
PRESERVING THE LEGACY OF WEST BENGAL'S CONCH SHELL CRAFTSMANSHIP FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS: A NECESSITY OF GI

Indranil Chakrabarty, Department of Law, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune

ABSTRACT

A distinctive cultural legacy that has been carried down throughout generations of artists is West Bengal's conch shell craft. But the craft is up against a number of obstacles, including as the loss of conventional expertise, competition from low-quality imitators, and a lack of protection. In this research paper we go over the importance of Geographical Indications (GI) in maintaining the conch shell craft as well as its part in conserving the cultural heritage of the trade.

And in this research paper we also look at the craft's history, cultural value, technical aspects, economic implications, as well as the present difficulties faced by the artists. We also look at the government of West Bengal's initiatives to promote the art and the potential advantages of GI for local businesses and artists. Additionally, we address many strategies that might support GI efforts to preserve the conch shell craft, including increasing capacity, marketing and branding, defending intellectual property rights, development and research, and partnerships. As a conclusion, we contend that GI is an essential instrument for safeguarding the distinctive character and history of the Conch Shell Craft and that a multifaceted strategy is required to assure its survival for foreseeable future.

Keywords: Geographical Indications, Cultural Significance, Conch shell crafts, Shankhakars, Artisans.

Introduction: -

West Bengal is well known for the distinctive style of its crafts and arts. It is really challenging to put into words the beauty and originality of these crafts. A conch shell craft is one of the most rare and stunning types of art practised in West Bengal. It is a West Bengal craft that is incredibly refined and delicate. According to Hindu mythology, conch shell crafts are not only exquisite and gorgeous, but also very auspicious. This type of particular art form is also quite costly and cannot be afforded by everyone.

Conch shell craft is essentially the technique of carving lovely motifs onto real shells that are taken from the ocean floor. Every craftsman carves the shell in a different way. Some artists decorate the shell with a drawing of Lord Shiva, while others depict complete Mahabharata scenes.¹ Then, prominent topics for etching on conch shells include tales about Lord Krishna. Conch shell carving is quite challenging; it often takes between two and three months to produce a single shell object.

This craft has been handed down through the years and has been vital to the state's cultural and religious traditions. The West Bengal Conch Shell Craft, nevertheless, is currently dealing with a number of issues that put its survival in jeopardy due to the changing circumstances. It is vital to investigate several options, including the utilisation of Geographical Indication (GI), in order to maintain this distinctive skill. The purpose of this essay is to evaluate the significance of GI in protecting the tradition of West Bengal Conch Shell Quality craftsmanship for coming generations.

History and Origin: -

Fig 1: - Conch Shells Product.

¹ Conch Shell Crafts.(Seen on 5th Jan 2026) <http://www.bharatonline.com/west-bengal/arts-and-crafts/conch-shell-craft.html>

Mr. Indranil Chakrabarty is the student of Department of Law, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune

The Sanskrit words "Shum," which indicates anything good, and "Kham," which signifies water, combine to form the term "shank." As a result, Shankam means "conch holding sacred water." The words "Shankara" and "kara," which together mean "conch blower," are also supposed to have been derived from one another. The most common name for particular gastropod mollusks is conch. Conch shells are employed as decorations, cameos, horns, and trumpets. The trumpet's original horn, the conch shell, has persisted.²

In order to construct creative conch bangles or "Sankha" for married Hindu women, artisans known as "Shankhabaniks" or "Sankharis" carve conch shells. They also use sophisticated patterns and decorations to produce several sorts of blowing conches. The talented artists also create exquisitely detailed miniature versions of Gods and Goddesses. Various forms of pictures, idols, toys, and other ornamental things are carved out of wood.

West Bengal's Conch Shell Craft has a long history and significant cultural legacy that have been passed along through the centuries. The city of Bankura, that is located in the southernmost region of West Bengal, is where the skill is mostly performed. Conch shell crafts are made by intricately carving and sculpting on the shells' surface using specialised equipment and methods.

The Bankura Malla Kings established the conch shell trade as a source of subsistence to the local artisans in the 16th century, beginning a longstanding legacy. The craft eventually became well-liked and highly regarded for both its aesthetic merit and cultural relevance. The conch's shell, which is employed in a number of religious and cultural rites in India and is regarded as an emblem of purity and the divine, gives the craft even more significance to the local populations.

Traditional musical instruments like snail trumpets, or shankh, that were utilised in Hindu religious rites, were mostly made in the early days out of conch shells. Making ornamental things like lamps, bowls, and ashtrays was also part of the skill. But as times have changed, the craft has developed to incorporate modern styles and has broadened its selection of goods to include jewellery, trinkets, and other ornamental objects.

² Statement of Case, Bankura Conch shell crafts, IP India Website (Seen on 6th Jan 2026)<https://search.ipindia.gov.in/GIRPublic/Application/ViewDocument>.

The craft has also become an important source of income for many local artisans and has helped to preserve traditional skills and techniques that have been passed down through generations. It has also played a significant role in promoting the cultural heritage of West Bengal, and has been recognized as an important aspect of the state's cultural identity.

As the number of competent artists has reduced and the demand for conch shell crafts has grown more competitive, there is rising worry for the sustainability of the industry. To maintain the ancient skills and expertise of the craftsmen and to protect West Bengal's cultural legacy for future generations, the necessity for legal protection and acceptance of the trade through GI is growing even more critical in this context. So therefore, the protection through is required for this.

Techniques and Processes Involved in Conch Shell Crafts: -



Fig 2: - Conch shell Making. Courtesy: - Bablu Nandi at work. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/my-kolkata/people/with-national-award-bankura-shankha-artist-reaches-new-heights/cid/1838274>

As these requires huge processes. So therefore, Conch shell crafts are a sophisticated art that need a number of complex procedures and techniques. The first step in the procedure is choosing the proper conch shell, which must be of superior quality and unaffected from any fractures or damage.

The following phases can be used to roughly split the process of making conch shell crafts:

1. Cleansing and Preparation:

The conch shell must first be cleaned of any dirt or contaminants on its surface. The

shell is often prepared for this by soaking it in water for several hours or overnight³. The shell must first be thoroughly cleaned before being prepared for carving by flattening the outermost layer with a file or sandpaper.

2. Designing and Carving:

The elaborate designs and motifs on the conch shell's surface are designed and carved during the second step. Knives, gouges, and other specialised carving implements are used for this. The patterns might have geometric shapes, floral themes, or religious symbols, and they could be classic or modern. The artists employ their imagination and talent to produce distinctive and detailed patterns that highlight their abilities.

3. Polishing and Finishing: -

Once the figure is complete, the coming step is to polish and finish the face of the conch shell. This is done using fine sandpaper or polishing composites to give the shell a smooth and lustrous finish. Some crafters also use natural accoutrements similar as coconut oil painting or beeswax to add a redundant subcaste of protection and shine to the shell.

4. Assembling this: -

The final stage involves assembling the different corridor of the conch shell to produce the finished product. This may involve attaching handles, bases, or other ornamental rudiments to the shell, depending on the type of craft being made.

The ways and processes involved in creating Conch Shell crafts bear a high position of skill and moxie, and are generally passed down through generations. The crafters use their creativity and imagination to produce unique and beautiful designs, while also following traditional ways and styles to save the authenticity and artistic significance of the craft.

Current Status and Challenges Faced while preserving the shell craft: -

Although it has its own credibility but due to some extend it is right in the current trend it is

³ Statement of Case, Bankura Conch shell crafts, IP India Website
<https://search.ipindia.gov.in/GIRPublic/Application/ViewDocument>.

facing severe shortage in the making and the industry. The viability and present state of the Bengal's conch shell craft have been influenced by a number of recent difficulties. The following are some of the main obstacles the vessel faces:

1. Absence of trained artisans:

The craft calls for a high degree of competence and skill that was passed down through centuries. However, as new generations have less interest in mastering the technique, the number of competent craftsmen has declined over time.⁴

2. Materials readily available:

Conch shells, the primary starting point for the skill, are getting more and more expensive and scarce. Because of this, it has become challenging for craftsmen to find premium shells at affordable rates.

3. Competition from substitute materials:

As substitute materials like plastic and metal are employed to produce similar goods at a cheaper price, the marketplace for conch shell crafts has grown more competitive.

4. Lack of recognition and legal protection:

Despite its cultural significance, the craft has not received the necessary legal protection and recognition, which has made it vulnerable to imitation and exploitation.

5. Limited market opportunities:

The market for conch shell crafts is largely limited to local and regional markets, which has made it difficult for artisans to expand their customer base and increase their income.

6. Changing consumer preferences:

With the rise of modern and contemporary designs, there has been a shift in consumer

⁴ Statement of Case, Bankura Conch shell crafts, IP India Website <https://search.ipindia.gov.in/GIRPublic/Application/ViewDocument>.

preferences, which has made it challenging for artisans to adapt and innovate their craft.

Efforts taken by the Government to Preserve the craft: -

The West Bengal government has implemented various measures to safeguard and advance the Conch Shell Craft of the state. Among these initiatives are:

1. Establishment of Conch Shell Craft Centers:

The government has established Conch Shell Craft Centers in different regions of the state, which serve as a platform for artisans to exhibit their wares and interact with potential customers. These centres also provide training and assistance to budding artisans, to motivate them to learn and carry forward the craft.

2. Financial Aid for Artisans:

The government offers financial aid to artisans for the procurement of raw materials and tools, and also provides subsidies and incentives to encourage the adoption of sustainable practices.

3. Advancement of the craft at National and International Levels:

The government participates in national and international trade fairs and exhibitions, to showcase the craft and create awareness among potential buyers and tourists.

4. Legal Protection through GI:

The government has taken steps to provide legal protection to the Conch Shell Craft through GI registration, which safeguards the authenticity and cultural significance of the craft.

5. Creation of Employment Opportunities:

The government has recognized the potential of the Conch Shell Craft to generate employment opportunities in the state, and has taken steps to promote the craft as a viable livelihood option for artisans.

6. Strengthening the Supply Chain:

The government has taken measures to strengthen the supply chain for conch shells, by establishing collection centers and regulating the harvesting and transportation of shells.

7. Collaboration with NGOs and Private Sector:

The government has partnered with NGOs and private sector entities to promote the Conch Shell Craft and create market linkages for artisans.

These initiatives by the West Bengal government have played a pivotal role in promoting and preserving the Conch Shell Craft of the state, and have assisted in addressing some of the challenges faced by artisans. Nevertheless, there is a requirement for sustained support and intervention from the government and other stakeholders, to ensure the durability and expansion of the craft in the future.

Importance of Preserving the craft for the future generations: -



Fig 3: - ShakhaPhola- Type of conch shell bangs that are used during the marriage.

Particularly the conch shell craft of Bengal is not only source of livelihood for artisans, but also a rich cultural heritage of the state for which its tradition has been passed down to the generations to generations⁵. So therefore, preserving the craft is important for various reasons such as: -

⁵ Sankha Conch Bangles: How Bengal's Sankhari community is fighting all odds to keep the craft alive. <https://30stades.com/2021/04/23/sankha-conch-bangles-bengals-sankhari-fighting-odds-to-keep-craft-alive-sankha-pola/>

1. Cultural Significance:

The conch shell-making craft is a significant component of West Bengal's cultural heritage and is ingrained in the state's traditions and customs. The craft, which has been handed down through generation to generation, is an expression of the artists' aesthetic abilities and ingenuity. Therefore, it is crucial to preserve the craft in order to protect the state's cultural character and guarantee its continuation for future generations.

2. Sustainable use of natural resources: -

Conch shells, in particular, are used in Conch Shell Craft, which is focused on the sustainable use of natural resources. The craft's preservation is crucial for encouraging responsible utilisation of these resources and preventing their harm or depletion. Conch shell harvesting regulations and the implementation of environmentally responsible practises can both contribute to the craft's sustainability.

3. Economic Importance:

The conch shell craft industry has the potential to boost the state's economy by providing jobs and a significant source of revenue for craftsmen. Therefore, protecting the craft may benefit the state's economy and its citizens.

4. Creative And Aesthetic Work: -

Conch Shell Craft is well-known for its creative and aesthetic worth and is regarded as a representation of West Bengal's rich cultural legacy. For the state's creative and aesthetic traditions to continue and be passed down to future generations, the craft must be preserved.

5. Valuable for educational and study: -

The Conch Shell Craft is valuable for education and study since it sheds light on West Bengal's history, culture, and aesthetic traditions. Therefore, preserving the craft can help with the study and comprehension of these characteristics and advance knowledge and research in the area.

At this point we could say that, protecting West Bengal's conch shell crafts is crucial for its

social, environmental, economic, artistic, and scientific importance. Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge the craft's importance and take action to maintain its sustainability and continuation for future generations.

Role of Geographical Indication in Preserving the Conch Shell Craft: -



Fig 4: - Bankura tehsil map.

The term "geographical indication" ⁶(GI) refers to a label placed on goods with a known geographical origin and that have attributes, a solid reputation, or other traits that may be directly linked to that location. A product's distinctive character and legacy are legally protected by GI from imitation and exploitation. It is a crucial instrument for safeguarding a product's continuous existence for future generations as well as for maintaining the traditional knowledge, legacy, and identity connected to it.

One-of-a-kind art that has been handed down through the generations is West Bengal's conch shell craft. The craft entails the use of raw materials, primarily conch shells, and a variety of age-old processes to produce a wide range of intricate and stunning products, including decorations, ornamental items, and mementos. The use of low-cost imitations and the absence of protection for the craft's distinctive character and tradition are only a few of the difficulties it is currently experiencing.

Obtaining a GI tag for the Conch Shell Craft can play a crucial role in preserving its unique identity and heritage. As far as this product is concerned as such there has been no GI tag has

⁶ Geographical Indications Act of 1999

been given to this product. But through IP India journal⁷ it could be stated that it is under the Pre- Examination stage. And hence if the GI protection is given to this product the following could be the roles that GI can play in preserving the Conch Shell Craft:

1. Protection from Replication and Misuse:

The GI tag offers legal protection against the appropriation of the distinctive identity and history of the craft. It can stop the use of any name, logo, or other identifying feature that can mislead customers into thinking a product is genuine when it is not. This legal protection may be able to stop the loss of the craft's cultural heritage and traditional expertise.

2. Promotion of Genuineness and Effectiveness: The GI tag can aid in promoting the Conch Shell Craft's Authenticity and Quality. It can reassure customers that the item they are buying was manufactured authentically utilising time-honoured methods and premium components. The demand for authentic goods may rise as a result of the advancement of authenticity and excellence, which will benefit the artisan community's economic development.

3. Economic Benefits:

The GI tag can help increase the demand for authentic Conch Shell Craft products, create new markets, and generate higher prices for the artisans. This can help sustain the livelihoods of the artisans and their families and contribute to the economic development of the state.

4. Protection of cultural heritage:

The "GI tag" can help to preserve the cultural heritage and identity of the Conch Shell Craft. It can help to raise awareness about the craft's unique identity and history, and contribute to its recognition and promotion. This cultural preservation can help ensure that the craft is passed down to future generations and is not forgotten.

Geographical indication (GI) is a special type of trademark that helps to protect the unique

⁷ IP India Website GI Journal

identity, heritage, and cultural knowledge of a certain craft or product from being lost or stolen. It can help to promote the product's quality and authenticity, and can also help to generate economic benefits for the artisans and the state government. In conclusion, the state government and the artisans should work together to get a GI tag for the Conch Shell Craft of West Bengal so that it can be preserved and continued for future generations. Hence if it is given it also fulfills the requirement that is: -

- A. That the place has some attributes
- B. It has History of Origin.
- C. It has its own cultural significance in particular part of the territory.

Alternative approaches to complement Geographical Indications: -

There are different ways to help protect the culture and heritage of the Conch Shell Craft of West Bengal, each of which can be helpful in its own way. One example is using geographical indications (GI).

1. Capacity building and skill development programs

It can also help artisans improve their production processes, develop new designs, and explore new markets. This will help to improve the quality of the products and increase the competitiveness of the artisans.

2. Marketing and branding

It particularly can help to promote the Conch Shell Craft products to a wider audience. This can involve developing a strong brand identity, building a website or an e-commerce platform to showcase the products, participating in exhibitions and trade fairs, and collaborating with designers and artists to create new products. This can help to increase the visibility of the Conch Shell Craft and create new markets.

3. Research and Development:

Research and development activities can be undertaken to explore new production techniques, materials, and designs for the Conch Shell Craft. This can include

developing new products that cater to changing market demands, exploring new technologies, and experimenting with sustainable production methods. This approach can help to keep the craft relevant and competitive in the face of changing consumer preferences and market trends.

4. Collaborations and Partnerships:

Collaborations and partnerships can be established between the artisans, government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other stakeholders to support the Conch Shell Craft. These collaborations can involve sharing knowledge and resources, providing financial and technical assistance, and developing joint marketing and branding activities. This approach can help to build a strong ecosystem around the craft and ensure its sustainability in the long run.

At this point we can say that, while Geographical Indication is an important tool for preserving the unique identity and heritage of the Conch Shell Craft, it can be complemented by other approaches such as capacity building and skill development, marketing and branding, intellectual property rights protection, research and development, and collaborations and partnerships. These approaches can help to enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of the craft and ensure its continued existence for future generations.

Economic Implications: -

The Conch Shell Craft of West Bengal has significant economic implications for the state and its artisans. Some of the economic implications are:

1. Employment Generation:

The Conch Shell Craft provides employment to a large number of artisans, who depend on it for their livelihood. The craft also generates indirect employment in allied activities such as transportation, trading, and marketing.

2. Contribution to the State's Economy:

The Conch Shell Craft is an important contributor to the state's economy, as it generates income and tax revenues for the government. The craft also has the potential to attract

tourists and generate revenue from the sale of craft products.

3. Enhancement of Artisan Skills:

The Conch Shell Craft has the potential to enhance the skills of artisans, as they learn new techniques and develop their creativity. This can lead to better quality products and higher incomes for artisans.

Conclusion: -

West Bengal's Conch Shell Craft is a distinctive cultural legacy that is threatened by a number of issues. A vital step in maintaining this trade for future generations might be the usage of GI. To protect the integrity and prestige of the craft, GI can offer legal protection against the use of the product's name without authorization. Additionally, GI can contribute to increasing demand for genuine goods and raising awareness of the craft's cultural relevance.

However, it is important to remember that the efficient implementation of the registration procedure and the provision of support to the traditional artists are prerequisites for GI's success in maintaining the Conch Shell Craft. The tradition of West Bengal's Conch Shell Craftsmanship may be preserved for future generations through a multi-pronged strategy that incorporates the use of GI and alternative preservation techniques.