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School of Development Studies
Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi

Role of Big Capital in Artisanal Production:

Labour and Informality in Rajasthan's Hand Block Printing Industry

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Abstract

This paper explores how big capital structures and benefits from artisanal production in Rajasthan's hand block printing industry while remaining largely invisible in the production process. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork (2019-2022) with 47 women artisans in Sanganer and Bagru, the analysis reveals that export market integration deepens artisan precarity rather than generating prosperity for the larger community. Big capital extracts value through market monopoly, credit dependencies, and layered subcontracting without direct ownership, maintaining production in informal arrangements that avoid regulatory obligations. The transformation is profoundly gendered, with women concentrated in the lowest-paid, most informal segments. Using Marx's concept of formal subsumption alongside feminist political economy, the paper demonstrates that informal artisanal production persists not as developmental lag but as strategic choice enabling exploitation. Development policies celebrating craft revival while promoting export integration miss this structural reality, deepening dependency when power asymmetries remain unaddressed.

1. Introduction

Traditional artisanal clusters in India have long formed the economic backbone of small towns and rural regions, representing unique models of industrialisation rooted in inherited skills, family-based enterprises, and community networks. Hand block printing in Rajasthan's Sanganer and Bagru regions exemplifies this pattern in the form of a craft practised for over three centuries by the Chhipa community, historically organised with the help of household members in and around the artisans' houses with minimal capital requirements. Yet, a paradox has emerged over the past five decades: while the hand block printing industry has expanded dramatically with growing export markets, increasing production units, and rising global demand, the artisans themselves face deepening precarity, declining incomes, and intensifying vulnerability.

This paradox raises a fundamental question about the relationship between capital and artisanal labour in contemporary India: How does big capital structure and benefit from artisanal production while remaining largely invisible in the production process itself? More specifically, what are the mechanisms through which export houses, global brands, and trading intermediaries extract value from artisanal work without directly owning the means of production or employing workers through formal wage contracts?

This question gains urgency within development studies, where artisanal clusters have long been championed as models of "inclusive growth." Government programs such as the Micro and Small Enterprises Cluster Development Programme (MSE-CDP) to the recent One District One Product (ODOP) initiative, promise that integrating artisans into global markets will lift communities from poverty while preserving cultural heritage. Sanganer and Bagru, officially recognised with Geographical Indication (GI) tags in 2010, exemplify this policy vision: traditional craft knowledge combined with access to export markets should generate prosperity. Yet, as this study reveals, such integration often enriches global capital while deepening artisan precarity. This paper thus attempts to understand the mechanisms connecting development rhetoric to ground-level reality which is central to critically examining dominant development paradigms that equate market integration with social progress.

Drawing from extended ethnographic fieldwork (2019-2022) in Sanganer and Bagru involving 47 women artisans across three generations, alongside interviews with male printers, export house representatives, and industry intermediaries, this paper examines how big capital has transformed hand block printing from household-based artisanal production into a globally integrated, yet profoundly informal, production system. The analysis reveals that this transformation operates through specific mechanisms of control what Marx termed "formal subsumption of labour under capital" wherein capital controls an existing labour process without fundamentally altering the basic nature of production (relevant for hand block printing units in the two regions)[1], extracting surplus value through market monopoly, credit relations, and subcontracting networks rather than through direct wage employment.

However, this paper extends beyond classical political economy by foregrounding the gendered dimensions of this transformation. Building on feminist political economy scholarship (Mies, 1982; Benería, 1979; Mezzadri, 2017), the analysis demonstrates that big capital's penetration into artisanal production operates through and reinforces gendered relations. Women's skilled

[1] However, it is to be noted that printing industry at large has changed over the decades, where more screen-printing units and digital printing units have been installed in the industrial area for speeding up the printing process. But when we look at the hand block units, this argument of ‘formal subsumption of labour under capital holds true.

labour is systematically rendered invisible through cultural categories that define their work as 'help', their contributions absorbed into the expansive category of domestic work, and their productive activities confined to spatially ambiguous zones of courtyards, household workshops, and small residential units that blur the boundaries between "inside" and "outside," domestic and productive space.

This gendered analysis matters not merely as an addition to political economy but as fundamental to understanding how contemporary capitalism structures informal artisanal production. The mechanisms through which big capital extracts value through spatial reorganisation, technological change, subcontracting chains, and flexible labour arrangements are accomplished through gendered processes that selectively displace women from certain roles while concentrating them in the most precarious segments of production. Understanding these gendered mechanisms reveals what conventional political economy often obscures: that capital accumulation in artisanal sectors depends structurally on the unpaid and underpaid labour of women, whose work remains unrecognised, uncounted, and unprotected.

The paper proceeds in four sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 outlines the methodological approach and analytical framework. Section 3 presents the analysis in three subsections: the transformation of production organisation and the emergence of hierarchical categories; big capital's mechanisms of control through market monopoly and subcontracting chains; and the gendered dimensions of displacement and devaluation. Section 4 concludes by discussing the implications for development policy and future research directions.

2. Analytical Framework and Methodology

2.1 Analytical Framework: Formal Subsumption and Gendered Circuits

The analytical framework draws on three interconnected theoretical traditions. First, Marx's concept of formal subsumption provides the foundational lens for understanding big capital's relationship to artisanal production. Unlike real subsumption, where capital transforms the labour process itself through mechanisation and factory discipline, formal subsumption describes situations where capital subordinates existing labour processes without majorly altering the tools and replacing manual labour completely (Marx, 1867/1976; Banaji, 2010). Artisans continue working with hand blocks in households and small workshops, either using inherited skills and traditional techniques in some cases, or slightly modified versions of blocks, use of chemical colours and standing tables, but largely doing hand block printing through wooden blocks- yet they become dependent on merchant capital through monopoly over markets, control of raw materials, and dictation of designs and payment terms. This creates what appears as "independent" artisanal production but functions as disguised wage labour wherein artisans bear all risks of production while capital appropriates surplus value through circulation.

Second, global value chain (GVC) analysis illuminates how lead firms including global brands, large retailers, export houses govern production networks without direct ownership (Gereffi et al., 2005). In buyer-driven chains characteristic of labour-intensive consumer goods like textiles and handicrafts, large buyers control through design specifications, quality standards, and price-setting power. The governance structure is "captive" where suppliers depend heavily on few buyers, face high switching costs, and experience significant power asymmetry. This framework helps map the hierarchical architecture connecting global brands (FabIndia, Anokhi, international buyers) to export houses in Sitapura, to traders and agents, to Category I-IV printers in Sanganer and Bagru, down to home-based women workers (explained in section 3.1 below).

Third, feminist political economy foregrounds how gender structures labour market incorporation and shapes who does which work under what conditions (Mies, 1982; Benería, 1979; Elson & Pearson, 1981; Mezzadri, 2017). The concept of "housewifization" (Mies, 1982) describes how women's productive labour gets ideologically constructed as domestic, supplementary, or temporary, justifying lower wages and informal status. Social reproduction theory extends this by analysing how capitalism depends on unpaid care and household labour, disproportionately performed by women, to reproduce the labour force (Bhattacharya, 2017). In artisanal contexts, this means examining not just whether women work, but how their work is named, valued, and spatially organised, and how these processes serve both capital accumulation and patriarchal control.

2.2 Fieldwork and Data Collection

This study draws from ethnographic research conducted between 2019 and 2022 in Sanganer and Bagru, two adjacent regions in Rajasthan renowned for distinct styles of hand block printing. Sanganer, located on the outskirts of Jaipur city, is known for fine-line floral prints on white backgrounds; Bagru, approximately 30 kilometers from Jaipur, specialises in bold geometric patterns and indigo-based *dabu* printing using mud-resist techniques. Both regions are home to the Chhipa community, whose caste-based occupation has historically been hand block printing.

The research involved in-depth interviews with 47 women across different categories: artisans working in household production units, wage workers in small printing workshops (*karkhanas*), self-employed printers managing family-based enterprises, and supervisors in larger export-oriented units. Additionally, interviews were conducted with male printers, export house representatives in Sitapura industrial area, online platform intermediaries, office bearers of Chhipa Association, and migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Participant observation in printing units, courtyards, and wholesale markets complemented the interviews, alongside analysis of government cluster development reports, and industry association documents.

3. Analysis: Big Capital and the Transformation of Artisanal Production

3.1 From Household Production to Hierarchical Categories: Mapping the Transformation

Hand block printing in Sanganer and Bagru has undergone a profound transformation in production organisation over the past five decades, driven by macroeconomic policy shifts toward export promotion, technological changes, and the integration of local production into global value chains. Historically, until the 1970s, production was largely organised within households where approximately 95% of Chhipa families in Sanganer and 400 Chhipa families (roughly 5,000 individuals) in Bagru participated in printing-related activities. All family members engaged in one or many tasks: preparing natural dyes from botanical sources, mixing *dabu* paste (mud-resist) for resist-dyeing techniques, carving wooden blocks, printing fabric stretched on courtyard floors, washing and drying cloth in open spaces, and selling finished products at weekly markets (*hatwaras*) in Jaipur city. This system required minimal capital investment, relied entirely on family labour, and maintained direct connections between artisan-producers and local buyers.

The transformation began in the 1970s-1980s with export market expansion and government policies promoting handicraft exports. Export houses emerged as intermediaries, initially appearing to offer artisans access to larger markets. However, integration fundamentally restructured production relations. The direct artisan-buyer connection was severed; production increasingly occurred through "job work" (subcontracting) where printers received cloth, designs, and specifications from export houses, performed printing tasks, and returned semi-finished products. This change in production organisation created multiple intermediation layers, each extracting value.

Simultaneously, technological changes introduced screen printing, chemical dyes, and paste preparation through weighing machines along with migrant labour in screen and hand block printing units (primarily male migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) and displaced women's traditional knowledge. Production spatially reorganised, with factories and larger workshops establishing outside residential areas while household production persisted in modified forms.

These changes produced a hierarchical structure categorizable into four groups based on access to means of production, market networks, and capital:

Category I comprises export brand owners and large industrialists controlling market access, design specifications, and buyer relationships. Examples include Rangotri and Anokhi in Sanganer, RK Derawala in Bagru, and Sitapura-based intermediaries aggregating production for FabIndia, Myntra, and international buyers. This category captures the largest value share while bearing minimal risk.

Category II includes medium-scale printers conducting "job work" taking orders from Category I, organising printing through hired labour and some family participation, managing specific production segments (typically printing and dyeing). They own workshop spaces and equipment, hire 5-20 workers, but lack direct export market access.

Category III consists of self-employed family units operating at viability margins. These households rent small workshops or work within home compounds, relying exclusively on family labour for job work orders. A 60-year-old woman in Bagru said while working on a traditional sitting table (*patta*) that she used to print 4-5 sarees daily at Rs 100 per saree. After material costs, the family clears approximately Rs 15 per saree barely subsistence income for full-day labour.

Category IV encompasses wage workers who own no means of production and work for piece-rate or daily wages in others' units. This includes local Chhipa women in residential workshops, non-Chhipa women from nearby villages in factories, and male migrants dominating screen printing and chemical dyeing.

This hierarchical structure reveals how big capital organises artisanal production through layered subcontracting rather than direct ownership. Value flows upward; risk flows downward to a broad base of precarious workers primarily women in the most informal segments.

3.2 Mechanisms of Control: Market Monopoly, Credit Relations, and Risk Transfer

Big capital's control over artisanal production operates through three principal mechanisms creating dependency without formal employment.

Market monopoly and monopsony power. Artisans cannot access end markets directly; they must sell through export houses and intermediaries possessing networks, export licenses, and buyer relationships. This creates monopsony conditions where artisans face few buyers while buyers access multiple suppliers. The power asymmetry enables buyers to dictate prices unilaterally. Printers in Sanganer receive Rs 13 per meter for complete printing, while the same fabric after value addition retails at Rs 250-300 per meter. One woman printer articulated this powerlessness as "Even if I keep a table at home and print fabric, who would buy from me? Dealers talk to employers. No one talks to us." Women face additional exclusion restricted by mobility norms and lacking kinship networks like men have in the form of social capital, they remain entirely dependent on intermediaries.

Control over raw materials and credit creates interlocking dependencies. Payment terms changed dramatically around 2010-2015 with mobile communication proliferation and digital platforms. Export houses now contact multiple printers simultaneously, compare via video calls, and purchase from whoever offers the lowest rate without advance payment. Printers have to invest their own money in materials and labour, receiving payment only after delivery and inspection, sometimes months later. This transferred all financial risk to artisans.

The new system enables arbitrary product rejection. A Bagru family had Rs 15,000 worth of printed suit pieces returned for alleged minor defects. Having received no advance payment and invested in materials and labour, the family bore the entire loss, forced to resell at drastically reduced prices. This risk transfer where capital (in the form of buyers) faces no risk (pays only for accepted goods), artisans bear all risk (investment, labour, potential rejection), thus fundamentally characterises contemporary production.

Flexible contracting and informal arrangements enable capital to access cheap labour without legal obligations. Nearly all production occurs through piece-rate wages with no written contracts, minimum wages, social security, health benefits, or employment security. Labour supply expands and contracts with demand; workers can be dismissed instantly; no compliance costs exist.[2]

[2] Although now there are few formal spaces like tech-parks where workers get ESI and Provident Fund (PF), but they are hired on contract basis and their contract does not guarantee permanent jobs.

The COVID-19 lockdown (April-June 2020) starkly revealed this mechanism. Small units immediately fired workers, relying on unpaid family labour particularly women's. As an example, a calendaring unit owner who operated four units employing multiple workers closed three and worked only on one unit. Another scenario, where *dabu* unit employing four women dismissed all; the 60-year-old owner worked entirely alone. Women who lost jobs had no recourse. They absorbed economic shock through unpaid domestic labour. As one noted, "We do not keep workers because they need payment on time. Payment comes in months. So we work ourselves to save money." This flexibility for capital means precarity for workers.

3.3 Gendered Mechanisms: Displacement, Devaluation, and the Inside/Outside Trap

The transformation is profoundly gendered, operating through mechanisms that selectively displace women from certain roles while concentrating them in the most informal, lowest-paid segments.

Technological displacement occurs not because technologies are inherently masculine but because they're introduced with gendered labour forces and coded as masculine skills. Screen printing arrived from Gujarat with male migrant printers who operated and trained local men. Chemical dyes replaced natural dyes through a process devaluing women's botanical knowledge while coded chemical measurement as masculine "scientific" skill. Mechanical *dabu* paste preparation displaced women's labour-intensive manual preparation not because women cannot operate machines, but because machine ownership requires capital and operation gets coded as masculine mechanical work.

Each technological change accompanied spatial reorganisation in which production moving from courtyards to workshops to factories selectively exclude women. A 60-year-old woman noted two changes in her 40-year career. She mentioned introduction of *saanjh* (sponge cushion), which reduced strain on hand, and standing tables that replaced sitting platforms. Standing tables enable faster production needed to speed up the export demands and mass-scale production. Women unable or unwilling to adopt standing tables find themselves relegated to slowest, lowest-paid work.

Cumulative effect of these changes resulted in women being concentrated in *dabu* printing (most labour-intensive, lowest-paid); excluded from screen printing entirely (only seen in associate jobs in such units); displaced from natural dye and paste preparation (traditional knowledge rendered "obsolete"); and confined to "helping" roles of washing, drying, folding, and packaging. Even if they are involved in other forms of printing for example in Sanganer, where dabu is not used, they get low wages than men and are usually seen operated in informal units where quality is not maintained, and production is done for domestic markets.

Spatial control through inside/outside categories operates as labour market segmentation. Chhipa community *purdah* norms, where women veil before elder male kin and observe mobility restrictions, are not static traditions but actively enforced through production organisation. Of 24 women workers interviewed in Sanganer, 23 lived and worked within residential area. When asked why they do not work in industrial-area factories with better wages, women cited mobility constraints. One woman working in Sanganer for 17 years mentioned, "Factories are too far, no transportation, cannot go alone." Another added, "We have elderly at home, young children. If something happens, we couldn't come back immediately if we work far away."

Employers strategically use these norms. Multiple residential-area units employ only women because families with young daughters live on premises and male workers would violate propriety. Although men also work in these types of units, but mostly they go out towards industrial area where they get more payment for similar kind of work. This creates dual labour markets, one having residential units with mainly women on piece-rates, two factory units with male migrants on higher daily wages outside the residential area.

The *aangan* (courtyard) functions as "threshold space" which is neither fully inside (domestic, private) nor fully outside (public, productive). Women working in courtyards engage in productive wage labour visible to the community, yet their work remains coded as "inside" and thus domestic help rather than productive work. This spatial ambiguity serves both patriarchy (women remain "inside" ideologically while working) and capital (access to cheap female labour).

Space is not pre-given but actively produced through gendered practices. Women can be "inside" even while working "outside" through working with male kin only, wearing veils, remaining in residential zones. This understanding is very particular to Chhipa women who still work and operate within the boundaries of the community.

Devaluation of women’s work further takes place in the form of considering women’s work as *madad* (help) rather than *kaam* (work). When I asked a 60-year-old woman if she works, she laughed: "Work? No, I just help (*madad karti hun*)." She has printed *dabu* sarees for 40 years, possesses intricate knowledge, trains younger women, contributes essential household income. Yet she categorises her labour as "help." This naming matters economically. In a *dabu* unit where 11 women work, skilled "first round" workers (placing initial blocks requiring precision) earn Rs 1.5 per meter. A skilled woman printing 10-12 cloth lengths daily earns Rs 150-180 maximum. Comparing this to men’s earning Rs 30-40 per saree for comparable work shows wage pay gap. The wage gap is justified by the employers, industry, community, and women themselves through the logic of *madad*/*kaam* distinction.

These mechanisms intersect to create gendered circuits of accumulation. Big capital benefits from women's labour precisely because women's wages are the lowest, there is no compliance cost in hiring women and they are ready to work for flexibility. Women's domestic responsibilities make them reliable as they do not migrate, and won't demand better conditions by giving up proximity of workplace to home. Patriarchal controls on women's mobility, domestic obligations, and social valuation create conditions making women ideal workers for capital seeking maximum exploitation with minimum cost.

4. Conclusion: Development for Whom?

This analysis reveals a troubling paradox. Policies promoting handicraft exports, cluster development, and platform-based market integration promise artisan prosperity while often enriching big capital and deepening precarity whose impact falls most severely on women.

Export growth does not translate to artisan prosperity because big capital extracts value through control mechanisms that operate beneath formal employment relationships. Market monopoly, credit dependencies, and subcontracting chains enable surplus appropriation while transferring all risk downward.

The article shows that formal subsumption persists not as developmental lag but as strategic choice. Capital maintains artisanal production in informal forms precisely because this enables exploitation without regulatory obligations, if they are getting required amount of printed clothes. Critically, formal subsumption operates through gendered mechanisms- women remain in home-based informal production while men transition to factory employment. Technology adoption, spatial reorganisation, and devaluation of women’s work in constructing their role as "helpers" rather than workers, simultaneously enable their exploitation and render them invisible.

Development policies celebrating craft revival while promoting export integration miss this structural reality. Market access deepens dependency when power asymmetries remain unaddressed. The question is not whether artisanal production survives global capitalism- it does, as flexible cheap labour source, but whether it can exist in forms that benefit artisans themselves. Answering this requires confronting how big capital and patriarchal controls mutually constitute exploitation of workers.

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