



Khatri community and development of handicraft industries in Kutch

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ABSTRACT

Khatri community across the country is generally understood as a trading community. However, Western India records them differently. The earliest archival demographic records detail them belonging to Hindu and Muslim Categories. My region of enquiry is Kutch and community is Muslim khatri. Anjar, Mundra, Nakhtrana and Bhuj record them as dyers since 18th century. A historic profile of this community since 18th century further establish them as workers in variety of crafts related to textile industry along with dying skill. This paper sketches their professional profile since 18th century till date; transformation under which this community has undergone in terms of entrepreneurship and finally as an identity in the Gujarat region.

Khatri community is well known for its business acumen since antiquity in Northern India particularly undivided Punjab. The origin of Khatri is somewhat ambiguous as oral Historiography establishes their linkage back to the time of the Parasuram, a mythological figure. Khatri derives its origin from the term "Kshatriya"¹. As a result of economic and political necessity, the Khatri expanded into various occupations besides being its military occupation, Khatri took over to trade activities, engaged in maintains of account keeping and served as scribes like kayasthas and Rajput. The Demographic statics reveals that Khatri migrated after partition in various nook and corner of India. They can be located at Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, and Uttar Pradesh. Generally the Khatri are non Muslim, Hindus, Jains and Sikhs, however a small number is Muslim which is generally found in western India particularly in Kutch.

Bombay Presidency Gazetteers establish them as weaver's² community in Gujarat and as skilled dyers³ in the Kutch region. As you all know that Kutch is the biggest district of Gujarat and known for his uniqueness in terms of morphology, culture and historical traditions. Its association with Sindh has made it different from the rest of Gujarat. The Muslim Khatri community is believed to be migratory population from Sindh which established itself from 1540 onwards. James Burners in his book 'History of Kutch'⁴ records the migratory pattern of the Khatri community and attributes this migration to famine condition of provinces of Sindh during the sixteen the century. The Rao of Kutch supported this migratory population in the town of Bhuj, Anjar, Mandvi and Mundra and Bhadreswar. Let us not forget that Kutch has a coast line of 1600 kilometer and a established sea fearing tradition which help this migratory communities to settle there or move forward towards Kathiyawar, South Gujarat, in Deccan up to Burhanpur and towards Persian Gulf seaports along the Red Sea and Somalian Coast. The migration of the Khatri from Sindh started in 1542 and continued till 1600 AD⁵. This can be verified from Sindh Gazetteer, Repots and correspondence etc. which are easily available from the archives of the historian M.H Panhwar⁶. This is available on the webpage www.panhwar.org. The names of both Hindu and Muslim Khatri resembled to the name of Sindh residents. In one of the interviews one of interviewer Ismail Haji Khatri⁷ revealed that he is a Punjabi Khatri and his fore father migrated long back. He belongs to 12th generation. He uses the surname Arora which to my best knowledge is very common in Punjab and Haryana

I would like to elaborate on how the Punjabi and Sindh Hindu Khatri accepted Islam after migration to Kutch. We are able to locate these two segments which Khatri Hindu and Khatri Muslim. These are two popular versions one a person from

Patae clan who was afraid of being burnt after death came to Mundra about nine generation back and took shelter in the Ismaili Khoja guest house and embraced Islam and got settled there⁸. Other account states that their male ancestors were forced to embrace Islam as they were unable to remunerate Brahman services for the performance of life-cycle rituals⁹ but in spite of this conversion both of this Hindu and Muslim Khatri community work together, not only that but the treasure of both this community has been kept together mostly with Hindu Khatri. This continues up to 250 years but latter in 1829 A.D. both of this community decided to separate their treasure. This led towards the famous Rangchuli case. In 1728 A.D both of this Community purchases the land near Mandvi for printing work. They used this land up to 1868 A.D. but latter Hindu Khatri refused to allow Muslim Khatri to work in this Land. This led Muslim Khatri community filed suit against Hindu Khatri in court of kutch in 1872 A.D. In this case the Muslim side Munshi Nazarahmad while Bhatt Ratanji Hathiram from the Hindu side fight the case. Kutch High court favor the Hindu but latter on Khatri Muslim community took this case in to the court of Rao Pragmalji of Kutch. Rao divided Land in three part one part with the Muslim while two parts with the Hindu¹⁰

At the present the population of Khatri is around 15000. Khatri men shave their head and keep beard, and look wise same as other Kutchi Muslim. They follow the Sunnis faith and follow the ordinary Sunni Maulvis. Their customs do not differ from other Sunnis. They speak Kutchi language and used Gujarati script. In the social life marriages is performed as per Shariat (Muslim Law) for two days. Both joint and nuclear families are prevalent. In The Contemporary Kutch development of Handicrafts industry brings huge transformation in the life of Khatri. The economic prosperity also increases their social status and changes in the position of woman. At present Khatri women enjoy comparatively higher status in comparison to her counterparts of other Muslim communities¹¹. She has the right of inheritance and her advice is sought and mostly followed in socio-religious activities of the household. She plays an active role in ritual activities of the community. Wherever the Khatri are found in a considerably good number they form caste council called Khatri Jamat at local level only. The caste council is organized by on Agrasar or Patel or Whyvati (President) and four other members to deal with problems like solving disputes and divorce cases. They take care of formal education of the children and making sincere efforts to raise the income of the community members through their traditional occupation. The caste council is registered with Wakf Board of Gujarat State. They celebrate all the five important festivals. viz, Idul-Zuha, Moharram, Milad-Un-Nabi and Gyarme in accordance with Islamic traditions.

Kutch is considered to be a haven for numerous handicrafts, which are carried on from generation to generation. The traditional basis of its prosperity has been its foreign trade in various handicrafts. The artifacts of Kutch moved not only the length and breadth of the country but also in the overseas market. The main handicrafts of the district are Embroidery of ethnic style, Mud Craft, Textile Craft Patchwork, Terracotta, Pen knives and Woodan craft, Tribal craft and etc. Amongst this Khatri community is very much famous for Printing Craft. There three main system of printing craft that was developed by the Khatri.¹²

BANDHANI - Bandhani is age old traditional craft of Kutch and Khatri community can be said to be preceptors of this craft. Khatri are involved in this art for the last 400 yrs. Bandhanis are very closely associated with deep rooted social customs of India and symbol of married life. Bandhani is also called as 'Bandhej' came originally from the word 'Bandhana' (to tie). Today, most of the Bandhani produced in India is made in Kutch, Saurashtra and in other neighboring Districts. In this craft the cloth is first tied with small thread at different places giving it a particular design. Then this cloth is dipped in coloured water. When this coloured cloth is dried then the threads are loosened and opened which ultimately results in final designed cloth raw material which can be used for different purposes. Bandhani is used in main products like sarees, Punjabi dresses, cloth, skirts and shawls etc. Tie-dye Odhanis are produced in cotton, silk and georgette. Mandvi, Bhuj, Khavda, Dhamanka, Tera, Bara and Anjar are main centres of tie-dye.¹³

AJRAKH PRINTING - Sindh is the birthplace of Ajrak. The word 'Ajrakh' means 'keep it today'. Men use it as a turban, a cummerbund and also wind it around their shoulders. Women use it as a dupatta, a chaddar or as a shawl. The authentic Ajrak is printed on both sides by a method known as resist printing. Several different blocks are used to give the characteristic repeated patterning. The block maker uses compass and a ruler for precision while making the graphs for the patterns, as their balance has to be perfect. Block making, which is a family craft that has been passed down from generation to generation, is a considerable challenge as the pattern has to fit perfectly with the whole of the Ajrak as well as cover various areas against dye. The entire process of printing Ajrak thus involves 13 stages that are inevitably more expensive to produce.¹⁴ Dhamrdka and Ajrakhpur is one of the most important centres of this crafts¹⁵.

ROGAN ART - It is an ancient skill with its origins in Persia, came down to Kutch around 400 years ago by Khatri. Traditionally, the craft was pursued to beautify bridal clothing of the regional tribes, beautiful borders and floral patterns on Ghagras, odhni and bead. spre. Because of its rare qualities, it's practiced by only one family in India and they reside in Jura and Nirona village in Gujarat. Most of the other artisans have lost their art as it was not passed on during partition or lost from generation to generation. Rogan art is currently the bread earner for a family of Khatri.¹⁶

During Last century there were in many remarkable changes in the Industries. My personal interview with Dr. Ismail Khatri and Ismail Haji Khatri and other Entrepreneur give me useful details regarding the development of these industries. I broadly classified this development in two categories (1) Before 1970 and (2) After 1970. Before 1970 Very few people were engaged in these industries mostly from the Khatri community but they only do the manual work while sales and investment were done by Shrivak and Vaishnav Vanias¹⁷. Most of the profit were collected by this class while the position of the Khatri who engage in this field not very satisfactory. The consumption is also entirely for the local community and no scope large scale production and export. Other important of features was disappearance of Hindu Khatri community from these industries. Dr. Ismail Khatri describes lot of reason for this disappearance of Hindu Khatri community. He attributes low profit and hard work responsible for them to shifts their business and they migrated at many place during the 19th

century. He also told that up to the 1845 A.D natural dyes were used by the artisans in the production but latter on chemical dyes were introduced. This chemical dye created many problem of health like skin diseases and asthma for the artisans. It resulted in disappearance Hindu Khatri from this field. After the Partition this Industries loose the charms. Introduction of synthetic cloth and factory-produced polyester in 1970s created big problem for this industries. Initially synthetic was a comparatively expensive, exclusive item, which was very often brought from the gulf countries by returning migrant workers who were attracted by its sheen and lurid colors. Latter on with development of Textile industries in Surat and Ahmadabad made this cloth very cheap and also widely available¹⁸. Arrival of factory-produced polyester versions of cloth eradicated the market for Bandhani (tie-dye), Ajrakh and other block-printed textiles; this led towards miserable condition for artisans and so many left this work.¹⁹

During the second phase or after 1970 there were huge transformations of these industries. Establishment of Gujarat State Handicraft Development Corporation (GSHDC) in 1973 A.D. and involvement of NGO became explosion for these industries. Gujarat State Handloom & Handicrafts Development Corporation Ltd. (GSHDC) is an undertaking of Government of Gujarat with the main objective of identification, revival, development of handicrafts and handlooms of Gujarat. It also provides marketing support to the artisans/weavers by way of procuring the products and selling through its chain of Garvi-Gurjari emporia. Other objective of this institution was to organize exhibitions for selling and creating awareness of handloom, handicrafts among perspective buyers. It also provide assistance to the artisans/weavers in the field of design development also started to arrange training programme for skill up-gradation in various crafts and weaving techniques to produce the products. During late Eighties and Nineties was arrival of NGO further consolidated and expanded the handicrafts industry. They provided input in terms of design and product development, and marketing. These NGO are Shrujan²⁰, Kutch Mahila Vikash Sangathan²¹, Kala Raksha²², Sewa²³, KHAMIR²⁴ crafts resource many other. Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan (KNNA)²⁵ has established Common Resource Centre (CRC) with prim eobjective to facilitate a sustainable recovery for the artisans. Centre provides need based support to NGOs working in the craft sector, such as design/ technical marketing inputs and support systems etc. Centre facilitated the buyer-seller relationship by linking international and national buyers to various artisans. This NGO play important role in advertising this handicraft in all over the world. Some of NGO established many emporia to sell this product in city and popularize this craft. Total around 32000 artisans work in this industry.

Major Centre of Khatri community for this Industries

(1) Dhamakada- It is village of Muslim Khatri artisans who will print ajarakh with natural dyes. The Geometrical and abstract motifs emulate those found in Islamic influenced Indian Architecture. One of the interviewer Dr. Ismail Haji Hhati, Abdul Razzaq and Abdul Jabbar Khatri (His work has been recognized by UNESCO with its Seal of Excellence for Handicrafts Award, both in 2006 and 2007) were the artisans of this village. After the earthquake, part of the printer community has rehabilitated in new settlement in closer to Bhuj called as Ajrakhpur²⁶.

(2) Ajrakhpur – It is new village established by our interviewer Dr. Ismail Haji Khatri who has been awarded an honorary Ph.D degree by de Montfort university for his knowledge of Natural dyes practices. This Village now became hub of artisans practicing traditional hand block printing in the resist technique on cotton/silk. There were other artisans like Abdul Raheem Buddha, Abdul Rahim, Abdul Gani Hasan live in this village²⁷. Shurjan also open his centre at here.

(3) Jura and Nirona - It is village near Bhuj of Rogan artisan mostly are khatri community. Abdul Gafur khatri was famous artisans other artisans like haji vali mohamad for his copper bells and mala khimisa for transform wood with bright lacquer colors²⁸.

(4) Bhuj – It is capital city of Kutch and one of the most important market for handicrafts industries. All the major have NGO have out late for selling their production. The Khatri vaas of Bhuj also known for this industry. There is lot of shop and production center established by the Entrepreneurs of Khatri Community²⁹. It is also Center for export in foreign County.

(5) Mandvi – It is famous for ship building industry and one of the important and old centres for khatri migratory. In the 16th century from here the Migration of Khatri population to other area were took place. Still there lot of Khatri Entrepreneurs have Out let and production centre³⁰. Some Entrepreneurs of Hindu Khatri also have their out let and production centre.

(6) Anjar- It is one of the oldest city of Kutch. Khatri artisans were famous for their skill. Many outlets send their production different country. This was the centre of bhandanhi art.³¹

(7) Mundra – It is city of seafarer's Kanji Malam. There lot of artisan and Entrepreneurs play important role in this city. Da-wood kaka a national award winner known for his elaborate Bandhani designs³².

(8) Khavda – It is situated in dessert called as small ran of kutch. It is also one of the important centre for this industries. It also known Ajarakh printing.³³

Earthquake and Handicraft industry – Earthquake of 1956 A.D. and 2001 A.D. also affected this community and his industry. In 1956 A.D. During Anjar earthquake major two communities Mistry and Khatri became Major victim. The epicenter of earth quake is near the Khatri vaas, this resulted in loss of men and material. Ultimately Government established new settlement for this victim near Anjar called as New Anjar³⁴, but Khatri communities not left their place expect few. They continue in to live and work in Khtari vaas. The Earthquake of 2001 was most distracted for them. In Anjar only 62 Khatri were died in Khatri vaas. Our of the interviewer also lost his 6 family member in this earth quake. All over the Kutch this earthquake resulted in loss of man and material. Most of

these small industries in village have received the aid from Gujarat Government and other social and private sectors. The earth quake was happen on 26th January but within the 5 days Reliance Industry³⁵ build 10 shed for these artisans to work. Government also gave aid by to seting up revolving fund of Rs.15.00 crores for working capital assistance, and institute a subsidized loan scheme for self-employed groups and cottage industries and also provide assistance up to Rs. 24,000 for handicraft and self-employed artisans to buy tool kits. Niranjn Shah³⁶, an exporter of Kutchi handicrafts, "The earthquake relief work meant more exposure of the Kutchi handicrafts before outsiders, particularly foreigners who had come as part of rehabilitation efforts. And that had meant enhanced sales. Meera Goradia, of the Crafts Resource Centre, an NGO helping Kutchi craftsmen: "Things are truly bright for most craftsmen of Kutch. In fact, Kutch is a brand now when it comes to crafts, particularly those to do with textiles." Shah estimates that the annual Kutch handicraft business has doubled. According to The winds of change blowing in Kutch came to the fore recently in Tundwandh village where models exhibited the textiles produced by local Kutchi craftswomen in a fashion show held in the presence of members of the Crafts Council of India. The models displayed the garments with the famous Kutchi embroidery work and also walked the ramp with Kutchi designers in the form of rural Kutchi women.

Conclusion

There were many migratory people living in Kutch among them Khatri successfully converted themselves from artisans to Entrepreneurs. Today there are the backbones of the handicraft industries of Kutch. This development also play important role in economical prosperity of the people and also increase the living standard of the people. They also successfully come out from the natural calamity of earthquake 2001 without much Damage. Henceforth with help of NGOs and Government and their inner strength they successfully established themselves as Entrepreneurs.

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