

Namda - The traditional felted craft of Rajasthan

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India's rural arts and handicrafts are the visual expression and technological processes of people living at several cultural, religious and social levels. For centuries Indian arts and crafts have been distinguished for their great aesthetic and functional value. The Indian handicrafts industry is highly labor intensive cottage based industry and de-centralized, being spread all over the country in rural and urban areas. One such traditional craft called *Namda* is produced since ages in the state of Rajasthan which is famous throughout the world for its profile art treasures, for its scenic beauty and bracing climate so also for its crafts. The present study was an attempt to study the traditional *Namda* craft of Rajasthan. Efforts were directed towards documenting the traditional *Namda* art of Tonk and to highlight its unique characteristics with respect to methods, materials, implements, raw materials and surface ornamentation techniques employed. Concern was also given towards reflecting the present scenario of this handicraft industry. Another major objective was to study the socio-economic profile of the craftsmen involved in the craft. Detailed emphasis was also laid on studying the changes that have intruded in the contemporary production practices of this felted rug.

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The handcrafted products of India are created through fusion of modern technologies and traditional craft skills. Crafts are not only bearer of Indian heritage but also the foundations of modern design innovations. The soul of Indian handicrafts lies in its rich cultural heritage. Indian civilization with its immense diversity and a history spanning centuries has developed its own language of color, structure and form expressed in innumerable rituals, objects, art forms and performances. The diverse *Rajasthani* craft articles range from modern textiles of fleecy soft texture by matchless excellence of handcrafted textiles of finest work and craft, to the exquisite designs, etc. These are all products of unique craftsmanship. Art, artistry and originality are intractably intertwined with each other and such an example is reflected by the *namda* makers of Tonk who give concrete shape to their imagination through this traditional craft of felted *Namda*. *Namdas* stand for Indian tradition in the present day. *Namda* is a local term used for felted wool floor coverings. It is a traditional floor covering, made out of coarse variety of wool. Rich hues and exquisite designing are the hallmarks of the handcrafted *Namda*. *Namda* comes

from the root word *Namata*, which is a Sanskrit word and it means woolen stuff¹.

Namda making is practiced as a craft in several cultures, especially the countries throughout Asia, viz. Iran in Persia, Afghanistan and several places in Laddakh, Kutch and Kashmir and Rajasthan in India².

The craft of *namda* making is not native, to Rajasthan. It is known to have come from distant land of Iran and the art of *Namda* making was actively promoted in the state under the patronage of the Mughal monarchs and the Rajput royals. Unique themes and floral patterns provide the themes for these masterpieces and flowers and leaves, buds and fruits are the essence of the designs³.

About 98 km from Jaipur, Tonk is already well known for its *bidis*, carpets, and melons. The *namda* have added another dimension to its fair renown. Though its origin may have been Persian, once the Indian craftsmen picked up the craft they made it their own. Making it is very distinct by use of their exclusive designs. Rajasthan produces around 40% of the country's raw wool and this sector supports nearly 30 lakh persons. It is said that there are only two *namda* making centers in India: Srinagar in Kashmir and Tonk in Rajasthan⁴.

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The present study was an attempt to study the traditional *namda* craft of Rajasthan and developmental initiatives for its revival. Efforts were directed towards documenting the traditional *namda* art of Tonk and to highlight its unique characteristics with respect to methods, materials, implements, raw materials and surface ornamentation techniques employed. Concern was also given towards reflecting the present scenario of this handicraft industry. Another major objective was to study the socio-economic profile of the craftsmen involved in the traditional *namda* craft.

Methodology

For attainment of the formulated objectives of the study a descriptive study was planned. The initiating step was to obtain data from various primary and secondary sources. To collect primary data field visit was conducted in selected areas of Tonk district. This method was devised for collecting first hand information about the production process and other details of the craft. For gathering of secondary data various libraries in universities, museums were visited and Information was also collected from people familiar to this craft.

In accordance with the planned research strategy, detailed study of socio-economic profile of the artisans involved in *namda* occupation and documentation of the *namda* craft was undertaken. Data collection was done using various methods and tool like focused personal and telephonic interviews, field visits, informal discussions and observation. In accordance with the objectives of the study, a structured interview schedule was formulated wherein a questionnaires was framed which included a combination of close ended and open ended questions to derive detailed information. For documenting the craft the selected locale of the study comprised of seven villages of Tonk district namely, Malpura, Niwai, Devli, Chhani, Uniyara, Sawar, and Bassi. Purposive sampling method was used to select the 50 samples amongst the *namda* workers, out of which information of 5 *namda* artisans was restored as case studies. The selection of these samples was done on the criteria of possessing traditional family history of practising *namda* craft and presently active in the same. The information was gathered by administering the formulated interview schedule, informal discussions cum observations to the selected samples of 50 *namda* workers including the 5 case study samples. The documentation of the traditional *Namda*

craft was supported with photographic documentation. All the discussions, meetings and interactions (for attaining information about the craft), were conducted in colloquial language and the responses were recorded in English. Libraries of various academic institutes, designing and research institutions, museums, exhibitions and trade fairs, are served as the medium of collecting secondary data. The data was systematically analyzed and the results tabulated to get a clear and in depth information regarding the socio-economic background of the craftsmen, evaluation of their living conditions along with their health status, job allotment patterns, analysis of the sources of raw material, craft process, problems at each stage of production, terms of trade, working conditions, nature of markets, examination of the existing technologies, designs and colors used, role of developmental agencies, examination of the existing infrastructure, legislation and social security coverage, critical issues revolving around the traditional *namda* craft, awareness regarding ongoing developmental programs and policies.

Results and discussion

The data gathered from the various primary and secondary sources was compiled and the obtained information is stated below:

Documentation of the craft

The *Namda* industry is a household industry and the entrepreneur is an artisan who works in his house along with the members of his family. This craft is majorly practised by the Muslim community however in contemporary times several artisans from the Hindu community have also started their involvement in this craft. The *namda* craft was started in Tonk during the time of Mughals. From thereafter the occupation is carried on hereditary or traditional basis and includes handicrafts units. The artisans purchase raw materials from the merchants and manufacture items on the bases of orders received from exporters and other sources. Though the craft is unique in itself, its valuation is restricted by various reasons which are also somewhat responsible for its present day deplorable conditions, the major one being the seasonal nature of the craft which has resulted into a poor socio-economic state of the artisans related to this activity. Based on the kind of activity being done by respondents and their status of employment, it appears that the majority of the self employed *namda* makers are involved in two or more activities at a time. Quite a few of them are involved in

four or more activities, ranging from carding to milling, and upto value addition stage.

From the occupational structure of the sample it clearly emerges that *namda* making is intrinsically a traditional craft of the Muslims and the Hindus have taken up this trade later on and hence the number of people involved is lesser. Again, among the Hindus more women than men are involved in this trade. This indicates that it is not the primary source of living for them and the women are taking up *namda* work on piece rate basis to supplement their family income. It was also seen that most of the Hindu males involved, have higher levels of education and hence possessed more progressive entrepreneurial traits and are self employed. For the Muslim families involved in *namda*, it is their main source of income and they have varying status of employment.

The findings revealed that the income earned by the artisan from the *namda* craft is not sustainable as it needs to be distributed amongst the family, which is usually a big number. All these circumstances have diverted the artisans towards other income generating activities which would help them earn a larger amount. Most popular activity is *bidi* making followed by agriculture.

Process of *namda* manufacture

The process of *namda* making is as follows:

Raw materials and tools for *namda* manufacture

The key raw materials for making *Namda* include wool, soap, acid and plain water. Other than these the other supplements used are described below with their regional nomenclature.

1. *Oon* (wool):- The main source is the locally available wool of sheep in Rajasthan mainly fetched from Malpura, Kekri, Bikaner, Devli, Jodhpur, Bikaner, Beawar, Sikar, Barmer, Jaiselmer, Jaitaran, Alwar, and Ajmer. The customers also sometime bring their own wool. Earlier the *Namda* makers had their own sheep and would shear them twice a year to obtain wool for their work, but now they are dependent on other sources, so the wool is supplied their by the wool renders. Basically 3 qualities of wool is used class A, B and C. In present times the wool is sometimes mixed with carded cotton also.

2. *Namda Saban* (soap):- It is a locally made soap available in Tonk. It is used in binding as well as washing of *Namda*.

3. *Rang* (colors):- They are synthetic dyes, which are brought from Jaipur, Pali, Bhilwara, Delhi and Surat. Acid colors are mainly used for dyeing the wool.

4. *Taizaab* (acid):- Used in the dyeing process, it is also easily available in the local market.

5. *Tilli oil, Alsi oil, namak and Fatkari* (alum):- are the other ingredients used in dyeing.

6. *Layi*:- Which is used as an adhesive for sticking the cut designs in appliqué, is locally prepared with refined flour (*maida*) and water.

Tools and equipments used in *namda* in making

Some of the traditional equipments used are *Dhoon* (instruments used for cleaning the wool), *Punjab* (a tool used to flatter out puffed wool), *Seekh jhadu* (brush broom), Rod, pipe or *dandi* (stick), *Ketli* or *lota* (kettle), *dabba* (tin box), *Tarazoo* (weighing balance), *Rassi* (rope), *Kenchi* (scissor), *Moza* (socks), *Ghutai* machine (milling machine), *Pinai* machine (carding machine), Drying boiler (drying machine).

Dyes

The dyes used to impart colors to the wool fibers are acid dyes. The colors popularly used are:

Gulabi (pink), *laal* (red), *hara* (green), *narangi* (orange), *kala* (black), *safaid* (white), *saleti* (grey), and *bhura* (brown).

Process of making a *namda* (Fig. 1)

1. *Chhatayi* and *dhulai* (carding/ cleaning of wool)

Wool is first cleaned by hand, by both men and women. It is separated according to quality of colour. The body parts of sheep which are protected from abrasion have better quality. It generally takes a labour of three or four people to separate wool according to different grades. This work is mainly undertaken by the women. Due to mechanization in the contemporary times several of the craftsmen are also known to use the carding machine, traditionally known as *pinai* machine (Figs. 1a,b).

The best quality wool is kept separated and is used for making the designs (cut out patterns for appliqué).The quality of wool is determined by the feel, fiber strength and colour. It is the inferior quality of wool that is actually utilised for *Namda* sheets or base. From here it is taken further for cleaning where they mix kerosene to remove the impurities. This process called as *dhulai*.

2. *Rangai* (Dyeing of wool):- Wool is dyed by craftsman themselves. *Taizaab* (acid) and *fitkari* (alum), *tilli* oil, or *alsi* oil and common salt is also used in the process. They dilute the acid in alum water, put the wool in it and heat it on a traditional

chullah in a metal vessel known as *degchi* for half an hour.

Nowadays dyeing machines, named boilers are also used by some *Namda* manufacturers. After the wool is dyed, it is taken out with the help of a same stick and kept for drying in the sun. Some craftsmen even resort to dyeing of the *namda* sheet when it is prepared after felting.

3. Bicchhayi (Flattening and layering of wool):- First the craftsman spread the mat/ *khaddar* cloth as a base for *Namda*. The wool cleaned up with a *dhoon* (Fig.1c) is now spread on the surface of the mat two sticks and *punjah* (a multi forked tool) is used to lay the wool evenly the wool further along the entire spread of mat (Fig.1d). Then warm soap water is sprayed with the help of a *ketli* (water kettle) or *lota*. The wet wool is rolled onto a pipe or a stick (Fig.1e).

4. Ghutai (the process of rolling and felting):- Rolling is followed by roping. The whole operation is done by kneeling down and matting the wool by rolling and unrolling it systematically. The rolling is done in order to set in the position of the frame, the physical form of the *Namda* and forming a united whole by the action of cohesion (Fig. 1f).

5. Saaban lagana (soaping):- Once the rolling is done, the *Namda* is opened and soap water is again sprayed on the back as well as the front. The craftsmen use socks to prevent their arms from bleeding. Once the rolling is over, the *Namda* is dried. It takes almost 3 days in summers and 10 days in winters for drying of a *Namda* (Figs. 2a, b).

6. Sancha baithana (Putting up a frame):- The craftsmen cut stripes from *sadha Namda*. With these the artisan lays down the grid of the design on the mat. The blank areas formed in the grid require filling in it. For this the artisan gets the coloured wool.

7. Sancha bharai (Filling of frame with colors):- The spaces within the frame laid out are then filled using dyed wool. After this the whole surface is filled with raw wool in order to create the underside of the *Namda* (Figs. 2c, d).

8. Ghutai (Rolling of *Namdass*):- Warm soap water is sprayed evenly on the surface. The face side of the *namda* is covered with a plastic sheet. The same processes used in the manufacture of *sadha namda* are repeated (Fig. 2e).

9. Dhulai (Finishing and washing):- Once the rolled *namda* is unrolled, some wool, under pressure spreads



Fig. 1—Process of *namda* manufacturing, a) manual sorting (*pinai*) of wool, b) mechanized carding machine, c) cleaning and laying of wool, d) flattening of the layered wool with a *punjah*, e) rolling of moistened *namda* on a wooden stick, f) traditional *ghutai* of *namda*



Fig. 2—Milling and design placement on *namda*. a) Spraying of soap water, b) Laying the prepared designs, c) *Sancha bhara*' or final design allocation on *namda*, d) Laying of designed *namda* for milling, e) Covering of *namda* with a plastic sheet and then rerolled for milling, f) mechanized milling of *namda*

out of the boundaries marked by the frame of the layout. The extra wool is trimmed using scissors (Fig. 3a).

The *namda* is then taken to a river or stream for washing (Fig. 3b) and finally dried with traditional sun drying method or with mechanized boilers (Figs.3c,d). Then the prepared sheets are resorted to several kinds of surface ornamentations (Fig. 4). Apart from *namda* (floor covering), some or other items like wall hangings and mats, bags, purse, foot wears, magazine covers, etc. are also made out of this.

The present day demands have introduced some changes in the production process of *namda*. There are very few implements which are used in *namda* making. Infact, there is hardly any machines which can replace the manual work but still, some machines can slightly speed up the process, e.g. carding or milling machine, etc.

Comparing implements with kind of activity respondents are involved in, it is seen that the respondents using machines are either doing carding only or they are involved in multiple kind of activities like carding, milling and value addition, etc.

The findings related to the designs and colors of the *namda* revealed that major part of production is now done on the basis of orders received; hence no specific reasons can be attributed for the use of some colors or designs.

Several *namda* makers have taken up remedial steps to overcome the health hazards related with the production of *namda*, however very less number of artisans has taken steps for the effluent treatment which has presently become the major source of water pollution.

The findings revealed that many artisans have attended the programs launched by the developmental agencies and received associated benefits. Majority of the artisans want genuine external institutional support specially focusing on the marketing aspect in order to improve the present conditions.

According to the opinions gathered from the selected sample several aspects need to be looked upon as an urgent need of the hour, which are a sincere concern towards the quality of raw materials as well as the finished products, design aspect needs to be explored more along with manufacture of such products that have a versatile usage, efforts need to be directed towards upgrading the skills of the craftsmen, credit flow must be made easy with the inception of several promotional activities for publicizing the traditional *namda* craft needs, in order to increase the sales, the freight charges can be reduced for instance, the Commercial Taxes Department of the Government of Rajasthan levies taxes on all the rugs sent out of Tonk, this makes the competition in the



Fig. 3—Finishing of *namda*, a) cutting the edges for finishing with a scissor (*kenchi*), b) washing of *namda* in the river *Banaas*, c) sun drying of washed *namda*, d) mechanized drying of *namda* in a boiler.



Fig. 4—Value addition and surface ornamentation of *namda*, a) by hand embroidery, b) by machine embroidery, c) by applique.

market for *namdas* tough. Abolition of sales tax might provide a great relief to the rug makers.

Conclusion

The survey has provided some firsthand information and has also assessed the socio-economic conditions of the *Namadgars* as well as documented *namda* as a traditional craft. The discussions, interviews and informal interactions with the *namadgars*, traders, have given a broad base to the study to draw some meaningful conclusions.

The study revealed that both the *namda* industry as well as the people involved in, is in deplorable conditions. *Namda* as of now is almost a dying industry. But all is not lost. The battle might have been lost but the war can and should be won. This traditional craft, although in a declining trend, has some distinct advantages. With appropriate kind of intervention and support a turnaround can be brought to the industry as well as the people. The industry can provide floor covering to a large number of people at cheaper rates and thus fulfill the aspirations of those who wish to have floor coverings but cannot afford

expensive carpets. *Namda* making technology is very simple and the production process does not require any expensive equipments. It uses inferior quality of wool which is not suitable for apparel making and hence, otherwise, it might not have been used economically. Thus from social point of view also it is important to rejuvenate the industry. The biggest problems facing the industry are the lack of market promotion and the lack of suitable credit facilities. These problems again, stem from the lack of education and knowledge of people in the trade. With some investment and proper marketing, good amount of money can be made out of this trade.

Hence, it is conspicuous from the findings that *namda* craft still holds its uniqueness which is the reason behind its high export potential. *Namda* craft has undergone several changes specially with regards to the production process. Use of machines have become very popular especially for milling and carding which are regarded as the main labour intensive operations in *namda* manufacture if done manually. This change has though come because of the present day demands and competition still the

output cannot compete with the handmade *namda*. Increased amount of participation of the craftsmen in the programs launched by the government and other developmental agencies is also viewed hence projecting the imbibed interest of the craftsmen, old and new in this traditional craft. Efforts thus, need to be directed towards counteracting the seasonal restraint of the craft and building up of proper marketing channels so as to ensure easy sale of products fetching sustainable income to the *namda* craftsmen and hence preventing them deserting their traditional hereditary craft.

This art needs all the possible encouragement to make the workers enjoy contentment arising out of their creativity, charming designs made with rainbow colors and exquisite workmanship. This is the dream in their eyes that they long to fulfill. In this view, the present study conducted was an earnest attempt directed towards preservation and promotion and propagation of the traditional *namda* craft before it completely loses its distinctiveness in accordance to the opinions given by the craftsmen the areas highlighted if worked upon will lead to an immense improvement in the socio- economic status of the

artisans and uplift the present profile of the art. Thereby, reviving the lost faith of the artisans in their traditional hierarchical craft, and thereby preserving an extinct heritage craft out of the magnificent art treasure of Rajasthan.

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