

MONOGRAPH

ON

IVORY CARVING IN ASSAM

BY

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IVORY CARVING IN ASSAM.

ONCE an important art in the days of the Ahom rajas, ivory carving has, since Assam came under British rule, gradually declined. In those past times the industry thrived, the workers, patronised by the rajas and leading men of the court, received, as a return for their work, free grants of land and labour. In consideration for these privileges, a special class of workers, known as Khanikars, worked solely for the rajas. This would seem to indicate that the work in those days was much valued. Coming to a more recent period we read as follows in Sir W. W. Hunter's Statistical Account of Assam, published in 1879 :

"Another speciality of Sylhet manufacture is ivory-ware, the carvers of which are characterised by much ingenuity and taste. Their work consists of ivory mats, which are sold at from £20 to £60 each, fans from £1-12 to £2-10, sticks from £1-12 to £2, chessmen from £3 to £5 a set, dice from 3s. to 6s. a set, and *gulis* (the pegs which pass between the great toe and the toe next to it to prevent the sandal from slipping off the foot) from 2s. to 3s. per pair."

As regards the Assam Valley, the only mention made by him of the industry is that in which he states that the industry is non-existent in Lakhimpur.

2. In 1891, the census showed 4 ivory carvers in the whole of Assam,—3 in Kamrup, 1 in Sibsagar,—while the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet now states—"Ivory carving is a practically extinct art now in Sylhet."

Bringing the information up to date, we might safely say that there is but one man in the whole of Assam whose occupation can be described as "Ivory carver,"—Fiznur, Mussalman, of Jorhat. From an important flourishing and honourable industry, it has, in the space of 70 to 80 years, been reduced to the work of one man, and that spasmodic. To what causes then are we to attribute this decline?

The demand in the past must have almost entirely been supplied by the rajas. The demand was, however, sufficient to occupy under one raja the full time of some forty men. Outside demand may not have been large. But could it be said that with the disappearance of the rajas the demand entirely ceased? I doubt it. Was there then no scope for the ivory carver's abilities?

Here the Assamese character asserted itself. Under the rajas the work was not altogether an optional one. There was a compulsory element. Care was taken to see that each man was kept busy at his trade, while at the same time the means of livelihood was certain. With the disappearance, however, of the rajas these influences ceased. The carvers, who had land and cattle, settled down principally to a life of agriculture — a life involving little labour on their part, yet ensuring a comfortable living. Not pressed by want, or compelled by force, to earn his livelihood, the ivory carver took no steps to push his industry, or to create a demand. An occasional order for an article in ivory would be executed generally at a profit so considerable that the worker could afford to lay aside his tools for some time before undertaking another commission. What was the result of this? What was spasmodic in the parent became despised by the child; he saw in it merely a secondary means of livelihood, demanding long and much perseverance, with no immediate prospect of prosperity. Their inclinations, if of good family, tended, as in the case of the son of Fiznur, the well-known carver in Jorhat, towards an office stool.

3. Another cause, which has led to the decline of the industry, is the "Ivory" itself. The rajas themselves used to have a large number of elephants, and from these, as well as from wild elephants killed, an ample supply of ivory was obtained. But with the introduction of the Elephant Preservation Act and its extension to the hills districts, ivory is at the present time rarely procurable. It is occasionally obtained from the owners of dead elephants, or from the tusks of dead elephants found in the jungle, brought to headquarters and sold. The purchasers in the latter case are, however, generally Marwaris or Kayas, who send the tusks to Calcutta for sale at a profit. Abors and Nagas kill wild elephants beyond the Inner Line, and the tusks they sell to Marwaris in Dibrugarh. This, too, is generally exported, except for an occasional demand by an ivory carver. But even these exports are very small, as the trade returns show, and have been gradually declining—

In the year 1897-98	...	...	17 maunds,
In the year 1898-99	...	...	1 maund,

ivory were exported from Assam. It might thus seem almost superfluous to enter into any detailed description of the work of the ivory carver in Assam. We have found but one

man whose occupation can be described as "Ivory carver," but there are others who, while dependent for their living on other occupations, still possess a knowledge of the art. In the case of all, however, the work is spasmodic, and entirely dependent on occasional orders received—generally from Europeans—which orders they do not always take the trouble to execute. The ivory carver in Sylhet (his principal occupation is that of "goldsmith"), whose speciality is fans, has received but one order for fans during the last ten years. No other orders has he received either from Europeans or Natives. And the others are in a similar position, although in the case of one or two more frequent demands have been made for their work.

4. The number of persons in Assam, who are acquainted with ivory carving, may be roughly put down at fifty. Of these, about forty depend for their living on agriculture, while the others have become carpenters or brass-workers. The industry has been at no time confined to any particular caste, the old class of Khanikars being composed of both Hindus and Mussalmans. The surviving representative of the Khanikar class is Fiznur, Mussalman, of Jorhat, whose family possessed the title of Khanikar Boroja—a title given by the Ahom rajas as signifying special knowledge in ivory carving. Of these fifty carvers, about forty reside in Goalpara, depending mostly on agriculture for their living, six in Manipur, whose general work is carpentry or brass-work, two in Kamrup, and two in Dibrugarh, also engaged in carpentry; one in Sylhet, a goldsmith, and one in Jorhat. As regards the work of carving, there is little that calls for remark. The ivory as procured is generally in a fit state for carving at once. In some places it is put in boiling water and milk before it is cut up, while in Manipur it is cut up and then put in the shade for a considerable time until thoroughly dry. The tools used for carving are practically the same as used in wood carving,—saws, chisels, and borers of various sizes, used according to the nature of the work. Tools, both of European or native manufacture, are equally used. For the final polish there are various articles. There is, of course, sand-paper (*siris kagoj*), the use of which is general. The scales of the "Pitbia" fish are also used. This fish is not in great request or favour as an eatable, but its large scales are very useful for polishing purposes. In Manipur the leaf of the "Heitmana," or jungly fig, is employed. The surface of this leaf is very rough, and acts as a fine sand-paper. Husks of paddy and leaves of the jack trees are also used, but to a small extent.

The nature of the articles turned out depends on the demand. Practically, the whole of the work done is the result of special orders, and generally any article ordered can be executed. The representative of the industry in Sylhet makes a speciality of fans, while the Jorhat worker has a preference for salad spoons and forks and back-scratchers. The latter carver, however, confines himself slavishly to these three articles, and will not execute orders for other than these. Small boxes, paper knives, dice, chessmen, combs, handles for knives, umbrellas, etc., bracelets, rings, and models of animals represent the general nature of the work.

In these articles there is generally some ornamentation. Figures of animals, as elephants and fish, and drawings of creepers and flowers, are common objects of ornamentation. Rubies and emeralds of a cheap nature adorn many articles, as spoons, forks and bracelets, and are used for eyes in the case of animals. Silver and gold, and brass, too, are occasionally employed. In Fiznur's case, there is little or no variety in the ornamentation.

The value of the ivory in its original state varies according to quality. Good ivory generally fetches from Rs. 12 to Rs. 15 per seer, while inferior ivory may not fetch more than Rs. 5.

In the Garo Hills any ivory found or brought in is sold to a contractor at a fixed rate of Rs. 9, good and bad. The ivory exported to Calcutta and sold there generally fetches a much higher figure.

5. The value of the finished article depends (1) on the amount of ivory required, (2) the value of the ornamentation, (3) the time required to carve the article. The ornamentation generally amounts to a very small proportion of the final cost, rubies used being worth but Re. 1 per hundred. For his labour the ivory carver generally charges one rupee per day. To illustrate this, we may take the salad fork and spoon, the work in which the Jorhat carver excels. The ivory required in this will cost from Rs. 20 to Rs. 24. The rubies used in its ornamentation would cost Rs. 5 to Rs. 12. (This figure seems to me rather high, and the carver, I think, must make a considerable profit on this.) The sale price of the fork and spoon varies from Rs. 30 to Rs. 50. Taking his value of the stones, this gives him on the average a sum of Rs. 14-8 for his labour, which in this case covers a period of 13 to 15 days. A day's labour, however, covers but few hours.

6. There remains little more to be said. Ivory carving once flourished because nurtured, and, as I have pointed out, because not altogether an optional industry. It decayed when both

these influences ceased. It has now reached the point of extinction, not so much because there is no demand, but rather because the workers, from want of energy or material, have so hidden their talents, that but few know of their existence.

7. I append a list of the principal articles made with their usual prices, with the hope that the information therein contained may prove, to some extent, a means of causing a demand, and thereby checking the decline of an industry, to all appearance, on the verge of extinction.

JAMES DONALD,

Assistant Commissioner, Golaghat.

APPENDIX.

LIST OF ARTICLES WITH USUAL PRICES.

1. Comb	...	...	from Rs. 5 to Rs. 20
2. Back-scratchers	...	...	" " 20 " " 50
3. Earpicks	...	...	from annas 6 to Re. 1
4. Spoon and fork	...	...	from Rs. 30 to Rs. 50
5. Toy (elephant toy)	...	...	" " 30 " 35
6. " (horse)	...	...	" " 8 " 10
7. " (fish)	...	...	" " 1-8 " 5
8. Cart	...	...	" " 50 " 60
9. Kakoi (a kind of comb made of bamboo for combing long hairs)	...	...	" " 5 " 6
10. Bracelet	...	...	" " 8 " 10
11. Paper knife	...	...	" " 8 " 18
12. Dice	...	...	" " 20 " 25
13. Chessmen	...	...	about Rs. 100
14. Knife handle	from Rs. 3 to Rs. 8
15. Knobs	" " 2 " 4
16. Tema (small box)	" " 4 " 10
17. Ring	" " 4 " 6
18. Fans	" " " 37

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