

Chapter – 6

Conclusion

CONCLUSION

The conditions of labor in unorganized sector and home based aspect of work having risen in the years on account of structural adjustments in globalised economy has been much covered theme of study. The gendered aspect of the home based productive work including the craft of embroidery has also received attention of scholars. In case of embroidery workers, however, particular attention had been on *chikankari* of Lucknow and *phulkari* of Punjab. This study therefore is an extension of the attempts to understand the life, work and conditions of embroidery workers in Aligarh. Here while the case of lock industry, for which Aligarh remains quite famous, has still been taken for study in some ways the other major craft of Aligarh, involving women working in the home based sector, however, has not received sufficient attention. The attempt is made here to bring out through the case study of embroidery workers in Aligarh, the conditions of home based women embroiderers in the current economic scenario. The craft though traditionally considered womanly on account of the traditional restrictions on women's mobility and home based nature of work, there are obvious recent dimensions of women's constriction of mobility and opportunities. Notably, there is considerable expansion in the market for embroidery and the working pockets of embroiderers have extended much in recent times.

The study primarily took up *patti* embroiderers for study (the sample had 140 *patti* embroiderers and only 50 *cut work* and 30 *karchobi* embroiderers in the total of 220). The study brought out the social profile of embroiderers and certain general features as quite evident for all the categories of embroiderers together. Embroiderers were poor women, predominantly Muslims, married with children, with hardly any access to education or training to have alternative livelihood. The restriction on mobility appears strong among these women but in many cases these were not neatly on account of the ‘Muslim’ concepts of *purdah* for women, but more on account of the household duties, family responsibilities and other societal norms. There were little options of alternative employment in their locality that left them with little option of work other than embroidery. The discourse on *purdah* however is successful in keeping women properly confined to their places. The restricted work opportunities create abundance of women labor confined to homes and available for embroidery. The pittance offered, on the other hand, is considered as a sort of a favor done to women who could not move out of home – a wage to ‘supplement’ their family income without needing to move out of home.

There was however clear differentials working within the category of embroiderers. These were not simply between men and women in the craft, but within the women embroiderers themselves; and not simply with respect

to different embroideries but within the same embroidery form as well. In the *patti* business there are men, but mainly as entrepreneurs, contractors, subcontractors while few of them are also tracers, tailors and launderers but not as *patti* embroiderers. In this gendered division of labor, women embroiderers working from homes earn little, while the male contractors, traders, shopkeepers earn higher profits. This was perhaps on account of embroidery considered as leisurely engagement for women and her skills considered rudimentary. Embroiderers themselves regard their work as little specialized and requiring lesser skills.

There were unequal relations between women embroiderers themselves. There were differentials in the wages of embroiderers engaged in different embroideries of *patti*, *cut work* and *karchobi*, and between the different *unskilled*, *skilled*, *workers-cum-subcontractors* categories. Beside the income differential between embroiderers on account of the skill or years spent in the craft, we have disparity between the pure embroiderers and women working as agents of traders and contractors in the business who amass a larger share per piece. However, in spite of the differential in earnings between the different embroidery types, there is restricted movement of embroiderers between the different embroidery types.

The income of embroiderers received through the *piece rate* wages is estimated. The wages appear as meager earnings for the hard work, not only

by the *unskilled* category but this is even for the *skilled* category. On an average, they are able to receive work for about 8 to 9 months in a year. For two to three months especially in the rainy season they are idle with no other alternative work. After working for almost 6-8 hours daily their wages remain between Rs. 13 to 20 per day or even less. Along with poor wages, there were delayed payments, arbitrary cuts in wages etc.

This appears more glaring on account of the rising demand for the embroideries and the high price of these products in the market. These women embroiderers take up hard work generally on account of depressed economic conditions of their families and consider their income as 'supplementary' to the family earnings. While the earnings of the *unskilled* category was quite low and would have contributed nominally to the little resources of the poor family, the earnings of the *skilled* category would have been substantial to the family where the other earners in the family, especially husband/father were in very low income occupations. Besides, the earnings of *worker-cum-subcontractor* category would have been considerable in low income families. Of all embroiderers *karchobi* workers appear better in terms of payment, though the work appears more demanding and intricate. Definitely, these aspects of earnings and differentials in terms of the male earners' contributions to the family income will be reflected in the gender relations in the household.

The study examines the connections between embroiderers' economic profile and their role in the decision making in the household. These were seen in terms of decision over household expenses, children's welfare and asset building. Interestingly, though a large section felt they had control over expenditure their incomes were mostly spent by them on the welfare of their children and their families.

Similarly, the health profile of embroiderers is examined in the light of the differential earnings of embroiderers and their respective contribution to the family income. The occupational hazards of the work were mainly severe headache, backache and weak eyesight. However, women with better earnings or with greater contribution in the family appear to be somewhat more conscious and caring about their general and reproductive health.

However, the decisions on the use of contraceptives largely remained male preserve, though women believed that it was a mutual decision. Overall, the general health conditions of embroiderers appear extremely poor.

In whatever state, the level of consciousness of these workers is also very poor. This is understandable given the nature of the home based work where the embroidery is intertwined with the usual household chores. The gendered experience of the home based work acclimatizes them about their limitation in life and work rather than encourage aspirations and consciousness of the worker. The pittance paid for the hard work frustrates

them but they seem to have little understanding of the significance of the complex system of labor exploitation at work in the home based embroidery. For many in the craft, this limited option is a sort of an opportunity. Women were also unaware of the wage disparities and did not bother much to know about the prevailing wage disparities if any in the localities and in different embroideries. Especially they did not question the high rates of men in business. These were also reflected in their lack of social and political consciousness. To some extent, the category of *worker-cum-subcontractor* showed greater market and political awareness.

The lack of the consciousness and voice amongst the majority of workers restrain women to come together to improve their situation. Besides, the fact that women embroiderers form a vast category composed of women from very low income group to even middle class which inhibited the process of coming together. But more importantly, there were different categories of workers and some with differing and even opposing interests which do not immediately bind all in common set of grievances.

They might become visible by forming groups and may have a strong voice for their problems. But they totally lack in initiative, and in fact fear hostility of the intermediaries (*the subcontractors*) if they take up to forming group. Options perhaps lie only with initiative from above, by civil groups or NGO – which appears quite an uphill task.