purposes and hold special significance and cultural values. Pulpul Jayakar (1983) defines the intangible cultural heritage associated with ritualistic practices and sacred artefacts as continually transforming into the contemporary moment through collective actions taken by a particular group.

This article is based on ethnographic field research conducted in six Gond villages in Telangana, India's two northern districts, Adilabad and Asifabad. The visual ethnographic methods include audio-visual documentation, focus group discussions with community leaders and semi-structured interviews. The research also relies on archival research and a study of brass metal artefacts as part of the ritualistic practices among the Indigenous communities in rural India. In the present study of aesthetic production, the emphasis has been diverted from the creative activity of creating the artefacts within the artisan's workshop to the social conditions reproduced on the demand of its socio-cultural context, which fosters the cultural significance of brass artefacts within the Gond society.

Review of Literature: To understand the close association of the Objects and the society that creates, consumes, and transmits these objects, it is essential to analyse them against historical changes and social processes that evolve around the cultural artefacts. The present section of the literature review will help to create the context of the importance of material culture as a field of study to understand Indigenous society and its significance in association with the beholder communities. Inquiries into the historical and material aspects of the culture help develop an understanding of social practices, design aspects and cultural phenomena,

Miller (1987), in material culture, emphasises the agency of objects in shaping social life. He argues that artefacts are not passive carriers of meaning but active participants in cultural practices. In Indigenous contexts, ritual artefacts such as masks, tools, or ceremonial attire are more than symbolic—they are social agents that embody ancestral presence, sustain belief systems, and structure daily life. In contrast, Catherine Bell's ritual theory (Bell & Geismar, 2009) focuses on ritualisation as a strategic and embodied process. She shifts the emphasis from what rituals mean to how they are enacted, highlighting the role of artefacts in shaping spatial dynamics, reinforcing social hierarchies, and mediating power. Ritual artefacts are central to structuring performance, rather than merely reflecting belief. Morgen (2005) uses different religious traditions to examine how the divine is communicated with and seen cross-culturally. He suggests that visual culture serves as an approach that bridges belief and materiality. Hervey

emphasises that ritual, materiality, and belief are intimately linked and are mutually influential in complex ways (2005a:2). Herman (2016) seeks to reconnect objects to their historical context in this genre by constructing collective biographies of objects and sites through thick descriptions. Using various references from past and earlier literature, Herman emphasises that the meanings revolve around objects and the complex association of the people with the artefacts, such as those who made, used, and lived around those objects.

The existing literature provides a multidimensional understanding of ritual artefacts by engaging with their material presence and performative role within cultural practices. Theories that focus on the ritualistic and ceremonial aspects of material culture studies emphasise the importance of artefacts in shaping social and spiritual life. Ritual theory highlights the dynamic processes through which these objects gain meaning and function in ritual contexts. Together, these frameworks emphasise that ritual artefacts in Indigenous societies are not static objects of display but are deeply embedded in systems of belief, identity, and power. They serve as tangible links between the physical and spiritual worlds, mediating relationships between humans, ancestors, nature, and the cosmos. This theoretical foundation creates space for a more holistic inquiry focusing on the complexity, symbolism, and lived significance of ritual artefacts. Building on these insights, the following sections examine how these objects are made, used, and understood within the Indigenous society of the Raj Gonds.

Materials and Methods

For the present study, the central focus was the cultural festivals and ritualistic artefacts of the Raj Gonds of Adilabad and Asifabad. The Raj Gonds of the region celebrate their annual festivals according to their traditions. Six Gond villages were identified for field research and ethnographic study. The villages were selected based on the population of the Gonds and the artisan communities of Ojhas. Visual ethnographic methods (Pink, 2013) were used for data collection, including audio-visual documentation, participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The primary data collection method was participant observation. The researcher lived with the community members during the festivals and rituals throughout the year, participating in daily activities and observing social interactions, rituals, and work processes. Detailed field notes were maintained. In addition to observation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants, including Ojha artisans, community members, and village

heads. Interviews focused on participants’ traditional knowledge, experiences, cultural beliefs, and interpretations of their practices. Informal conversations and dialogues also contributed to the depth of the data. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institute's Ethics Committee. Informed consent was secured from all the participants, and their anonymity was preserved throughout the process. Moreover, the participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point.

The collected data were categorised into the four major themes, and interviews and audio recordings were transcribed. The data was categorised using a typological approach to classify ritual artefacts based on their function, form, and symbolic meaning and a data catalogue was developed. This method helped organise and understand the artefacts in a structured way, making it easier to interpret their cultural roles and significance within the community. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis, and grounded theory principles were applied to analyse field notes, transcripts, and media, focusing on reflexivity and researcher positionality.

Results and Discussion

Annual fairs and Festivals of the Raj Gonds

Clan deity worship is one of the significant parts of the tribal culture. The festivals of the Raj Gonds are (i) Clan Festival and (ii) Village Festival. The clan deity worship is celebrated annually by the members of the same phatery gathered together at the temple or the designated site. The Persapen worship takes place for all four sub-clans of the Raj Gonds. While the village shrines have local deities, their worship occurs annually. Moreover, the village and clan deities also hold ceremonial importance on auspicious occasions such as weddings and childbirth. The list of the annual fairs and festivals, along with the Gondi Months, has been given in Table 1 below.

Table 1: List of the Gondi festivals celebrated throughout the year as per the Gond calendar

Sr. No	Name of the Month as per the	Name of Festival	Type of Festivals	Significance of the Festival
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	Gondi Calendar			
1	<i>Poos</i>	<i>Bada Dev Puja Jangubai Jatra</i>	Clan Deity Worship, Goddess Jangu Bai Pilgrim	Bada Dev Bhinmal Dev Worship. Celebrated by Gonds and Kolams. Beginning of Nagoba Jatra with Jangubai Pilgrimage.
2	<i>Mohon</i>	<i>Nagoba Jatra</i>	The Mesram Gonds celebrate Clan Deity worship	One of the most important festivals and highly celebrated among the Gonds
3	<i>Durari</i>	<i>Durari or Holi</i>	Village Festival	Associated with the Harvesting season and Village Get-togethers
4	<i>Chait</i>	Ugadi	Village Festival	Worship of Mother Earth and bulls symbolically. Ploughing the Farms for the next sowing season
5	<i>Chait</i>	Sat Raiwal / Gaon Sat	Village Festival	All the villagers gather outside the village to cook food and celebrate the festival.
6	<i>Chait</i>	<i>Vijjan Tohwal</i>	Local Deity Worship	The festival is celebrated to seek the blessings of the goddess before the onset of Sowing.
7	<i>Chait</i>	<i>Chench Bheemana</i>	Clan deity worship	The month ends with the celebration of Chench Bheemana's wedding on the day of Amavasya.
8	<i>Bhavai</i>	<i>Persa Pen Puja</i>	Clan Deity worship	Celebrated by all the Gonds. It is an elaborate ritual to worship the great god (Persa Pen)

9	<i>Bud- Bhavai</i>	<i>Mohtur</i>	Village Festival	The entire village celebrates the festival, and individual families start sowing on their farms.
10	<i>Aakadi</i>	<i>Rajul Pen puja</i>	Local Gods worship	Worshipping Forest gods to protect cattle and human lives while wandering in the forests
11	<i>Aakadi</i>	<i>Yetmasur Puja</i>	Local Deity	The worship symbolically heralds the Dandari dance festival.
12	<i>Pola</i>	Hanuman Puja	Hindu Deity	Celebrated to offer worship to lord Hanuman
13	<i>Pola</i>	<i>Shivabodi</i>	Village Festival	To protect the entire village from epidemics and seasonal diseases. The Medicinal plants and Herbs are stuffed and tied on the outskirts of the villages.
14	<i>Pola</i>	<i>Pola</i>	Village Festival	Decorating and Thanksgiving worship of the bulls. Slits walking was also performed by the young in this Month's
15	<i>Akur Pok</i>	<i>Sama</i>	Agricultural Festival	The ritual of the first community feast to celebrate harvested crops.
16	<i>Diwadi</i>	<i>Pen da Dasra</i>	Village Festival	Celebration of local deities associated with the Dandari dance.
17	<i>Diwadi</i>	<i>Bhogi - Dandari Gusadi</i>	Village Festival	Worshipping the Artefacts and costumes used in the Dandari Gusadi Dance.

18	<i>Diwadi</i>	<i>Laxmi Puja</i>	Village festival	Worshipping of the Cows and the Dandari Festival ends with the event Kola Bodi the next day.
19	<i>Karti</i>	<i>Karun</i>	Ancestral worshipping	The festival is celebrated to worship and offer tribute to the ancestors
20	<i>Satti</i>	<i>Satti Puja</i>	Clan deity worship	The festival is celebrated by offering the newly harvested broad beans and red grams to the gods.
21	<i>Satti</i>	<i>Bheenmal Pen Puja</i>	Clan Deity Worship	Worshipping the Bhinmal God is an important event for the Gonds and Kolams.

Ritual objects and material expressions of faith

The Ojhas are the brass smith community that does not belong to the Gond tribe or any Indigenous group, but got settled in the Gondwana villages later, after wandering in the hills and forest villages in search of selling brass objects (Haimindorf 1948) The brass metal artefacts hold special significance in the ritualistic practices among the Raj Gonds. These objects are placed in the temples and are now being collected by tourists and outsiders at various fairs and festivals. The sacred bells used for offerings symbolise the Persa Pen, the small idols of the brass placed in the shrines of local deities and the trumpets of the Pradhans and the Thotis are created and supplied by the Ojhas. These objects are essential in the Gondi religion, and they are still in practice and hold significant importance in the cultural ceremonial practices of the Gonds. R.V. Russell (1916) mentioned the probable emergence of the symbolic worship of Iron and Bell Metal associated with agricultural practices and using metal in mundane life. As well as a close-knit relationship with the cattle for livelihood.

Ojhas creates several objects in the cire-perdue (lost wax) process. Traditionally, they create measuring cups and vessels, ritual jars, incense burners, oil lamps and wick lamps in various forms and motifs. Moreover, utilitarian objects such as ladles to pour liquor, ornaments, and

objects used for ceremonial purposes also create icons of Gods and Goddesses, local deities, totemic animal objects, and other ritualistic objects used for offerings and worshipping the deities. In addition, they also create several decorative objects such as temple bells, animal figurines, bullock bells and jingles.



Image 1: Ojha women at Nagoba Jatra festival



Image 2: Ojha artisan showing bunch of tavij made by him.

The Ojhas create totems for several deities, which Gonds purchase from them at annual fairs such as Nagoba Jatra and Bhinmal Jatra. We have identified twenty-three ritualistic artefacts constantly used in the Gond society. The ritualistic artefacts made out of brass can be divided into the four major categories as shown in Table 2 below.

Sr. No.	Ceremonial Artefacts	Tools used in rites	Wearable artefacts	Site-specific items
1	Masks	Musical Instruments	Headdresses and costumes	Alters
2	Idols of clan deities	Offering vessels and utensils	Body adornments	Shrines

3	Totems and symbols made for deity worship	Oil lamps and other utilitarian artefacts for performing rites	Sacred ornaments and beads	Sacred palanquins
4	Metal symbols and sign engravings		Amulet	

○ **Ceremonial objects (masks, idols, totems)**

Ceremonial objects hold a significant role in performing the rituals and serve as a tangible representation of the clan deities and mythical legends. Ceremonial artefacts often include the motifs engraved on the cultural artefacts, which signify the religious symbolism associated with the four phratries of the Gonds in the Chanda Region. The minute symbolism indicates details and beliefs associated with the clan deity worship, including embellishments of Snake, peacock, and Tortoise motifs on the ritualistic and utilitarian artefacts to indicate the clan totems. The engraving of five natural elements, the sun and the moon, is mandatory for ritualistic artefacts. Only once such engravings embellish the priest and others can they use them for ritualistic purposes. Apart from the totems and idols, sacred brass bells are also being used for ceremonial purposes and serve as totems known as *Chat Ghaghara*, *Salla Ghaghara*, *Jangubai Ghaghara* and *Bhinmal Ghaghara*. Bells such as *Janwer Fer* are used as part of the sacred performance. Moreover, the bells were created to offer the *Jangubai* and the *Bhimdev* additional mark-making, indicating *Jango-Lingo* and *Zanda*. The ritualistic bells are usually created in the months of *Bhave* and *Paus* as per their increased demands during various pilgrimages.

○ **Tools used in rites (drums, knives, vessels)**

The musical instruments and various tools are deeply associated with the cultural and ritualistic ceremonies of the Raj Gonds. The festivals, such as *Akari*, *Dandari Gusadi* and *Clan deity worship*, include playing instruments and particular songs at the ceremonies and festivals. The *Pradhan's* musical play on *kinkari* and *dappu* marks the divine presence of the clan deity worship. Apart from the musical instruments, vessels, and lamps, such as *Jangubai Dive*, *Divti*, *Kan Dive*, and *Dhuparni*, they are associated with clan deity worship. In contrast, *Pen Ghomta*, *Dive*, *Semia* and *Zalkara Semia* are associated with ritualistic purposes. *Pen Ghomta* is a lamp associated with the clan deity and is usually kept in the house in one corner

dedicated to the deity's worship. Moreover, Votali is a revered brass spoon crafted by Ojha artisans. It serves a significant role in the sacred rituals during festivals such as the Persapen Puja and the *Bheemmal Puja* of the Raj Gonds in Telangana. This ornate spoon is used to ceremoniously offer alcohol and other sacred offerings to the *Bada Deo*, symbolising a connection to their spiritual heritage and traditions. Intricate patterns and motifs vary from clan to clan, and the motif of celestial bodies such as the sun and moon is intricately patterned on the front side of the artefact. The hollow inside part allows the smooth passing of the liquid offerings during the rituals.

- **Wearable artefacts (headdresses, amulets, body adornments)**

The wearable artefacts are not merely adornments but carry deep symbolic, spiritual, and social meanings within the ritual context. The Gusadi festival attires have various sizes and types of brass bells associated with the Dandari-Gusadi costumes. The sound of the brass metal bells is considered sacred to evoke the deities and seek blessings. Thus, the *devari* also wears an armlet and a *Kada*, known as '*Newari*', on the feet while performing the *Bada Deo* Puja. The mark-making of sacred motifs needs to be engraved on the bells created for ritualistic purposes, such as marks indicating the sun, the moon, and the five natural elements, such as the earth, the sky, the water, the fire, and the air. The "*Tavij*" is adorned on the waist/hand by the members of the Gond community in the Telangana Region. The shape and size differ from the conventional *Tavij* used in other regions. The hollow part contains sacred ashes and is sealed after stuffing and then attached with black/red thread. Traditionally made in around 1-inch sizes earlier, smaller pendant sizes are now available in brass. Wearable artefacts occupy a central category, signifying their role as body extensions mediating between the physical and spiritual realms.

- **Site-specific objects (altars, shrines, sacred stones)**

Site-specific ritual objects such as altars, shrines, and palanquins represent a crucial material expression of religious and cultural practices, embedded within the spatial and symbolic environments of the Gond society. The significance of these artefacts emerges from their relationship to the site, community, and ritual context they inhabit. Altars function as focal points for devotional acts, typically within domestic, communal, or temple architecture, and are shaped by regional aesthetics. Shrines, ranging from modest roadside installations to elaborate temple complexes, mark sites of spiritual resonance and serve as a site for

pilgrimage, commemoration, and daily worship. *Sembi* is a portable ceremonial vehicle similar to a palanquin used to carry deities such as *Persa Pen* and *Bhinmal Pen* during festivals. It activates ritual processions that temporarily reconfigure public space into sacred geography. These objects are collaboratively produced by artisans, community leaders, and priests. They embody vernacular knowledge systems and sustain intangible cultural heritage through their continued use, display, and performance within socio-religious practices in the Gond society.

Conclusion

Brass metal crafts are integral to indigenous societies and mark an important connection between ritualistic and ceremonial practices. The study highlights the intricate relationship between brass metal crafts and the socio-cultural festivals of the Raj Gond society in Telangana. Through visual ethnography, the study underscores the significance of Dhokra artefacts, particularly in the context of clan deity worship and indigenous rituals. The research focuses on how these sacred objects are not merely functional or decorative but vital carriers of intangible cultural heritage. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how material culture is sustained by examining its creation, use, and embedded meanings. It reflects the living heritage and communal identity of the Raj Gonds.

Author Declaration

The authors declare no conflicts.

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