

CARVING CONTINUITIES: THE LIVING HERITAGE OF SOAPSTONE ARTISANS

(Ethno-Archaeological Studies)

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ABSTRACT

Soapstone, valued for its softness and ease of carving, has a deep history of use in the Indian subcontinent, dating back to the Indus–Saraswati Civilization and continuing through Chalcolithic cultures. Over time, its role has extended beyond archaeological contexts into enduring craft traditions, where artisans continue to shape the stone into functional and decorative objects. This paper explores the living practices of soapstone carving across different regions of India, where the craft is still sustained in workshops and households. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, oral narratives, photographs, and close interaction with artisans, the study highlights how skills, material knowledge, and styles are transmitted across generations. The tools in use demonstrate a blend of inherited techniques and adaptations suited to present-day needs.

By examining contemporary practices, the research also opens windows into past stone-working traditions, showing how traces of ancient knowledge continue to survive in artisanal memory. A comparative perspective across regions brings out both shared continuities and local variations in style, technique, and livelihood patterns. Rather than seeing these sculptors only as preservers of an old craft, the study situates them within wider discussions of intangible cultural heritage, livelihood resilience, and artisanal identity in present-day India. It also reflects on how changing patterns of patronage, tourism, and markets shape the future of this tradition. By documenting both process and knowledge, the paper underlines how heritage lives on—not only in excavated sites and monuments, but in the hands of artisans who still carve, adapt, and remember.

INTRODUCTION

Stone carving in India has always been a medium through which artisans expressed what's happening in contemporary societies, emotions, creativity and *Bhakti*. Among all the stones, soapstone was used the most. Due to its soft, fragile yet remarkably versatile nature, soapstone has been serving as a constant material for carving since ancient times to present. It connects today's living traditions to those of the past.

In India stone sculptures have received considerable scholarly attention, particularly the monumental temple architecture in sandstone, marble and granite meanwhile the contribution of soapstone in sustaining local artistic traditions remains relatively underexplored. Soapstone carving persists across India, yet academic engagement with this practice and its artisans is very limited.

Traditional soapstone carving is an important part of our intangible heritage and what remains undocumented is the background of artisans, how regional demand, cultural ethos and ritual significance shape the types of soapstone sculptures produced today and the shifts in their practices and livelihoods. The objective of this paper is to investigate the living traditions of soapstone carving in Madhya Pradesh, with particular emphasis on Udaipur, Jabalpur and Jhabua-Alirajpur region. It also provides a comparative study between the sculptural demand in these regions. It also attempts to establish connections among artisans of central and western India.

METHODOLOGY

The present research is based on a qualitative approach that combines museum study, oral accounts, and secondary literature review. During my internship at The City Palace Museum, Udaipur, I was able to engage with curatorial discussions and gain a broader perspective on the significance of regional craft traditions.

A major portion of the data on contemporary practices was collected through personal networks. Information regarding the Gata tradition of Alirajpur was shared by a close acquaintance, while details about soapstone carvers from Jabalpur were obtained both from friends familiar with the craft and directly through conversations with one of the practicing artisans. These oral accounts provided crucial insights into the transmission of knowledge, tools, and techniques employed in soapstone carving today.

To put these practices within a wider time frame, secondary sources such as excavation reports, scholarly articles, encyclopedias, the Indian Mineral Yearbook, and online craft archives (including MAP Academy and Craft Archive) were consulted. These resources helped trace the antiquity of soapstone usage in India, from the Indus Valley Civilization to the historic and early modern periods.

Thus, the methodology combine museum-based inquiry, oral narratives, and textual research, enabling a comprehensive understanding of both the historical depth and the contemporary relevance of soapstone carving traditions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Soapstone has been in use in India since very early times. Archaeological finds like Indus seals, beads from Chalcolithic sites, Mauryan–Śunga ringstones, and reliquaries from Sanchi show that the material was valued across different periods. These studies mainly focus on artefacts and prove the long history of soapstone in the subcontinent.

Government reports such as the Indian Mineral Yearbook talk about the availability of steatite in different states, and online platforms like MAP Academy and Craft Archive briefly describe stone craft traditions. However, most of this writing is centred on the material and objects, with very little attention given to the artisans themselves.

The traditions of soapstone carvers, their techniques, and their lived experiences have not been systematically documented. Much of what is known about them survives only in oral accounts. This study attempts to address this by linking the historical use of soapstone with the voices and practices of present day artisans.

SOAPSTONE

Soapstone or steatite is metamorphic rock primarily composed of talc, a mineral rich in magnesium. It is also known as soap rock due to its soap like softness, hence the name and workability(Img.1-2). it is highly dense and non-porous in nature. And because of its heat resisting, it was being used for making cookware and still in use for it. The state of Rajasthan and Uttarakhand hold about 49% and 29% of India's total soapstone reserve, remaining 22% is spread across states like Chhatisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Andra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu and a few others.¹

In Madhya Pradesh, soapstone mines cover the area of Dhar, Jabalpur, Jhabua, Katni, Narasinghpur and Sagar district². Although soapstone production in Madhya Pradesh does not contribute much to the overall soapstone production in India but the artisans here play a significant role. They source soapstone locally and from other states as well.



Img.1-2.Grey-green and white soapstone

HISTORY OF SOAPSTONE CARVING

The history of soapstone carving in the Indian subcontinent dates back to the Indus–Saraswati Civilization, as evidenced by archaeological findings such as seals, beads(Img.3), and most importantly, the iconic Priest King statue.

Discovered at the Harappan site of Mohenjo-daro, this figure represents one of the earliest examples of stone sculpting in the region. From the Maurya–Shunga period, ringstones made of sandstone or steatite have been unearthed (Img.4). So far, around seventy such ringstones have been discovered, spread across regions from Punjab to Bihar³. A 5th–6th century steatite sculpture of Skanda (Gupta period), found in the Swat Valley of present-day Pakistan, is now housed in the Ashmolean Museum⁴(Img.5). Moving into more recent history, a stunning Panchmukhi Lingam dating to the 19th century, carved from black steatite, was discovered in Bengal and is currently on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London⁵ (Img.6).

Throughout history, the use of soapstone has remained consistent. Beyond the selected examples mentioned here, numerous other artefacts—such as pendants, bangles, dice, and small figurines—have also been recovered from different sites across the subcontinent.

Particularly in Madhya Pradesh, the use of soapstone and steatite goes back to the Chalcolithic period. Excavations from this period have yielded steatite beads, indicating their wide use in ornamentation and trade. A remarkable example comes from Kaytha, where a hoard of nearly 40,000 beads made of steatite was unearthed⁶, pointing towards large-scale production and usage. Excavations at Kaytha have brought to light a clear cultural sequence of Kaytha, Ahar and Malwa cultures⁷. The stratigraphy at Kaytha revealed that the Kaytha culture is succeeded by the Ahar and followed by the Malwa culture. Which suggests both continuity and contact among these cultures. Ahar excavations also yielded steatite beads and discs. Such evidences not only show the shared cultural traits but also the possibility of raw material exchange.

Moving into the early historic period, evidence becomes even more significant. Reliquaries discovered in excavations of stupas around Sanchi—some inscribed and others plain—are crafted out of soapstone. These caskets have been found from sites such as Sonari, Satdhara, and Andher⁸(Img.7). In most of the cases these reliquaries contain the relics of the disciples of Lord Buddha, highlighting the sacred value and durability attributed to soapstone during that time.

Although references about the use of soapstone in subsequent historical periods are relatively scarce, it is quite evident from both past and present practices that its use never truly disappeared. Rather, it continued in subtle and consistent forms. The soapstone carving tradition prevalent in Madhya Pradesh today is the outcome of a long process of generational transfer of skills, where artisans inherited and refined techniques that trace their roots back to antiquity.



Img.3. Steatite beads



Img.4. Ringstone, Mauryan period
(source: Article, MAP Academy)⁹



Img.5. Skanda, Gupta period (5th-6th century)
(source: Article, MAP Academy)¹⁰



Img.7. Reliquary vase, Stup 2, Sonari
(source: Saurabh Saxena, June 8, 2023)¹²



Img.6. Lingam; Bihar, 19th century
(source: Article, MAP Academy)¹¹

HISTORY OF THE ARTISANS

The history of stone artisans in India is as old as the history of human beings themselves. The art of carving on stone traces its roots back to prehistoric times, when humans engraved figures on cave walls, and gradually developed into the great temple architecture with its intricate carvings on walls and idols.

Madhya Pradesh has numerous examples of impeccable stone carving, whether it is the temples of Khajuraho(Img.10), the Bateshwar group of temples, Gwalior's Saas Bahu temple, or Jabalpur's Chaunsath Yogini temple. Different types of stone such as sandstone and granite were used in the construction of these temples. Stone carvers adorned these temples with high-quality designs and carvings. This legacy is still alive in the form of soapstone carving, where artists continue to use chisels, hammers, and other tools to carve a sculpture from a single piece of soapstone.

From the oral testimonies of artisans, it is known that their ancestors were involved in temple construction and made intricate carvings. There is no clear documentation of their lineage, but some historical references link them to the Silawat and/or Vishwakarma communities. This connection, however, is debated, as many artisans do not accept this association. Traditionally, the Silawats were stone carvers, with a strong presence in central and northwestern India, as well as in present-day Pakistan, including Karachi and Hyderabad. In Pakistan, the Silawats converted to Islam and came under the Hanafi sect and still contribute in constructions.¹³

In the Udaipur region of Rajasthan, many craftsmen claim ties with Rajput gotras and say that their forefathers migrated from Gujarat(Img.8). They also recall their great-grandfathers working on temple construction and carvings. In Madhya Pradesh, particularly in the Jabalpur region, communities such as Jain, Brahmin, and Sahu, along with traditional carvers, are engaged in soapstone carving. Some own large shops and employ artisans or use machines for making sculptures. The presence of soapstone carvers is not limited to Jabalpur-Chhatrapur; they are also found in Jhabua, Alirajpur, and Sagar regions¹⁴.

In Jabalpur, stone carving traditions can be traced back to the Kalachuri dynasty. Temples such as the Chausath Yogini and Lakshmi Narayan temple used chlorite schist, a stone harder than talc-rich steatite, which was usually used for small objects. Chlorite schist was used for larger elements like pillars and door jambs and was also referred to as soapstone. This suggests that the ancestors of traditional soapstone artisans in Jabalpur may have worked on temple walls.

A well-known soapstone artisan and national awardee from Alirajpur, Shri Shiv Dhanna Lal ji, also shared that his ancestors were temple carvers and had migrated to this region(Img.9). According to the information provided by the artisans, the craft has been practiced in their families for the past four to five generations, which roughly spans 100 to 150 years¹⁵. They are unaware of its history prior to that period, as the knowledge has been passed down orally within the family for these generations.



Img.8. Artisan working on small sculpture of soapstone



Img.9. Shri Shiv Dhanna Lalji
(source: *Gatha Stones~Alirajpur, Craft Archive*)



Img.10. Kandariya Mahadeo Temple, Khajuraho

TYPES OF SCULPTURES CRAFTED BY ARTISANS

In Jabalpur region, the tourists are fewer in number and mostly from the nearby areas, so the artisans there make devotional and decorative sculptures, cookware, toys and showpieces. The sculptures include Shivlings, demigods for ritualistic worship, Bhedaghat scenery, elephants and birds, idols of great personalities like Gandhi ji and Ambedkar ji(Img.11). Due to the fragile and soft nature of soapstone, artisans avoid large sculptures. These artisans source soapstone of different colours such as white, cream, light pink, and grey from the mines near Bhedaghat. For the large sculptures, artisans use marble which they source from Makrana, Rajasthan.

In Jhabua-Alirajpur region artisans make traditional ritualistic sculptures known as “Gaata” or “Gaate” in local language, often carved in relief style(Img13-14). Gaata are carved in memory of someone who died, especially in cases of untimely deaths. These carved stones are then installed near the house and worshipped daily with food offerings placed before them. Villagers and relatives gather with dhol to dance and celebrate the installation. Apart from Gaata, artisans also carve sculptures for temples, crossroads etc. Sri Shiv Dhanna Lal ji is one of them who is carrying forward his family’s tradition. His forefathers had migrated to Alirajpur. In Jhabua region these are known differently. The artisans in this region source soapstone from soapstone mines in Jhabua district and also from Rajasthan and Gujarat. They choose the colour of stone based on the type of sculpture being carved. It can be white, dark brown or light reddish. Apart from these regions, Tikamgarh, Kailaven, Ratlam, Kurkshi and Mandsaur are also known for carving idols of various deities and other sculptures of soapstone.

The types of sculptures crafted by artisans largely depends on the region’s demand and its socio-economic context. These sculptures range from modern art to ritualistic purposes depending on the demand. The region of Udaipur witnesses a constant flow of tourists, and therefore the demand here is largely for modern art. Even the religious sculptures here carry a hint of modernity to suit the contemporary taste especially for international buyers. The sculptures artisans make include abstract and figurative designs, Lord Ganesha idol, small Shivlings, decorative boxes etc(Img.12).



Img.11. Soapstone sculptures, Jabalpur



Img.12. Soapstone sculptures, Udaipur



Img.13.Gaata
(source: *Gatha Stones~Alirajpur, Craft Archives*)¹⁶



Img.14.Artisan carving gaata from a soapstone slab
(source: *Gatha Stones~Alirajpur, Craft Archives*)¹⁷

CARVING METHODS

The traditional soapstone sculptors use variety of tools, depending on the type and size of the sculpture(Img.18-19). For bigger sculptures, larger tools are used and for smaller or more delicate work, smaller tools are used. For detailed designs and ornamentation, finer tools are used. Artisans select raw soapstone and cut it into pieces based on the required size for the intended sculpture. Once appropriate piece is selected, the sculptor starts outlining its basic shape(Img.15). This is done with the help of hammer and a broad ended tool. The artisan carefully strikes the surface to chip away the unwanted portions. After this rough carving, artisans move on to make more refined features using specialized tools(img.16).

After this, the process of smoothening begins. This work is mainly done by the women(Img.17). They use sandpapers of different grits and water during this process. Once the desired design or shape is achieved, the next step consists of minute detailing. With the help of fine, pointed tools, the sculptors carefully decorate and ornament the sculpture(Img.16).

The final step involves polishing and/or colouring of the sculpture. Artisans use waterproof primer or oil-based substance over the entire surface of the sculpture. This helps in sealing the porous surface of the soapstone and deepens the colour and give it a glossy finish. In recent practices, many sculptors use spray paints (Img.20).



Img.15.Basic shape outlining



Img.16.Detailing of desired shape



Img.17.Smoothing



Img.18.Tools



Img.19.Tools

(source: Gatha Stones~Alirajpur, Craft Archives)¹⁸



Img.20.Spray Paint

CONCLUSION

When i started researching soapstone carvers, i didn't fully realize how much this journey would offer beyond just facts and figures. What seemed like a simple study of an old craft turned into something much deeper- an experience of meeting people, hearing stories and understanding their way of life. Talking to the artisans was learning in itself. They didn't learn the craft of sculpture carving from books or schools but simply by watching their elders and practicing for years. Listening to them made me think about how much traditional knowledge survives outside written records.

As the time changed, the art of soapstone carving and the life of artisans went through many shifts and changes. With the advent of machines, the practice of traditional hand carving has declined drastically and it can be concluded that in the near future this craft may face the threat of extinction as the coming generations of these artisans are also increasingly unwilling to pursue this work. Although already well established shopkeepers rely on machine based production but if do employ traditional carvers, it is ofte at low wages. Adding to these challenges, sales remain closed during the monsoon season due to heavy rains for the small scale sellers who display open stalls or modest shops. However, factors like growth in tourism, improve transport and the availability of raw material in low prices have contributed to an increase in profit margins.

In this context, it becomes essential to bring these artisans into limelight so that their practice can be safeguarded and transmitted to future generations. And the documentation of their knowledge, skills and tradition is equally important, as they are an important part of our intangible cultural heritage. There's a real need to recognise their efforts and take steps to support this beautiful tradition, whether through awareness, government schemes, colaboration or simply by valuing handmade art more.

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