

India

Chandan Bose, *Perspectives on Work, Home, and Identity from Artisans in Telangana: Conversations around Craft*

Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 311 pages, 76 photographs. Hardcover, \$109.99; eBook, \$99. ISBN: 9783030125158 (hardcover); 9783030125165 (eBook).

Chandan Bose's book is an ethnographic account based on eleven months of research, between 2012 and 2014, that he conducted with an artist named Danalakota Vaikuntam Nakash and his family in Cheriya, a small village in Telangana state, which is located in southern India. From Vaikuntam, Bose learns about the practice of his craft known as *paṭam-pradarśan kathā*, which translates roughly as “showing and the telling (*pradarśhana*) of stories (*kathā*) through painted images (*paṭam*)” (3). These painted scrolls are crafted by a single community of artists who popularly identify as *naqqas* or *nakas* (8). The author's ethnographic research is largely a documentation of conversations between himself and the artist Vaikuntam. He terms these conversations as narratives “because they were born of the memory of the event and reflections at the time of narrativizing” (37).

Largely, the book is an examination of the narratives that the author analyzes to gain an understanding of the way artists like Vaikuntam understand and communicate the experience of being a craftsperson. The author's aim is to go beyond the colonial and postcolonial classification of crafts and craftspeople to show the way that artists like Vaikuntam, practicing the craft within certain physical spaces, actively participate in the construction of their own subjectivity.

The book is a simultaneous account of two “doings”: Vaikuntam doing his craft and Bose doing his ethnography. While the primary focus is Vaikuntam and Bose's

documentation of his craft within the realms of his physical workspace, household environment, kinship networks, and the larger nation-state, the book is also about the author's presence in Vaikuntam's studio, sharing the physical workspace. While Bose sustains his primary focus on Vaikuntam's craft, his book also opens up important ways of looking at ethnography as a context for the verbalization of thought. As Bose notes, it is not just questions but the presence of the ethnographer that elicits responses to things that, as Vaikuntam states, "no one usually asks" (37). The book, therefore, is also an exploration of the relationship between the craftsperson, his material world, and the ethnographer. It is a valuable read for anyone interested not only in South Asian scroll painting in Telangana but also in ethnography as theory, method, and practice.

While Bose provides an insightful account of a *naqqasī* artist, the book is limited to an ethnographic account of the conversations that transpire between Vaikuntam sitting behind his desk, where he works on his paintings, and Bose, who sits in front of him, conducting his ethnography for limited durations a few times a week. When Vaikuntam leaves his desk to take care of a domestic chore or matter, the conversations pause and so does the ethnography. As a result, the book is largely a compilation of long quotes rather than a detailed ethnographic account of what it is like to be a craftsperson or ethnographer in Cheriya, Telangana. The subtitle of the book is therefore apt, since the ethnography is primarily a dialogue. Although the author is interested in the exchanges and negotiations that Vaikuntam and his family undergo in the organization of their practice, the everyday, as lived experience, is restricted to the confines of the studio where the craftsperson works, simultaneously engaging in conversation mainly with the ethnographer, even though other family members are mentioned coming in and out of the studio or working in the same room.

One reason that the book focuses on one-on-one conversations between the author and individuals coming and going in and out of the studio is because the native tongue of the family is Telugu, a language that the author does not speak. He thus, unfortunately, misses out on the conversations occurring between family members while working together. The one-on-one interviews with the author, the reader guesses, were done primarily in the Hindi language, because in some places Hindi phrases are mentioned in parenthesis. The book, sadly, does not address the issue of language, even though conversations are at the center of this ethnography, and the author has, in many places, even analyzed linguistic dimensions underlying certain technical and non-technical aspects of the craft. In one instance, he mentions that "simple and minimal Hindi was sufficient to survive everyday life in Cheriya" (36), which implies that people do not speak Hindi widely in the region, which is not uncommon in much of south India. In another instance, Vanaja, Vaikuntam's wife, whom the author interviewed, is noted as saying that she is not very fluent in Hindi (188). The reader is left wondering how the author negotiated issues over language and how the lack of a common tongue may have impeded comfortable dialogue and accurate translation.

The book also ignores other regional aspects of Telangana culture, which any ethnography conducted in a specific ethnolinguistic region should have addressed. For instance, the author does not address a likely confusion that may occur among readers when he presents his primary informant's full name in the introduction of the book as Danalakota Vaikuntam Nakash but refers to him throughout the text as Vaikuntam and his household as Danalakota. While the author explains in a later chapter why the

family added Nakash to the family name, he does not comment on the south Indian practice of putting the family name before the first name, which should have been explained earlier on in the book. For a reader unfamiliar with this south Indian cultural practice, Vaikuntam could be easily mistaken as a middle or last name and thus lead to inaccurate knowledge of the primary informant's name.

In another instance, he refers to the ritual design made by women at household entrances by its Tamil name *kōlam*, although the Telugu term for these threshold drawings is actually *muggu*. Although clarifications over regional names, or the order in which they are culturally written and spoken, may appear like miniscule points that do not interfere with scholarly analysis, addressing such accuracies, nonetheless, helps flesh out nuanced details about people and their places of residence that makes the work ethnographic. Such missing details would appeal to a readership familiar with south Indian cultural practices or prove educational for those who are not experts. While the book makes a convincing argument about treating conversations as narratives, it fails to ground the craft investigated within an ethnographic narrative about Telangana.

In spite of these oversights, the book is well-written, maintaining a clear focus and structure throughout. The introduction, which also serves as chapter 1, provides the necessary theoretical background and central focus. Each chapter develops the main point of the book, which is that the experience of being a craftsperson is not just about the experience of making objects but rather exists alongside other kinds of experiences and other kinds of production (48). The author is interested in exploring the “plurality of contexts” that shape experience. Each chapter then examines these diverse contexts, starting with the physical, then moving to the domestic, commercial, and national.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal most directly with the physical aspect of making this *naqqāṣī* craft that Bose describes as a practitioner's “corporeal experience” of engaging with materials and techniques (136). Chapter 2 explains how the artist treats the canvas, prepares and mixes colors, and makes the brushes he uses to paint. Chapter 3 provides a detailed account of the painting process, including the manner in which the artist sits in order to paint, as well as the sketching, outlining, and painting of characters on canvas. These chapters are the only two that discuss the material and technical aspects of the craft in great detail. The rest of the chapters are less about the material craft and more about the relationship between the craft and craftsperson within other contextual frameworks.

Chapter 4 discusses the way Vaikuntam situates himself within the broader historical context of how his caste, community, and craft originated. It outlines the central role an origin tale plays in defining identity and the sense of cultural inheritance for the artist on a daily basis. Chapter 5 explores the way that the making of material objects is experienced within the physical space of the studio. Analysis of studio space within the household and kinship relations therein is central to the chapter. The Telugu term *pauti tatvam*, which means something like a healthy working environment, provides an important contextual framework that is used to examine the collective and shared practice of the craft within the household.

Chapter 6 examines the way that the space of exhibitions and demonstrations of handicrafts at museums, craft fairs, and national and international expositions shape the craft itself. This chapter highlights how the twentieth-century nation-building

process expected handicrafts to shed their particular local contexts that tied them to specific communities, only to appear to become a part of national culture. Compared to all others, this chapter (and the next) situates the *naqqāṣī* craft squarely in Telangana, reflecting on the meaning of traditional craft and its visibility within the larger geographical context of the nation. The final chapter looks at the way the state's practice of organizing culture ideologically around discourses of authenticity as a tool for nation-building is experienced and reconfigured by the craftsperson. The author examines the producer's relationship with his practice within an intertextual context—with India, on the one hand, and the practitioner and his craft belonging to and rooted in the specific place known as Telangana, on the other.

Due to the larger contexts around which the *naqqāṣī* craft has been examined, this book would not only appeal to scholars of material culture but also to a wide readership interested in issues of space, place, colonial history, and gender, among others. The book, theory-heavy and broad in scope, provides important insights into how the materiality of a craft is embedded within a craftsperson's everyday life—one that is experienced within a variety of contexts, which is the main focus of the book.

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