



Song of the Copper Bells

Within the dusty by-lanes of this handicrafts village is the Luhar family keeping the ancient tradition of copper bell-making alive through seven generations

TANIA BANERJEE

Comfortably seated inside the air-conditioned car, I was en route to Nirona, a village 40 kilometres from Bhuj. I was on my way to discover the song of Nirona's copper bells.

Denuded scrublands of Kutch passed me by on both sides of the road. Moist patches ahead magically vanished as I neared them. Women walking by had their hands loaded with white bangles from elbow to shoulder, their outfits shining bright under the scorching sun. I reached Nirona, where a village local guided me to a sleepy-looking alley. The doors of the houses were shut tight except for one house.

Luhar Husen Sidhik greeted me with a broad smile. The art of copper bell-making has lived in his family for seven generations now. Bell-making as a sustainable form of business started in the Sindh province of undivided India. The distinctive sound of the bells made it easier for cattle-herders to identify their own livestock from that of their neighbours.

Inside his house, the floor was cemented, save a single rectangular portion on one side covered with sand and mud. That was, I would learn later, the main workstation of the craftsmen. All around, the walls were bedecked with tinkling bells. As the breeze washed in and out of the open windows, the bells chimed their songs.

Husen *bhai* seated himself on a mat spread near the workstation. He took out a piece of iron sheet from his work desk, placed it on top of a tiny iron platform and started beating it with a hammer. In a minute, the flat iron scrap



took a semicircular shape. The artist then employed a new tool – a metre-long iron rod with one pointed end and the other end bent to form a perpendicular shape with a flat top. He fixed the pointed end deep into the mud and over the flat top he positioned the semicircular iron scrap. After some more hammering and then cutting with scissors, the semicircle transformed into a hollow cylinder.

'Interlocked,' he explained. Interlock is what sets the bells of Nirona apart from the ones found in the rest of India. It is because the bells here are crafted without welding. Using another tool,

Husen *bhai* took measurements on an additional iron plate. Scissors were engaged again to cut out the requisite size. A round of drubbing later, it took the shape of a bowl. A hole was made on top of it to attach a loop from where the tongue of the bell would dangle. The bells in Nirona have a wooden clapper, another unique feature.

He then performed the art of interlocking yet again. He attached the bowl-like piece to crown over the hollow cylinder, thus giving the bell its shape. This was the climax of the live demonstration, after which Husen *bhai* took a break. Once

the bells are shaped to the crafter's imagination, they are soaked in a mixture of clay and water. This process is carried out by the women of the household. The mud-laden bells are then coated with copper and iron dust, wrapped in cotton and baked in a furnace. This guarantees the lustre of the bells. Completion can sometimes take up to four days.

Husen *bhai* got up and jingled three bells at three different stages of production to show me the remarkable difference of the music they generate. One by one, I walked past the wide array of bells on display. The seven progressive notes of *sa re ga ma pa dha ni* flowed through the house when some of the instruments were gently touched with a stick. Today, the primary consumers of the Luhars' copper bells are Yoga practitioners who use the bells as



part of their meditative practice. Or schools for children with special needs as part of therapy. Or for decorative purposes by resorts nearby in a bid to support the local craft of the region.

As I watch Husen *bhai*, I realise this isn't a mere business, or even just a passion, but something that goes beyond the craft. It is what

gives him the energy to tirelessly give this live demonstration to anyone who lands at his doorstep. It is what makes visitors of the Rann Utsav take time out to visit the Luhars. It is what transforms Husen *bhai* from a metal artisan to an artist. As the wind picks up the notes around me, I realise perhaps what that something is – timelessness.



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