
THE POLITICS OF BRASSWARE PRODUCTS IN THE UNITED PROVINCES: MARKETS, CONSUMER DEMAND, AND CRAFT TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how changing markets reshaped the nature, quality, and identity of brassware products during colonial India. It argues, that the evolution of brassware was driven not merely by artisanal traditions. But by the interplay of market forces, consumer demand, commercial competition, and technological change. The expansion of domestic and export markets, shifting consumer preferences, and increasing competition among manufacturing centres: encouraged artisans to diversify their products. And develop distinct commercial identities, to adapt their craftsmanship according to changing market requirements. Simultaneously, commercialization, standardization, and mechanization transformed traditional production practices. However, that contributed to a gradual decline in artistic quality. By analysing these interconnected developments, the paper is going to demonstrate the transformation of brassware products. The transitions reflected broader processes of market integration and commercial change in colonial India.

Keywords: Brassware Products, United Provinces, Consumer Demand, Markets, Craft Transformation, Economic History

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, the term, which has been used as “politics of brassware products”. It refers to the interaction between markets, consumers, artisans, technology, and commercial competition. All these forces shaped the nature, quality, design, and circulation of brassware in United Provinces. The expansion of urban, European, and export markets transformed brassware from purely utilitarian and ornamental goods into a diversified range of products. This encouraged product innovation, varied craftsmanship, and contributed to Moradabad’s early prominence in tin-plated wares. Arabesque-engraved wares catered to affluent consumers, whereas tinned wares became increasingly popular among poorer households, reflecting the industry’s growing market segmentation. Mirzapur emerged as a major centre for brass and copper utensils, specializing in *lotas*, *thalis*, *parats*, and *gagras* [1] produced through casting and sheet-metal techniques. It also manufactured *phul* [2] metal ware and served as an important supplier of household utensils to Benares and the neighbouring districts. [3] Similarly, Farrukhabad specialized in brass household utensils catering primarily to the Muslim community, producing *lotas*, *badhnas* (*tontidars*), *handis*, *degchis*, *patilis*, and *parats*. Manufactured through both casting and sheet-metal techniques, its products were widely distributed to the hill districts, Punjab, Cawnpore, and Allahabad. [4]

Likewise, Lucknow was renowned for its ornamental and domestic brassware, chiefly serving the Muslim community. As the rising price of copper encouraged a shift towards brass, the town specialized in *khandans* [5], *pandans* [6], *badhnas* [7], *senis* [8], *degchis* [9], and *patilis* [10], with its finely chased *senis* (trays) reflecting a high level of craftsmanship. [11] In contrast, Benares developed a distinctive brassware tradition closely associated with Hindu pilgrimage, specializing in *Gangajal lotas*, brass idols, sacrificial implements, bells, embossed trays, and other ritual objects produced through casting, engraving, and repoussé work. Alongside domestic utensils, these religious and ornamental wares established Benares as a leading centre of traditional Hindu brass craftsmanship. [12] However, by the early 20th century, the artisans had diversified their production process into European-style articles (such as paper knives, salvers, and jardinieres). This happened by adapting traditional craftsmanship to changing market preferences. [13]

2. COMMERCIALIZATION AND CHANGING CONSUMER MARKETS

At the outset, European-inspired brassware was introduced into India. Predominantly, to meet the needs of British residents, rather than Indian consumers. As overseas demand expanded, however, Indian artisans increasingly adapted their traditional skills to Western tastes, producing articles such as paper knives, salvers, jardinieres, and, by 1920-23, engraved thermos-flask covers commissioned by an American firm in Moradabad. The town’s growing prominence was further enhanced by the publicity it received at the 1924 Wembley Exhibition, which significantly strengthened its export trade. By the 1940s, nearly 80 per cent of Moradabad’s brassware output was exported, illustrating the increasing integration of the industry into international markets. Expanding consumer demand, improved transport and communication, and exposure to Western markets also diversified the town’s product range. [13] Traditional tin-plated wares gradually gave way to nickel- and silver-

plated products, while hammered wares underwent continuous modifications in design, decoration, and finishing to satisfy evolving market preferences.[15]

The expansion of domestic and export markets, however, fundamentally transformed the character of brassware production. By 1907, A. C. Chatterjee had already noticed, decline in the artistic crafts and their related quality of brassware, produced in both Benares and Moradabad. As productions had shifted away from elite patronage towards urban consumers. The export markets, and manufacturers increasingly prioritized commercial viability over artistic refinement. The growing demand for standardized, affordable, and fashionable goods encouraged the simplification of traditional crafts and designs. This generated greater reliance on repetitive production techniques, and the imitation of European-influenced article. Escalating commercial pressures also reduced the time devoted to engraving, finishing, and decorative work. While colonial art education and changing consumer taste further weakened indigenous aesthetic traditional crafts. Consequently, authenticity of goods gradually gave way to standardized ornamentation and inferior finishing. Although centres like, Moradabad and Benares successfully adapted as per expanding markets. This commercial success often came at the expense of authenticity of quality, unlike Jaipur and Madurai. Where traditional standards of craftsmanship were comparatively better preserved than others. [16]

3. MARKET COMPETITION, PRODUCT DIFFERENTIATION, AND REGIONAL RESPONSES

By contrast, experience of Jaipur suggests that institutional support played an important role. This paved way to shape the trajectory of craftsmanship during the period of commercial transition. Jaipur's relative success was partly due to the presence of the only art school. That schools mainly established to offer specialized brassware training. Somewhere, it combined with strong state patronage, that enabled manufacturers to preserve traditional skills. While adapting the designs and crafts of new products.[17] Unlike Jaipur, at some places in United Provinces received little institutional support for the brassware-industry. Although, the Lucknow School of Arts and Crafts introduced a metal-ware design course in 1911. Its benefits primarily remained confined largely to the families of goldsmiths. The limited dissemination of technical training and design awareness meant: the market transition, where, many artisans relied on imitation rather than innovation. This altogether, contributed to the production of inferior-quality brassware.[18]

Lacking comparable institutional support, the manufacturers increasingly became dependent upon commercial strategies, instead of, technical innovation to remain competitive. As market competition intensified, prominent manufacturing centres relied on product differentiation and the creation of distinct brand identities to secure their position. This process was further strengthened by the migration of skilled artisans from declining centres to larger commercial towns, where better market access and expanding demand offered greater opportunities. In contrast, centres that failed to adapt to changing consumer preferences and competitive pressures gradually lost their prominence. At the same time, increasing competition within a common market made consumers more discerning, compelling manufacturers to adopt greater standardization and quality control. Firms that established a reputation for consistent quality, particularly in centres such as Moradabad, emerged as leaders in the expanding export trade.[19]

As these commercial strategies became increasingly institutionalized during the twentieth century. It concerns over declining craftsmanship gradually gave way to a greater emphasis on quality enforcement, standardization, and the concentration of production in a few well-established manufacturing centres. The relocation of trade towards these prominent towns further strengthened the association between particular products and particular places, reinforcing the commercial value of regional brand identities. Over time, Moradabad gradually developed a reputation for consistent quality. It has been enabling reputable firms turned into to dominate both domestic and export markets. However, the wider commercial acceptance of branded products generated new types of market challenges. As consumer preferences shifted increasingly to favour low-cost alternatives. Many manufacturers began imitating the designs and styles of established producers of popular centres. In order, to cater to price-sensitive buyers. This proliferation of similar products, blurred the distinction between authenticity, among high-quality wares and cheaper imitations. Even within the same manufacturing centre. Thus, when branding of products enhanced commercial reputation and market competitiveness. It simultaneously, encouraged products imitation and heightened the contradiction between, these three dimensions: quality, authenticity, and affordability.[20]

The outcomes of commercialization were neither uniform, nor linear across all the different brassware centres in United Provinces. While, the most prominent manufacturing towns (such as Moradabad and Benares) came to adapt mass production, product diversification, and export-oriented standardization. The decline of ornamental craftsmanship was not universal. Among the numerous temple related towns of South India, acknowledged for producing religious objects (such as colossal multi-branched ceremonial lamps). Tanjore and Madurai remained

prominent centres of ornamental craftsmanship. Rather than abandoning their traditional engraving skills. Artisans in accumulated towns adapted to produce silver-inlaid copperware. Thereby, creating new markets without sacrificing artistic quality. The survival of continued demand for temple-related objects and the presence of strong cultural and religious patronage. This enhanced the sustainability for an appreciation of artistic craftsmanship even as European-style products gained increasing popularity elsewhere.[21] Commercialization was not only confined to Moradabad and Benares. Even some brassware centres similarly reoriented their production in response to evolving market demands. Bidar, traditionally known for its black-polished metal-ware with intricate silver inlay. Whereas, the artisans of Bidar modernized its designs and introduced less expensive methods of production: to cater to a wider consumer base. Instead of, concentrating solely on traditional decorative objects. Artisans progressively manufactured commercially viable products (such as cigarette cases, knives, and bowls). This transition showed the growing impact of market forces. Whereby, craftsmanship was reshaped to made balance between 'artistic traditions with affordability'. In the amidst, of changing 'consumer preferences', and 'commercial profitability'.[22]

Among the leading manufacturing centres, here, Moradabad displayed the most comprehensive expression: for commercialization and product diversification. The integration of Moradabad's brassware industry, made its product-composition highly complex as well as diverse. With expansion of trade, competition became intensified. Artisans started continuously experimenting with new designs, decorative techniques, and improved processes (such as superior lacquering). Just, to distinguish their products in an increased competitive market. This process of 'product-differentiation': enabled manufacturers to cater to affluent and export-oriented consumers. Specially, for those who were seeking quality and distinctive craftsmanship. At the same time, rising raw material costs and the growing demand from wider domestic markets. By combining altogether, it encouraged the standardization of production and started manufacturing cheaper wares in much larger quantities. Consequently, commercialization resultant in to create a 'dual product structure'. In which, premium differentiated goods coexisted with mass-produced, low-cost brassware. And that allowed, Moradabad to serve both elite and popular markets, while maintaining its commercial dominance. [23]

4. COMMERCIALIZATION AND THE REORGANIZATION OF PRODUCTION AND EXCHANGE

The widening range of products was accompanied, by significant transformation in the organization of trade and commercial exchange. The expansion of domestic and export markets, not only increased the scale of brassware production. But somewhere, also reshaped the mechanisms- through which products were marketed and distributed. With the emergence of large-scale merchants, commercial success became largely depended upon modern marketing practices, instead of production alone. Merchants established agents in distant commercial and port cities (such as Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras): to expand their market reach. Due to which, they could advertise their products to attract new consumers, and sought to create distinctive brand identities. And this helped to differentiated their wares from those of competing centres. This, in turn, brassware products became identified independently. Not merely, by their craftsmanship, but also through their commercial reputation, place of origin, and the credibility of the merchant. [24] Thus, the 'politics of brassware products', increasingly shifted from the workshop to the marketplace. Where branding, distribution networks, and commercial strategies, all together, became as important as- artisanal skill in determining market success.

5. COMMERCIALIZATION AND THE DECLINE OF CRAFTSMANSHIP

As market forces gained prominence at decisive role in determining commercial success. They also began to redefine: the very nature of craftsmanship. The integration of brassware fundamentally altered, artistic integrity and commercial viability. As manufacturers sought to maximize output and satisfy an expanding market. Coupled with craftsmanship, it was increasingly subordinated to the demands of speed, uniformity, and cost efficiency. Decorative work became more repetitive and standardized. While the pressure to produce fashionable and inexpensive goods encouraged: 'the simplification of traditional crafts' and 'the use of less meticulous finishing techniques.' Therefore, authenticity gradually gave way to imitation. Just to balance between: 'aesthetic to overcrowded ornamentation,' and 'careful workmanship to hurried execution.' This market-driven transformation, eventually, resulted in the '**commodification of craftsmanship.**' Whereby, the commercial value of brassware highly overshadowed-- its artistic significance. All these forces, leading to a perceptible decline in the quality of ornamental craftsmanship.[25] The decline in artistic quality was not unique to Moradabad, but was equally observed in Benares. Where, in turn, comparable patterns of deterioration emerged.[26]

However, the process of deterioration, did not occur uniformly but unfolded across different manufacturing centres. Where in, historical contexts as commercialization deepened. In central India, Ganguli criticized, for growing production of grotesque brass images. Regarding him, it marked as a departure from established artistic

standards. Similar concerns had been prevailing in Moradabad during the Second World War. When manufacturers had attempted, to replace tin with the cheaper metal lead in certain production processes. Although this substitution reduced manufacturing costs somewhere, amid wartime shortages. And in response of it, it compromised the quality and durability of the finished products.[27] These examples demonstrate that: despite, regional variations, commercial pressures, changing consumer preferences. There was a persistent search for cheaper methods of production. In turn, this gradually eroded traditional standards of craftsmanship throughout the brassware industry. The impact of market forces was so pervasive. That even, some centres enjoying institutional support and were not entirely insulated from changing consumer tastes. Jaipur, despite benefiting from a specialized School of Art and strong state patronage. It gradually modified its products to suit evolving market preferences. Contemporary observers criticized for displaying an abundance of colours in brassware, in a kind of questionable taste. By suggesting that commercial considerations increasingly influenced artistic decisions.[28] Although Jaipur continued to retain a relatively high standard of craftsmanship. Such criticism illustrates that even the most renowned centres were compelled to compromise. At certain artistic conventions in response to the evolving market dynamics.

These changing commercial priorities, not only transformed the character of brassware, but altered the control over its production. The broadening commercialization of the brassware industry brought: about a significant shift in the 'authority governing production'. Earlier, artisans, largely determined the nature of the goods they produced. By drawing upon inherited skills, local traditions, and the requirements of religious or domestic patrons. With the extending of domestic and export markets, however, this autonomy gradually diminished. Decisions regarding what should be produced, in what quantity. This all had been happening through the hands of **mahajans, Karkhanadars**[29], merchants, exporters, and commercial firms. They were, who responded primarily to market demands rather than artisanal traditions. Thereafter, artisans became executors of 'commercially determined designs', instead of independent creators. They started to produce goods, which was the reflection of consumers' preferences and the demands of trade.[30] **Thus, the "hands" controlling production shifted from the 'craftsmen' to 'commercial intermediaries.'** **This was the marking of fundamental transformation in the politics of brassware production, under colonial market-integration.**

This redistribution of authority was accompanied by: a parallel reorganization of the production and exchange system. In which, the works of commercial intermediaries became increasingly specialized and interconnected. With the growth of domestic and export markets. It transformed the 'production line' and 'exchange system' of the brassware industry, by redefining the roles of dealers, *karkhanadars*, and merchants. Earlier, dealers primarily acted as local traders who purchased scrap metal from peddlers. And supplied it to artisans, and marketed the finished products. With improved transport, expanding trade networks, and the growing use of imported brass sheets. However, 'dealers' assumed far more complex roles as importers, financiers, suppliers of raw materials, and organizers of commercial exchange. Simultaneously, the *karkhanadar* evolved from a 'master craftsman' into a production intermediary. They was responsible for coordinating labour, supervising workshop organization, and executing market-oriented orders, on behalf of merchants.[31] Workers, in turn, became increasingly specialized within workshop-based production. While economic risks and commercial decision-making were progressively concentrated in the hands of merchants and intermediaries. Commercialization, therefore, not only deepened markets, but also reorganized the entire production and exchange system. By creating new commercial relationships, redistributing economic risks, and institutionalizing the growing dominance of intermediaries over artisanal workshop.

Prominent outcomes of this reorganization: was the transformation of the raw material supply network. Which, shifted from a 'decentralized village-based system' to a 'centralized commercial network'. Earlier, scrap metal moved from villages through small peddlers to local dealers before reaching artisans and workshops. Earlier decentralized supply chain.[32]



Later centralized commercial network [33]

Northern Cities



Large Scrap Dealers



Moradabad Importers / Dealers



Karkhanadars (production organizers)



Artisans / Workers

By the 1920s, growing influence of market forces on the brassware industry had fundamentally reorganized the whole connected network. Moradabad emerged as the principal commercial centre. This happened among small group of large-scale importers. Where, these petty importers used to supply brass sheets, not only to local workshops, but also to manufacturers across other brass-producing towns. Simultaneously, the procurement of scrap metal became prominently centralized. Whereas, the urban scrap dealers in northern cities, have been started to replace the 'traditional network of village system (peddlers). Raw materials started to flow from large importers and dealers to *karkhanadars* (who organized the whole production, before passing down the work to artisans). These developments demonstrate the incorporation of commercial operations through the hands of a limited number of middlemen. They transformed, Moradabad from merely a manufacturing centre into a regional hub. Whose operations became concentrated for the import, distribution, and exchange of raw materials. In effect, commercialization, somewhere, replaced a localized and fragmented supply chain, through a centralized market-oriented network. This altogether integrated production more closely with expanding regional and export markets.[34]

The consolidation of commercial-activities, within the centralized network. Somewhere, also strengthened the influence of intermediaries, over the production process itself. The growing involvement of *mahajans*, fundamentally altered the politics of brassware production line. Earlier, as paper already discussed, the artisans used to hold autonomy over the selection of products, designs, and methods of manufacture. By responding primarily to local traditions and customary demand. As *mahajans* gradually got the control over the supply of raw materials, finance, and access to markets. They also acquired greater influence over production related activities itself. It turned into, since artisans depended upon them for raw materials and the assured purchase of finished goods at predetermined prices. Now, they started increasingly produced, as per the demands of commercial preferences of *mahajans*. Instead of their own artistic judgement towards production. In the broadening market, where standardized, inexpensive, and increasingly European-style goods commanded higher demand. And *mahajans* usually took interest to encourage: the production of commercially viable wares. Because that could be sold more easily in both: domestic and export markets. This transformation could particularly evident- in the brass-producing clusters of western Bengal [35]. Where artisans engaged primarily in the production of simple utilitarian wares. And this remained them, heavily dependent upon the intermediaries (who used to control trade). Because artisans used to possess little knowledge of prevailing market prices. Contemporary accounts observed, that many workers were so detached from commercial transactions. They were unaware even of the current value of the goods they produced. Such dependence enabled *mahajans* to took over a substantial share of the profits, while simultaneously, directing production towards marketable commodities.[36] This in turn, artisans adapted their craft to satisfy commercial requirements. It led to greater standardization, imitation of Western forms, and somewhere little fusion or simplification of traditional designs. [37] The decline of craftsmanship, therefore, was not merely the outcome of changing consumer tastes. But it was a big picture to understand, where all forces acting or relatively responsible for shifting in balance of power of production. Whereby, commercial intermediaries increasingly got ownership, what was to be produced, by leaving artisans with progressively less creative autonomy.

6. CONCLUSION

The transformation of the brassware production process in the United Provinces was the result of multiple interconnected forces. Thus, it collectively reshaped the production, exchange, and craftsmanship under colonial

commercialization. Initially, production remained rooted in local systems of patronage, where artisans used to enjoy considerable autonomy. They primarily used to cater to temples, aristocratic households, and local consumers, to preserve traditional craftsmanship. This pattern of work, gradually changed with the expansion of domestic and export markets in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Growing European and urban demand, improved transport, and expanding trade networks: collectively encouraged manufacturers to diversify their products. By adopting European-inspired designs, and shift from ornamental craftsmanship to commercially viable wares. This led to become market demand: the principal driver of production. Commercial expansion could be helpful to reorganize the production system. By transferring autonomy over: raw materials, product selection, and market access from artisans to commercial intermediaries (such as mahajans, dealers, *karkhanadars*, and merchants). Improved transport and expanding markets encouraged to help the transformation. That made centralized procurement, specialized production networks, branding, and quality control. This has been transforming the whole brassware industry: into a more 'market-oriented' and 'commercially organized enterprise'. However, this also transformed the other forces too: 'labour organization' and 'artisanal autonomy'. As market demands increasingly had been dictating production. Due to which artisans became executors of commercially determined products, rather than independent creators. Although, standardization and mass production expanded market opportunities. And collectively, these forces commodified craftsmanship, simplified traditional designs. This resultant in gradual decline of artistic quality across several brassware centres in the United Provinces.

The impact of commercialization remained uneven across centres. While centres (such as Tanjore, Madurai, and, to some extent, Jaipur), somewhere preserved traditional craftsmanship. This could happen, through religious patronage, institutional support, and specialized training. Many centres in the United Provinces adapted gradually to expand market demands. Whereas, commercial success in the market-oriented atmosphere, increasingly depended on: 'product diversification', 'branding', and 'market reputation' instead of- artistic excellence. Among them, Moradabad emerged as the prominent brassware centre. By successfully integrating diversified production, merchant networks, branding, quality control, and export-oriented manufacturing. Consequently, 'the politics of brassware production'- came to be shaped less by 'artisanal skill' than by the combined forces: of markets, intermediaries, consumer demands, and global trade.

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4. Dampier, *A Monograph on the Brass and Copper Wares of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, p. 19.
5. *Khāndān*- A large, lidded metal container or bowl, often richly decorated. In the context of Lucknow brassware, it was commonly used for storing or serving food, sweets, or dry fruits in elite households.
6. *Pān-dān*- A decorative betel-leaf box with separate compartments for betel leaves (paan), areca nut (supari), lime, cardamom, cloves, and other ingredients. It was an important symbol of hospitality, especially in Mughal and Nawabi culture.
7. Badhna (also Tontidar Lota)- A water vessel with a long spout (tonti). It was particularly associated with Muslim households and was used for ablution (wudu) before prayers and for personal washing.
8. A large circular serving tray, often beautifully engraved or chased. In Lucknow, finely decorated senis were considered examples of superior craftsmanship.
9. A deep cooking pot with a wide mouth and rounded base, usually fitted with a lid. Commonly used for cooking rice, meat, curries, and stews.
10. A shallower cooking vessel than a degchi, with straight or slightly flared sides. Used for boiling milk, preparing curries, or everyday cooking.
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29. Karkhanadar was not necessarily an actual workshop owner. But he was invariably an artisan intermediary or could be the head craftsman, who used to train the workers.
30. United Provinces, *Banking Enquiry Committee Report*, p. 252.
31. Chatterjee, *Notes on Industries*, p. 121.
32. Raw materials came mainly from villages in the form of old brass and copper utensils, peddlers collected these vessels from households and carried them to local markets, dealers purchased the scrap and supplied it to artisans, the exchange system was decentralized, dependent on numerous small collectors and local transactions, and artisans remained relatively close to the source of raw material.
33. Raw materials were now obtained from urban scrap markets rather than directly from villages, large scrap dealers accumulated metal in northern cities, Moradabad importers and dealers purchased brass sheets and

scrap in bulk, these dealers supplied not only local workshops but also manufacturers in other towns, *karkhanadars* organized production and distributed work among artisans, and artisans became the final producers within a larger commercial chain.

34. United Provinces, *Industrial Survey*, Moradabad, p. 20.
35. Such as the Kharar group of villages and Bankura, where mahajans not only owned the workshops but also controlled the supply of raw materials and marketed the entire output through Calcutta.
36. In certain instances, commercialization did not completely displace traditional craftsmanship; rather, it encouraged the emergence of hybrid products that fused indigenous artistic traditions with commercially oriented and modern designs to cater to changing consumer preferences.
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