

The Everyday Life of the Jewellery Karigars in Siliguri: A Case Study

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The conventional predominance of the Bengali Swarnakars in jewellery making is on the wane as the non-Bengali karigars are taking their place. Making jewellery is no longer a caste occupation in the Hindu social order as non-swarnakars are also finding a place in the craft. Counted in the informal sector the karigars are subjected to the crudest form of exploitation which leads to their alienation at work place. The elements of estrangement pervade their family and social life.

Keywords: Swarnakar, karigars, alienation, jewellery trade, family life.

Introduction

Incidents and changes happening in every micro or macro moment are stitched together to form an individual's life. The routine, habitual and repetitive activities are collaged together to form everyday life which continues in a wave form. In order live a life, an individual has to engage in productive activity, called work. Repetitive works, with least deviation, from an unchanged everyday working life. The everyday working lives of the *karigars* are like the playback singers behind beautiful actresses. A lot of hard work is ignored in the aura of gold jewellery. This paper talks about the "behind the scene" reality of the everyday working life of the *karigars*, their struggles, and sufferings, who work hard to create a beautiful world of art and fashion and fantasy in exchange of the bare minimum that is required for their survival. This paper focuses on the daily routine of the *karigars* who spend a large part of their life in workshops for making jewellery.

Karigars are an important part of jewellery industry. Their art and skills transform the raw gold metal into fashionable gold jewellery which is adorned by both women and men; thus, they are the real goldsmiths (Baxi and Prasad 2005: 223). Their daily life consists of activities at work and family. The day to day activities of the

karigars do not merely alienate them from the products they produce, but also from the working activities, which ultimately bring vulnerability in their family life as well (Bottomore 2000). They generally place themselves under the category of Vaishya caste (trader and merchants) in Hindu caste hierarchy. Jewellery *karigars* in siliguri belong to several sub-castes, namely, Karmakar, Sonar, Vishwakarma, Verma and so on. Despite differences in their caste positions all these castes are clubbed under the Other Backward Caste (OBC) group by the government for the purpose of protective discrimination.

Fieldwork

The present paper is based on the primary data which have been collected applying case study and direct interview methods. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the *karigars*, who are working in workshops for making jewellery, from different parts of Siliguri. I have visited 4 jewellery workshops where the *karigars* are working in a group of 6 on an average and 22 small jewellery shops with attached workshops. For my study, I had selected 8 Karigars from 4 workshops and 8 Karigars from jewellery shops. I have studied their working life in details, interviewing them in person with the help of a prepared interview schedule.

A brief account of the Everyday life of the Jewellery karigars

Karigars of Siliguri constitutes a heterogeneous group as one can find both Biharis and Bengalis among them. Bihari *karigars* have learnt their skill of making and refining gold jewellery after coming to Siligui. They have learnt the skill from the fellow members of their own community, who have their shops on Hill Cart Road and Khudirampally; a few Biharis have learnt the art from Bengali traditional jewellers, who have their shops in Mahabirsthan. Bengali *karigars* have come to Siliguri from Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Coochbihar and several districts of Bangladesh. They are the most skilled craftsmen because they have inherited the art of making jewellery from their forefathers. As they had less capital to set up their own shops, they continued their hereditary occupations as *karigars*. Over generations, they have worked under jewellery shop

owners. A few of the Bengali *karigars* have come to Siliguri from Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri after they failed to establish their business in those two places.

In order to know about the daily routine of the *karigars* it is important to know the working environment of the workshops. The daily life of the *karigars* includes various responsibilities which are required to run the workshop. Jewellery workshop is the place or a system where a group of *karigars* interdependently related with each other for making gold jewellery. The relationship among the workers is more or less intimate. They not only work together but also share their food and make fun of each other. There is a kind of division of labour, though not complex, as all the *karigars* are dependent on each other for making one single jewellery product. Working in a team gives a sense of solidarity to the workers. In the following section, I have briefly discussed the important aspects of the everyday life of the workers.

Duration of work. *Karigars* start their day by reaching workshop in the morning around 8:30 am. The workshop is generally opened either by the shop owner or the senior most *karigar*, who is entrusted with the responsibility. If the owner or the senior *karigar* arrives late, the rest of the *karigars* wait in front of the workshop, on the road. On most occasions, they have to wait for 20 to 30 minutes, before the workshop is opened. In the words of one of the respondent Mr. Rajesh Karmakar, who is working under a jewellery shop owner has said: 'I come to the workshop within 8:30 am or else the shop owner gets angry. But when he comes late I have to wait for him outside the shop and this is not fair'. On the contrary, the *karigars* who have their own shop maintain their own schedule of work. Mr. Umesh Prasad, a jewellery shop owner, opens his workshop between 8:00am and 8:30 am during the summer season and after 10:00 am in the winter season. He is punctual about his timing. He thinks every businessman should follow a routine. The customers would know about the timing of the business in order to plan their visits. Now the business is down and the customer flow is less, yet Mr. Prasad is in the habit of maintaining the time. He said: 'it has become a habit for me to open the workshop on time. With the timing, out of customer flow I get enough leisure time; I seat ideal, read a newspaper, wait for the customers/ jewellery shop owners to come. But I am

punctual about the duration of my work.' Thus, the perceptions of a worker can vary depending on whether he is a mere worker or a shop-owner-cum-worker (a petty bourgeois).

The working hour is long and the environment within the workshop is unhygienic, to say the least; the *karigars* get completely exhausted and fatigued by the end of the long working day. In general, they are expected to work for 10-11 hours a day. By the end of the day the *karigars*, in general, lose their energy and concentration. The closing time of the workshop is not fixed; it varies with the varying workload and seasons.

Beginning of the work. After the workshop is opened by the shop owner or the senior *karigar*, all the *karigars* get to their works assigned to them. They start their work after dusting and cleaning the workshop, splashing water on the open space in front of the workshop and lighting incense stick in front of the image of God. Each *karigar* is given a specific duty which he performs before getting to jewellery making. The *karigars*, before starting jewellery making, worship their tools and instruments, which they consider "sacred" (to use Durkheimian term) by praying to the *God Viswakarma*. Mr. Dulal Mondol has said: 'for us, all the works that we do after entering the workshop, are sacred. There are some works, like cleaning and dusting, which the owner would never do. After opening the workshop, he would sit on his chair and command us to do those works for him. We cannot say "no" to the owner because we all do this kind works because he is our *Mallik* (owner/employer).

Work environment. Working environment plays a significant part in the working life of the *karigars*. It is the place where the *karigars* spend their long working hours every day. It is natural that the work environment would have a direct bearing on the life of the *karigars*, their health, and mental condition. I have found that most of the *karigars* confront some form of health-related problems due to an unhealthy work environment. The size of the workshops is generally small and congested. Small jewellery shop owners keep at least one *karigar* in their workshop. For them, the workshop size, on an average, is approximately 5 feet by 5 feet. For the medium sized shops, where 6-7 workers work, the room size is 9 feet by 10 feet. Besides congestion, the work involves burner, flame and high temperature resulting from heating and melting the gold.

Free movement of air inside the workshop is restricted in the absence of windows and ceiling fans. The working environment becomes intolerable due to rising heat, irritating smoke, and smell of the chemical used for melting gold. For cooling down the temperature inside the workshop they use a table fan. While the work is on, the *karigars* are not allowed to use fan as it interferes with the process of making jewellery. Inadequate ventilation and polluted air inside the workshop stress the *karigars* and cause fatigue and drowsiness. The *karigars* are made to inhale toxic particles day after day, thus inviting irreversible ailments. In general terms, this can be termed occupational hazards, but from the perspective of the *karigars*, it is 'taken-for-granted realm of routine' (Storey 2014). I have found that 16 of the *karigars*, whom I have studied, suffer from asthma and spondylitis. Other 3 *karigars* have developed eye problems. Mr. Shubhas Karmakar, of the *karigars* has said: 'few weeks ago, I started feeling a weird sensation in my right-hand finger, which turned worse within a few days as I continued working with my jewellery tools and instruments. My hand started shaking while making jewellery.' The other *karigars* have complained having pain in hand, arms, neck, shoulder, and the back.

Work distribution. Jewellery making involves multiple steps and each step needs specialization on the part of the *karigars* to accomplish the work. These *karigars* with specialised skill are depended on each other in order to complete a single jewellery product. Making of a single item of jewellery involves four kinds of specialist *karigars*, namely, *melting wala*, *patra cum die wala*, *sona/rupa karigar* and *polishing and shining wala*. The melting wala's work is to melt the gold bars. Patra wala cum die wala's work is to use this gold bar to make wires and smaller sheets of standard size by hammering or using machines. Then the sona/rupa *karigars* take up the gold wire from Patrawala for creating designs, moulding of the micro parts of an ornament, soldering various parts of design by heating to form single finished jewellery products. They also give the finishing touches (glowing) to the gold jewellery. The *karigars*, who work in the shops of the traditional swarnakars, play a crucial part in making jewellery. They also have their own workshops where they take an order from the local jewellery sellers who do not have any *karigar* of their own. They are the actual goldsmiths or Sona/Rupa Karigars.

In the last category of the *karigars*, the polishing and shining *walas*, finally put a shine on the jewellery using indigenous techniques. The process of jewellery making thus follows a standard *division of labour*¹ among the specialist *karigars*, who work in harmony, although they are placed in a hierarchy in terms of payment and status. Several *karigars* who falls under the category *patra wala* and *die wala* say a common word related to their work. Among them, one respondent and a *karigar*, Mr. Jagat Prasad has said: 'now-a-days, it has become difficult to sustain our hereditary business. The machine-made products have captured the market. We have been turning the gold into thin/wide wire for making a gold jewellery design. Now those products are easily available in the markets. Jewellers who used to depend on me for those products are now purchasing the machine-made jewellery from the middle-man who comes from Kolkata to sell the products in Siliguri. We are, as a result, in the process of losing our livelihood.' Another *karigar*, Mr. Pradip Goswami, is a specialist *rupa karigar*; he has inherited this craft from his father. Even his grandfather was in the same profession. Four months back, Mr. Goswami purchased a polishing and shining machine, which has minimised his production cost, as he does not have anything for polishing work. But this mechanisation has led to a loss of job of the polishing *karigars*. This is a typical example of how the mechanization of production, which is unavoidable in order to cut the production cost, leads to loss of job of the traditional craftsmen. In the jewellery trade, the *patrawala-cum-diewala*, and polishing *wala*/shining *wala* are the direct victims of mechanization of the jewellery production. The larger is the trade greater is mechanization; the highest degree of mechanization could be seen in the corporate jewellery trade.

Relationship among the karigars inside the workshop. Relation among the *karigars* is generally cordial as everybody get into much *focused interaction*.² A *karigar* has to deal with his fellow *karigars*, consumers and the owners of the jewellery shop. Although they are dependent on each other for making one single jewellery product, their everyday interactions are primarily work related. While working inside the workshop, they communicate through body gestures and verbally. The working environment often yields informal relation like friendship although an individual worker tries to maintain his own creative form of work through his skills, which he does not want to share with other workers (Simmel

1971); everybody in workplace tries to maintain his unique skills. The relationship between the *karigars* and the owner of the workshop and between the *karigars* and the owner of the jewellery shop is largely formal and hierarchical.

Break time. The gold jewellery making requires a minute and detailed work, which leaves its stress and another negative impact on the body and mind of the worker. The stressful body posture for a long time leaves the worker exhausted. As a way out, the *karigars* take short breaks, 5 to 6 times a day on an average, to relax their eyes and muscles. At the time of the break, they drink tea from the local “chai-wala” for refreshment. In jewellery workshop, the workers are not allowed to take break in a group, excepting the lunch break between 2pm to 2:30pm.

Extra work. Besides jewellery making the workers have to do some additional works every day; such as, bringing jewellery making orders from the known jewellery shops and delivering the finished jewellery to the respective jewellery shops. The small traders without workshops of their own sublet the orders to the relatively bigger traders owing workshops, where the *karigars* work.

Family Life of the Karigars

The thought process and activities of the *karigars in social life* are largely governed by family values. Since, the parents, in general want their children to continue with their gold jewellery making business or craft, they do not give much importance to formal education. The *karigars* in Siliguri are continuing with their family occupation over three generations. They have learnt the skill and techniques of making jewellery from their father and other male relatives. As they have to carry forward their hereditary occupations their family members are least bothered about the formal education. Raju Prasad, one of my informants, has captured the situation like this: ‘my father and the family members never motivated me for going to the school. They gave more emphasis on learning the craft of making jewellery. I had least interest in studies and going to school early morning, so, I turned myself towards the family craft. Right from my early childhood, I was moulded to join the family occupation of jewellery-making’. He further said: making jewellery is a part of our socialisation

process; we are trained to carry our family occupation forward; we start learning the craft early at the age of 14. When we settle down with our business, the parents and close relative put pressure for getting married at an early age.' On an average, the *karigars* get married at the age of 20, which is lower than the legal age at marriage.

Out of 16 informants, 5 (31.25 percent) of the *karigars* have studied up to class IV, 8 (50 percent) *karigars* studied till class IX and 3 (18.75 percent) could barely read and write. When formal education is not a cultural priority the *karigars*, in general, get dropout at the junior high school level and that is when they start working. The lack of education shapes their everyday life in many ways; they do not try for an alternative occupation which would have given them a better life; they have no habit of saving and investing money in other enterprises. On the whole, lack of formal education constricts their livelihood opportunities and they end up falling back on their traditional occupation.

Out of 16 *karigars*, 7 have said that they have an affable relation with their family members. Family members understand the ups and down in the business. Wives stand by their husbands when they are financially down, at the time of work crisis. As this is their hereditary occupations they are aware of the lean period in business and they are used to the hardship that falls on them. One informant, Mr. Pallav Dutta, has said: 'my wife supports me all the time. She understands the jewellery business and the crisis that we face every year. She never complains because her father is also a *karigar*. She is well accustomed with the fluctuating fortunes of the business. She tackles the situations very well.' In this case, the husband and wife work in perfect harmony to weather off the crisis. On the contrary, 9 other *karigars* have said that the relations with the family members are good but the relations come under stress at the time of financial crisis. In the words of Mr. Gopal Barman 'during the off seasons, when the jewellery market is down, the work load is considerably low, and so is the income. This is the time my relations with the family members become under stress. With low income, I cannot meet the basic needs of my family members and everybody is unhappy with me. With my limited resources, I cannot do much to take the family out of crisis'.

This is a crisis that is common to most of the *karigars* I have studied. The family life gets disturbed because of the financial crisis and the *karigars* become depressed. The financial crisis compels some of the *karigars* to take a loan from the known and close ones and they try their luck in gambling or by buying lottery tickets. When things do not work out well, the relations in the family worsen; bad economic management deepens the crisis. They cannot pay the school fee of their children and cannot pay for medical treatment which is becoming more and more expensive. They sometimes turn to alcoholism in order to get rid of stress, but this leaves them further impoverished. All this leaves a destabilizing effect on their family life and family relations. They spend some time with their friends till 9:30 – 10:00 pm, after work, and return home late. They return home terribly tired, go off to sleep after having dinner with the family. Things, however, turn normal when the business is back on its track.

There are a few *karigars* who stay away from the family in order to earn their living. These *karigars* have learnt the skill of making jewellery from the local jewellers at places like Ishlampur, Alipurduar, Mainaguri, Bagdogra, Malbazar and Siliguri Khudirampally and Mahabirathan. They have chosen this occupation because they neither need any formal education nor any capital for getting into this work. As they are barely literate or less educated, for them jewellery making is a relatively easy task from where they can earn a living. Although it requires skill and hard work it is part of their shared culture. The *karigars*, living away from their families, remit most of what they earn, to their respective families. The *karigars* in Siliguri earn Rs. 15000 to Rs. 17000 per month, on an average. They go meet their family members thrice a month on an average.

Conclusion

The life the *karigars* in Siliguri is governed by a process called *habitualization*³, where they are 'expected to follow particular routine' (Storey 2014: 56). This habitualised routine forces the *karigars* into monotonous work every day. Their day begins with a glitter and brings a chance to innovate and create a piece of art which will be held close to someone's heart, and each day ends

with a shadow of crises, like, apathy towards social well-being, physical damage, and psychological wear and tear, an agony that unsettles them emotionally.

The *karigars* work without the job security that their formal sector counterparts enjoy. They live with a sense of “alienation” at work because of the division of labour which results into loss of the individual skill of the craftsmen. The alienation also works in a sense that the impoverished *karigars* do not consume the products they produce. The hard and long working hours involve the extraction of “surplus value” in Marxian sense. The workers also show some signs of a shared “culture of poverty” as they are less educated, take to alcohol, and do not invest money in their children’s education, have no knowledge about value of educations. All this restrict their economic and social mobility. The way of life they live is sustained over generations. It demonstrates some features of culture of poverty outlined by Oscar Lewis. The moot point of the concept is ‘Once the culture of poverty has come into existence it tends to perpetuate itself’ (Lewis 1966). We have noticed that the children are taken out of school early and are engaged in family craft, which kills the possibility of upward social and economic mobility. The collective perception of life is passed on from one generation to the other. In other words, there is a shared sense of surrender to their habitual everyday life and an urge to break free is almost invisible.

Notes

1. Karl Marx defines the term division of labour as ‘the totality of heterogeneous forms of useful labour, which differ in order, genus, species and variety’ (Capital I, Ch. 1).
2. The term “focused interaction” is derived from the work of Erving Goffman, and the concept has played a crucial role in understanding the interactions among the co-workers. Focused interaction takes place when an individual give direct interaction to what people say or does (Giddens et al. : 2003).
3. Berger and Luckmann have introduced this term in their book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise on the Sociology of Knowledge*, where they have observed: ‘all human activities are subjected to habitualisation (...) , implies that the action in question may be

performed again in the future in the same manner and with the same economical effort.'

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