

**"Men often become what they believe themselves to be. If I believe I cannot do something, it makes me incapable of doing it. But when I believe I can, then I acquire the ability to do it even if I didn't have it in the beginning."**

***Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948)***

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# Introduction

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*"There is no mistaking, the voice of joy, which is the distinctive note of all the best Indian art. As long as the masses of India (and the world) retain their taste for superb workmanship, as long as they continue to appreciate the value of skilled craftsmanship, as long as they continue to delight in the really beautiful so long will the art – crafts of India survive and forever flourish"*

*Sir George Birdwood*

History has demonstrated that art and crafts of India is a product of our traditional culture; of our intimate personal background. Embroidery is one such craft, which springs from the desire to record or decorate.

Embroidery is the art of using stitches as a decorative feature in their own right. It is very versatile, does not require equipment like weaving and unlike weaving where the patterns are perforce linear, curvilinear work is easy to achieve. (24)

According to Dongerkery Kamala, 'embroidery in India, taken in a broad sense, is not merely a work of needle and thread, but an artistically arranged ornamentation, be it with strips of old materials, tinsel, mirrors, sequins, buttons, bells, beetle wings, shells, pearls, beads, metal or silk and cotton thread'(19). The materials used for embroidery can signify luxury, religion, social identity, superstition, vanity etc. (24)

As a craft, embroidery has played a prominent role in the pre-independent India as well as post-independence. Whether in rural tradition, in which embroidery featured strongly as dowry goods, wedding paraphernalia and group identifier; at the courts of the Mughals and other

ruling elites, in which embroidered textiles adorned the carved stone halls as well as the persons of the nobility; or in the thriving export market that has made India's textile products famous for two millennia, embroidery has always been to the fore in India's uniquely rich tradition (23). Embroidery as a handicraft is an enviable possession of our national heritage that contributes substantially to Indian economy. Jayakar Pupul, the doyenne of Indian crafts, once said, 'Craft is an economic activity before it is a cultural activity.'

Excavation of fragments of cloth of cultures which flourished in 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C found in the burial grounds of Egypt suggests the use of gold and silver wire embroidery. It is likely that even before the use of silken embroidered, was gold and silver wire embroidery prevalent (18). From the 12<sup>th</sup> century, onwards silk thread was used along with the gilt to pick out details such as the flesh of the figures (9). There is mention of use of gold in fabric of the times of ancient Egyptians, Hebrews and Romans. Later, in early Christian times, the gold strips were spun around filaments of silk or flax to make the first gold threads (10). An embroidered fragment from 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy contains a bird motif couched in gold (61). Dongerkery Kamala has classified stitches used in several regions and hence, gold and silver embroidery is stated to belong to places such as Arabia, China, Egypt, England, France, India, Italy, Portugal, and Spain.

Embroidery is acknowledged as of Oriental origin and India is said to be one of its homes. The references of embroidery in the Vedas and later in the Epics prove their antiquity. Embroidery in India as a leisure occupation has been essentially rural and feminine. As vocation and profession, it thrives in cities and towns, followed as much by men as by

women. Though certain basic stitches may be common in all embroideries of India, each region has developed distinct characteristics of its own that mark it out, but Zardosi embroidery the only one being practiced nearly all over India is said to have no distinctive styles associated with geographical region. Gold and silver embroidery is of ancient origin and has been known in India certainly from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Where and how it originated is not quite certain but it has been extensively practiced in different parts of the world. Under the patronage of the various royal clans that ruled India, particularly the Mughals, the Rajputs and the Deccani nawabs, this industry spurred to new heights while at the same time laying the ground work for its decimation. These traditions were continued, and even augmented by later regional nawabs in Bengal, Mysore, Central India, Punjab, Awadh and Kashmir. Although Islamic influence was felt throughout most of India, it's most obvious rural effects were found in villages in Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Gujarat, and Andhra Pradesh (31). With the fall of the Mughals, craftsmen who had depended on imperial support were left unemployed. Growing urbanization during 18<sup>th</sup> century provided many opportunities for the craftsman. Though the work was not on opulent scale as that of the lavish furnishings formerly made for palaces and royal encampments, the craftsmen found many advantage in the steady market for smaller works, to which they devoted their technical skill. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century - a cheaper but superficially effective class of work was produced. Zardosi work was still practiced in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but lacking strong patronage the craft tended to deteriorate. (26)

Embroidery done in Gold and Silver known as Zardosi is in a class by itself and its unique position is due to its artistic appeal. Zardozi is a term used to describe the stitching or couching of silver and gold thread

wires of varying thickness and forms such as kalabatun, naqshi and dabka on to fabric stretched tightly over a wooden frame known as karchob (43). Perhaps, in the field of ornamentation Zardosi embroidery alone can match jewellery in splendour. The diversities and local characteristics of Zardosi, the 'Bharat-kam' of India are as numerous as are the seats of the craft, writes Sir George Watt. It is in the details of wire drawing, in the form of wire used, in the nature of the stitch employed and the degree of combination with precious stones and silk that the most fruitful directions of classification are given. India's gold and silver Bharatkam takes one's mind back to the days of oriental pomp and pageantry (38). Gold always has fascinated the Indian mind. After all, it can withstand the ravages of time and the corroding effects of the natural elements. Is it any wonder then that embroidery in gold and silver should fascinate all, and that even today, it still has its traditional use on auspicious and festival days, apart from it being a fashion statement repeatedly?

Gold and silver embroidery was known as Karchob. This had been divided into two categories: Zardosi, the heavier and more elaborate was used for masnads, floor covering, bed covers, cushions, animal trappings, canopies, shoes. The ground for these heavy embroideries was usually velvet, satin or heavy silks. These materials were once also used on sheaths and handle covers for swords, in saddlecloths and tents. Kamdani was the lighter embroidery done on lighter material like wearing apparel, caps, scarves, and veils. In the Kamdani embroidery the needle was threaded with ordinary thread doubled, the ends being secured with a knot. When the knotted end of the wire was pressed and pulled through the material with the wire pressed down at every stitch, small dots of overlapping satin stitch were thrown up, producing a lovely glittering effect, especially in what was popularly known as hazara

buti, because of the creation of a thousand tiny dots from the metal thread. Then there was Minakari, a style in gold embroidery, which perhaps got this name because of its resemblance to enamel work. An attractive and popular item in this work was the border going by the name of Kataoki Bel for saris and various costumes like skirts, blouses, kurtas, shawls etc. It was made of stiff canvas, with the whole surface of the design filled in with embroidery in gold or silver and sequins and the result was a resplendent edging. An alternative to this was lace made on net and gracefully filled in with metal embroidery and spangles i.e. badla as on the canvas, which was soft and helped especially the sari to fall gracefully. (21)

Indian craftsmen produced embroideries in a variety of styles to suit specific foreign markets, and in the courts of the Mughal emperors, embroideries synthesized Persian aesthetics with traditional Indian textiles to create decorated fabrics of singular types (31). Zari workers were kept feverishly busy during the marriage season preparing richly embroidered articles for the old and young. Every festival in the calendar brought them work. For Id, thousands of Zari caps used to be prepared, for Diwali Lehngas and Cholies worked in gold were prepared for every Hindu household (18). Zardozi workshops were a traditional family business with skills passed on down through the generations. Skills were taught, continued, changed and added over time and because of this, the process too could alter and change (41). Still, new styles were evolving in a unique collaboration between commercial designers and traditional craftsmen and women continued an enduring Indian tradition to assimilate and synthesize diverse views in the creation of textiles of extraordinary beauty. Embroidery, which evolved as a court and religious tradition, richly imbued with symbolism, was adapted skillfully for commercial use. (23)

Zardosi unlike any other embroidery appears to have received very little or no attention by the Government or the Voluntary organizations, though it is the much sought embroidery by the consumers today. Even in larger cities, which have department of village and small-scale industries run by the Government, it is difficult to find a complete collection of the technical and aesthetic details of embroidery crafts. It may be just likely to find a collection in the museums or with the private collectors.

It is believed that what happens in Indian fashion and style today is necessarily based on what has preceded them. There were times when India's arts and crafts enjoyed a challenging status in the world market. A much-used Zardosi in Indian fashions today would be a contributing factor towards the resuscitation and strengthening of our ancient arts and crafts. Several couturiers like Ritukumar, Tarun Tahiliani, Meera and Muzzafar Ali, Abu Jani and Sandip Khosla, etc. have made effective use of this skilled heritage, which displays the truth of the above statement. David Abraham whose stylish label is exported to London says, "Textile arts have benefited from the explosion in the Indian Fashion Industry. At the same time, nothing can be kept alive by sentiment and nostalgia. There has to be a sound economic basis for its survival. It has to have a proper function." In addition, he says that art, craft and industry cannot survive nor have a future unless a steady market i.e. both local and foreign is secured for its goods and this requires organization. Textile maverick Martand Singh and textile historian Rita Kapur Chisti too, feel that to survive, crafts have to focus to the high end of the market.

Historians regard India as the original home of embroidery, before the last century; however they feel no research on different forms of embroidery, their roots, evolution, socio-economic importance or analysis



of the craft have been recorded except in the 'paramparic' tradition, which was handed down from parent to child. Thus, an attempt has been made to draw upon the literary evidence, oral traditions, photographs and other media sources to reconstruct the structural character of zardosi craft and examine the changes in this craft.

### **1.1 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY**

Indian textiles, be it woven, embroidered, painted or printed, has always been the wealth of an individual, as well as the cultural tradition of our country. The last century has witnessed in India a tremendous change at all levels of social, economic and aesthetic life. New methods of communication, a new science and technology, new functions, new demands and an alteration in the very terms and relationships and meanings of art objects has resulted in the breakdown of the contours within which the textile craftsman functioned. In all civilizations, change is becoming a norm and this pressure of change at all levels of vision and environment leaves the craftsman bewildered and insecure. Unknown to his capacities, and unaware of his contribution in the advancement of Indian economy, he cannot make most of the opportunities available in the course of events of the developmental activities. With the inexorable process of urbanization and climate of globalization gaining momentum in our developing country over the last quarter-century, there arises a vital need for preservation of country's national treasure of excellent textile arts and crafts, to further reposition its lost glory in the world market. "In the case of handicrafts, an additional reason for their preservation and development lies in the fact that they are the material symbols of India's unique cultural ethos and unlike the products of the mindless machines which are more or less alike the world over, the products of Indian craftsmanship would always be inimitably Indian..." writes Chattopadhyaya Kamaladevi.

Zardosi embroidery one such craft has undergone a process of natural evolution. Traditionally, the patronage of kings and emperors has enabled the Zardosi craft to flourish. Post independence, the setting up of the All India Handicrafts Board appeared as continuing patronage to crafts by the Government of India to preserve and promote its cultural heritage. It is believed that culture has intrinsic importance that transcends economic viability. It was only by 1980's that the presence of Zardosi items in the mainstream exports was visible due to the efforts of the Export Promotion Council of Handicrafts, which meant a shift from the local market base to a value added product segment.

Gold and Silver embroidery, a medium, evolving from a court tradition, further taking up its form in utilitarian and socio-religious paraphernalia is thriving in India with rapid expansion and growth in both domestic and export markets but is supposedly on the decline in taste and craftsmanship. The technical skill and elements of the court tradition in design are absent. Thus it becomes necessary to re-examine the norms that underlie the roots of its design concepts and to re-examine the elements that contribute to the emergence of design in its richest form.

There are small and large, clusters scattered throughout India, doing Zardosi both as a living tradition and as a mainstream economic activity. Globalization and liberalization have changed the face of the Indian market and the psyche of the Indian consumer, putting new pressures on the craft sector and small producers. These new pressures need a new perspective. An insight into the status in terms of their earnings, conditions at work, living conditions and institutional or traditional arrangements for social security will open our eyes to the contemporary challenge of new function, new

technology, a new environment and new relationships. It is out of this challenge, out of very dimensions of the problem of style, proportion and technique that the new discrimination will emerge dictating solutions that will nurture the one and many; be it the craftsmen, the design units, Government's development programme, independent organizations, museums, art education institutions etc. It is also important to identify their felt needs, based on an understanding of socio-economic community of producers and their terms of trade.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Zardosi as a craft is omnipresent in India, in urban as well as their rural hinterland in homogenous clusters. The traditional craft of Zardosi today, assumes variegated approaches and forms. The inquisitiveness in this craft, led the investigator to undertake the present study to document the methods, materials, designs and techniques existing today. An attempt has also been made to understand the cultural and socio-economic background of the community of producers, their terms of trade and their felt needs. The investigator has taken up this problem with the following objectives, for a larger and deeper understanding of this precious craft of Zardosi embroidery that has come down to us and is here to stay.

### **1.2.1 Specific objectives of the study**

1. To trace the origin and history of Zardosi craft.
2. To comprehend the socio-economic and cultural background of the Zardosi craftsmen.
3. To delineate and register the materials, tools, equipments, methods and designs used in Zardosi embroidery.

4. To examine the trends in zardosi for domestic and export market, highlighting its use in contemporary wear.
5. To examine the role of Government, Non-Government Organizations and Individuals initiatives in uplifting, preserving and reviving the Zardosi craft and craftsmen.
6. To identify the cause and effect of change in Zardosi embroidery craft.

#### **1.2.2 Delimitation**

The study was limited to the city of Lucknow, Bareilly, Surat and Howrah district of Kolkata.

### **1.3 SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

1. The study on the Zardosi Craft as it exists would provide a better understanding of the production processes.
2. The pictorial study of the craft in the historical and present context would be useful to one and many interested in the study of this textile craft.
3. The information on socio-economic status and working conditions can serve as a data base to the Government for policy making.