

## THE BRASS-SMITH: AN ARTISAN

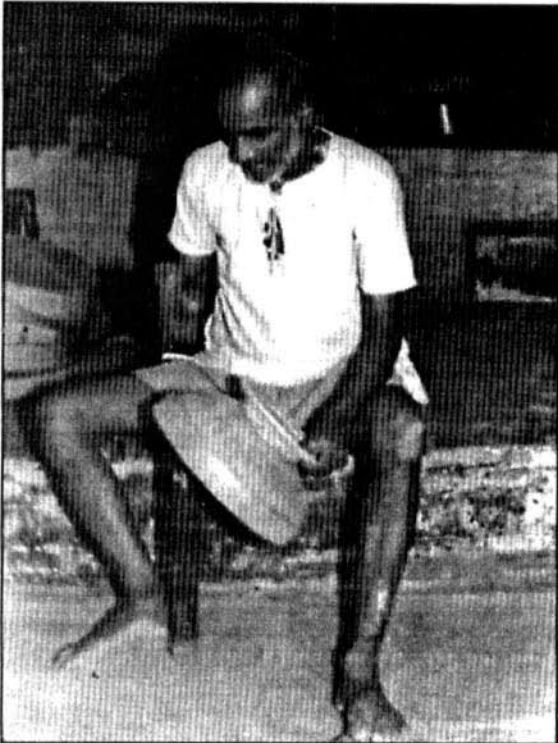
In this chapter we will see how the brass-smiths, or *kaseras* as they are called in Hindi, manufacture utensils from brass sheets. We shall go to the *kasera mohalla* to meet some of the artisans.

As we approach the street in the evening, the sound of *thak-thak-thak* can be heard even from a distance. The sound makes it difficult to even hear what someone is saying. But what makes this sound? There are about 8 houses of brass-smiths in the street and they are hammering away at brass-sheets with iron and wooden hammers. This is what is making the *thak-thak* sound.

### Bansilal's Family Makes Utensils

*Bansilal lives with his family in the kasera mohalla. They make many kinds of pots and pans - such as the batloi (brass pot) used for*

Fig. 1 A brass-smith at his workplace



*storing water, the kuda to measure foodgrain, the tapela to cook food in, etc. His brother, Mannulal, and two sons Rameshwar and Arjun, also work with him.*

*Work begins early at about 6.30 AM in the front portion of the house. With balla, balli, mogri, loni and many other small tools, they sit down. A metal ring, about a foot in diameter stays fixed on the floor where they work - this is the kathelna. Some big and small iron rods have also been fixed on the floor. The utensils are held on these for hammering. Besides, there are two fire-places where the job of welding or joining two parts of brass together is done.*

*Today, they are working on a batloi which is made of three parts - the bottom, the middle and the mouth. If you have a batloi at home, look carefully to see where the three parts are joined to each other.*

*Rameshwar and Arjun are preparing the bottom part by hammering the brass sheet. This sheet of brass has been machine-pressed. Mannulal and Bansilal are hammering another round sheet of brass to prepare the middle part.*

*Together they make about 8 to 10 bottom and middle pieces of the batlois in a day. Into the middle piece, a hole is made to fix the mouth in. Look at the batloi mouth carefully. Has it also been hammered out of a brass sheet? No! The batloi mouths are not made by brass-smiths such as Bansilal. They are made by melting brass, which is poured into moulds and allowed to cool to the shape of the mould. This is called casting. The work of casting is done by only one family in the mohalla.*

*The next day, the three pieces of the batlois were to be welded together. Thus, early in the morning, two fires were lit in the*

workplace. On one fire, Bansilal and Mannul welded the mouth to the hole that had been cut in the middle piece. They would hand over the welded piece to Rameshwar and Arjun, who were sitting at the other fire. These two would join the middle and the bottom pieces together.

After the three parts of the batloi had been joined, it had to be polished. For this it is first fixed on a lathe and rotated. As the utensil rotates the artisan scrapes it. The batloi starts shining in a moment.

Whether it is the task of giving a shape to the brass sheets, joining them or giving them a shine - all the operations are done by Bansilal's family. Once they begin work at 6.30 AM in the morning they get hardly any respite until it is 8 or 9 o'clock at night. In between they stop work only for lunch for an hour or two, at around noon, or for a little while in the evening, for snacks. They say that the four of them together are able to make goods weighing 40 kilos in two days time. This is equal to 10 batlois as one batloi weighs about 4 to 5 kilos.



Fig. 2 Welding the mouth to a batloi

Instead, he exchanged some old brass vessels for the new ones and gave some extra money.

First, all the goods were weighed - the batlois separately, the tapelas separately and the lotas separately. Whatever was the weight of brass in the new utensils, the trader gave to Mannul an equal weight of old brass.

Are you wondering how the trader had so much old brass with him?

Well, he gets it from people who come to buy new utensils from his shop. They give the trader their old, worn out utensils. The trader, in return, gives them new utensils of a slightly lesser weight, and charges some money as manufacturing charges. You may have noticed that the trader did not just give Mannul old brass but also gave him some money as making-charges.

- Describe the three parts of a batloi and how they are made.
- Correct the false statements -
  - The brass-smith works at home.
  - Bansilal employs labourers to work for him.
  - Bansilal gets tools on loan from a trader.
- Bansilal's family depends on another family for making one part of the batloi - which part is it?
- Discuss with your teacher the difference between 'hammering into shape' and 'casting'.

### Mannul Sells the Utensils

A number of utensils were ready in eight days. Mannul took these to the trader in the town to sell. The trader did not pay cash for all the utensils brought by Mannul.

Fig. 3 Polishing a vessel on a lathe



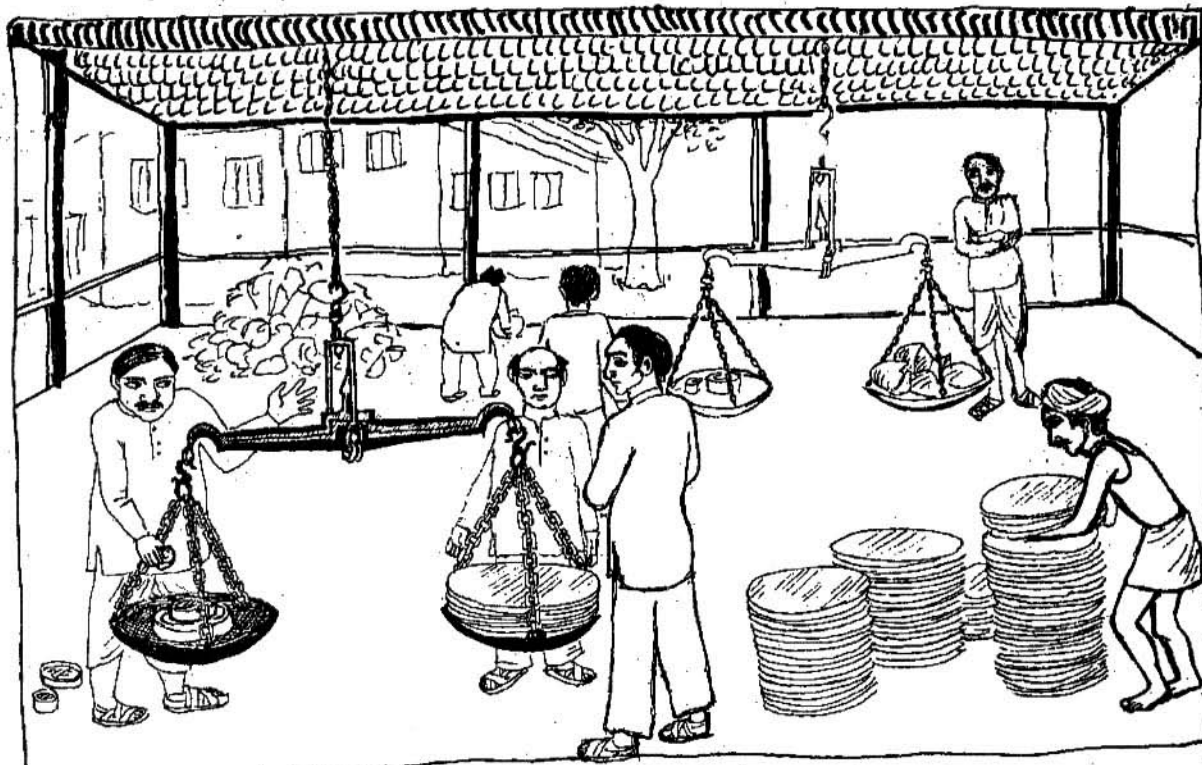


Fig. 4 The brass-smith at the factory

- *If there is a shop selling brass utensils in your place, go and find out how new brass utensils are sold in exchange for old brass utensils, or ask people at home about it.*
- *The trader had weighed everything separately. What do you think could be the reason for doing this?*
- *How does a trader acquire old brass?*
- *How does a brass-smith acquire old brass?*
- *What do you think the brass-smith will do with the old brass?*

### Munnul Buys New Brass Sheets

Mannul took the old brass from the trader and went to a factory in a truck. He got off at the factory and paid Rs 50 to the truck-driver. There are many factories that manufacture circular brass sheets and also press them to make the bottom parts of the batlois. These factories also accept old brass in return for the goods they manufacture.

In one of the factory-sheds, one can see the weighing of old brass that is brought by brass-smiths from far-off places. Whatever

be the weight of the old brass they bring, an equivalent weight of new brass is given to them in exchange. The brass sheets are available in varying thicknesses. The brass-smiths select the thickness they need and get the sheets weighed. Besides the old brass of equal weight, the brass-smiths also give to the factory some manufacturing charges.

Munnul bought 54 kilos of new brass sheets of various sizes, and paid Rs. 810 as their making charges. He loaded the sheets on a truck and returned home.

Mannul had a few kilos of old brass remaining with him. He gave this to Chhagan the brass-smith who casts mouths for the batlois. Chhagan and his brother do only the special job of casting and live near Bansilal's house. They do not make batlois or tapelas like other brass-smiths. Mannul paid Chhagan some money as making-charges and collected the batloi-mouths from him.

Thus finally, all the materials required for making utensils were once again collected at home - new brass sheets, batloi bottoms and mouths. Now, Bansilal's family would continue to keep the cycle of production going. We also find that at every stage old brass is exchanged for new and some extra manufacturing charge is paid.

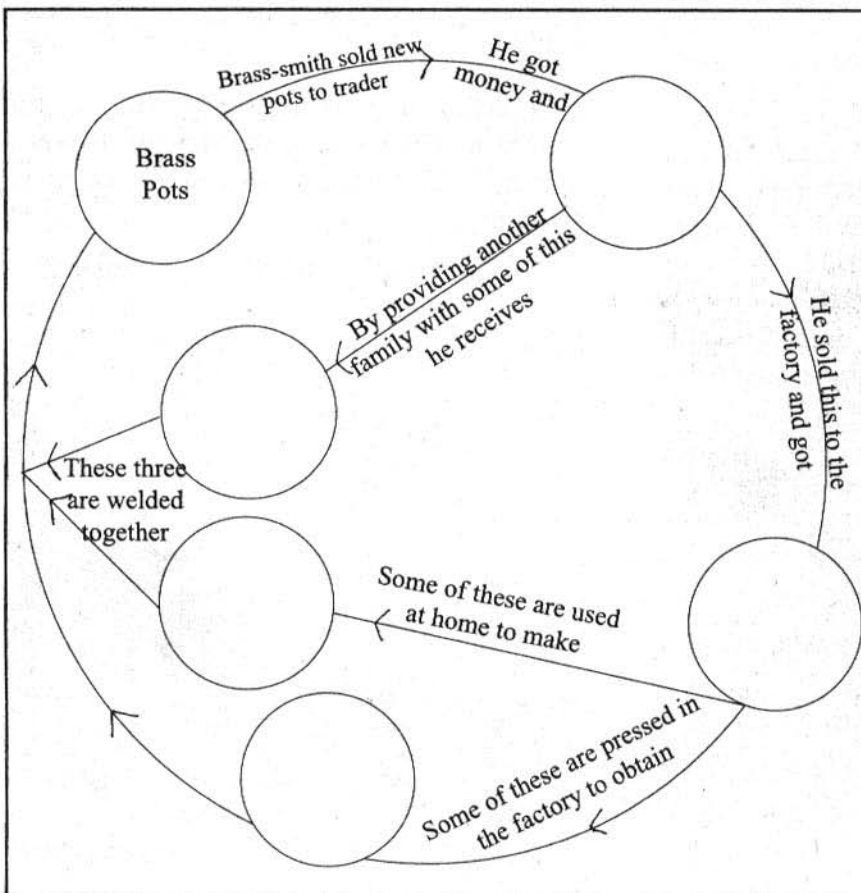
## INCOME AND EXPENDITURE

You observed that four persons worked as brass-smiths in Bansilal's family. The utensils which Mannulal had taken to sell, were made by them in 8 days. With the money received from the sale of these utensils, Bansilal and Mannulal meet the expenses of the 12 persons in their household. Sometimes they are also able to make some small savings.

The earnings of the family are, however, not very stable. They are not always able to sell all the goods they make. Sometimes the trader buys up goods weighing 100 kilos in just one week, whereas sometimes only 200 kilos of utensils are sold in an entire month! These ups and downs are often related to agriculture. When the crops are good the business of the brass-smiths is also good. When crops fail, then business is slow. Likewise the brass-smiths'

business increases in the season of marriages and festivals and also after the harvest.

**Production Cycle of Brass pots (Batlois)**



- *Why does this happen? Can you think of any explanation?*
- *Can you list the months in which the brass-smiths' business booms and the months when it is slow? Discuss this amongst yourselves.*

This is the life of a brass-smith. He works and manufactures the vessels at his own home. He has all the tools required and is a skilled person. He plans and organises the purchase of the raw materials required. He also has to take the risk of independently deciding how much he would produce and how he would sell his goods.

## Declining Number of Brass-smiths

There was a discussion in the kasera mohalla. People were saying, "Some 50-60 years ago there were almost 100 households doing brass work. The sound of *thak-thak-thak* resounded upto the sky, all through the night. But these days, work ends in the evening itself. Only 7-8 households still practice the profession. The others have given up this work."

Why has this happened? It is partly due to the effect of the stainless steel and aluminium utensils that now have a greater demand. Stainless steel utensils are cheaper. They are also easy to clean. It is laborious to wash the brass utensils and they have to be periodically tin plated. That is why many people, especially in the urban areas, have started using stainless steel utensils. Since the demand for brass utensils is going down the brass-smiths are shifting to other occupations. They are trying to take up other jobs that require less physical labour and provide more earning. Many have started shops to sell cloth or utensils. Many who are educated are now in government service or with private firms.

However, many people in the villages continue to use brass utensils because they can save money by exchanging old brass lying at home for new utensils. Old steel utensils cannot be exchanged for new ones because they cannot be melted easily to make new ones. Thus this is one reason why the demand for brass utensils has not finished altogether.

- *If people in your family go to the market to buy utensils would they buy brass utensils? Raise the question at home and write down the explanation.*
- *Think of some other occupations which are being given up by people in favour of other jobs and the reasons behind such changes. Discuss your observations in the class.*

## ARTISANS

We called the brass-smith an artisan. This is because, as we saw, they are skilled people and produce goods that require their special skills and training. Secondly, they are also self-employed. They work from their homes, own their tools, get their own raw material, produce goods by using their own labour and the labour of their families. Besides, the most important factor is that they are free to sell their goods and keep all the earnings with themselves. If the earnings are low, they bear the loss.

### Other Examples of Artisans

The potter is also an artisan. He brings clay from the riverside, filters it and kneads it. When the clay is ready in a couple of days, it is placed on the wheel and rotated. As the clay rotates the potter uses his special skills to make a variety of vessels. He also strokes it with wooden hammers to give it shape. He dries the pots and then bakes them. The oven is also made by him, and it is he who gets the wood for firing the oven.

After the pots are ready he goes from village to village or to the nearby market to sell them. In summers his work increases and so do the sales.

You would agree that the potter is an artisan. Other artisans are weavers, dyers, basket-makers, leather-workers, etc.



Fig. 5 A potter

- ***Keep in mind the following points and describe the work of any one artisan-***  
***What is manufactured and how?***  
***Where is the work done and by whom?***  
***Who owns the equipment and tools?***  
***Who organises the purchase of raw materials and the sale of final products and how is it done?***

### **Artisanal Production**

The artisan's work has some special features. Firstly he works from his own home. He is the owner of his tools and also decides his working hours. No one else determines the time at which he should begin or end his work every day. In contrast, a teacher, an officer or a bank-employee, certainly do not work from their homes. They have a separate place where they go to do their work. Similarly the workers and managers of a factory do their work in the factory.

- ***Can you identify which among these people do not determine their work-time on their own -***  
***potter, basket-maker, government employee, teacher, factory worker, bank-manager***
- ***Who determines their work-time for them?***

The second special feature of an artisan is that the family works as a whole to produce the goods. The family members have traditional skills and normally they do not employ outside labour.

The third special feature of an artisan's work is that he is normally an independent person. He buys the raw material himself and he also sells the goods himself. He either sells them to the buyers directly or to a trader who then sells it to the consumers. Thus he keeps the entire profit and he also bears the entire loss when it is there.

Compare this situation with that of a worker who works for a businessman in a factory. He does not organise the purchase of the raw material or the marketing of the goods he makes. He only gets the fixed wages for putting in skill and labour in making the goods.

For example, many brass-smiths today are unable to work as independent craftsmen or artisans. They make utensils whenever they get an order from the trader. The trader usually supplies old brass to them for producing new vessels.

We have tried to understand the way in which work is organised by artisans. We will now study the other systems of industrial production.

### **EXERCISE**

1. Arrange the following statements in the right sequence to explain the making of the batloi -
  - a. Welding of the bottom part of the batloi to the middle part
  - b. Shaping the bottom part
  - c. Shaping the middle part
  - d. Polishing
  - e. Fixing the mouth and welding it
2. What do brass-smiths like Bansilal and Mannulal do with the things they make?
3. What is the raw material used by the brass-smiths? How do they procure the raw material?
4. What do brass-smiths get in exchange for their goods?
5. Name some tools used by brass-smiths and also draw their pictures in your notebook.
6. Where and when do brass-smiths work?

7. Make a list of the jobs for which the brass-smith is dependent on someone else.
8. How does the trader acquire old brass and what does he do with it?
9. Fill in the following table about the following artisans –

| Artisan                                   | Product | Raw-material | Sources of raw-material | Sale of product | Work by family members | Place of work |
|---|---------|--------------|-------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|---------------|
| <b>Potter</b><br>( <i>kumhar</i> )        |         |              |                         |                 |                        |               |
| <b>Basket-weaver</b><br>( <i>basodh</i> ) |         |              |                         |                 |                        |               |
| <b>Blacksmith</b><br>( <i>lohar</i> )     |         |              |                         |                 |                        |               |

10. You studied the work of a potter on page 106. Use the description to make a diagram showing the process by which the potter makes earthen pots.
11. Why is the trade of the brass-smiths declining over time?
12. Make a list of the people you know who produce goods at home? Can you identify the special features of the artisans in all of them? What differences do you find? Discuss with your teacher.

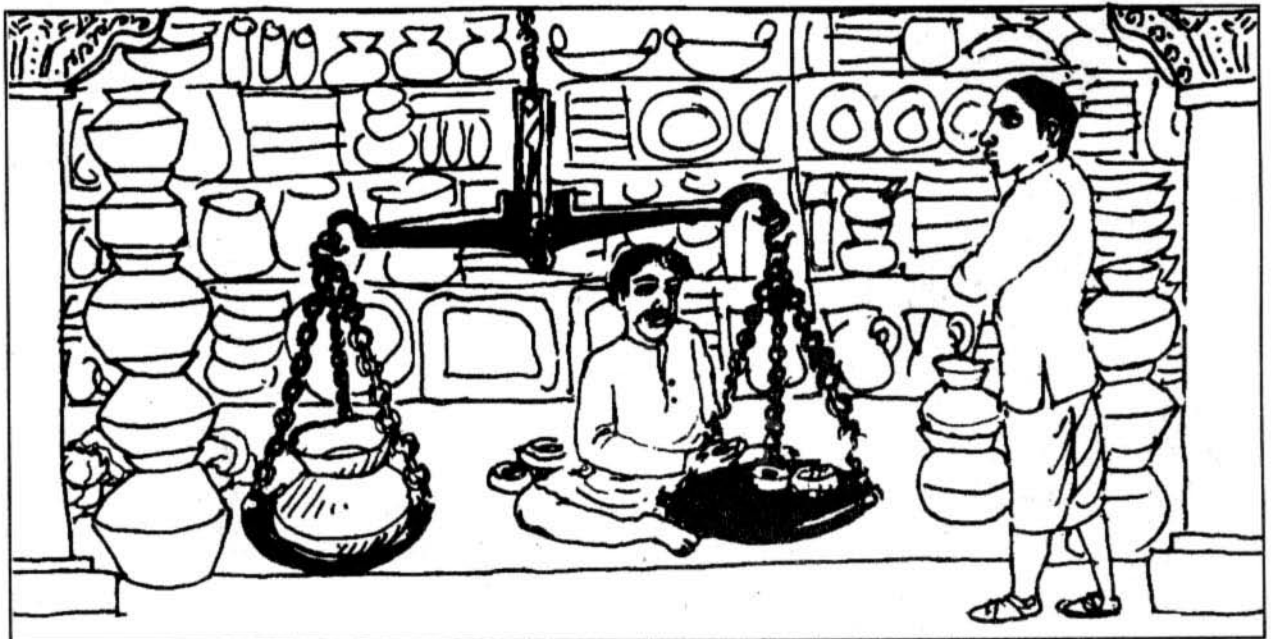


Fig. 6 Brass-smith at the utensil shop