



from the age of the Peshwas to the modern day, and spotlights Studio Coppre,

who are working with the local

Tambat m e t a l w o r k i n g community

on its resurgence



BULLY

n 1885, the Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency created a list of the most important art manufactures of Poona (now Pune). Headlining the list was the crafting of copper and brass objects by the hereditary Tambat community of metalworkers, enumerating the 14 categories of objects they crafted, each one of which included a long list of items. The significance of the Tambat craft lay not just in this long list but also in the part the artisans played in the ritual and everyday life of the city. From vessels used in rites of passage and sacred ceremonies, to cookware especially tailored to meet the dietary requirements of their clientele, from storage for grain and water to objects for the elegant serving of paan quid and other delicacies. Coins for gifting, ritual amulets to ward off the evil eye, oil lamps, musical instruments, religious icons, an English kettle for the sophisticated, and for the young bride a set of miniature vessels that were filled with auspicious offerings of rice, grain, sugar, butter and lentils and accompanied her to her marital home were just some of the bespoke items crafted. While further back in time, under Peshwa rule, the list would perhaps have been even longer as it would have included titles to land grants that were engraved on copperplates, arms and armour crafted for the Peshwa's army, special orders placed for temple finials, and other bespoke items commissioned for sacred and secular use.

The records underline that business in 1885 continued to be brisk and during the high season—extending from November to May—the 810 members of the Tambat community often needed to work past midnight to fulfil their orders. Depending on usage and commission sizes, objects ranged from a minuscule two inches to a gargantuan five feet and larger.

From a time when the wealth and status of a family was ascertained by the number and size of their copperware, much was to change and by the start of the new century, the use of bespoke copper objects began slowly losing its ascendancy, followed by an unrelieved decline over the decades. The reasons have been many, including the rising price of copper plates, mechanization, cheaper substitutes, changing food habits and cooking methods, new materials available for dinnerware and cookware, and the inaccessibility of the tinning necessary for the use of copper cookware, among others.

Fortunately for us, copperware in Pune continues to retain its hold and, though reduced in number, the Tambat artisans continue to live, craft, and conduct business in the same precincts where their fore-fathers lived and created. As copper is regarded as one of the five auspicious metals connected to the planets, its use in rituals remains unchanged, listed in the *Hindu Shilp Shastra* texts that define the canonical guide to art, religious icons and architecture, and also in the *Materia Medica of Ayurveda*, the Indian traditional medicinal text that recognizes the health-giving properties of copper vessels. In addition, for feasts and other celebrations only traditional copperware from Tambat Ali will do.

Walking past their homes-cum-workshops, many of which open onto alleys, is like taking a walk back in time, as passers-by can see artisans hard at work, hand-tooling and beating copper sheets into shape. Their immense skill lies in using basic tools to handcraft bespoke shapes and sizes. Though they face competition from machine-made industrial products, their characteristic hand-hammered indented patterning, or *mathar kaam*, cannot be replicated. This technique

requires great artisanal skill as the hammer's head has to be even in weight and pressure, consistent in sizing, and the indents have to evenly cover the surface. The *mathar kaam* indentations add a faceted, light-reflecting aesthetic to copperware, with the added value of strengthening the vessel, adding to its longevity and durability.

The artisans continue to pass on their tradition to future generations in much the same way as they were taught—through oral learning and on-the-job apprenticeships. This tradition could have been further endangered if not for the initiative of Studio Coppre, a social-impact brand based in Pune that has worked for over a decade to preserve the craft by working in partnership with Tambat artisans. By promoting a culture-based development model that focuses on heritage and craft preservation they keep the artisan at the core of all development. Studio Coppre's patterns and designs have revitalized the tradition of handcrafting, making Tambat copperware relevant for contemporary homes in India and around the world—exhibited to much acclaim in Frankfurt and New York, and at design weeks in Milan, London, Dubai and other venues; and the recipient of a World Craft Council award in 2016 and a Shilp Udyam Samman award instituted by the All India Artisans and Craftworkers Welfare Association in 2021.

Their initiatives have changed the narrative of the Tambat metalworking community by bringing the products of their craftsmanship back into the mainstream. And as if in appreciative applause, the charming alleyways of Tambat Ali in Kasba Peth, the heart of old Pune, resound with the beat of the hammer.

BY RITU SETHI