

Original Article

## DHOKARA METAL CRAFT: A STUDY OF AN ANCIENT INDIAN HANDICRAFT

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### ABSTRACT

Dhokra metal craft is one of India's oldest metal handicrafts, based on the lost-wax casting technique. Its origins are traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization (approximately 4000-4500 years ago), where the famous 'Dancing Girl' bronze statue from Mohenjo-daro is the oldest known example created using this method.

The name 'Dhokra' comes from the Dhokra Damar tribe, who were nomadic metalworkers and have preserved this art form through generations. Primarily practiced by tribal communities such as the Gadwa (Baster), Ojha (Adilabad), and Karmakar (Bankura), this craft is prevalent in Bastar (Chhattisgarh), West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Telangana. Dhokra products are made from brass or bell metal, with religious idols, animals (elephants, horses, peacocks), birds, musicians, and scenes from daily life being the most common motifs.

The manufacturing process is laborious and environmentally friendly: creating a clay core, wrapping intricate designs with thin wax threads, applying layers of clay, melting and draining the wax, pouring molten metal, and finally breaking the Mold to extract the finished product. Each product is unique because the wax Mold is destroyed in the process. Regional variations are evident—hollow and bold designs in Baster, while solid casting is characteristic of Adilabad.

Culturally, this art reflects tribal life, nature worship, and religious rituals, and also serves as a source of livelihood for the community. Currently, it faces challenges from rising raw material costs, lack of interest among younger generations, and mass production, but it is experiencing a resurgence due to GI tags (Bastar 2008, Adilabad 2018), government schemes, and international markets. Dhokra is not only an ancient heritage but also a symbol of sustainable handicraft, keeping Indian cultural diversity alive.

**Keywords:** Dhokra Art, Lost Wax Technique, Tribal Handicrafts, Dhokra Casting, Bell Metal Craft, Indian Metal Art, GI Tag, Cultural Heritage

### INTRODUCTION

Dhokra art holds a unique place in the diverse landscape of Indian handicrafts. It is the art of creating sculptures from non-ferrous metals (brass or bell metal), based on the ancient lost-wax casting technique. Its origins are believed to date back approximately 4000-4500 years, when the famous 'Dancing Girl' of Mohenjo-daro in the Indus Valley Civilization was created using this very method. The name 'Dhokra' is derived from the Dhokra Damar tribe, who were originally nomadic metalworkers and spread from West Bengal and Odisha to Central India.

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Received: 22 December 2025; Accepted: 20 January 2026; Published 28 February 2026

DOI: [10.29121/granthaalayah.v14.i2SCE.2026.6765](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v14.i2SCE.2026.6765)

Page Number: 182-184

Journal Title: International Journal of Research -GRANTHAALAYAH

Journal Abbreviation: Int. J. Res. Granthaalayah

Online ISSN: 2350-0530, Print ISSN: 2394-3629

Publisher: Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors' Contributions: Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Transparency: The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.

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The greatest characteristic of Dhokra art is that each product is unique, as the wax mold is destroyed after a single use. This art reflects tribal life, nature worship, religious beliefs, and daily life. Currently, it primarily thrives in the tribal areas of Bastar (Chhattisgarh), Bankura (West Bengal), Adilabad (Telangana), and Odisha.

This research paper studies the historical development, technical process, regional variations, cultural significance, and contemporary challenges of Dhokra art. In the modern era, this art is threatened by mass production and the indifference of the younger generation, but the GI tag and government efforts are giving it a new direction.

## HISTORY AND ORIGIN

The roots of Dhokra art lie in the Indus Valley Civilization (3500-1500 BCE). The bronze 'Dancing Girl' found in Mohenjo-daro and other figurines from Lothal are evidence of the lost-wax casting technique. This method is one of the oldest metal casting techniques in the world, also found in Egypt, China, and other civilizations, but it has continued uninterrupted in India.

During the medieval period, the Dhokra Damar tribe preserved this art form. These nomadic artisans created religious idols and utilitarian objects in villages. The tribe originated in West Bengal and spread across eastern and central India. The prominent communities practicing this art include the Ghadwa in Bastar, the Ojha in Adilabad, and the Karmakar in Bankura.

In the 20th century, archaeological discoveries brought it global recognition. In 2008, Bastar Dhokra and in 2018, Adilabad Dhokra received the Geographical Indication (GI) tag, a recognition of its unique origin. This art form is a living testament to tribal culture, deeply connected to nature and ancestor worship.

## THE MANUFACTURING PROCESS (THE LOST WAX TECHNIQUE)

The main technique used in Dhokra art is 'Cire Perdue' or lost wax casting. This is a laborious, environmentally friendly process involving 12-16 steps, using clay, beeswax, rice husk, and scrap brass. The main steps are:

- 1) **Making the clay core:** Creating the base shape from river clay and cow dung.
- 2) **Making wax threads:** Wrapping thin wires of beeswax to create the design.
- 3) **Applying clay layers:** Applying several layers of clay mixed with rice husk over the wax, leaving inlets and outlets.
- 4) **Removing the wax:** Melting the wax by heating.
- 5) **Melting the metal:** Melting the brass in a furnace.
- 6) **Casting:** Pouring the molten metal into the mold.
- 7) **Breaking the mold:** Removing the sculpture after it cools.
- 8) **Finishing:** Cleaning and polishing.

Hollow casting is prevalent in Bastar, while solid casting is common in the South. The entire process takes weeks, and each product is unique.

## REGIONAL VARIATIONS AND THEMES

Dhokra art varies regionally:

**Bastar (Chhattisgarh):** Bold, hollow designs by the Ghadwa tribe; deities, musicians, animals.

**Bankura-Dariyapur (West Bengal):** Delicate wire ornamentation; the Bankura horse is famous.

**Adilabad (Telangana):** Solid casting; jewelry and utensils.

**Odisha-Jharkhand:** Birds, deities, and scenes of daily life.

Prominent themes include elephants (symbolizing strength), horses (beauty), peacocks, deities, and tribal life.

## CULTURAL AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

Dhokra art is a reflection of tribal culture. It is used in rituals, weddings, and festivals. The sculptures depict nature worship, ancestor veneration, and community beliefs. It provides a livelihood for tribal men and women and is kept alive through generational transmission. In the global market, it is a symbol of Indian heritage.

## CURRENT STATUS, CHALLENGES AND REVIVAL

**Today, Dhokra craft is in crisis:** Raw materials are expensive, there is a lack of interest among young people, and it faces competition from mass production. Many artisans have started pursuing other professions.

**Revival efforts:** GI tag, Tribes India, NGOs, and online platforms. Design interventions have led to modern jewelry and decor. International demand is increasing.

## CONCLUSION

Dhokra metal craft is a bridge between ancient traditions and modernity. Its preservation will contribute to cultural heritage and tribal empowerment. Further focus on digital marketing and sustainable practices is essential.

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