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Lac Bangles, Folklore and Indigenous Knowledge in Rajasthan

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Abstract

In traditional craft knowledge, especially in communities where skills of an occupation are not recorded in writing, but are transmitted orally, folklore has an important role in the preservation, production and transmission of knowledge. This study investigates the interdependency of folklore, artisanal knowledge and economy, using the example of production of lac bangles in Rajasthan. Knowledge and skills are traditionally passed on through folk songs, rituals, customs, myths and narratives in traditional craft communities, which are important ways of transferring the technical aspects, values and collective memory. Such oral forms not only help to pass on special knowledge, but also play part in the building of social identities and community cohesiveness. The bangle lac tradition, practiced mainly by the Manihar community, is an example of the inter-generational transmission of knowledge regarding the extraction, preparation, colouring, heating and shaping of the lac. The craft reflects a rich body of indigenous knowledge which has undergone continuous practices and adaptation over centuries. In addition to serving a functional purpose, lac bangles also become meaningful in response to rituals, festivals and marriage ceremonies, and in these contexts, folklore helps to create and strengthen the symbolic associations of being prosperous, married, feminine and belonging to a cultural community.

The craft also is a salient part of the handicraft economy of Rajasthan, providing livelihoods through domestic production networks and local market networks; in this context women are involved in different aspects of craft production and marketing. With the advent of industrialisation, evolving consumer tastes, and the growing accessibility of machine-made alternatives, lac bangle craftsmen have persevered in their trade, relying on traditional knowledge systems and cultural practices. The paper examines the cultural, folkloric, and economic aspects of lac bangle practices, underlining the importance of oral traditions in sustaining traditional craftsmanship, cultural identity, and community livelihoods. It also believes that the promotion of this craft tradition should rely on the material techniques and intangible cultural knowledge that are embedded in folklore and community practices.

Introduction

Folklore holds a crucial role in conserving the culture knowledge and everyday life of the communities in Rajasthan. Folk songs, oral traditions and ritual performances are not only means of expressing emotions and social relations but also reflect the material life of the people. These

traditions contribute to generating cultural significance for objects of daily use, such as jewellery, clothing and handicraft, which become part of the material folk culture of the region. Ornaments are often part of folklore and stories and are associated to memories, relationships, celebrations and life-cycle rituals. Moreover, these objects reflect social structures, regional identities and community traditions. This means that ornaments in folk culture not only symbolise aesthetic or ritual values but also represent the ancestral skills, craftsmanship and production systems that are embedded in the local society.

In this long tradition of ornamentation, lac bangles have a special place in the culture of Rajasthan. Lac bangles are worn by women on multiple occasions such as weddings, festivals and other auspicious occasions and have been associated with marriage and traditional customs for long. The techniques involved in making these bangles are the skill of the lacquer preparation, heating and shaping the material, and the careful application of colours, mirrors and stones. These processes are usually transmitted from one generation to the next in artisan families, in order to conserve this native technique and culture. Lac bangles are not only culturally and symbolically important but also provide economic support to the local communities. The artisans involved in these activities are responsible for the production and sale of these products. The market is sustained by sales at festivals and weddings. Artisans sell their products, keeping their traditional craft practices alive, at local fairs and markets and through regional trade networks. The lac bangle making tradition is, therefore, an instance of folklore, material culture and indigenous knowledge as integral component of the economy, which helps to preserve the continuity of culture and community's livelihood.

Lac: Natural Material and the Crafting of Traditional Bangles

The art of making lac bangles is a traditional art form of Rajasthan where natural resin is transformed into ornamental jewellery by the deft hands of artisans. The main material used in traditional bangle making is a natural resin secreted by scale insects, in particular "Kerria lacca". These bugs occur on twigs of host trees, feeding on the plant sap and forming a resinous layer on branches. This layer is known as 'stick lac' and is collected by scraping the branches. It is then refined by crushing, sieving and washing to remove impurities such as bark and insect debris. The refined version, seed lac, is further refined to produce shellac and other usable forms for craft production. Lac insects were found to be present on host plants such as *Butea monosperma* (palas), *Schleichera oleosa* (kusum) and *Ziziphus mauritiana* (ber) in India. The main lac-producing areas are Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh. The craft centres in Rajasthan procure the resin through both local collection and established trading networks between production areas and markets such as Jaipur and Pushkar. The raw resin is heated, coloured and shaped over a number of stages to make decorative jewellery. The shellac is supplied to artisans in small, round pieces, known as chapadi or tikli, usually dark brown or ochre in colour. These pieces are heated in a kadai with a soft resin called berja and a fine powder of stone called giya powder (earlier sand was used). When the mixture has melted, water is added and the ingredients are blended until a thick mass is obtained. The mixture is then kneaded and rolled into coils, which are combined using a wooden stick called a 'hati' and then heated again over burning coals or a sigdi to make the lac soft and pliable. The lac coil is then softened and stretched and moulded using a hand held tool called a 'hatta'. The prepared coloured lac is heated and applied to the base material using colour, thus enabling the artisan to create various patterns and colour combinations. To make it into a bangle the coloured coil is cut and reshaped with a wooden tool called a 'khali' which has a narrow groove which gives the coil a circular shape. The ends are then joined to make a hoop and the structure is reheated to improve the finish.

Traditionally, this craft is done by artisan communities like the Manihars, many of whom have settled in parts of Jaipur like 'Maniharon ka Rasta'. This craft is not documented in written texts but is transmitted from one generation to the next, within families, orally and through hands-on practice. Children are allowed to see this process from an early age and to learn its techniques gradually by sharing in the work and learning on the job. As artisans gain experi-

ence, they learn to skillfully incorporate different colours, designs and decorative elements like stones or glass. The craft of lac bangles reflects how indigenous knowledge systems sustain artisanal skills, thus interconnecting natural resources, community labour and cultural creativity across generations.

Cultural Significance and Popularization of Lac Bangles through Folk Songs

In Rajasthan, the significance of Lac bangles in the social customs of the communities is much more than that of being ornaments. Bangles are closely related with life cycle practices, particularly marriage, and seasonal festivals, and in such situations, the wearing of bangles is a powerful means of making sense of identity, social position and health. As part of the wedding preparations, the bride is presented with sets of colourful bangles to wear which symbolizes her entry into married life. These are worn by women after marriage during festivals and family gatherings as they are regarded to be a symbol of auspicious fortune and prosperity. So, the bangles are a definite indication of marital status, social connection and the expectation for a pleasant life in the home.

Folk songs have a very important role, by paying attention to the cultural significance of lac bangles, and by creating the demand for lac bangles. The bangles are not just a piece of jewelry in the Rajasthani traditions, but it is a symbol of happiness, good fortune and joy during celebrations. The importance is well illustrated by the folk song “Char Char Choodla Re”:

“Char Char Choodla Re, Padya Re Banni Re Atechi Maa, Banni Re Atechi Maa”

(Bangles jingle. The bride is adorned, carrying her belongings.)

In this song, the term ‘Choodla’ literally means bangles, and the song situates them in the context of bridal adornment, highlighting the importance of bangles in wedding ceremonies. Further, lines like “Laal Laal Lagra Re, Padya Hai Banni Re Peti Maa” (The bride wears a red skirt along with her bangles) links bangles with traditional festive attire and ceremonial display. The song portrays the cultural value of bangles as it celebrates their jingling and links them to happy occasions, making its listeners aware of it.

Through their repeated performance at weddings and festivals along with oral transmissions, folk songs popularize lac bangles among communities and enhance their desirability. For listeners at a wedding or in markets and public gatherings, bangles are associated with prosperity, social identity and emotional expression. This cultural framing not only sustains traditional practices but also produces market demand, thus contributing effectively to the commercialization of lac bangles. Thus, folk music is a medium to preserve the heritage and sustain the local artisan economy.

Lac Bangles and the Craft Economy

Lac bangle making is an important aspect of local handicraft economy of Rajasthan. Many of the small scale industries are at home and for many artisan families, this craft is their way of life and livelihood. Making of Lac bangles generally takes place in Family workshops, where all the members of the family is involved from the preparation of Lac to the decoration of bangles and selling of the products. From there the craft is deeply embedded in the network of community and thus it also lends itself to being supported economically and culturally by a network of communities, which facilitates continuity and sustainability of the craft.

The importance of lac bangles is intricately linked with the need of rituals. The constant demand for this ornaments is fulfilled at wedding ceremonies, seasonal festivals and community celebrations. Local markets and fairs see a lot of bangles being made and sold during the wedding season. This constant demand means that the artisan families have a continuous income from their craft and at the same time the traditional methods of production are preserved. “This is how economic activities and cultural practices feed on each other. But the economic importance of lac is not restricted to bangles alone. It is used by artisans to make a variety of other objects including toys, decorative boxes and small figurines. A well known example from Jaipur is the production of 'Gulal Gota' which are small hollow spheres of lac filled with coloured

powder and used during the festival of Holi. These balls explode on impact showering colours during the celebrations. This tradition has been traditionally associated with the royal Holi celebrations of Jaipur. It employs many artisan families on a seasonal basis and they produce large quantities of Gulal Gota and send to different cities like Vrindavan. Such festival-based handicraft production is an example of how folk material culture is integrated into the ritual calendar and generates periods of increased handicraft production and employment.

Women are emerging as important and visible actors in this handicraft economy. Many women in artisan families are engaged in decorative work, run small shops, or go directly to buyers' houses to sell bangles. In some areas female artisans have formed self-help groups and cooperatives that enable them to pool resources, access credit and negotiate better prices for their products. Other efforts have been made to improve women's access to markets beyond their immediate neighbourhood, such as financial assistance programmes, training programmes and handicraft fairs. The knowledge and skill associated with this handicraft economy is transmitted primarily through informal learning from one generation to another within the family. Rather than relying on written manuals, these skills like selection of raw materials, preparation of lac mixture, estimation of prices and understanding the customer preferences are learnt from the active participation in the everyday tasks of the craft. From an early age, children observe their elders at work and, by a process of practice and learning, they gradually become masters of these techniques. Through the years artisans develop their creativity by experimenting and exploring new colour combinations, decorative motifs and designs. These experiments go hand in hand with changing customer preferences and maintaining traditional aesthetics.

Bright colours, intricate designs and flexibility to changing fashion trends have brought back lac bangles in vogue. The artisans are constantly experimenting with new patterns and are using traditional crafts with modern elements like stonework, mirror work, metallics and contemporary colour palettes. The innovations have expanded the use of lac bangles, making them a suitable accessory to wear for traditional events such as weddings and festivals, as well as for everyday wear and fashion. This has made them more appealing to numerous consumer groups including consumers in urban areas, tourists, and young consumers who are interested in handmade and culturally unique accessories. The use of bangles is not limited to the state borders of Rajasthan, as they are also being used in the local markets, craft fairs and the internet by a larger population. In addition, such adornments are seen in new people by means of social media or tourism and craft exhibitions which offer fresh opportunities to artisans to showcase their work. Moreover, with these bangles becoming popular, their affordability and lower costs can be also attributed for people to engage in the culture tradition of bangles. In this sense, the craft of bangle making of lac is a case study of indigenous craft traditions. Producing the craft remains dependent on the skills and on the local knowledge that has been handed down from generation to generation, and adapts to the shifting preferences of consumers and market opportunities. So, lac bangles are not only cultural heritage but also a live economic product that supports the livelihood of artisans and keeps the traditional knowledge alive in the present.

Lac bangle making craft, besides its cultural and economic aspects, also signifies an innate relation with ecological balance and sustainability. Lac is a renewable resource as it is a natural resin secreted by the insect *Kerria lacca*, which depends on host trees like palas, kusum and ber. This symbiotic relationship helps maintain the tree cover and increases the local biodiversity. The synthetic materials used in the manufacture of industrial jewellery are not biodegradable and involve relatively high levels of pollution to the environment in processing. The process of production is based on manual labour and low energy techniques, thus further minimising the ecological footprint. Moreover, artisans are closely familiar with natural cycles and the use of resources based on experience. This familiarity is an expression of indigenous environmental knowledge systems, where sustainability is embedded in everyday practices. Hence, manufacturing of lac bangle not only supports the livelihoods and cultural traditions but also helps to maintain the balance between human activities and natural environment.

Conclusion

The study of lac bangles in Rajasthan highlights the complex relationship between folklore, indigenous knowledge and traditional craft practices. Lac bangles are not only decorative accessories but are powerful cultural symbols of marriage, success, social identity and form part of folk culture and life cycle rituals of the region. The cultural knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation via folk songs, customs and festivals. The craft is an extremely complex indigenous knowledge system which includes natural resource utilization, technical knowledge and community based learning. The knowledge is maintained and passed on orally and by practice from the artisans, such as Manihars. This aids in maintaining the craft as well as the culture that goes along with it. Family-based industries, the seasonal demand of the market, adaptation to the wide market and changes in taste are all reasons why the production of lac bangles is an economically important practice. This craft is also relevant in today's times due to its ecological aspect. The traditional knowledge systems can play a role in the sustainability, as they are based on the use natural, non-toxic and biodegradable materials, use of low energy production methods and the sense of environmental balance.

As such, the lac bangles appear to be a cultural or economic practice, as well as a system with the intertwining of tradition and livelihood and environmental concern. Preservation and promotion of such traditional crafts is, therefore, of great importance, not only for the promotion of cultural diversity, but also for the sustainable development of the production system in keeping with the current ecological issues.

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