

The Chikan Workers of Lucknow

It's a cruel trade that thrives on debt and poverty

A strange silence pervades the dusty, sun-baked Muslim village of Chhanayya on the Lucknow-Hardoi road. A small cluster of mud and concrete houses on either side of a winding dirt-track, the village strikes the in-

truder as a strictly private place: the women and children are wary of outsiders, especially when their menfolk are away, speak in undertones and stay indoors nearly all day, glued to their work—embroidering piles of *kurtas* and *sarees* to fine patterns

with threads of varied colours. The women, many of them with babes in arms, squat in the courtyards or on their doorsteps, stooping to peer at each stitch they make. The work must go on all the year round—even if the workers' backs ache and their eyesight fails—for the precious 25-75 paise it brings them per piece from middlemen who carry the clothes away to cloth dealers in Lucknow's Chowk and Aminabad bazars, for sale on the local, national and foreign markets at whopping profits.

It is a cruel trade that runs on two premises—that finesse and craftsmanship be damned; and it is the trader at the head of the line who alone dictates terms because the workers and middlemen, far from being his partners in business, are slaves bound to 'serve' him by continuing debt. For the workers there is only misery. And even those free from debt must work with needle and thread to survive because their men can hardly earn enough to feed their large families. They are a few of the 50,000-odd Chikan workers' families—seven or eight members in each—spread over Sandila, Malihabad, Kakori, Lucknow, Bakshi ka Tal, Chinhat, Barabanki, Masauli, Sitapur, Rae Bareilly, Sultanpur and Mohanlalganj.

Salma (30) spoke shyly from the threshold of her house in Chhanayya, while a crowd of girls peered from behind: "Earlier the *dalals* gave us 40 paise for each *kurta*, now they give 50 paise. They give the thread. I manage to make two to three *kurtas* a day. All of us work here but still it isn't enough." It takes her three days to finish a ladies *kurta*, she said, the kind she was working on, a light blue *kurta* embroidered in white. "Sarees take much longer. We don't take sarees because *kurta* work is faster and easier." Salma's family, among the poorer in the village, are landless.

Fatima (25) sat down on her doorstep to speak to us: "We have been doing this for ages. Women in most homes do this work. We all started when we were the age of these *laun-*



A Chikan worker in Chhanayya

diyas (girls) you see here," she said, pointing to a couple of ten-year-olds who were standing by, listening. "We have no land at all, so we have to survive on Chikan work. When our eyes grow weak, we go to doctors in town. There are no doctors around here, only one in Dubhagga." Another woman worker in Fatima's family said that middlemen were preferred because it saved the women the trouble of stepping out of their homes and dealing with traders. "They are our men," she said. "We know them for long."

Hamida (47), robust and stocky, at first mistook us for a couple of entrepreneurs. "They're interested in starting some business in Chikan clothes. That's why they're asking us questions," she thundered, intervening in a hushed discussion among some women on the purpose of our visit. She knew the market value of Chikan clothes very well. Later, she yielded to our questioning: "These traders make quite a sum on these clothes, and look what we get. For a ladies' *kurta* we get 20 annas, and it takes us two to three days to finish one. But the men's *kurta* comes in different types and qualities. For high quality work we charge more. It varies from 25 paise to 50 paise. The *dalal* (middleman) pays us all right: if not in a week, at least every 15 days. Sometimes he gives us the thread, sometimes we have to buy it." Has her eyesight weakened? "Of course, our eyes are affected. *Aur kya? Aankhen pharna hai, hadiya phara...* (What else? Our eyes are blinded, our bones are broken). She seemed bitter at the mention of how the work affected their health. Hamida said she and her two elder daughters worked throughout the year on Chikan embroidery, even though her family was better off than the others in the village. "We work in all seasons, there is constant demand for the work. There are 50 houses in this village, and all have Chikan workers."

The ordinary Chikan worker is homebound and shy, so the middleman is a vital link in the trade. Today, according to an estimate, not more than ten per cent of workers deal with traders directly, particularly because the traders are too shrewd and calculating. The middlemen, many of whom are related to the workers, are in a better position to tackle traders because they deal with a number of them simultaneously. "If one of us disappoints them," said a trader in Chowk, "they can always go to another." On an average, depending on the type of work done on it, a middleman charges the trader Rs 15 on each saree he gets embroidered



Middleman Hakimuddin outside a Chowk shop

by 'his workers.'

Before giving the clothes to the middleman, the trader has to get them tailored and printed and after receiving the embroidered clothes, gets them washed, and netted (with *jaalis*), a kind of work normally assigned to Chikan specialists in the city. It costs one rupee to print each saree, another two rupees to wash it, Rs 15 to get it embroidered, and, finally, another rupee to get each netted. Total costs for the trader come to Rs 50. And yet, the price of an ordinary Chikan saree is never less than Rs 65, which yields a neat profit of Rs 15 on each sale for the wholesaler; for the retailer, of course, the price is a matter of hard bargaining. As one buyer in Chowk said, "The sky is the limit" for the unscrupulous.

Hakimuddin (40), a middleman who has been in business for 20 years, uses a motorcycle to carry stitched plain *kurta*s and sarees from shops in Chowk bazar to Chikan workers in villages in Barabanki and alongside Kursi road, on the outskirts of Lucknow. He keeps an account of how many pieces he has given to each family, and after the workers have embroidered them, brings them back to the wholesaler for sale. "All I get is a small cut. Believe me, there is nothing for me in all this," he lamented. Hakimuddin has to buy the thread for the embroidery at Rs 26 to Rs 28 a kilo. A kilo of thread suffices for 400 *kurta*s

or five or six sarees. He said that he usually brought back bundles of *kurta*s from the workers in eight days, and larger ladies' *kurta*s in 15 days. Sarees could take more than a month to embroider, he said. In addition to expenses on thread and 'fees' at octroi checkposts, he has to spend at least Rs 20 a day on petrol while on tour. "In the end, all I get is a cut of 60 paise on each large *kurta*, 10-15 paise on each small *kurta* and about a rupee on each saree. I buy each saree for Rs 30 a piece from the wholesaler, and give it back to him, embroidered, for Rs 45. Of the Rs 15 that I get from the wholesaler, I hand over ten rupees to the worker, two rupees to cover the price of thread, and another two rupees cover the overheads. This leaves a profit of about one rupee."

Hakimuddin has a wife and five children to look after, besides an aging father. "All the children go to school. The eldest goes to Shia College, here in Lucknow. He is the only one in the family who helps me out, besides my father, with his advice. After all, he was the one who led me into all this." Hakimuddin is unhappy that he has no bank account, although he has to get a daughter married. "When we have enough money," he said, "my son Shakeeluddin and I hope to give up this line and start a new business."

The wholesalers, he said, were helpful in general, but worked subtly to exploit them. "They give us loans whenever we need money, for mar-

riage or if someone in the family falls ill. But at 24 per cent interest." Haki-muddin does all his business transactions in the name of his father Amruddin Beg. "I'm just carrying on his work. I go to the same traders he visited."

He agreed that workers in faraway villages were easily exploited. "But we middlemen are not to blame but the traders who make a fortune out of Chikan. They put their own prices on the stuff when they sell them on wholesale markets and when they export them and give us nothing for our work. *Isme majdoori bahut hai* (A lot of effort goes into this). But the people are so poor, they are happy with just a rupee or 75 paise on each piece. You should see them queuing up in front of my door; such long queues even for so little money." But in spite of the exploitation, he said, the personal nature of relationships between workers and middlemen (often part of an extended family) and middlemen and traders made things more humane: "I help the workers when they are in need. And the traders help me when I'm in need. Once a trader I was doing business with landed up in my house when I fell ill, although he is a *lakhpatri*."

An almost exclusively Muslim trait, Lucknow Chikan was first popularised in the heyday of the last ruler of Oudh, Wajid Ali Shah, who is known to have rewarded women who excelled in the art. Many in Lucknow believe it to be 'an inherited art,' which probably explains why a Muslim girl develops an aptitude for the work while most Hindu girls do not. But the Chikan that now sells in the market is a mere shadow of its past. In its original form, the embroidery is an intricate combination of a variety of patterns and stitches that do not involve 'tearing up' the fabric. Some of these are *jaali* (network), *murri* (surface work), *ultra bakhsia* (shadow work), and designs like *raka*, *bijli* and *phanda*. A number of these are specialised jobs; the *jaali*, for example, is something only workers in chosen areas can be trusted with. The skills are highly individualised, too. Some famous craftswomen are Miss Badar Anjuman, Miss Shamim Jahan, Miss Akhtar (whose father is a famous craftsman also) and Mrs Humaira Khatoun, who have won national awards for their work.

But the handicraft is on the decline. Said Jagesh Tandon, an exporter, "Chikan work comes in two types, one for the discerning elite, the other for the masses. The city is the place where you get all the delicate work done; for mass production, you have to go to the rural areas

where the majority of workers live. But the village Chikan worker does not care much for finess. She is not trained in that art. She can only work through large quantities of cloth quickly to meet the commercial need. And her labour is very cheap. So it is to her that most of the work is assigned these days. And this is what has caused the decline of the handicraft."

Mr Tandon, who seemed more concerned about the intricacy of the craft than the condition in which most rural workers live and toil, said poor quality Chikan accounted for a reduced demand from connoisseurs, and growing demand from the ordinary public: The demand for the embroidery abroad, he said, existed partly because of humanitarian reasons—because it involves great labour, and the workers are poor—and partly because, as a unique handicraft of Lucknow, it is intricate and beautiful. "But the mass production of Chikan *kurta*s and *sarees* has commercialised the handicraft. People abroad also are beginning to realise that what they are getting is of poor quality. Exporters and wholesalers, in their attempts to undercut each other, end up selling bad stuff. In Chikan, price varies directly with the quality of work."

Mr Tandon also complained that a large number of Chikan exporters were based in Delhi and knew nothing about the embroidery and its intricacies. "They cannot make out the difference between various kinds of work, they export cheap clothes." Even in India, Chikan clothes are the cheapest alternative to formal wear, Mr Tandon said. "You can never buy a shirt for the price you pay for a Chikan *kurta*." Hence the mass production.

More important than the decline of the handicraft, however, is the problem of poverty among the lakhs of workers in Lucknow and its suburbs. Most of the families live in congested houses, amid filth and squalor, and work to supplement their menfolk's meagre earnings. Bina Duggal, a Congress(I) MLC who is president of the Chikan Karigar Union and the Chikan Vikas Parishad, two bodies set up for the welfare of Chikan workers in 1974, believes that education is the best way to rehabilitate the women because ignorance is always their worst foe. "They need money for marriages and to pay for their sick, so they borrow from the wholesalers and end up in slavery." She claimed that a Chikan production unit opened in Lucknow by the Uttar Pradesh government which runs under her supervision attracts about 700 regulars from surrounding

villages. "But this number is still not enough, considering there are so many of them. However, we try to teach these 700 how to conduct themselves in society. They take their money directly from us."

Was the experiment any help? Far from it. "Government schemes and projects have been miserable flops," said Jagesh Tandon. "All that the government does is set up units, appoint teachers, and these people walk off with their salaries. There is no work done."

Although he regretted that traders like him were destroying a beautiful craft, Mr Tandon denied exploiting workers: "You've got to see that all our cloth is blocked up with the middlemen. If we give them 100 pieces, they return 90, and say the rest are torn. In the workers' houses, you will find them using the *kurta*s as bedclothes and curtains. The workers take up quite a bit of the garments themselves. And who among us doesn't have health problems?"

Though Mr Tandon, sitting in his palatial house in a labyrinthine Chowk bylane (luxury strikes you out of the blue in Chowk) thought otherwise, the workers' health problems are real, weak eyesight, spondylitis and TB being major complaints. Said Dr Ram Kapoor, an ophthalmologist who has held a number of eye camps and treated Chikan workers, "The women have eye trouble first because they work in very dim light, and second because the nature of their work is very minute. Thus they come up with complaints which are quite natural in anyone with normal eyesight. Then they go to quacks, saying that they are having difficulty threading the needles, although their eyes are normal. The quacks, eager to sell off their stocks of spectacles, give the workers plus lenses which are only magnifying glasses, even though the workers are young. Many of them start using plus lenses at 25. Normally, plus one lenses are given to people aged 35, and plus two to people aged 50. The workers' eyes grow weak, and when they age, have to start using minus lenses, which should never happen." TB among workers was common, Dr Kapoor said, because of their living conditions and also on account of the fact that they sit close to each other, often coughing on one another, spreading bacterial infection.

Bogged down by the pressure of an exploitative trade on the one hand, and large families on the other, the Chikan workers of Lucknow continue to live like wretches, desperate to survive. Will the government ever help?

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