

The Sociocultural strain on traditional crafts - and the generational shift: A case study of Dhaka's Biharis

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ABSTRACT

The traditional crafts of the Bihari community in Dhaka, particularly the making of Benarasi sarees, are under significant threat due to economic and cultural pressures. This craft has historically been integral to both the identity and livelihood of the Bihari people, passed down through generations as a form of cultural expression and income. However, the rise of mass-produced goods and global market dynamics have reduced demand for handmade products, undermining the viability of artisanal work. Economic challenges are compounded by shifting consumer preferences for cheaper, modern alternatives, while the younger generation, increasingly educated and attracted to more secure career paths, shows little interest in continuing the craft. As a result, the transmission of traditional skills is increasingly at risk, and the community faces a cultural transformation where artisanal work is increasingly viewed as economically unsustainable. This paper explores whether the economic decline and cultural shift pose a threat to the future of this traditional craft and, if so, how significant that threat is.

KEYWORDS - Bihari, Generational shift, Minorities, Traditional craft

1. INTRODUCTION

The traditional crafts of the Bihari (refers to the people from the state of Bihar, India) community in Dhaka, like many other artisanal practices in South Asia, are facing significant economic and cultural pressures, reflecting broader global trends that threaten their survival. Historically, this craft of making Benarasi (refers to something related to Banaras, a city in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India; often synonymously used as Benarasi Saree in Bangladesh. Saree refers to a traditional South Asian garment for ladies) Saree has been a vital part of Bihari identity and livelihood, passed down through generations as both a source of income and cultural expression. However, with the rise of mass-produced goods and the increasing influence of global markets, the demand for hand-crafted products has diminished, placing traditional artisans at a precarious crossroads. Economic strain is compounded by shifting consumer preferences, which favor modern, cheaper alternatives over the time-intensive labor of traditional craftsmanship. This situation is further exacerbated by socio-economic changes within the Bihari community itself, where younger generations, often educated in more formal institutions, are increasingly opting for employment in more secure and remunerative sectors, such as in the garment industry or administrative roles. As a result, the transmission of craft skills to the next generation has become more challenging, with fewer young people willing to inherit the trade. The generational shift from artisan work to more urbanized career paths also signals a cultural transformation, where traditional practices, once central to community life, are increasingly viewed as economically unviable. This dual strain—economic and cultural—threatens not only the survival of the crafts themselves but also the very cultural fabric of the Bihari community, raising important questions about how traditional skills can adapt to contemporary economic realities while preserving cultural heritage.

2. BACKGROUND

The Indian Independence Act of 1947, which led to the creation of India and Pakistan, was influenced by the two-nation theory, where religion was the primary dividing line between the two newly formed nations. While Muslims in the Indian subcontinent were concentrated in the territories that became Pakistan (comprising both West and East Pakistan), their geographic separation by 2,000 km, with India in between, posed significant challenges.

The substantial cultural differences between the two territories also did not help. The initial enthusiasm for independence and religious separation was short-lived, as the complexities of religious, political, and cultural divisions soon became apparent.

A major consequence of partition was the mass migration of minorities, particularly Muslims from India to Pakistan, and Hindus from Pakistan to India, resulting in the displacement of 10-12 million people and sparking a refugee crisis [1]. Among the affected groups were the Biharis, Muslims from the Indian state of Bihar who sought refuge in East and West Pakistan. Initially, their migration was not viewed negatively by the people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), as the influx of Muslims was seen as a part of the new nation's consolidation [2]. The Biharis, skilled in various professions, contributed significantly to the local economy. However, their presence became contentious due to cultural and linguistic differences, as they spoke Urdu, which was imposed as the national language of Pakistan, unlike the Bangla language spoken by the majority in East Pakistan.

Over time, tensions between the Biharis and Bengalis escalated, particularly with the rise of the Bengali nationalist movement in East Pakistan. The Biharis, who identified more closely with West Pakistan due to their language and cultural ties, supported the central government's position during the Bengali struggle for independence. This led to their alienation and widespread animosity from the Bengali population. In 1971, during the Bangladesh Liberation War, many Biharis sided with the Pakistani military, further deepening the rift between them and the local population. Following the war, the Biharis were regarded with suspicion and resentment, as many had supported the West Pakistani forces, which led to their marginalization [3].

After the creation of Bangladesh, the Biharis found themselves in a state of limbo, with many unwilling to accept Bangladeshi citizenship and others being denied Pakistani citizenship, rendering them stateless. The New Delhi Agreement of 1973, which aimed to address the plight of stateless persons, resulted in Pakistan agreeing to accept 170,000 Biharis. However, the repatriation process was slow, and many Biharis remained in Bangladesh, stateless and without a clear national identity, despite efforts by various political figures to address the issue [4].

In Bangladesh, approximately 300,000 Biharis, a linguistic minority primarily speaking Urdu, live in 116 refugee camps. Known locally by various terms, including "non-Bengalis," "Biharis," and "Urdu speakers," this community's citizenship status was officially recognized by the High Court of Bangladesh in 2008, which designated them as "Urdu-speaking Bangladeshis." Despite this recognition, they are not classified as a linguistic minority within the country. The majority of the camp residents have lived in these settlements for over four decades, enduring conditions often described as subhuman [5].

The community faces significant social and economic marginalization, particularly in employment. Biharis are systematically excluded from public sector jobs, and even those who manage to secure formal employment face discrimination in terms of salary and treatment, primarily due to their ethnicity and uncertain legal status. Consequently, most Biharis are relegated to the informal economy, where they perform low-paying jobs such as rickshaw pulling, driving, butchering, barbing, and mechanics [6].

This population also struggles with limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, all of which are exacerbated by state-level discrimination, a phenomenon not uncommon in several other parts of the world under similar circumstances. The economic activities of the Biharis are mostly confined to their settlements, with many engaging in small-scale businesses or day labor [7]. Common occupations include food vending, operating small eateries, and crafting goods such as handicrafts, sequined items, and Karchupi (refers to a type of traditional embroidery). Among these, the craft of making Benarasi sarees is particularly notable, and outsiders often identify the community through this unique skill.

The Biharis did not initially possess the skill of Benarasi saree crafting when they migrated to Bangladesh; rather, it emerged as a pragmatic adaptation to their socio-economic circumstances, where survival was at stake. This form of adaptation can be likened to the process of mutation observed in certain species, which evolve in response to new environmental challenges [8]. In this context, the development of specific skills by marginalized groups is often a strategic response to limited access to broader opportunities available to the dominant majority. As a minority group, the Biharis faced exclusion from many sectors of the job market, necessitating the cultivation of this specialized skill to overcome their social and economic disadvantages [9].

A comparable situation occurred with Vietnamese immigrants in California, who, upon identifying a gap in the labor market, predominantly filled the emerging demand for nail salon workers. This does not imply that all Vietnamese immigrants, or all Vietnamese in general, are limited to this one skill, nor does it suggest that they displaced native workers. Rather, it reflected a strategic response to their marginalized status, where access to diverse job opportunities was restricted, and their focus on a specific industry was a means of survival [10].

It is important to note, however, that, unlike the Biharis, the Vietnamese immigrants, in this case, had greater geographic mobility, allowing them to seek employment in various locations. In contrast, the Biharis' confinement to specific camps limited their options, making the development of a particular skill, such as Benarasi saree crafting, their primary means of economic survival.

Often, a call to preserve traditional crafts is framed as a cultural imperative for restoration or safeguarding. However, without the necessary economic and political infrastructure to protect skilled workers both socially and economically, the survival of a particular craft remains uncertain. In the case of the Bihari minority, it is even more likely that the skill will fade within a generation or two, as it was not inherited, but rather adopted as a strategic means of adaptation. Their current attachment to the craft, which may have provided some degree of social inclusion and recognition, could dissipate as economic pressures resurface.

Nevertheless, previous study highlights a positive aspect of the transition: during this period of generational change, when part of the community continues to practice the traditional skill while others seek new professions, the process facilitates broader social integration. The involvement in this skilled labor has, at least in part, contributed to the Biharis' social inclusion and recognition, creating a pathway for their eventual integration into the wider community. But, the future of this traditional craftsmanship in upcoming generations remains an unresolved issue, raising critical questions about its sustainability. This uncertainty forms the basis of the research inquiry for this study: Will the craft endure over time? What is the significance of preserving this skill within the context of evolving socio-economic conditions? Furthermore, if the younger generation does not continue the craft, to what extent can responsibility be attributed to the individuals themselves, and to what degree should broader systemic or cultural factors be held accountable?

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this study follows an ethnographic research method, which is particularly suited for exploring the nuanced, personal experiences and perspectives of artisans regarding the future of their traditional crafts. Central to this approach are open-ended questions that allow for in-depth responses and provide rich, detailed insights into the participants' views and concerns. The first question, "Are your children interested in this craft, why or why not?" seeks to uncover the factors influencing the intergenerational transmission of craft skills, focusing on both intrinsic motivations and external influences such as economic pressures, societal norms, and shifting cultural values. This question aims to explore the perceptions of artisans about the role of family in sustaining traditional craftsmanship and the challenges faced in passing down these skills. The second question, "How do you feel about the possibility of this craft becoming extinct in the future?" delves into the emotional and cultural implications of the potential decline of these traditional practices. By asking participants to reflect on the future of their craft, this question facilitates a deeper understanding of their sense of cultural identity and the broader socio-economic factors that contribute to the erosion of artisanal trades. Through these open-ended inquiries, the study seeks to capture a range of perspectives on the sustainability of traditional crafts, the challenges to their preservation, and the personal and collective stakes involved in maintaining such skills across generations.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Sustainability concerns of traditional crafts in a globalized market

Biharis, in general, harbor concerns about the sustainability of the craft in future generations due to the potential decline in income. This apprehension is compounded by the broader economic pressures facing traditional artisans in an increasingly globalized market, where shifts in consumer preferences and the volatility of supply chains, exacerbated by crises such as the pandemic, can undermine local craftsmanship. While the surge in demand for Benarasi sarees during the pandemic and due to the closure of the border has provided temporary respite, their concerns highlight a deeper tension between the survival of heritage skills and the financial viability of artisanal labor.

Rahima, a skilled karchupi craftsman, resides in a modest two-room dwelling with her family of four. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, Rahima's family relies on the income generated from their craftsmanship. The demand for Benarasi sarees has surged during these times, as the closure of borders limits the import of

fabrics. Rahima's son has embraced the art, learning the craft from his mother. However, Rahima harbors concern about the sustainability of the craft in future generations due to the potential decline in income.

The transition of her son into the craft may offer a sense of continuity, but it also raises questions about the long-term economic prospects for such traditional crafts, especially as global trade dynamics and local economic conditions continue to evolve. Thus, the sustainability of crafts like karchupi not only depends on the preservation of technical knowledge but also on the establishment of a more stable and equitable market environment that can ensure the financial security of artisans and their families in future generations.

4.2. The Socioeconomic pressures and cultural dilemmas confronting traditional craftsmanship

The Biharis acknowledge the diminishing demand for traditional designs and are grappling with the challenge of keeping the craft alive amidst changing consumer preferences. This challenge reflects a broader trend in the artisan sector, where the shift toward mass-produced goods and modern aesthetics has significantly eroded the market for time-honored craftsmanship.

Md. Javed, another dedicated artisan, earns a monthly income between 20-25k (200 – 250 US\$) through his skills in tanti work. His two sons have chosen different career paths—one working in a garments factory, the other as a household guard. Javed acknowledges the diminishing demand for traditional designs and is grappling with the challenge of keeping the craft alive amidst changing consumer preferences.

While Javed's income from his tanti (refers to a Benarasi craftsman) work provides some financial stability, the evolving tastes of consumers, particularly younger generations, have created a disconnect between traditional artisanship and contemporary consumer demands. The fact that his sons have opted for careers outside of the craft—one in a garments factory and the other as a household guard—further underscores the economic pressures driving families away from artisanal trades in favor of more secure and higher-paying jobs. This intergenerational shift is emblematic of a larger societal transformation where traditional livelihoods are increasingly seen as economically unviable, a concern that threatens the long-term survival of unique cultural practices like tanti work. The diminishing demand for these traditional designs, therefore, poses a critical question for the future of artisanal crafts: how can such traditions be preserved in a way that aligns with both cultural heritage and contemporary economic realities?

4.3. Intergenerational craftsmanship: navigating tradition and economic realities

The dynamic of traditional craftsmanship being passed down to the next generation is evident in the Bihari families, showcasing the delicate balance between preserving heritage and adapting to contemporary demands. This intergenerational transfer of skills underscores a broader cultural trend where artisans strive to maintain the integrity of their craft while also navigating the economic realities of modern life.

Asma Begum, engaged in both household chores and karchupi work, has a son and a daughter. While her daughter has followed in her footsteps in the craft after completing SSC (Completion of High School), her son has become a household guard. The dynamic of traditional craftsmanship being passed down to the next generation is evident in Asma's family, showcasing the delicate balance between preserving heritage and adapting to contemporary demands.

Asma's daughter, following in her mother's footsteps, represents continuity in the tradition of karchupi work, while her son's decision to pursue a career outside the craft as a household guard reflects the growing trend of younger generations seeking more stable or lucrative employment opportunities. This shift in career choices points to the tension between cultural preservation and economic necessity, as traditional craftsmanship increasingly competes with modern labor markets that promise greater financial security. The challenge, therefore, lies in ensuring that these time-honored skills can remain viable in a rapidly changing world, where the survival of such crafts may depend on both adapting to new markets and fostering a sense of cultural pride and economic relevance among future generations.

4.3. Balancing tradition and modernity: the challenges facing the younger generation of artisans

The younger generation, having completed SSC (High school), faces the challenge of maintaining traditional practices in an ever-evolving world. This generational shift is exemplified in the diverse roles within their families, where, despite their shared foundation in the art of tanti, each member tries to carve out a distinct career path. While some continue in the traditional craft, others, the overall situation represents the broader tension between sustaining artisanal traditions and seeking opportunities in more financially secure or modern sectors. The collaborative nature of their shared living arrangement, however, illustrates the persistence of

familial bonds and the potential for collective action to preserve these crafts. Yet, the younger generation's pursuit of educational qualifications and alternative career paths signals the difficulty in balancing heritage with the demands of a globalized economy.

Jasim Ali, a tanti along with his four brothers, demonstrates the diversity within the artisan community. While some of his brother's work as tanti, one serves as a business owner, and another specializes in coloring fabrics. Their shared living arrangement underscores the collaborative nature of their craft. The younger generation, having completed SSC (High School), faces the challenge of maintaining traditional practices in an ever-evolving world.

As artisans like Jasim and his brothers navigate this balance, their experience reflects a broader societal challenge—how to ensure the survival of traditional craftsmanship amidst shifting economic structures and cultural expectations. The challenge for the younger generation, therefore, is not only the adaptation of artisanal work to contemporary realities but also the preservation of a sense of cultural identity in an increasingly modernized world.

5. CONCLUSION

The stories of Rahima, Md. Javed, Asma Begum, and Jasim Ali, and many others shed light on the intricate tapestry of traditional craftsmanship. While these artisans strive to pass down their skills to the next generation, the challenges of adapting to modern trends and economic uncertainties loom large. The future of crafts like karchupi hangs in the balance, requiring a delicate balance between preserving heritage and embracing change to ensure the continuity of these timeless traditions.

This presents a unique sociocultural dynamic in which minorities. Often facing marginalization and striving to survive, they engage with job markets that may be vacant in the communities around them. Initially, individuals of that community may not possess the requisite skills for these opportunities, leading to a process of trial and error. If they succeed, they may immerse themselves in the skill, often because the dominant majority is focused on other areas, as it provides a sense of safety and less competition. However, the financial returns from such efforts are uncertain; while there is potential for monetary stability, it is far from guaranteed, and in many cases, economic success does not materialize.

But for them, survival—rather than social mobility or recognition—becomes the primary concern. While gaining social recognition through skill acquisition can be an added bonus, this is not the initial motivation. Discrimination, particularly in the first generation, is a common experience, and social inclusion remains a significant challenge. Cultural differences, which in this case are mainly the language barriers, often hinder integration, further testing the adaptability of minority groups.

If financial stability is achieved, individuals may continue developing the skill, but if not, there is little incentive to persist in a craft that does not offer economic security, let alone ~~the~~ social inclusion. In such contexts, the attachment to a particular skill becomes a luxury, one that can be difficult to afford when more pressing financial concerns take precedence. In this specific case, despite possessing technical proficiency, members of the minority group were exploited by local politicians and policymakers who utilized their skills without offering corresponding social dignity or economic reward. This situation ultimately diminished the appeal of the craft for subsequent generations.

As new employment and entrepreneurial opportunities continue to expand, and as education provides younger generations with a broader range of options for economic participation, it becomes increasingly likely that they will move away from this traditional craft in the coming generations. This trend challenges the assumption that certain communities will persist in a particular skill or trade merely due to cultural inheritance. This is particularly evident among minority groups, where external socio-economic pressures and a lack of recognition can discourage the continuation of inherited skills.

The question of whether such skills should be preserved as cultural or national heritage is one that lies within the domain of state or local authorities, rather than the marginalized communities themselves. These groups, who often receive minimal economic or social benefit from the craft, are not inherently responsible for its preservation. If alternative opportunities present greater potential for financial advancement or social inclusion, it is highly probable that individuals will shift away from the traditional skills in favor of more lucrative or socially rewarding pursuits.

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