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LOCATING SYNERGIES

WITHIN GENDERED DIVISIONS OF LABOUR IN THE INDIAN CRAFT OF BANDHANI

It is a widely agreed fact that craft-making across global communities has traditionally been an activity with intriguing gender dynamics. Within India's vast diversity and rich cultural heritage of crafts, gender has played a notable role in practices that are shaped by and continue to shape the social structure of each community. Historically, and quite broadly, Indian crafts have been categorized under two purposes: commercial or personal use. Families producing commercial crafts had the male craftworker as the central protagonist, while his wife was his assistant and his children his apprentices.[1] Personal crafts were done by women to embellish their garments or those of their children for wedding ceremonies, be given as gifts, or become part of a dowry.[2]

The rise of fashion in the era of commercialization resulted in the fact that, today, most crafts are systematically organized as commercial crafts to serve the desirable purpose of catering to fashionable lifestyles. Many of them involve a clear division of labour and are perceived as male-dominated, while women are seen participating passively in 'background' activities as they are engaged in other household chores. By highlighting the mobility and capacity constraints arising from women's domestic responsibilities, one set of researchers emphasizes that the flexibility of the working conditions is one of the fundamental motivations for women artisans to pursue craft-making as a means of livelihood.[3] In this connection, there has been an increase in organizations that focus chiefly on decentralized operations so as to allow women to work from the convenience of their homes. Conversely, another set of scholars argue that crafts traditionally led by women have generally been classified as leisure-time activities, and have therefore failed to present women as craftworkers contributing to the economy.[4] In turn, the very domestic origin of certain 'feminine' crafts contributed to the construction of gendered roles and the corresponding value systems in craft production.[5] While an official national survey reports that 47.4% of India's handicraft industry workforce consists of women,[6] it is debated that their labour is largely considered part-time home-based work, and is generally underpaid.[7]

The abovementioned studies offer a general overview of the cultural systems that produce unequal divisions of labour through a broad lens of gender imbalance. While some aspects of gendered practices emerge from frozen impressions of 'tradition' and 'heritage',[8] others point to the socio-spatial relations[9] that produce specific gender codes. Each craft ecosystem is nonetheless self-organized and presents its own complexities and an intersectional social order that is constantly in motion. This diversity of craft production itself calls for a closer inspection of social systems, and

1 A dyed piece of Bandhani textile with the ties yet to be opened

for a keener observation of opportunities that are overlooked owing to a standard rhetoric of gender inequalities. Considering the recent shifts in the craft landscape, I argue that analysing the barriers in gendered craft production necessitates a context-specific evaluation with a focus on craft practice, geographical location, market influence, production (infra)structure, and socio-political interventions – all of them factors that jointly affect the aspects of mobility and agency, and the perceived capacities of each gender.

This paper presents a case study of the tie and dye craft of Bandhani, which is prominent in the states of Gujarat and Rajasthan in Western India. The craft involves a fascinating gendered division of labour, whereby the tying is done mostly by women, while men handle the dyeing and sale in the market. Extending from the broad assessments of gender imbalances, I take a new look at how these paradigms have been challenged in the craft of Bandhani. Based on interviews with male and female craftworkers from various economic levels, I unpack the logics, choices, and negotiations behind the division of labour within two distinct clusters so as to examine whether it is discriminatory towards a particular gender, or if it is a domestic and social organizing of labour that is harmonious, or at times even synergistic.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE TWO CLUSTERS OF BANDHANI

Bandhani, also known as Bandhej, is a craft that evolved as a meticulous tie and dye process involving multiple steps. It is a technique of resist dyeing, in which the fabric is pinched and small ties are made with thread on a cotton, silk, or wool base. The fabric is then dyed, with the resulting fabric revealing an undyed pattern of dots. The traditional Bandhani textiles gained immense popularity across Europe and the Americas in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, thus expanding the international commercial links of the craft.[10] Traditionally, a significant part of the production, the tying and dyeing, has been a household activity practiced over generations. Within a cultural network of diverse actors engaging in this trade,[11] I put a particular focus

2 Freshly dyed pieces of Bandhani fabrics put out to dry

on gender attributes in the craft-making and how they have evolved. For a more in-depth inquiry, I found it extremely useful to explore two distinct clusters of craft production. Since Bandhani is seen in both Gujarat and Rajasthan, it is important to understand the resources and socio-economic backgrounds of these states.

GUJARAT

Bandhani in Gujarat was traditionally the intergenerational expertise of the both Muslim and Hindu caste of Khatris.[12] Gujarat experienced a massive earthquake in 2001, which severely affected many craft clusters. Afterwards, the state government led initiatives to train more village communities in the craft, especially in tying, in order to strengthen the trade and rebuild the craft economy. Slowly, both men and women from an increasing number communities and religions joined forces. Another crucial catalyst in this region is the Somaiya Kala Vidya (SKV), an institution that offers design education especially for artisans in diverse crafts.[13] Over the years, SKV has trained a new class of artisan-designers to expand their respective crafts through design-oriented thinking, business management, branding, and marketing.

RAJASTHAN

In Rajasthan, Bandhani has a strict division of labour. A prominent practice that has led to socio-economic development here, however, is the formation of self-help groups (SHGs) by women. The SHG model of trade unions involves savings-based microfinancing, whereby rural women come together to contribute small amounts of money to a group fund on a regular basis, and use it as capital to either invest in local craft businesses, or to obtain simple personal loans from the community fund. This model has proven to be quite successful[14] and is also supported by the state government as well as NGOs[15] through a variety of financial schemes providing additional support. My focus here is on three districts, known together as the Shekhawati region. An important aspect here is that most men from these villages have moved to countries in the Middle East for work. So, in their

absence, women have found greater motivation and need to earn money through tying Bandhani.

GENDER-BASED CAPABILITIES: PERCEPTIONS AND PROJECTIONS

The craft process in Gujarat, as it was consistently narrated by my interview partners, starts with men preparing the design. It is then rendered on a tracing sheet and transferred to the fabric by applying a temporary blue pigment known as *neel*, and is then passed on to women for tying. This step takes anywhere between a few weeks to a few months, depending on the intricacy of the design, the fabric, and the product. In some cases, elderly men also do the tying to supplement their income from home. Next comes the dyeing, which is again done by men. Sometimes, when the design involves multiple colours, it requires multiple rounds of tying and dyeing. Finally, it is once again men who take the Bandhani fabric to sell in the local market, to suppliers, or at craft exhibitions.

3 A woman making the Bandhani ties along the printed design

4 A man dyeing a fabric tied in the Leheriya style, which results in a wave of stripes

During the conversations I had, most of my interview partners stated that there is no gender discrimination, but the division of labour is nonetheless structured around the lifestyles and cultural roles of men and women. The reasoning for this is that, traditionally, women have always participated in producing Bandhani in their leisure time for a few hours in the afternoon after finishing their household duties. While working in the private sphere, they would gather together and sing traditional local songs to motivate each other during the mechanical work of many days. Every young girl in the Khatri community is expected to be skilled in the craft of Bandhani tying. Due to the social and cultural norms that expect men to be the breadwinners for the family, men handle all tasks related to the public sphere.

Considering the co-dependency of the work shared asymmetrically between men and women, it is first important to look at the nature of each task and the labour involved in order to ascertain the corresponding value. The master craftsman Abdul Aziz Khatri's description in response to this question is particularly insightful:

'There is hard work in every step, but of different kinds: Design involves *dimag ki mehnat* (labour of the mind) as well as the hand to some extent. Because every design starts from a new thought, from scratch.

Dyeing requires *haath ki mehnat* (labour of the hand and muscle power). The dyeing formula itself is like learning how to ride a bicycle – once you learn it, you know it. But it requires endurance to the heat of the dye bath, and strength for the washing. Understanding different consumer tastes, both in the domestic and international markets also requires some thinking.

Tying demands *sabr ki mehnat* (labour of perseverance). The mind is fully focused, but there is also the hard test of one's patience and perseverance, because you work with the same piece every day for about one or two months.'

This perspective acknowledges different kinds of labour that cannot be measured on the same scale. But the implication is that design and dyeing are associated with 'brain work', whereas tying does not require a thought process but is instead a mechanical activity. I will provide a brief examination of this notion later on in this paper.

Another indicator of value in the collaborative work is the means of compensation. Whereas tying and dyeing are both activities that are paid per piece, several studies so far indicate that women earn far less as piece-workers, since they are mostly home-based and invest fewer hours in the work.[16] In comparison, men who work at the market or dye several pieces a day effectively earn more by dedicating more hours to their respective roles.

A third and frequently disregarded aspect of value is the joy[17] factor. All my interview participants unanimously stated that the most rewarding moment in the crafting process is when the ties are unravelled at the end to reveal the moment of truth.[18] Now, since the textile is produced in sequential steps, the fabric is passed on to the men to be dyed and left out to dry. The dyers are thus ultimately the ones who unveil the much-awaited outcome of the co-production. Typically, the women who have meticulously tied the fabric are not present to witness this rewarding sight.[19]

5 A man opens the ties of a multi-coloured Bandhani textile to reveal the final outcome

Some craftsmen assured me that the people who do the tying do not care about the end result once they have received their payment, suggesting that they are emotionless hands at work that simply execute the job. Regarding the earlier rationale of 'brain work' vs. mechanical work, the artisan-designer Zakiya Adil Khatri had a fresher perspective to offer:

'For one of my collections inspired by the heritage monuments of India, I created a design inspired by a decorative gate. I gave the piece to an artisan to tie. When she brought it back, I saw that it was very badly done. I said: "What did you do?

Does it even look like a gate to you?" She looked at me, shrugged, and said very casually: "Oh, you should have told me that it's supposed to be a gate."'

Struck by this response, my husband and I conducted an experiment. We picked a design and shared it with two groups of artisans. With the first group, we shared the entire concept, showed them the mood board, and gave them a detailed explanation of what we envisioned. To the other group, with whom we had been working for a long time, we simply handed over the fabric as usual, without any information. To our surprise, the first group's work surpassed our expectations! I then realized what a loss it had been so far to not share our concepts with the individuals doing the tying. We immediately decided that, at least within our capacities, we would bring a change to this system and ensure that the tyers participate in the conceptualization. Since then, we have made sure to invite both tyers and dyers to witness the end result being revealed before them.'

In her book *Critical Fabulations*, the designer Daniela K. Rosner underscores a similar assumption of intellect based on the gender of craftworkers.[20] In the above anecdote, Zakiya, a master craftsperson herself, points to two intriguing insights: by turning the design ideation and final unravelling of the ties into a group ritual, Zakiya not only acknowledged the joy factor, but also addressed the significance of all stakeholders thinking, producing, and seeing the quality outcome collaboratively. This experience highlights an opportunity to recognize individual capabilities and collective capacities so as to effectively establish synergies in the craft ecosystem.

CAPACITY BUILDING: MOBILITY AND AGENCY

In the Shekhawati region of Rajasthan, women artisans, who typically belong to various SHGs, receive Bandhani tying work from middle-men who are the dyers themselves in many cases. Locally known as *neelgar*, the middleman transfers the design onto pieces of fabric and travels to remote areas of craft clusters to deliver it to the doorstep of women homeworkers for tying. He then collects the tied fabric, dyes it, and supplies it to craft showrooms or designer stores in the bigger cities. Although this supply chain provides work to women in the convenience of their home, it is their very immobility and lack of information about the shifting market demands that pose challenges in negotiating a suitable price for their work. Since most of their husbands live and work in the Middle East, the women are forced to rely on the piece rate quoted by the middle-men.

6 Men selling heaps of colourful Bandhani textiles in a small outlet in Jodhpur, Rajasthan

Among other social organizations, Rangsutra is a notable craft-based social enterprise that has a well-established base in the Bandhani cluster of the Shekhawati region. My conversation with Rangsutra's manager of operations[21] shed light on their remarkable experience in navigating gendered roles.

In 2017, in collaboration with the Rajasthan state government, Rangsutra initiated a Bandhani project in a cluster called Churu in the Shekhawati region. Quality control was a major issue in the village-based model, since the artisans had various skill levels and did not adhere to strict guidelines for production. But one important aspect that was prevalent in the lifestyle of women in the region was their participation in SHGs and possessing considerable knowledge about the microfinancing model. Recognizing this as the most striking indicator of their potential agency, Rangsutra proposed the establishment of village centres where the women could gather and work in a more organized manner. After several rounds of persuasion, the enterprise managed to get the homebound women to travel to the village centres. During the skill assessment programmes, Rangsutra's team recognized the individual capabilities and involvement of the women, and trained specific women in the areas of marketing, business management, quality control, communication, pricing, planning, resource management, etc.[22] Their objec-

tive was to support the women in establishing their own producer companies and becoming self-reliant. Gradually, along with the addressing of quality issues, this shaped an ecosystem in which the women were equipped with technical knowledge and skills so as to eliminate middle-men. My interlocutor pointed to the fact that while the company's supply chain still includes men at selected positions today, women have been able to develop a sense of ownership and solidarity by building a community and accessing first-hand knowledge about market mechanisms. In a cluster that had previously showed significant gender-based constraints, this case indicates the opportunity arising from collective empowerment, and also highlights the agency that comes with mobility and an expansion of roles for women artisans.

Agency also relates to the choice(s) women are able to make regarding their own roles and responsibilities. Quite intriguingly, it is sometimes their personal choices and motivations that 'minimize' their participation in the craft process. This became apparent in my conversations with women artisans in Kutch, Gujarat, who belong to relatively higher economic classes. They have either chosen not to continue the tying practice anymore or strategically outsourced agency in the supply chain from their husbands or fathers, who are well-established in the family business of Bandhani production. Unsurprisingly, it is the women who have received design education in the SKV that are observed to be achieving upward socioeconomic mobility.[23]

CONCLUSION

Several historical literature and research studies largely indicate the presence of a gender imbalance in the craft industry of India. While traditional systems of craft production have involved a gendered division of labour, it is useful to re-examine the gender dynamics while considering the shifting socio-political structures with respect to particular craft contexts. This article presents a case study specifically on Bandhani craft production, and dives deeper into the social organization of two different clusters to analyse the aspects of discrimination, harmony, and synergies. By highlighting context-specific opportunities, I have outlined the scope of design interventions and the role of social enterprises in examining existing nuances in the communities so as to achieve robust gender-sensitive planning.

Each community is organized differently and has its own capacities and constraints. Instead of a standard understanding of gender issues, it is essential to consider the different levels of awareness, adaptability, motivation, and responsiveness that arise from various socio-political structures.

While it is undoubtedly challenging to overcome the limitations within existing gendered roles and put the two genders on an 'equal' footing, the social order and infrastructure available in distinct clusters lay the foundation for developing suitable practices adapted to various groups practicing the same craft in different ways. Seen through a broader lens, such context-specific approaches hold the potential to bring about a sustainable social impact at different levels in multiple stages.

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1 See Gupta for a historical overview of the social and gender-based organization of labor in commercial and personal crafts of India. Gupta, Toolika: Indian Handicrafts: *Epitome Of Design And Sustainability*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YK_apC7MhnI (retrieved June 01, 2021).
2 Maskiell, Michelle: »Embroidering the Past. Phulkari Textiles and Gendered Work as "Tradition" and "Heritage" in Colonial and Contemporary Punjab«, in: The Journal of Asian Studies, 58(02) 1999, 361–388.
3 Krishnamoorthy, Priya, Anandana Kapur, Aparna Subramanyam: *Business of Handmade. The Role of Craft-based Enterprises in (Formalising) India's Artisan Economy*, Mumbai 2021, 47.
4 Wilkinson-Weber, Claire: Women, work and the imagination of craft in South Asia, in: Contemporary South Asia, 13(3) 2004, 289.
5 Cummings, Cathleen, Cynthia Ryan: »Reimagining Contexts. Art, Authenticity, and Identity Among Female Artisans in India«, in: Journal of Poverty, 18(01), 2014, 36; Edwards, Clive: »"Home is where Art is". Women Handicraft and Home Improvements 1750–1900«, in: Journal of Design History, 19(01) 2006, 11–20.
6 NSDC-KPMG: *Human Resources and Skill Requirements in the Handloom and Handicrafts* Sector - 2013-17, 2017-22. NSDC, 26.
NSDC-KPMG 2013, 26.
7 Krishnamoorthy, Kapur, Subramanyam 2021, 30.
8 Maskiell 1999, 361–88; Wilkinson-Weber 2004, 287–306.
9 Acharya, Jyotirmayee, Ragnhild Lund: »Gendered spaces - socio-spatial relations of self-employed women in craft production, Orissa, India«, in: Norwegian Journal of Geography, 56 2002, 207–218; see also Ranade 2007, 1519–26.
10 For a detailed account of Indian Bandhani during the colonial era and the origin of the ban-dana culture, see Postrel, Virginia: *The Fabric of Civilization. How Textiles Made the World*, New York 2020, and also her YouTube video The Hidden History of Bandanas: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fJLP2P3CH4 (retrieved June 01, 2021).
11 The cultural ecosystem of Bandhani was organized in a manner that brought many actors together. From the procuring of the raw material, the printing of the design, and the tying, dyeing, and sale, each cluster was divided up between various religions, castes, and genders.
12 See Khamir's YouTube video. Khamir: Bandhani. Voices of the Community, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fJLP2P3CH4 (retrieved June 01, 2021).
13 Somaiya Kala Vidya, previously known as Kala Raksha Vidyalaya, was established in Kutch in 2005 by the American anthropologist Judy Frater to encourage skilled artisans to gain holistic knowledge in design by training them in business, market strategies, and brand positioning.
14 For detailed insights into the inception of SHGs in India and their socio-economic impact see Kilby, Patrick: *NGOs in India. The challenges of women's empowerment and accountability*, London 2011, 1–42.

15 NGOs such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Sadhna, and Annapurna Mahila Mandal encourage and employ women belonging to numerous self-help groups.
16 Krishnamoorthy, Kapur, Subramanyam 2021, 31; Homenet South Asia: *Promoting Decent Work for Women Home-Based Workers in Value Chain. Cases from India and Nepal*, New Delhi 2021, 3–5.
17 Kulick briefly touches upon 'relatability', describing how a group of women craftworkers, after delivering the assigned work to her, expressed to her that they did not enjoy the process, since they were unable to relate to the design she conceived, and thus subsequently discontinued the work. Kulick, Gwendolyn: Conversational Spaces in the Craft for Empowerment System in Pakistan, in: Swiss Design Network Symposium 2021, SUPSI, HSLU, swissdesignnetwork, 451.
18 See Shila D.'s YouTube video Bandhani Bhuj from 2017, mins. 1:40–2:28, to sense the rewarding feeling of opening the ties of the Bandhani: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LI69kbMWCoY (retrieved June 01, 2021).
19 Elderly women at home are occasionally given the task of opening the ties. This is a minor exception.
20 See Rosner, Daniela K.: *Critical Fabulations. Reworking the Methods and Margins of Design*, Cambridge Mass. 2018. See also a discussion of her work in the YouTube video: Critical Fabulations, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KT-QE5WKI0 (retrieved June 01, 2021).
21 My interlocutor here has chosen to remain anonymous.
22 For an in-depth study on Rangsutra's community organizing in Bikaner, see HomeNet South Asia, 2021, 31–44.
23 Cummings and Ryan 2014, 30–49.