



SAPTASAJYA FESTIVAL

A collaboratiive attempt to revitalize the metal art traditions of Odisha

27TH-29TH DECEMBER 2019





Saptasajya Festival 2019: A collaborative attempt to revitalize the metal art traditions of Odisha

Text and editing: Pronoy Chakraborty

Designer: Palash Banerjee

Copyright @Saptasajya Foundation

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information without the prior written permission of the Publishers. Brief passages (not to exceed 1,000 words may be quoted in reviews)

<http://saptasajya-foundation.org/festival/>

ISBN:

Price: INR

Contents



INTRODUCTION	2
GAYATRI RATH (founder)	5
BILASH SARDAR (curator)	7
INTRODUCING THE MENTORS	11
DHOKRA	15
JEWELLERY	32
SILVER FILIGREE	37
BELL METAL	43
CEREMONIES AND EXHIBITION	47



Introduction

Saptasajya Foundation was set up in 2014 with the dream to revitalize the artistic traditions of Dhenkanal district, at the heart of which lies the village of Saptasajya, surrounded by seven hills with perennial streams. Today, however, Dhenkanal is counted among the 150 most backward districts of India, with its once rich cultural heritage endangered.

The Foundation seeks to work for the welfare of the people in the area, especially the traditional artists, with the mentorship of young contemporary designers and artists from other parts of India, who have graduated from diverse pedagogical art and design institutions.

Saptasajya Festival 2019 curated by Bilash Sardar, an art historian by training with MVA from MSU Baroda, was the first formal attempt to empower the local traditional artists and focused on the living traditions of metal crafts in Odisha, the roots of which can be traced far back to 300 BCE.



The present and the first edition of the three day festival from the 27th to the 29th of December, brought together 20 indigenous metal artists, working for years in a familial tradition. While some of them are masters in the craft of Dhokra (non-ferrous metal work done in the wax thread mould casting method), some excel at filigree work in silver, and some experts in bell metal utensils.

The traditional hand-made metal items, with all the skill and labour put into its production, however, have hardly any innovation in design to adapt to the taste and utilitarian requirements of a contemporary urban lifestyle. With the art forms losing commercial relevance, many of the next generation are shifting to other professions. The critical interventions made by artists and designers through the collaboration this year, and in the years to come, aspire to provide an extended, sustainable and viable market. At the same time, the engagement allows the contemporary practitioners to take back a rich plethora of traditional knowledge of the 'desi' or the folk genres, to their respective studios.



The hills overlooking Saptasajya village



From the Founder of the Saptasajya Foundation, Gayatri Rath

While growing up in Dhenkanal (in Odisha) in the seventies and eighties, Saptasajya was a favourite picnic spot within easy cycling distance from where my family lived. The temple atop a strenuous winding climb and the surrounding green hills had a unique charm and just the right amount of adventure for me and my cousins. Those countless picnics shaped the dream and idea of what, in 2019, became the Saptasajya Festival.

Saptasajya Festival is an annual congregation of artisans, art and craft enthusiasts. It is an attempt to celebrate the natural beauty and the rustic artistic fervor of the place. Home to two Dhokra artisan groups, it also has a rich tradition of other folk crafts and performing arts.

Saptasajya Festival has been conceived as a platform that allows designers, art and craft enthusiasts and casual visitors to participate in an enriching experience that is creatively fulfilling for all and commercially lucrative for the practicing artisans. Thus, the combined efforts are directed at promoting the local creative economy.



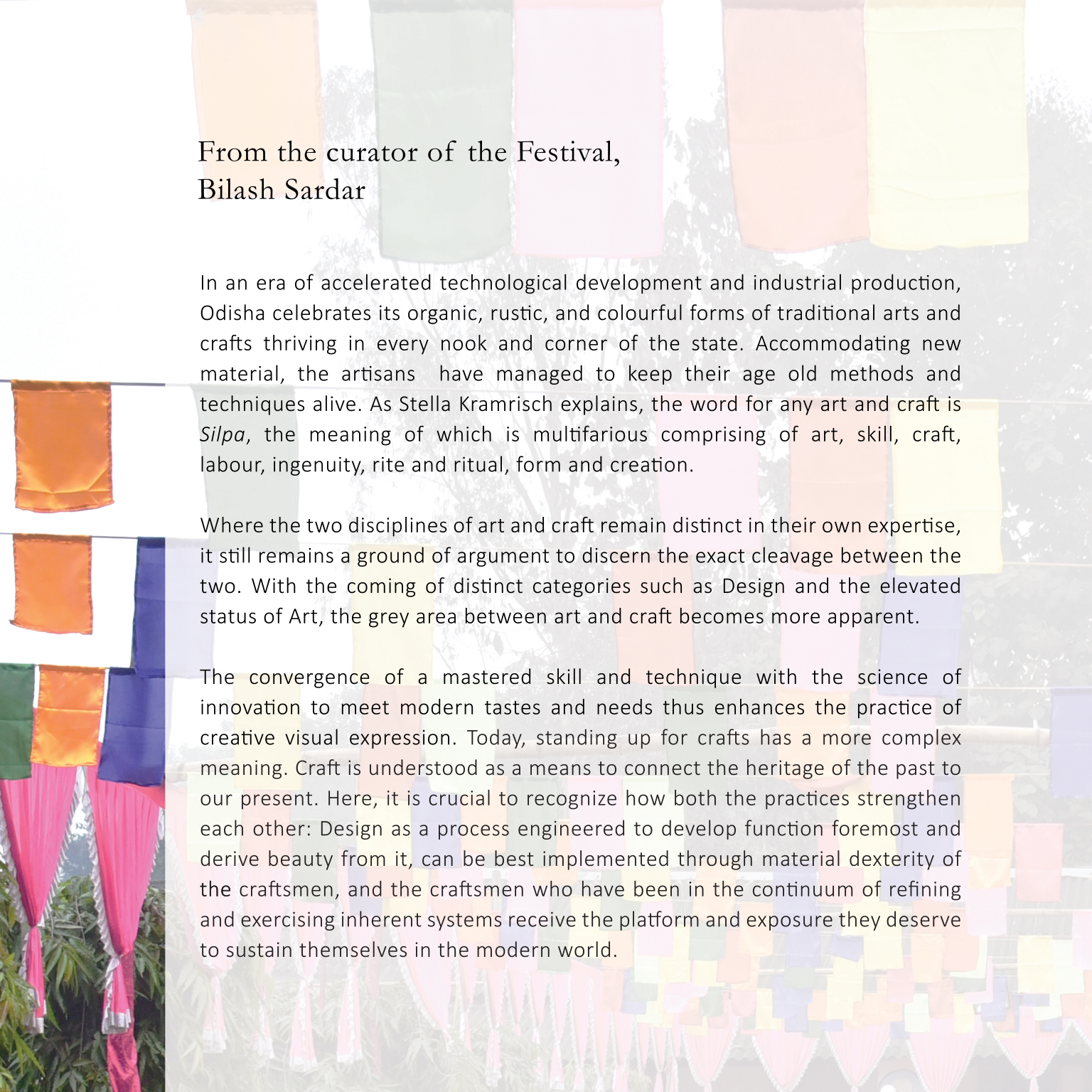


The road to Saptasajya Festival 2019 involved countless discussions and email exchanges with our friend, advisor and a noted sculptor, Arunkumar H.G., the young Festival curator, Bilash Sardar and his groups of mentor-designers, the local administration in Dhenkanal and the local Panchayat members. When Bilash, the Festival Curator, decided to focus on metal-crafts alone in the first year, we were unsure. However, when he found five different groups of metal crafts artisans in Odisha, we rediscovered a treasure of folk and tribal crafts techniques and designs.

During the month preceding the Festival, the eight designer-mentors exchanged ideas with the participating artisans and outdid themselves in how they collaborated and co-created during the Festival. Over a thousand guests and visitors applauded and encouraged them over the three days, firmly establishing the idea of the Festival. I would like to thank each one who played a part in making this first edition of the Festival such a resounding success! Over the next few years, we hope the Festival will come a milestone in a journey for art and craft enthusiasts and practitioners and a destination for visitors.

Our biggest takeaway from the Festival this year – experimentation excites the master craftsperson who has been practicing his/her craft for decades, as much as the millennial mentor- designers who spoke of New York fashion show as casually as they took a stroll in the paddy fields near the Festival venue! Creating the new excites us all!

Until Saptasajya Festival 2020,
Warm regards



From the curator of the Festival, Bilash Sardar

In an era of accelerated technological development and industrial production, Odisha celebrates its organic, rustic, and colourful forms of traditional arts and crafts thriving in every nook and corner of the state. Accommodating new material, the artisans have managed to keep their age old methods and techniques alive. As Stella Kramrisch explains, the word for any art and craft is *Silpa*, the meaning of which is multifarious comprising of art, skill, craft, labour, ingenuity, rite and ritual, form and creation.

Where the two disciplines of art and craft remain distinct in their own expertise, it still remains a ground of argument to discern the exact cleavage between the two. With the coming of distinct categories such as Design and the elevated status of Art, the grey area between art and craft becomes more apparent.

The convergence of a mastered skill and technique with the science of innovation to meet modern tastes and needs thus enhances the practice of creative visual expression. Today, standing up for crafts has a more complex meaning. Craft is understood as a means to connect the heritage of the past to our present. Here, it is crucial to recognize how both the practices strengthen each other: Design as a process engineered to develop function foremost and derive beauty from it, can be best implemented through material dexterity of the craftsmen, and the craftsmen who have been in the continuum of refining and exercising inherent systems receive the platform and exposure they deserve to sustain themselves in the modern world.

Any product or artwork development requires a prototype even in the development of an industrial product the primary place of the computer is shared with manual effort. It is not about romanticizing craft but of highlighting the uniqueness and identity of it alongside a new manner of its articulation.

Saptasajya Festival 2019 aims to create an experience beyond the visual, cerebral and that of the tactile. It will situate itself at the confluence of the two faculties of materiality and concept. The idea is to inspire and promote the practices that emerge out of the local communities and history to consolidate itself with the practices that come from the contemporary domain.

The participants will involve themselves in dialogues, research and documentation of the intricacies of visual, material and cultural impressions and expressions. The curatorial concept **Re-Cognition: Crafting a New Path** refers to the understanding of this coming together of the traditional and contemporary. The project further expects to inculcate a newer sense of approach of the craftsmen towards their practice, for them to explore new possibilities. The produced works will be exhibited besides traditional pieces in order to draw a lineage to Odisha's cultural practices and to extend the notion of the Saptasajya Festival.





Traditional Dhokra works by artists from Nuagaon



Dhokra door handle made by Diganta Rakshit and his group



Introducing the Mentors



Sidharth Mohanty is an architect and designer from Bhubaneswar, having studied architecture from Manipal University. Through his practice and experiments, he focuses to communicate with different mediums, materials and aspects of architecture and design. Sidharth is currently working as a faculty in INIFD, Bhubaneswar.

Diganta Rakshit completed his B.F.A from College of Art & Design, Burdwan and M.F.A from Kala Bhawan, Santiniketan with specialization in Sculpture. He has participated in many group exhibitions in various cities in India. He is currently working as a guest faculty in Rajasthan School of Art, Jaipur.



Pinaki Mohanty, coming from a small village near Lake Chilika, pursued Post Diploma in Ceramics Design from Kala Bhawan, Santiniketan after BFA in Sculpture from B.K. College of Art & Crafts, Bhubaneswar. Pinaki has participated in many exhibitions and art festivals in India. He is a recipient of the Lalit Kala Scholarship and the Serendipity Art Foundation's visual art grant 2019.

Damayanti Debnath is a practicing visual artist, based in Kolkata. Her recent works are in the format of installation, incorporating different mediums in an interdisciplinary approach where she collaborates with practitioners from varied fields. Damayanti graduated from College of Art and Design, Burdwan University in Painting and received Master's degree from S N School of Arts and Communication in 2018. She was a part of the 'Khoj Peers residency programme' in 2018.



Tarashis is a mechanical engineer who moved on to fuse fine arts and technology by becoming a product designer having proficiencies in machine design and industrial design from IISc-Bangalore. He has been working as a packaging designer until he started inculcating on his new found interest in architecture and lifestyle design. His pursuit to invoke a new age where arts and technology are interdependent and coexist, by promoting the dying cottage industries, has got him this far.

Sidharth Mohanty is an alumni of NIFT, Bangalore with more than 13 years of experience in the apparel industry. Having special love and fascination for indigenous crafts he has been designing for several handlooms and handicrafts like Bomkai, Ikat, Terracotta, Bell Metal, Bamboo etc in various places around the country. Sidharth is also a professional contemporary dancer/choreographer and has collaborated with many eminent dancers, musicians and visual artists for performances.





Jagrutee Das is an alumni of NIFT, Hyderabad with 5 years of experience as a Faculty. She has been conferring design education to students of NIFT, KIIT, INIFD and CET. She has also worked with handlooms and handicrafts of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh: with Kalamkari of Machalipatanam, hand knitting crochet of Narsapur, Pochampalli ikats, Patachitra etc. She has specialized in knitwear designing and aims at exploring possibilities of collaboration in knits and handicrafts.

Bilash, having completed his masters in Art history from MSU Baroda, has worked as the Centre Administrator and in house curator at Utsha Foundation, Bhubaneswar, specialising in contemporary art. He was an integral core team member of Bhubaneswar Art Trail 2018 and has also curated several exhibitions, like 'Chai ki chuski' (2016), 'Retables of St. Thomas Churches' (2017) and Sreemesha Art Studio Annual Exhibition (2017). Interested in graffiti and street art, Bilash's current research and practice are directed towards public art.



Pronoy Chakraborty is a recent post-graduate from the department of Art History and Aesthetics at Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. His academic concern covers the esoteric spectrum of Indian philosophy and ritualistic practices, with particular focus on the mahasiddha tradition of Tantric Buddhism and anthropological research and documentation of the cults of Bauls and Fakirs in Bengal.

Traditional metal artists were divided into 5 groups in the first edition of the Festival, each under the mentorship of contemporary designers and artists. This marked the beginning of a symbiotic two-way process of interaction and exchange of ideas, that can be carried ahead in the future endeavours.



The metal-artists along with contemporary designers and artists at the Festival



Dhokra, the indigenous lost-wax process of non-ferrous hollow metal casting, prevalent in various rural tribal belts of India, is perhaps the most prominent artistic tradition of Dhenkanal, with two Dhokra villages: Nabajibanpur and Nuagaon in a radius of only a few kilometres from Saptasajya.

The first group of Dhokra artists: Banambar Padhan, Ramesh Padhan, Maheswar Behera, Kirtan Gadtia and Suman Padhan from Nabajibanpur were mentored by Diganta Rakshit and Pinaki Mohanty, postgraduates in Sculpture from Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan. The second group from Nuagaon consisting of Trinath Behera, Ramesh Dehury, Prasanta Behera and Bansionara Padhan were guided by Sidharth Mohanty, Architecture graduate from Manipal University.

In the next few pages, various stages of the technical process of Dhokra casting, the innovations attempted by the mentors of the two groups and the final products that came out of this collaboration at the Festival, shall be looked at, in order to analyse its achievements and shortcomings in light of market sustainability.

The promise of better living and working conditions for the rural traditional artists, who sell their works mostly depending on the weight of the metal and not according to the aesthetic value, also needs to be taken up seriously and dealt with. It would be an uphill task here on, to give the traditional Dhokra artists of Dhenkanal a larger commercial market, allowing the art form to flow through the coming generations.



Traditional Dhokra works in process at Nabajibanpur village

Process of Dhokra casting begins with heating the wax and making threads of it after giving the heated wax a cold water bath. The wax used is composed of beeswax, resin, oil and charcoal, and the threading and coiling of the cooled wax is done on a low stool called 'pidha' using a wooden tool called 'muthia' by the indigenous artists.



Threads of wax to be wound around in patterns

The core, slightly smaller than the final artefact, is made with clay and has to be left to dry in sun after which a coat of wax is given, equal to the desired thickness of the cast object. The wax layer is then covered with clay, on which the fine intricacies get carved.



Mould ready for de-waxing and metal pouring

This clay layer which bears the negative impression, after drying is coated with multiple layers of clay until it hardens and thickens to form the mould. The mould is then heated in the furnace for the wax to melt and subsequently molten metal is poured into the cavity through multiple channels and left to take the shape of the clay mould. After the metal cools off, the clay mould is broken and the artefact is revealed. Since the mould is broken for each piece, every Dhokra work is unique and can never be exactly duplicated.



Traditional artist Maheshwar Behra looks on at the furnace after metal pouring

However, the damp and moist conditions of the first morning became the major obstacle that the designers and artists had to bypass in order to come up with a substantial production by the end of the third day.



To reduce the time and cost of the moulding process, Sidharth was the first to decide to use raw materials such as pebbles and bits of bricks, around which the wax modelling of animals was done skilfully by the traditional artists. In the short span of three days, Sidharth tried to achieve maximum production allowing some pieces to come out partly damaged.



Sidharth Mohanty believes that even in the rugged quality of the Dhokra pieces, there is a strong sense of aesthetic beauty. Through his designer intervention, he tried not to take away the rustic charm of the medium, but to enhance it with the use of easily available natural materials for the core of his animal sculptures. The apparently unfinished quality of the Dhokra metal cast pieces blends with the texture of the underlying natural objects and gives them a contemporary aesthetic appeal.



Animal figurines in Dhokra
produced by the collaboration



7.5cmX1.8cmX4cm



Wax model and Dhokra cast
of Sidharth's crocodile sculpture





10.2cmX2.4cmX1.8cm





Diganta Rakshit used his sculptural training to design utilitarian objects like exotic door handle, wall hanger and candle stand in Dhokra and provided the traditional artists to reflect upon new forms, breaking the confines of the decorative objects that they make skilfully, yet repetitively. These artefacts while retaining the traditional forms and motifs, can reach out to an urban elite clientele like restaurant chains or corporate offices.



Diganta drawing in his sketchbook



Diganta like Sidharth, evaded the process of making the clay core because of the moist weather and instead went for direct modelling of the utilitarian designs in wax. Being a prolific sketcher which is essential to his sculptural practice, Diganta could envision novel forms with contemporary urban relevance and functions. The Dhokra pieces designed by him show the perfect blend of traditional ornamentation and modern utility.



21cmX20cmX2.4cm

Designed by Diganta to be used as wall hanger,
photographed at one of the streams



Door-handles in Dhokra made by Diganta
photographed at one of the perennial
streams of the Saptasajya hills

21cmX3.3cmX6cm





Pinaki, on the other hand, used the collaboration as a platform to execute his envisioned form about the legendary origins of the name - *Saptasajya*, literally meaning the bed of seven hills. The natural beauty of the locale instigated the romantic ideal in Pinaki as his Dhokra work shows the *Saptarshis* or the Seven Sages of the Vedic times seated under a tree. Oral legends maintain that it is after the myth-historical seven sages, the village got its name.



Again, like the other mentors working with Dhokra, Pinaki used perishable materials for making the core of the tree and modelled the seven *rishis* directly in wax. Through his sculptural work, he wanted to give the traditional artists a sense of artistic composition because usually they work on individual decorative pieces.



The mould of *Saptarshis* drying in the sun on the second day





26cmX6cmX20cm

Dhokra sculpture of the Saptarshis photographed at a stream



Diganta Rakshit with Dhokra artists: Banambar Padhan, Ramesh Padhan, Maheswar Behera, Kirtan Gadia and Suman Padhan at Nabajibanpur village



Jewellery in Dhokra is becoming immensely popular, concurrent with the ethnic trends in fashion. The craft involves simple tools of pliers and hammers for bending the metal wire of varying thickness; soldering is done using a small blow torch run by petroleum using silver and soldering powder to join two pieces together.

The brilliance of the ornamental piece depends on the skill and inspiration in manipulation of the wires and the play with copper beads, metal foils cut into shapes, small motifs in Dhokra cast and the conventionally used black string in Dhenkanal. With ethnic wears by some leading brands and designers, Dhokra jewellery can be the perfect match and it is precisely here that the role of the artist/designer becomes crucial.

Dhokra jewellery designed by Damayanti Debnath and made by the traditional artists



Damayanti Debnath, a visual artist with her MVA from HCU, Hyderabad was closely with Dhokra jewellery artists from Karamul- Vrundavan Maharana, Kabita Maharana, Manas Kumar Sahu and Suchishmita Sahu at the Saptasajya Festival. The collaboration marks the beginning of a relation between a contemporary art practitioner who works primarily with installations and a traditional art form of jewellery-making practised by the members of this family, including the women.

By the end of third day, with Damayanti's design interventions and the skill of the local artists, the group came with a quality and quantity production of ethnic metal jewellery, retaining the rustic quality yet having a new modern edge to it. It would be very interesting to see how this collaboration is taken ahead in the next edition.



Dhokra necklace made in the collaborative project

39cmX6.9cm



Dhokra necklace designed by Damayanti
49cmX2.7cm



Dhokra earrings
designed by Damayanti







Tarakasi or filigree work in silver is a celebrated traditional art form from the Eastern shores of Odisha, with most of the artists coming from Cuttack today. The art form is more than 500 years old and has been an integral part of Odiya cultural heritage with Tarakasi artefacts being used from marriage ceremonies to Odissi dance to the 'chal-chitra' or backdrop of the idol of Durga, using up to 400 kilos of silver.



An alloy consisting of 90 % silver is used for the lump which is molten in a pot of coal and after cooling put into a rod like mould. The silver rod is then pressed into a long thin wire which can be intricately carved on or soldered using a small kerosene fire. One artist directs the small flame with a tube held in his mouth and blows into it, while the other moulds into the desirable form before it cools. After the precise detailed carving, soldering is done to insure that the design stays intact. The piece is placed in a mixture of borax powder and water and soldering powder is sprinkled on it, followed by heating in a low flame.

Sidharth Mohanty, mentoring the filigree artists from Cuttack, aimed at bringing a rupture in the repetition of old traditional forms like the icon of Jagannatha or the Konark wheel. With formal training in fashion designing, Sidharth and Jagrutee tried using the tremendous skill of the artists to meet the potential of the art form in the high-end fashion industry. It would be interesting to see how they materialize the collaborative project and market the products in future.



8cmX7cm



Silver filigree artists from Cuttack: Ramachandra Das, Mahindra Jethy, Surendra Behra and Pradip Kumar De are masters in the traditional indigenous technique executing works from miniature icons of the Puri temple to the gigantic Durga-puja 'chal-chitra'. They were being mentored by designers: Sidharth Mohanty and Jagrutee Das, graduates in Fashion Designing from NIFT Bangalore and Hyderabad, respectively. Siddharth and Jagrutee's attempts were directed at invoking an urge in the traditional artists to work on accessory designs which can cater to a high-end, niche and international clientele.

Ranging from a stand for a mobile phone to belt buckle, broche and buttons, pendants and rings, the production in the short span of three days was exquisite and exotic, having a lot of potential in the fashion industry, thereby taking the traditional art of silver filigree from Cuttack to a completely different level.



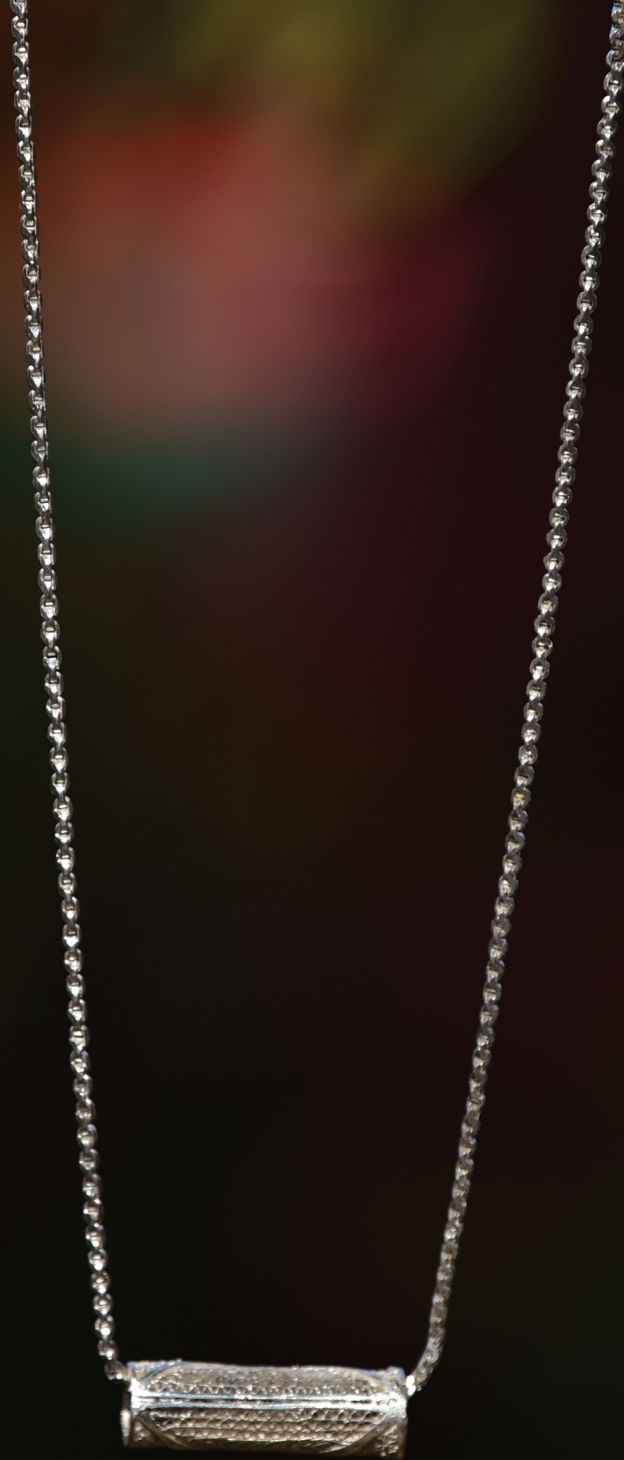


Silver filigree mobile stand 3.7cmX5.3cm





Silver filigree pendant of a miniature elephant



Silver Filigree pendant



Bell metal is a hard alloy of copper and tin, roughly in the ratio of 4:1 and named so because of its sonic resonance property used in making bells and percussion instruments. Higher tin content gives the alloy greater strength, rigidity and resonance, making it suitable for industrial use as well. Called 'kansa' in Odiya and Bengali, the alloy was traditionally used for utensils before being replaced with stainless steel, chinaware and now plastic.

The craft of making bell metal utensils require a great amount of collective manual labour starting with making of the furnace and heating it up with a blower. A small solid lump of the prepared alloy is heated at a temperature of around 800 degrees Celsius and then beaten with an iron hammer on a platform made of bricks. The form is shaped by repeated hammering and the final lustre is given by scraping and polishing, turning the dark metallic mass to a shiny utensil.



Process of making bell metal utensil





Tarashis Mohapatra, a product design postgraduate from Indian Institute of Science (Bangalore) was working with bell metal artists from a village named Bhuban near Dhenkanal Rabi Narayan Sahu, Santosh Kumar Sahu, Ishwar Chandra Sahu and Sanjay Sahu. Tarashis intended to make minute but effective design interventions in the traditional alloy craft of utensils so that the utilitarian objects can adapt to contemporary aesthetics and functionality.



Bell metal utensil with a new shape to suit functionality

The traditional artists worked towards production of a few experimental pieces under his mentorship on some new and exciting designs of curry bowls. These curry bowls fit the approximate size of the palm of an average Indian person, and is designed such that the curry does not splatter while pouring.





14.5cmX13.7cmX7.5cm



Kansa or bell metal utensil designed by Tarashis
16cmX11cmX7.3cm



Local villagers responded to the event with great excitement and enthusiasm. That young designers and artists from all over India have gathered to help empower the traditional artists and dying art forms of Dhenkanal, gave them a huge moral boost. In such an unprecedented art and design festival in the village, the locals came in huge numbers, both on the first day during the grand opening ceremony: showcasing the rural traditional heritage of Odisha and on the last day concluding ceremony and exhibition.

While a large section of the villagers were drawn in by the spectacle of the ceremony and the novelty of the festival, some took a keen interest in the collaborative process. On seeing how subtle modifications can bring a huge change in the very look, feel and function of the traditional items they have been seeing, being made in from of their eyes for years; a few of the local visitors were struck with a sense of wonder and amazement.

Here, it is worth mentioning the volunteers who spent their valuable time and energy in working as translators between the non-Odiya mentors and the local artists. Right from on-site registration for the event, to fetching whatever materials required during the workshop, to the final display of the works and prints and the felicitation ceremony, the volunteers were crucial agents in making the first edition of the Festival successful to a large extent.

Dina Krishna Mishra and Sthitaprajna Debdutta Kar, from Cuttack, have to be acknowledged for managing all the events of the Festival, including comfortable stay and delicious breakfast, lunch and dinner. Particular mention must be made of Sasmita Patnaik and student volunteers from the Global Institute of Engineering and Management, Bhubaneswar, for their help in execution.



The ceremonies on the opening and closing day comprised of folk music, dance and other performative folk traditions of Odisha. The opening ceremony was graced by the presences of Shri Mahesh Sahoo (Hon'ble MP, Dhenkanal Lok Sabha) and Shri Bhumesh Chandra Behera (Collector and District Magistrate, Dhenkanal).

Among the dignitaries present at the closing ceremony, Shri Satyabrata (Kuna) Tripathy (Managing Director, Odisha Film Development Corporation Limited) needs to be mentioned, for his entertaining yet educative speech to communicate to the villagers the true motive and potential of the Saptasajya festival.

The colours and vivacity of the ceremonies and the warmth shown by the local people would definitely provide added impetus to the contemporary designers and artists to come back next year and extend this collaboration to help Saptasajya mark a place of its own in the global map, for its rich and now revitalized cultural heritage.









Exhibition of prints of old metal works from Odisha was an effort to rekindle the memory of the olden days of the artistic traditions in the local artists, the contemporary practitioners as well as in the villagers and other visitors. The wide range of products made by traditional artists from more than a generation ago, along with the plethora of design patterns and motifs were captured brilliantly in the photographic prints of Dhokra, Bell metal and Silver Filigree works which Bilash Sardar, the curator had brought together from various archival sources.

The exhibition was significant in the context of the collaborative workshop model of the Festival, for providing visual cues to the historical past of the metal craft traditions in Odisha and for crafting a bright future ahead.





Saptasajya Foundation was set up in 2014 with the dream to revitalize the artistic traditions of Dhenkanal district, at the heart of which lies the village of Saptasajya, surrounded by seven hills with perennial streams.



Saptasajya Festival 2019 curated by Bilash Sardar, an art historian by training with MVA from MSU Baroda, was the first formal attempt to empower the traditional artists of the area and focused on the living traditions of metal crafts in Odisha, the roots of which can be traced back to 300 BCE. The critical interventions made by artists and designers through the collaboration this year, and in the years to come, aspire to provide an extended, sustainable and viable market.

