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Construction of Social Relationships through Clothes: Gender, Caste, and Inter-religious Relationships in Kutch, India

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This study examines the manner in which the *odhani*—a head cover cloth used by women in the Kutch District, Gujarat State, India—is worn, in order to explain how clothes create social relationships, like gender, caste, and inter religious relations.

One of the limitations of previous studies on Indian Muslims is that this community -- a minority -- was discussed separately from Hindu society, which has a different social system and structure. However, in reality, both communities share a common culture to a large extent, and regularly interact with each other. Their clothes provide a new perspective for understanding the social relations between the Hindus and Muslims.

It is said that clothes indicate an individual's social status. In my opinion, however, the function of clothes is not limited to a representation of the community to which the wearer belongs, but also creates differences between communities. Boundaries between communities are not rigid. Interaction with others can lead to changes in those boundaries and the significance of clothes. Hence, clothes are both an indicator and creator of the boundaries. This paper discusses the process of how visible boundaries are created by clothes, in order to complete the traditional discussion on Muslim society, in which the Muslims are considered separate from Hindu society.

Earlier, clothes were not exclusively different for the Hindus and Muslims, as they are now in Kutch. In general, communal distinction in India has been a historical process that started during the age of British colonialism through censuses, governor's policies, etc. Since independence, communalism has expanded gradually throughout India. In Gujarat, communal violence began in 1969. Kutch was also affected by that national phenomenon.

I study *odhani* made by tie-dyed techniques. Kutch is famous for its production of tie-dyed textiles. There are previous studies by [Murphy & Crill 1991] and [Buhler, Fisher and Nabohlz 1980] on tie-dyed textiles of western India including Kutch, but these studies focus mainly on the textile itself and not on their social contexts. I have conducted an anthropological fieldwork of the producers and users of tie-dyed textiles for more than one year from 1998 to 2000, investigating the social meaning of tie-dyed textiles in local society. I used local language, Kutchi, for my research.

Kutch is located in the westernmost part of India and has been a major trading port of the Arabian Sea. Kutch is still famous for its traditional textile production. Many merchants went

from Kutch to East Africa and Arab countries by ship for trading. Kutch was ruled in the sixteenth century by Hindu kings who originally came from Sind in present day Pakistan. The king invited artisan and merchant communities from Sind to Kutch to develop handicrafts and commerce. Many pastoral people came to Kutch from Arab countries and Rajasthan in India.

What is *odhani*?

The *odhani* is a cover for the head commonly found in Gujarat, including Kutch. It is a piece of cloth two square meters in size made with a remarkable variety of materials, designs and colors which vary according to caste, age and locality. *Odhnun* means putting cloth on the head and *odhani* means cloth for putting on head in Kutchi. Traditional women's dress in Kutch is not the sari, but skirt, blouse and head cloth, *odhani*. The population in Kutch is comprised of 80 percent Hindu, 19 percent Muslim and 1 percent Jain. Hindu castes are called *nat* in Gujarati. The Muslims have mostly converted from Hinduism and also have caste like groups. Hindu, Muslim and Jain women each have specific dresses and *odhanis*. A tie-dyed *odhani* is necessary as a part of the wedding dress in every community, though it is referred to by a different name according to the community.



Figure 1. Woman wearing odhani, 2006, (c) Miwa Kanetani.

There are many different ways of wearing *odhani*. Figure 1 shows an example of one way of

wearing *odhani*. *Odhani* has a variety of sizes. *Odhani* is grouped into three classes by size: *bu-poti* (two parts), *ded-poti* (one and half parts), and *paniu* (one part). The structure of *odhani* design is divided into four parts (fig. 2). One is *tar*, which is the ground; the second is *chello*, which is the end; the third is *kor*, which is the border; and the fourth is *matte*, which means head.

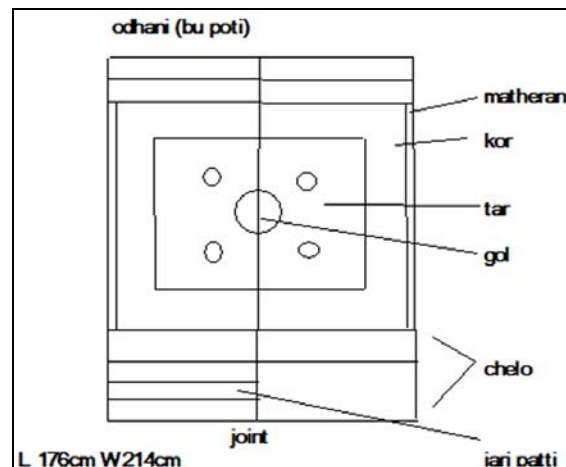


Figure 2. Structure of *odhani* design, (c)Miwa Kanetani.

Odhani is produced by a Muslim group called Khatri. The Khatri were originally Hindus from Punjab. They migrated from Sind to Punjab and later to Kutch, and during that time some members of the Khatri converted to Islam. The Kutch king invited the Khatri to Kutch to develop dyeing work. Kutch Muslim Khatri is an endogamous group with a population of about 8,000 all over Kutch. Khatri is known to be a community of dyers, and most of them are occupied with dyeing work and selling clothes. They are not engaged in weaving.

Let me show you the production process. There are workshops inside master's house. Previously, there was a common dyeing place in an open space near a river or pond, which was called *rangchuli* (color stove), but this is no longer used. Nowadays, dyers use water from the water supply in each workshop inside the house, and synthetic dye. Artisans make designs on the cloth material. They use a transparent sheet where there are small holes that make up the design. The artisans brush color and oil (or water) on the sheet spread on the cloth material to copy the design. And artisans tie the cloth. There are both male and female artisans. Artisans dye and dry the cloth in the workshop, and the master sells their products.

***Odhani* Representing Gender**

Next, I will discuss how *odhani* represents the women's gender. Many previous studies on Indian Muslims have regarded the practice of wearing an *odhani* as the custom of *parda* -- the seclusion of women from men -- and hence have considered it to be an Islamic custom. In this study, however, I would like to clarify that *odhani* has function but for *parda*. The tie-dyed

odhani is symbolic of a married woman with a living husband (*suhagan*). On the wedding day, the husband presents the bride with a special tie-dyed *odhani* which she can wear as long as she is a *suhagan*. This special tie-dyed *odhani* is considered to be auspicious, and is of great significance to the *suhagan* in the Hindu context. Although the Muslim community does not believe in the idea of such auspicious gifts, married Muslim women with living husbands also wear tie-dyed *odhani*, whereas widows do not.

The *odhani* functions as an *amdhal*, whereby women hide their faces behind the *odhani* from their husband's father and elder brothers. This custom is traditionally practiced by both Hindu and Muslim married women in Kutch. *Amdhal* means "inside" in the local language.

Take Khatri wedding for example to show how the groom gifts a tie-dyed *odhani* to the bride, and how the bride uses it. Tie-dyed *odhani* has a different name in each community. Khatri or other Muslim communities call it *khombi*. Khatri has a special design for wedding *odhani*, called *candorokhani* (fig. 3), but other designs can also be used.



Figure 3. Tie-dyed wedding *odhani*, *Candorokhani*, 1998 (c) Miwa Kanetani.

Gift from the groom is called *pero*. *Pero* is everything that the bride wears at the wedding. It includes tie-dyed *odhani*, jewelry, upper dress, trousers, sandals, bag,. First, the groom has to show all the gifts to the representatives of the Khatri community in his own village. This is called *dikh*, which means "showing". The groom's party goes to the bride's village and shows the Khatri members the gifts to the bride. All the gifts, except the *odhani*, are carried to the bride's house. *Odhani* is carried by the groom himself. There is a separate place for men and women in the wedding ritual called *nikah*. The bride sits together with the women folk.

Next, the *odhani* is carried by the groom to the bride's women folk, and then to the bride. The bride wears two kinds of *odhanis*, one is *laelo*, which has pink color spotted on a white

cotton background, and the other is *khombi*, which is tie-dyed *odhani*. Representatives of bride's side and groom's side come to the bride for signing the marriage agreement, after the groom signs it. The bride signs the paper veiled by the two *odhanis*.

After the marriage agreement is signed, the groom takes the bride to his house. In the groom's house, family members welcome the bride by playing a game known as *tel bharaien*, sesame scooping (fig. 4). The veiled bride scoops the sesame and hands it to her new family members, such as her mother-in-law, sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law.



Figure 4. *tel bharaien*, sesame scooping played by Khatri bride and her in-law, 1998 (c) Miwa Kanetani.

Next morning, the family performs the ritual of unveiling the *odhani*. Father-in-law and elder brothers-in-law give some money for unveiling the *odhani* to see the bride's face. Women make fun of men saying, "Give her money to see her face!" A daughter-in-law has to hide her face from the father-in-law and elder brothers-in-law after that.

***Odhani* Representing Castes**

Every caste has a specific design and color for the *odhani*. Although the *odhani* usually represents a particular caste, it also indicates the economic status or social class. Thus, women in Kutch identify the wearer's status, such as caste, financial position, social class and gender role by interpreting the color, design, material and embroidery of the *odhani*. Such interpretation is possible only when one understands what is symbolized by the clothes.

The wedding *odhani* of a Hindu royal family is light color, such as pink, white and red, ornamented with gold plated thread, and gold beads. The name of the design is *bar bhat*, which means "12 places". The cloth is divided into squares in which small designs such as flowers are placed. The *odhani* of Jain merchant people is called *bawan bhat* which means "52 places",

which is similar as the design used by Hindu royal family.

The *odhani* of Hindu pastoral people, Wagariya Rabari is woolen tie-dyed and embroidered *odhani*, called *ludi*. Kutchi Rabari's *ludi* is red patterned on a black background. Cloth is woven by the weaver's community, Wankar, and dyed by Muslim Khatri, and embroidery is done by the pastoral people themselves.

The *odhani* of Hindu pastoral people, Ahir is called *moreri* which means "peacock design". It is a tie-dyed *odhani* with red and white patterns on a black background. The other Hindu pastoral people, Barwad's *odhani* is woolen tie-dyed, red pattern on a black background and is ornamented with embroidery. This *odhani* is ornamented with machine embroidery.

The Muslim merchant's *odhani* has specific features. *Odhanis* of this group are delicate tie works on silk cloth and its black color. They are called as *bagh* design and *patori* design.

The *odhansi* of Muslim pastoral people who mainly live in the northern part of Kutch. The feature of *odhani* of this group is rough tie work of circular design on cotton cloth. Muslim pastoral group, Daneta Jat's women wear a long one-piece dress with embroidery on it and cotton tie-dyed *odhani*. Garacia Jat's woman wearing a red long one-piece dress with embroidery and red cotton tie-dyed *odhani*. The white *odhani* is specially called as *dhorsa*.

Megwal do not have their own *odhani* and imitate the community living near by. They were previously an untouchable caste, and are now recognized as a Scheduled Caste. They imitate from their patron communities. In the northern part of Kutch, majority population is Muslim pastoral people living with Megwal who are leather workers. There is a hierarchy between Muslims and Megwal. Megwal and Muslims wear a very similar dress and *odhani* in this area, and it is sometimes very hard to distinguish them from each other by their dress.

Boundary between Religions

While both Hindus and Muslims have shared the significance of the *odhani*, they now assign new meanings to it. Currently, many Muslim women are refusing to practice the custom of *amdhal*, in which they hide their faces behind the *odhani* in the presence of male in-laws. Instead, they drape the *odhani* over their head and upper body in reverence of Muslim saints, in the presence of Islamic intellectuals, or when they hear the *azan* (call to prayer) from the mosque. This implies a change in the main function of the *odhani*. That is to say, at present, it is mainly being used to symbolize women as good Muslims, rather than as good daughters-in-law.

This picture shows how Muslim women visit a Muslim saint's mausoleum wearing their *odhani*. They cover their hair and breast with their *odhani* to show their respect for the saint.

On the other hand, Hindu women have begun to abandon the practice of wearing the *odhani*,

and are wearing the sari instead. They cover their heads and hide their faces with the end of the sari, instead of with the *odhani*, in the presence of their male in-laws. These changes are considered to represent modernization for the people in Kutch.

Hindu women have started to wear the “new traditional” wedding sari, *gharchola* and *panetar*. *Gharchola* is white and yellow tie-dyed on a red background with checked pattern of gold plated thread. It has auspicious patterns like elephant, flowers and mango. *Panetar* is a white sari with red tie-dyed border. The bride wears *panetar* sari gifted from her mother’s brother, and wears *gharchola* sari gifted by the groom’s side on top of it. Although many Hindus in Kutch think that *gharchola* is a traditional wedding costume of Kutch, it actually came to Kutch from another place in Gujarat, Saurashtra.

Let’s examine the Hindu Khatri case. Hindu Khatri now wear *gharchola* and *panetar* for their wedding. But in an interview with a Hindu Khatri couple who married about 40 years ago, I heard that the traditional wedding costume of Hindu Khatri had two types of *odhani*. They were *chandrokani* and *laelo*, which are now worn by Muslim Khatri. Hindu Khatri was converted from Hindu Khatri to Islam. Hindu Khatri and Muslim Khatri wore the same wedding costume for a long time until recently. Now Muslim Khatri preserve the traditional costume, while Hindu Khatri have abandoned it and have started to wear the new traditional costume.

The sari did not originate in Kutch, but is related to the national culture of India. Therefore, Hindu women prefer to wear the sari instead of the *odhani*, which is associated with backwardness. On the other hand, Muslim women prefer to wear the *odhani*, but in an Islamic context, and not for *amdhal*. New dressing styles are regarded as improvements in the wearer’s social position. Currently, people identify the wearers of the sari as Hindus and those of the *odhani* as Muslims, thereby establishing a new significance of appearance.

It is said that clothes indicate an individual’s social status. In my opinion, however, the function of clothes is not limited to a representation of the community to which the wearer belongs, but is also related to a creation of differences between communities. Boundaries between communities are not rigid. Interaction with others can lead to changes in those boundaries and the significance of clothes. Hence, clothes are both an indicator and creator of boundaries. I have discussed above the process of how visible boundaries are created by clothes.

Earlier, clothes were not different for Hindus and Muslims. In general, religious distinction in India has been a historical process that started during the age of British colonialism through censuses, governor’s policies, etc. Since independence, communalism between the different religions has expanded gradually throughout India. In Gujarat, communal violence began in 1969 and Kutch has also been affected by that national phenomenon.

Visible differences create boundaries between the Hindus and Muslims. This new phenomenon can be associated with communalism at the national level. In the context of modern Indian history, the significance of the *odhani* and the sari has been newly differentiated, creating a boundary between the two communities.

In conclusion, the recent change in the wearing of the *odhani* among the Kutch women provides an insight into the issues related to clothes, gender, boundary between two communities, and modernization.

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