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Ethnic Dominancy in Informal Sector: a case study of Vaghri Community in Mumbai

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Abstract: ***By profession, the women from Vaghri community in Mumbai collect discarded clothing from households and in exchange give new utensils and plastic wares. They are called as 'bhandivale' or 'bartanwale'. They belong to Vaghri community from Gujarat. They have migrated to nearby states like Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. There is limited study on Vaghris who make a living out of this profession. In furtherance, this part is from the ongoing Ph.D. work on 'Informal Sector in Mumbai: A socio-economic study of Vaghri community'. The objective of this study is to understand the present socio-economic conditions of Vaghirs and identifying the changes in their work environment.***
The present paper is an effort to understand a specific informal business of Vaghri community which is a unique mode of informal business and their socio-economic conditions in Mumbai city.
Keywords: Clothing waste, Second-hand clothes, Occupational details, Socio-economic conditions.

I. INTRODUCTION

The old clothes are not always thrown away. Many a time they are recycled and reused. Either they are sold again in old clothes market or are recycled into raw material for the manufacture of other recycled apparel products. Sometimes old clothes are exchanged for new utensils and plastic wares (Mundkur & Dedhia, 2014)[1].

In the city of Mumbai Vaghris collect old clothes from residential areas in exchange for utensils or plastic wares. The utensils are purchased from stainless steel merchants and carried door to door in a basket or they sit at strategic locations in some residential localities. The exchange business is mainly carried out during afternoon and evening hours.

They have to walk long distances and use pooling cabs or rickshaws for transport. It was found in the study that mostly men travel longer distance to collect old clothes whereas women do pheris (going on round) in nearby areas. Once the clothes are collected, they are sorted out. The wearable clothes are sold in old clothes markets at Chor Bazaar, Thane (Kopri) market, Mulund old clothes market, street side or on the railway bridges in the city. Alternatively, the clothes are sent to remote villages for sale, as there is always a good demand for these clothes in villages due to their colour and design.

The torn and non-wearable clothes are sold by weight to rag merchants called 'chindhivale'. Vaghris normally collect old clothes that are in good condition and mostly they prefer 'sarees' and 'jeans pants'. The expertise has helped the community to dominate the trade in the city.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

With the aim of understanding the ethnic dominancy of Vaghri community, the main objectives of the present paper is-

1) To understand the occupation of Vaghris who are dealing in second-hand clothes.
2) To understand the socio-economic condition of Vaghris residing in Mumbai.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An Exploratory-descriptive research design was selected for this study and qualitative and quantitative methodologies are used to gather information. The researcher made use of non-participant observation, case study, oral history and narrations to gather the data. The semi-structured interview schedule and observation schedule were also used as tools to gather primary data. Data was collected from various residential locations from Kandivali-Borivali-Dahisar in Western Suburbs and Mulund-Thane in the Eastern Suburbs. Market operations at Chor Bazaar near Mumbai Central, Old clothes market at Thane (Kopri) and Mulund old clothes market were observed during the field visits in the business hours. The samples were drawn through non-probability convenience sampling design using snowball technique. Most of the indicators were quantified for analysis. The findings have been presented using statistical methods and their theoretical implications.

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IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

A. Functioning of the business:

The Vaghri women, 3-4 members in each group collect garments during the daytime, usually between 11 am to 4 pm in the afternoon, when women of middle-class households of the city take rest (Saha & Sukanta, 2016)[2]. They choose this suitable timing for approachability and suitable conversations for bargaining. The exchanges of steel, plastic utensils, which are required in everyday domestic uses, are attractive to the middle-class housewives. The middle-class housewives prefer such a non-market barter transaction as an opportunity to trade their used and unused family garments without any cash irrespective of much profit-loss calculations in mind. The regular collection builds up and maintains a long-term mutual familiarity and acquaintance between the two counter-parties appearing in a non-market inter-class barter transaction of used clothes and fresh utensils at the doorsteps of the household. The collected old clothes get an apparently new-look after processing through the treatment of washing, cleaning and ironing. The male members provide active assistance in this washing-cleaning-ironing activity. However, not all Vaghris prefer washing-cleaning-ironing. Vaghris in the present study do the sorting of clothes and take these clothes to sell in the market. The male members of their families assist them in the task of transportation of the clothes to the market and also in sale. Mostly the cotton garments, which are not torn and can be retrieved for re-use, are sold in the market. The buyers of the market are low-income individual consumers and petty traders of different parts of the State. The petty informal traders purchases second-hand garments from this market and supply these clothes to markets across Mumbai. They purchase bulk of clothes at a rate much cheaper than the individual consumers due to their already established contacts in the market. The obsolete rotten clothes, which are not in a condition to sale, are supplied to industries at different locations of metropolitan cities of other States like Ghaziabad in Delhi, for the purpose of cleaning machines. Here, a formal-informal linkage appears there where informal trading market is supplying rotten clothes to the formal sector in the form of 'dusters' to clean as raw materials. Muslim zari workers collect expensive zari (mostly from saris) and use zari as raw materials in Zari and Embroidery industry. Here, parts of the products sold in the informal second-hand garments market is entering into the informal production of Zari and Embroidery which is ready for sale as finished products in the formal market, establishing a informal production – informal sale linkage. The informal trading market of second-hand garments is scattered in different spaces throughout Mumbai. A significant market operates near the Thane railway station at Kopri. This particular market operates in the evening, but Vaghris gather there with old clothes right from afternoon. Another market is Chor Bazar in Marine Lines. This market starts in early morning and gets windup by 8 a.m. before the other regular shops start. The market also includes a few number plastic and metallic utensils shops, mostly owned by big businessmen from the Marwari community, who sell the utensils to the second-hand garments traders of the market. The growth of this trade has been generating self-employment to the young city slum-dwellers without much initial investment and sufficient minimum basic sustenance.

B. Vaghri Community:

Vaghris are a depressed community of itinerant traders who hail from Gujarat and are engaged in various forms of trade all over India (McNaughton, Darlene Ann, 2003)[3]. Vaghris were initially forest hunters and itinerant traders who maintained patron-client relationships with local Rajputs, worshipped goddesses and held origin myths connecting them to the Middle East, the Vaghri did not fit easily into the category of caste or tribe, as these categories became more rigidly codified during the colonial era. At the same time, their ambiguous marginality is picked up by a regime that articulated a fantasy of occult criminality. This resulted in the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) (1871) through which the social marginalization of the Vaghri was greatly extended and a stigma attached that persists into the present day even after the De-notification of Criminal Tribes (1952).

JM Malkan, a researcher and former bureaucrat says that the origins of the community can be traced back to the Vedic period, where they are identified as Mrigaya or Vyadha, the hunters (Parth Shastri, 2014)[4]. Subsequently, they were not even considered as Sudhra as they were categorized as Antyaja (last in the last category) and were generally given space outside the main town for residence. The oppression continued in the colonial period where they were categorized as one of the criminal tribes. Vaghris have been classified earlier as both Scheduled Caste (SC) and socially and Educationally Backward Class (SEBC) but now they are not considered as Scheduled Caste.

According to Enthoven (1922)[5] the name Vaghri means 'tiger-like'. However, it is more likely that the name is derived from 'vadags' meaning the sand hills of Rajputana desert. It may have also been derived from 'vaghurs' or 'gaghars' means net, in which case, Vaghris would mean a tribe that trap animals in nets. Sometimes, 'Bagri' is used as a synonym for Vaghri. The Baghri tribe inhabits the Bagar country in the old United Provinces. Enthoven (1922) mentioned that the Vaghris of Gujarat probably belonged to the Bagri tribe. During the colonial period, Vaghri were listed under the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 as being a tribe "addicted to

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systematic commission of non-bailable offences". They suffered greatly as a result of this decision, and are still suffering the consequences. The constitutional status for the Vaghri in Maharashtra is Vimukta Jati i.e., de-notified tribe.

In Maharashtra, they are few in number and have settled in small towns and cities for their subsistence. There are quite a few sub-groups of the Vaghris: one group is called the Kathiawad Vaghri or the Vedus who sell masala (spices) in the cities (Thakre, 2014)[6]. The second group is Chunaria who are lime burner or cultivators. The third group is Dantaniyas who sell twig toothbrushes, and fourth group comprises Vaghris pursuing different professions other said than above. All these are endogamous groups and do not intermarry. These sub-groups cannot be placed in any definite hierarchical order.

Vaghris are migrants residing in this city for almost three generations now and they said that dealing in second hand clothes is the occupations carried by their forefathers; that they wish to continue.

C. Background:

All the Vaghris in the sample are migrants from the Gujarat belonging to various districts like Ahmedabad, Rajkot, Ambreli etc. They migrated to Mumbai city years back and are in the occupation of second-hand clothes for almost three generations now. The sample comprised of 73.33 percent of women and 26.67 percent of men, in the age group between 20 and 55 years. In the present study, 88.00 percent of the respondents are married, while 7.33 percent are single and 0.67 percent is divorced and 4 percent have lost their spouse. Boys are married at late age, but girls marry as soon as they attain 18 years of age. Vaghris live in three types of families namely nuclear, joint and extended. It was found that 21.33 percent of the Vaghris live in joint families, comprising of three generations living together, while 76.00 percent of the Vaghris live in nuclear families. Majority of the families have around five to eight members. A small proportion of 2.67 percent of the respondents live in extended families. Shortage of space in cities is now a constraint for them to live in extended families. However, it is found that they maintain close ties with their extended families (staying away) in villages. The presence of each member from the extended family is counted during special occasions like marriage, festivals etc. In case of number of children it was found that only 4.67 percent families have 1 child, 16.00 percent families have 2 children, 24.00 percent families have 3 children, 26.67 percent families have 4 children, and 16.67 percent families have 5 children and 8.67 percent had 6 children. There are 3.33 families who do not have children.The trend of more number of children can be attributed to the fact that the awareness level about the family planning and various government initiatives among the Vaghri community is low. Being in poverty, they feel more children are sure assurance to earn bread for the family.

The level of education among Vaghris is very low. Girls' education is not given priority. Those educated have studied in vernacular medium. There were just 16 percent who have studied till S.S.C, while only 10 percent had acquired education up to H.S.C and 34.67 percent have studied below S.S.C. However, a change is seen among the Vaghris as new generation children are interested in taking education and 6.67 percent have done their Graduation and 1.33 percent have done their post-graduation and 2.64 percent were found doing other professional courses like B.Ed. A small proportion of Vaghris who were educated/ matric pass have entered into this occupation, as only available choice. The reasons for poor educational levels among Vaghris are due to lack of motivation to study and unaffordable educational expenses. Few want to provide education to their children to make them eligible for other occupation, as they feel that this generation will not be able to carry on this occupation and hardship.

D. Reasons behind joining this occupation:

It was found that these people did not possess much land. Frequent droughts were making their life miserable; hence they migrated to the cities. Forefathers of few respondents were selling soaked rice, wheat, jowar, dal and other grains and pulses and gaining profits due to increase of weight. They were also engaged in selling 'masala' (spices), garlic and tried their hands in selling glass and China clay jars. Then they had started to collect cotton clothes in exchange for these. These exchanged clothes were then sold to poor workers and laborers in factories and to the fishermen and orchard farmers.

They also explained that even if they migrate to cities, their life is not easy. Criminal stigma attached to their community lag them behind other communities in case of educational and social upbringing. They are thus sidelined and ignored. Even if they fetch education, people are hesitant to give them employment opportunities. Thus, they have to switch to their traditional informal occupation. Hence, the primary reasons for this switch are unemployment, lack of skill development to take up any other occupation, comfort stay in this informal occupation, less financial investment and hereditary knowledge of the occupation passed by the family members of this informal occupation of exchange of old clothes with new utensils and plastic wares.

In case of number of hours spent working per day, it is found that 13.33 percent of the respondents spend on an average 4-5 hours working per day, 21.33 percent of the respondents work for an average of 5-6 hours per day, 48.67 percent on an average spent at least six to seven hours working per day, 6.67 percent respondents spent on an average 7-8 hours per day and 10 percent of

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respondents work for more than eight hours daily in collecting old clothes. They leave their house at 10 a.m. or 11 a.m. in the morning and return home by late in afternoon depending upon how much clothes they are able to collect in exchange. The trade does not have a fixed market place or shops. Therefore, they adjust their timing to sale the clothes in places before the regular market opens; and the suitable place is the Chor Bazaar and the timing is 4a.m. to 8 a.m.; before the shops open up for the day. The respondents of Mulund and Kopri normally sell the old clothes in Mulund and Kopri markets respectively. And those market starts around 3:00 p.m. in the afternoon and goes on till 6.00 p.m. in the evening.

The study on the daily income from the trade in old clothes revealed that nearly 10.67 percent of the respondents earn a daily income of INR ₹ 100 to ₹ 200, 14.67 percent of the respondents earn a daily income of INR ₹ 200 to ₹ 300 and 66.67 percent of the respondents earned a daily income of INR ₹ 300 to ₹ 400 and only 8 percent earned between INR ₹ 400 to ₹ 500. However, no respondents reported to be earning above INR ₹ 500.

Vaghris are now more flexible in their pattern of exchange and they offer aluminum ware, plastic ware and even cash in exchange for old clothes. The clothes that are collected are sold for a living in three ways. First, they sell the clothes directly in the old clothes market; secondly, they take these clothes to their native place and sell there; thirdly, the clothes that are too much torn or are not sold in market are sold to 'Chindivalas' for ₹ 5-6 per kg.

E. Distribution of work among the genders

There is more visibility of women in the collection of old clothes in the residential localities of Mumbai. Besides collecting the clothes, there are multiple tasks in which women are engaged. They do sorting of the clothes that are collected, sometimes wash and iron them, carrying the bundles of clothes that were collected to the shared tempo service, also selling them directly at Chor Bazaar, purchasing utensils from dealers, preparing for the next day's collections along with looking after children and the household chores. The participation of women in the recycling business was significantly higher than that of men. However, there are systematic divisions of labour among men and women.

The younger in the age group between 20-25 years do not carry any utensils with them, but they do carry a basket to carry the bundles of old clothes. Since they do not carry utensils, they are not recognized on the roads easily. They may be easily spotted wearing the latest brand of jeans and sport a single earring in one ear. They are more selective of the clothes and are on the lookout for gents' garments like jeans, pants and shirts. Most of these are sold through agents on railway bridges and roadsides or weekly markets. The agents are mostly Muslims migrants from Uttar Pradesh. Children of Vaghris are taking up different occupations. Few are working in back offices, call centers, tattoo making etc.

F. Living Conditions

Vaghris in the study live in chawls and zopadpattis. Vaghris of Mulund live in building developed by Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA). They live in the house owned by them. Few of the respondents however, do not have a house to live. They live on railway pavements. It was found in the study that 86.67 percent of Vaghris have their own house, 10 percent live in a rented house and 3.33 percent of Vaghris live near the railway stations. The basic facilities like water; electricity, toilet, kitchen, store room and proper sewerage connection are of inadequate quality. Only 41.5 percent of the respondents were availing this facility and rest 58.5 percent had made their other arrangement to fulfill the requirement of water from other sources like hand pump, filling water from neighborhoods, community tapes etc. It was also found that some of them were paying ₹ 5 for 15 liters of water. Sourcing drinking water was found to be acute problem among the Vaghris living in Chawls and slums.

The pathetic state of living of the Vaghris came to notice from the field inquiry that 53.33 percent households are having separate kitchen facilities at their living place. Rest of them either cooks their food in open or in the same room where they sleep. Few are having temporary arrangement outside in open space without proper cover or dish washing arrangements. Only 66.67 percent have cooking gas facility. Others use 'Chula' (stove made of mud) to cook food especially chapatti since they said due to large size of family, cooking as does not suffice and they find it expensive to refill it. Another problem encountered by Vaghris is that of toilet facility. Only 50 percent of Vahgris have toilet facility in their house rest have to use public toilets, especially Vaghris living in chawl and those living on pavements have to defecate in open. On the whole the availability of basic facilities in the houses of Vaghris is insufficient for daily subsistence.

G. Future trends

The trend in the future with regards to disposal of used clothes could be on the same lines as that of newspaper in the present time in Mumbai. The deal is a phone call away. The younger generations of the Vaghris use mobile phones. They may be able to pick up

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used clothes on a phone call. As of the present clothes are collected and sold by piece. The trend of collection of old clothes by weight has started and may be the likely practice in future. There are Vaghris who have set up shops and offer cash in exchange of old clothes. Also few Vaghris mentioned that they have a visiting card and they give the visiting card to people residing in rich apartments who can give them a call whenever they want to discard the old clothes.

V. CONCLUSION

The Vaghri community suffers from an extremely poor reputation, as might be expected for dealers in waste, whose moral character is often identified with the materiality of their trade. The story of the Vaghri community is one of struggle, prejudice and victimization. The informal economy in Mumbai represents a significant element of economic activity with its major source of income, employment and social upliftment; and positive and negative characteristics, amplitude and omnipresence of the informal economy enshroud the state and the society. Vaghri are still suffering from the stigma of being a 'Criminal Tribe'. The government should formulate tailor-made programmers to suit and address the specific socio-economic needs of the Vaghri community. The blanket approach is not going to solve the problems of the Vaghri community. Policies and legislation can be formulated providing them access to basic services, including education, employment, health care, clean water, sanitation and transportation. Society should be inclusive in nature to accommodate Vaghri community.

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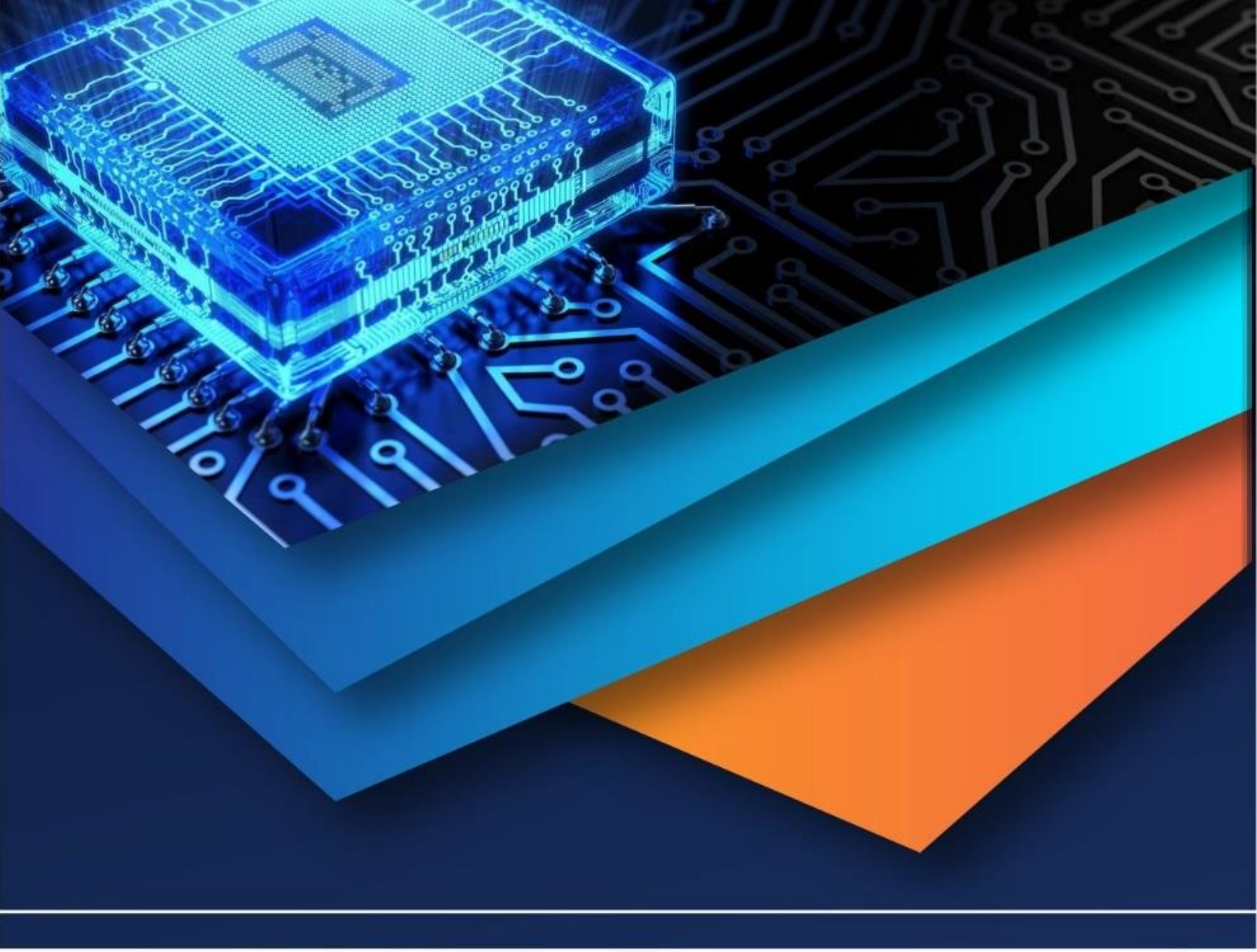

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