

Tracing the Journey of a craft from embeddedness to commercialisation:

A case study of hand block printing in Jaipur region

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Abstract:

Polanyi proposed that the rural economy of a craft is immersed in the social interactions i.e., it cannot be a separate, autonomous sphere vis-a-vis society as a whole (Polanyi, 2014). Gradually, with an increase in social interaction and technological development, the crafts got disembedded and disintegrated from the social structures that once formed the backbone of it. This paper studies this transition through the case study of hand block printing in the Jaipur cluster. With an increase in the global demand for hand-printed textiles, this craft has also witnessed heavy commercialisation, causing disadvantages to the marginal communities that traditionally engaged in its production. The primary research based on observation and undisguised participation is complemented with secondary research to understand the concepts of embeddedness, disembeddedness and commercialisation and the consequences of the same on the different stakeholders.

1. Introduction

India is characterized by its rich traditional heritage of arts and culture. The geographical location played a pivotal role in shaping the customs and culture of various communities. Diversified art forms (*kalas*) emerged from the tribal and rural communities of India which

depicted their daily activities or were a representation of holy texts. In this manner, *kalas* played an instrumental role in reinforcing social integrity, crystallizing social solidarity, fortifying communal harmony, and intensifying the value system of the community. The craft was by sharing the resources that were readily available in the area. The produce was either used for self-sustenance or for the purpose of bartering with other communities in the same area, and the transactions were predominantly submerged in social relations. As Polanyi would say, the rural economy of the craft was immersed in the social interactions i.e., it cannot be a separate, autonomous sphere vis-a-vis society as a whole. Polanyi

Gradually, people from rural areas started venturing outside villages to sell their products in the market. As their products reached the market and came in competition with other products, the social control over the economic process of production and distribution started deteriorating. This control further diminished with an increase in popularity and the consequent demand of their produce. As a result, the rural economy that was once embedded became disembedded as it adjusted to market dynamics.

Markets came into existence with the advent of globalization when a synthetic homogeneous macro-culture emerged that was dominated by the forces of demand and supply. To exploit the growing demand, external players entered the market and moulded the process to ensure a quick supply of handicrafts at the cheapest rates possible. In an attempt to capitalize on the growing demand, the authentic process of production was forsaken. Under the influence of such a voracious all-pervasive macro-culture which was demand-driven, the identity of the craft suffered attrition and erosion. Thus, the socio-cultural exclusivity of the multifarious communities at the different nooks and corners of our country started disintegrating.

The expansion of production was met by dismantling and disintegrating various steps of the original process. Each part of the procedure which was once carried out by certain specific communities was now outsourced based on comparative advantage. This widened the divide between the community, the craft and its identity, leading to its absolute disintegration.

Background for Context

Karl Polanyi, a renowned economic historian of the 20th century, introduced the idea of embeddedness in his prominent work “The Great Transformation”. Polanyi argued that the functioning of an economy could not be understood in isolation from the social world in which it was embedded. He argued that before the 19th century, the economic system had been conceived as a part of the broader society governed by social customs and norms as much as by market principles of profit and exchange. The rise of capitalism, however, involved political efforts to de-link the economy from this social environment. However, this dis-embedding of the economy necessarily meant changing its social environment and, thus, society. Polanyi (2014) saw the market exchange and market economy as self-regulating and disembedded.

The concept of embeddedness has acquired great analytical precision over the years as it has been analyzed and referred to by various thinkers to study the interaction between various elements in society. One such example is the study *The Transcultural Journeys: The Disembedding and Re-embedding of Sepik Art* by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin which evaluates the transcultural journey of handicrafts in pre-colonial times by employing the concept of embeddedness.

As mentioned by Polanyi, in a dis-embedded economy, the value of goods and services is determined by the market dynamics of demand and supply. In such a scenario, the product becomes an object of trade and capital, devoid of originality and identity. In other words, it is reduced to a commodity. In Marxist theory, commodification means the transformation of relationships, formerly untainted by commerce, into commercial relationships, relationships of exchange, of buying and selling (Marxist.org)

The paper tries to study the concepts of embeddedness, dis-embeddedness and commodification by closely analyzing the hand-block printing community in Jaipur is one of the oldest hubs with a rich history that dates back to as early as 3000 BC. Traditionally, the craft of hand block printing was pursued in local and tightly defined places. The key raw materials were collected locally, and the technologies and knowledge of production were also developed by the community.(Seth and Bhatnagar, 2016) (*see Box 1 below*) . Flowers, barks of the tree, fruits and vegetables were used to extract the colours which were used as natural dyes. Different steps of the process were carried out by separate members of the community such as the Chhippis (printers), Rangrez (dyers) and wood block carvers. The process of hand block printing is briefly explained in box 2 below, as going into details of the procedure is out of the scope of this paper.

Box 1: The Story of Origin

The origin of the inherited knowledge of dye and print can be traced to a popular oral tradition of the chhippa community in Sanganer. There are different versions of the folklore but all are directed towards the nomadic mystical poet, Sant Namdev. Lalita Mishra has recorded this

version, where it is believed that the process of vegetable dyeing was explained to Namdeo in his dream. The next morning, he shared it with his friends and the community accepted it as a gift from God.

The popularity of this tale reinforces the traditional belief that Indian crafts result from the harmony between religious devotion and practice of art

Box 2: The process of hand block printing in brief:

- Creation of the block: The block is prepared out of wood by the carvers and is dipped in oil for days. Once created, it is used for multiple uses till the design imprinted on the cloth is precise (See Figure 1)
- Preparation of cloth: The cotton cloth is washed, bleached and dried. It is then stretched on tables with layers of cloth (to make it softer and stamping easier)
- Preparation of dye: The dye is prepared using natural extracts or pigment. The “Dabu” printing or mud resistant technique (famous in Bagru) still uses natural dyes while the Sanganer prints use pigments or chemicals mostly. The natural extracts are soaked in water and mixed in different combinations to get the right shade and texture.
- Hand block printing process: The mud resistant technique uses mud. The wooden blocks are dipped using a fine mud solution which is then dried in the sun. Once it dries, it is dipped in the dyed/coloured water. The areas where there is no mud is coloured. While the mud washes off to give the colour of the cloth. Also, the cloth is dyed a couple of times to bring out different shades of colour (the common ones being indigo, red, black, beige). (Refer to figure 2)

For the Sanganeri prints using pigment, the wooden blocks are dipped into colours. The range of colours is greater as they are artificially created. First, the outline is created and then the inner portions of the design are coloured.

- Drying, sorting and stitching- The cloth is then dried, checked for errors and prepared to be stitched.

Figure 1:

Figure 2:

Figure 3:

The process and images show that the designs and colours form the essence of this craft form. These have been developed with knowledge amassed over decades as members of the community learnt the techniques from within the family through observation and participation, which was further passed down as traditional knowledge. The designs of the prints transformed with time under the influence of changing dynasties, movement through trade routes and growing demand. The prints, cloth type and cloth design were also a subtle assertion of social status. (Mathur, 2019)

Figure 4: Sanganeri Jaal Design (Inspired by the Mughal culture)

Source: The Indian Ethnic Co.

Figure 5: Fadat Print of Bagru (One of the oldest designs)

Source: Fabricolore.com

In India, the craft grew in prominence with royal patronage. In Rajasthan, Jaipur became the cultural hub owing to the establishment of kingdoms, increasing trade and production. The king,

Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II of Jaipur, an admirer of art and craft, invited artisans and gave land to them on the outskirts of the city to establish their units in towns such as Sanganer, Jahota, Amer and Bagru. (Skidmore, 2013)

Before the 17th century, historical accounts only mention the town of Sanganer as a source for finely dyed or bleached cotton. It was founded by the Kachchwaha Rajput Prince Sangaji in the early 16th century (Skidmore, 2013: 9). It was thriving by the 17th century partially due to its strategic location along major trade routes. It prospered during the 18th century with the growth of the hand block printing community which transformed the town into a prominent centre of textile printing. This was mainly because in 1727 Maharaja Jai Singh of Jaipur had shifted the capital from Amber in Aravali foothills to Jaipur situated on the plains below (Skidmore, 2013: 8). According to oral accounts, the artisan families of Jaipur began to shift their work to locations where space and running water were freely available yet still within easy reach of the capital. Sanganer provided a perfect place for this with the added benefit of specialist dyers and cloth bleachers residing in the town. Such artisans formed a large, supportive community with block printing at the core of their culture. (Batham, 2014)

Besides Sanganer, Bagru is another area around Jaipur that gained prominence owing to its unique technique of hand block printing. Situated about 30 km from Jaipur, the chhipa community of the village has been involved in the craft for 350 years. It is believed that the community migrated to the village to settle near the Sanjaria river. (Polyani, 2014) Though the river dried up 20 years ago, the village is still famous for its “Dabu” printing technique.

Figure 6:

3. Methodology

The craft's journey has been ethnographically observed to understand how the community and stakeholders accord importance to the traditional knowledge system and social networks. Different methods of ethno-centric observation were employed to understand how the craft of hand block printing evolved adapting to various dynamics of market and technology upgrade.

- a. Naturalistic observation and undisguised participant observation: Within the areas of Bagru, Sanganer, Amer and Jaipur, various manufacturing and printing units of different types were identified to understand the transition of the craft ethnographically. These included hand block printing units using organic dyes (Ojjas, Teetanwala), hand block printing using pigment (Ojjas, Indus), manufacturing and wholesale units (Riddhi Siddhi textiles and Mansarover Textiles) and Screen Printing Units (various places in Sanganer). These locations ranged from small units catering to local needs to large units dealing in exports. The team interacted and spent time with printers from within and outside the Chhippa community, first and second-generation entrepreneurs, families of the printers, and experts in the field of hand block printing. Most of the interactions took place during the hours of work at the workplace.
- b. Case Study: The deeper understanding of the craft required deeper engagement with the craft and the process. The full-day workshop at Ojjas Hand Block printing centre allowed

first-hand experience with the craft along with detailed insights on the craft's journey from Ms Raj Kunwar who heads the Ojjas Unit. The team was absorbed into the process of hand block printing using natural dyes (mud resistant or “*Dabu*” printing) and pigment. From the preparation of the dyes to the sorting of the final cloth, the team participated in each process. Interaction with different people involved in different stages allowed us to use participant observation methods to collect information and anecdotes that help us trace the transition of the craft.

- c. Archival Research: The Anokhi Museum of hand painting in Amer was a storehouse of information that offered visual and textual aids to collate the history of the craft. The library of the Department of Archaeology and Museums offered a rich source of information on crafts and textiles of Rajasthan. It helped in building a background on the deep relationship of the region with different forms of textile crafts. The other studies were sourced from the web that allowed to build conceptual clarity on the theories of embeddedness, disembeddedness and commodification.

Figure 7

4. Literature Review

The observations collected from the field were interpreted with the help of secondary research that helped establish a foundational understanding of the craft and culture. The book “Costume, Textiles and Jewellery of India, Traditions in Rajasthan” by Vandana Bhandari provides a crisp

overview of Rajasthani crafts. Krystyna Hellstrom's book "Jaipur Quilts" covers the craft of hand block printing and the life of the workers which helped to substantiate the field observations. The book, "Sanganer " published by the Anokhi Museum of hand printing proved to be a major source of information as it offered a detailed insight into the craft practised in the Sanganer area. The book traces the history of the craft explaining the gradual transformations in the process and developments in the techniques of dyeing and printing.

Different sources emphasised the value of craft within a societal system. The process of creating the craft item was identified by reciprocity and redistribution. The members of the community shared common resources for the purpose of production. Most of the products created were redistributed within the society through the barter system. The value of the product was not pre-defined, and it varied with each transaction. The measure of a good was left open to interpretation, determined by one's immediate needs and not by the dynamics of demand and supply. Essentially, most of the things were accomplished through having a good relationship and the sense of reciprocity was imperative for the construction of good community living. Therefore, reciprocity and redistribution played an instrumental role in reinforcing social integrity, crystallizing social solidarity, fortifying communal harmony and intensifying the value-system of the community.

It can be said that such an economy is substantivist because it has its roots in humans' dependence on nature and their fellow humans. ¹¹. Substantial economics is the system of institutions, values, and practices that a society uses to define, mobilize, distribute, and organize capabilities and resources to best meet legitimate needs. (Rodrigues, 2020)This concept draws

from the theory of embeddedness propounded by Karl Polanyi in his work, *The Great Transformation*. According to him, an economy is immersed in social interactions i.e. it could not have been seen as a separate, autonomous sphere vis-a-vis society as a whole. This holds true for the ancient hand block printing community of Rajasthan, where the transactions were predominantly submerged in social relations and were not driven by either scarcity or self-interest.

The value of handicrafts is intimately associated with the people and places where they are made (Cohen, 1993). The greater the degree to which the hands of the artisans, their inherited knowledge and skills, and the local environment and its resources can be seen to be embodied in the products, the better. The cultural authenticity and value of handicrafts rest upon their very placeness.

However, with the movement of people and the circulation of handicrafts, the ideas and interpretations of its use and meaning crossed the original place of practice and entered new channels. It was at this point that the handicraft became “disembedded” from its authentic context. Consequently, the disembedding of the craft implied a separation of time and space: the craft was lifted out of a long-lasting temporal-spatial continuity and was transported to places where a completely new life started for it. As soon as it was dislocated from the places where it had been conceptualised, its original context blurred, since, in most cases, it was unclear whether these objects had been produced for local use, for the rulers or were newly made for export purposes.

During the 18th century, the *chippa* and *rangrez* communities of Sanganer expanded trade by uniting to create delicately patterned and coloured muslin material for a broad-based clientele. Royal patronage fuelled domestic trade and eventually launched the work of Sanganeri craftspeople into the international arena. Towards the end of the 19th century, mechanisation accompanied by the introduction of chemical dyestuffs resulted in competition from less labour intensive processes emerging in the west. The ability to create chemically coloured, machine woven and roller printed fabrics significantly reduced production costs.

The paper *Working Through Tradition: Experiential Learning and Formal Training as Markers of Class and Caste in North Indian Block Printing* sheds light on how dynamics between the craft, hand printers and designers have changed over time. It speaks about how the division between innovation and tradition has increased and has got exclusively restricted to designers and printers respectively. Lakhimi Jogendranath Chutia Mrinmoy K. Sarma's *Commercialization of Traditional Crafts of South and Southeast Asia* by looks into the transitional dynamics of traditional crafts of South and Southeast Asia. It aims to explain the various factors that necessitate the commercialization of crafts, the most important element in transitional dynamics.

These papers helped in linking the journey of hand block printing with the concepts of embeddedness, disembeddedness and commodification. The following section links the interactions and observations from the field with a broader conceptual framework

5. Observations

As observed from the previous section, in an embedded society, craft items are produced in relatively small numbers essentially meant for an audience comprising the producer and members of the community (Cohen, 1983 and Graburn, 1976). With time, these traditional craft communities became disembedded and artisans started exploring outside the internal domain to expand their market base. The contact with external audiences led to an increase in demand for the product. To cater to this new demand, the craft began to transform to adjust to the emerging trends.

Traditional designs were the first to get transformed. Initially, the artisans picked up designs from their surroundings or holy texts which were special to their community and in a manner marked their identity. By the early 17th century, the Indo-European cultural exchanges affected the fashion trends within India. As a result, the craftsmen re-fitted styles and designs to suit their diverse clientele. Therefore, their designs became contemporised and subsequently merged with the popular trends of this time.

One such trend was the popular European motif of the ‘cabbage rose’ which was subsequently integrated into the Indian design. By the late 18th century, roses appeared in Sangneri textiles as loose, asymmetrical flowers with a sculptural shape more reminiscent of European florals than the lineated regimented roses of earlier periods. (Skidmore, 2013) Similarly, the revival of hand block printing in the 20th century borrowed from 18th-century designs. The early 1970s saw the western dress reflecting the popular eastern ethos of the hippie culture and the traditional hand block prints were repackaged as the latest rage.

This repackaging resulted in growing popularity and made the craft reach top fashion magazines and ramp walks. The fresh, new perspective to traditional designs symbolised the craft as 'Indian' culture in the international market. (DeNicola, 2008) This encouraged the designers and manufacturers to develop mutually beneficial relationships within the printing community which allowed them to continue with the craft and adapt the products to the growing trends. However, the domain of designing and meeting the changing market demands remained exclusive to the designing houses/ manufacturers. The colour, prints and designs are decided by the designers and the instructions are followed by the printers.

The loss of traditional designs was amongst the first repercussions of the introduction of the craft into a commercial space. The oral accounts of pioneers in the field suggest, 'We have lost 30-40% of the original designs and they are irrecoverable. This is the main loss as these designs were reflective of our traditions and roots'. The printers and designers are concerned about the uniqueness of even the new designs. Since the designs are easily replicable, the designs get copied by different producers in the market. Many famous printers in Bagru expressed the concern saying, 'We do not display our designs in the store very easily. The other printers might copy it and reproduce it using screen printing and sell it at cheaper rates; there will be nothing unique for us to offer to the clients'.

As the designs evolved and adapted to the taste of the global clientele, the demand grew even further, peaking during the 1970s and 1980s. To capitalise on the growing demand for the product, people from outside the community started pursuing hand block printing. Under the

influence of the market forces, the object acquired a new meaning for the artisans. They did not view the product as a means of sustenance, but as a commodity to draw profit. Once the craft grew in prominence, more and more people undertook to print. The craft disoriented as the craftsmen drifted away from its essence.

Especially during the 1970s and early 1980s, when cloth demand was the highest in Bagru, nearly every household made at least a partial living either by working for established printers or by setting up their print shops in their homes. Young men from nearby farming villages came to Bagru in response to newspaper advertisements and learned the basics of printing in a matter of days. (Mathur, 2019) The ones who were not originally associated with the craft could not identify with its meaning and essence. For them, it was only a means to an end, which was profit.

As the demand grew, more people within the village joined the work and the units expanded. This meant that a printer started training and employing other printers. Over time, to meet the demands of the market, manufacturers emerged who built centralised units and employed the printers. To increase the business, they also outsourced some material to the smaller printing units. The individual household units were replaced by aggregated centres or units owned by one person where printers were employed. These centres became printing sources for the manufacturers who in turn sold to their clients. These manufacturers can be seen as middlemen that link the printers to the customers. The introduction of a new player widened the wedge between the printers and the consumers.

Figure 8:

Even within the community, the process was scaled-up to meet the rising demand. As units expanded, workers were hired and trained as printers. These were usually migrant labourers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Their motive was only to make a fair wage and was not concerned about the value, essence or meaning of the craft. As the craft gained more value as a commodity, it gradually drifted away from its original meaning and identity. The disorientation of the process of hand block printing deepened further.

As mentioned earlier, designing, marketing and innovating were assigned to the designers/manufacturers while printing or mechanical work was limited to the printers. The big clients buy the material or products from the printers or manufacturers and put their labels before selling. They invest in marketing, branding, relationship building which enables them to reach a larger consumer base and sell the products at higher prices. However, in this process, the printer's identity gets lost. But, no matter how distant the printing community gets from the entire process of the craft, printing by hand remains a unique selling point for the craft. In a personal interview, Ms Raj Kunwar, owner of Ojjas Printing Unit, recounts multiple times that the hand block printed cloth goes through a hundred hands which makes it unique.

Figure 9

The study conducted in 2019, reports that some of the artisans shared that ‘the Chhipa artisans were not involved in every aspect of marketing. This was a disadvantageous situation for them. Although artisans have various issues related to design, production, costing, and marketing, they have no idea on how to adapt to the changing market needs’. (De Nicola, 2008) De Nicola (2008) sums the situation in the following lines:

The work of printing is linguistically complex, encompassing both the actual application of colour to a cloth with a wooden block (a process which can be learned quickly with little training) as well as the overall process of procuring work, taking a blank piece of cloth and turning it into a piece of art that can be effectively sold in the market (a process that is dependent upon years, sometimes generations, of training and building of networks). To meet the demand, these two aspects got estranged. The first realm of craft has become limited to craftsmen and printers, and the second realm has become mostly exclusive to the designers.

Traditionally, buyers and artisans have known each other well. With a focus on commercial markets today, clients have become distant. New clients contact the wholesale manufacturers or businessmen who employ printers to produce the fabric. Most of the printers are limited to printing the ordered designs and supplying them to the manufacturers. Their involvement in the design or innovation is almost negligible. Though the craftsmen have become distanced from the end consumer, the designers play an important role in scaling up the demand. As DeNicole mentions, the two realms of “innovation” and “tradition” are now confined to “designers” and “printers” respectively.

As the craft continued to adapt to the changing dynamics of the market, there was a shift towards screen printing by the 20th century. Screen printing, however, changed the entire process and the production cycle. It requires much less workforce and time. It also offers a greater variety of colours and combinations. It results in producing cloth in greater quantity and at a lesser price. Screen printing borrowed the designs from the hand block printing tradition and recreated them using machines and chemical dyes. On one hand, screen printing overhauled the hand printing process and on the other hand, it made the prints reach a larger consumer base.

Figure 10

The introduction of screen printing is central to the commodification of hand block printing as it disintegrated the process of hand block printing. It dismantled every bit of the original process. The carved blocks were replaced by large screens where the designs were created by machines and not hands. Hand stamping was replaced by screen printing and natural colours were replaced by chemical dyes. The end product seemed the same and was sold under the name of 'hand block printing', but the entire process was transformed. The 2019 study was conducted to understand the socio-economic status of the workers and according to the study

Almost 58 per cent of the respondents reported that they strongly feel that the hand block printing industry has changed and is different from what it was earlier. Now the hand block printing has been taken over by screen printing. The clients have no time; they want variety in the designs, some of the shades that cannot be prepared organically, and a variety of clothes as a base; screenprint has all these options hence that comes as a cheaper option and the orders can be prepared in lesser time. Therefore, over the years hand block print has been gradually taken over by screen printing. (Mathur, 2019)

Another growing concern is selling screen printed cloth under the name of hand block printing. This practice has been discouraging for many firms to continue with the traditional practices. As we can observe that the craft has adapted and responded to market demands and technology upgrades over the years, it continues to do even today. The manufacturers that continue with

hand block printing do so in tandem with their client demands. For example, many manufacturers print ‘Anokhi’¹ designs as they are more in demand. To avoid copyright issues, they tweak colours and designs slightly which make them aesthetically similar to what Anokhi offers. Also, the manufacturers in Jaipur said, “We cater to the demands. We are dealing in hand block printing because there is a heavy demand. If the clients want something else, we will switch to that”

Thus, we can see that over the years, craft has seen various stages of being traditionally embedded, disembedded, commercialised and commodified. Although commercialisation has popularised the craft and increased its demand, it has also estranged the craftsmen from the craft. The prints and designs are popular but the process and craftsmanship have lost their due credit. A craft that was once entirely carried out within a village by different members of the community is now being outsourced based on comparative advantage. The most defining part of the disintegration is the wedge between the craft and the craftsmen. The craftsmen are mostly unaware of the market base for their products. They operate according to guidance from the middlemen who link them to the final customer. In this manner, the craftsmen are reduced to working as labourers. In essence, the process has strayed from the ideas of tradition that deeply implicated the artisan’s body and performance in the very meaning and value of the commodity produced. (Greenough, 1995 and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998)

6. Conclusion

¹ Anokhi is a brand that deals in hand block printed apparel and accessories. It has been a prominent leader in the field known for its role in reviving the art and the artists in the late 20th century.

In the act of buying an artisanal commodity, the consumer is buying the constructed experience of authenticity and traditionalism, establishing a connection that symbolically links the commodity back to the artisan and their community. (Scrase, 2019) Rapid globalization has expanded the demand for hand block printing over the years. Based on the oral accounts, in the coming years, both international and domestic demand for the product is expected to grow. However, the concern lies if the tradition and the knowledge system attached to the craft will survive along the way. The transformed process of producing the craft item does not qualify as either 'traditional' or 'authentic'. The commodification of the craft has strayed it off its identity and has led to a slow but sure separation of the craft from the craftsmen. The study nudges further investigation on whether this transition is an obvious and inevitable outcome of expanded demand and industrialisation. It endeavours to understand if the framework of studying a craft through the lens of embeddedness, disembeddedness, commodification and commercialisation can be applied to other crafts also.

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