

Overview of Zardozi Craft in the Dharavi Region

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on the much popular and publicized craft of Zardozi embroidery. Today, every designer in the fashion space must have come across this craft at least once in their career. Mumbai, being the fashion hub has victimized this craft that has been practiced for ages. As time passed, this craft has been much commercialized with respect to its traditional practice. This paper explores the process being practiced by this small settlement spread across the Dharavi district and reflects on the issues observed in the artisans working as Zardozi hand embroiders and their working conditions. For this research, I collected my information by visiting these establishments and personally interviewing and observing the practices. This paper will also reflect on the former glory of this craft and where it has headed in current times. To summarize, this research will highlight these key points to understand the evolution of this widely practiced craft from its traditional origin to now commercialized and much - overexploited craftsmanship, witnessing a thought - provoking reality of these artisans'*

Keywords: Artisans, Commercialization, Ethics, Handicraft, Human Rights, Zardozi

1. Relevance to Design Practice

This research is one of the examples of Indian artisans being overworked under unsustainable conditions and forced to earn a livelihood in any metropolitan city. To be able to understand these conditions it's also important to understand the craft itself to be able to point out the time, effort, and hard work gone into the making of each article that is being put out in the marketplace for the consumer without the awareness of where it is coming from.

2. Introduction

Zardozi has been one of the most popular and commonly practiced hand - embroidery techniques and surface ornamentation observed in Indian and Middle - Eastern ethnic wear. Its popularity in the Indian apparel market can be observed by the mere demand of its supply during the wedding season. This is a craft that almost every renowned fashion designer has used in almost every runway collection in the ethnic wear industry. Popular names like Sabyasachi and Manish Malhotra take pride in the exquisite display of this craft in their Haute Couture collection. Zardozi, although traditionally and historically observed as a craft practiced by a particular sect of the community, is now being practiced in almost every part of the country and is not imparted through a family lineage, but by whoever is looking for a work opportunity in any urban city hoping for a better livelihood. (Poray, 2019, #) A work opportunity that is characterized by seasonal demand. As the wedding season is the peak of Zardozi embellished outfits, this demand usually impacts the time, effort, and credit given to these artisans. We can observe these artisans working round the clock to finish their targets prescribed by the contractors.

As this article only focuses on the pre - pandemic phase, it will also discuss how these artisans have been surviving and sustaining themselves in one of the most densely populated slums around the world - Dharavi. Dharavi is not only an area that accommodates the major underprivileged population of India's Fashion Capital - Mumbai but also sustains various craft practices that are now lost to industrialization. Through observation, it was witnessed that

these artisans are migrants from tier 3 cities and rural parts of the country and are living in clusters all across Dharavi. These clusters are managed by master craftsmen who hunt for jobs from suppliers associated with small - sized boutiques to high - end designers. There is a commonly observed supply chain according to which the artisan is at the end and the consumer on the other which involves mediators. To be able to explain how the artisans are being impacted by the high demands and why these designers are so keen on mass - producing this practice, it is very important to understand its origin and how it has been evolving. The later sections of this article will be discussing these points in detail

The Craft

Inception and Evolution

Zardozi is a Persian word that can be broken down as 'Zar' which is Gold and 'Dozi' which means embroidery. This craft was patronized under the Mughal empire during the reign of Akbar. Although its roots in India are traced back to the Mughal empire, there have been mentions of such work in the Vedic period to the Epic Age, identified by the mentions of gold handwork in the garments in the excerpts of Mahabharat and Ramayana. (Singh, 2018, #) Due to its exquisite and high cost of materials, this craft was restricted to the royal court. After the Mughals this craft traveled through the courts of Awadh, Rajasthan, Bengal, Punjab, etc. The Mughals, therefore, created a system of work for the workers. There were Persian craftsmen who traveled and imparted their knowledge to the skilled craftsmen of the court. There were Karkhanas and Riyasati Karkhanas made for the training process where this craft was practiced in its full bloom.

This craft suffered a major setback during the British Rule. This is when the entire system of working changed. The concept of royal training centers was dissolved, which led the artisans to migrate to other cities in search of work. The craftsmen also faced the issue of identifying a market to sell their finished goods which were made out of expensive materials. This led to the evolution of the craft itself, transitioning from real gold and silver threads to artificial

substitutes. This marked the beginning of the commercialization of this craft. (Pezarkar, 2019)

As these artisans migrated from the original center, the post-colonial period had no set location that marked this crafts territory. Zardozi has flourished in almost all parts of the country, having its own regional centers such as Lucknow, Bhopal, Hyderabad, Delhi, Agra, Kashmir, Mumbai, Ajmer, and Chennai. Lucknow is the only center in today's age that has a registered GI for "Lucknowi Zardozi". (Rizvi, 2015, #) (Singh, 2018, #) Other centers majorly are settled due to the demand for craftsmen in that region. One such center is Mumbai, where this craft is being practiced in different regions such as Dharavi, Byculla, Govandi, Madanpura, etc. Mumbai being the fashion capital of India has observed a high demand as many flourishing designers originate from this city. Every year, Lakme Fashion Week features various design collections that showcase the craftsmanship of these artisans. Runway shows are not the only opportunity, the

ethnic wear industry is the biggest marketplace for this craft, which is also dominated by a major machine work embroidery sector. (Poray, 2019, #)

Techniques and its Localisation

Zardozi traditionally was practiced with premium material for the aristocrats of the society. Currently, due to industrialization and inflation, traditional materials are being replaced by cheaper alternatives. Traditionally this craft was practiced with metal wires coated with silver or gold plating. There were precious gemstones also incorporated with the designs which were exquisitely detailed and elaborate with themes based on nature and its elements. The materials used in the embroidery process are now mostly made out of plastic and metal alloys. Some of these embellishments are metallic wires, kora, saadi, kinari, salma, badla, sequins, and stones. Still, the most commonly used materials are metallic threads, wires, and dabka, visuals of the same are mentioned in Fig.1.



Figure 1 (left) Metallic threads that are originally made out of cotton and coated with metallic dyes. (center) Metallic wires are made out of alloy and coated. (right) dabka and sitara are made out of plastic or cheaper substitutes with a metallic coating

The technique and process of doing this embroidery still have its traditional approach at some steps, such as the motifs or the way tools are used. Although there is a significant difference in the tools themselves, some of the traditional practices can still be observed. For example, still 3 - 5 artisans that work on the same workstation i. e. *Adda* simultaneously. Although this circle was larger during the Mughal period, the idea of sitting together and working remains the same. A simple needle or crochet - like hook fixed to a wooden stick called the zardozi is used for embroidery. The Zardozi greatly enhances the speed of the work, as it enables the artisan to pass the threads both above and below the fabric. The zardozi has its disadvantages, though. One tug at a loose thread can spell disaster to the entire design as it can unravel in a matter of minutes. The needle and thread method is far more dependable and is the most commonly observed practice. (Pezarkar, 2019)

Zardozi and Mumbai

In Mumbai, several such zardozi workers live and work in cramped workshops in Santacruz, Dharavi, Madanpura, and Govandi, where traditional embroiderers from Lucknow, Allahabad, and Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh and Kolkata in West Bengal come to earn a better living. These men, who earn between Rs 500 and Rs 1, 500 a day, are the invisible workforce behind the glittering fashion world. Even though designers have confirmed that they employ the services of these zardozi workers, either outsourcing the work or calling them to their own workshops, paying them at the same rates.

This has led to two factors that are driving them back: Rising living costs in Mumbai and growing demand for their skills in emerging markets such as Lucknow, where there is now enough work and comparative pay, and the added advantage of living closer to home, where the cost of living is much lower.

There is a fall in the market due to recession, that is why many of the artisans have left this craft and either went back to their native places or have switched to other industries. Artisans prefer working independently as a separate unit as per their convenience, they take orders from various designers and don't get any kind of recognition as such Ladies don't get involved in these activities as many artisans get together and work; they also live from their place of work.

3. Methods

The research was carried out by collecting information from various clusters, primarily focusing on the Dharavi region. For this research, an ethnographic approach was best suited. It was carried out within a span of 1 week wherein various craft clusters were covered. A rough estimate of people working in zardozi embroidery is 100 in this region (mainly young boys from Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar (Patel, 2010) A total of 7 such clusters were covered, each consisting of 1 master artisan and 5 - 6 embroiders. The process followed to identify these clusters was through

snowball sampling. Data were collected mainly through observing the technique, their surroundings, and one on one interviews with master artisans and the trainees working under them. As observed and the data collected Master Artisans are between the age group of 40 - 45 and trainees were between the age group of 20 - 30 all belonging to the lower - middle - class income strata.



Figure 2 (left) One corner of the room is being utilized as a make - shift kitchen. (right) A glimpse of how these artisans live at their workplace itself

The slack season for export orders was from September to December while October - to March was a busy time for the domestic market. The variety, quality, and quantity of work depended on various articles produced. Zardozi craft served as the main and only occupation for almost all the artisans, and the other members of the family were also engaged in this craft or in farming.

They have been living to survive and send their earnings to their hometown for the families to survive. On average, these artisans are able to earn between Rs.10, 000 to 15, 000 by working 10 to 14 hours every day. Most of these artisans have no more than a higher secondary education level. As observed, these small clusters are working for their day - to - day survival with very less scope of having savings for their future. In many such cases, Master Artisans are responsible for getting the projects for these clusters to work upon through contractors who are associated with Labels and Designers. Their marketing works mostly through word - of - mouth promotion and the Label names attached to their projects. It was also observed that these contracts give the same projects to more than one cluster which also creates a highly competitive environment. Despite having the same kind of projects there can be a wide scope of differentiation observed in each of these clusters, as they all specialize in different skills levels and techniques. This is primarily because of their training and their native places.

5. Discussions

As mentioned throughout the literature above, it is quite evident that this craft is of high value in India, considering the ethnic wear market and the wedding trousseau industry have a constant demand for these artisans. It is also observed that this demand is mainly seasonal, henceforth many artisans have found it difficult to survive due to a lack of

4. Results

Based on the observation it was observed that most of the trainee artisans are migrants from other states of the country looking for better pay. Most of these artisans live in the space of their work itself, usually in small rooms ranging between 20x12x7 ft to 15x15x7 ft. These spaces are their workspaces during the day and also their accommodation by night as can be observed in Fig 2.

consistent income. One of the major issues identified is the physical pain and trauma these artisans have to go through. Many of the artisans were witnessed to have an eyesight issue at younger age i. e.22 onwards and severe back issues from the age of 25 - 30 onwards. This is mainly due to the negligence of the ergonomic factors in the working spaces. Most of these artisans have to sit on the floor without any back support for long hours as the *Adda* that they work on has to be set up at a lower height. The material used to do this embroidery is usually fine metal wires and beads, there is a lot of strain on the eye added with improper lighting in the place of work. The workplaces of these artisans are usually dimly lit and heavily reliant on the daylight. Dharavi is a densely populated region and has no more than 4 story buildings. As these buildings are built without any infrastructural planning, they are set very close to each other allowing very insignificant sources of natural daylight. Many of the rooms that these artisans work in don't have enough windows as well. After talking to the master artisans, it was also found out that these rooms are rented and not owned by either the artisans or the master artisans. As these places mostly have men who have migrated from different cities to work together, women are not part of the commercial market in these clusters.

There are no set Unions or organizations that govern this craft practice. There are many schemes issued by the central government that are useful for these artisans, such as the minimum wage criterion or schemes and funding dedicated solely to the craft industry, but these artisans are not aware. As this region mostly practices this craft for commercial contracts there is also no regulation in terms of deadlines or final wage received by the artisans. As it is more of a job rather than a craft, it is also prone to mass production and less scope of exclusivity. As there are many middlemen in getting these projects, what these artisans receive is a very

meager amount. The clusters themselves support their fellow artisans and the master artisan is responsible for the well-being of his trainees. Many of the artisans were also observed to be related to each other whether in terms of relation or from being from the same part of the country.

6. Conclusion

Zardozi craft was utility - based and economically viable and hence was not static. It has responded to the changes in the market, consumer needs, fashion, and usage. Earlier Zardozi craft survived due to patronage of the affluent and it was an exclusive preserve of the rich and the fashionable but today commercialization of the craft has brought a boom in the export and domestic businesses. The work which was exclusive to the royal clientele has now evolved as a major item of trade. It has reached the masses irrespective of age, gender, and stratum. Progressing technologies have contributed to the change in the production and marketing of Zardozi craft. The development of chemical compounds has assisted in the production of non - tarnishing Zari threads, and its wide acceptance.

Zardozi craft now survives as a profession and has become a means of livelihood for artisans and their families. The craft has seen a two - way movement. On one hand, families have left their traditional work and on the other hand, there were new entrants practicing this extravagant craft.

A Zardozi artisan today has become more of a worker than a craftsman. His role and sense of identity have been devalued from what it was earlier. Yet, the artisans have adapted themselves to the changing markets, fashion, and consumer needs. The sub - contracted artisans were working under exploitative conditions. They worked long hours, especially in the peak season, for low rates and with delays in payment in several cases. There existed a shift in the status of artisans i. e. the same artisans were self - employed at one point of time and contracted at another. In many cases, these artisans have established their own independent units and employ artisans from their own areas or on their recommendation.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank the fellow groupmates Ankita Rohan, Lakshika Gupta, Rutvi Sheth and Sabina Khan who worked in the cluster alongside for visitation to the locations and helped throughout data collection. The author would also like to thank the Masters of Design Research Department, National Institute of Fashion Technology, Mumbai for organizing this cluster visit.

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