

Dalits among the Dalits-Jutti Makers of Patodi

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Abstract

Rajasthan in India is home to many arts and crafts. This case study throws light on problems faced by the Jutti craftsmen of Patodi. This craft is a traditional craft practiced by the men and women of the household. The case discusses their socioeconomic status, and the social stigma attached to their community. The case study will also serve as a close identification and analysis of the work done by the craftsmen, the challenges they faced, their present issues, and societal concerns that are putting barriers in the way of hampering their growth.

Key words: *Patodi, Artisans, Jutti, Leather, Tradition*

Introduction:

Sitting outside her home Santosh was deftly moving her fingers which held a needle and coloured thread to embroider a design into a piece of cloth spread out before her. Her eyes were narrow with concentration to keep pace with the movement of her fingers through the cloth. She was engaged in the traditional art form of kasidakari, just like every other women and girl in her village, Patodi. Her husband Prithvi Raj Manaram, seated inside the house was busy shaping the piece of leather into a jutti or shoe. His hands were so used to it that he could now make the frame of juttis without even seeing. He remembers telling his children if he did not make juttis on a certain day his day would feel incomplete such is the addiction to it. Santosh usually sat outside, near the doorstep, so that the bright light outdoors would help her as she worked on the intricate embroidery. Prithivi Raj's work with shaping the leather did not require this level of intricacy and visual acuity so seated inside the cool shadowy interiors in the hot desert village of Patodi he carried on his work.

Santosh recollected that it had been more than three decades that she was making juttis. She was 12 years old when she got into my ancestral tradition of making juttis. Today Santosh's usual concentration was disturbed as the needle pricked her finger twice. Recently, she had been finding it

difficult to make out the warp and weft of the fabric and the multi coloured threadwork on the fabric also blurred if the cloth was placed too far. She had to lean over to see clearly and this she had been experiencing back pain that made it difficult to sit for long. She had been expecting the problem with her eyesight to start sooner or later as every other woman of the Jeengar Samaj in Patodi who were engaged in Jutti making. But then strangely while all the women faced these health issues, the men were not much affected. Santosh had been thinking about this gender asymmetry for some time. Strangely in the orthodox and conservative Jeengar community Patodi where the ghoonghat or women wearing a veil to cover the face was common practice, as the ex-Sarpanch she had desisted from wearing the ghoonghat. She had been a strong advocate for women rights and this lopsidedness of the Jutti making work that left women with these health problems irked her.

Usually, Prithvi Raj would have noticed her upset and asked her. More than 30 years of working side by side with each other had given them this compatibility and perfect understanding but today even he was distracted. Multiple concerns and thoughts raced through his mind. Prithvi Raj was concerned about the declining demand and low sales for the juttis that the family made. During the Covid-10 pandemic it had become difficult to run the household. Parithivi Raj and Santosh were hopeful that once the pandemic eased, the orders would pour in like before once the tourist flow resumed. However, that was not to be. They were still dependent on the middleman. He was worried about the future of the craft and keeping it alive. Recently the Jeengars of Patodi had been approached by a big private company which wanted to buy their juttis and sell in in the market. The Jeengar Samaj had called for a meeting two days later to discuss this proposition. Prithvi Raj was also mulling about the involvement of the private company. Would integrating artisans with a private company truly be a game changer, or would it only perpetuate exploitation? Would exposure through the private company and increased income improve the livelihoods of these dedicated craftsmen and craftswomen? The Jeengar Samaj had been masters of their ancestral talent, would their exclusivity be lost through these private company? Multiple questions ran through his head that he had no answers to at the moment.

Santosh and Prithivi Raj Mankaram

Santosh and Prithvi Raj Manaram were the inhabitants of Patodi for more than 50 years. Santosh was an ex-Sarpanch of Patodi. As a woman Sarpanch she was the first woman from the Barmer district not to follow the “Ghoonghat” system. This was quite a strange thing to see in the

backward district of Barmer where women follow this archaic system religiously. Wearing 'ghoonghat' or covering the head and face with a piece of cloth pulled down is an age-old tradition among women in north India, especially in rural areas.

A B. Ed graduate, Santoshi had a passion for teaching. As a Sarpanch and even otherwise, she advocated that girls received proper education so as to reduce the strong patriarchal norms in the village. On being interviewed as to how she had managed to remove the so-called "Ghoonghat" system, she had replied "I was elected as the Sarpanch of the village and was supposed to attend meetings, give speeches, raise awareness which required a strong sense of expression to make people listen to me and take me seriously. I rebelled against my family to let me remove Ghoonghat if they wanted me to continue being in power. So, unwillingly they had to allow me. Since then, many women have been inspired by me and are removing their ghoonghats slowly. As a Sarpanch they came to me with their problems and I tried to find a solution for them without involving any man, or the so-called "Sarpanch pati" into it. The general norm is that after a woman becomes the Sarpanch, her husband takes decisions on her behalf. Santosh could not let that happen. She did not transfer the power given to her to her husband or the so-called "Sarpanch Pati". She added in the interview "I have been working for the welfare of the people here engaged in Jutti making, by motivating them to go and attend melas so that they have an idea about the market trends and are not exploited by the middlemen easily".

Patodi- The Centre of Jutti Making

Patodi, is a village located in the Pachpadra tehsil of Rajasthan's Barmer district, 30 kilometers from the sub-district headquarters of Pachpadra (Tehsildar office) and 120 kilometers from the district headquarters of Barmer. As per the 2009 Census data, Patodi village is also a Gram panchayat. This village is home to the 200 families of the traditional leather Jutti makers of Rajasthan, the Jeengar Community. Jutti making has been the family business for the 200 households in this village involving a craft handed down from generation to generation since the last 8-9 generations. It is 112 kilometres from Jodhpur, the nearest city and a tourist host spot (see Exhibit 2). Jodhpur therefore is the main market area where the Juttis are sold. However, the fact that this craft is losing its allure due to lack of exposure. Patodi village is a story of thousands of heartbroken heirs of this beautiful tradition of jutti making that is fast moving towards extinction. It becomes important to investigate why this ancient practice of manufacturing juttis is in danger of perishing despite the fact that its practitioners possess exceptional aptitude and competence.

The Jeengar Community of Patodi- The Jutti making and Kashidakari craftsmen

The Jeengar community is a community of around 200 families making leather juttis. These families have a tradition of leather-craft of more than 100 years, and every generation has been involved in this profession since then. The Jeengar community got their name from the word jeens, meaning 'saddle'. This community had been traditionally involved in making leather saddles for horses. As rearing and domesticating horses became rare, the demand for saddles fell and the community moved to making leather juttis. These craftsmen have been identified as an "intangible cultural heritage" in 2019 by UNESCO New Delhi. In collaboration with the Government of Rajasthan UNESCO has also launched an initiative to enliven cultural tourism in Rajasthan.

The "Jeengar Samaj"- is also known to be the "Dalits among the Dalits". They belong to the Scheduled caste which categorizes castes under the basis of their socio-economic marginalization. While belonging to the lower caste as per the caste hierarchy in India, what makes their position worse they are the lowest of the lower castes in the social heirarchy- the Dalits among the Dalits. This means that other castes do not go into their home or accept water and food from them.

However, surprisingly, it was seen that despite this discrimination, it is in this community where equal participation of both males and females was seen. Although the division of labour according to gender was pretty evident. While the women did the embroidery and work of embellishing the footwear, the men folk worked on the framework of the footwear.

The Intricately Embroidered Footwear - Jutti

Juttis are bespoke handmade leather footwear from Rajasthan, a state of India. These juttis are typically made from camel, cow or buffalo leather by male craftsmen. To add colour and style to this footwear they are subsequently adorned with the intricate *kasidakari* work by women. In the rural areas of the desert state of Rajasthan, these footwears were worn by men and women as a daily necessity given the climatic condition and the daily routines. Men wore them for their journeys on foot over the hot desert sand or as they tended to livestock and worked in their agricultural fields. Women wore them as they walked long distances to collect drinking water, fodder for cattle and firwood. The Jutti was airy and tough enough to walk long distances on the rocky hot soil. The thermal properties of leather, together with the thick sole, protected the feet from the sand, pebbles

and thorns, and the hot terrain. It was designed as a slip-on making it easy to slip it off when required inside homes.

Livelihoods Through Jutti Making

Apart from the sales garnered through individual efforts, there had been some efforts by the government and private bodies. Under the Aajeevika Mission (National Rural Livelihood Mission) for self-employment of the rural poor people, there were 11 groups consisting of 4-5 women named “Jhansi ki Rani” for collaboration and coordination in increasing income from jutti making. They were not very happy about the progress under the mission. Earlier the craftsmen had been working for the company Bangla.com to provide them with orders during the pandemic, but it discontinued. They get occasional orders from foreign clients to fulfill their daily needs, but the income generation is inconsistent.

Raw Materials Required for Jutti Making:

- a. *Hides and raw material from Factories of Jodhpur, Balotra, and Bhilwara-* Depending on the order given by a specific customer, the craftsmen buy leather, mainly of cow and buffalo, from the factories located in the places mentioned above. 1 quintal being the highest amount yet, smaller craftsmen who cannot buy directly from the factories, buy from larger craftsmen. For one pair of Jutti the cost of leather is around INR 125.
- b. *Velvet, silk threads, cloth pieces, and atta* (used as a natural adhesive). These are used as embellishments. The cost of these per jutti is around INR 130
- c. *Transport system-* the transportation of leather and finished goods is usually done either by private vehicles or public transport i.e., Depot buses or other public buses. This is to save on cost. The cost of transportation from Jodhpur to Patodi is INR 20 per jutti
- d. *Pre-requisite skills-* The juttis are usually famous for their authentic craftsmanship and these include the *Jodhpuri* designs that are sewn on by the females of the house once the framework for the juttis is prepared by the men. A labour charge of INR 280 can be added to the making of a jutti.

It needs to be noted that the wholesale price of selling this jutti is INR 600, the retail price is around INR 750 or more depending on type of retail outlet it gets sold from.

Jutti Making Losing Favour with the Younger Generation

It is found that the younger generation was not too keen to continue with the craft of jutti making. They had seen problems faced by the craft which was making maintenance of livelihoods solely dependent on the craft difficult.

Women being victimized and health hazards: The continuous sewing and working with threads along with minute detailing works, had proved to be harmful for women in the long run. 7 out of 10 women were seen wearing glasses and about 90% of the women had blisters and depression on their hands due to cuts from the thin threads that they worked with. These depressions further created nerve issues. Women craftsmen were unaware of the risks and the reasons that contribute to these problems. The men too had hardness on their palms which was due to working with the iron instruments for making a framework for the shoes and hammering for a long duration to flatten the leather.

Effect of the COVID Pandemic: During the pandemic, since everything was shut down, these households worked on orders from companies. There were no other orders flowing and the craftsmen faced a huge downfall in their sales making them unable to run their families.

Lack of awareness of the value of the craft: The families were not aware of the talent and skill set that they had. The handicraft industry was at its glory, and these found appreciation from an international audience. But the benefits of the popularity of handicrafts were not reaching them. They only made the orders they received and got the labour charges for it. The craftsmen, who could have showcased their talents at melas, and exhibitions did not participate in them as they were not aware of when and where these melas were held. Therefore, they lost out on the opportunity to be noticed.

No help from the government: A major concern which existed is that the government had not recognized these jutti makers under certain monetary benefit schemes, which could have provided a continuous source of income. Women of Patodi had suggested their inclusion under the Labor card could provide them with guaranteed employment and there by a continuous source of income.

Disconnected from the latest designs and trends: Since the designs that the craftsmen made were age-old, they had become redundant. Hence the “craftswomen” were struggling to catch up with market demand and the latest trends. This was further leading to a point where the *Jodhpuri* style or their authentic prints were not sought anymore. It was likely that this could lead to the extinction of their uniqueness and these- juttis may not hold any special place.

Unorganized production: Since the production of juttis happened solely within the houses of craftsmen, the production was cluttered due to lack of working space, storage space, etc. The

production was in scattered clusters though they belonged to the same community and even the same colony.

Domination and Leverage of the Middlemen- The middlemen had been quite successful in dominating their role in jutti making. They had greatly marginalized the craftsmen and made only paid them their labour charges although the products sold for more in the market. These middlemen had been exploiting the craftsmen by getting them orders and not letting them explore the market themselves to get better opportunities and better deals. The middlemen had convinced the artisans that they lacked the required skills. They increased their perception of importance by helping organise training sessions. Often these training sessions had been “completely useless and a waste of time”- as felt by some of the craftsmen.

Conclusion

It was seen though the women were responsible for the most difficult job or as we call it the “*kaarigari*” which gave the footwear its distinctiveness, it was the male craftsmen who were recognized as the owner of this craft. The female members even faced many health-related issues and this was completely ignored by society.

Santosh wondered as she got back with her seeing was it an unintended disparity or could the division of labor be justified? Why were the female craftsmen, who undertake the challenging *kasidakari* not given due recognition while facing numerous ignored health-related issues? Could these women ever feel empowered while practicing this craft? Would elimination of the middlemen, who exploit the craftsmen, result positively?

Could awareness, assistance, and organized marketing help address the challenges and minimize middlemen domination? Was there a way to provide capital to craftsmen for modernizing the craft while preserving its authenticity, allowing for the introduction of new products and fulfilling market demand to keep this century-old culture alive? And most importantly, who would help with answering these questions?

Exhibits

Exhibit 1: Map of Patodi, Rajasthan

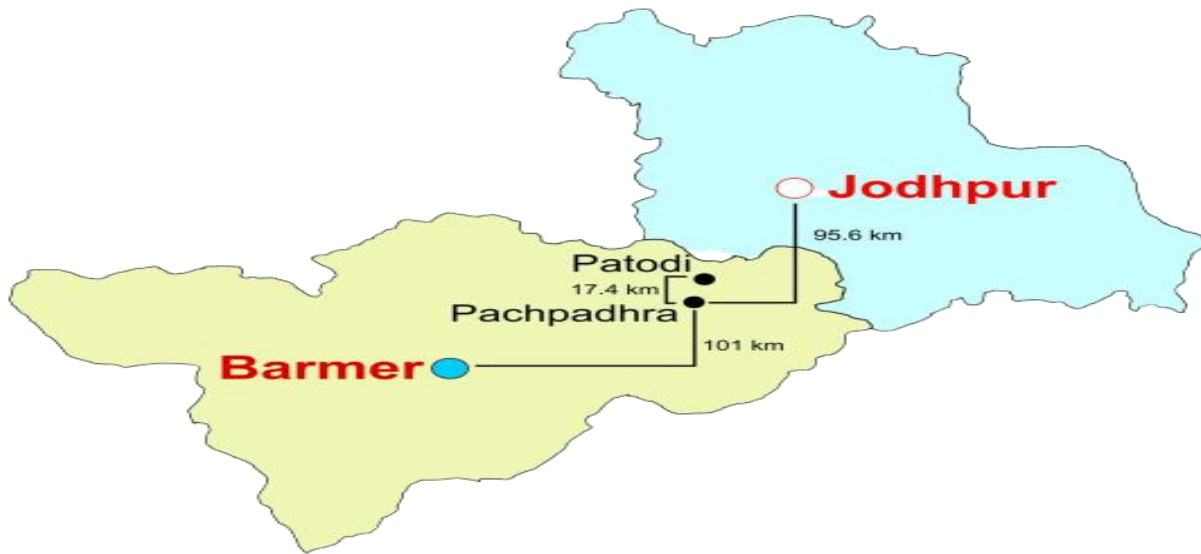


Exhibit 2: Tanned buffalo hide bought from Jodhpur



Exhibit 3: The intricate process of Embroidery



Exhibit 4: *:Depression in hands due to working with needles*



Exhibit 2: *A finished Jutti*

