An insight into the traditional Bandhej craft of Sikar City of Rajasthan

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Indian Bandhani, a traditional form of tie and dye, began about 5000 yrs ago. Also known as Bandhni and Bandhej, it is the oldest tie and dye tradition still in practice. The craft is still thriving with Gujarat and Rajasthan as chief production centers. This paper is an outcome of a diagnostic study of the Bandhej craft in Sikar city of Rajasthan. The objective of the study was to portray the present scenario of Bandhej craft and to record the changes that have occurred with the spinning wheel of time in the techniques, patterns of designs and the motifs.

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Indian Bandhani, a traditional form of tie and dye. Intricate designs are made by resisting the penetration of the dye by tying certain parts of the cloth with the help of the thread. Later the tied cloth is dipped in the dye and retied and redipped for more number of colors, finally after drying the tied thread has to be removed to visualize the design. The Bandhej and Leheria are two distinct methods of tie and dye that have acquired ample popularity from the time of their inception. Bandhej, better known as ‘Bandhani’ or ‘Bandhni’ is a highly sophisticated and complex method of cloth decoration by combining various colours. Leheria, on the other hand, is a pattern that can be easily identified in the turbans worn by the people of Rajasthan. The wave-like style, has given the art such a name as Leher in Hindi means waves.

Bandhani fabrics reign supreme in Rajasthan and Gujarat which are home to an astounding variety of traditional crafts. Bandhani process is believed to have originated in the Kutch area some 5000 years ago and seems to have remained in production ever since. The art of Bandhani is practiced extensively in Rajasthan also, with Jaipur, Sikar, Jodhpur, Barmer, Udaipur, and Nathdwara being the main centers. According to some references it first developed in Jaipur in the form of Leheria. But it is also widely believed that Muslim Khatris who are still the largest community involved in the craft brought it to Kutch from Sindh. Bandhani cloth comes in a variety of designs, colors and motifs and these variations are region specific. Each district has its own distinct method of Bandhani, which makes the pattern recognizable and gives it a different name. In Rajasthan Bandhej has assimilated itself in the cultural codes in way that it has become inseparable.

For instance, Peela, a form of Bandhej cloth is gifted to ladies on auspicious occasions like birth of a baby boy by their blood relatives. Bandhani of red color is the symbol of fortune; therefore it is worn by the bride during the religious rituals.

Sikar is a district situated in the northern region of Rajasthan. It is one of the trinity called Shekhawati. Shekhawati is a semi desert region in North Rajasthan and it is situated entirely in the triangle between Delhi-Bikaner-Jaipur. Bandhej is one of the few handicrafts, which are practiced in Sikar district. Hundreds of families of all classes and castes are involved in this art either directly or indirectly. The Sikari Bandhej, a form of Chunari from Sikar is known throughout India. Exquisite motifs of the craft are also practiced on sari, salwar-suit, and lahanga in Sikar. Moreover, Sikar has emerged the most productive center of Bandhaj cloths in Rajasthan in last decades.

The present study attempts to portray the present scenario of Bandhej craft in Sikar and also records the changes that have occurred with the spinning wheel of time. It also explores the techniques, patterns, motifs and their selection criteria’s adopted by the artisans while practicing the craft.

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Methodology

Bandhani involves different amateur people in artisan’s category, tier (who ties the knots resisting colour), designer (who chalks outs the prints) and dyer (who dyes the tied cloths). Each of them specializes in their domain of expertise.

To explore the techniques, patterns, motifs and their selection criteria’s 125 artisans from Sikar city were selected. The sector is unorganized. The artisans engaged in the Bandhej craft are not registered in any Government or non-Government agency. A baseline survey was conducted to know that there are nearly 7000 families of tiers living in 11 colonies 800 families of dyers, living in 8 colonies spread all through the city. Five families from each selected colony were selected using snowball method. A great care was taken by the investigator to select those families which produce maximum amount of tie and dye work. Thus, 55 tiers, 40 dyers were taken as the sample of the study. There are about 300 designers. Hence, 10% of them making a total of 30 designers were taken as the sample of the study.

The data for the present study was collected by filling up the questionnaire prepared meticulously after studying the literature concerned. It included both closed and open ended questions. Artisans were told the purpose of the study and their verbal consent was taken before administering the questionnaire. A pilot study was also conducted to verify the authenticity of the questionnaire.

Results and discussion

Bandhej is a highly skill based art involving expertise of three different kinds of people, these are tier, dyer and designer. The ultimate outcome of the meticulous efforts put in by these artisans results into exquisite pieces which are handcrafted. Individual roles of these three are significant. Designers need to be artistic to create design to keep pace with the changing market demands, tiers who with perfection and muscular coordination of the fingers have to maintain the intricacy of design with the right kind of tension while tying the fabric. Further dyers who with the experience prepare beautiful tints and shades of different colors ought to have an eye for color combination. They give final color to the product; they are the people who understand dyes and their preparation process along with various additives and chemicals. Hence, designers, tiers and dyers each with their own expertise perform their roles. With the passage of time certain modification were done in techniques and tools used in designing, tying and dying to strive for excellence.

Recent trends in Bandhej technique

To keep pace with the times, the techniques and tools used by the artisans have undergone lot of change. Designs of Bandhej are prepared and printed by the specialist designers. A change has come in the process of transferring the designs. Traditional designers used engraved wooden blocks to impress the design on the cloth. However, in Sikar at present only 24.4% of the designers are using the wooden blocks (Figs 1 & 2), whereas 76.6% designers use plastic sheet as a modern tool (Table 1). Here, a 2/3 mm. (i.e. 8-10 micron) thick plastic sheet of a certain size is taken and holes are made into it according to the pattern of the motif or design (drawn with pen by designers himself) with the help of a syringe used of veterinary doctors. The syringe is cut from the pricking point and is welded to a screw-driver in order to get big holes. With their innate skills, the designers make holes as per the patterns drawn. Then the paper is spread on the grey cloth on which Bandhani has to be done and wiped with a piece of foam dipped in a solution of soil (multani mitti) and fugitive colour (generally blue). Thus the designs are printed through the holes in a few minutes. Whereas traditionally wooden blocks were used which were of 45- 60 sq cm in size. The plastic sheets used now days are of 90-180 sq cm in size. Thus with plastic sheets design can be imprinted on large area of the cloth in less time. Since wooden blocks demand more time, labour and money; therefore plastic sheets are more used in design imprinting. (Fig. 3)

Table 1—Recent trend in Bandhej technique

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bandhej processes</th>
<th>Modern tools/ equipment</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Traditional tools/ equipment</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Designing</td>
<td>Plastic sheet</td>
<td>76.6%</td>
<td>Wooden block</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tying</td>
<td>Plastic pipe</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>Nakhuna</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thread: Silk</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Cotton</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyeing</td>
<td>Direct and Acid Dyes</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Natural Dyes</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sodium hydrosulphite</td>
<td>77.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spinning machine</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Washing machine</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After designing the next stage is tying the printed design, the art of tying the Bandhani is still the same as in olden days. The tool used for it has undergone change for improvement. The grey printed cloth was taken with help of one hand and is lifted above with the help of nail in the form of a metal cone worn in the index finger which has a pointed end to facilitate lifting of cloth for tying. It is locally called nakhuna (Fig. 4). In Sikar, however, along with nakhuna many women (80%) have started using a plastic pipe which is taken from a used Gel pen. The plastic pipe is inserted in the thread coming from the cone. The tiers hold the pipe while tying the impressed design; the pipe helps in tying the cloth smoothly without entangling the thread (Figs 5 & 6). This is a novel change brought for convenience. It also makes the tying process faster and protects their fingers from being hurt by constant tying. Majority of the tiers revealed that now day’s only silk thread is used in tying different types of cloths. The reason can be that majority of the Bandhani production involves the use of silk cloth. Silk cloths include Ojhariya, Georgette, Italian crepe, etc. Traditionally only cotton thread was used as shown in Table 1.

With respect to dyeing, traditional dyers used natural dyes extracted from plant sources mainly roots, flowers, leaves and berries. Hazi Gulam Hussain a national awardee of Sikar shared that in ancient days a limited variety of colours were available, yellow was extracted from kesula flower, red from rose leaves mixed with some root and light brown from the skin of khus tree, which used to give fragrance also and these days acid and direct dyes are used dominantly. Earlier dyers had to use many containers for different colours to be dyed, whereas, with the introduction of sodium hydrosulphite (locally called as hydros) only one container can be used for dying various colours. Sodium hydrosulphite is a strong bleaching agent that bleaches any colour dissolved in the water (Fig. 7). Consequently the same water is used and reused for dying many colours. Only 10gm of sodium hydrosulphite can bleach water to be used for dying 50 sarees. Dyers of Sikar expressed that use of this bleaching agent has made dying very easy. Earlier they needed at least 100 L of water to dye 10 sarees. The same number can be dyed now in 40-50 L of water. As data shown in Table 1 there are significant changes in traditional and in modern techniques of dying. Dyers of Sikar city use washing machine, and mechanical spinning machine.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No</th>
<th>Selection of design</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Customer choice</td>
<td>59.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Designer made</td>
<td>21 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Traditional designs</td>
<td>19.1 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Type of Motif | Modern design | Traditional design
---|----------------|------------------
Animal/bird motif | 30 % | 53.3 %
Bel buti motif | 46.6% | 60 %
Rasleela motif | 10% | 25 %
Geometric motif | 70% | 35%

• Multiple responses are possible

These equipments are used to wring out the water from the dyed cloth, thus saving time and labour of the artisans (Fig. 8).

Selection criteria for design

Designs are the backbone of the Bandhej craft. As many as 59.9 % designs are selected keeping in mind the consumer choice as shown in Table 2. Customers pick up the Bandhej products depending upon how appealing the designs are. Only 21% designs are ingenuously made by the creativity of the designers themselves and rest 19.1% designs are the traditional designs which have not been abolished with the passage of time. Thus the designs have become more specific to the customer demand which keep on changing.

With the change of time designers modified the traditional designs due to the demand of something novel which is in the vogue. The Table shows that among the traditional designs animal/bird motifs (53.3%) and Bel-buti motifs (60%) are dominant(Figs 9 & 10). Geometric figures were less used; only 35% designs were made of geometrical patterns. However, modern designs are prominently based on geometric figures (Figs 11 & 12). As the geometric designs are easy to make and demand less labor, 70% designs include geometric patterns. Further, bel-buti motifs are also included in 46.6% designs.

Moreover, the traditional designs like animal/bird motifs and rasleela are very minute designs and take a lot of time, labour, cost and skill and are used by royal or well off families. Modern designs are not very minute and designers reduce the cost, time and labour in order to make them available for the low and medium income groups. Consequently, today there are very few skillful designers who can make those traditional designs. Only 10% designs are made with
Figs. 1-12—(1&2) Wooden blocks for imprinting designs; (3) Plastic sheet for imprinting; (4) A lady tying a knots with nakhuna; (5) Tier using a plastic pipe and nakhuna; (6) Tier showing the plastic pipe; (7) Dyer using modern equipment; (8) Using sodium hydrosulphite (hydros); (9) Traditional bird design; (10) Traditional bel buti design and (11&12) Modern bel buti design.
rasleela motifs and 30% are using animal/bird motifs. Market demand, fashion trends and consumer choice forced the artisans to change the traditional motifs into stylized forms.

**Conclusion**

From the present study it is concluded that the Bandhej Craft of Sikar has undergone a number of changes. Colonies of tiers and dyers still continue this traditional craft and pass it to their successors trying their level best to keep pace with the customer demands. There are modifications and adaptations in the technique of dyeing, tying and designing and also there is a change in selection criteria for motifs of design so as to meet the demand of the consumers who are from various socio-economic positions. New designs are customer and sales oriented. Ease in making the designs is also an influential factor. The complicated designs have given way to more contemporary stylized geometric designs. All these modifications artisans have learned by trial and error method striving to meet the costumer choices. No formal training is given to them. They are dependent on the traders for the sale as well as for the raw material who make the best of the profit. An insight into this traditional art makes one realize the importance of these artisans in a big way.

**Recommendations**

Bandhej craft products have market value not only in India but also in other countries too. Concentrated efforts from the Government organizations as well as Non Government organizations are missing which can help these artisans to secure a promising future. Hence, they need to be centralized not only to enhance consistency, regularity and uniformity of production but also to reduce the interference of the middle men or traders, thereby reducing cost of the produce yet better profit margin realization of the artisans themselves. For the survival and sustenance of this most prominent traditional method of hand work, various Governments as well as Non Government organization have to play proactive roles in the form of integrated cluster development approach. The entire artisans’ community should be brought under the umbrella of various consortia or cooperative societies, the main object of which would be: a) capacity building like skill up gradation, awareness enhancement etc., b) marketing development, i.e. dissemination of information on export producers, marketing strategy formulation, exhibition and buyer-seller meet, publicity campaign for brand building, etc., c) technical intervention or technological up gradation in different stages of value chain, and d) institutional development which involves bulk purchase, credit facilitation, development of public information centers, and social intervention (artisans). This craft sector needs immediate attention by the government by arranging various social welfare schemes and incentives for the artisans, thereby ensuring social security and socio-economic empowerment of the artisans’ community.

Besides this it is recommended that grey material should be provided at reasonable price. Special training should be imparted to improve dyeing knowledge about advanced dyes. The dyers should be made aware about the process of multi-colour dyeing. Using hydro in order to reduce consumption of water is a very crude one, environmental and cost issues need to be examined while using it. Hydro is a powerful reducing bleaching agent. Whenever this salt is added in water bath to destroy any previously added dye, there is every possibility that same amount of it is present in the bath. Afterwards, when the same water is reused for preparing another dye solution some amount of dye would be wasted by the reducing action of the excess hydro present in the water. Hence, an urgent need is felt to update the knowledge of the dyers. Technology should be improved for ease in dying. Promotion of the products through advertisements, exhibition, and trade-fairs should be done to keep an edge with the global scenario.

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**References**