

***Galarputul* - story of a dying industry**

The enriched cultural heritage of Bengal is resonated not only in old architectures, literature, paintings, and cuisines but also in its unique toys. Galarputul - shellac coated clay dolls is one such heritage toy. These bright colored toys represent a diverse socio-cultural history of the rural Bengal. The toy making procedure itself is a delicate and skilled artwork. Soil for making galarputul are collected from termite hills as it is relatively gravel free and adhesive in nature. The moist soil is kneaded, cleaned, pressed and pinched to form models. Baked models are coated with long sticks of painted shellac. Finally, Guna work (thin shellac threads making from lac sticks) is done to decorate the figurines. Nose, eye-ball, hair, moustache, ear-ornaments, etc. are formed by colored shellac drops. The toys include small dolls, elephant rider (hatishowar), horse rider (ghorashowar), animals, fruits, votive figurines or folk goddesses like shasthi. A full range of these toys represents the contemporary society and art forms of the south-western rural Bengal. The specific geographic conglomeration of this art form is due to the availability of natural resources in the region.

Shellac, the essential raw ingredient for GalarPutul is a resin secreted by the female lac bug (*Kerria lacca*) while sucking tree sap. The insect secretes it as a tunnel-like tube while moving through the tree branches. The main host trees used for its cultivation are Palash (*Butea monosperma*), Kul (*Ziziphus mauritiana*) and Kusum (*Schleicher aoleosa*). Mature crop along with branches are harvested, lac encrustations (stick lac) are scraped off and processed to form shellac. Generally, the lands unsuitable for agricultural purposes are used for lac cultivation. Lac cultivation is being done in Bengal since ancient times in the districts of Purulia, Midnapore, Bankura & Birbhum.

Lac industry was in its glory days back in 1787, when David Erskin founded Erskin & Co. company in Illumbazar, Birbhum. It lasted till 1882. But situation



declined with the shortage of raw material and competition from other toys by 1920 when many artists have forsaken the profession. Rabindranath Tagore attempted to revive the art by holding training sessions at Sriniketan but the situation didn't improve.

Nuris of Birbhum and Shankharis of Bankura and Medinipur districts are the communities engaged in making galarputul. Sadly, this colourful toy industry has been losing the battle against cheap plastic dolls. Most of the artisans have changed their professions and there remains very few to carry forward the legacy of this folk art.

Photo: Abhik Sarkar, Wikipedia

Collector: Debarati Chakraborty