

DELHI is an important centre for trade in many kinds of handlooms and textiles. But the people whose hands produce all the varieties of handloom material, from the fine to the coarse, receive neither recognition nor a fair return for their labour. These people live and die in conditions of miserable poverty.

Thousands of *zardozi* workers fall into this deprived category. In Delhi there are more than 50,000 *zardozi* workers, of whom about 70 percent are women and children, and about 30 percent are men. Most of these workers live and work in dirty slum; areas in Turkman Gate, Ajmeri Gate, Chausath Khambha, Sui Walan, Karol Bagh, Daryaganj, Trilok puri, Ranjit Nagar and the trans Yamuna area.

Zardozi work includes embroidery in gold, silk and cotton threads, making of borders and sewing on of tinsel decorations, spangles, beads and gold cord. Embroidered veils, saris, shirts, maxis, caps, jackets are made from various textiles such as velvet and chiffon. *Zardozi* work is also done on handbags, bracelets, purses, curtains, shoes, burkabs, crowns and *rakhis*.

It is said that this work has been going on ever since Vedic times. It received great impetus during the Mughal period. Since then, not only Benares but also Delhi, Agra and Bhopal have become special centres of *zardozi* work. In Delhi, this handicraft has a history stretching over more than two centuries. A large majority of the workers are Muslims. Many families have been plying the craft from generation to generation. In the course of the last two decades, many more families have been driven into the trade by poverty and unemployment.

In the past, kings and courtiers were the chief consumers of *zardozi* products. Today, too, the chief buyers are the rich. Some of the products, are bought by wealthy sections of the urban population. A substantial amount is exported, particularly to middle eastern countries. The average household in Delhi buys a

Behind The Glitter

Zardozi Workers In Delhi

Interviews by Deepti and Pushpa Mehta:

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few items now and then, mainly at festival times or for weddings. The workers too make a few items for themselves and their families on the occasion of a wedding or a festival.

We talked to some women *zardozi* workers about their lives. Though we talked at length only to about a dozen women, we felt that we managed to get a few glimpses of their lives. The women we

spoke to were, we felt, fairly representative of the women workers of this category yet there was a wide range of differences even amongst these dozen women — differences of age, educational qualifications, and ways of thinking. At one extreme is Fatima Bi, who lives in parda. At the other is Qamar Jahan, who has gained some measure of independence and self reliance.

Fatima Bi is about 40 years of age. She lives and works in a narrow alley in Ajmeri gate. She took up *zardozi* work about 15 or 20 years ago. Her natal home is in Secunderabad but she was not engaged in this employment there. She learnt it when she came to live in this alley, after her marriage. She spent about three months learning the skill from a neighbour woman. She has taught it to her daughters and sons, "This work is not easy", she says, "It is very laborious. It is fine work. The needle has to be taken out exactly where it was put in."

When work is available, Fatima and her children together make between Rs 50 and 60 a week. Fatima has eight children, three daughters and one son help *the zardozi* work. Considering how much labour they put in, the income is very low. And there are times when work is not available to them.

Fatima tells us that work has to be



fetches from shopkeepers. But women do not go to fetch the work. Men of the family or of the neighbourhood act as intermediaries. There are three men who do the job of giving work to Fatima and other women in her alley. These middlemen take a big cut. If shopkeepers pay Rs 50 for an item the middlemen give only Rs. 30 to the women.

It is impossible for Fatima to bargain with the middlemen because she is forbidden to speak to any man besides her husband, brother and sons. The middleman sits at the outer door and Fatima sends a child out to deal with him. The house is so small that she and the man usually cannot avoid seeing each other yet she does not speak directly to him.

“Women do not go to the market to get work. I do not even know where the shops are. It would be good if I could go myself. But how can I go? None of the women go. Ever since I entered this house on my wedding day. I have not even set foot in the alley without wearing a burkah. I cannot even stand unveiled at the door. My sons and their father forbid me. My movements are completely restricted. I cannot go anywhere even for half an hour without taking permission.”

Fatima did send her daughters to school but girls here leave school by the time they are nine or 10 years old. They just cannot manage to study further. The youngest girl is still at school. Fatima wants her to study and take a job. But who knows whether or not she is fated to study? Fatima regrets that she herself is not able to study or to move round freely and mix with people. She feels that this is necessary in today's world, and that her own condition is pitiable.

Fatima's husband manufactures cooler parts so they have a cooler in their house. But Fatima tells us that her husband is highly eccentric. Whenever he feels like it, he walks off with the cooler. He is quite capable of walking off with and selling any of the household furniture. He has often done this in the past.

Fatima does not know how much her husband earns. He does not contribute at all to the household expenses; He eats outside the house. They have been married 20 years. In the beginning, her husband used to contribute towards running the house but for the last 12 years he has stopped contributing. Fatima says she no longer has any expectations from him nor does she ever say anything to him, “How can I say anything? He is always ready to hit me. He gets abusive. At first, I used to answer him back but now I do not. I feel it is better this way. Otherwise, he beats up the children too.”

About 10 years ago Fatima had gone off to her natal home. She stayed there two years and did not want to come back. But her husband went and fetched her back.

Her eldest son is a tailor. He has a sewing machine at home. When he gets work he can earn at most Rs 100 a month. At other times he may earn nothing at all. He gives whatever he earns to Fatima.

The responsibility of earning enough to run the house falls on Fatima. Apart from everyday expenses there are also the heavy outlays at festivals and weddings to be accounted for. Fatima is worried about her eldest daughter who is 17 years old. Thousands of rupees will have to be spent on her dowry. Utensils alone will cost about Rs 5,000. They will also have to give jewels and a cycle. A refrigerator and a television may be demanded. Somehow or other, they will have to buy all these items. Fatima says that when her fourth child was born in hospital the doctor asked whether she wanted to be sterilised. “I wanted to be saved from having more children but what could I say? I said: ‘Ask him.’ He was very rude to them. If it had been in my hands I would have got the operation done! But I feel very afraid.”

Fatima carries the burden of poverty as well as the special burden of religious restrictions. She fulfils the rules of *parda*, *roza*, and *namaz* with painstaking honesty. We met her during Ramzan and found that she was keeping a strict fast all day. Not a drop of water passed her lips. Her husband

was also supposed to be on fast but he sent for *halwa* and *puri* from the market and ate it at home. Yet only men go to the mosque. Women are forbidden to enter the mosque at prayer times. Fatima obeys all these rules without question.

Nur Jahan, aged 45, also obeys all the rules and customs. Her situation is slightly better. Her husband too is a *zardozi* worker so he fetches the work from the shopkeeper. He distributes work to half a dozen other women in their alley. Nur Jahan tells us that most *zardozi* work may be done by either men or women. But there is a particular heavy needle which is wielded only by men. The work done with that kind of needle is less tedious and better paid. Women are forbidden to do that kind of work but a few of them have started doing it.

Nur Jahan has nine children. Some of them go to school and they also help with *zardozi* work. Nur Jahan says that she and her family draw their own designs and print them on the cloth. Then they sew spangles, beads, shells on or embroider in silk along the printed lines. For instance, a fine job like embroidering flowers on a sari is done by three or four people together over a fortnight. They are paid between Rs 200 and 250. They have to buy the materials like beads or silk thread for about Rs 25 and a packet of shells for Rs 15. This means that each person earns about Rs 3 for a whole day's labour.

Nur Jahan says that the wages for *zardozi* work have not risen over the last 20 years. In fact, the wages for some kinds of work may even have fallen. Her explanation is that if one woman refuses to work at a certain rate another can always be found. The real wage is also falling since prices are rising. “We work from morning to night And what do we get? Foodstuffs have become five times more expensive but the price of our labour has not increased.”

Nur Jahan's eyes, like those of all the other women, have been affected by the work; By the time women are 35 years old their eye sight becomes so weak that they

need to wear thick spectacles. After some years, they find it impossible to work, even with the spectacles. Fatima wears spectacles yet her eyes are always aching. Jamila Bi, aged about 40, says that without her spectacles she cannot recognise someone standing right in front of her. Saira, aged 45, has been wearing spectacles for the last 13 years. Her eyesight is rapidly deteriorating so she will soon have to get new, higher powered spectacles.

Zardozi work has other ill effects on the health. The women sit on the floor and bend over their work. Over a period of time, this results in a chronically hunched back. The hands and fingers ache due to overwork, and the legs ache due to lack of exercise since the women sit in one position for hours together.

Each house has only a couple of rooms so the women work surrounded by all the activities of the household. Continual fine sewing for hours with a racket all around leads to chronic headaches. Saira says that when she lies down at night every inch of her body aches.

Saira Bi has been engaged in *zardozi* work ever since she was a child. Her old mother, Fatima Bi, who is now about 65 years old, tells us that she too learnt the work when she was a child, and was engaged in it all her life long. Now her failing eyesight has made it impossible for her to continue. Saira is her only daughter. Saira has four daughters and three sons. Her eldest daughter used to help her with the work. Now she has gotten married and her husband earns enough so she does only domestic work. The second daughter works in a shop as a salesgirl. Saira's other two daughters, Samar Jahan and Reshma, help her every day with the work. Reshma, aged 10, also attends school. The boys are very young.

Saira's husband keeps a shop in Bhajanpura. He has to live in the shop. Saira and her children stay with Saira's mother, Fatima.

Saira grew up in this same three roomed house in Ajmeri Gate.

Saira's family pay a rent of Rs 6 for

three tiny rooms. There is nothing besides objects of bare necessity in the house, not even a radio. None of the women except Qamar Jahan wear a watch.

Here in the courtyard, she works all day at a wooden frame. One frame lasts about 50 years. A new one would cost



about Rs 150. All *zardozi* work is done on this frame. The cloth is pinned on to it, and the women sit on the floor to work on it. The cloth is stitched into a garment only after the *zardozi* work has been done.

Saira and 16 year old Samar Jahan are sewing beads and spangles on to a pink dupatta. It will take them five days to get this dupatta ready. The dupatta was given by a customer to a shopkeeper to be embroidered. The shopkeeper got a design printed on it and handed it over to Saira. He also gave her the embroidery materials. It is not decided beforehand how much they will be paid. "When we hand it in, we will get to know how much we are to be paid. At most, we will get Rs 30 or Rs 50. But the customer will pay the shopkeeper at least Rs 100. The shopkeeper got the printing done and he will get the dupatta washed. But our labour too goes into it. The stuff comes from Karol Bagh or Nai Sarak. The poor have to get their bread somehow or other. So they work for any

price. Even this work is not always available." If two women are paid Rs 30 for five days' work, it means that each one gets Rs.3 for a whole day's labour.

Saira's husband gives her Rs 10 a day for household expenses. This is the only fixed income she has. "But how can we manage on this? A week's rations cost Rs 100. And then there are so many other expenses. My work is absolutely essential for our survival." There is no question of their saving any money as even bare survival is difficult. They often have to take loans, even for the day's food. They find it difficult to get loans. People are not willing to lend them money.

Saira performs all religious rituals like *namaz* and *roza*, and observes *parda*. She never moves around unless it is absolutely necessary and she always wears a burkah. She goes to the market to buy household stuff and also visits Bhajanpura every second or third day.

Qamar Jahan, aged 21, is Saira's second daughter. She is rather different from her mother. Her marriage was arranged by the elders in traditional fashion. Her in-laws lived in Kashmir. Qamar went to live there with her mother-in-law, father-in-law, brothers-in-law and sister-in-law. Right from the beginning, her husband used to beat her up. He was a drunkard, a gambler and a womaniser.

Qamar Jahan says: "I returned here but my family sent me back there. This happened five or six times. Each time, I would be sent back. That is how I was forced to have three children."

This time, Qamar Jahan has decided that she will not return to her husband. She has now lived for about a year at her parents' house. She has two daughters and a six month old son. When the son was born, her husband came, quarrelled violently with her, beat her up and quietly took the older girl away with him.

When I, asked whether the *mehr*, or settlement that is fixed in every Muslim marriage according to Islamic law, as a security for the wife in case of divorce by

the man, is actually given to divorced women, she laughed and said that 20 years ago Rs 500 was customarily settled as *mehr*. Now the sum fixed may be anything up to Rs 10,000. But when divorce does take place, far from giving *mehr*, men do not even return the dowry which they are required to do by Islamic law. One man in a 100 may return the dowry.

Qamar Jahan has decided to get a divorce. Saira supports her in this decision, and does not wish to send her back to her husband. But the husband is not willing to Divorce Qamar. So she will have to incur the expenditure of going to court and engaging a lawyer.

Qamar looked for a job and found one for Rs 700 in a shop at Naraina. But when she was to be paid, the shopkeeper refused to give her more than Rs 500 so she left the job. "I have wandered miles in search of a job. I have searched day and night. All for the sake of these children. Necessity gave birth to this courage in me. When I was in Kashmir I learnt to embroider shawls and I used to do that work. When labour is written in one's fate one must labour. Now I have got a job in a showroom in Paharganj. They are good people. They have a flourishing business. I have to sit in the shop and do mending work. I will be paid Rs 800."

Her *zardozi* skills will come in somewhat useful on this job. She works more than nine hours a day. Qamar hopes to start her own business and to employ other girls to do embroidery at fair rates.

In her struggle to stand on her own feet, Qamar Jahan has spontaneously broken many restrictions and rules. She does not read the *namaz*—"Where do I have the time", nor does she keep the *roza*—"I feel exhausted if I do not eat or drink", nor does she wear a burkah—"Now that I have come out into the world why wear a burkah? I've stopped wearing it."

Saira says: "At first, when she used to go out to look for a job I used to forbid her to do so. I felt afraid for her. But now I feel it is all right. Now I too would like to do

such a job if I could get it."

The old grandmother, Fatima, comments: "The world is a bad place. It is best to get married and mind the house. Of course, you may get a worthless man. That

the girl, utensils and bedding.

Hazra Begum and Rehmat Jahan are sisters. They have been doing *zardozi* work for over 15 years. Hazra is about 30 years old, Rahmat about 35. They live, in

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depends on your fate."

Saira tells us that the marriage of her daughter, Samar Jahan, has been arranged. The boy is a relative. The elders arranged the match. Now she is busy collecting the dowry. She gave 70 utensils to each of her older daughters. But this time she will give only as many as she can manage to put



together. Qamar Jahan advises her sister: "Before you marry him, make him give you in writing an assurance that he will not beat you and will not drink or gamble." Samar Jahan takes this as a joke and laughs. These days, Rs 10,000 is normally spent on a girl's wedding in this community. At the absolute minimum, Rs 2,000 has to be spent. This sum will just cover the price of five sets of clothing for

Haveli Azamkhan, a slum in Old Delhi, with their 40 year old brother who is a tuberculosis patient and cannot work. Hazra and Rehmat run the house on their earnings.

Their father worked in tin and their mother did not earn. Both parents died in 1961. The oldest brother, who is now 60 years old, got these two girls married. Hazra was then about 10 years old and Rehmat about 15. They were married to two brothers, then aged about 30 and 35, who lived in Amroha. Hazra and her husband did not get along together. There was constant strife and bickering. So she came back to Delhi. Rehmat accompanied her. She did not want to live in a house where her sister found it impossible to live. They came back to their parental home and began to live there with their invalid brother who is unmarried. The older brother is married and lives separately with his wife and children.

It took them three months to learn *zardozi* work from the women of the neighbourhood. They have a wooden frame at home on which they work from morning to night. Their room is small and dark. Their hands move slowly. People who learn the skill in childhood can work at a much faster pace.

They take work whenever they can find it. They are not bound to any particular shopkeeper. To begin with, they used to make only caps but now they make purses, jackets, belts and many other items. They accept any kind of work which will pay them a little more. Yet their earnings remain very low. Two years ago, they used to be

paid Rs 40 for a *karchobi* sari, now they are offered only Rs 35. Exasperated, they refused the work. The shopkeeper was not in the least perturbed by their refusal. There is no shortage of workers. Since they are scattered in many different colonies, they cannot agree on common rates. The shopkeepers raise and lower the rates at their own sweet will. Jamia Bi too told us that she had been paid Rs 150 for a maxi of a new style. But when the demand for this style grew, the rate came down to Rs 40. She argued with the shopkeeper and managed to raise the rate to Rs 50.

Like the other women, Hazrat and Rehmat Jahan never went to school. At home, they learnt to read Urdu and the Quran Sharif. They hardly ever used to go out of the house. Even after they began to do *zardozi* work, their brother had forbidden them to go out of the house. Gradually they got a little more freedom. But even now they wear the burkah whenever they go out. Rehmat says: "The burkah is our religious dress. It is very important. It is necessary to cover the body." But Hazra says: "If it were left to me, I would take it off this very day. But our family members have control over us. We have no wish to remain within these limits. These days, girls want to remove the burkah but the elders want parda to remain."

Both Hazra and Rehmat Jahan are members of SEWA, Delhi. SEWA gives them guidance and advice regarding new kinds of designs. It also helps with provision of orders and of raw materials. SEWA helps them to participate in exhibitions and sell their work. They participate in SEWA's savings and life insurance schemes.

I also spoke to a few male *zardozi* workers. I found that even though they are not organised some of them are migrants from Moradabad to Delhi and Bombay and know about workers' organisations there, and most of them have more information about the trade than the women have. Thus they are able to get a higher wage for their work than the women get.

According to them, the export market for these products has expanded in the last eight years or so, and there has been a boom in the last couple of years. Some male workers go to do *zardozi* work in a small factory at Jhandewalan where they



get a better and regular income, making as much as Rs 1,500 a month. But most of the men workers are very bitter about the situation, saying that a few big traders are enjoying fat profits by sucking the blood of the underpaid workers. They named some of these traders who, in the last few years, have risen from being petty street vendors to being millionaires. Among them are Mustaq, once a seller of boxes, Nur Hasan, Nanha Pahlwan, Mulla Shiraz, Shifaq, and Zakki. These men have made lakhs in black money. They make the workers toil about 15 hours a day for a miserable pittance. They look for minor faults in the finished products as a pretext to cut the wage.

The men say that a few men workers

have profited but most have not benefited at all from the expanding export market. In the last few years, in some places, the actual wage rate for some kinds of work has fallen. Their explanation for this phenomenon is that a kind of embroidery work that used to be paid at Rs 60 a piece is now Rs 40 but there is much more work available now. So by embroidering more pieces a worker may get an overall higher income even though the rate per piece has fallen. Thus the workers are forced to work much longer hours in order to survive.

SEWA, Delhi, has been working amongst *zardozi* women workers since April 1980. Their attempt is to raise wages and to ensure the workers a steady supply of work. About 3,000 women members of SEWA. But SEWA activists feel the main problem confronting them is that an atmosphere conducive to trade union organising just does not exist in Delhi. Years pass just in explaining to the women what an organisation is. The second problem is that the women find it difficult to come out of their houses, even for a meeting. They are over-burdened with housework and childcare. The women have no means of transport available to them. In addition, they face hostility from the men of their families. Often, a woman who begins to think in a new way is forced by her husband to slacken her interest in the organisation.

A few other organisations such as Nayika and Dastkar are also working amongst these women. Their efforts too are directed towards controlling the proliferation of middlemen and shopkeepers and ensuring that the labouring craftspeople get the full price of their labour. But they too face the same problems as SEWA does.

So depressed is the condition of these women that their voices do not reach the rest of society. Everyone has seen the finished products of their labour but no one sees the wounds on their hands nor is anyone able to apply the requisite medication.

(translated from Hindi)