



Special Project: Zardozi Stitches of Lucknow | Visual Ethnography | Sakshi Gambhir | IDC

Approval sheet

This Project Report entitled 'Zardozi Stitches of Lucknow' by Sakshi Gambhir (08625006) is approved towards partial fulfillment of the requirements for the post graduate degree of Master of Design in Visual Communication.

Project Guide:

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Declaration

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Special Project:

Zardozi Stitches of Lucknow

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of
the degree of Master of Design

By

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Abstract

Lucknow has been famous for its various handicrafts for as long as anyone can remember. *Zardozi* is one of the most exquisite ones. It is extensively practised in Old Lucknow where a lot of craftsmen live and work. I visited one of the *addas* where it is done and in no time made a bond with them. This project is an attempt

to understand the nuances of the craft and its people, get a glimpse of their life and know them better. Each day marks a different experience, a stronger bond and a deeper layer of insight. In the course of this visual ethnographic study, I begin to enjoy the rhythm of everyday activities and evolve in a way that is intangible.



Introduction

I love Lucknow for reasons more than one. I have been born and brought up in that city and I have my emotional chords at work. It is home. There is always an inviting air about the place, a positive energy, a down-to-earth attitude, a charm that casts a spell. Choosing a city for the project wasn't difficult at all. Obvious as it was, I packed my bags to get home.

Lucknow has always been famous for its various handicrafts. The *Nawabs* of *Awadh* were great patrons of the fine arts. The city boasts of crafts like *chikankari*, *zardozi* and *kamdani*. In their own distinctive way, these crafts have provided employment to thousands who keep alive the invaluable traditions of a magnificent city.

For this ethnographic study, I wanted to choose a craft that I did not know much about and one that I had not witnessed before. I had seen a few *zardozi* table mats and wall hangings at my grandmother's place and I always looked at those pieces in bewilderment of their intricacy, precise detailing, fine workmanship, durability and shimmer. I saw similar *karigari* (craftsmanship) on my mother's *saaris*. I loved them all - each one unique,

handcrafted with special warmth and care, giving a glimpse of the hours and days of hard work gone into making them beautiful. *Zardozi* intrigued me.

The next day after I reached home, I found myself riding on a *taanga* (horse driven chariot) in Old Lucknow. I was on my way to *Darzi ki Bagiya*, an area where a lot of *zardozi* craftsmen live and work. I had not visited this area of the city for quite a few years. It was a feast for the eyes, totally full of life - people running around, tourists stopping by to see *British Residency*, *Chota Imambara* and *Bhool Bhulaiya* (the iconic buildings of the city), cows walking in the middle of the road, fruit sellers all along the footpaths, chaotic traffic, *taanga* rides, old people catching their share of winter sunshine.

I kept going into the deep interiors of the area, on foot. The streets smelled of cow dung, the vegetable seller announced his arrival and departure at regular intervals, dogs sun-bathed and the loud speakers at the mosque emitted lyrics of *namaaz* from time to time. Asking people around for *Aslam Bhai's adda* for *zardozi*, I finally got to my destination.

I was introduced to *Aslam* by *Ammi* (his mother). She works for *Lovely*, a friend of mine, who stays in the same locality and has his own *chikankari* studio and shop. *Ammi* (*Aslam's* mother) does crochét on *chikan* suits and *saaris*. She works from home.

Having found my way to *Aslam's* house, the route to which was fairly simple, I called out for him. '*Aslam Bhai? Ammi? Koi hai?*' I asked out loud as I knocked on a door which had no number or name. I was a little excited and nervous as well. Maybe nervous is not the best word to describe what I felt that time, it was an out-of-your-comfort-zone sort of a feeling; new place, new people, new experiences. Day one of anything new starts with such mixed feelings I guess.

Aslam's elder brother came out and told me that he could be found at the first floor of the building opposite to this. I crossed the narrow lane full of cow dung and colorful plastic bag litter. Climbing up a spooky staircase, I reached the room where a team of eight *karigar* (craftsmen) sat and worked all day. I greeted *Aslam* and he invited me in to his workshop. I went in

but soon grew a little uncomfortable with only men around me. To overcome my inhibition (and slight fear to be honest), I started to strike conversation with *Aslam*, the only man I knew out of them all.

The craftsmen were shy. They didn't talk much when I was around. They just wouldn't open up. In the beginning I thought that it was cold behavior but it was my fault to have formed that opinion so wrongly and so soon. With the passage of a few days, they started having conversations and sometimes initiating them. The whole equation changed. Our relationship grew warmer and there was a light-heartedness about the whole place. It had started to feel like a friend's home with *Aslam* inviting me to eat *Sevaiya* (the legendary Muslim speciality) at his place right opposite this *adda*. I also made *chai* and took it for all of them sometimes. The idea was to bridge the gap as quickly as possible.

I didn't carry a camera or any intimidating equipment in the first few days of the visits. It is not pleasing to intrude on someone's personal space and I didn't want to seem pushy with them. I took my own time to

familiarise with them and gave them theirs to open up too. Only after a comfort level was reached did I ask them if I could take a few video clips but I was very careful with the camera. I didn't leave it 'on' always or take it too close to them, in their face. They would stop being themselves if they knew they were being filmed all the time and would put on a show. The best was to observe them as they were, naturally, and make notes later at home.

First two weeks passed by in just talking to them, grabbing some footage here and there and discussing about their lives in general. *Aslam Bhai* was keen to know about me too (fair enough to know the details of a person visiting them everyday). I clearly remember him asking me '*Kahan rehti hain aap? Kahan padhti hain, aapke ghar mein kaun kaun hai?*' (enquiring about my place of residence, education and family).

In the third week, the craftsmen started sharing more personal experiences. They would talk about their interests, problems and family members. *Aslam* and his brothers even talked about their daily earnings (low

wages) and the steep profit made by the shopkeepers whom they work for, their future plans, their aspirations etc. I was beginning to grow fond of the place and the people. I loved their craft. They were absolutely mind-blowing in their precision, pace and perfection. They work for the finest boutiques and showrooms in the city. I requested them to embroider a *kurti* for me too. I wanted a memory of them and their work, for always.

Over the days the *karigar* got used to me being around all the time. Infact, they would wait for me everyday at the same time and should I get late, they would ask me the reason for the delay. We had all become friends. I was like another member of their small family.

The last week of the visits was the most emotional one. I had become attached to them. Coming to this *adda* and spending the day here with them had become my everyday routine. I enjoyed it. I didn't want to leave so soon. The last few days of my stay in Lucknow passed by in putting the notes together, viewing and editing the footage, sorting the pictures (and clicking some more) and trying to recapitulate the month that just flew by.

Visual Ethnography

Before I actually started visiting the *adda*, understanding the deeper meaning of the word 'ethnography' was very important. So I did my homework to know what it really implied, constituted of and aimed at. After getting a somewhat clear picture of how the study would shape, I set out on the field.

Ethnography (Greek: *ethnos* = folk or people, *graphein* = writing) is a qualitative research method often used in the social sciences, particularly in anthropology and in sociology. It is often employed for gathering empirical data on human societies or cultures. Data collection is often done through participant observation, interviews, questionnaires etc.

Visual Ethnography aims to describe the nature of those who are studied through a whole range of methods for collecting data. Photography, filmmaking, notes, fieldwork are some of them. The strength of visuals in communicating a sociological context is unparalleled. Unlike text, images have more than one potential meaning. Infact, there is no end to meaning-making.

These studies are usually holistic, founded on the idea that people are best understood in the fullest possible context. So an ethnographer lives among the people who are the subject of study, learning the local language and participating in their everyday life while striving to maintain a degree of objective detachment. While detailed written notes are the mainstay of fieldwork, tape recorders, cameras or video recorders are also used because the beauty of everyday activities is best 'seen' and cannot be explicitly described in mere words.

I didn't use the camera initially and asked them after a few days if they were comfortable with the idea of being filmed. I wanted to give them time to open up and waited for a comfort level to be reached. Participant observation is the best in such situations. One gains a closer and a more intimate familiarity with the people by being a part of them. This gets a deeper insight of their religion, culture, occupation, practices, beliefs, thoughts and way of life through an intensive involvement; and since this is done in their natural environment, it is least intrusive or intimidating.

Since I didn't carry any recording instruments in the first few days, I only observed and made notes. The initial bit of the study did make me feel uncomfortable and also bored sometimes as I would be sitting idle, not doing anything. But here's the catch. One has to keep at it, patiently, and not give up.

Knowing that the first phase wouldn't be much hands-on work, I involved myself in a lot of conversations. I talked to the craftsmen about their families, their interests and their problems in general. The kids who would visit the *adda* from nearby houses would come and recite a poem or two that they were taught at school. *Ammi* would chat at great length about her daily routine, the problem of water shortage in the area, her sons working hard to earn a decent living, her grandchildren having no memory of their grandfather who expired five years back (as they don't have any photograph of him) and a lot of other things. So, the first half of the study was non-participant observation. During this while, once I had familiarized enough and built a rapport with them, I asked them if I could film

them. Initially the craftsmen were a little conscious of the camera but they soon loosened up. Infact they started enjoying the attention being given to them and their craft. They would proudly show it off!

It has taken them years of practice, patience and dedication to reach this level of expertise. One can never judge a craft only by observing it from a distance. The steps and small details that one needs to take care of can only be well understood when one does it hands-on. So, the second phase of the ethnographic study was participant observation. I sat and perforated their patterns on paper, passed them sequins and threads, helped them lay out the wooden frame to begin work etc. Once in a while I did try a few basic *zardozi* stitches too. That is quite a thing to crack I would say. It took me some time to get a hang of it and it definitely got me closer to them. All of us talked more freely and informally. They felt like I was one of them now. This participation or involvement was very rich in its nature. An out-of-the-world experience it was, leaving me happy about something that I don't know of.



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MANU LAM

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Purana Lakhnau (Old Lucknow)

Located in what was historically known as the *Awadh* region, Lucknow has always been a multicultural city. It is popularly known as the city of *Nawabs*. Regarded as one of the finest in India, the city represents a culture that combines emotional warmth, a high degree of sophistication, courtesy, and a love for gracious living. The *Pehle-aap* (after you) culture, popularised as a tagline for the society of Lucknow and rightly so, is the etiquette possessed by the Lucknowites. This sublime cultural richness famous as *Lakhnawi tehzeeb* blends the cultures of two communities living side by side for centuries, sharing similar interests and speaking a common language.

Chowk, as the name suggests, is a street in Lucknow with the distinction of being the oldest in the city. This commercial stretch is an ideal shopping hub for those looking for good quality *chikan* or *zardozi* garments in

the state capital (*Chowk* is where the maximum number of *chikan* manufacturers and shops can be found). These crafts are the important small-scale industries in the city. They provide employment to thousands of craftsmen.

Chowk is also famous for traditional jewellery, flowers and *attars* (scents). *Nakhhas* is another market where one can get a feel of traditional Lucknow. It is jazzy and full of life. *Chudi wali gali* (street of bangles), *Phoolo wali gali* (street of flowers), *Sunaar ki dukaane* (jewelers' shops) are other places to empty the wallets.

Chowk is a gourmet's delight as well. It boasts of the best quality non-vegetarian food available in Lucknow. A visit to this area would be incomplete without trying one's hand at the tasty *Tunde ke kebabs*, the wide range of Lucknow's authentic *Lassi*, *Kesaria doodh*, *Thandai*, *Rabri*, *Malai paan* and the very famous *Chatpati-chaat*.



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बैंक ऑफ इंडिया Bank of India
HDFC BANK

श्री कृष्ण लाल कृष्ण मुस्ती
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श्री कृष्ण
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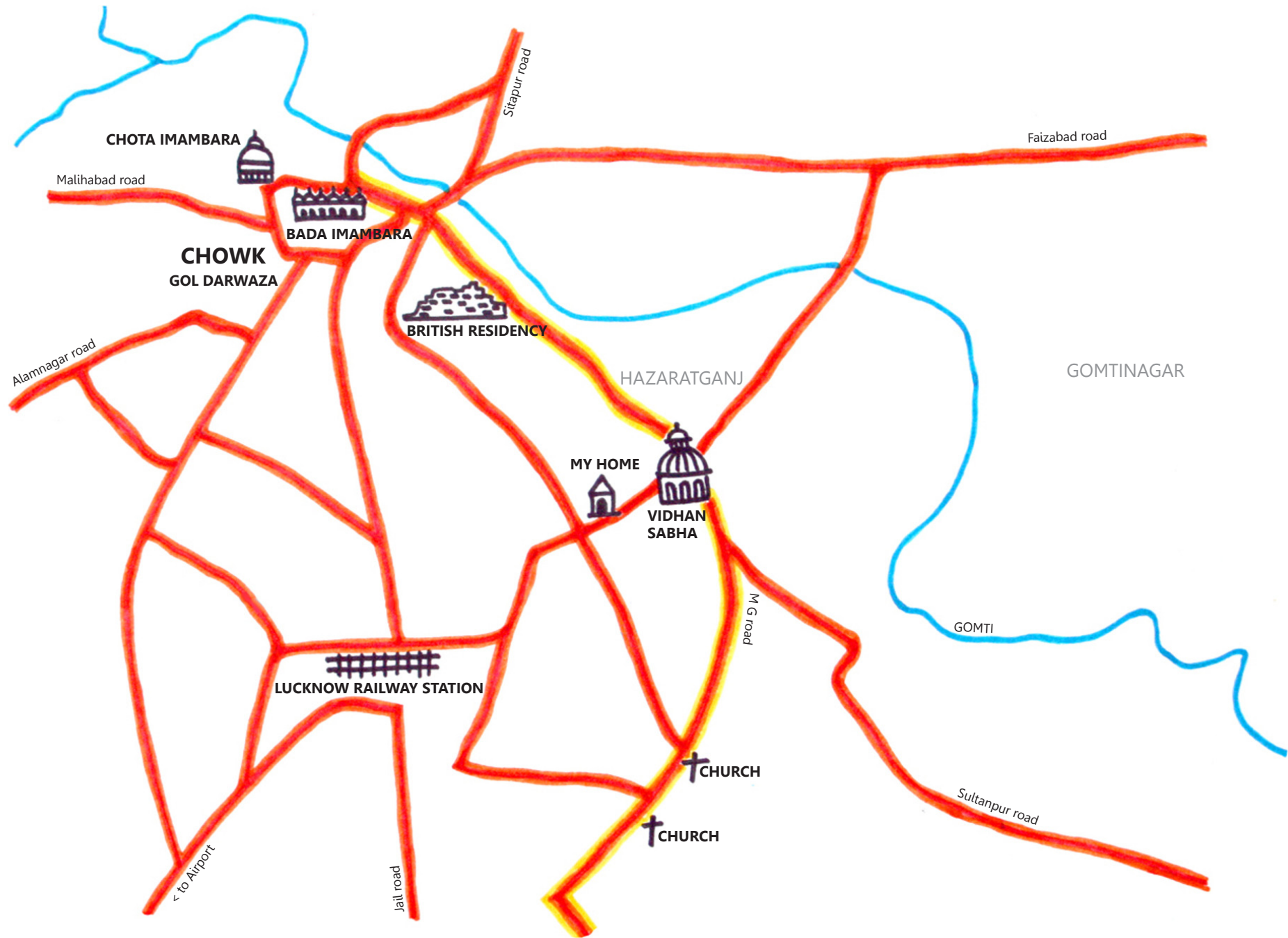
Pragati
CHIKAN KENDRA

Man in yellow and red jacket walking

Silver car

Auto-rickshaw with CNG label

Auto-rickshaw with 706 label



<< Opposite Gol Darwaza at Chowk



River



National Highway



Mahatma Gandhi Marg

RECIPE
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एले ग्रुप से कक्षा व तक
अंग्रेजी/हिन्दी नाट्यम
रानी कटरा चौराहा



Mohalla : The Locality

The *galis* of Old Lucknow are not the most appropriate place to walk around in bling-bling fancy (read: cheesy) clothes. People can stare at you quite a bit if you take up the courage to wear them but this is the place where they are made. *Darzi ki Bagiya* is a small *mohalla* in *Chowk* where a lot of *zardozi* embroidery is done.

The lane is narrow but noisy. One can spot cows and dogs basking in the sun, men driving around on bikes and cycles, women working in courtyards or terraces, lots of electric wires and many more people fixing them. Pigeons fly over high terraces at short intervals.

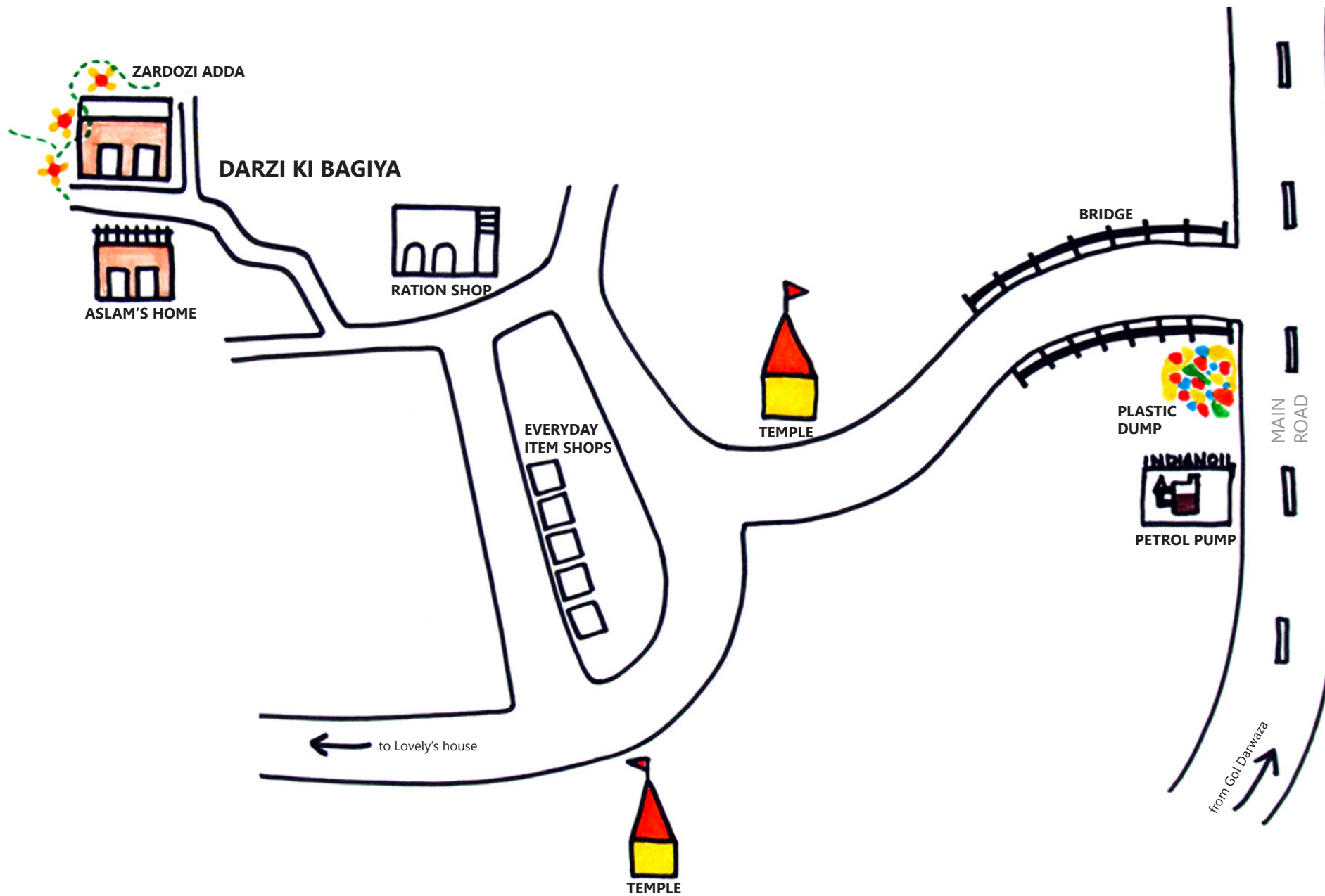
The architecture is British. The houses here were built more than a century ago and face each other, standing tall, at each side of the narrow lane with the sky bright blue between them. They have big windows for fresh air and light to seep in. One can also smell food being prepared in kitchens of these houses. The aroma stays for almost all day long and makes one feel hungry!

Since most areas of Lucknow are assured of electricity twenty four hours a day, this *mohalla* doesn't have much power cuts either but once in a while the transformer does fuse off. The real worry is the water problem in this area as the supply is not regulated. The people here have to store water in buckets and drums and stock it for the day. '*Paani ki bohot dikkat hai yahan*', says *Aslam*, when asked about it.

It is predominantly a Muslim area and most of the people residing here are embroidery experts. A few Hindus live here too but they are not involved in craft. They usually own small shops that sell everyday items or grocery. There are *mandirs* (temples) at the beginning of the lane and a *masjid* (mosque) further down.

The people here are extremely warm, simple and down to earth. They smile at you when you pass them by. They are great hosts. They are wonderful story-tellers. And they are workaholics.







Adda







Home



A number of workshops are there in this area. As I walked through the lane, I could spot shoes and slippers outside several houses that had rented out space to the craftsmen for practising *zardozi*. Small rooms with many people sitting and working inside is a usual sight here. Each one comes sparkling clean, fresh, barefeet to the workplace or the *adda* for the respect of the craft.

After reading their early morning *namaaz* at 5 am, all the people in the *mohalla* start about their daily activities. The men go to work, the women start cooking and kids rush to school. The lane is full of motion all morning.

The locks at the workshop doors are opened, punctually and religiously everyday (excepty sundays) and the *karigar* start their work at 9 am each morning, sometimes earlier. They come from various parts of the *mohalla* to work. They walk their way to the *addas*. There are meal breaks in between. They go home to eat and come back to continue the work. The workshops usually close by 9 pm.









Adda : The Workplace

The building opposite *Aslam's* house has a huge room at the first floor which is taken up on rent as their *adda* for *zardozi* (an *adda* is actually a large wooden frame that the fabric is stitched upon but the word is loosely used for a space where craftsmen work).

Earlier, not much space was needed as his father was a *chikan karigar* and didn't work back at home. But as the family grew and their *zardozi* business expanded, more craftsmen joined in. More space was needed to accomodate everyone and make them comfortable.

Presently a team of eight craftsmen works full time at this *adda*. They go for their meals and tea breaks in

between. Unlike *sarkari* offices (government offices that are usually nine to five boring desk jobs), they work hands-on, twelve hours a day (nine to nine) and sometimes even more. Sitting for hours on the floor is undoubtedly back-breaking work. The first time I sat down at the floor to try some stitches, my arm kept aching for quite some time. It is amazing how these people sit for all day long. They have been working here for more than a decade. Fifteen years to be precise. After *Aslam's* father expired (five years back), he set up and started this *adda* with his elder brother *Abdul Salaam*. They pay eight hundred rupees as the rent of this room each month; surely steep for people who earn a few thousands a month.



Also, the quantum of work here is seasonal. This *adda* produces dresses back to back, one after the other at jet speed during the wedding season. That is when work happens in full swing and the craftsmen work over-time. To meet the demands of the market and customers, some work is outsourced too, sometimes. During the off-season (when the weddings don't happen) there is just about enough work to keep them busy.

Only men work at the *adda* and females take care of the household chores. It is also interesting to note that all the craftsmen working here are Muslim. And none of them wear spectacles. They love what they are doing and take great pride in talking about it.

It is amazing how they seem an everyday task look exquisite every day. Their needles move up and down

in a rhythm so fast that they make it seem almost effortless at that. It is true of all handicrafts that the craft seems like an extension of the craftsman, natural and full of grace.

There is a constant prick-in-the-fabric sound of the needle with a background score of *namaaz* five times a the day. All the men from the *mohalla* go to the *masjid* to offer their prayers while the women do that at home (women are not allowed inside). The slots of reading are fixed to 5 am, 1 pm, 4 pm, 6 pm and 8 pm. On fridays, there is a special one hour reading in the day time from 12:30 to 1:30. '*Shukkarvaar ko namaaz padhne sab jaate hain*' says *Babu Bhai*, one of the craftsmen at the *adda*, who loves dressing up in his sparkling white *chikan kurta* for the special *namaaz*. (Everyone goes to read the afternoon *namaaz* on friday as it is an auspicious day).







Sit here on the cold floor on a winter morning and then one would really know what winter is. The place almost freezes and only gets better in the afternoon with sunlight slightly warming up the place. The *karigar* wear several woolens to keep themselves good to work.

In the summer, it burns off with the heat as it is the floor just below the terrace. Most of the time the fan is switched off as the light weight sequins fly all around the place. It is extremely difficult to work with sweaty hands. '*Garmi mein kaam karne mein bohut pareshaani hoti hai*', says *Irshad*, one of the craftsmen at the *adda*.

Monsoon doesn't make life easier either. The ceiling leaks during the rains and constant downpour inside the room is assured. To prevent the fabric from getting stained with water, they have put up a *barsaati* (plastic sheet) under the roof that runs along the length of the room - temporary solution to a permanent problem.

The *adda*, in general, isn't in the best of its condition because it hasn't been repaired for long. The windows can crack up anytime. It is full of spider webs and *Paan* stains. The room seems to be just out of an old haunted movie but the craftsmen don't have much choice. There aren't any vacant *addas* in the vicinity but they do not crib about it either.

The only consolation to this condition is that the room is quite well ventilated. There is lots of natural light seeping in through the windows. That makes it manageable during the difficult weather conditions. *Aslam*, who heads the team is the *Karkhandar* - one who pays the craftsmen for working at the *adda* on a daily wage basis. He has plans to fix these problems soon but it takes about five thousand rupees to whitewash the entire room. Consequently, the place hasn't been painted for couple of years. There are chances that it will get cleaned and painted during *Eid* next year.



Zardozi : The Craft

Zardozi is an ancient Persian art. *Zar* in Persian means gold and *dozi* is embroidery. It has been passed down for many generations. Pure gold and silver were used for *zari* threads in olden times but that is now replaced by copper as the base metal to cut costs. It is coated sometimes though.

This style of embroidery has been in existence in India from the time of the *Rig Veda*. It reached its zenith during the reign of Mughal emperor *Akbar* but it suffered a decline during the kingship of *Aurangzeb*. The major cause of this decline was the reduced royal patronage and the incurred expense due to the use of precious

metals and stones. But soon after independence, the embroidery form began to breathe once again. The major revival of the artwork took place in cities of Hyderabad and Lucknow.

It is called the queen of all handworks on garments, originally a privilege enjoyed only by the royalty (*Aslam's* family and ancestors seem to have absolutely no relation to the *Nawabs* though. They took up the craft for the love of it). Even today, when the choice is for richness and glitter, there is no alternative to *zardozi* work especially for *lehngas*, *salvaar kameez* and *sherwanis* (bridal trousseau).

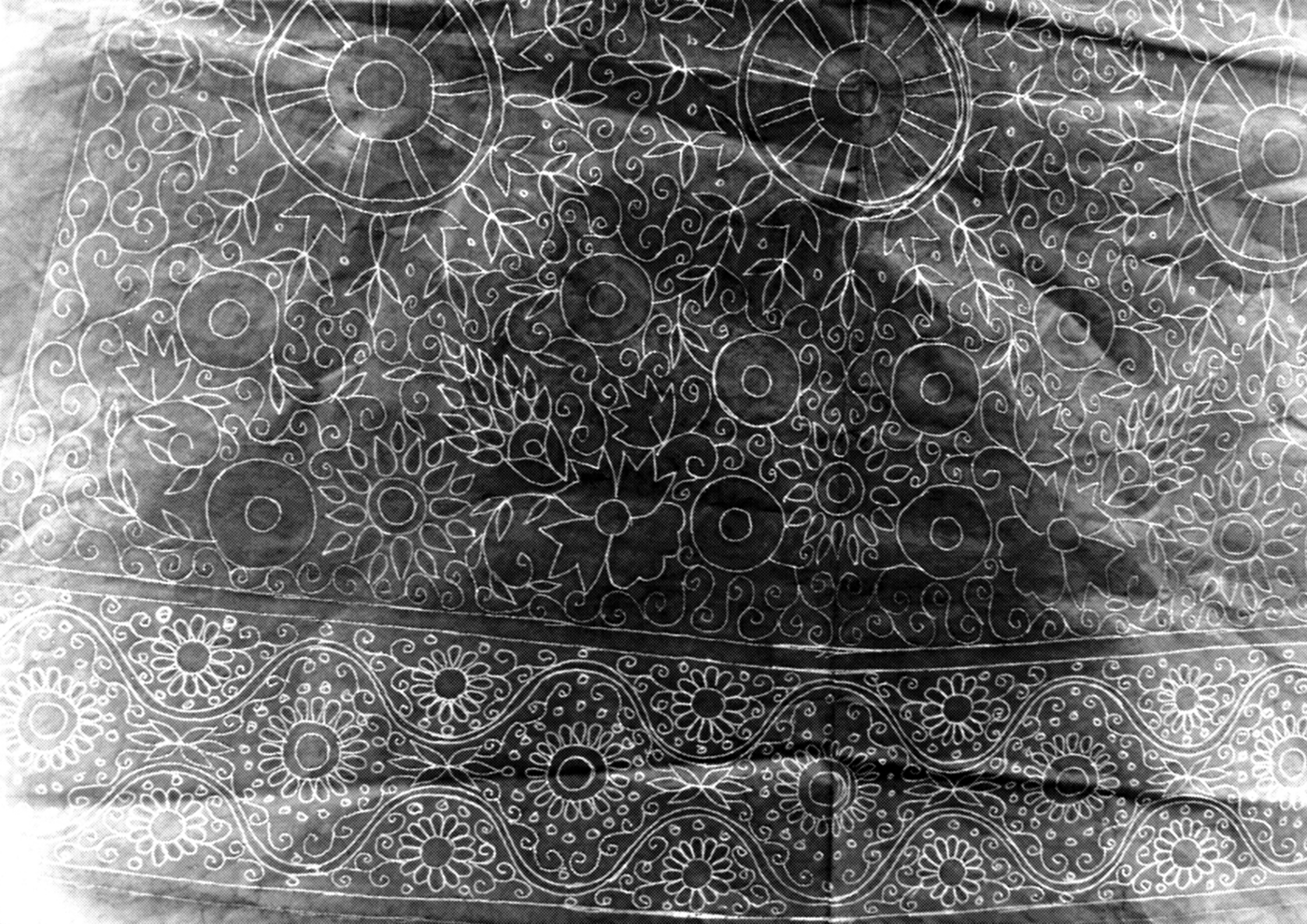


In the four weeks that I visited the *adda*, I got to witness each and every step of the embroidery, the first of which is laying out the wooden frame. It is called *adda bichana*. The four wooden planks are held together with nuts and bolts. The fabric on which the embroidery has to be done is first stitched to a *khaadi* strip running

along the length of the wooden frame. This is done to prevent the fabric from tearing off. Then it is wound up tightly with strong *sutli* (thread) along the width of the frame so that the fabric is stretched enough to do the embroidery comfortably. This process is called *taankna* and requires great expertise to do it perfectly.

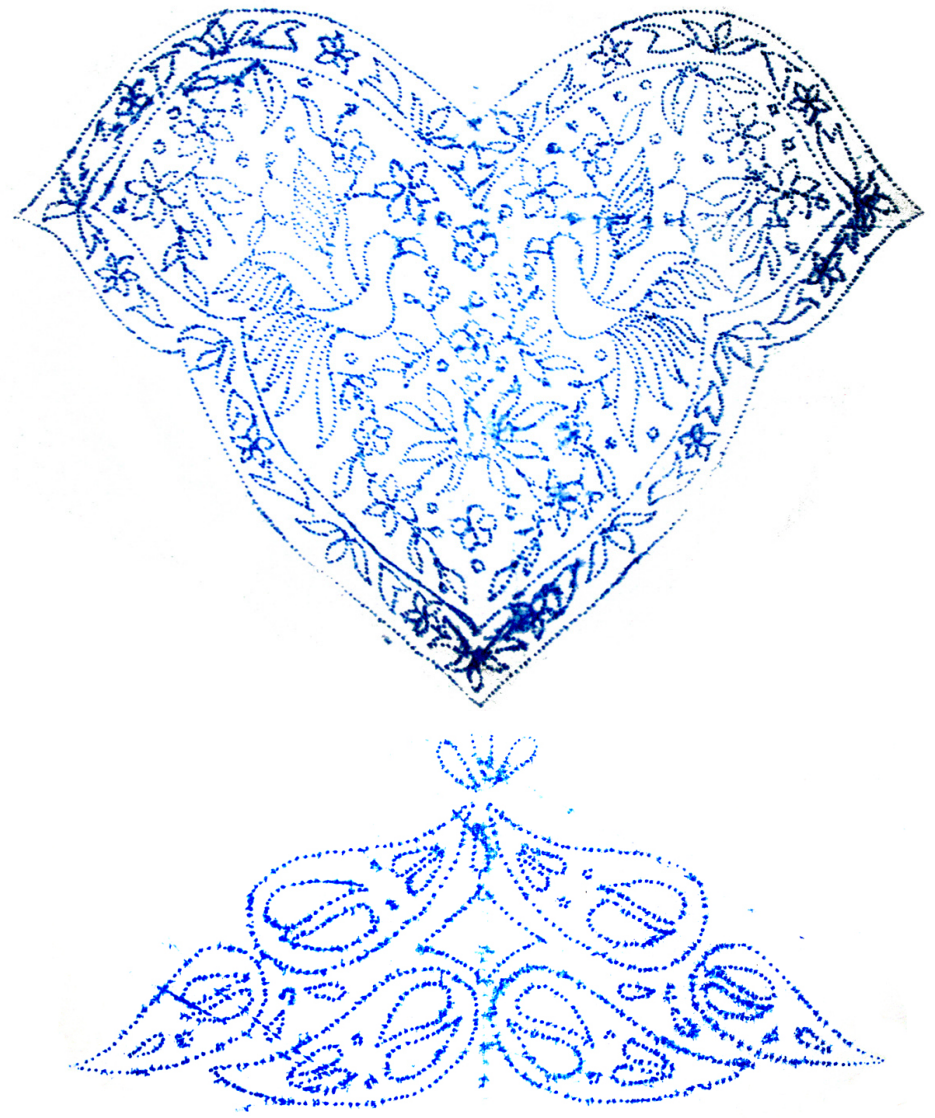






The next step is transferring the pattern onto the fabric to be embroidered. The craftsmen at this *adda* have a wide range of designs that they have embroidered over the years, so there's a great variety to choose from. These include floral patterns, elephants, peacocks, dancing figures, leaves and feathers, geometric patterns etc. The motif is first sketched on a piece of thin butter paper. Its outlines are perforated with a needle. After the perforated *khaakha* (the tracing paper with the holes) has been placed on the cloth, the pattern is rubbed with a solution of *khadiya* (chalk) and *ghaaslet* (kerosene oil) to transfer it onto the cloth. The pattern is then seen as white dotted lines on the fabric. This process is called *chapai* and embroidery starts after this. The craftsmen sit cross-legged around the *adda* with their tools and start stitching.

When stitches have to be embroidered on *shaneel* (velvet), the entire pattern is traced out with thread also after printing it with chalk. This is because the design can't really be seen on velvet due to its texture. This is done with *haath ki sui* (the regular metal needle).





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Zardozi stitches are done with *muthiya*, a special kind of wooden needle with a bent metal tip that is used to pull the thread from below the fabric and run the stitches on top of it. This kind of stitching allows the craftsmen to use both hands as they work, which is obviously double the effort of any other kind of embroidery. The hand above the cloth works with the needle, while the hand below the cloth ties each stitch - making *zardozi*.

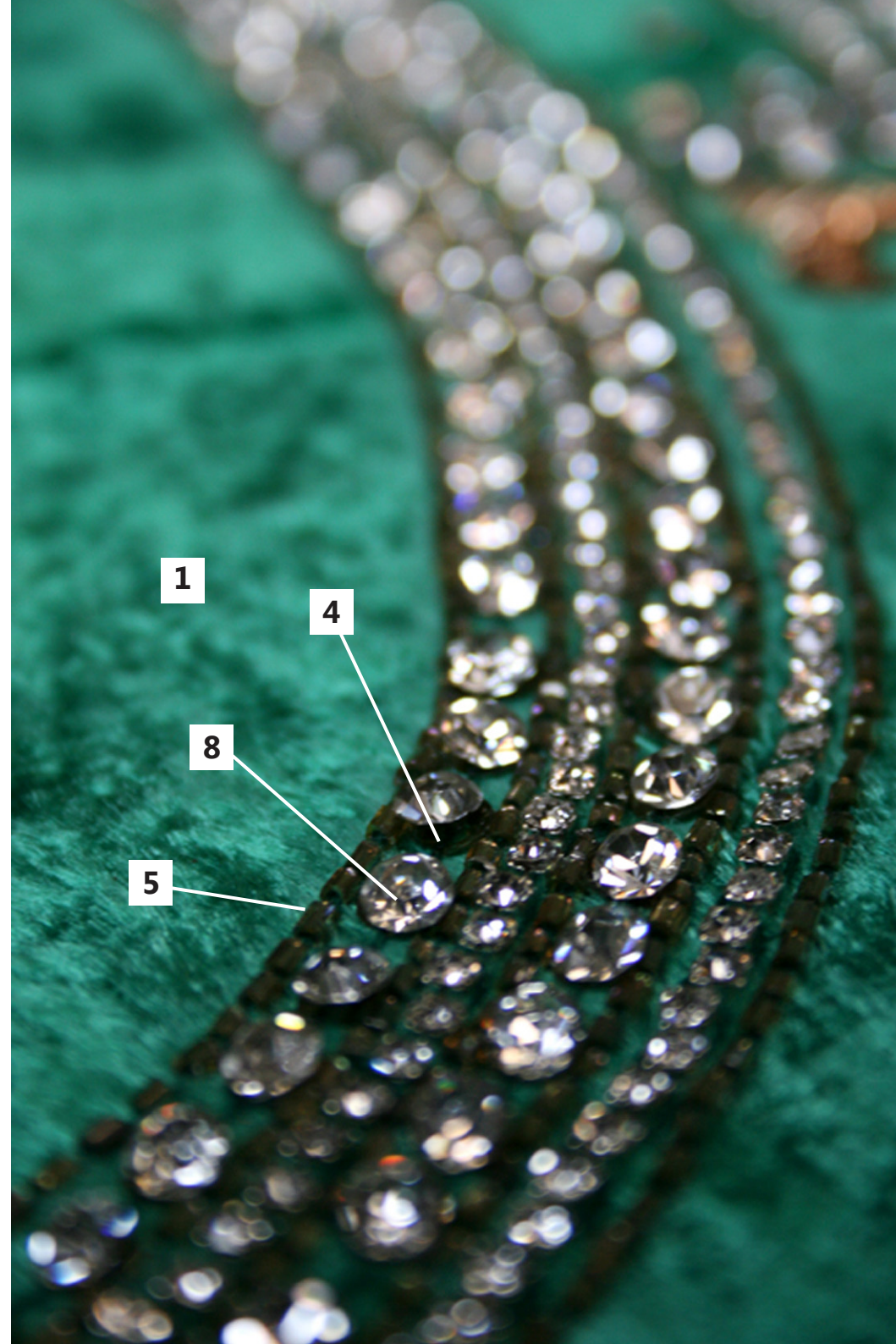
Thus the products are not only beautiful but long-lasting and durable. Definitely, it is not as easy as it appears. When I tried my hands on it, I couldn't get it right for several days. Infact, the craftsmen who join in afresh are made to practise the usage of the *muthiya* needle for a few months (or sometimes years). *Mohit*, one of the craftsmen at the *adda* has been doing just that for about two years.



Zari thread, *salma*, *kora*, *dapka*, *sitara*, *kangna* etc. which are different types of metal threads and sequins used to embellish the stitches. There is a huge range of threads and embellishments to choose from. Most of *zardozi* embroidery is done with *saadi* and *naksi* which are small metallic springs of sorts and are made by swirling metal threads (called *kasab*) tightly. These are cut into small pieces to make the stitches. *Saadi* is thinner, lighter and finer than *naksi*. A combination of these are used

to achieve the desired effect (or visual weight). *Kundan* and *nageene* (stones) are used to further enhance the beauty of this embroidery. These are stitched or stuck with fabric glue on top to make the dress shimmer. They are made to rest into *katoris* (conical sequins) for better sticking. *Kardaana* (hollow glass pipes) and *tikki* (flat sequins) are also used. Zardozi is done on all sorts of fabrics like silk, cotton, net, georgette, crepe, chiffon, brocade and *shaneel* (velvet).

1. *Shaneel* (velvet)
2. *Zari* thread
3. *Naksi* (heavy metallic coiled thread)
4. *Katori* (conical sequins that holds the stone)
5. *Kardaana* (hollow glass pipes)
6. Plastic beads
7. *Kundan* (stone)
8. *Nageene* (stones)
9. Net
10. *Resham ka dhaaga* (silk thread)













After all the stitches and embellishments are done, the fabric is unstitched from the wooden frame and *khaadi* strip. It is then examined carefully. Sometimes a stone or two are left unglued by mistake. That is taken care of at this stage and then the fabric is brushed lightly to remove the dust that settled on it over the days when it was being embroidered. It is a very painstaking process and attention is paid to the minutest detail at each stage. It is labour intensive I would say. It is *mehnat ka kaam*, as the craftsmen would put it and they have been doing it dedicatedly for years.

The finished garment is sent to the showroom or to the customer who commissioned the craftsmen to embroider it. Though they get paid very less, none of them can afford to stand up and say 'no' to the big players. They would lose business and the shopkeepers would ask someone else to do it, if not them. Since, this is their *rozi-roti* (source of all the income they have), they can't dare to lose it. They keep up with the injustice and not complain about it. So, even though it is tremendously unfair to the craft and its craftsmen, sadly nothing can be done about it.



Dukaandaar : The Big Players

The *karigar* of this craft, like any other craft, are not paid their due worth. The profit is swept away by the big players or people who sell their product with a fancy packaging at an exorbitant price. The showrooms and big businessmen (middle men) benefit from this hard work. They make good money (read: steep profit) but none of it reaches the unsung heroes of the craft. *'Humein sirf laagat ke paise milte hain. Asli paise toe showroom wale kamaate hain, jahan tak pohochte huey daam chaar guna badh jaate hain'*, says Aslam. (We only get the cost of the raw material. The actual

profit is minted by the showroom owners who sell these garments at four times the production cost).

Sadly, no credit or acknowledgment is given to them either. The showrooms that they work for (*Mehra Arts* and *Calcutta's in style* in Lucknow and *Roopmhal* in Kanpur) sell their handicraft under their own name, with their own brand tags and prices. So they swiftly sweep away the credit for all the shimmer of sequins which is a result of several days of craftsmens' hard work and sweat that goes into putting this show together.

Calcutta's
IN
STYLE



CALCUTTA'S
IN
STYLE

CALCUTTA'S
IN
STYLE

PEA

CHEDI LAL RA

CHEDI LAL RA





Karigar : The Craftsmen

The craftsmen who create *zardozi* patterns are known as *zardoze* (pronounced zar-do-zay). Usually children are made to sit at the *addas* from a very early age so that they don't wander around the *galis* and the mothers don't have to run behind them all day long. So, one finds a lot of young boys working at these places, learning the craft.

Most of the outfits are made to order and the design is selected by the shopkeeper or the customer. The craftsmen only do a sample on a small piece, show it to the customer and then the final order is placed. No design decisions are made by the craftsmen themselves. Color combinations and patterns are also decided by the shops. They charge them only after the outfit is finished according to the *kaam* (extent of work) done on the dress material.

Since skill-based-production doesn't get them much money, *Aslam* wants to expand the scale of work. Presently the *karigar* are from *Aslam's* family and his neighbourhood (a total of eight people) but he wants to own a shop and be on his own, rather than working for someone else. That should get them better income. He wants about a thirty people to work with him full time. He kept asking me too if I knew people who would want to get embroidery done from them or rent out a bigger space to him for a cheaper price but even though the *karigar* of this craft don't make much money (like any other craft), they accept the situation as it is and try to make the most of it. They want to keep the tradition alive. None of them wants to discontinue because of the unfairness of their income. The craft has become more than a source of livelihood for them. The pride they feel in being associated with it is beyond commerce.



1. Aslam

Aslam learnt the craft of *zardozi* at a workshop in the same locality because he was intrigued by it. Then he taught it to young boys in his neighbourhood who now work with him. He has been working for about fifteen years on the same *adda*. He is twenty six years old, unmarried, the third to eldest son in the family. He started this *adda* with his Uncle and elder brother *Abdul*. Now they are planning to grow their business.

He opens the room every morning, locks it every night and leaves after all the craftsmen have left. Once in every two or three weeks he sources all the raw material and tools from *Nakkhas*, a local market nearby. Since he is the *karkhandar*, he pays the craftsmen their daily wages depending on their hours of work.

Already having made his pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, Aslam has worked in the UAE for a few years. His uncle stays there, so he happened to get involved in *zardozi* with him there as well. He returned to India to take care of this unit but wants to go abroad and work as there is more money for the skill of the hand and craftsmen are paid their worth. Here in India, they get paid very less. '*Hum se achhe toh mazdoor hain jinhe ek sau chaalis rupaye roz milte hain. Hum karigar logo ko sirf assi rupaye milte hain*', he adds. (The construction workers are better off than us who get paid a hundred and forty rupees daily. We get only eighty rupees a day). He also mentions that the craftsmen in Delhi and Mumbai are paid better - to the figures of a hundred and twenty for eight hours a day.

JUST DO IT



2. Abdul Salaam

Abdul Salaam is *Aslam's* elder brother (second to eldest son in the family). He is forty, and has been practising the craft of *zardozi* for more than thirty years. He started this unit along with his Uncle who still pursues the craft at the *adda* downstairs, in the same building. *Abdul Bhai* recently had a fracture in his leg as he fell down the staircase in his home. He had not been able to climb up for weeks as the doctor prescribed him

complete bed rest. Only in the last week of my visits to the *adda* did he start climbing up the staircase slowly. He is a workaholic too and can't sit at home all day long doing nothing. He loves *Paan masala* and chews it all the time. He is married and has two children. His wife does household work. She prepares food along with *Ammi* (his mother). The men of the family return home for lunch and tea breaks.



3. Mubarak

Mubarak is the quietest amongst them all. He smiles once in a while and works with super human concentration. He stays closeby and goes home for lunch. He has been married for eight years and has three kids. Two of them go to school and the third one is too young. He learnt the stitches when he was eight years old and has been doing *zardozi* for over twenty years. '*Bacchpan mein seekh li thi kadhai*', he says. His wife is from Sitapur. She takes care of household work and the kids. The men in his family are tailors but he enjoys doing embroidery more than tailoring.

4. Mohammad Irsaad

Irsaad is *Aslam's* younger brother (the youngest son in the family and is twenty years old). He loves talking just like his mother. He has stories to tell about everyone in his family and talked about his four sisters, three nieces and four nephews from time to time. He enjoys the craft and is spotted working with glass-pipes most of the time and he's quite fast at it too. Since the women don't work at *adda*, *Irsaad* also helps his mother and sisters to embroider *zardozi* suits for themselves. He likes wearing *Lungi* even in the winters and finds it quite comfortable to sit on the floor wearing that.



5. Mohit

Mohit can't speak. He is disabled to do that but he's not the sorts who would hold a bowl and go begging on the street to earn money. He wants to 'do' something to make money and thus is learning the craft since two years. He is practising the simple steps and *sui nachana* (the dance of the needle, which is a more poetic way of saying the basic movements of the needle).

6. Babu Bhai

Wajid a.k.a. *Babu bhai* is from the same locality. He has been working at this *adda* for over six years. He was one of the *awaara* types so his father made him take to the craft at a very early age. He has three sisters, one brother (who works at the same *adda*) and one father in his family. His father is a *chikan karigar* and his sisters do crochét work. He is the youngest *karigar* at the *adda*.



7. Irshad

Irshad does the fastest stitches out of them all. He has been working for sixteen years at the same *adda*. He has three brothers and one sister. The men in his family stitch gents' *sherwanis* but he doesn't like the stools and sitting posture of that craft. He likes sitting on the floor to be able to work comfortably for long. Ladies in his family don't work and take care of the kids at home. *'Auratein ghar par bachhe sambhaalti hain. Agar woh kaam karengi toh gents kya kareng, match khelenge?'*, he laughs. He is a firm believer of women shouldn't work outside home.

8. Golu

Golu is *Babu Bhai's* elder brother who works at the same *adda*. They both come and go together and really enjoy working at this *adda*. *Golu* particularly thinks that it is one of the places that doesn't restrict anyone in rigid working hours and there is freedom to do things the way one wants. He doesn't talk much but smiles at the people around him from time to time. He likes to work with the metal needle instead of the wood one. He loves flowers, which is why he can be spotted working on the floral patterns in the garments mostly. *Golu* takes more tea breaks than anyone else; he loves tea!



Ammi

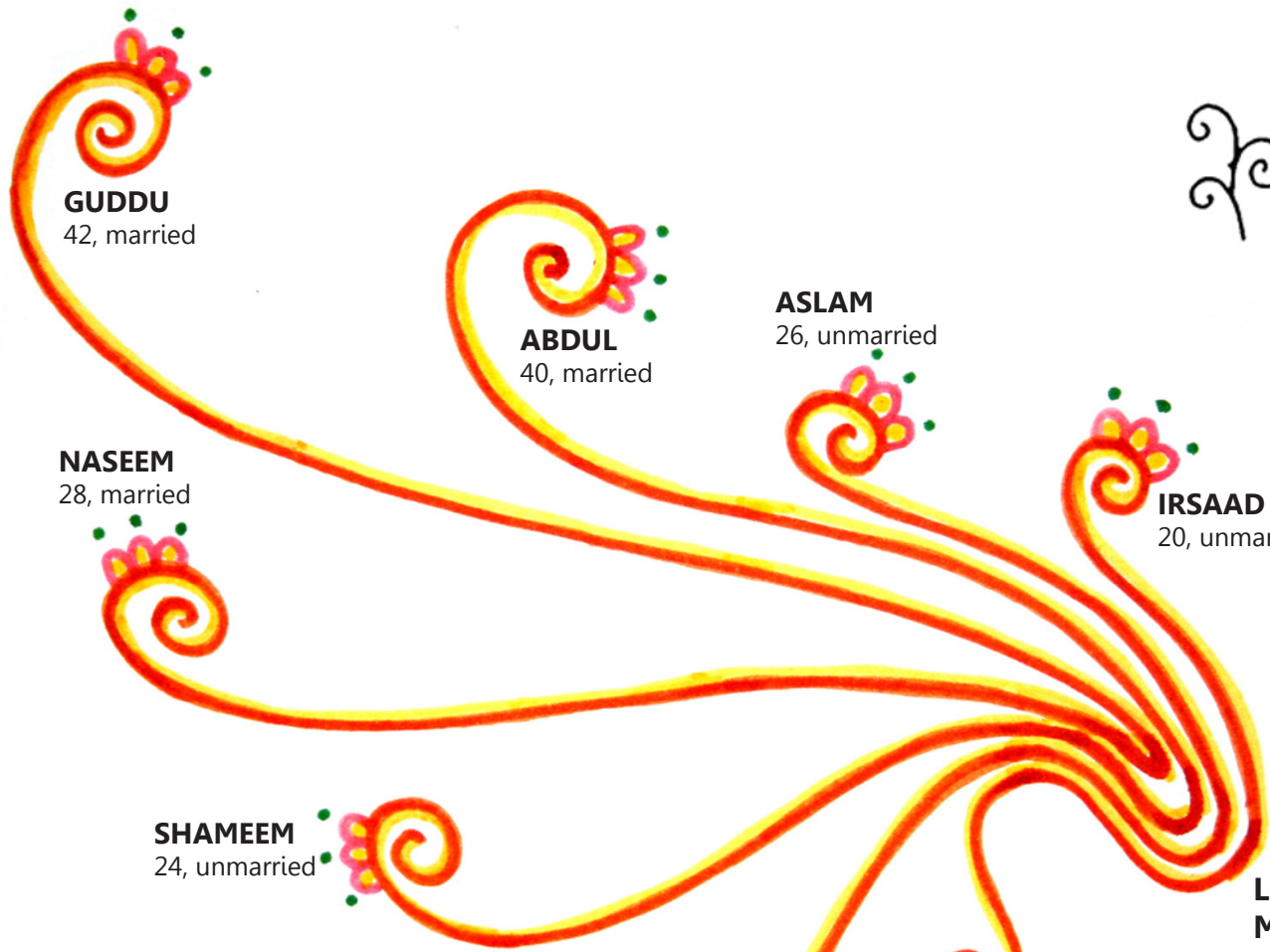
Ammi is the elder most in the family. Her name is *Meer Jehan* and she is the most incredible story-teller I have ever known in Lucknow. She can go on chatting for hours without getting tired. She loves talking. Her family has been staying in *Darzi ki Bagiya* for over fifty years now. Lucknow is where her ancestors have lived too. She was born and brought up in this *mohalla* and has always stayed here. '*Humare yahan zardozi ka kaam ladke karte hain aur hum shuru se yahin reh rahe hain*', she says.

Her family consists of four sons, four daughters and seven grandchildren. They all stay together under one roof except the eldest son, *Guddu*, who has his own *chikankari* business and stays closeby. *Abdul, Aslam* and *Irsaad* are involved in *zardozi* and work at the same *adda* opposite their home. Her eldest daughter *Naseem Bano* is married in the same city. The second daughter *Shameem Bano* is going to get married in April this year. The two younger ones *Ruksaar* and *Ushma* are in tenth

grade. They all converse in urdu at home. Her husband expired five years back.

Ammi is a superwoman. Her day starts at five with reading a few pages of *The Quran* every morning. Household chores after that - which include cleaning up the house, cooking for the family and taking care of the grandchildren. After all this, whatever time is left goes into knitting crochét for *chikan sarees* and suits. She strongly believes in earning her own bread and looks up to women who do the same.

She works for two businessmen (one of them is *Lovely*, my friend). They let her take the fabrics home to work upon and she visits them once in every week or two to give them the finished garment. This makes it much simpler and easier for her. Sitting and working at someone else's place wouldn't leave her any time to take care of home.



GUDDU
42, married

ABDUL
40, married

ASLAM
26, unmarried

NASEEM
28, married

IRSAAD
20, unmarried

SHAMEEM
24, unmarried

Late SALAMAT ALI (Abba)
MEER JEHAN (Ammi)

RUKSAAR
16, unmarried

USHMA
16, unmarried

Women usually do this kind of work in this locality. They don't go to work at *addas*. Crochét and wool knitting make decent options to be done at home. Also, men in the locality are firm believers of the thought that they should be the bread earners in the family and women shouldn't work, they should only take care of *ghar ka kaam* (household work) and kids.

Though the skill of the hand isn't really paid its worth anywhere in the country, *Ammi* tries and makes the most of this fact that she has already accepted. She charges a hundred bucks for a *salvaar kameez*, a fifty for a *dupatta* and a hundred for a *saari*. Each one takes two days to be worked upon. Immaterial of how less she gets paid, she loves working and that is the beauty of it.



Conclusion

Four weeks passed by very quickly in getting to know the craftsmen better. A strong equation was made and kept strengthening with time. The craftsmen shed all inhibitions gradually. We shared bonds of working and eating together. *Chai* conversations happened at the *adda* and we talked a lot.

I realized in the course of this visual ethnographic study that it takes a lot of patience and calm. This project was a test of exactly that. To break the monotony of everyday existence and transcend that to make each day special takes a lot of determination and dedication. In the beginning, the task seemed a little boring sometimes but I kept at it for as long as it demanded and saw the beauty of life as I've never seen before. In the light of such an endeavour, I began to enjoy

the rhythm of everyday activities like the dance of the needle on the fabric, the hand that moves to its music, the pricking sound, the sips of hot *chai*, the *namaaz* in the background and the chirping of the birds far above.

I have in my mind memories of this place very special, of its people very warm and of a craft very exquisite. It was a wonderful journey from day one to the last. Each day was a different experience, a different state of mind and a different point of view. Each day gave me time and space to stop and ponder over fundamental questions of life and livelihood and find answers to them. In the search for answers to those questions, I found more questions along the way and evolved with the craft and its people in a way that is intangible and can not be explained in words.

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