

INFLUENCE OF SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS ON CRAFT SKILLS OF PATTU WEAVERS OF BARMER, RAJASTHAN

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ABSTRACT

Pattu weaving is a traditional craft practiced by Meghwal community in desert region of western Rajasthan mainly in Barmer, Jaisalmer, Bikaner districts. It is an integral part of their social and cultural living that well balances utility with decoration. It was earlier made from locally available wool that helped in protecting from extreme cold in winters and at the same time symbolized the colourful clothing traditions of local communities using it. Pattu weavers, as a part of larger eco-system, have adapted to the changing socio-cultural environment and their craft skills have also evolved according to the social setting and the end-market. The same gets reflected in the design and quality of pattu they weave. This paper assesses the social and cultural factors that have significantly influenced the skills of pattu weavers of Barmer, thus resulting in design evolution of pattu.

KEYWORDS: *Communities, Design, Meghwal, Pattu, Weaving*

Article History

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INTRODUCTION

Pattu weaving is a local craft of desert region of Rajasthan and the craft is practised by Meghwal community. They are considered to be occupying the lowest status in the social hierarchy among the local communities (Mathur 1986) and are currently classified as scheduled caste by Rajasthan state government. According to Singh (1891), many Meghwals draw their ancestral reference from Rajputs, Jats, Brahmins and Charans; the probable reason for lower ranking in social hierarchy being (i) marriage with lower caste woman, (ii) declared untouchable on lifting of cow carcass (iii) accepting food or water from a Meghwal (iv) hiding for life from Muslim rulers after being defeated. They are also known as Bambi (Singh, 1891). Meghwals are Hindu by religion and are spread over the desert region, both in India and Pakistan. Meghwals were mainly involved in cultivation and hand crafts – leather work, shoe-making, leather tanning, wool spinning and weaving of blankets (Sehgal 2002; Bhagat 2004; Munshi et. al. 1992; Nath & Wacziarg 1987). They used to get involved in weaving during drought time when farming activities could not be done; however over centuries they lost their land to upper caste and weaving became their main means of livelihood. According to Census 1891, more Meghwals were into weaving comparable to leather work (Singh 1891). They wove cloth for the basic needs of the local communities and were paid in kind (Bhagat 2004). Pattu weaving was an important source of sustenance for them. The skills of Pattu weavers have evolved with time as a matter of changing socio-cultural factors. There have been significant happenings that have marked the transition in their pattern of weaving resulting in changes in design of pattu.

METHODOLOGY

This research was explorative in nature. This research had to be conducted in the real world setting and the primary data was collected from the field for there was no prior literature available on the same. Qualitative research approach was taken to get in-depth understanding and analysis of the various factors contributing to the change in skills of Pattu weavers of Barmer. The sampling method was snowball probability sampling method to be able to reach out to people who had relevant information with regard to research topic.

The data was collected through in-depth face-to-face interviews of forty Pattu weavers from different locations in Barmer district. Their interview transcripts were categorized as young, middle-aged and old weavers to assess the skill levels in different time periods and the changes that took place with time. Interviews of people from other communities with varying backgrounds, areas of work and locations, including those who had migrated from Pakistan were taken to revalidate the findings. The work images and documents of designers who had worked with pattu weavers in the last decade and worked on craft design intervention were also collected.

The data when compiled and analyzed, gave a view of the changes in pattu designs over time period of about seventy years and henceforth, changes in weaving skills of the weavers with the evolving market. The transcripts of pattu weavers from different age groups- above 75 years, 60-75 years, 40-60 years and below 40 years were prepared to understand the pattu designs they wove/ weave and the transitions they witnessed. The qualitative analysis of the transcripts helped in relating social and economic factors to the change in craft skills with time.

RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

There was a general agreement that traditionally pattu referred to wool blanket that was woven in two panels, hand-stitched width-wise and each having border on one side. It was made from hand-spun wool obtained from sheep that were reared by locals for food and wool. It was woven in natural wool colours. Pattu is woven by Meghwals and it is used by people of all communities. It is used in winters to protect from desert cold. Pattu is an integral part of marriages in this area. Pattus are gifted to bridegroom and other elder male relatives by the bride's father and the ceremony is called 'Odhavani'. This is to mark respect to the other person.

The findings that emerged from the transcripts of people of Meghwal community are:

Maru Meghwal above 75 Years of Age

Plain pattu were woven and used with borders lengthwise as well as width-wise. There were some rib stripes & designs at the width-wise borders. They mainly wove Bardi, Hiravali pattu, Sada pattu, Lunkar. The raw-material was locally procured and prepared, and pattus were woven in natural wool colours.

Meghwal Weavers 60-75 Years of Age

According to them, woven designs in pattu started with their generation. Though most weavers practiced weaving plain and simple pattus, some were involved with URMUL in its training programme and claim to have started weaving extra-weft designs in their area. The changes in pattu weaving they could recount for were - - Desi local wool replaced by cotton and other qualities of wool (natural as well as synthetic); reduced size of pattu and availability in bright colours. Motifs were inspired from things around and embroidery from Pakistan. Sada, Hiravali, Bardi, Chatri-Kangsia, Lunkar Pattu were different types of pattu they wove. Chatri-Kangsia has extra-weft designs.

Meghwal Weavers 40-60 Years of Age

They have experienced lot of transition in pattu weaving but the end-product has remained to be pattu blanket/ shawl. They all have done weaving of chatri-kangsia pattu. Some claim to have started extra-weft designing, and some have learnt it from neighbourhood or from their elders. Their grandfather/ father wove plain pattu. The changes in pattu in their times were – Desi local wool replaced by cotton and other qualities of wool (natural as well as synthetic); reduced pattu size and availability in bright colours. They have majorly catered to the local demands of pattu; some are connected to Khadi (Jaisalmer) or Urmul

Meghwal Weavers less than 40 Years of Age

Some of the weavers of this age group have adapted to pattu - inspired fabric weaving and some continue to make pattus. They are more connected to outside buyers and feel local demand for pattu is not motivating. They have seen Chatri-kangsia pattu since childhood. They weave pattu as well as pattu inspired products such as cotton fabric, sarees, stoles, dupattas with extra-weft designs. They are open to experimentation in terms of material, design, colours, method of production, end-product. They have modified looms to be able to develop newer products. Newer motif designs are inspired from traditional Chatri-Kangsia pattu motifs; these are either copied as such or modified. In some work orders, designs are given by buyers. They are trained to work on fine yarn counts of wool and cotton (up-to 2/1020's cotton yarn). This started from 2010 onwards. Raw-material for making pattu is purchased ready from the market or supplied by buyer.

Dhati People -Migrated to India during India-Pakistan Wars in 1965 and 1971

Pattu with designs were woven in Pakistan; these had intricate patterns of designs. There were phuni designs with stripes in between. Pattus woven in India were plain and simple when they came here. Weavers in Barmer learnt and copied designs from them. They do not have pattus of the time they were in Pakistan – pattus were either thrown away as they got damaged or were used in rallis.

DISCUSSIONS

The skills of Pattu weavers have evolved with the changing social, cultural and economic environment. It is clearly reflected in the pattu products they made traditionally and the ones they are producing now. The important factors that have brought in a change in pattu weaving skills are (i) migration and settlement of Dhati pattu weavers during and after India-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971 (ii) work by URMUL in adjoining districts of Jaisalmer, Bikaner and Jodhpur post economic liberalization of 1991 (iii) organized weaver trainings in Barmer by Rangсутra post 2010 (iv) design trainings and interventions by designers and organizations.

The pattu weavers made plain and simple pattus before the pattu weaver migrants from Pakistan settled in Barmer. These were rectangular blankets with borders on all side



Figure 1: Pattu With Plain And Simple Designs – Sada And Hiravali Pattu

Before independence, Barmer came under the jurisdiction of Jodhpur and was quite neglected and isolated due to unstable political environment. Post independence, the pace of development in Barmer was quite slow and there was not any significant change in the living or clothing of people. In effort to promote the local crafts, cooperatives were set-up but pattu weavers could not benefit or connect to external markets. The local fairs continued to be the main selling points for the weavers. From 1960 onwards, local demand started dwindling as the men in towns were shifting to western outfits; trousers and shirts were preferred over traditional attire for offices. The limited connectivity to other parts of the country and poor economic condition of the district led to static state of the craft and thus craft skills. The weaving of these pattus was in simple plain or twill weaves in the absence of any external cultural influence.

Pattu Weavers Post India-Pakistan Wars

The infiltration and settlement of people from across the border brought in changes in social demography and cultural mix of the region (SURE NGO). The statistical data in the table below implies that there was phenomenal growth in 1971-81 decade and it majorly constituted scheduled caste and tribe.

Table 1: Decadal Growth Rate in Barmer

Decades	Total SC/ST	Others
1961-71	51.11	17.95
1971-81	85.12	43.32
1981-91	76.50	26.91
1991-01	78.04	36.55

Source: Statistical Abstract of Rajasthan, 2005. (Cited in IDS UNDP report, 2009)

These migrants were referred to as *Dhati* for they had moved from Dhat division of Thar desert. Meghwals and Charans among these communities had exquisite hand embroidery and patchwork traditions. The Meghwals from Sindh region were familiar to extra weft weaving and taking a cue from this technique, and inspired by embroideries, weavers started to weave motifs in extra weft technique in pattu.

The ornamental pattu from Barmer became famous as Chatri Kangsia pattu due to motifs by these names. The weft borders had rib stripes and the body had rows of motifs either spread over complete body surface or towards the borders. The extra weft motifs are inspired by objects in the surroundings. The pattu with motifs woven all over came to be known as 'Mallani' pattu as it is historical name for Barmer.



Figure 2: Mallani Pattu and Close-up of Extra-Weft Motifs

Pattu Weaving– Post Economic Reforms in 1991

In 1991, Indian Government liberalized the economic policies as part of conditions laid by World Bank and IMF in order to provide economic support to the country. The policy changes led to reduction in taxes and import tariffs, deregulation of markets, greater foreign investment making the economy more market and service oriented. Devaluation of Indian currency supported promotion of exports. Thus economic liberalization opened up new opportunities for the handicraft sector as well.

Meanwhile in the neighbouring district Bikaner, URMUL identified spinning and weaving as a potential means to sustainable livelihood and enhancing their family income, and Urmul Marusthali Bunkar Vikas Samiti (UMBVS) was formed in 1991 with the help of URMUL Trust. Bikaner being one of the biggest wool market in India, wool spinning and weaving was an obvious option. It invited skilled traditional pattu weavers from the adjoining areas and started training camp at Lunkaransar (Bikaner) to train youths (not from traditional weaver family) for extra-weft pattu weaving. NID students were engaged to come up with designs that were in sync with the market requirement. This gave boost to the expert weavers who were struggling to keep up their work in the changing market scenario. After few years, the training facility was expanded to Phalodi, Jodhpur. The UMBVS initiative gave new dimension and contemporary outlook to pattu weaving.

Some pattu weavers of Barmer got connected with UMBV and Khadi (Jaisalmer) and worked for them. They were given yarns and they did weaving on job-work. Some weavers relocated to these centres and worked there. The pattu weavers started working with alternate materials, cotton and merino wool, which are softer and preferred over Desi wool, With easy process of dyeing with synthetic dyes, the colours became more vibrant and varied as per the market. The number of such weavers was small and till 2010 there was not much movement in the region.

Pattu Weavers over the Last Decade

Rangсутra played a pivotal role in promotion and evolution of this desert craft. The major transition happened in 2010 when Sh. Muggaram from Rangсутra tried to connect Barmer weavers to their artisan network and train some of young weavers to work on finer cotton counts. Many trainings were conducted in association with local weaver, Sh. Modaram of Dhanau, They trained around 200 weavers to work on 2/52 cotton count Many of the young weavers pushed themselves further to work on up to 2/100 cotton count and made stoles and sarees inspired by technique and designs of pattu. Weaver Modaram is to be awarded Nation Merit Award for his contribution in this regard.

The looms were modified in the process and the concept of working for an organization grew stronger. A weaving facility was set by Rangсутra in Dhanau in 2015, which got later closed in 2018 due to internal conflicts. Few ambitious young weavers have opened up their own centres and work for organizational orders.

Apart from this, Government organizations have conducted design trainings for weavers to help them come up with market oriented products. Designer Bibi Russell has worked with Barmer weavers for Rajasthan Heritage Week 2015 and 2017. She gave a contemporary look to the designs, colours and products.

The young weavers are adapting fast to the requirements of the external buyers bringing in a swift change in the craft and the weavers who are not able to upgrade their skills are slowly dying out.



Figure 3: Saree Inspired by Pattu, Woven for Rangсутra



Figure 4: Design Woven by Pattu Weaver in Training Conducted by Weavers Service Centre, Ministry of Textiles



Figure 5: Rajasthan Heritage Week 2015 & 2017 – Bibi Russell

CONCLUSIONS

The Pattu weavers of Barmer have adapted their weaving skills along with the changing social-cultural environment. The influence is evident with the change in designs in pattu weaving. Significant development of craft skill occurred after pattu weavers from Sind migrated and settled in border districts of Rajasthan after India-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971. Economic liberalization post 1991 had major influence in the adjoin districts which indirectly impacted the weaving

proficiency to some extent. The craft skills of the pattu weavers have evolved swiftly in the last decade for there is complete transition in the pattu ecosystem. They no longer cater to the local requirement utilizing local resources but work for the external market. The young weavers have adapted themselves to the new market requirement.

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