



## UNTYING THE KNOT OF *BHULIA* COMMUNITY: THE ARCHITECTS OF SAMBALPURI TEXTILE

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The western part of Odisha is famous throughout the world due to the richness in its textile. Such textile, is popularly known as 'Sambalpuri Textile' and is named after its place of origin 'Sambalpur'. Bhulia, Kustha and Ganda are the three major castes in Odisha who are found to be involved in this weaving business. Out of them Bhulias are skilled weavers and producers of superior quality of 'Sambalpuri Textile' using typical technique of 'Bandhakala'. Keeping this standpoint, the present study revolves around the untold stories of Bhulias, the architects of Sambalpuri Textile. It tries to explore the story behind their origin, their migration to Odisha and their culture which is as much beautiful and interesting as the textile they weave. It also tries to understand the typical technique they use to manufacture the handloom and find out the present situation of the caste group. Data have been collected from 50 Bhulias families of Barpali through semi-structured interview schedules and few voices have been recorded for a deeper understanding.*

*Bhulias being a migrated caste in the Western part of Odisha, consider themselves as caste with a very distinctive identity which they have achieved through their art in handloom and contribution to the textile. Government of Odisha has also extended its hand of support for*

*the people attached to this caste based occupation but the benefit is hardly percolating to the real beneficiaries. Moreover, the new generation Bhulias are losing their interest in this caste based occupation and occupational identity resulting into a new generation of Hybrid Bhulias who though bearing the surname Meher bear a very less knowledge related to their caste and traditional craft.*

**Keywords:** Sambalpuri Textile, Social Identity, Caste based occupation, Weaving, Occupational mobility

### **Introduction:**

Handloom sector contributes the largest unorganized sector in India after agriculture and essentially found to be a traditional one. Along with supporting the livelihood of semi rural and rural households it also represents the craftsmanship of Indian culture and forms the backbone of the rural economy (Seshadri 1978)<sup>1</sup>. It has recognition in India as well as abroad. According to Karunakaran, & Joseph Nelson (2002)<sup>2</sup>, even in the era of machine made clothes, handlooms have its place of perfection. To support the weavers Government introduce various programmes in various financial years to encourage the handloom sector. But in the time of faster weaving through power-loom and technology in mills, handloom and it's weaving facing scarcity of recourses and market. As a result this is affecting the economic conditions of weavers and they are facing loss

A tradition is also found to be attached to this industry where a generation inherits art from the preceding one. But the unfortunate fact which cannot be ignored is that, because of contributing only 11% to the textile industry, the weavers of this sector constitute the weaker and vulnerable section of the society. But if economic facts can be kept aside, the height of art and intricacy of design created in this handloom textile is unmatched to any machine woven design.

The western part of Odisha in India contributes to such intricacy of handloom and famous throughout the world for its textile. Such magnificent designs of textile is popularly known as 'Sambalpuri Textile' and named after its place of origin 'Sambalpur'. It is nothing but cotton fabric made out of "Ikkat" work which is popularly known as "tie and dye technique" and locally as '*Bandhakala*'. Bhulia, Kustha and Ganda are the three major castes in Odisha who are found to be involved in this weaving business. Out of them Bhulias are skilled weavers and producers of superior quality of cotton fabrics using this typical technique '*Bandhakala*'. Using this technique or '*Kala*' they make the best of Sambalpuri cotton clothes exhibiting

considerable taste in colour and variety of patterns. Even the coarsest cloths are woven with dainty border,

Bhulias domiciled in western part of Odisha in districts like; Sambalpur, Bargarh, Jharsuguda, Sundargarh, Bolangir, Boudh, Sonapur and mainly concentrated in the rural areas. According to the Bengal district gazetteers (1901) in Sambalpur there was 12,241 *Bhulias* present during 1901. The speciality about *Bhulias* is that, they are the migrated caste, having a distinct cultural life and unique method of weaving. They differ from other weaving castes in Odisha because of their different methods of weaving, unique designs and motifs. But it is quite unfortunate that, though the handloom they produce is appreciated worldwide, the creators behind this magnificent creation are being less recognized still now.

There are various de-motivational factors are there to be sufficient enough for discouraging these weaving community which gradually pushing them to occupational mobility in the recent era.

In his study Mishra (1994)<sup>13</sup> found that weavers of *Bhulia* community were more interested towards providing higher education to their children rather than engaging them in traditional occupation. These aspirations of achieving better through higher education motivate the children of weavers to move towards another occupation. As a response to that they found in a situation of occupational migration and settle in places where they found new opportunities for new profession. This implied towards the occupational mobility in the weaver community which, resemble with the concept of occupation mobility induce migration.

Thus though people worldwide have started appreciating the textile in the present time still the architects of such unique weaving materials are more or less ignored. Furthermore the eyebrow raising fact is that, with the new trend of globalization, occupational mobility and migration, the new generation among this weaving caste are also gradually getting disconnected with their origin and culture and as a result of which their social identity is in jeopardy.

### **Social Identity: Forming a Conceptual Framework**

The concept of identity is defined as various ways in many disciplines; it can be formed and can be given. Many times it depends on the social and cultural circumstances and on very process of socialization. Every individual has both personal and social identity. The Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, Turner, 1986)<sup>3</sup> explains that a part of a person or self is always

belongs to the group based identity. People adopt the group norms and behaviour to be as accepted members of it. These behaviours are passing on from one generation to another through the very process of socialization.

Stryker and Burke (2000)<sup>4</sup> described that; identity of an individual is formed by the effect of the socialization process at one hand and the continuous influence of social institutions such as family, the education system and mass media on the other, which also involves both elements of personal choice, circumstance, socio-cultural attitudes and environments. Social identity forms the cultural construct of a person, where as personal identity represent the personality in him/her. With the interplay of these two kinds of identity the individual identifies him/herself in the society. In India, caste based identity play a very important role for a person both in social and personal front. Usually this caste based identity generates from the class of occupation the generation is involved in. But with changing of time and development in social sectors, people change their occupations depending on the market demand neglecting their caste based occupation.

Caste identity or caste group affiliation may serve particular psychological functions for the self-concept and in some cases it may also provide feelings of belongingness and self-esteem. In light of that caste groups are social identity categories and individual social identities as caste group members become important through self-identifying as members of that caste (Tajfel, 1981, 1982)<sup>5</sup>. The person is born into the caste and holds the identity till death. But in due course of social change like migration and occupational mobility this process of identity formation can be affected. In case of group which recognize itself to a certain cased based occupation, where sources of livelihood is the main content of identity formation is often threatened by occupational mobility of its members.

### **Understanding Occupation Mobility & Migration: Some Important Reviews**

Migration not only enables change in cultural identity but also leads to occupational mobility. Occupational mobility often induces migration and sometimes the reverse can be happened. Occupational mobility has been considered important to societies where occupations and positions are fixed, set at birth, and are transmitted from father to child through rigid schemes. This left with little room for innovation and fulfilment either for the individual or group (Bourdieu et al., 2006)<sup>6</sup>.

Occupational mobility is an important change in the society where occupations and positions are fixed and set at birth. As they are transmitted from generation to generation through rigid socialization leave little room for innovation and change of occupation either by the individual or collective level (Bourdieu et al., 2006)<sup>6</sup>. The caste based occupations found in India have the scope for occupational mobility due various change in the society like globalization, industrialization etc. this change in occupation from caste based occupation strike the identity formation in the individual. In case of *Bhulias*, this factor serve as motivating and demotivating factors for them.

Against such backdrop, the present study tells about the untold stories of *Bhulias*, the architects of Sambalpuri Textile and tries to unfold the mystery behind their origin, migration to Odisha, and their culture which is as much beautiful and interesting as the textile they weave. It also tries to understand the typical technique they use to manufacture the handloom. At the end the paper tries to explore the present situation of this weaving caste group and explore how their identities get intertwined with the handlooms they weave.

#### **Area of Study & Methods Used:**

This study is conducted in a small town under the Barpali block of Bargarh district (Odisha) which is a Notified Area Council or NAC. It was a hub of traditional weaving craft of *Bhulias* in earlier times. The area is purposively selected because of the high concentration of *Bhulia* families residing here. A local market is also found near to it, famous for the wholesale business of Sambalpuri textile and weaving tools. It is named as '*Bailjuri Bazar*' and previously was the only market where Sambalpuri *Kapda* or clothes were available.

The research design used while making the present study is purely qualitative in nature. 50 *Bhulia* families out of 300 are selected through purposive sampling method. These families are attached with different phases of weaving. The weavers directly involved in weaving process are taken as primary respondents where as their family members as the secondary ones. Both the respondents are interviewed with a semi-structured interview schedule and few voices have been recorded as well. Among the 50 respondents, 18 are found to get directly attached with weaving or '*Buna*' whereas 32 are found to be attached with '*Bandha*' or tie & dye. During the course of the study, voices of some *Bhulias* proprietors are also recorded to have a greater understanding regarding the business marketing of Sambalpuri Textile. The actual names of the respondents are not disclosed in the narrations keeping in mind the ethical issues of research.

## Objectives:

The study tries to explore the

- Origin of *Bhulia* community and the myth behind their migration to Odisha;
- The weaving process (*Buna & Bandha*)
- The motivational and de-motivational factors affecting caste occupation

## Major Findings:

### **Bhulias: Origin & Migration to Odisha**

The history of *Bhulia* community is attached to the legend of *Ramai Dev*, first *Rajput* King of Patnagarh and warrior king of Odisha. According to their own legend *Ramai Dev* was the son of *Ashabati*, who was supposed to be a *Rajput* queen of Rajasthan. When *Rajputs* were defeated by *Mughal*, many *Rajput* queen sacrificed themselves in *Jouhar*. But at that time queen *Ashabati* was pregnant. She ran away and took shelter in Patnagarh. The community which helped her during this time was *Hul* community who were engaged in weaving. When *Ramai Dev* was establishing his kingdom in the Western part of Odisha (currently the undivided Sambalpur region), he searched for the weaver community who helped his mother and helped them to settle in Patnagarh. Later two brothers of the same family divided the kingdom, the elder remained in Patnagarh while the younger one, *Ramai Dev* established a new capital Sambalpur named after Goddess *Samlei*. After taking a number of *Bhulia* families he established them near his fort. There after the *Bhulia* started establishing themselves in western Odisha <sup>4</sup>.

However a couple of stories are also found to be related with the emergence of the term *Bhulia*. The first being the belief that the same was derived from the term '*Hul*', a community in Rajasthan who accompanied Queen *Ashabati*, mother of king *Ramai Dev* to fled away from Rajasthan to Patnagarh. It is also told that they originally migrated from Rajasthan and were responsible for introducing tie and die art to Odisha fabric. All *Bhulias* bear the surname of '*Meher*' which seems derived from '*Mihir*' meaning *Surya* or Sun since they were follower of *Suryavanshis*. Whether their legend of origin is true or not it is found that they have certain similarities with *Rajput* of Rajasthan, like worshiping sword which is normally not found among the communities of Odisha. Surprisingly it is also found that the tie and die technique used in weaving by the *Bhulias* is also somewhere similar to the technique of *Patola* art in Rajasthan.

### **‘Bandha’ and ‘Buna’: The Weaving Process**

The *Bhuliapara* of Barpali most commonly produce Sarees; followed by dress materials for *Shalwaar suit*. The threads, when later being placed on the loom are called warp (*tana*) in their length, and weft (*buna*) in their width. First of all, the yarn which is un-coloured, not yet too ordinary bundle of spun cotton needs to be prepared for the tying process and thus separated and grouped. Therefore, the bundles are placed on a circular device (*chakri*), from where they are wound onto a wooden reel (*asari*). While winding the cotton on the reels, eventually broken yarn can be discovered and by the help of ash paste quickly be repaired in a way the knot will hardly be visible. At next, as required for the width and length of the Sarees, the thread is put on a warping device (*jatur*), being either an iron or wooden peg. With the help of this sometimes even electronic device, those pieces later being tied can be separated by threads before being applied on a wooden frame (*kamada*). Once put on the frame, the last step prior to the famous tying and dyeing process, popularly known as ‘*bandha*’ is to draw reference lines upon the portioned yarn by using a simple pen. According to the required design, those pieces that should not get in touch with the colour are being tightly wrapped by plied cotton thread. While smaller portions only require thin threads (*bue*), wider sections are wrapped by bigger threads (*suta*) or pieces of stretchable plastic. The untied portions get dyed by dipping the whole bundle in liquid colour. In doing so, the tied sections remain white. By gradually opening certain wrappings and again dipping the bundle in different colour baths, more colours can be brought onto the yarn, thus adding to the design. Before opening the wrappings, the dye needs to dry in order not to spoil those sections supposed to remain white or to keep the respective colour that was brought onto the yarn in a previous bath. While the yarn for the warp was to be attached on the looms, the thread being used in the weft undergoes a different procedure: After being tied, dyed and dried, it is again placed on a bigger circular device (*uffurna*) and once more wound on the reel. From there, with the help of a small pulley mechanism, the colour yarn was transferred onto a swift or spool and wound on small spindles (*nali*). These spindles can finally be put in the shuttles (*nari*) that will be used for weaving the weft. Before being attached on the looms (*manga*), the warp yarn was stretched into its full length along a stand (*pajni*), carefully brushed and additionally treated with starch based chemicals supposed or some rice paste (*mod*) to strengthen the material and adding glaze to it.

Preparing the loom begins by passing the latter through the herald of the loom as demanded by the design. After that, the warp is passed through the reeds (*boi*), separating each single thread; a fine task that requires lots of experience and sleight of hand. Once the yarn of the shuttles was attached to the weft, the actual weaving process can start. After pulling the cord which is attached to the shuttle, the latter will ‘fly’ through two different sections of the warp which again, by the help of two pedals embedded in the ground, are one by one being pulled up and down in order to enclose and thus weave the yarn of the weft into the warp. Slowly but steadily, the pattern consequently appears on the woven fabric. In order for the material to become fine-meshed, each new line of the weft gets pushed towards the end of the border of the developing fabric by the help of some kind of comb (*kunehi*). Shifting the pedals, pulling the shuttle and pulling the “comb” altogether create the typical “*khrick-khrick*” sound that can be heard even while standing in front of a weaver’s house. Only by extremely careful processing, almost irreversible and quality-reducing irregularities in the pattern can be prevented. When the threads of both weft and warp have been tied and died, the product is known as “double ikat” (*milan*). If tying and dyeing work is only done for the weft, it is called “single ikat”. The term *bandha* on the one hand is used to name the way a product was created and also labels the tying and dyeing process. The whole production process was divided into two major parts, one constituting of those steps centred on *bandha* and the other one including those steps belonging to the work of weaving or *buna*. Those steps related to *bandha* are further separated into winding for the frame, tying and dyeing, while those related to weaving roughly include the winding of weft yarn, the preparation of the warp yarn on the stand, the preparation of the loom and the actual process of weaving.

### **Motivation and De-motivation behind ‘Bandha’ & ‘Buna’**

According to Mr. Nilamani Senapati, ICS and Mr. Bhabakrushna Mohanty, IAS, in Orissa District Gazetteers, Sambalpur (1971)<sup>7</sup> *Bhulias* are one of the important castes of this district, who are expertise in weaving fine clothes with colourful borders. These *Bhulias* are known as skilled weavers and produce superior qualities of cotton fabrics. Villages like Barpali, Tora and Remunda are traditional centres of handloom weaving. Most of the weavers have their looms in their homes and also market their own products<sup>5</sup>.

L. S. S. O’ Maly referred ‘Sambalpuri textiles’ in Bengal District Gazetteers, Sambalpur (1901)<sup>8</sup>, as fine cotton clothes with coloured borders, woven by *Bhulias*. But this cottage industry doesn’t appear to have been affected by the competition of imported machine made

clothes as they are woven by the weaver from *Bhulias* families themselves. Sambalpuri Textile is also well appreciated by its customers for its lower price and lighter texture than the machine made stuffs<sup>6</sup>.

The information about *Bhulias* in the above two cited literatures showed how their identity is attached to weaving. T. C. Lewellen's statement that the anthropological problem in defining identity lies in its inclusion of three major concepts: The individual self-perception, perception of the individual by the society, and the perception of the individual by the researcher.

The study reveals the very fact that, the key factor which motivate the community to continue weaving is, their sentiment attached to it. '*Bhulia*' identity is interwoven with the textile these *Bhulias* weave. One of the respondents Mr. Pradeep Kumar Meher from Sambalpur defined his *Bhulia* identity like:

*"We Mehers are identified not only in India, but throughout the world by the Sambalpuri Kapda (textile) we weave. It is more related to our identity than our profession."*

(Mr. Pradeep Kumar Meher, Age 49 years, Proprietor of Radhika Handloom, Sambalpur)

The above narration of Mr. Meher brings into light his inner-self attachment with this profession. Weaving for him is somewhat attached with his identity rather than only a source of bread earning.

Weavers of another studied area Barpali, also voiced about their similar sentiments attached to weaving. For them, weaving of Sambalpuri textile is the only medium through which they can represent themselves to the other caste people throughout Odisha and India at large.

One of the weavers Mr. Surendra Meher narrated about his identity like this,

*"Since my birth, bunai (weaving) of Sambalpuri kapda is the only thing I had seen. I was brought up with the "khrick-khrick" sound of Manga (loom). It is the only skill I know; it is the only thing with which I can identify myself."*

(Mr. Surendra Meher, Age 35, Weaver)

The above narration of Mr. Meher clearly reveals how his identity got related with weaving and the sound of the loom since childhood.

Thus the identity of *Bhulia* caste is related to the textile they weave. It is their cultural identity which is related to caste-sentiment and reflects through the textile they produce.

But in spite of such emotional attachment, since last 20 years the scenario is changing. Huge number of occupational mobility is found in this caste based community as the new generation of *Bhulias* have adopted different occupations depending on their individual opportunities and merits.

One of the weavers Mr. Chandrabhanu Meher of Barpali shared about his notion of caste based identity through the narration as follows:

*“We are weaver from generations. Buna is the only thing I know, since I got things to know. But in spite of this very fact, I don’t want my son to pursue this profession. I want him to study and if possible go outside for better opportunities. Buna is a very tedious work and always need more hard work and men powers. If my son will get better education he will be in better job and can earn better, of course.”*

(Mr. Chandrabhanu Meher, Age 40 Weaver)

The above narration of Mr. Meher brings into light the fact that, despite of the identity attached to this caste based occupation the present generation want their next generation to pursue in different fields of work for their overall advancement.

Weaving of Sambalpuri Textile always needs diligent work along with continuous physical and psychological involvement of the whole family directly or indirectly involved in weaving. Despite of this fact, the family won’t get proper remuneration for it. Moreover due to the lack of prospect and innovativeness related to this craft, it failed to attract the new generation to get involved in this occupation. Only the young people, who cannot excel in academics, are left with no option but to join this caste-based family occupation.

One of the new generation *Bhulias* Mr Saroj Meher, who is from a weaving family at Barpali, and currently living in Sambalpur for his job in a private bank also shared the reasons behind his occupational mobility.

*“I am out of Barpali since last 10 years. Though my family is involved with weaving since last two generations, I didn’t choose it as my profession. Even my father never encouraged me to get involved in the family business as he always dreamt for a bright future for me and so I could only do my MBA from a reputed university. Weaving is a tedious job with a very little prospect. So, In spite of being a Bhulia it never attracted me”.*

The above narration of Mr. Saroj Meher clearly expressed about the de-motivating factors for which many of the new generation Bhulias are now getting mobilized into new jobs leaving behind their traditional occupation.

The experience of Mr. Anand Meher, who is involved with Sambalpuri Textile through marketing of this product reflect the above situation like this,

*“One of the major reasons, why weaving and marketing of Sambalpuri Textile is not flourishing, is the meagre supply of raw materials. The cotton and silk which are the prime raw materials generally imported from outside Odisha and weavers are compelled to buy it at premium rates. The government may help the profession by extending some subsidy or incentives. Moreover there is no such change in the design pattern of the textile as per the changing demands of market. The most surprising fact is that, there is no such private or government institution to create new designs for the weavers and even if it is there, it is beyond their approach, as they are residing in villages.”*

(Mr. Anand Meher, Age – 64, Proprietor of Anand Meher Bastralaya )

Thus the above narration of Mr. Meher, explain about the current crisis, weavers attached to Sambalpuri Textile are facing. Such hardships actually de-motivate them to get attached to this profession through generations.

According to Blommaert (2005 in Sabella, 2011)<sup>10</sup>, most identity experts agree that identity is not something that people have, but is something that is constructed in practices, which produce, enact or perform <sup>7</sup>. Thus, it can be figured out that identity is an outcome of a social-cultural condition as well as the circumstances, where the individual resides. Thus the identities of the new generation *Bhulias* which are not attached to weaving remain more of a caste based identity than an occupation based identity. *Bhulias* who are no more attached to this craft still bear the surname ‘Meher’. Though this group of new generation considers them as *Bhulias*, but lacks the basic knowledge a related to it.

## **Conclusion**

Weaving of Sambalpuri textile, which is popularly known as ‘*Bandhakala*’ is a craft based occupation composed of two major steps; *Bandha & Buna*. *Bhulia* people, who are identified by this *Kala or* craft, in spite of having magnificent contribution to this ‘*Bandhakala*’, are now getting mobilised from their traditional occupation and putting their steps into newer

ones. During the study, the respondents involved with Sambalpuri Textile fully or partially and directly or indirectly are found to identify themselves with the craft. But along with this fact, another very fact, which cannot be avoided is that, somewhere these new generation *Bhulias* are lacking the motivation in continuing it as a profession. Even many of the old generation *Bhulias*, who are personally attached to the different steps of this craft, no more want their children to get involved to this tedious caste based occupation as they think it can create hindrances in their educational and economic developments. Even getting prestige and recognition at national and international level is not working as enough motivational factor for them to encourage their next generation to continue in this profession.

Being a migrated caste in the Western part of Odisha, *Bhulias* always considered them as caste with a very distinct identity. They have gained such identity gradually through their art in handloom and contribution to the textile. Government of Odisha also extended its hand of support for the people attached to this caste based occupation by making many cooperative clusters at many places of the state. But the benefit is hardly percolating to the real beneficiaries. In spite of it, the new generation *Bhulias* are losing their interest in this caste based occupation and occupational identity resulting into a new generation of *Hybrid Bhulias* who though bearing the surname *Meher* bear a very less knowledge related to their caste and traditional craft.

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