

An Ethnographic Research on Gulal Gota

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Abstract

Lac, a resinous secretion produced by female scale insects, has been an integral part of India's cultural and economic landscape since ancient times, as evidenced by its early mentions in Vedic texts and epics such as the Mahabharata. This paper explores the historical significance of lac, its production process, and its diverse cultural and commercial applications. It focuses on the Manihaar community of Jaipur, renowned for their expertise in crafting lac bangles and Gulal Gotas, small lac spheres filled with vibrant colors used during Holi celebrations. Through ethnographic research, this study delves into the intricate craftsmanship of Gulal Gotas, the daily lives of the Manihaar community, and the challenges they face in preserving their traditional craft amidst modernization. The methodology involves qualitative interviews with community members, providing insights into their artisanal practices, socio-cultural dynamics, and aspirations for the future. The findings highlight the enduring cultural significance of lac, the resilience of traditional artisans, and the need for greater governmental support to safeguard India's rich heritage.

Keywords: Gulal Gota, Lac, Manihaar Community, Artisan, Jaipur, Manihaaro ka Rasta, Art, Tradition, Culture, Socio-economic Dynamics.

Introduction

Lac, a resinous secretion produced by female scale insects, has been utilized in India since ancient times, with its earliest mention found in the Atharva Veda. Referred to as 'Laksha', the Vedic texts describe the insect's characteristics and behavior. The epic Mahabharata recounts the construction of a 'Laksha Griha', a lac-coated house designed by the Kauravas to trap and burn their rivals, the Pandavas. The English term 'lac' is akin to 'lakh' in Hindi, derived from the Sanskrit 'Laksh', meaning a hundred thousand. This suggests that the Vedic people were aware of lac's origins and understood its biological and commercial significance. The construction of such a laksh griha would have required a substantial amount of lac, indicating the presence of a thriving lac industry during that era (Singh, 2006).

Lac is a resinous substance produced as a protective secretion by lac insects (*Laccifer lacca Kerr*). Due to its significant commercial worth, these insects are cultivated, and the lac is harvested from the plants they inhabit (Admin, 2017). Usually lac is cultivated from trees like Palas, Ber, Kusum, Ghont, Jallari, Arher, Pipal, and Babul etc. Lac farming ranges from small to large-scale operations, yielding millions in profits with minimal investment. This form of farming involves rearing a large population of lac insects, resulting in substantial lac production. Cultivating lac entails planting host trees along the borders of infertile land or fields to provide a habitat for lac insects. It's a business that offers high returns with minimal expenditure, easily integrated with other ventures. India leads globally in lac production, accounting for 70% of the world's total. Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh are the primary regions for lac production within the country (Anand Rao Azad, n.d.). Lac in its different forms is widely used in various industries like

handicraft and furniture, medicine, food, textile, cosmetics, industrial products, and cultural and religious practices.

Being largest producers of lac from the ancient times, it is evident that India has various places and communities which has inculcated lac in their religious and cultural practices like Lakhara community – lac bangle makers of Madsaur (MP), Karbi Community of Assam- uses lac in their household practices and as a dye to prepare their traditional clothes (Nepolion Borah, 2020). In the diverse communities of Rajasthan, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa and many other states, lac serves not only as a source of supplemental income but also holds deep cultural significance. One of its notable cultural uses is in weddings, where lac bangles adorn the wrists of brides, an integral part of Indian bridal attire. These bangles symbolize not just celebration but also tradition, encapsulating the essence of marital joy and heritage. The tradition of brides wearing lac bangles underscores the profound cultural relevance of lac in the fabric of marriage ceremonies across India (Lac bangles~Mandsaur, n.d.).



Figure 1 Image of a Bridal lac bangle set from AYAZ ARTS SHOP, Manihaaro ka Rasta, Jaipur

Manihaar Community

The Manihaar Community of Jaipur has immersed itself deeply in the intricate art of lac craftsmanship. Their dedication to this craft has become an integral part of Jaipur's rich cultural tapestry. Such is their influence that they are commemorated with a street named after their community, "Manihaaro ka Rasta," located in Tripolia Bazar, Jaipur. For centuries, this vibrant street has been the heart of the Manihaar community, serving as a testament to their enduring presence and contribution to the cultural heritage of Jaipur.



Figure 2 Slab at the entrance of Manihaaro ka Rasta

The Manihaar community of Jaipur has upheld a longstanding tradition centered on the meticulous artistry of handcrafting lac bangles. Renowned for their mastery in intricate design work, and skilled craftsmanship, this community is synonymous with the creation of lac bangles—a cherished emblem of Indian heritage and customs. Devoted to their craft, Manihaar artisans pour their expertise into fashioning stunning, vibrant lac bangles, each imbued with profound cultural, religious, and auspicious symbolism. Their dedication preserves not just an art form but also a deeply ingrained aspect of India's cultural identity and traditions.



Figure 3 A bangle shop in the middle of Manihaaro ka Rasta

The tradition of crafting lac bangles in Jaipur traces its origins back to the city's founding, dating back to the establishment of Jaipur in 1727 CE by Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II, who shifted the court of Amer to this new capital. Recognized as a connoisseur of beauty and a generous patron of the arts, Jai Singh envisioned Jaipur as a bustling hub of trade and culture. To realize this vision, he invited artisans and craftsmen from various parts of India and beyond to settle in the city. Among these skilled artisans were the Manihaars, a community of bangle makers. The term "Manihaaro" is believed to stem from the Sanskrit word "mani," signifying "jewel" or "precious stone." Predominantly Muslim, this community brought with them their expertise and traditions, enriching Jaipur's cultural landscape with their craft (Rajvanshi, 2021). Currently 600-700 families of this community resides in Manihaaro ka Rasta, and interestingly all the members of this community are family relatives.

In addition to their mastery in crafting lac bangles, the Manihaar community has expanded their repertoire to include a diverse array of exquisite lac artefacts. Beyond bangles, their skilled hands fashion an assortment of captivating creations, ranging from ornate wall hangings and intricately designed toys to elegant jewellery, stunning vases, charming diaries, and exquisite boxes. Each piece reflects not only their craftsmanship but also their rich cultural heritage, making the Manihaar community synonymous with the artistry of lac in Jaipur.



Figure4 Exquisite diaries made up of lac



Figure 5 25 year old lac buttons



Figure 6 Beautiful boxes made up of lac



Figure 7 Lac coated Vase

Gulal Gota

The Manihaar community is renowned for crafting culturally significant items such as Gulal Gota. This unique tradition, originating in Jaipur, Rajasthan, has a history spanning approximately 400 years. Gulal Gotas are small spheres crafted from lac, each filled with vibrant Gulal powder. During Holi festivities, these colourful spheres are joyously hurled at participants, bursting upon impact and showering the surroundings with vivid hues, adding an extra layer of excitement and tradition to the celebrations. According to (Kulshrestha, 2024) it is believed that the forebears of the Manihaar community were nomadic shepherds and horse traders called “Baddu” migrated from Afghanistan. Upon settling in Bagru, Shahpura and Manoharpura, towns in Rajasthan, they immersed themselves in the art of lac craftsmanship. It was here that they acquired their skills in making Gulal Gotas from indigenous Hindu lac artisans, known as Lakheres, marking the fusion of cultural traditions and expertise that would define their craft for generations to come.



Figure 8 Hollow Gulal Gota with a pack of Gulal Gota

Historical Significance of Gulal Gota

Legend has it that since its inception in 1727 by Sawai Jai Singh II, Jaipur’s royal traditions included the use of Gulal Gotas. These colourful spheres were specially crafted for the royal family’s Holi celebrations. During this festive occasion, the king would embark on a ceremonial elephant ride through the city, joyously tossing Gulal Gotas at the delighted residents, symbolizing the jubilant spirit of the Holi festival. Till date Gulal Gotas are sent to the royal family of Jaipur before the festival of Holi.

Objective

- Investigate the intricate process involved in the creation of Gulal Gotas, delving deep into the craftsmanship and techniques employed.
- Explore the rich cultural heritage and daily lives of the Manihaar Community, shedding light on their traditions, customs, and social dynamics.
- Identify and analyse the various challenges faced by the Manihaars in both the production and marketing aspects of Gulal Gotas, aiming to understand the socioeconomic factors influencing their livelihood and sustainability.

Methodology

The methodology for this ethnographic research study on Gulal Gota involved a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with members of the Manihaar community. These interviews provided invaluable insights into the intricate art of crafting Gulal Gotas, offering a comprehensive understanding of the techniques, traditions, and cultural significance embedded within. Additionally, through these interviews, the study delved into the multifaceted lives of the Manihaar community, exploring their daily routines, social dynamics, and the interplay between their craft and livelihood. This immersive approach allowed for a nuanced exploration of both the artisanal practices and the broader socio-cultural context surrounding Gulal Gotas and the Manihaar community.

Literature Review

Annually, in the lively city of Jaipur, the traditional preparations for Gulal Gotas commence in anticipation of the Holi festival. Gulal Gotas are intricate lac spheres filled with vivid dry colours, sealed, and joyously hurled at individuals during the festive Holi celebrations (Ani, 2024). Although lac bangles are available throughout the year, the same materials are used to create Gulal Gota specifically in the lead-up to Holi. These seasonally sought-after items serve similar functions, akin to playing with water balloons during the festival. However, while balloons contain water, Gulal Gotas are filled with powdered colours known as "abir" (Resham, 2024).

For the Manihaar community, crafting lac bangles serves as their primary means of livelihood, as the production of Gulal Gota is a seasonal endeavour. Artisans emphasize the eco-friendliness of these bangles, highlighting their production without the use of chemicals. However, Jaipur has recently witnessed the emergence of numerous factories producing inexpensive, chemical-laden bangles, often containing minimal amounts of lac and leading to skin irritations in certain instances. Authentic lac bangles, albeit pricier, face diminished demand due to the proliferation of manufactured alternatives (Kulshrestha, 2024).

As traditions evolve and customs become more ritualized, the allure of lac artefacts and jewellery, and the bustling Manihaaro ka Rasta is fading. Modern, fashionable jewelry often takes precedence over lac bangles, leading to a decline in both the prominence of lac bangles and the number of shops along Manihaaro ka Rasta. Despite artisans' efforts to remain relevant by introducing innovative products, they struggle to compete with mass-produced, shinier goods flooding the market (Kishore, 2024).

Economics of the tradition

A single box containing six Gulal Gota balls is priced from Rs 150 to Rs 250, significantly higher than the cost of water balloons. Typically, entire families of artisans, including women, are involved in this craft. Each year, the Gulal Gota pieces crafted specifically for the Holi festival are initially dispatched to Vrindavan. As the childhood abode of Lord Krishna, Vrindavan holds profound significance, marking the commencement of the Holi festivities. Subsequently, boxes brimming with these vibrant spheres are forwarded to the royal family, remaining an indispensable component of their traditional celebrations.

In the past, only a select few, mostly residents of the walled city of Jaipur, were familiar with Gulal Gotas. However, the advent of social media has propelled these traditional spheres into the limelight. Viral reels and posts have captivated the attention of the new generation, exponentially increasing their popularity. According to the Manihaars, 2024 witnessed unprecedented profits from Gulal Gota sales. Enthusiasts from various corners of India flocked to Jaipur, drawn by the allure of these colourful spheres. Corporate

orders surged during the Holi season, and tourists were particularly enamoured, purchasing boxes of Gulal Gotas as souvenirs. The phenomenon extended beyond social media, with numerous articles spotlighting this age-old tradition, garnering global recognition. Such was the demand that supplies ran dry two days prior to Holi, leaving many shops depleted of Gulal Gotas.



Figure 9 A box of 6 Gulal Gotas

Process of making Gulal Gota

The production of Gulal Gota involves a meticulous series of steps:

1. **Lac Boiling:** The process initiates with boiling lac shells in water to render it pliable.



Figure 10 These lac shells are being boiled in water

2. **Shaping:** The softened lac is meticulously shaped into desired forms.
3. **Colouring:** Colour pigments are infused into the lac, typically beginning with primary hues like red, yellow, and green, which can be blended to produce various shades. These colours are extracted from natural sources like vibrant pink and red hues derived from rose flowers, each colour is thoughtfully

crafted.



Figure 11 Colored Lac which is heated to make Gulal Gotas

4. **Heating:** Post-colouring, the lac undergoes heating to enhance its malleability. Artisans usually use a wooden stick to heat lac over a small angeethi (small coal burner). It is a common practice to keep angeethis in the shop as artisans also use it to make lac bangles and customize it for their customers.



Figure 12 Artisan Mohammad Kashif heating coloured lac

5. **Blowing into Form:** Artisan then takes 5-6 grams of coloured lac and using a specialized blower called "Phunkni," the heated lac is skilfully blown into spherical shapes.



Figure 13 Phunkni

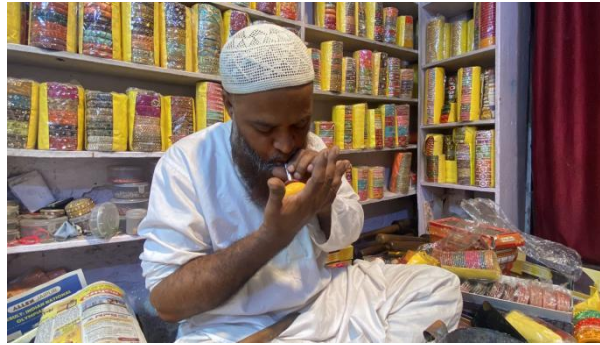


Figure 14 Artisan Mohammad Kashif shaping Gulal Gota using Phunkni

6. **Cooling of Gulal Gota:** Once shaped, hot sphere of Gulal Gota is being put in water to cool it down and harden it.



Figure 15 Gulal Gota kept in water to cool down

7. **Gulal Infusion:** The lac spheres are carefully filled with dry Gulal powder. This Gulal is crafted from arrowroot powder, a finely textured starch sourced from the rhizomes of the arrowroot plant which is blended with natural colour extracts. This approach extends to all shades, ensuring that the Gulal powder remains both environmentally friendly and visually stunning, enhancing the overall appeal of the Gulal Gota tradition.



Figure 16 Broken green coloured Gulal Gota filled with green Gulal



Figure 17 Yellow Gulal in plastic bag along with lac shells and Gulal Gota

8. Lac Sealing: Finally, the filled balls are sealed with golden wrap, completing the Gulal Gota



Figure 18 A box of sealed Gulal Gota with hollow Gulal Gotas

This intricate process demands expertise and attention to detail, rendering Gulaal Gotas a distinctive and cherished facet of Jaipur's cultural legacy.

Social Dynamics of Manihaar Community

Within the artisan community, crafting handcrafted lac products is a family affair, with every member contributing to the process. While men focus on the intricate craftsmanship of lac products, women often manage sales in the shops, or the roles may be reversed. Children of this community are naturally immersed in the craft from a young age, either observing their parents' skilled workmanship or receiving direct tutelage from elder family members. This passing down of artisanal knowledge ensures the preservation of traditional techniques and fosters a deep sense of cultural heritage within the community.



Figure 19 Woman, Man and a boy all involved in managing their respective shops

Despite the increasing number of individuals from this community pursuing higher education and diverse career paths in fields such as medicine and law, they remain deeply committed to their traditional craft. Whether by managing the family shop or assisting with production during peak seasons, they prioritize maintaining their connection to their heritage and supporting their family's artisanal traditions. This dedication underscores the enduring value placed on their cultural legacy, demonstrating a harmonious balance between modern pursuits and the preservation of age-old craftsmanship within the community. While not all, a significant number of younger individuals from the community exhibit a fervent desire to uphold and propagate their cultural traditions not just within India but across the globe. They actively promote their craft by organizing workshops for tourists, providing hands-on experiences in crafting various lac products. These workshops have garnered immense popularity among foreign visitors, who relish the opportunity to create their own unique lac items while immersing themselves in the rich heritage of the community.



Figure 20 Foreign tourist intrigued by the skills of the artisan

Furthermore, members of this community are increasingly being recognized and invited to prestigious events on both national and international platforms. For instance, at the G-20 Summit in 2023 held in Delhi, they were selected to represent India's traditional culture. Additionally, they are invited to prominent corporate events and weddings, where they captivate guests with their remarkable skills, swiftly crafting customized bangles tailored to individual preferences within minutes. Through these endeavours, they not only showcase the beauty of their craft but also serve as ambassadors of India's rich cultural heritage on the global stage.

As ancient as the city of Jaipur itself, the Manihaar community boasts ancestral homes steeped in history—their iconic havellis. While these architectural treasures stand as enduring symbols of the community's heritage, many now lie in ruins. The passage of time, coupled with the shifting dynamics of family life, has led some families to relocate outside of Manihaaro ka Rasta in search of more spacious accommodations for their expanding households. However, amidst the changing landscape, some families continue to reside within these havellis, holding steadfast to their ancestral roots and preserving the legacy of their forebears.



Figure 21 Artisan Mohammad Kashif showing his havelli



Figure 22 Ruins of a havelli of a Manihaar Family

The Manihaars have seamlessly integrated with various other communities, creating a vibrant tapestry of cultural diversity along Manihaaro ka Rasta. This bustling thoroughfare epitomizes a harmonious coexistence of traditions, exemplified by the juxtaposition of a Jain temple and a mosque, their walls shared in close proximity. Here, the call to prayer from the mosque harmonizes with the melodious chimes of bells echoing from the nearby Krishna temple, creating a symphony of spiritual resonance. For many members of the Manihaar community, now in their 40s and 50s, their fondest memories harken back to their childhood days—a golden era enriched by the camaraderie shared with children from neighbouring Jain and Hindu communities. Together, they revelled in the simple joys of flying kites, frolicking in the courtyard of the Jain temple, and partaking in the sacred offerings of Prasad from the Krishna temple.

Their upbringing was steeped in a spirit of unity and mutual respect, fostering enduring bonds of friendship and admiration across cultural boundaries.



Figure 23 Artisan Kashif Mohammad cherishing his time spent in Jain temple as a kid

Challenges faced by Manihaar Community

Crafting these intricate Gulal Gotas requires meticulous attention to detail, resulting in delicate spheres so sensitive that even the warmth of body heat can distort their shape. Consequently, artisans frequently encounter the daunting task of safeguarding these fragile creations during transportation from their shops to customers' homes. To mitigate the risk of damage, they earnestly encourage patrons to forego home delivery orders and instead opt to personally collect Gulal Gota boxes from their shops. This ensures that each exquisite creation reaches its destination unscathed, preserving its beauty and integrity for the joyous festivities ahead.

Despite garnering increasing global attention, the community remains dissatisfied with the government's efforts to preserve their craft. While initiatives like the Vishwakarma Scheme for Artisans and Craftsmen, as well as Mudra Loans, have been introduced by the Indian government to support local artisans, members of this community assert that corruption often obstructs the flow of sanctioned funds to the intended beneficiaries. In a bid to safeguard their cherished tradition, some members of this community have called for the designation of a Geographical Indication (GI) tag. Such a tag holds the potential to elevate awareness of the product and underscore its unique geographical origin. Moreover, it serves as a vital tool for the original creators to protect their creations against unauthorized imitation, thereby preserving the authenticity and integrity of their craft.

Conclusion

The study sheds light on the enduring legacy of lac craftsmanship and the invaluable contributions of the Manihaar community to India's cultural heritage. Despite facing challenges such as changing market dynamics and limited government support, the artisans remain committed to preserving their traditions and passing them on to future generations. Through initiatives such as workshops for tourists and participation in global events, they continue to showcase the beauty and cultural significance of their craft on both national and international platforms. However, concerted efforts are needed to address the socio-economic concerns of artisans and ensure the sustainability of India's traditional crafts. By recognizing the cultural importance of lac and supporting artisanal communities like the Manihaars, India can preserve its rich heritage for generations to come.

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