

ZARI AND ZARDOZI: 'GLOBAL LIES 'OR GLOBALISE!!

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Would you mind buying a pocket diary, size 5x3 (inches) for a 13.5\$ or a photoframe 11x13(inches) worth the same? Makes you wonder what's special about them. Well what makes them special is that the diary is ensconced in a 'zari jacket', while the photo-frame has been handcrafted in the same, someplace in northern India and the biggest of all that you must be standing in some art shop somewhere in Europe or America.

The cross-continental journey of these items starts somewhere in Seelampur, Jaitpur or Shahpur Jat (if in Delhi) or any of the zari centers in north India ,goes through the packaging process in some export house in Okhla or South Delhi and ultimately takes a flight to the place where the 'moolah' is coming from.

Well, the 'moolah' is not bad, but globalisation sure is, seems to have been a thought long supported by popular notion for long. Here is an example how far from being bad, it is actually the reason why most of the handicrafts industry is flourishing.

One of the key sites for outsourcing the zari work for the export houses in Delhi is the Shahpur Jat area. Clogged with double storied buildings and narrow lanes the area's 80% population consists only of the zari artisans. There are 14-15 artisans working out of either two 15*15(ft.) rooms or a single 22*22 (ft.) room on each floor putting in 12-13 hours of work each day. The working conditions are far from good but none of these workers seem to have much complaint as they get almost double the amount they are paid for in their hometown. Yes a compromise as they have to stay away from their homes, but the possibility of better pay is what has driven this mass migration to this 'village-city'.

Most of these artisans are from the 'Midnapore' district in Bengal, weaving from an early age of 6 to 7 years. And as was evident, some of them also do migrate to the city too at this early age. Child labour certainly doesn't appear to be an issue in this area. Though how does globalisation tackle the child labour issue will also be seen ahead.

While if the work for the artisans seems tough, the export houses don't have it easy either. To a layman the designing process might seem easy, suspecting the designers to pick up anything from the vast collection of the traditional designs, well it remains quite a task to please western tastes. Because among the designs, it's not the paisleys (a common Persian design motif) or the peacocks that sell but the butterflies and the tulips.

Moreover it's here that the screening process for the export houses starts. Keeping in touch with the fashion predictions for the next season and innovating continuously, the designers at these houses go through the rigour of designing and redesigning for 5-6 months. With the intent of zeroing on the best supplier the foreign buyer works with 5-6 export houses (in the designing phase) at a time. Hence at the end of the day, for the export house, the 'elusive moolah' might just remain that.

Apart from these there are certain severe labour restrictions to be followed, guided not by the government but the foreign buyer. All the export houses have to have a signboard outside their offices prohibiting anybody below the age of 18 years from entering the premises. As per the export houses, if the said restrictions are not followed, the whole order from the foreign buyer risks cancellation, and thus we see an efficient control over the issue of child labour.

So how much role does the government play? Well apart from exempting certain duties to the member export houses to various export promotion councils it does not seem to have much of a role until the goods concerned are quota restricted which in case of handicrafts does not apply.

¹ Saransh was a CCS Summer Research Intern 2004. This paper is a shorter version of a longer paper researched and written during the Internship Program.

The simple case is that if there is demand for an art, it would always survive and rather flourish if it is able to adapt with the changing times. Hence even if there is a wiping out of the traditional design and an onset of the western motifs, the truth remains that the artisan is able to earn better and is incentive-*ised* to continue with the art. A poor but talented household in 1992, that might have been in Bareilly, Midnapore or Benares has today shifted base to either Sangam Vihar, Seelampur, Shahpur Jat or Jaitpur with access to better living standards and a better pay.

And hence globalisation definitely is the way to go.