

# Bandhej and Contemporary Artisanal Livelihoods: A Gendered Perspective

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## Abstract

The ancient art of Bandhej is a tie and dye method vastly practised in the state of Rajasthan in India. The art of tie and dye is used to render beautiful colours to a simple looking fabric. It is a traditional art which is practised as a familial occupation and is passed on through generations. The production process of a Bandhej garment involves various steps which involve artisans with various skills, and are characterised by a sexual division of labour. Women are predominately the tiers, while men are mostly engaged in designing and dyeing.

The community of Bandhej workers in the city of Jodhpur, Rajasthan was the main focus of this study. The history of Bandhej work in Jodhpur is as old as the city itself. The study was carried out with the women of artisan communities of two main identity groups in Jodhpur, namely, the Chadhwasi and the Kyamkheni. These communities have been involved in Bandhej work since centuries. Over the past few decades a lot of changes have taken place in the livelihood of the community of Bandhej workers. Expanding markets and increasing demands have all changed the way Bandhej is produced and marketed, and have led to changes in the process of production and brought about product diversification. This in turn has resulted in a change in the working patterns of artisans specifically and for the community as a whole.

The findings of the study include emerging trends in the Bandhej industry. The study traces the community's experiences with changing patterns of their livelihoods. As women artisans form an important part of the Bandhej industry, the study also focused on gaining an understanding of the gendered roles and relations and their influence on women's lives and livelihoods.

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**Keywords:** Bandhej, traditional craft practices, livelihood, women artisans

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## Introduction

Bandhej is a household-based industry. It is a traditional art which is passed down through generations. Entire households, with several generations of family members, tie and dye together. The process of manufacturing involves artisans with different skills- mainly designing, tying, and dyeing. Like other traditional handicrafts, Bandhej work also involves a gendered division of labour. The act of tying is predominantly done by women. This is the primary livelihood of women in the community of Bandhej workers.

Handicrafts have both cultural and economic importance. Their cultural significance lies in preserving tradition, inherited skills, as well as the art itself. On the economic front, its importance lies in low capital investment, high employment potential, many options for value-addition, and its potential for export and foreign exchange earnings. The handicraft sector plays a significant role in the country's economy and provides employment to more than 7.3 million people; mostly from rural and semi-urban areas. Based on historical trends, the handicrafts sector is expected to grow by 16 percent during 2017–2022 (NSDC, 2013). It is also among India's main foreign exchange earners.

However, this sector is the largest unorganized and decentralized sector of the Indian economy. In spite of the growing importance of handicrafts in the economy, employment, and development, millions of artisans who produce these goods still have to struggle for the basic amenities of life. Out of the total artisans, 24.16 percent are from the scheduled castes, 4.18 percent from the scheduled tribes, and 22.9 percent belong to minority groups. The handicraft sector largely comprises of women

workers and artisans from the weaker sections of the society. The level of education among workers is significantly low, leading to poor marketing skills and low standards of living (NSDC, 2013).

Artisans in India live a life of instability and marginalization. It has been estimated that the number of artisans in India has declined by more than 30% in over the past 30 years, as many artisans have started working as casual wage labourers in the informal economy. This is because standardized mass-produced, cheap factory products have replaced many of the various goods that were once produced by the artisans (Seth, 1995).

In the handicraft sector, women constitute 47.42% of the total workforce. More women are engaged in the household industry than in the registered, small scale or cottage units. Even within the registered units there are more women in the unskilled and lower paid jobs than in the skilled or trained categories. Among the women workers, around 71% are illiterate (NSDC, 2013). As a result in this unorganized sector women are more prone to exploitation and injustice. For many women there is no demarcation between the work within and outside their households. This is very evident in artisanal occupations, where they work extensively but even their own self-perception is that of being a 'helper', not a worker (Krishna, 2004). Underestimating the quantum of women's work as compared to men's reinforces the notion that women only supplement the family income and are not engaged in productive labour.

The urban artisan community of Bandhej workers in the city of Jodhpur in Rajasthan is engaged in the traditional art of Bandhej. This

study is focused on understanding the livelihood of the artisan community. Women artisans, who are household workers, have a huge contribution to the economy of the Bandhej industry. The work of Bandhej is practiced by two communities in Jodhpur, namely the Chadhwa and the Kayamkhani. These communities have been involved in this art since generations and it is a family tradition. This study thus aims to capture the traditional and contemporary livelihood patterns of these communities. The main focus in the study is on the experiences of women artisans in relation to their livelihoods and their opportunities and struggles within the constraints of patriarchy.

## Research Methodology

The present study is concerned with the livelihoods of Bandhej workers and the lived experiences of women in relation to their livelihoods. An exploratory qualitative research methodology was used by the researcher to understand how the livelihoods of Bandhej workers have transformed over time, and what meaning women attach to their livelihoods. It was done with the phenomenological perspective where the aim was to understand women from their own frames of reference and to understand how they experience reality. The strength of phenomenological approaches lies in their emphasis on the importance of personal perspective and interpretation (Lester, 1999). In effect, the focus of the present study was on understanding women's subjective experiences, and gaining insights into their actions and motivations, while cutting through any objective assumptions.

The area of study for this research was Jodhpur. The city of Jodhpur is famous for its forts, temples, culture and handicrafts. Handicrafts

form the largest industry in Jodhpur. A variety of handcrafted products are manufactured, including textiles, leather goods, and pottery. There are some arts which are unique to the indigenous people, including the art of Bandhej work. In Jodhpur, there are mainly two identity groups which are traditionally engaged in Bandhej work. The Bandhej workers are located in the old city area, surrounding the fort. The Kayamkhani community mainly lives in the area called Bamba Mohalla, also called as Hathi Ram ka Hoda and the Chadhwas reside in the area of Khanda Falsa.

The following tools for data collection were used- 1) In-depth interview with women, 2) Key-informant interviews, 3) Group interviews, 4) Oral history, and 5) Observation. The method of purposive sampling was used for choosing samples for in-depth interviews, which is a non-probability sampling method requiring deliberate efforts on the part of the researcher to gain representative samples. In-depth interviews were conducted with total 18 women, including 7 Kayamkhani and 11 Chadhwa women. The sample consists of women engaged in different activities, including women who purely do the tying work, women who do chhapai (imprinting), and women, who in addition to tying, also act as intermediaries providing work to women in their neighbourhood.

The process of data collection began with a personal contact in the Kayamkhani community, living in the Hathi Ram ka Hoda area. One group interview, in-depth interviews and one oral history were conducted with the women of this community. This was the community where only women were engaged in tying work, and the men of their households were not involved in any work related to Bandhej.

Next, a contact in the Chadhwa community was discovered. In Chadhwa community, mostly entire households are engaged in Bandhej or related works. Some families have their own business of tie and dye, while in others both men and women work as labourers. Women are engaged only in tying work mostly. The occupation of men from these households varies, but is mostly related to Bandhej. In-depth interviews and one group interview were conducted with women from this community. Also, two key-informant interviews were conducted with two men, to gather insights into contemporary livelihood patterns, opportunities and constraints of Bandhej workers.

After data collection was over, the data was coded into various themes. Recurring themes were identified and organized. Themes were built in a bottom-up manner as data was organized into abstract information units. This process of coding and organizing into various themes was repeated until a comprehensive collection of relevant themes was achieved. Important and significant sentences, statements and words in the data were also highlighted during the process. This was done understanding the importance of such statements in answering the key research questions.

## Results and Discussion

There are primarily two communities which are currently engaged in Bandhej work in the city of Jodhpur. These are the Chadhwa (Chunrigarh) and the Kayamkhani. Both the communities follow Muslim religion and come under the category of OBC. They are located in the old city near the fort but in different areas. The Kayamkhani live in the area called Bamba

Mohalla, also called as Hathi Ram ka Hoda. Only women from this community have been involved in Bandhej work for two to three generations. Men in the community work as tailors, wage labourers, shopkeepers, clerks etc. The Chadhwars live in the area called Khanda Falsa which is the main centre of tying and dyeing in Jodhpur. The livelihood of most men and women from this community is earned through Bandhej. Women are mostly involved in tying, while men are in various occupations along the supply chain of Bandhej. Lately, a few families have moved from Khanda Falsa to newer residential colonies in the city.

The art of Bandhej involves people with different skills at multiple levels. A Bandhej product passes through several stages of production and a supply chain before reaching the end consumer through the market. The supply chain forms a business activity including the procurement of raw materials, production, and distribution. All these stages employ a lot of people including traders, manufacturers and artisans. A manufacturer has a Bandhej production unit which includes different artisans with different skills. The artisans include designers who imprint the designs, tiers who tie the cloth, and dyers who dye the cloth in different colours. The manufacturer then sells the tie-dyed cloth to the wholesaler in bulk, who in turn sells it to retailers. The retailers finally sell the Bandhej products to the consumers.

The process of production of Bandhej involves various steps- buying of cloth, bleaching, imprinting, tying, dyeing and selling. First of all the cloth is bought in bulk and is cut into pieces according to the design. It is then bleached white. Then the design is imprinted and the cloth is sent for tying and dyeing. Various contractors are employed sending and

collecting clothes from artisans. Sometimes for complicated designs the process of tying and dyeing is repeated twice. Afterwards the finished garment is sold to the wholesaler. In the process of manufacturing a Bandhej garment it passes through multiple hands. There is a traditionally practiced gendered division of labour in the production process of Bandhej clothes. Men work as dyers, while women work as tiers. Women from the family assist in tying, opening and drying but dyeing is done only by men. Designers are also found to be only men.

### **Emerging Trends and Changing Patterns of Bandhej Work**

Over the past few decades a lot of changes have taken place in the livelihood of the community of Bandhej workers. Expanding markets and increasing demands have all changed the way Bandhej is produced and marketed, and have led to changes in the process of production and brought about product diversification. This in turn has resulted in a change in the working patterns of artisans specifically and for the community as a whole.

Bandhej production in Jodhpur in earlier times was only limited for the local market of Rajasthan. Over time, the demand for Bandhej garments outside the state as well as in foreign countries has increased exponentially. Within India, a large market for Bandhej garments has evolved mainly in the cities of Delhi, Mumbai, Pune and also in the state of Kerala. The demand of quality of products in these markets is quite different from the local market. Diversification of products is taking place in order to cater to these markets. The changes can be categorized in the terms of the fabric used, types of garments produced, designs and patterns, and the kinds of dyes being used.

Along with the use of different types of fabric, newer designs are also being made now. In earlier times most designs were complicated, including vegetation designs, and animal and bird designs. These days, with the onset of mass production for wholesale markets, the majority of the clothes being produced have simpler designs in the form of geometrical patterns. This enables faster production of garments in large quantities. Also, while earlier only saris, dupattas, lehengas and men's turbans were produced, there has been an increasing demand for western tied and dyed clothes. Women's dresses, skirts, and tops are increasingly being produced, which mostly cater to foreign markets. Clothes specific to the culture of a state in India are also being produced. A significant feature of such markets is that there is an abundance of buyers who are willing to pay good amounts if the product design and quality cater to their needs. New and unique designs are high in demand.

### **Innovations in the process of production**

The world of clothing is vastly dynamic because of the ever changing fashion trends and demands of the market. To cope up with these market demands, several modifications have been done in the techniques and tools of production of Bandhej. Changes have taken place in each of the step of production, namely, designing, tying, and dyeing. Geometrical designs are becoming common for mass production. Before imprinting of the designs, cloth is folded in a particular manner to form repetitive patterns. This new folding technique is an innovation in the designing and imprinting process. It is called *tipai*. The cloth is first folded

twice, thrice, or more times and is loosely stitched on all sides to keep the cloth intact when designs are being imprinted. Another process innovation has come in the imprinting process where stacks of twenty to thirty pieces of cloth are kept together. That is, cloth pieces are kept in a dig one above the other and tipai is done on all of them simultaneously. The colour is put on the cloth at the top of the stack according to the given design, which then percolates to the cloth at the bottom. If the cloth is thin then up to thirty pieces are stacked together, whereas if it is thick then not more than twenty cloth pieces are stacked together. This is a new practice in Bandhej, started only in the past decade. Earlier only one layer of colouring was done. The coloured part is then sent to be tied. After tying the cloth is dipped in a chemical which removes the entire extra colour which was left untied and that part of cloth becomes white again. Only the tied portion is remained with the colour. Then the tied cloth is dyed in another colour.

The tying technique has also seen modification over time. Traditionally a pointed nail called Nakhuna is worn over the finger to enable tying of small knots. But with time the usage of nakhunas is decreasing. Most of the women interviewed have either never used it or have left using it. The method of lifting of dots for tying, locally called as 'boond uthana', is the most prominent method of tying in practice nowadays. This change in traditional practice has come in last two decades, since when designs with bigger dots have become more commonplace. Nakhuna was designed for creating smaller dots and with the increasing use of designs with bigger dots the use of nakhunas is slowly decreasing. No other significant modifications in tying process were

found. With time there has also been significant change in the dyeing process. Traditionally dyes were extracted from flowers, roots, leaves and fruits. This led to the availability of only a limited number of colours for dyeing. Chemical dyes are being used much more intensively now. The use of natural and vegetable dyes has almost become redundant. Chemical dyes are long-lasting and are colour-fast and hence a better option for bigger markets. Also, bleaching agent Sodium hydrosulphite is being used these days, which bleaches any colour dissolved in water. As a result of this the same water in the same container can be re-used for dyeing with another colour. In case of natural dyes this was not possible hence different containers were used for different colours, thus taking up more space as well as more water. This practice has especially helped in saving water to a great extent.

### **Recognition of Bandhej Workers as Artisans**

A great change came in the livelihood of Bandhej workers in Jodhpur with their recognition as artisans by the state. This recognition came in two ways- issue of DCH Artisan ID cards and awards for artisans who excel in their craft. The Office of Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), Union Ministry of Textiles issues Artisan ID cards to all artisans and craft-workers. The artisan ID card helps artisans access a variety of handloom and handicraft schemes for marketing of products, access to credit, insurance etc. it is an official proof of being an artisan, and can be made free of cost. In all government organized exhibitions, there are always a few free stalls available only for card-holders. In the past decade many artisans

from the community of Bandhej workers have got an ID card issued for themselves. This card has helped artisans from this community to participate in exhibitions all around the country and to sell their products at higher rates. While many men and women in the community now have the artisan card, but only a few have benefitted from it by moving out and exploring diverse opportunities.

The artisan card has benefitted greatly by allowing artisans to easily participate in government exhibitions all across the country and abroad - free of cost. A few artisans, mostly men, have participated in multiple exhibitions in Jaipur, Delhi, Orissa, Mumbai, Hyderabad and Goa. Artisan and businessman (Bandhej producer and wholesaler) from the Chadhwa community Mr. Mohammad Nazeer, 71 years of age, has also won the state level artisan award for the work of Chunri Bandhej. He won this award for his skills in designing and dyeing. Selected men of the community have had varying experiences and their exposure to the outside world has opened-up opportunities for whole community. The success and exposure of a handful of people in the community have brought recognition for the entire community.

### **New Modes of Earning: Trainings and Paid Visits to the Community**

Some new modes of earning have emerged in the Chadhwa community. These are training people in Bandhej work and organizing paid visits to people who want to understand the craft. A few organizations as well as government agencies arrange training sessions for different groups of women willing to learn the art. They call artisans from this community to train them in the techniques of tie and dye. Three to five

days workshops are arranged in different cities and the artisans are given good training charges along with free travel and accommodation. During the process of data collection for this study, two artisans from the community were found with such an experience. Although only a few well-connected artisans have been able to engage in such activities.

Another method of revenue generation found within the community is that of exposure visits to tourists and students. This mode of generating revenue is in a very nascent stage and is unorganized as of now. Few known names of the community get requests from various sources like hotels, organizations, and tourist operators etc. to take groups of tourists or students on exposure visit to the

sites of tying and dyeing. These groups are taken around the area and the entire process of Bandhej is explained to them. They are taken on home visits and to the sites of dyeing and are introduced to various artisans- both women and men. The aim of these visits is to familiarize people with the work of Bandhej and to gain an income from the same. These visitors are charged for this visit, though the amount is not fixed. If the artisan takes time out of their work to help the visitors, they are also asked to pay them. It is a new mode of earning emerging from the community itself. However, it needs to be more organized in order to become a prominent source of earning.

### **Effect of Changing Trends on Women Artisans' Livelihoods**

Bandhej is a traditional occupation which is passed down in families through generations. Women mostly learn the art of tying at their homes from their mothers, or at their husband's

home from their mothers-in-law. So one of the main reasons why women tie is because of it being a family tradition, a culture. They begin to learn this art from a very young age while assisting their mothers, and start working independently since the age of 15-16 years. Their work gives them financial independence and in many cases women earn more than their husbands. However, their income in community's perception is still considered as supplementary to what their spouses earn. While a few people consider women's earning as an 'extra income' for the family, many women are or have been, at a certain point of time in their lives, the sole breadwinners of their families. When their husbands' incomes have been irregular and low, women have provided for the family solely through their work of tying Bandhej. They have raised their children and brought their families out of poverty by tying. Numerous women have accounted their stories of how they have either singlehandedly or by contributing significantly to their husband's incomes, have built houses for themselves and have improved their living conditions. They have worked in addition to their domestic chores, they've worked in sickness, through pregnancy, during festivals and also when they are overburdened with other household responsibilities.

As women are paid on per piece basis, their daily earnings vary. Women consider it as an advantage as this provides them with the flexibility to work according to their capacities. Also, they have the scope to earn more money by putting in extra effort daily. Hence whenever they are in need of money they do not have to ask for it from their husband, or son or other people in the family. They put in some extra hours into their work and manage to earn up to

100 extra each day. Hence the work has given women a financial independence and also confidence and a sense of self-worth. A unique feature of the community of Bandhej workers is that women usually earn more than their husbands.

Also, their income is stable as they never stop working in any condition, and are able to work more when needed. Men, however, do not always stick to a job and hence their incomes are fluctuating. In such cases it is the women's income that forms the base of the family's finances.

However, with the growing demand for Bandhej products in national and international markets, the production has also increased tenfold. This means more work for artisans, which should ideally lead to more income. However, what is observed in practice is contrary- the cost of tying per piece of garment has reduced significantly in the last decade. While the cost of tying a sari with a simple design was 15 per piece a decade ago, it has now reduced to only 10 per piece. One of the main reasons for this change is that with the growing population of the community with each generation and increasing popularity of Bandhej work, more and more workers are being added to the workforce.

As more artisans are now available to do the work, the rates have been reduced. The negotiating power of women has hence become quite low, because if they demand higher price for their work there is always somebody else who is willing to do the same work at the lower price. In addition to the increased number of artisans, the kinds of products being produced for wholesale markets are less labour intensive, as the designs are less intricate.



As discussed earlier, it is known how the artisan card enables artisans to increase their contacts by taking part in exhibitions and selling their products in bigger markets at higher prices. Many women from the Chadhwa community have their own artisan cards. However, while the male artisan have been able to make good use of this opportunity, women artisans, even after getting an artisan card, are unable to capitalize on such opportunities due to patriarchal constraints on their mobility. There is also a new kind of market which has been developed where artisans can go and teach their art. It is a diversification of livelihoods that gives artisans an exposure to the outside world as well as newer form of earning. Women's exposure and experiences to the outside world are, however, highly dependent on the men in their household. The wives, sisters, daughters and daughters-in-law of men, who have had such opportunities and are willing to "allow" the women in their family to be exposed in a similar manner, are the ones who've got the chance to explore various options. A few such women have been able to explore the newer forms of work. They have accompanied the male members of their family to various exhibitions, and have got the opportunity to visit other cities and states to train people in the art of tying.

It is said in the community that the extent of change in the world of Bandhej can be validated by the fact that in the span of last 35-40 years, almost fifty percent of artisans have started their own business. The remaining ones get jobs in this sector with different employees. Some have become manufacturers, some are importers and exporters of raw material and produced goods, and some have their own retail shops. But the 'artisans' here are only male artisans. Women haven't been able to break those boundaries yet.

## Conclusion

In the paper the contemporary livelihood patterns of Bandhej workers were traced, and their differing impact on women artisans was studied. In order to empower the lives and livelihoods of women in the community, interventions need to be made on three levels- community, state and market. At the community level, there is a need to rework gender roles and relations. At the state level, policies for enhancing their quality of life and improving women's livelihoods should be brought. Also, gender-aware policies to support artisan livelihoods should be formulated. At the market level, interventions should be in the wages and working conditions of women artisans.

The first level of intervention needs to be done with the community of Bandhej workers as well as with the society at large. Gendered division of labour at home and patriarchal constraints on women's mobility act as a huge deterrent in letting women adapt to the ever-changing world outside. Redefining the relationships within the home, as well as between the home and the wider community is an important aspect needed to bring gender equality in the community. Creating awareness regarding gender and gender roles in the community is an urgent need where people should be made to understand about the constraints on women due to their domestic duties and how they can contribute to lessen their burden, which can then help women to engage in income-generating activities and enhance family income. Also, awareness regarding importance of education is very important for the community to develop and progress.

Gender-aware state policies should aim at improving the quality of life of artisan communities by improving their access to various resources regarding health, education, banking facilities and credit. These policies should enable empowerment of women in the community. Issuing credit in the name of women and promoting women entrepreneurship will encourage the community to promote women to come out and seize the opportunity. State policies should also aim at regulating incomes of people engaged in unorganised sector so that they are not exploited by their employers and paid fair wages.

Hence enhancing quality of life, providing income stability, and granting wider opportunities for growth should be the focus of state policies for artisan communities, with a focus on women artisans. Irregular wages, undesired working conditions and factory-like production process are the issues that market level intervention needs to address. The work of artisans should promote creativeness from their side, rather than monotonous mindless activity they are forced to do. The forced de-skilling of artisans should be prevented by expanding their opportunities to engage in diverse work. Also,

wages should be regulated and equalized for all artisans.

To conclude it can be said that in order to build better lives and livelihoods for women, they should have the freedom to create their lives the way they want. Their freedom shouldn't be 'freedom with conditions' like it is at present. Various transformations at the structural level are needed to change the patriarchal mindset of the society in order to enable women to explore various opportunities, create their own identity and to be able to exert their agency without any limitations.

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