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Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi



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Insights from a Labour-Space Study

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Abstract

Traditional artisanal industries in India represent local, specialised products and are recognised for their positive contribution towards economic growth. These clusters signify indigenously developed; place-based economic-systems and their promotion have been a long-accepted development strategy. One District One Product (ODOP) is a recent initiative that aims to foster a balanced regional development of small towns and districts. Drawing from an empirical study of glass-bangle making cluster in Firozabad that examined labour-space interrelationship, this paper situates the findings within the current policy frameworks for these cluster. It offers a critical reflection on existing policy perspectives to advocate for a rethinking of conventional spatial and economic planning model to better accommodate complex socio-economic and spatial reality, dynamic geography of work as well as place-based system of skill acquisition.

1. Introduction

Traditional artisanal industrial clusters in India form the economic base of several small towns and cities that grew indigenously around local crafts and communities with skills around specific products. As these smaller towns provide a spatial character to the Indian economy (Harriss-White, 2002) they became the catalyst for urbanisation. Small-scale, informality, and place-based economic systems are their defining organisational structures. Even today, they form an integral part of India's informal capital economy (Basole, 2014; Das, 2007; Harriss-White, 2002). With a significant employment base and reliance on manual labour and craft skills. They have contributed to the character of industrialisation (Berg, 2014; Haynes, 2012; Roy, 1999). Thus, they represent places with unique socio-spatial landscapes centred around a predominant economic activity.

The promotion of these artisanal clusters has been a long-accepted development strategy under the Micro and Small Enterprises–Cluster Development Programme, or simply MSE–CDP (MSME, 2016). Recently, One District One Product (ODOP) initiative was launched in 2019, for increased global competitiveness of these small towns and urban centres. The aim of this

programme has been to foster a balanced regional development of small towns and districts known for their indigenous and specialised products and crafts (MSME, 2016). Low industrialised Uttar Pradesh became the first state to adopt the ODOP initiative to realise the potential of its several traditional artisanal clusters. Accordingly, the state identified 75 districts, each associated with a single product to establish its regional distinctiveness. Firozabad is one among these clusters identified for its unique position as the largest glass cluster, which also holds the GI tag for glass registered under the handicrafts goods category. The cluster is engaged in manufacturing glass toys, candle stands, Christmas hangings, flower vases, chandeliers, automobile glassware, street ware, scientific laboratory products, etc.

Firozabad holds a unique spatial¹ and economic position as the only town and traditional industrial cluster in the country, where glass bangles are exclusively produced (TERI, 2015) and has provided this non-metropolitan town with its regional identity as *Suhaag Nagri*.² Out of the total workforce of approximately 5,80,000 individuals today, an estimated 3,00,000 individuals are employed by the glass industry. Out of these, around 50,000 workers are associated with the non-bangle glass industry and the remaining 2,50,000, are employed in the glass-bangle industry. Just 10% of this (around 25,000 people) are employed in the formal sector of the factories as labourers, while the rest work outside the factory in the unorganised sector.

However, the question arises as to whether the policy imaginations for such clusters represent an understanding of the economic processes from a socio-spatial perspective. This is to say how are work–labour relations and organisation of work related to its space and place? The paper draws from a spatial perspective on work–labour relations developed from a multifaceted ethnographic study of the glass-bangle making traditional artisanal cluster of Firozabad. As an epilogue to this spatial perspective, this paper aims to direct attention to the ordinary, mundane built environment,³ spatial (physical arrangement of space at the building level) and urban forms (physical arrangements of space at the city scale) that often lie at the margins of the

¹ This refers to the geographical location, patterns including characteristics of people, objects relating to the phenomenon of bangle-making in the physical space of Firozabad.

² A term that is in official and popular usage. In Hindi, the word *suhaag* refers to the marital status of a woman; one whose husband is still alive. The word *nagri* means settlement. Amongst other bangles in different material-glass, metal, plastic, lac etc., the glass bangles hold the special significance and symbolizes good fortune for a marriage and the husband. This cultural association with the material of the bangle has contributed to the practice of wearing glass bangles, even today. Firozabad is locally and officially referred to as the city where glass bangles are made.

³ A commonly used term in architecture and urban studies, which refers to both built structures and open spaces made by human intervention.

development paradigms.⁴ It is argued that this is due to dominant planning conceptions rooted in western ideologies, which fail to fit such clusters in developing countries, in their development frameworks. Consequently, it draws from existing literature that calls for the role of state in rethinking the standard policy response to informality of work and labour relations and recognising their particularity in the case of traditional artisanal industry (Carre, 2016; Castree, 2007; Chen, 2016; Das, 2008).

2. Methodology

Looking deeper within Firozabad glass cluster, bangle-making in comparison to other glass products is where the collective control of the tradition of making bangles continues to be still alive in an artisans domestic environment, (Bansal & Kumari, 2016; Kaba & Gowda, 2021; Mittal, 2020). From an exploratory, initial field study in 2022, bangle-making emerged as a complex division of labour involving 80–100 artisans/workers in the making of a single bangle spread across the urban space (see Figure 1). Its geography of work is a composite of a factory system, small firms, and home-based work interconnected through complex, heterogeneous work-labour relations interlaced with the urban fabric. Thus, as the city is entirely engaged in the making of glass bangles as a unique cultural representation of matrimony, it is officially and in local parlance referred to as *Suhaag Nagri*.

It is in this backdrop that the proposed study was concerned with the centrality of space to social processes. It explored how space is central to labour processes through a multi-scalar approach—the exploration of interconnection between multiple scales, as action at each level has an impact on the other. The study has drawn this interrelationship between work, labour, and space from a feminist and architectural perspective. At the level of – i) the geography of making and its urban structure (spatial arrangement of different constitutive elements of a city); ii) the workplaces intrinsic to the labour process; and iii) the spatial practices of workers located within them.

3. Bangle-making in Firozabad as an Urban Practice – Place, Process, and Labour

From a spatial mapping and labour process analysis, dualistic organisational structure, multi-sited, and spatially disaggregated, a multi nodal and polycentric ‘geography of making’ emerged. Historically, bangle-making developed indigenously due to the presence of

⁴ This is based on the researcher’s personal engagement with development issues in the Global South by mapping the transformations of the built-environment from a socio-spatial perspective, over the last 20 years,

Sheeshgars—an indigenous community of Muslim glass-bangle makers within the region. Industrialisation of glass making with subsequent mechanisation of glass-bangle making for mass production during the inter-war period led to the emergence of factory as the new site, with its corresponding division of labour. This marked a major shift, from the indigenous process of single method (making a single bangle at a time) to its mass production using the spring method (molten glass rolled into a glass spiral); traditional wood-fired ovens to coal-fired furnaces; and from a single craftsman (and his family) handling the making of a bangle to one involving numerous workers and artisans. As a result, the process of bangle-making gradually disintegrated from an artisan's home to its spatial disaggregation over multiple sites across the city with a spatial skill-based division of labour and developed into an urban practice. Glass-bangle making today represents a state of hybridity between craft and industry (Kaba & Gowde, 2021).

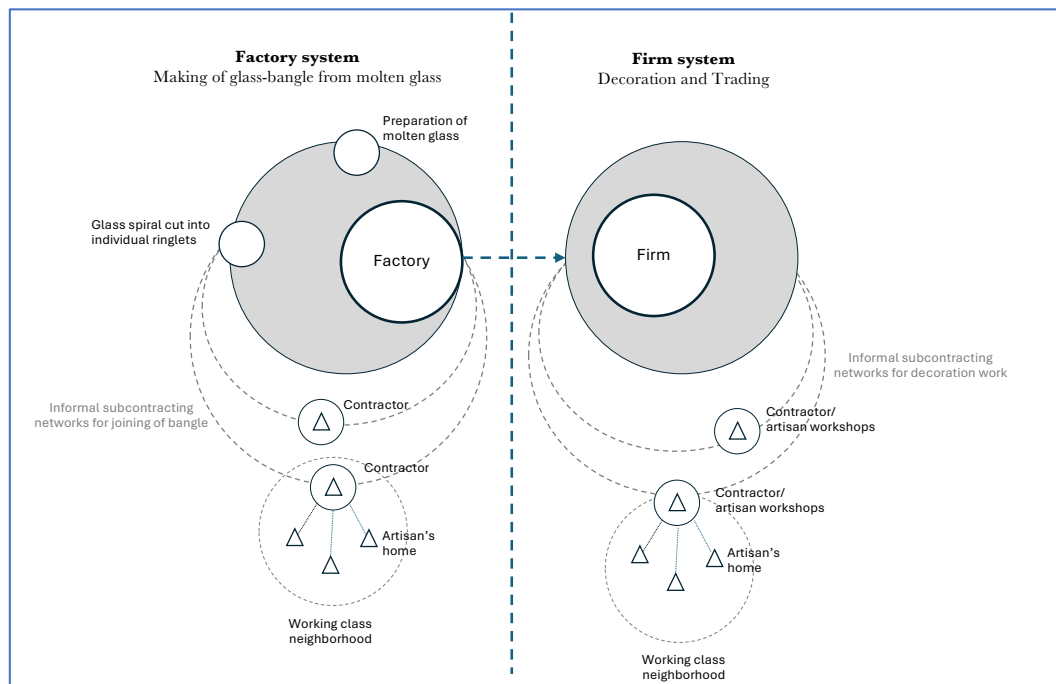


Figure 1: Centrality of Spatial production Networks within Dualistic Structure
Source: Author's own conceptualisation

Contemporary bangle-making is a two-stage process which provides it with its dualistic organisational structure divided between i) the factory (from molten glass to glass bangles) and ii) the small firm (decoration and trading). After the completion of the bangle (straightening and joining of individual ringlets cut from the glass spiral), they undergo an additional decorative process carried out by local firms based out of small workshop-based decoration units and finishing units. These also further subcontract the decoration work to home-based

units present in almost every household of working-class neighbourhoods. Bangle-making has continued to be partly mechanised even today as the bangles produced in a factory are further subcontracted to be joined at artisans' homes and workshops, giving the factory system a quasi-industrial character and multi-sited geography. This is combined with a flexible and informal subcontracting of decoration work, both representing a continued reliance on manual labour and informal subcontracting. These characteristics have provided the geography of work with its spatially disaggregated nature based on complex production networks connecting various sites and nodes of making.

The mapping of the contemporary process of bangle-making onto its built environment draws the interrelationship between the process of bangle-making and its sites, nodes, and networks and establishes the unique spatial pattern unique to bangle-making (see Figure 1). From this, a complex spatial network of bangle-making emerges as different nodes of production spread across the city are interconnected, creating a web of production networks. These spatial production networks are an intricate and complex web of socio-spatial and economic relationships between artisans, contractors, merchants, and their intermediaries, which deeply intersect with the urban structure. Further, from a detailed analysis of its dualistic structure from a commodity chain perspective and analysis of work organisational structure, the centrality of spatial production networks in glass-bangle making has been established. Moreover, each individual of the city finds himself/herself located in a spatial condition of territorially embedded, tacit, and situated knowledge at the community level (Hudson, 2005) as bangle-making has extended beyond the indigenous community into a community of practice (Kaba & Gowda, 2021)⁵. This spatial concentration of skills (Mittal, 2024) is representative of the spatial embeddedness of bangle-making in Firozabad.

4. Development Trajectories

The evaluation of policy relevant to traditional artisanal industry reveals how such clusters lie at the intersection of craft and industry with bangle-making in Firozabad being an exemplar of this intersection. From this analysis, it emerges that while the indigenous identity is well recognised, a simultaneous lack of this recognition emerges within the actual policy apparatus. It highlights a contrast to the existing informal, community and place-based systems on which Firozabad bangle-making thrives. Two key empirical evidence and analytical contribution of

⁵ Refer (Kaba & Gowda, 2021) for more detailed discussion on extension of skills beyond traditional community.

the study are reinvoked in this paper to substantiate this.

4.1 Skill Acquisition: Role of Place

Traditionally, the transmission of skills has been primarily through home-apprenticeship or trade apprenticeship in the absence of any formal training, as bangle-making lies at the intersection of craft-based practices and industrial processes. However, the development of bangle-making into an urban practice within Firozabad represents the spatial embeddedness of bangle-making in Firozabad. One that has led to the transmission of skills beyond the indigenous *Sheeshgar* community to other communities.

Three distinct ways of skill acquisition emerge in bangle-making: (i) social-intergenerational; and (ii) spatial/place based. First, the participation of the entire family represents the intergenerational aspect of family labour, as skills are acquired by one's sheer existence within the work-home scenario (Mittal, 2024).

Second, the shift from a 'community of practice' to the 'communities of practice' (Kaba & Gowda, 2021) has manifested itself in creating a social-spatial condition. A condition of interconnectedness and interdependence of community members on each other to perform their part in the functioning of networks of bangle-making (Mittal, 2024). Mittal (2024), has points out how the interlinkages of bangle-making necessitate community support and that by one's sheer location within the city, skills can be acquired. The presence of an individual in this 'community of practice' at the neighbourhood level thus allows non-traditional, first-generation artisans, and workers to enter bangle-making. The following excerpt, from a conversation with Asem, a 30-year-old godown owner from the *Sheeshgar* community highlights this condition more explicitly.

Now it is not limited to any particular individual, or to any one format or to any one community... it's everyone's work now... this city (*shehar*) Firozabad got established. A logic emerges from the fact that once this city is built around this work, where this work is done therefore everyone will do this work."

What it brings to the surface is the location of the inhabitants of the city in a *spatial condition*, of territorially embedded, tacit, and situated knowledge at the community level (Hudson, 2005) and an individual's consciousness of his existence in these community-based networks of bangle-making. An individual finds himself located within the unique material-place relationship that Firozabad represents (Mittal, 2024). This socio-spatial position of an individual in this particular setting facilitates the participation of the future generation in

bangle-making and the continuance of this practice itself. Thus, Firozabad becomes the *setting* where every Firozabadi is involved in the practice of glass-bangle making, either directly or indirectly (Mittal, 2024).

4.2 Zoning vs Land Use

The spatial development vision for Firozabad district is to develop it as a large urban agglomeration of a twin city—Firozabad–Shikohabad (see Figure 2) region—under the proposed master plan of 2031 developed by the Town and Country Planning Department Divisional Planning Section, Agra. This master plan, as a typical zoning plan, stipulates codified separation of different land uses as single-use activity zones—residential, industrial, commercial, institutional, recreational, transportation, open areas, agricultural land, and other utility lands. It further proposes that all industrial areas be moved to the edges of the city with no allocated zones for mixed-use developments.

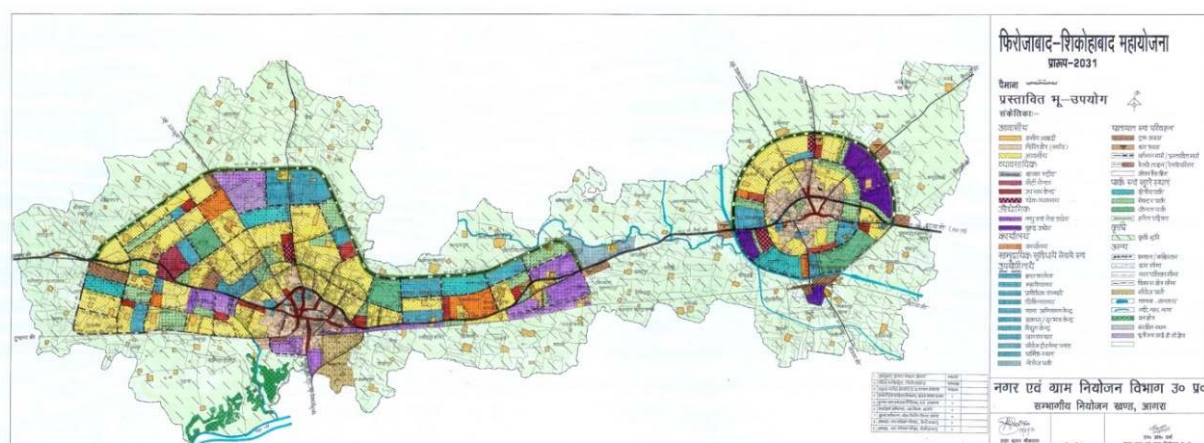


Figure 2: Firozabad–Shikohabad Proposed Master Plan for 2031

Source: Firozabad–Shikohabad Development Authority and Firozabad Nagar Nigam (2016)

However, Firozabad city, as a key characteristic of small cities epitomises mixed-use development. This is implicated from the empirical findings and analysis of various production sites ranging from: i) location of godowns and workshops in residential areas; ii) artisan's home-based workshops combining 'place to live' with 'place to work' including some godown owners; iii) the working class neighbourhoods with production networks emanating to and from an artisan's workshop invoking 'neighbourhoods as factory' (Benjamin, 1996). The spatially disaggregated and multi-sited geography of bangle-making is further populated with presence of numerous micro-geographies and multi-scalarity that show the dynamics of scale and flexible use of both space and place. These characteristics of Firozabad also facilitate easy

access to employment and better integration of different transportation modes.

The land use zoning as seen in the proposed master plan for urban development of Firozabad indicate a simplification of ‘ground realities’ a thing that planning relies on to make the work more ‘legible’ (Sharma and Gupta, 2009) and the ‘neatness of regulatory framework” (Ellem & Shields, 1999). This use of zoning within the proposed master plan represents a ‘one size fits all solution’ policy imagination, rather than accommodating the socio-economic and spatial peculiarities (the centrality of spatial production networks). It thus calls for attention to be diverted to the complexities of capital-labour relations – informality, flexibility and dynamism that Firozabad city exhibits. This provides the necessary grounds for further questioning the approach to reinstating craft production in an industrialised world, as seen in the allocation of industrial zone for future expansion wherein existing topologies of work are relegated to the past. This is clearly reflected from the following excerpt from an interview with a local firm owner.

“How can such a large hub be made that the entire place can move? And even if we make the hub, all the labour resides in the mohallas. They won’t stay in these hubs, even for work. If they have to go to the hub we will have to pay them extra. And then the karigar...extra money for that too. Also, because ladies who are working at home...for them ₹200–300 is enough.”

Therefore, it argued that these are small cities and towns which have their own local heritage at the urban scale and an economic reality where a craft is being practised at an industrial scale, it calls for its own method as well as theorisation where imaging their future.

5. Conclusion

Bangle-making integrates industrial production with traditional craft practices as it evolved from an indigenous craft limited to a single site into its present day dualistic, spatially disaggregated and multi-sited urban practice. As a result, production is distributed across various sites- factories, godowns, workshops, retail outlets, and household units -that span the city yet remain interlinked by networks facilitating the movement of material and labour. From this emerges the centrality of spatial production networks intrinsic to bangle-making. The detailed on-ground study of a small town brings visibility to the unique model of urbanisation and industrialisation centred around indigenous crafts.

The comparison of policy imaginations with the socio-economic reality emerging from the study however points towards a disjuncture between the two. This indicates a simplification and standardisation of an otherwise complex and dynamic nature of bangle-making, in the

object of planning. In effect, it reflects a marginalisation of socio-spatial forms associated with bangle-making due to dominant conception of workplaces. From the arguments presented in the paper, it has emphasised for a localised approach towards spatial development that is rooted in the economic development vision that fosters regionally dispersed development for such clusters associated with small cities. Finally, in doing so, it proposes a multi-scalar methodological approach rooted in a materialistic perspective i.e. focusing on the specificity of the object in question while planning for such cities.

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