

THE TRADITIONAL CRAFT OF LEATHER BELLOWS-MAKING: TECHNO-ETHNOARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FROM SHOLAPUR, INDIA

Bellows are devices constructed to furnish strong blasts of air into the hearth or furnace, resulting in the fuel burning more intensely and with a brighter flame. Although the use of bellows is a crucial aspect of metallurgical processes, this is one area that does not lend itself to easy study in the archaeological record since bellows are made of perishable materials. Although fragments of furnaces and other forms of archaeo-metallurgical debris such as tuyeres, crucibles and moulds are known, bellows are rarely reported from archaeological contexts, particularly from India.

It is therefore timely to trace the making of leather bellows in India through evidence for current practices. This study brings out the methods of manufacture of leather bellows with the help of a survey of workshops in the Sholapur and Nagpur areas. This research will document and understand the technology of leather bellows-making from the initial to the final stage. It is important to document the indigenous craft of bellows-making so that the craft can be passed on to future generations. This research will discuss the methods of traditional leather bellows-making with reference to Sholapur district, Maharashtra, through an ethnographic survey. The research has been supported by an award from the R.F. Tylecote Fund.

Study Area

Sholapur district is located in Maharashtra state, India (Fig. 1). The city of Sholapur is the district headquarters and is located on the south-east edge of the state and lies in the river basins of the Bhīma and Sina rivers. The Sholapur district is rich in archaeology and history. The leather bellow-making artisans are located in Kontam Chauk, Basaveshwar circle, in Sholapur city.

Observations on bellows-making in Sholapur

Bellows-making in Sholapur involves a variety of techniques and processes including preparing the goatskin, shaping the wooden components, making the desired outline for the bellows length and size, and creating the designs to decorate the wooden frame. Indian smelters and smiths regarded the bellows as the most important element of their work. In many parts of India, the iron-smelting process was simply known as 'blowing the bellows' and competent smiths were referred to as 'men skilled in bellows'. Iron smelting and forging technology has a long history and is practiced even today. Despite this, we have no evidence for bellows in the archaeological assemblage. However, in ethnoarchaeology we have important information on the making of bellows for smithies (Fig. 2 and 3).



Fig. 2. The author with the leather bellows artisans from Sholapur

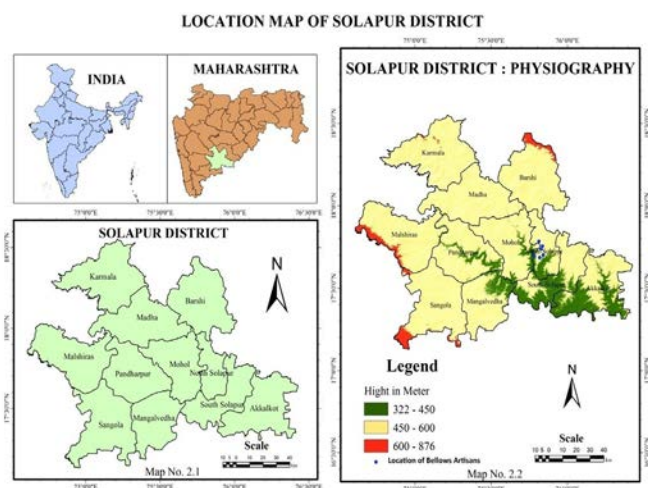


Fig. 1. Location of Sholapur District, Maharashtra



Fig. 3. Bellows made in the Sholapur workshop

The decline in leather bellows-making techniques

The current situation is that leather bellows-making is fast disappearing, the numbers of artisans is dwindling as many are changing their occupation as the demand for leather bellows declines. The main reason for the decline in demand is the use of steel mechanical bellows now available in the market. These new bellows are compact and therefore easier to use for the ironsmith. Very few ironsmiths are now buying the traditional leather bellows. Further reasons for the decline in bellows-making is the lack of goat or cow skin, and the lack of skilled labour to work in the workshops alongside the skilled traditional chief artisan.

S. Udayakumar

LESLEY-ANN COWELL - MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

I joined HMS with Mike in the 1980s. Although I have a limited knowledge of metallurgy, archaeology or history, I have always enjoyed the meetings and conferences – and learnt a little along the way. I became Membership Secretary in 1999 whilst still working as a Registered Paediatric nurse.

My main function is to keep the database up-to-date so that members receive their copy of *The Crucible*. I also ensure that lapsed members are removed so that postage costs are not wasted. I keep files of new and removed members so that the statistical trend of membership is available for Council. And I work closely with our Treasurer to ensure that he is notified of all the PayPal payments and we correlate information. I also bank the cheque payments. I am co-opted onto Council so feel I am able to have a positive input into some aspects of running the Society. I am responsible for mailing *The Crucible* to members three times a year, together with any other papers they require for information. Latterly I have also taken over mailing the journal, *Historical Metallurgy*, to our overseas members. This has helped in cutting down the amount of time it has taken them to receive their copy.

I very much enjoy engaging with members through emails, letters and phone conversations. The job has changed quite a lot since 1999 but nevertheless keeps me quite busy. Over the years, I received lovely letters, cards and words of kindness from members, all very much appreciated.

Outside of HMS I am an active member of our church, including being secretary of the Parochial Church Council, a Sunday school teacher and, once a week, taking the worship session at our village school. I also currently edit our Parish magazine, and I am a volunteer with our local Brownie unit. I take bookings for both our village halls, as well as being a Trustee of one of them. In between everything else, I also enjoy amateur dramatics and if that were not enough, there is the community choir and my small allotment plot!

