

His name is Mumtaz. He is in his mid thirties. I have known him for over ten years. Mumtaz is an expert in tie-and-dye who combines the expertise of a Rajasthani *rangrez* or *lilgar* with a flair for dealing with the exigencies of the market and the cutthroat trade practices of a metropolis like Delhi. He is also honest and proud of his work.

Mumtaz's family left its native village in the Sisar district of Rajasthan and migrated to Delhi in search of work sometime around 1980. The movement didn't involve just Mumtaz, his parents and siblings, but was part of a larger extended family-based unit headed by Mumtaz's uncle, his father's elder brother. Once in Delhi, they rented a house in Jafrabad, a trans-Jamuna locality where some people from their community had already settled earlier and which also had a fairly large number of Muslims. Both the factors played a very important role in choosing the place and in helping them to reorient themselves in a totally new, strange environment. From his perspective, after twenty years, Mumtaz reflects that the main reason for migrating to Delhi was simply the declining demand for the goods his community produced in the village.

"Earlier all the womenfolk of the farmers wore our *odhnis*. But when the printed stuff from the mills reached our villages they were besotted with the unusual colours and designs of these new fabrics. What we used to make became old-fashioned. Nobody wanted our goods any more. Our expertise was not appreciated, our work not required. We lost our status in the village. We became like nobodies. Then our talk turned to big cities and the dreams of opportunities available there. So we decided to take a risk and try our luck in Delhi. At first we were enamoured with the prosperity on display, the multitudes thriving there. There were so many markets, so many shops. With a bit of luck and hard work we could find our place there. And of

course there were the visions of big export orders.

"We found enough work to survive. We worked for the local shopkeepers and for the *thekedars* from export factories. We made ladies' suits, tops, and skirts. The earnings were better than in the village. But ours was a joint family and my uncle's son, who was elder to me, was the apple of the eye not only of his parents, but of my father, too. I was the eldest among my brothers and sisters, but always felt deprived of my father's love. He didn't seem to care for me as much as he cared for my uncle's son.

"So I thought I would go to the Gulf and earn money there. Nobody took me seriously. The only person who helped me in this was my mother. She didn't have money of her own but she pawned her jewellery, which she brought as her dowry. I got a ticket through an agent and went to Saudi [Arabia]. I knew some sewing and

worked as a tailor. I sent money to my mother to recover her jewellery. After a few years I saved enough to think of coming back. The news of my arrival frightened my uncle's son, who was looking after our family business. He used to get the orders, deal with the parties and take care of the bank work. My father, who is illiterate, took care of the workshop, for he was a very good *karigar*. But a few days before I came back to India, my uncle's son disappeared. Later on it was discovered that he took with him all the money the family had put in the bank.

"With my earnings from the Gulf I bought a house in Jafrabad. It is the same house I stay in now. I registered it in my father's name. All the properties we have acquired over time are in my father's name. Later on we bought a house in Gandhi Nagar, in a locality where most of our neighbours are people from our side of Rajasthan, and that is where my parents went to live with my brothers and sisters. The factory from where we worked was there too. After a few years I bought a plot next to ours and later on, one more. Now we have three adjoining houses on the same street. They are all in my father's name but are for my three brothers, of whom two are married. Three years back my sisters also were married to men of our own community, in Rajasthan. I myself, with my wife and children, live in the old house in Jafrabad, for somehow I never wanted to stay on the same premises as my parents and brothers. It is not that our relations are not good. Far from it. But in my childhood I have seen that the joint family is not always the best. That

From Villages to Cities

Income Generation Turns Male Monopoly

○ Maria Skakuj Puri



Mumtaz at his new location in Loni

is, if all don't follow the rules. So I wanted to make provisions against such an eventuality.

"When I came from the Gulf I never thought that one day I will look after the family business and be responsible for it. But now I think it was unimaginative of me. I am the eldest and a son, and how could I have not but stepped into my cousin-brother's shoes and looked after my parents and my brothers and sisters?

"It took us many years to come to this level of prosperity. We worked hard. Hard work was one thing we were not afraid of. All of us, including my mother and my sisters, would sit and tie the threads for tie-and-dye. Later on we would employ a few *karigars* from amongst our own people, who would stay in our factory and go home to the village only every few months. Or we would give some job work to neighbouring households. The dyeing was done by us men.

"I invested in property to acquire a place to live and a place to work; I also invested in machinery. I installed a water pump, generator, hydro and also drums for acid-wash processing. When the antipollution drive started, I invested in a filter and whatever else was required. But, finally, two years back I was forced to shift the unit to the outskirts of Delhi, to Loni. Now the main work—that is, dyeing—is done there. So is most of tying.

"But the participation of our own womenfolk is now less than before, for they are bound to the house, and it is impossible and improper for them to come and work in Loni, many kilometers away from home. I give them specific jobs in the house but it is difficult to carry the cloth to and fro. The work atmosphere is also changed, for once upon a time when there was lots of work, all of us would sit together and talk and work late into the night. Now that is not possible. Now our unit in Loni works like a little factory. At the same time, there is less work from



Bismillah Begum, Mumtaz' mother and his great support

the export section, for the exporters don't want to take on orders which might get delayed because of all those problems of pollution, lack of water and electricity. Units like ours are too far for them. Nobody wants to waste time on following up on work in those dusty, dirty, inaccessible places. I have a motorcycle now and a mobile phone; it is a must. I have to be constantly in touch with my clients. And the work, as I said, is not as plentiful as before."

The unit Mumtaz runs today is different. At first the women of the house still did most of the *bandhej* at home while the dyeing was done in Loni. But soon an alternative was found: women from local villages were trained to do the most basic task of tying the threads prior to dyeing. Local *thekedars* would pick up the fabric or garments from the unit to distribute in nearby villages. These would be collected later and returned to the unit.

There was no need any more to employ the women of the family, who, though better off financially, found themselves excluded from participating in work and were no longer directly involved in earning. They no longer earned money which was all their own. The traditional mode of production was replaced by outsourcing the job

work to virtually unskilled and unrelated labor. Though it provided employment opportunities to women who never had done this sort of work before, at the same time it made the *rangrez* women's skills redundant. This may eventually lead to a marginalisation of women who were once an essential link of the production/earning process, and to strengthening of patriarchal structures.

The story of Mumtaz and his family is a story of the new face of Delhi. On a personal level it is a story of success—a success in more ways than one. His family, transplanted to Delhi, managed to stay together and make a living by using their traditional skills. Of course it could be argued that the art of *bandhej*, the art of tie-and-dye, was the only one they knew so they had nothing else to fall back upon. Yet it is a sad but well-known fact that most of the migrants from the countryside are forced to abandon their traditional callings and employ themselves in any way they can, merely to survive. Thus, to be able to hold on to a traditional skill, and that, too, one seemingly made obsolete by the encroachments of modern means of production, and at the same time find a niche in the present day market for the same skill, is something which deserves our close attention.

The 2005 scrapping of quotas for export of garments to the USA and EU, coupled with the popularity of the ethnic look, wrought yet another change. Export orders grew many times over; a unit like Mumtaz's found itself in great demand. Today Mumtaz has no time for small orders and ready-made suits for the local market. He works only for those export factories that give him work which involves tens of thousands of pieces. He has no time to talk with the small-timers. He cannot afford to waste even a moment. And he has

not much time left to sit with his family, let alone sit and work with them at home.

Most of the people from the same community as Mumtaz, like Siraj-uddin, who is a dyer from Gandhi Nagar having a unit in Loni, or Wafati and Riaz who specialize in acid-washing, came to Delhi around the same time as Mumtaz and his family. They settled in colonies beyond the Jamuna and went looking for work in the factories, bazaars and shops of Delhi. This was a period when the growing export of cotton garments created a requirement for groups of skilled workers—be it tailors or pressmen, washermen, dyers, printers or embroiderers. The exporters needed their vendors and their workforce, including dyers, to be close to their export units. The *rangrez* of Rajasthan seized the opportunity and filled in the vacuum by setting up numerous little workplaces in the by-lanes of Seelampur and Gandhi Nagar. They adapted their skills to suit the new requirements and they soon added the skill of chemical dyeing to their traditional skills.

Their low status as a community in their native place in Rajasthan made them even more determined and ambitious to succeed when they arrived in Delhi. They held fortune by the forelock and would not let it go. They had one great advantage over many other rural migrant groups. Their traditional occupation required active participation of the family's women in the work. The job of getting the cloth ready for dyeing, preparation of dyes from plants and minerals, and the art of *bandhej* were the domain of women. Once the menfolk shifted to Delhi, they brought their womenfolk along to help them in the work, avoiding the forced separation and preserving the household. They were saved from the fate of those migrants who left their families in the villages and could

rarely afford to settle them decently along with them in the big city.

The household-centered nature of production, combined with steady demand for their cloth, enabled Rajasthani *rangrez* in Delhi to keep their traditional occupation while simultaneously drawing sharp boundaries between their own and other communities. The community acquired a surprisingly strong bonding as well as a sense of identity. Its links with their native place were not only not severed but rather strengthened by drawing the younger, the Delhi-born-and-bred, generation to actively participate in communal activities in their native villages. For example, all their contracts, including their marriage contracts, are still entered into at an annual fair held in Sirsar district. The dowry is fixed at a level of Rs.5000 and all the *nikahs* performed on one day. Mumtaz tells me that last year fifty-four marriages were celebrated at the same time. His own three sisters were married simultaneously three years back. The actual departure for the houses of their in-laws, however, took place only months later.

Divorce is not a common practice, for no member of the community



Mumtaz's business has become a male monopoly.

would like to give his daughter to a divorced or, God forbid, already married man. Though strongly patriarchal, the community looks after its women and ensures that they are not mistreated in their marital homes, mainly by ostracising the offending households. In Delhi, at least, it is the custom to give a woman a part of the earnings in sold goods, especially if they were made for the local market; the community considers it due to her as wage.

Gender segregation at the workplace is limited to the customs one would follow in observing *pardah* in the house. I used to observe Mumtaz's younger sister-in-law nursing a baby and working along with his mother and sisters in a big room where male members of the family and some *karigars* were also working. Another sister-in-law was sitting with her back towards the others and didn't actively participate in the conversation. She was very young and newly married so the prevailing norm would be to keep a certain distance. She was not debarred from empowering work and delegated to cooking only, and though her foot was bleeding from holding and pulling the thread, she worked happily alongside her husband and his family.

Traditional modes of production usually require participation of many members of the family; there was a clear cut role for each one of them. That was four years back. Now, because the Government banished this garment unit to the outskirts of Delhi, the women of the household are marginalised from the income generating activities which become a male monopoly. □

The author is of Polish origin and married to an Indian based in Delhi. Together with her husband she is running an export unit using traditional skills of weaver and craft families. Mumtaz supplies hand printed fabric to her garment enterprise.