



## Review Paper

# Social Bonds by the Creation of the Craft Artist's Legacy – Fact Findings from the Villages in West Bengal, India

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## Abstract

*Creation can unite individuals or groups through social bonds, where social interactions and other relationships act as the catalyst. Such social bonds can be financial instruments that can be used for family financing. The money earned by an artist can meet the health, food, and daily household needs of every family. The result is that families connected by a common origin of the same creation are bound together into a large group, from which a village is established somewhere. In these villages, people of the same craft form a strong bond that allows them to work together and solve various social and family problems. Two such villages, located in two adjacent districts in West Bengal, are Natungram and Balagarh where craft artists can be found in almost every family. The craft of making wooden dolls in Natungram and small indigenous wooden boats in Balagarh has been going on for about five or six generations. However, due to lack of government assistance and the touch of modernity, the present condition of these traditional wooden dolls making and boat making villages is quite deplorable.*

**Keywords:** Social bonds, Wooden dolls, Family cohesion, Natungram, Boat making, Social instinct, Balagarh, Economic boost.

## Introduction

The first instance of a village whose name is derived from the artistic entity of wooden dolls making that enhance family cohesion is called Natungram<sup>1</sup>. Natungram wooden dolls are a famous handicraft from Purba Bardhaman district of West Bengal, known for their distinctive traditional style, especially Egyptian mummy-like shapes and the creation of different characters made from the same and single piece of wood (e.g. owl, king-queen, Gour-Nitai etc.), which is associated with the Vaishnavism sect (Figure-1). Thus, the village originated named Natungram, located near Purbasthali in Purba Bardhaman district. The dolls, closely associated with Vaishnavism, especially in demand during Rasa Yatra and Jayadeva Mela, are culturally significant and this wooden doll making is in the process of getting GI tag. It is a nationally recognized craft making industry. Currently it is known as the wooden doll's village and is an attractive place for tourists.

The other instance is a boat village established in the name of Balagarh of Hooghly district of West Bengal as a result of social ties and social capital<sup>2</sup>. It is a centuries-old boat making industry which is a traditional craft of making mainly indigenous wooden boats that once dominated the waterways of eastern India. Efforts are currently underway to obtain a GI tag and revive it because even though this industry faces various adversities, craftsmen still continue to build boats for fishing, passenger transport, and goods transportation using traditional

methods, which continues to carry an important tradition of Bengal. The boat making industry of Balagarh is thousands of years old, where craftsmen make boats from wood using hammers and chisels which are traditional. Different types of boats are manufactured here, such as fishing boats, passenger boats, and deep-water boats. Local craft workers build their skills at every step, from selecting the quality of wood to building the boat (Figure-2). Revival efforts are underway to get the Geographical Indication (GI) tag to keep this industry alive and gain new markets. Although this industry has faced some crisis due to modernity, it is expected to be revived through the joint efforts of researchers and craftsmen. This boat making industry of Balagarh is not just a profession, it is an integral part of the culture and history of Bengal's waterways, which still survive in the hands of craftsmen. One of the main objectives of this work is to explore the current social conditions and social bonds of both the villages established by the creation of craft and cottage industry.

## Social Ties in Wooden Doll Making

**Artistic Essence:** The wooden dolls made in this village look very similar to Egyptian mummies. The artists in this village mainly make dolls of gods, goddesses, kings, queens, animals, birds etc. Among them, the owl and the king and queen are traditionally the original and genuine ones. More or less everyone here is an artist. Everyone from young to old, men to women, is engaged in this cottage industry. The name of this

handicraft is wooden doll making and the name of the village is Natungram. The distance from Natungram to Agradwip station is only a few kilometers. Agradwip is a small rural rail station on the Burdwan-Katwa railway line. Natungram is located in a completely rural environment under Purbasthali Development Block II of East Burdwan, West Bengal. This is where wooden doll makers from every family in the village work all day and night. About 43 families in this village are involved in making these wooden dolls with their artistic essence which is a result of social instinct<sup>3</sup>. Sambhunath Bhaskar, an unforgettable figure in the art of wooden dolls from this unknown village, was awarded the President's Award in 1966 for showing off his artistic talent. Now his grandsons Jaydeb and Sudeb Bhaskar along with the husband of his granddaughter, Manik Sutradhar who lives in this village have earned fame at home and abroad by making and supplying these wooden dolls.



**Figure-1:** Wooden dolls displayed on the wall of a doll maker house at Natungram of East Burdwan.

The name of the village, which shows a new direction by walking on some familiarity, some ideas, and a new path, is Natungram. The name of the man who showed this new direction may no longer be remembered by anyone in this wooden doll's village. But four or five generations ago, someone or a group or community started making wooden dolls. They had their own confidence in that work. Currently, the entire village is dependent on that work. Some of them make wooden dolls, some are busy sawing wood in the sawmill located near the entrance of the village, some cut wood, some plant trees to provide wood for the future, some people buy tree trunks from other districts and supply them to the wooden doll

makers in this village. The people of the village are the descendants of their ancestors, their soul mates. They all belong to the carpenter community. So, since childhood, the boys and girls of this village have been fascinated by watching wooden dolls being made, similarly, the young men and women of this village are bound by marriage within the same village although there are currently exceptions to this social norm.



**Figure-2:** A boat is being built in the boat-making village of Sripur in Balagarh CD Block of Hooghly.

### Connection to the Lineage and Heritage

In this village, most of the family members have the surname Bhaskar, or Sutradhar. It is not known what the surnames of the ancestors were. It is said that the king of Burdwan donated land to these artists to live in this village. The King not only provided land but also granted financial assistance to these artists to settle and encourage their artistic endeavours. That king may have honoured these artists with the surnames of Sutradhar by giving them the title of Bhaskar, which later became their surnames. The title given by the king is now passed down from generation to generation. A wooden doll maker of this village said that they have been carpenters for generations and their ancestors also changed their title from Sutradhar to Bhaskar, but there was some confusion regarding ancestral property. And that is why he and his other family members have changed their surname back to Sutradhar by filing an affidavit in court. According to the carpenter, those who hold the title of sculptor (Bhaskar) are actually involved in stone carving. That straight forward wooden doll maker made a wooden owl from *Amrha* wood.

## Changing Commercialization for Climate Change

The carbon fertilization effect of plants has been observed for climate change, which is useful for plant growth. As a result, the plant requires less water to grow. In some districts of South Bengal, farmers have started planting trees like Sonajhuri, Eucalyptus, Lambu etc. in their paddy cultivation lands, which become marketable very quickly. Currently, artists are making wooden dolls from the wood of these trees, which is causing the quality of wooden dolls to decline. Moreover, by making only wooden dolls, the family has become helpless in their daily lives in this expensive market. So, doll makers have increased the number and variety of items they create. Now they don't just make wooden dolls, they have started making chairs, tables, tea tables, door frames, wall clocks, lamp shades, key rings, and dressing tables keeping up with the pace of the same art of wooden dolls. This update on making new furniture with wooden dolls seems to be their idea. If the mind speaks this word to the mind, they too gradually become thoughtful people. So, the creation of the current 43 carpenter families in this small village of Natungram never stops. And for this reason, this cottage industry accelerates in new directions, new destinations. The wooden dolls made in this village are sold at fairs held in various cities like Kolkata, Asansol, Siliguri, Burdwan, Durgapur, Medinipur, Bankura, Purulia, Bolpur, Baharampur, Kharagpur, Jhargram etc. This year, several stalls selling wooden dolls were seen at the fair of Mahesh Ratha Yatra in Hooghly district. The wooden doll makers of this village usually start working in full swing in September to sell these wooden dolls at handicraft fairs and other fairs in Kolkata during the winter.

## Alternative Wood Supply

There is no longer any evidence that this village Natungram was established in which year or who took the initiative for its foundation. Since people from outside the village started making new types of things from pieces of wood, the village was named Natungram. There is no way to know whether this was the original name of this village or not. The new type of item is nothing, but a doll made from pieces of wood. The pieces of wood used to make these dolls are: Sonajhuri, Neem, Pituli, Gamar, Lombu, Mehagini etc. The presence of these trees is not noticeable in Natungram, only bamboo bushes and a few coconut trees are around. So, the tree trunks have to be imported from outside the village. There is a sawmill at the entrance to the village. There, stored tree trunks around the sawmill are cut as needed. The wood of the Sonajhuri tree is used to make the most dolls. The wood of this tree is relatively soft, and rural doll makers use Sonajhuri wood to make almost all types of dolls, such as owls, king, queen, Ganesh, Radha Krishna, Saraswati and Durga idols.

The wood is usually collected by the doll makers from districts like Burdwan, Hooghly, Bankura, North and South 24 Parganas, Nadia etc. In these districts, many farmers plant Sonajhuri trees

instead of crops on their land. Sonajhuri trees grow to marketable size in just a few years. Currently, doll makers are using the Lambu tree instead of the Sonajhuri tree for its equivalent softness and availability in the market. Now, Lambu trees are planted almost everywhere in South Bengal. This Lambu tree is probably the local Gamar tree, from which relatively more wooden dolls are made today.

## Role of Rural Women

Today, when the lifeboat of the poor families is tossed about in the sea of chaos, the hands of rural women, who possess a deep mind, skillfully and effortlessly paint wooden paintings and that art knocks on the world's door, becoming a symbol of artistic beauty. And to make these wooden dolls, the men of the family initially cut the wood and shaped it into a doll. In the final step, the female members of the family colour the doll in three stages to turn it into a beautiful, marketable doll. The wooden dolls leave an impression of their simplicity on the hands of the girls as they paint them. In this village, women of almost every household of all ages paint wooden dolls. However, the wooden owl takes on a different form at the touch of their hand. The traditional wooden owl painted by women is like a symbol of good luck for this village (Figure-3).

## Involvement of Present Generation

According to villagers, the current generation in the age group of 5 to 10 years, have started studying in English-medium schools located nearby the village. Although most students in English medium schools that spring up in small villages do not fully succeed, yet, the manners, speech patterns, dress, etc. of children studying in English medium distinguish them from the others and cover them with a kind of apparent artificiality. This artificiality could displace some family members currently educated in English medium from their ancestral work. Again, the future course of teenagers studying in this English medium may be different. They can go to the city and present their family's marketable items with smartness speaking in English to the city dwellers, other organizations, or at the shopping malls in a perfect manner. They even help with everything from advertising their marketed items on social media to placing and taking orders and delivering them to the specified address within schedule. They will be able to update newly created marketable items using and applying computers, tabs, laptops, scanners, etc.

## Current Status

An art gallery has been built as a government effort to display various beautiful wooden dolls as a testament to the skills of craft artists. Wooden dolls of various shapes made of different wood are displayed throughout the art gallery. Above the art gallery is a guesthouse where each room has three beds for three people. Currently, it costs Rs.1000 per person per day for lodging and dining at this guesthouse. Nitai Sutradhar, one of

the local wooden doll makers, single-handedly manages the accommodation and catering arrangements for the guests at this guest house. There is a plaque on the wall of the art gallery and guest house that reads: The Common Facility Centre at Natungram, Bardhaman is developed by West Bengal Khadi and Village Industries Board (WBKVIB) under the project 'Developing Rural Craft Hubs of West Bengal' supported by Department of MSME &T, Government of West Bengal and UNESCO. In a word, the government has respected the artist's identity. The name of the rural craft is called making wooden dolls. And these wooden dolls are their life, and making wooden dolls is the livelihood of the inhabitants of Natungram. At the same time, a message can be given that the demand for wooden dolls to decorate homes in the metropolis or to give as gifts to small children or acquaintances is increasing.



Figure-3: Wooden dolls under making stage in a doll maker's house at Natungram.

### Traditional Boat Making

A boat on the water reveals the hidden beauty of the river. A boat is an artist's canvas painted on the water surface, with a river beneath it and the sky above it. One of the main elements of such a stunning scene is the boat, which the locality of Balagarh adjacent to local railway station began supplying about 300 years ago in Bengal. In those days, boats were made from sal and teak wood. As the supply of such valuable wood stopped, suitable wood was harvested from the Sundarbans to build boats. When the Forest Department banned logging in the Sundarbans, boat builders started building boats using local wood. In the past, due to the sufficient supply of wood, an average of 40 boats were made every week in Sripur, Tentulia, Chandra, and Rajbangshipara in the Balagarh region.

This boat industry is now thriving here. Now, on average, 12 boats are built per week, if not more. In just two decades, the 44 boat-making units have been reduced to 14 now. There are about 2,000 workers involved in this boat industry in 4 villages of Balagarh, although they do not get work every day because the boat industry is currently in decline.

A worker's attendance time for boat building is from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. But due to the shortage of raw materials, low number of boat supply orders, power outages, lightning strikes, and torrential rains, not all workers get to work building boats every day.

Moreover, the use of boats is gradually decreasing due to the construction of bridges over rivers, the closure of ferry services, and the rapid increase in road transportation. Now building boats is turning into a seasonal business. A boat building business unit sells 2-3 boats a month, although that number increases to 8-10 during the monsoon season. Boats are sold for sand hauling, fishing in rivers or reservoirs, and for ferry services that still exist in some places.

The traditional boat building at Balagarh is an industry that is hundreds of years old. However, boat builders have to keep profit and loss in mind. Currently, boat craftsmen have great difficulty meeting their family's daily expenses. Workers' families can survive somehow because every member contributes to earning money. Although boat industry traders earn substantial profits, workers involved in boat building do not receive proper wages for their labour. For a long time, the daily wage of these workers has been stuck at Rs. 400 only.

Many workers complain that the boats they build with their labour are sold and the owners make a profit from them. The owner of a boat building unit uses that profit to build a house and buy a car, but the workers' family situation does not change. However, the boat buying and selling market is still quite good, claim workers involved in boat building. The workers have been demanding a daily wage increase of two hundred rupees for the past two years, but the employers are somehow not listening.

### Boat Making Initiatives

The boat industry of Balagarh has been known for around 300 years since the existence of Saptagram Port. Boats are intertwined with the art and culture of this place like the veins and arteries of the body. Boat motifs have been used in the region's songs, poems, chants, stories, and even in the terracotta art on the walls of the temples. People from within and outside the area would regularly buy boats from here for travel, business, fishing, etc. Even gangs of robbers would regularly buy boats about 100 years ago to commit robberies on the water by water way. It is everyone's hope that with the sincere and joint efforts and enthusiasm of boat builders, boat traders, and the government, the prosperity of this industry at Balagarh will return soon.

## Indigenous Boat Making

Upon arriving at the boat-building village, anyone will notice tree trunks scattered here and there. There is a wood-cutting sawmill in the village of Sripur. The smell of new planks fills the noses of visitors all around. Boat builders used the planks to build boats on the instructions of boat traders at Sripur, Rajbanshi Para, Chandra, and Tentulia villages of Balagarh in Hugli District. These villages are known as boat-building villages. Orders are taken here to build boats 40 feet long and 11-12 feet wide for transporting passengers. After the boat is built, threads are inserted into the gaps between the planks in the workshop and tarred so that water does not leak into the boat. After the tar is applied and it dries, the boat is delivered to the buyer. Small boats are delivered in machine vans, while large boats are delivered in 10-12-wheel lorries. The Hooghly River flows past the boat-building village, and most of the boats are floated in the river and shipped to the buyer's address.

## Woods Used for Boat Making

Balagarh in Hooghly district, located on the west bank of the Hooghly River, is recognized as a historical place for its ancient temples and antiquities, in addition to its boat building industry. It is said that boat building has been going on here since the time of Vasco da Gama, although there is no historical evidence for this claim. Balagarh is located very close to the historic Saptagram port. Boat building workers from this place, which existed long before the British era, are now in dire straits. They are now facing financial difficulties due to low wages. Moreover, one of the obstacles to boat building now is the supply of better-quality wood against demand. Instead of the wood that makes good boats, other cheaper woods are now being used in this boat building industry<sup>4</sup>. Now, work is underway to make boats from other woods besides *jilipi*, *sirish*, *lambu*, *anshfol*, *subabul*, and *babla*. Police stop lorries while patrolling the roads during transport if they notice any deviations in the construction of the boat. The traffic police demand a good amount of money as a bribe. Apart from these, nowadays, the use of boats made of fiber is gradually increasing, and the use of wooden boats is gradually decreasing. This is why the price of wooden boats is falling, which is why boat builders are unable to increase the wages of their workers – said Nitai Pramanik, a local boat trader.

To build a standard size boat, workers need about 40 kg of pegs of different sizes including 2-inches *jolui*, *tarkanta*, ropes, cotton, tar etc. along with wooden planks. Accessories are available for purchase at local stores. A boat made of *jilipi* or *shiris* wood lasts for four years, but a boat made of *babla* wood lasts for 8-10 years. It takes two carpenters 10-12 days to build a 24-foot boat, and the workers are paid Rs. 5,500 as wages, the market price of which is 18 thousand rupees. But making a 40-foot boat costs 4 lakh rupees, and the labour charge required to build it is 50 thousand rupees. In any case, the next generation of boys are not interested in getting involved in boat building

because it is a lot of hard work, but the wage is low. Until this generation, boat building workers of Balagarh generally did not receive any formal education or training. They continue to work maintaining the tradition shown by their ancestors. Ranaghat is on the opposite side of the river ghat in Balagarh. There is a government-run ferry service for crossing here. The ferry service boats here are vessels which are made of iron and tin. If all these wooden boats are replaced by vessels in this way, then wooden boats will soon disappear in the river routes.

## Family Cohesion

Usually, the members of the family at Balagarh start building boats at the age of 15-16, which have been passed down through generations that work as bridging and bonding social capital<sup>5</sup>. It may take two craftsmen about 20 days to build a large fishing boat, but if the boat is small, it takes two people 10-12 days. Wooden cargo boats are usually 30 feet long. It takes two workers 15-16 days to build a 24-foot boat. No worker is paid a proper wage, so they work on a contract basis with the traders to build boats. But even if they work on a contract basis, the daily wage comes to 350-400 rupees. Their family can't survive on that money. For this reason, even after four generations of workers have been working, the next generation of workers no longer want to come to the boat building business.

## Acceleration of Economic Boost

Boat traders of Balagarh receive orders to sell boats from almost all districts of West Bengal (Figure- 4). However, compared to North Bengal, South Bengal, especially the Sundarbans, has a large number of rivers and canals, so orders come from there in greater numbers<sup>6</sup>. The members of the fishing community place orders from places like Namkhana, Kakdwip, Patharpratima, Diamond Harbour, Canning, Basanti, Gosaba, Godkhali, Sandeshkhali etc. in the Sundarbans<sup>7</sup>. Now the boats are neatly packed in cars and delivered from Balagarh to other places. Moreover, since the river Hooghly flows along this place, most boats are supplied by river route from here<sup>8</sup>. However, the buyer has to bear the cost of transporting the boat.

The boat-making industry at Balagarh is about 300 years old, with more than 300 families involved in the industry. These boat manufacturing factories are visible on the way from the railway station to the Ganges River. Several ancient temples and *rasmancha* can be seen on the same path. Those temples are located on a large field where fairs are held on festival days. After crossing that path, the sound of hammers hitting nails could be heard from inside the bamboo groves. To build a good boat, solid sal and teak wood are needed, which makes the boat durable. However, since the price of boats made of expensive wood is several times higher, buyers no longer want to buy expensive wooden boats. Boats last longer in freshwater. A wooden boat is much more susceptible to corrosion in coastal saline water, so it has a relatively short lifespan<sup>9</sup>. Wooden boats made of Babla (*Acacia*) are used for brackish water fishing or ferry services.

## Current Status

Boat traders offer GST at specific times. After the government received its fair share and learned about the problems of the boat traders, no help was forthcoming. If the government provides loans for this industry, traders can expand their business, and this may result in an increase in the daily wages of workers. The traders will be able to add more workers to this business. Another problem is that if the ready-made boats are not sold for a year, they are damaged by the sun and rainwater. And the paint on the boats has faded, which means those boats are old. If a warehouse to store the boats can be built with government funds, then the boats will not be destroyed, nor will their selling price decrease. If there is a boat warehouse, all traders can store their boats there and they can buy and sell boats from that place.

## Shambling Improvement

In short, the boat industry at Balagarh is now in shambles. Currently, a concerted effort has begun on the part of businessmen and the government to achieve GI recognition for this boating industry to revive its declining momentum. If Geographical Indication (GI) tagging is recognized, the fame of the boat industry at Balagarh will be known to the entire world. If boat sales increase, business scope will increase. As a result, boats from Balagarh will start being exported not only to other states in the country, but also to countries outside India.



**Figure-4:** Boats made in the boat-making village of Sripur in Balagarh are displayed for sale.

## Conclusion

One of the various aspects of social bonds in creation is social cohesion, which is the ability of strong social bonds (such as family, friends, community) to help people obey the rules of society and refrain from immoral acts. There is social control within village families created through artistic or craft entities because when individuals are strongly connected to society, they are less likely to break rules, which help maintain social order. Social capital is created in such villages as Natungram and Balagarh. It creates a bonding and bridging social capital, where bonding is the bond within a particular group and bridging is the connection between different groups<sup>10</sup>. It can be useful to look at the economic context of a village established through cottage industrial creation. In the economic context, a social bond or impact bond is a financial instrument that raises money to solve specific social problems such as education, health, housing or job creation. In the context of the psychological aspect, social bonding is when a person of such villages as Natungram or Balagarh integrates well with society and feels part of that society, then creativity and positive behaviour increase. In short, the social bond of creation is a process that connects individuals and society, maintains social order, and helps achieve specific social goals.

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