

THE GLASS BANGLE INDUSTRY OF FIROZABAD: a conflict of parallels

Authors

Saumya Gupta, Zeenat Kaisher, Sushma S. Jois, Charul Shah, Priyanshi Shukla,
AnamikaDebnath and Montu Basak,
National Institute of Fashion Technology, Kolkata, India

Corresponding Author: anamika.debnath@nift.ac.in

Abstract

The Firozabad district of Uttar Pradesh, India houses a 200 years old bangle industry which is also the largest glass bangle industry of the world. There are over 0.4 million people directly or indirectly associated with this industry that supplies extensively to the whole country as well as exports to the world. The area of highlight however is the workers of the industry who work in extremely unsafe environments with almost no job security.

Glass bangles are an integral part of Indian culture and are more than just a fashion product. They hold a strong religious and sentimental significance in the life of married Indian women and are considered to be a necessary ornament symbolising a fortunate and prosperous marriage. The vibrancy of this culture is brilliantly reflected throughout the country in various folk songs which often display bangles as a representation of eternal love and commitment. Bangles are a symbol of the Goddess of wealth and affluence and are even worshiped on certain festivals. In “Encyclopaedia of Hindi Cinema”, Soma Chatterjee talks eloquently about the unique “purely culture-specific sound” & symbolism created by Glass bangles. Chatterjee points out that “Glass bangles, however, cut across the caste-class divide in India, as far as films go, because they represent the same things within the script as well as for the audience”.

The lives of the Bangle-makers are rather dark and grim though. As per different reports, the workers in the bangle industry work on fairly low daily wages under hazardous conditions with almost no safety measures. Experts note that handling of molten glass around temperatures as high as 1200-degree Celsius with bare hands have reported several accidents of serious burns among the bangle makers; direct exposure to harmful chemicals and inhalation of particulate matter like silica dust results in acute respiratory tract disorders which in majority of cases become fatal. In this majorly household bangle industry, young children often join their parents by quitting education at an early age ultimately leading their future

into similar kind of darkness. Experts point out that working around intensely bright flames and furnaces damages the tender tissues of young eyes and affect their eyesight severely by the time they turn into adults.

The paper implores the stark realities of these two parallel worlds in a culture-based approach where the “Glass Bangle” has been explored as idea, object and image. The cost of these colourful Glass bangles, considered to be harbinger of prosperity in marriages, is paid by the bangle makers who live a life filled with ailments, destitution, hardships and no recognition.

The story of Glass bangles thus exists on contrasting parallel worlds throughout history as well as today. Is there a bridge?