

Design Research Seminar
**VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY:
GADIYA LOHAR**

Project Guide: Nina Sabnani

IDC, IIT Bombay

Name: Boski Jain

Roll Number: 146250006

Specialisation: Visual Communication

Batch: 2014-2016

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Name: Boski Jain

Roll Number: 146250006

Date: 23.2.2016



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ABSTRACT

Gadia Lohars (also known as Gaduliya Lohars) are a nomadic community of Rajasthan, India. They are lohar (ironsmith) by profession who move from place to place on bullock carts. These carts in Hindi are called gadi, hence the name 'Gadia Lohar'. As they have been on a constant move since many years, they are found in other parts of the country too. They generally camp in the outskirts of city for few weeks or months, temporarily establishing work place and selling their in the markets of nearby city.

Their current economic status is not good and they are in constant struggle for political rights since they have been on a constant move from place to place since many years.

This report is about one such group settled in the outskirts of Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. It is the account of an attempt that has been made to study the lifestyle of this ethnic group.

INTRODUCTION

Traveling on road in Madhya Pradesh, often one can see beautifully carved wooden carts parked on road sides. What accompanies these carts is practically an entire household including beds, place for cooking and place for work. The first thing that strikes about the owners is their traditional dressing esp. the brightly coloured clothes that women wear. Next is the exquisite jewelry that accompanies these clothes. I have seen these families in and around Bhopal. My first interaction with one such family was in Chanderi. Roaming about the town as a tourist, me and my aunt spotted two women who were preparing dinner. One of them was mashing the dough which was so big, that we could see it from right across the road. Intrigued by their dressing and the smell of the food, we decided to go and talk to them.

There were no questions about who they were or where they came from but brief chitchatting about their household, their beautiful clothes etc. There was a beautiful wooden cart on the side that seemed to be belonging to them.





Off course they were more curious about our where abouts. As our brief talk was getting over, they offered us food. By that I mean the lady who was making roti, simply picked up a hot, ready to eat roti from the pan signaled us to take it in our hands. We happily took the roti and joked that we could not eat the roti alone. So she put a spoon full of thecha on top of our roti. Thecha is like a green chilly chutney. It was indeed very spicy. After we had finished the roti, we took our leave.

Then while typesetting a book about the social-geography of Rajasthan in my previous work place, I found out that this community is known as the Gadia Lohars.

I have come across them many times since then. One can easily spot their presence by a small display of iron utensils on the roadsides. They do not stay in one place for long. They are on a constant move. Thinking about the challenges of such a life style, I decided to take a closer look at this community through this project.

HISTORY

Their origin is shrouded in legend. Their forefathers were blacksmiths in the army of Maharana Pratap of Mewar.

When Rana Pratap's army was defeated at the battle of Haldighati in 1576, the Gadia remained loyal to him, following him into the forests to which he fled, skirmishing with the Mughal army in a long drawn out struggle that continued even after his death.

After the fortress of Chittorgarh fell to the Mughals, the Gadia Lohars took a vow never to return to their homeland, and never to settle anywhere else until the Rana's hegemony was restored.





PRESENT

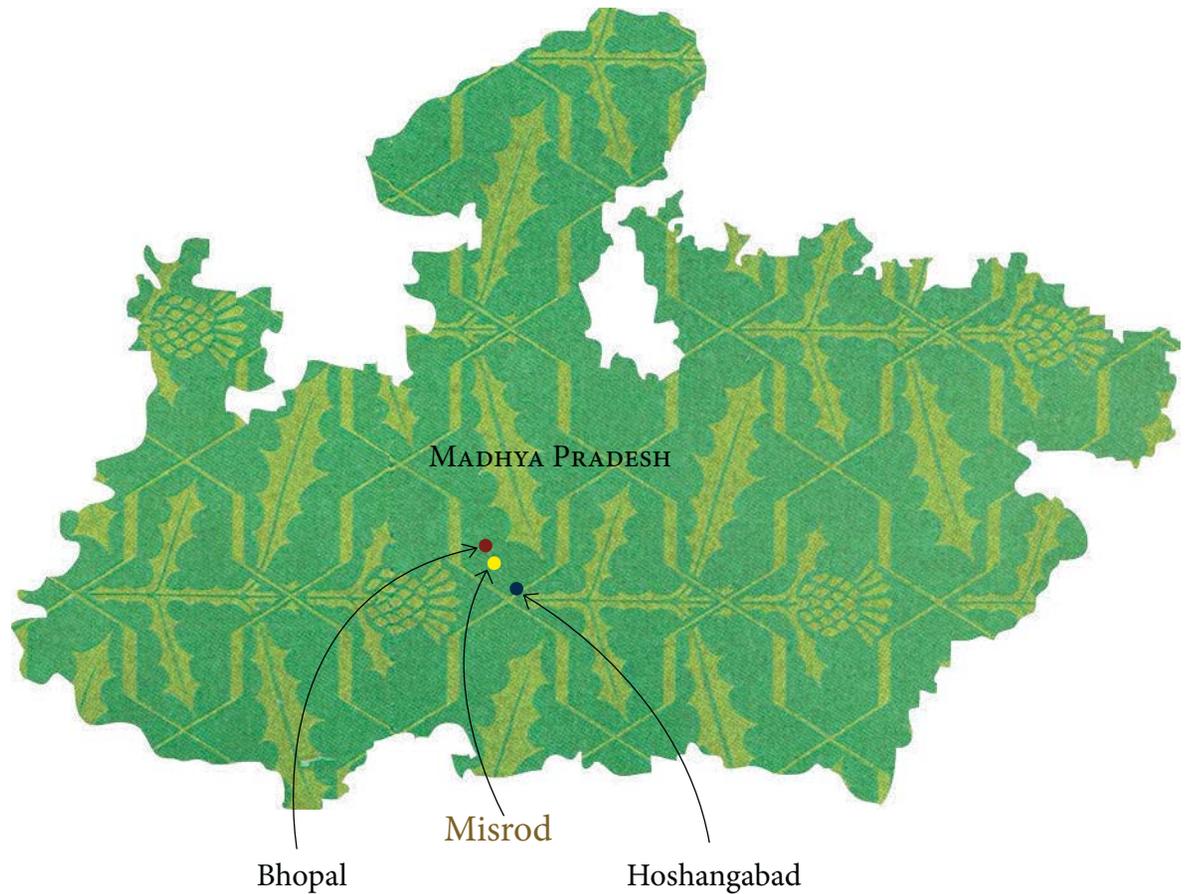
It has been hundreds of years since these people moved out of their kingdom. Generation after generation, they have traveled on their carts and have continued their traditional occupation. The next few pages describes a closer look at their lives in current times.

LOCATION

As the Gadiya Lohars do stay in one place, locating them was a problem. I visited the locations within Bhopal where I had seen them before but with no success. Then, a friend of my father told us about a Gadia Lohar settlement about 15kms from Bhopal.

On the highway that connects Bhopal and Hoshangabad, lies a village called Misrod. Bhopal, being the capital city of Madhya Pradesh, is expanding continuously. And in this process, Misrod has almost become a part of the city. Here, about 100mts from a mall, is a settlement of 8-10 Gadiya Lohar houses.

Familiar displays of iron utensils could be seen from a distance. Women were busy cooking and washing utensils, little kids were running around them. I could recognize the ethnic group. But there was no sigh of the beautiful wooden carts.



CONVERSATIONS

I was first introduced to Sukhram by Mr. Patel. Mr. Patel's family has been a part of the *panchayat* at Misrod since generations. Their family owns a lot of land in this place including the piece of land on which these Gadiya Lohar families are living currently.

Sukhram came to Bhopal along with his brothers some 40 years back. Since this place seemed friendly and suitable for sustaining a life, they decided not to move further. Other families who came with them, settled in other parts of the city. It was with his family and a few of his close relatives living in this settlement that spent the next few days learning about their culture and lifestyle.

After the first visit, when I returned to the settlement, I was carrying with me, few prints of the photographs I had clicked before. This eventually became my excuse for coming to back again and again, everyday. The women and children, esp, would be thrilled to see their pictures.





There are small settlements in and around Bhopal. Although they have been occupying these pieces of land since a long time, they do not have any legal rights on these. They are still confined to the traditional work of blacksmiths. They enjoy joint families but when extended families become a problem for income and employment, brothers split to other parts of city taking their respective families with them.

As the tradition goes, both males and females are trained in the blacksmith work so everybody can participate in the family business.

Each household has small shops of their own that sell construction equipment, gardening equipment, and some utensils.

These shops ascend the entrance to their house. The houses are mostly made of cow dung and hay. With plastic cover roofs reinforced by bamboo or branches of bigger trees. The interior of the houses are impeccably arranged. Typically, a house will contain one or two charpai, a shrine, some utensils and most importantly, a beautiful wooden cart.



THE CART

This is the same cart that each family has inherited from their forefathers. All equipment for work and house hold things are stored in it.

Even though the migration has stopped, these carts remain a cherished possession. Every morning, the bedding, the clothes and even the charpai is neatly stacked on top of these carts leaving space in the rest of the house for sitting or doing other work.

The carts occupy major portions of the house as well as their lives. These carts are decorated and painted every year. There have been instances, though, that when in need of money, a family had to sell off their cart. Some 10 years ago, a family sold their cart to Doordarshan for about 80,000 Rs. The broadcasting channel used it as a property in their studio.



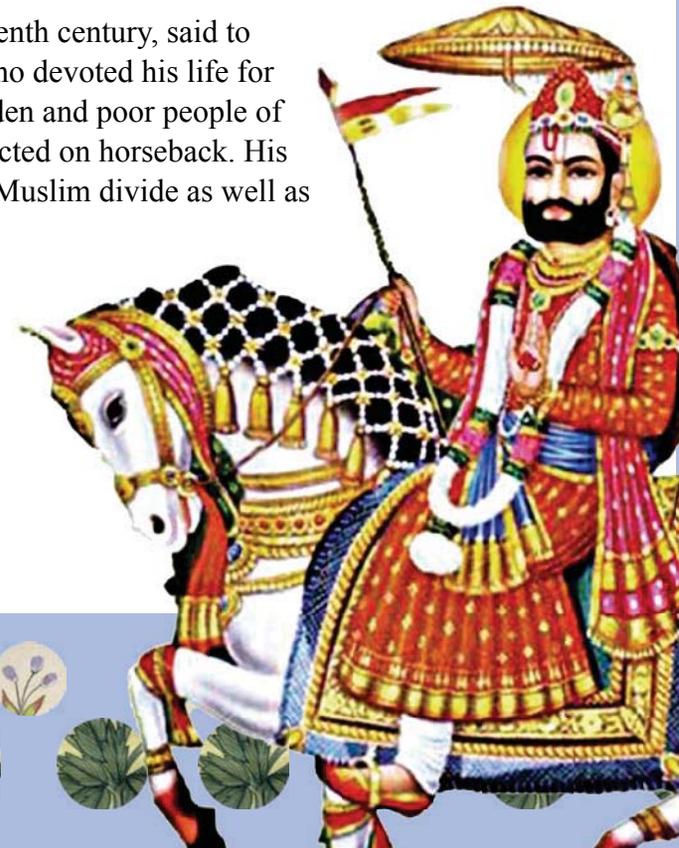


FAITH

Typically each shrine contains framed photographs of Ramdev. This photographs is accompanied by photographs of members of the family standing around posters or wall size paintings of Ramdev.

Ramdev is a Hindu folk deity of Rajasthan. King Ajmal (Ajaishinh) married Queen Minaldevi, the daughter of Pamji Bhati of Chhahan Baru village. The childless king went to Dwarka and pleaded with Krishna about his wish to have child like him. They had two sons, Viramdev and the younger Ramdev.

He was a ruler of the fourteenth century, said to have miraculous powers, who devoted his life for the upliftment of downtrodden and poor people of the society. He is often depicted on horseback. His worship crosses the Hindu-Muslim divide as well as the distinctions of caste.



WORK

Their work is mostly about repairing construction and gardening material. Since the city is expanding rapidly and in the direction in which they live, there are many construction sites around that bring them business. Typically, construction sites are closed on Sundays. Hence weekends are busy for the iron-smiths as this is when the construction workers come and get their tools repaired. The piece of iron is heated till it becomes red and then is beaten with a hammer to bring it to the desired shape. Common tools used by them are hammer, bellow, gripping tools, anvil, water vessels etc.

A new trend for these traditional iron-smiths is to buy ready made iron utensils and sell them their own shops. Its more 'convenient' for them is what they say. It requires less effort than to make utensils from scrap metal. Some iron-smiths have now started participating in fairs to sell their products.

Even though Gadiya Lohar women are trained in iron-smith work, they keep themselves engaged in other kinds of work as well. Within an hour of my arrival to the place, the women started inquiring if I would be interested in buying their traditional dresses, hand stitched by them. They even offered to sell some jewelery similar to what they were wearing.



TRADITIONS AND FESTIVALS

Gadiya Lohars celebrate all major Hindu festivals. Marriages usually have ceremonies spread over 7-8 days. The celebration ends with Bidai (the bride finally taking her farewell from her father's house) which takes place on the 9th day. A *mandap* is made with trees and branches outside the bride's house. This is where all the major ceremonies take place. The variety of food served at weddings is restricted but consists of traditional Rajasthani cuisine

DRESS AND ORNAMENTS

Women usually buy fabric and stitch their own clothes at home. their typical attire consists of a full-sleeve or half sleeve blouse, a pleated skirt and a dupatta which they use to cover their heads. The complete dress requires about 10 mts of cloth. During weddings, the bride is usually given about 8 to 10 sets of these among other things. The men are not particularly traditionally dressed. Except for a few who wear dhoti. The children do not wear traditional dresses. As girls reach their teens, they are required to switch to traditional dressing.



The Gadulia Lohar wears many kinds of ornaments. Both men and women like to wear different kinds of them. Normally, these ornaments are made of, silver and sometimes of copper metals. The men wear earrings, generally in one ear but sometimes also in both. Sometimes they wear metal rings in their ankles. The women wear earrings, bangles, belts, necklaces, rings, head chain and anklets made of silver. The bangles worn now are made of both glass and plastic. The white bangles worn on upper arm, right from the shoulder, were made of ivory in early days but now have mostly become plastic imitations.





INSIGHTS

Even though I came across much that has been written about this community previously, but spending time with them was a different experience altogether. As much as they are attached to and are loyal to their ancestral history, they are struggling to find their place in this modern world.

When ever anything about their customs and traditions was mentioned, they insisted on being upper caste Hindus. Traveling continuously and not having a piece of land to call their own might be a reason for their Slowly decoding my ecounters with them before, to understand their current status, struggle and aspirations as far as economics and culture go.

The economics of the *Mirch Thecha* that was offered with the *roti*: small quantities of such a spicy curry or chutney is enough for the entire family to eat their meal. This might one of the tactics for running the house hold in limited budget.

Unlike what has been written before, women do not share the load of iron-smith work. Even though they are active participants when it come to retailing.

clothes and jewelry to tourists. This could also be because they do not really get a good share in the family income that comes from iron-smith work.

Their repeated insistence on being upper caste Hindus: Gadiya Lohars are officially recognized as a tribal group by the government. History says that by the end of his life, Maharana Pratap eventually was able to recover many territories that he had lost to the Mughals. This puts the history narrated by the iron-smiths in question. Why did they continue with the nomadic lives when they could have returned to their kingdom. Does the society force them to put up a disguise that commands more respect than what their actual identity does. Is it a result of being a victim to caste system.

An attempt has been made to present this report using some elements of miniature paintings. Thus depicting the lives of the Gadiya Lohars as tales of the aristocrats depicted in miniature paintings.



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