



A REVIEW OF CHANDAN BOSE'S PERSPECTIVES ON WORK, HOME, AND IDENTITY FROM ARTISANS IN TELANGANA: CONVERSATIONS AROUND CRAFT

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Abstract: This review considers Chandan Bose's ethnographic study into arts and crafts practices in Telangana, India. Merits of the book include Bose's nuanced interrogation of ethical complexities in and around ethnographic work, a centring of artisans' voices through direct quotes, and an emphasis on knowledge as something crucially formed in and through subjective inter-relational connections. Bose draws links between practices of ethnography, art and storytelling. Broaching the book as a *collaboration with* rather than a *study of* the artisan community, Bose offers ways of re-seeing research, knowledge, and cultural engagement that will hold relevance across a wide range of fields and practices in and beyond contemporary academics.

Keywords: ethnography; craft practice; arts research; relatedness; becoming; post-colonial India

I want to continue painting in my traditional medium, but also want this craft to expand and get its due recognition. I want more and more people to know about the work we do. I maintain the blog and am very particular about updating it regularly with new work. I have been learning from my father since I was a child; whenever we were free, he used to make us sit and show us different styles of painting. (artisan Rakesh, cited in Bose 2019, p. 200)

Today I want to introduce new techniques, new mediums. I have only just completed my first year of the BFA. Once I begin my second year, I will get to specialise. I'm hoping to learn some new techniques, which I can then apply to these paintings. (artisan Vinay, cited in Bose 2019, p. 201)

Through his ethnographic study of *naqqash* craft practices and communities in Telangana, India, Chandran Bose makes an important new contribution to the emerging field of research around *patam-pradarshan katha* (the showing and telling of stories through painted images). Yet Bose does more than this; his book provides insights of relevance for academic as well as general readers spanning a wide range of interest areas beyond those explicitly studying craft and/or Indian culture. He interrogates the nature of ethnography itself, and by extension, practices of knowledge production or research across multiple fields, and practices in and beyond contemporary scholarship and/as the arts. Bose emphasizes connectivity by framing his work as *collaboration with* as opposed to *a study of* artisan communities. He thus signals possibilities for doing and sharing research in ways that unsettle conventional knowledge-power relations. Such research encourages more laterally-aligned, reciprocal, and relational ways of conceiving and re-conceiving—that is, re-creating—our worlds, selves and potentialities for be(com)ing.

Quandaries of what knowledge is, the challenges it poses, and of how to work with and beyond these are present from the book's introduction. Continually linking the micro with the macro, the personal with the contextual, Bose maps the field of *patam-pradarshan katha*, positioning his own study in relation to earlier work by Kirtana Thangavelu (1998; 2012) and Jagdish Mittal (1998). He raises issues of post-colonial ethnography that flow throughout the book, particularly regarding ethicality, representation, and knowledge as a politically imbued social as well as cultural force. Turning to ethnographers, philosophers, arts practice researchers and theorists, including Michael Jackson (2008); Caroline Jones (2010); Aditya Malik (2005); and Tim Ingold (2000; 2011), Bose unsettles dominant academic treatments of knowledge as something that research *produces* in a neoliberal sense. He instead treats

knowledge as most crucially about *connections* formed through interpersonal engagement. As Bose explains:

narrativizing is contextual to the extent that what is said is shaped within and by an environment... speaking is engendered by "listening", which assumes "presence" of the other, in this case the "ethnographer." (p. 37)

In this way, ethnography "emerges within the exchange between thought and action" and is crucially bound with "the world of materiality" including bodies and their movements, or in this case specifically "the physical act of painting" as a necessary precondition for "setting for the world of language" (pp. 37–38). For Bose, this leads to a book which "dwells upon the expansion and elaboration of moments which transpired as the practice was being constructed through dialogues and conversations" (p. 51). He explains how by "blowing up" situated moments, he aims to encourage readers to dwell upon how "ethnography like its subject matter does not have a centre or fixed locus" but is rather "constantly appearing within corners... emerging within conversations... *being made*" (p. 51, emphasis in original).

Bose's argument for relational reciprocities between art and ethnography goes beyond the theoretical. He demonstrates the lived, experiential nature of this connection as he introduces the artisans who form the book's focus, especially Danalakota Vaikuntam Nakash (henceforth Vaikuntam) and family. Their voices and collaborative engagement with the project remain strong throughout the book. In a candid description of their first meeting, Bose explains how Vaikuntam "popped the question which encapsulates all the anxieties which the discipline of anthropology has been grappling with since the umbilical cord with its colonial legacy was cut" by asking, "What is it exactly that you have come to do here? ... How will my paintings figure in your research?" (p. 31). In this scene, Vaikuntam upends conventional configurations of the researcher-researched paradigms, immediately claiming agency as a craftsperson who, "within a neoliberal market economy," recognises how he has "inherited this history of negotiations between "nostalgia" and the space it creates within the discourse of "otherness," namely museumology, anthropology and development" (p. 34). Vaikuntam strategically negotiates the ethnographic encounter to ensure it serves rather than exploits him and his community. Indeed, Vaikuntam propels Bose as researcher towards a methodology of "craft through conversation" (p. 47) in which what began as a remote engagement with an artistic practice and the identity of its practitioners amidst the struggle over regional autonomy... metamorphosized into an enquiry into the different ways of experiencing and talking about "craft" and being a craftsperson. (p. 47)

Between the book's introduction and conclusion are six chapters that collectively offer a deep, embodied sense of the craft practices, the communities, the challenges for practitioners in neoliberal times, and the creative ways in which practitioners work with and beyond these challenges. Frequent use of direct quotes from artisans themselves keeps their voices and their self-empowered modes of practice always at the fore. Bose's engaging writing style is enhanced through the inclusion of images depicting finished as well as in-progress artworks, sketchbook plans, and artisans at work. These bring a reader deeply into the creative process and fit the spirit of this book as one focussed crucially on situated, contingent processes of being, becoming, belonging and/as the *naqqash* concept of *odupu*—which in Vaikuntam's terms signifies “a quality” that in Telugu (language) means “to ‘try and catch or seize something,’” which *naqqash* artisans achieve through “the way in which the body or the figure sways, the grace in which she or he adorns the garments, and the brilliance of the jewellery” (p. 121). Following Bose, *odupu* refers not to “ultimate fruition or completion” but crucially to:

a process whereby fruition and completion are desirable... the artist is constantly looking to find that moment when the forms which she is articulating come closest to expressing a life force in them... *odupu* does not refer to the artist creating a life force, but the life force, like a shuttle in a loom constantly zooming through the surface of the weave... all the artist can do is attempt to embellish and elaborate on that moment. (p. 123)

Immediately following the introduction, chapters two and three—“Craft: Doing Telling Writing” parts one and two—zero in on fine details of the artisans' techniques and technologies including preparation of cloth canvases, sourcing and preparation of coloured paints, brush selection, training of the body to sit and hold the brush, finishing, bordering, signing off and more. The details of these is phenomenally intricate, engendering deep respect for the intense time and dedication *naqqash* artisans devote to their work. These chapters collectively demonstrate how

craft as a practice is then moulded through the life histories and an environment within which it not only exists but in fact from which it is generated—life cycles, dietary habits, social relationships and exchanges between different practitioners. (pp. 84–85)

Of particular interest to me were discussions of how painting and writing intersect as collectively engaged modes of “creative exchange between story-teller

and artist” (p. 95). Bose describes how story-tellers bring with them an old or tattered scroll, which they use as a “mnemonic text” to instruct them about the figures and what actions they are engaged in. So as the story-tellers verbally trace the figures in the old scroll, the artist simultaneously outlines fresh figures on the new canvass. The process of outlining all the figures of the scroll usually takes three to four days during which the story-tellers are hosted by the artist. (p. 95)

Bose proceeds to elaborate on how each “specific story-telling community has the cultural monopoly to present their corresponding audience community with narrative tools to participate in the construction of their etiological histories” (97). He thereby signals how story-telling and art interweave with the social and cultural co-construction—and re-construction—of knowledge, and thus with ideas about intimacy, solidarity, politics, interpersonal relations, and more (p. 97). Running through this—as throughout the book—is the potentiality of reading these discussions as analogous to ethnography and general research or academic scholarship, including pedagogy. For me, as a university-based lecturer and independent researcher, it was while reading these sections that I first began forming a realisation that would continue unfolding as I continued reading and returning to these and later sections of the book—that Bose’s study is one through which a reader may learn most fruitfully *from* as opposed to *of* Vaikuntam and fellow *naqqash* artisans.

The interconnections between the artisans’ practices and those of ethnographers or researchers broadly grow stronger still in the fourth chapter, “‘Goddess’ and ‘King’, ‘Migration’ and ‘Boon’: Artists and their Histories,” in which Bose turns squarely to questions of representation, artistic inheritance within a temporally—as well as geographically—located community, collective memory, self-positioning, imagination, and more. Raising Lassiter’s (2000) point about the objective in ethnography being “not which story is ‘right’, but which story is meaningful to whom and why” (cited in Bose 2019, p. 139), Bose proceeds to interrogate ideas about histories from “above” and “below” (pp. 139–144) in order to contextualise the political significance of “artists as/and historians” (p. 145). Within this chapter, Bose offers a sophisticated and sensitive investigation into complexities of caste politics in India. The insights he offers can do much to unsettle Western misconceptions or oversimplifications of caste’s traditional meanings and manifestations. For instance, Bose discusses how British colonisation of India reconfigured caste, introducing and institutionalising issues of hegemony and injustice that persist today:

What the centralized role of caste in understanding and controlling the Indian population required the British to do was demonstrate what Rahejia considers

“consensual nature of caste ideology” (Rahejia 1996: 494). That most of the British informants and assistants were upper-caste elites is significant, one, because it was them who were given the task to authenticate practices, rituals and mythologies of other communities. Two, owing to the promise of colonial acceptability, Brahamic ideas about religion and conduct in the nineteenth-century India were largely Victorian in standard. (p. 146)

Chapter five then turns squarely to relatedness and reciprocity as indicated in the title “Craft-Through-Relatedness; Relatedness-Through-Craft.” This chapter conveys a particularly strong sense of craft as “an embodied practice, around which the everyday life of the artisans is organized” (p. 169). While the body and embodiment are present throughout Bose’s book, they here form a most dedicated focus. Again, as a worker in the tertiary education system, I found myself thinking continually about how this might inform ways of engaging with and in relationships and bodies in academic settings. Sections that broach “the possibility of another kind of learning... an implicit notion of learning” (p. 186) offer much from which to learn about establishing the necessary conditions in the lifeworld for growth. With reference to Ingold’s (2011) work on inheritance and personhood, Bose pitches this growth as one best understood “not merely as the realization of pre-specified potentials,” but crucially “also as *retrieving* or *remembering* of knowledge that is relevant to the situation at hand” (p. 187, emphasis in original).

In chapters six and seven, “Showing, Making and Selling for the Market” and “Desire for the Nation State,” Bose broaches the challenges *naqqash* artisans face as they strive to continue their traditional practices in a fast-changing world. In particular, he reveals the surprising, ingenuitive strategies they apply in order to negotiate neoliberalism and the ongoing social, cultural, economic, and political effects of colonial rule. Bose does not sugar-coat the situation: the problems and constraints arising from neoliberal and colonial forces are real and extensive, manifesting, for instance, in the frustrations artisans express about snobbish judgements of their “craft” as inferior to so-called genuine “art,” and about their needing to produce particular types of work to satisfy pre-existing expectations of a commercial market to whom they must sell in order to survive. Yet he avoids the easy temptation to position the artisans as victims of external factors, foregrounding instead the empowered ways they work with, against, and beyond the constraints they encounter. This includes deliberate engagement with the problematic arts / crafts dichotomy, and determination to find ways to continue experimenting with and extending the boundaries of “traditional” practices that have—as the artisans themselves

emphasise—always changed, developed, and indeed involved experimentation as part of the tradition.

Particular treats of chapters six and seven may be found in discussion of how, as reflected in the two quotes positioned at the top of this review, younger generations of *naqqash* artisans actively engage with technology and university-based education in order to pursue these possibilities and to erode stereotypical misconceptions of their practice as a fixed and finished one, located always and forever in some distant imaginary and idealised past. Although it is not raised explicitly in these chapters, as I read, I found myself thinking back to the idea of *odupu* raised in the book's early sections—the centring of life forces and of processes in which fruition and completion figure as ever-shifting drivers of never-extinguished creative desires in which there is always yet more to explore. Although chapters six and seven deal with topics that could easily lead towards discouragement and despondency, the optimism and defiance of *naqqash* artisans shines strong, in ways that prove uplifting and inspiring. As throughout the book, and as earlier noted, I found myself continually learning *from*, as opposed to *of*, the people and practices at the heart of this conversationally constructed ethnography.

Implied interconnections between the artisans' practices and those of ethnography—or indeed, what ethnographers and academics generally stand to learn from the *naqqash* artisans' accounts of what they do and how—carry through into the book's concluding chapter. Bose states most explicitly his “political solidarity with the ways in which his [Vaikuntam's] negotiations offer ethnography ways to rethink about capitalism, colonization and history” (p. 306). He ultimately positions his ethnography as “the result of a collective will to remember the craft” while upholding an “agentive purpose—to demonstrate the way in which the craft practice becomes a site for practitioners to express their capacity to imagine and act” (p. 306). The deeply collaborative nature of the work is reflected in Bose's closing reflections, in which he concludes it “only apt to profess that it is because Vaikuntam is narrating about and through the craft that I am here” (p. 306).

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