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Crafting Muslim Artisans Agency and Exclusion in India's Urban Crafts Communities

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The term “artisan” evokes for us a certain stability, a certain identification of an individual with a function. Yet identities are often misleading.

RANCIÈRE 1989: 5

If we are to attend to the specificity as well as the internal variety of experiences and expressions of workers' lives in order to understand the present as well as possible futures, we need to recognize that theirs is an internally differentiated reality, that does not necessarily conform to the prevalent models that homogenize “labour” as a single category.

TALIB 2010: 13

I met Shafiq, an embroidery worker in his forties, in a small, dimly lit one-room workshop in Seelampur, a slum area on the eastern outskirts of Delhi. His workshop was one of many located in the dusty inner lanes of the sprawling neighborhood—a bare room with a concrete floor and a single florescent tube light. Inside, on the floor, were three raised wooden rectangular frames,

about five feet by three feet and about two and a half feet high. Between the frames was either velvet or silk cloth pulled to the edges by thick pieces of string. Shafiq, along with his four young apprentices, sat cross-legged on the floor, hunched over the frames, rhythmically sewing sequins into the brightly colored cloth with a long crochet-like needle, a technique known as *hathari*. These embroidered velvets and silks would eventually be tailored into inexpensive *saris* and *kurtas* (long shirts) and sold in one of the many local markets around Delhi (see Figure 19).

I had known about Seelampur early in my fieldwork. It was one of the many impoverished neighborhoods that formed the periphery of the capital metropolis. Neighborhoods like Seelampur were notorious for being resettlement areas for communities that had been forcibly removed from more central (and desirable) neighborhoods in Delhi during the time of the Emergency in the 1970s due to policies of urban “beautification.”¹ With rapid urbanization over the past thirty years, Seelampur has also become home to migrant populations looking for work in Delhi, often arriving from rural parts of India. Seelampur, in particular, has a large concentration of Muslim migrants who have settled in the area, making it one of the few other “Muslim neighborhoods” in Delhi. As a result, the neighborhood has a growing informal economy, evidenced by rows upon rows of small workshops, like Shafiq’s.

I was strongly urged to spend time in Seelampur by a long-time activist who was involved in craft revival. She told me simply that, if I wanted to



FIGURE 19 *Two wooden frames in Shafiq’s workshop, located in Seelampur © Mira Mohsini Photograph taken by author*

understand the state of urban Muslim artisans in India, I must not only spend time in Old Delhi—my primary fieldwork site—but also in Seelampur. The locale was particularly known among Delhi embroidery workers, especially those who lived and worked in the old city, as a place where one could find “labor,” and most importantly, cheap labor. If one needed to get a bulk order of embroidered wall hangings or *kurtas* made, then many embroidery workers would sub-contract the work to “labor,” the term implying a category of person. I often heard my Old Delhi informants talk about getting extra work done by “their labor” in Seelampur.² The work that was done there was generally considered to be low quality (*chalu*). If a high quality embroidery piece needed to be made, then the work would be sub-contracted within networks of kin or outsourced to well-known artisans in Old Delhi, Agra or Farrukhabad—but certainly not in Seelampur. Whenever the need arose for the sub-contracting of intricate, high quality work, I rarely heard the term “labor” being used; instead the word “*karigar*” or artisan would typically be used. In some cases “*buzurg*” or noble elder would be used to convey a high level of respect for the artisan.

Yet despite being someone else’s labor, Shafiq was by all measures a highly skilled artisan, and referred to himself as such. His parents had sent him to a master artisan (*ustad*) in the village where he learned how to do *hathari* work for a number of years. Shafiq proved to be talented in embroidery and learned the skill faster than most. After some years of rising through the ranks of apprenticeship, Shafiq’s *ustad* bestowed him with a formalized certificate, which recognized Shafiq as a master of the craft, and licensed him to teach others. So when Shafiq’s nephew bought a workshop in Seelampur, he moved to Delhi to teach others how to do *hathari* work. Because of his current position as a master artisan, Shafiq did not consider himself as labor; he was an artisan (*karigar*)—and the distinction was clearly made—but he conceded that he often does “labor-work” (*mazdoori kaam*).

Shafiq’s positionality as both artisan and labor offers a measure of ambiguity and tenuousness in analysing categories that are, by definition, stubbornly rigid. As Mohammad Talib notes, in order to challenge homogenizing categories we must pay attention to the “specificity as well as the internal variety of experiences and expressions of workers’ lives” (2010: 13). In this chapter I critically examine how two particularly salient categories, artisan and labor, are constructed and subverted throughout the occupational trajectories and life-courses of embroidery workers in India. I will consider how local experiences and articulations of work, and engagements with economic and social contingencies blur the boundaries between conceptualizations of “artisan” and “labor.” The majority of embroidery workers I know in the old city of Delhi have been in the position of and considered both artisan (*karigar*) and labor (*mazdoor*) throughout their careers.³ These two categories

demarcate different experiences of work, which are often overlooked when craft production is perceived as a unified and near-mechanical industry involving types of actors, such as artisans, middlemen, buyers, workshop owners, and etcetera. With an ethnographic lens focused on the “sites” of concept-making⁴ (Hacking 2002), I will elaborate on the different meanings of these two categories as they are understood in everyday experiences and in relation to the life-course of embroidery workers. In particular, I focus on critically questioning the broad category of artisan by examining the way it has been constructed in the literature on craft in India. My reading of the category of labor will be limited to its local articulations in relation to constructions of “artisan.”

In the next section I discuss the site of my fieldwork, Old Delhi. Instead of situating the site as a singular “craft community” (Bundegaard 1999; Venkatesan 2006), I present the old city as a complex and at times liminal place where contesting visions of craftsmanship, authenticity and belonging combine to produce a tense and ever morphing understanding of who is an artisan and who is labor. Following this section I turn to the literature on craft in India to interrogate the construction of “artisan” within a resilient binary in the scholarship: craft as heritage versus craft as exploitative small-scale industry. I argue that in both cases the persona of the artisan is conceived as a fixed social fact whereby there is little room to question, for example, whether the artisan—either as purveyor of heritage or as victim of economic exploitation—even considers herself to be an artisan. Before presenting ethnographic accounts of two of my informants’ life-courses as embroidery workers, I will briefly discuss the local meanings of “labor” as a category.

Situating “labor” and “artisan” in Old Delhi

Old Delhi brings to mind many images and sentiments with regard to its history as well as its long-gone and present-day residents. When some think of the old city, it conjures nostalgic sentiments of a glorious Muslim past, when the Mughal Empire was at its height. For others it evokes Muslim decline in India. After the unsuccessful 1857 rebellion of Indian soldiers against the British, the city’s inhabitants were brutally suppressed and many fled the violence; the city became a shadow of its former self (see Ali 1940; Gupta 1981). By the middle of the twentieth century Old Delhi was at the crossroads of major events, the foremost being the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Partition resulted in a significant population transfer between the two countries—Muslims from the elite and middle classes migrated to Pakistan and Hindus, including a large number of Punjabis, relocated to the old

city. In recent decades, many of Old Delhi's previous residents have moved into more "middle class" neighborhoods in south Delhi, and the prevailing discourse about the old city is that it has become a "Muslim ghetto" that is more prone to "communal violence" than other parts of the city.⁵

Today there is a perceptible demarcation of neighborhoods (*mohalla*), with Hindu residents and Hindu owned shops spatially separated from those neighborhoods with predominantly Muslim residents and shops. Yet regardless of the spatial divisions of the old city, its most prominent aspect is that it is, like many medieval towns in India, a city of small workshops. The variety of small-scale production that occurs in Old Delhi ranges from the manufacture of auto and motorcycle parts to paper printing to woodwork to embroidery work. Indeed it was the abundance of workshops located along the busy market roads and narrow inner lanes that created my first impression of the city (see Figure 20). Furthermore, Old Delhi did not conform to much of the craft literature's notions of "community" as a spatially, socially and economically integrated unit of production. Old Delhi's craft scene was, if anything, highly heterogeneous and socially stratified.

This heterogeneity was particularly salient within the embroidery industry. My fieldwork was conducted with embroidery workers who are skilled in *zardozi*, a form of embroidery that uses various kinds of metallic wires.⁶



FIGURE 20 *The view from a workshop of Old Delhi's busy market* © Mira Mohsini Photograph taken by author

Perceptions of this industry are not uniform and often vary depending on one's relationship to and impression of the old city. There is a widespread perception that the craftsmanship coming from the old city is by and large sub-standard and of low quality. This opinion was conveyed to me in a number of ways. In a meeting with a woman who has been involved in craft revival for many decades, she characterized Old Delhi's craft scene this way: "The city is full of *chalu* (sub-standard) work; artisans are the '*banyas*' of Old Delhi." This was a bitter indictment of the perceived state of craft in the old city. Banyas are a sub-caste who primarily engage in merchant trade. In essence she was saying—with an acute sense of distaste—that artisans have left their skill-base to become sales-people who push their wares at any chance they get. This opinion is often accompanied by an impression of the old city as a place of filth, poverty, and general unrest.

In another conversation with a skilled artisan in his home in Old Delhi, I asked him if there is any "*asli*" or real and authentic work being done in the city anymore. To my surprise he said that most of it is cheap, and the only real work to be found is in cities like Agra or Bareilly. But, he said, there is one exception in Old Delhi: the badge-makers. According to him, these are the real artisans who do very fine work in embroidering badges that are part of official uniforms, usually for the police and military (I have also seen this fine zardozi work on the regalia of Free Masons). He added that in this case it is women who do most of the work, because according to him, men are less diligent and likely to be either sleeping or out of the house "chatting."

Apart from these views on who does work and in what capacity, the zardozi industry is marked by both the variety of people who take up the craft and the multiple forms of the craft. To illustrate these complexities, it may be instructive to compare Old Delhi's zardozi industry with Clare Wilkinson-Weber's (1999) ethnography of the Lucknow *chikan* embroidery industry. The zardozi and chikan industries share certain similarities. Both are situated in urban centers and the majority of workers are Muslim. Also zardozi and chikan were historically patronized by the local ruling Muslim elites; products made in these styles symbolized wealth, status, and power. The production processes of both types of embroidery are fragmented and middlemen play an often exploitative role, resulting in the marginalization of embroidery workers. It is quite common for both groups of workers to take up home-based piece-work, but workshops also provide employment. These similarities, however, give way to important differences between the two industries.

There are three fundamental differences between the chikan industry in Lucknow and the zardozi industry in Old Delhi. In Lucknow, the production of chikan is virtually synonymous with the city and attracts a host of tourists to its many dedicated chikan emporiums. The zardozi industry in Old Delhi, on

the other hand, does not have a similarly exclusive association with the city in popular imagination. Zardozi is known to be carried out in many places across India; from Calcutta, Delhi and Bombay to Agra, Bareilly and Farukhabad. Indeed, at present Delhi is not even the most renowned place for zardozi work. I was told that Agra is much more famous for its zari embroidered wall hangings and carpets, whereas Bombay is better known for the production of so-called “fancy” zardozi, which is produced in the factories of high-end designers who often cater to the film industry.⁷ However, what is common among zardozi production in these diverse places is its association with an “Islamicate,” and often a specifically Mughal, courtly culture and a perceived Muslim aesthetic.

In addition to the differing ways in which the two styles of embroidery are related to place, there are also differences in how workers conceptualize the origins of their craft. In the case of Lucknow embroidery, Wilkinson-Weber documents numerous different stories and origin myths, some of these narrated by businessmen and others by embroidery workers, in order to explain how this craft emerged in Lucknow. Some of these stories and myths focus on royal origins where aristocratic women initiated the craft, while others attribute its origin to visiting angels who taught the skills to one man. By contrast, in Old Delhi, I came across no such stories or widespread myths in the case of zardozi. Yet, many workers stated that the craft began in India during “the time of the Mughals” and that it was the Mughals who took the craft wherever they settled in India, thus explaining why zardozi is found in so many parts of the country. Being able to connect one’s knowledge of the craft to a long and illustrious past also produced a discourse that, from the perspective of “artisans,” separated them from “labor.” Labor just did work, but artisans were embedded in a wider socio-cultural craft-based milieu.

The third distinction between the two industries is the gendered aspect of production. In Lucknow, embroidery is done predominantly by women whereas in Old Delhi this is not the case. Women producers in Lucknow, according to Wilkinson-Weber, are often superficially propped up as bearers of tradition and heritage, in order to promote the industry as authentic. She discusses some of the images of women doing embroidery in Lucknow, where they are pictured wearing the full veil, known as *burqa* or *purdah*. Wilkinson-Weber notes that “[i]n these depictions, *chikan* is portrayed not just as the archetypal artefact of Lucknow, but one produced by a marked and, to middle-class Indian and foreign consumers, exotic group; that is, women in *purdah*” (2004: 294) However, the zardozi industry in Old Delhi is not as gendered in terms of production, where women are the primary home-based producers and men are the buyers, suppliers and middlemen. In fact, one of the first things I realized was that the composition of zardozi workers is extremely heterogeneous. I met women who did zardozi at home and produced piece-work

that would often supplement the family income; I encountered both male and female zardozi workers who became fairly adept at taking advantage of coveted government schemes; and I met men and women who belonged to families where the knowledge and skill had been passed down for generations. I met immigrants (boys and young men) from Bihar and West Bengal who had come to Delhi in search of any kind of work and just happened to be placed in a zardozi workshop to learn the skill for the first time. I met men and women, who came from a long line of crafts production, but were becoming increasingly disillusioned by the state of their craft. I met zardozi workers who would use their wide networks to get high quality products made from Agra and Kashmir, thus essentially taking up the role of the middleman. I met men, and a few women, who had successfully made the transition from craftsperson to businessperson and presided over a large portion of the supply chain or had opened their own businesses. I knew workers who specialized in doing embroidery on handbags, belts, saris and cushion covers, and I met those who seemed to be competent in many styles of embroidery, priding themselves in being innovative creators of unique designs.

As a result of this plurality and difference, it is impossible, I contend, to subsume all people involved in the industry under a homogenizing identity. As I have already mentioned, the category of “artisan” is insufficient, if not sometimes misleading and contentious, because not all people who work in the industry are referred to or consider themselves to be artisans. In the next section I discuss how the category of “artisan” has been constructed in the craft literature. I argue that the consequent rigidity of its boundaries often does not correspond to the lived realities and experiences of work.

“Artisan” as symbol and victim

In much of the literature on craft, the word artisan (or craftsmen/person) is used to describe those who produce particular objects of aesthetic and/or functional value and purpose. It is understood that a considerable amount of time and manual effort goes into creating such objects, often through embodied and repetitive practices, gestures and actions (Ingold 2000). Richard Sennett writes that the defining feature of the artisan-craftsman is that he produces for the sake of doing something well, with consummate excellence (2008: 144–5). Thus pride in handicraft is the realm of the artisan.⁸ As Jacques Rancière (1989) notes, the term artisan evokes a definitive stability within this form of identification.

Furthermore, it is assumed that when this figure of the artisan becomes estranged or alienated from his pride of work, he loses the essence what it

means to be an artisan—he loses a sense of self and therefore stability. This is the well-known narrative of anomie. The threatening specter of anomie, and the loss of some artisanal “essence,” I suggest, imbues the category of the artisan with two prospects of identification: artisan as symbol of tradition and artisan as victim of economic disturbance.

Symbol

In the context of India, the term artisan or craftsperson seems to signify a range of emotional sentiments and political commitments. India’s complex history of trade and commerce is replete with mentions of artisans (Asher 2006; Bayly 1983; Roy 1996, 2005), and observers often praise the unsurpassed work that has been produced in the region. In many ways the history of craft work, including the movement of craftspeople with conquering armies and their role in establishing empires, is coeval with the history of globalization, well before its twentieth century manifestation (Ludden 2005; Vanina 2004; Washbrook 1990). In India, the history of craft work is also an inherently powerful symbol of national struggle and identity. The connection between the persona of the artisan and the historical development of the nation-state engenders a particularly resilient construct where the artisan remains entrenched as a rigid categorization. This is the construct of craft as heritage and tradition.

Craft production as a manifestation of heritage and tradition has tended to serve the interests of nation-state building, or nationalism in general, and it is especially salient in the literature about Indian craftsmanship.⁹ During the late colonial period, the notion of craft as symbolizing heritage and tradition was influenced by conditions emanating from the advent of industrialization in Europe. The separation of work from other spheres of life along with the alienation of worker from his work, offered fertile ground for the categorization of “artisan” as the anti-thesis of industrial labor or the proletariat (Mollona 2009; Thompson 1963, 1980). The Arts and Crafts movement, beginning in Britain in the nineteenth century by the efforts of writers, poets and activists, was a reaction to and condemnation of the worker’s alienation. In turn, the movement also romanticized non-industrial work, and in particular, the plight of the Indian artisan was taken up as a cause for concern among the movement’s proponents (Venkatesan 2009). Ananda Coomaraswamy, who was actively involved in the Arts and Crafts movement, produced numerous written works on South Asian art that captured the pre-Independence nationalist view of the synonymy between crafts and the nation. His plea was that the Indian craftsman must not only be saved from the prospect of extinction due to colonial policies and the onslaught of modernity—which were held in

stark opposition to traditional values—but the artisan should also be upheld as representative and symbol of India as a nation (Coomaraswamy 1909).

Coomaraswamy portrayed artisans as carriers of an authentic image of India, one that is predominantly rural, Hindu and uncorrupted by colonial modernity (see also Inden 1990; Mohsini 2011). In particular, he viewed traditional Indian crafts as specifically bound to caste society, which symbolized a kind of organic solidarity (Greenough 1996: 232–3). For him, and for his ideological successors and contemporary craft revivalists, “Indian craft ... [is] timeless, materializing, not an individual’s vision but a community’s, indeed an entire nation’s” (Venkatesan 2009: 80). In the postcolonial era of development and modernization, the state has continued to adopt, in its policy agenda, the “craft-as-heritage” notion with its inherent allusions to authenticity (cf. Lindholm 2008). For instance, the preamble of a comprehensive manual detailing programs for artisanal development in India, published by the Ministry of Textiles in 2007, states that handicraft “started as part time activity in rural areas.” Greenough contends that it is village industries—which resonate with popular ideals of an authentic India—that have featured prominently in the government’s successive five-year plans, and been “allowed to persevere more or less unmolested by industrial competition” (1996: 243).

From the anti-colonial struggles up to recent efforts to manage India’s economic liberalization, artisans have been etched into the nation’s imagination as in need of being saved or revived from the haunting specter of radical change. Perhaps with the hegemony of “free market” ideology and the rise of export-oriented production (see Ong 2006), the rigid category of the artisan is reinforced and reified by its commercial appeal to both domestic and overseas buyers. Ethnic chic, fair trade, and “lifestyle” shopping are all variations of a commercial, and also developmental, impetus that construct narratives of authenticity, projecting certain “types” of people (artisans) who produce certain “types” of things (Indian handicrafts) to fulfil a hybrid desire for modern-traditional consumption. Similarly, tourism, civil society and government programs have in many ways reified the closely related categories of artisan, heritage and tradition (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). The artisan becomes a mere symbol of traditional values in the face of modernity and globalization. Meanwhile the artisan as worker, as a producer embedded in local and global economic structures and social relations, is overlooked in this discourse.

Victim

In parallel to this vision of the artisan as purveyor of authenticity and traditional values is an equally essentializing notion of the artisan as victim, or

as a member of an exploited small-scale industry (Kak 2003; Scrase 2003). Again, if we look to Coomaraswamy and the influences of the nineteenth century European Arts and Crafts movement, both condemned the alienation of the worker, and especially artisans, due to colonialism, industrialization and mechanization. In these early writings, the figure of the artisan became a symbol of the struggle between tradition and modernity, and it was the prospect of the exploited, alienated artisan-worker along with a dying crafts industry that invigorated the rhetoric of anti-colonial sentiment. Indeed, Gandhi's *swadeshi* or self-reliance movement was premised on the effort to free India from colonial exploitation, and it was the handloom weaving industry that was seen as the most damaged by colonial-capitalist interventions.¹⁰ According to the narrative, the heavy extraction of raw materials from India to Britain bolstered the latter's industrial capacity and Britain's textile industry experienced rapid growth in cities like Leeds and Manchester. Meanwhile India's handloom weavers struggled to cope with the influx of cheap textiles from colonizer to colony; weavers abandoned their trade and often joined the ranks of industrial factory workers. However, recent historical work on the handloom industry paints a different picture from this dominant narrative of exploitation and decline. Economic historian Tirthankar Roy writes that the assumed high costs of industrialization seem to be undermined by the survival of "several hundred thousand handloom weavers" in India. Roy considers that "[b]y the end of the nineteenth century, not only had a large number of weavers survived competition from British cloth, they were also investing in new tools and processes" (2002: 507, 508).¹¹

Contemporary anthropological scholarship on artisans in India also tends to emphasize the disenfranchisement of workers, and the threats to livelihoods from the forces of global capitalism. To give one example, Peter Knorringa (1999) examines Agra's leather footwear artisans and the threats faced by this unregulated, informal industry. Knorringa notes that before the 1990s—when India's economy was less open to export and foreign investment—the footwear industry functioned quite effectively within a home-based and small workshop economy. Since India's market reforms and liberalization during the 1990s, leather workers have been adversely affected by competition from mass produced plastic footwear and have experienced the loss of markets. As a result of such threats, fewer workshops are in operation and artisans are forced into overcrowded home-based production, where wages are meager and employment is not secure. The artisans in Knorringa's study are indeed agents who are forced to adapt to rapidly changing economic conditions—and not mere relics of a bygone age, as feared by those who promote the craft as heritage discourse. However, as the study's focus is on economic marginalization, artisans are portrayed as victims of an increasingly *laissez-faire* system, with little agency to shape their worlds. How do artisans (re)

engage with processes of learning, skill acquisition and accomplishment (cf. Marchand 2001) under tough circumstance? How do artisans (re)conceive their lives as sites of struggle and what forms of everyday acts serve to overcome or succumb to daily trials? How do ongoing dialogue and debates recast understandings of culture and belonging (Smith 1999), and what role does travel and mobility serve to (re)constitute their economic, social, and cultural lives (Marsden 2008)? These questions are often elided when narrowly perceiving artisans only as victims.

The point here is not to rewrite history or deny the detrimental effects of colonial and neoliberal policies on craft communities. Instead my point is to question and deconstruct the ways in which the category of the artisan has become a static symbol of the nation or a narrowly conceived victim of hegemonic economic changes by way of the resilient binary that I have discussed in this section: craft as heritage versus craft as exploitative small-scale industry.¹² While these studies are insightful in their own right, they do not problematize the local meanings of the category nor do they fully account for the changing claims that people make about the positions they inhabit in relation to social and economic contingencies. Without critically questioning the broad category of artisan in our framing of the analysis, we miss the ambiguity and tenuousness that inflects people's everyday experiences of work. For instance, new questions can be foregrounded when the stability of "artisan" is challenged. For instance, what are the processes that one undergoes to *know* that one is an artisan? Does one remain an artisan all throughout one's life? Is it possible to become a non-artisan even while doing handicraft? Insights into these questions can be excavated from detailed ethnography that takes into account, as Talib notes, both the experiences and expressions that workers use to articulate their relationship to various kinds of work.

Before presenting such ethnographic accounts, I will briefly discuss, in the next section, the local meanings of "labor" in the context of Old Delhi. Following this discussion I will provide two ethnographic accounts of embroidery workers' occupational trajectories as they move between inhabiting the categories of artisan and labor.

Who is "labor"? A note on local meanings

In the broader Indian context, the term "mazdoor" (or "majdoor") is regularly translated as "worker" (see Talib 2010: 257). Many trade unions in India employ the term in their organizations' names: Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union is a jute mill workers union; Hind Mazdoor Kisan Panchayat is the

India Workers Peasant's Council; and Hind Mazdoor Sabha is the Workers Assembly of India. However, in this chapter I choose to interpret the term as "labor" for a number of reasons. Firstly, the term "worker" is often conceived in relation to industrial work, thus making it—especially within Marxist and trade unionist discourses—a politically cohesive category that denotes an element of proletarian collective consciousness. In the context of craft work in Old Delhi I want to avoid such connotations because embroidery workers (and here I use the term in its more generic form) are indeed not organized nor do they express an overt political consciousness as "workers." Secondly, in translating *mazdoor* as labor, I want to emphasize the distinction between what Arendt calls *animal laborans* and *homo faber*, or the separation between the labor of our bodies and the work of our hands (1958: 85). The embodiment of labor, also conceived of as toil where the body experiences hardship, is a critical aspect in the constitution of the *mazdoor*. Thirdly, and on a more ethnographic note, my informants would sometimes interchange the English word "labor" and *mazdoor* to reference a locally constituted hierarchy of work. Many would often go to Seemapur, which I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, or other peripheral areas in Delhi to source cheap labor.

In considering the question of who is labor, therefore, I must first clarify the context in which the term is used. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, my fieldwork was conducted among embroidery workers, primarily in Old Delhi. The embroidery workers I knew had long family histories in the industry, often spanning four to five generations. Many had been settled in Old Delhi for this length of time, while others had settled relatively more recently, often from Agra or Bareilly, but still came from families that had passed on the skills of *zardozi*. My informants explained that because they had long association with craft, and because they had trained either within the family or with master artisans for many years that they were real, authentic (*asli*) artisans (*karigar*). They felt that they were accomplished in their knowledge and practice, and that they really understood how to produce work of the highest quality. As one of my informants told me, "real craftsmanship (*asli karigar*) is about *understanding*, not just about *doing*."

In the context of the *zardozi* industry in Old Delhi, the connotations of being labor, or *mazdoor*, are akin to the anti-thesis of how the *asli karigar* (real artisan) is constituted. If one is deemed to be a "*mazdoor*" this typically characterizes someone who is not skilled to a high level in the craft. Being "labor" also often implies a transient relationship to the craft—the *mazdoor* who enters the trade does not have a family connection or history of doing this kind of work. The stereotypical *mazdoor* is usually a male migrant, and especially in Old Delhi, often comes from the eastern states such as Bihar, West Bengal or Uttar Pradesh to find any kind of work in order to send back money to his family or sometimes to pay off a debt (cf. Breman 1996). In some cases

the laborer, usually a young boy, may be left at a workshop, often by a relative, and will then proceed to learn the trade. However, in these situations, the period of apprenticeship usually lasts an average of six months and the level of skill acquired is usually just enough to do basic hand embroidered work made for the mass produced market. These young apprentices learn a version of embroidery known as *hathari*, which requires less learning time than *zardozi*. This kind of work carries a stigma and is considered sub-standard by those who are known as and consider themselves to be real artisans. However, as I discuss later in the chapter, those who initially begin as (often migrant) labor subvert such categorizations to become regarded as artisans. But even this may not be the end of the story as many revert again to being considered “labor.”

Occupational trajectories and life-courses: Two ethnographic sketches

Najma

Najma lives and works in Old Delhi. She belongs to the largely Muslim occupational group, or *biradari*, known as Ansari. This *biradari*, a term that is akin to “internal caste-like stratification” (Harriss-White 2004: 144) encompasses a wide range of artisans associated with textile production, including embroiderers. Najma is a skilled *zardozi* worker, meaning that she has learned metallic embroidery work from her mother and maternal and paternal aunts.¹³ Like many women who have inherited the skill Najma considered herself to be a real artisan, or an “*asli karigar*.” However, this is not a story about how Najma became an *asli karigar*, but instead this is a story of how she became “labor” and what the concept of labor means for her, and others who are in similar positions. This may seem like an inversion of the narrative that first one commits one’s unskilled labor to learning a craft through apprenticeship methods and then one becomes a skilled artisan who is capable of teaching others. But as I will argue in this chapter, Najma’s story of becoming labor sheds light not only on the nuances of both terms—artisan and labor—but also on how contemporary economic changes have made such categories a flexible and fluid part of every life for those who have acquired a craft skill.

Najma’s story that is fairly typical of how many women (and some men, although the trend is more prevalent among women) experience the process of becoming labor even though they may come from a family skilled in the craft for generations. After completing tenth grade at the local government school, Najma started learning the craft at the age of fifteen from her

maternal aunt (*khala*). The craft of zardozi has been passed down in the family for generations, mostly through women.¹⁴ All of the women in Najma's extended family knew how to do zardozi, but in her generation, some male cousins had also learned the craft. Najma was proud of the fact that she had not been initially trained in hathari, but instead became very good at doing "*haath ka kaam*," or hand work, which implies learning real or "*asl*" zardozi. From the age of fifteen till about forty-five, when I met Najma, she had been producing on-and-off from home.

But throughout Najma's time as a skilled zardozi worker, she has not always referred to herself nor been thought of as an "artisan." The period when she felt like and considered herself to be an artisan was when she effectively became a "middleman." The shift from home-based work—a topic I will return to later in the chapter—to going out and producing without intermediaries occurred when she successfully obtained a government issued artisan ID card, which recognized her as a skilled craftsperson. With this identity card, she was eligible to display goods and sell directly to consumers at government sponsored exhibitions and fairs, such as Dilli Haat, a popular venue in Delhi where artisans from all over India showcase their crafts for a two week rotation period.¹⁵ Najma received her ID card in 1994—soon after Dilli Haat had opened—but then, unlike today, the application process was tedious and Najma had to travel 170 kilometers north of Delhi, to Rourkee, in the present-day state of Uttarkhand in order to apply for the card. Regardless of the cost and distance, Najma was dedicated to procuring this card because she knew it could potentially open many doors for her as an officially recognized artisan. There are two important incentives to having an artisan ID card: Najma was eligible to exhibit zardozi products at government-run venues and she could submit an embroidered piece for either the state or national award scheme, also sponsored and funded by the government. The ID card therefore officially recognizes and promotes skilled artisans and simultaneously creates what it means to be a "skilled artisan."

Thus, Najma pooled together her resources and became a small-scale producer.¹⁶ This meant that she procured the raw materials and design templates independently, usually by going to the various wholesale markets in Old Delhi, such as Nai Sarak and Kinnari Bazaar—well-known places for buying materials for zardozi work, such as metallic wires, semi-precious stones and pre-made design sheets (*khaka*). Moreover, she was also in a position by that time to outsource some production to other artisans, whom she referred to as her labor. She told me that during her days as a "middleman," the labor that she employed for outsourcing work tended to be unreliable and would often "get up to no good" ("*nakhray karte hain*"). This manner of talking about labor was quite common among people who had perhaps once been in a similar position themselves—the position of

doing labor-work or *mazdoori kaam*—but who had managed to diversify their activities so that they were no longer at the bottom of the production chain and more importantly, were no longer “labor.” Najma maintained her independence and status as a real artisan for a few years; however, at the behest of her teenage sons and husband, she went back to working from home once her government issued ID card had expired. It was from this point on that Najma returned to the domain of being “labor” (*mazdoor*), a position that she had also inhabited before she obtained her artisan ID card, when she felt like and was considered to be an “artisan.”

Becoming labor, or returning to being labor, marked an important point in Najma’s life. For many years prior to being a real artisan—that period when she sourced both materials and workers (labor) to make her zardozi products—Najma had done home-based piece-work for a middleman; she had considered herself as labor at that time as well. Now she was again in the position of being labor, doing low-quality piece-work for low wages. Although Najma is a highly skilled artisan, at various times in her life she has presented herself as labor due to the nature of the work she was given and her positionality vis-à-vis the chain of production. Although she gained independence and perhaps a certain status as a real artisan through her connections with government schemes—which of course enabled a high degree of control over her own production process—this was short-lived and she returned to home-based production.

Atif

With the prevalence of cheap, low-quality work in the zardozi industry, many who are considered to be real, authentic artisans mark themselves apart from people who produce low-quality work. A distinct social stratification emerges based on meanings of cultural capital. Urban residents, and especially those with a known family history linked to former centers of Muslim power—urban centers like Delhi, Agra, Bareilly, Calcutta, Saharanpur—leverage this cultural capital against those perceived to be their inferiors, namely rural Muslims. It is rural Muslim workers, whether skilled or unskilled, who are labelled as “labor” (*mazdoor*). In addition, with rapid urbanization and increased migration into cities, it is migrants, usually young boys and men who come from villages, who are also referred to as “labor.” The stigma of doing low quality, *hathari* work is largely associated with migrants and rural workers. However, coming to Old Delhi does not necessarily mean that one remains labor or that after becoming a skilled artisan one does not return to being labor. Much like Najma’s story—except in reverse order—Atif’s illustrates the tenuousness and flexibility of these categories.

Atif came to Old Delhi from a village in Bihar and began as an apprentice in a workshop located off one of the main bazaar roads in the old city. This workshop is adjacent to a well-known retail shop that specializes in elaborate and heavily embroidered wedding outfits. What is unique about this business is that all the embroidery work is done on the premise as opposed to being outsourced. The workshop consists of a large room that accommodates about six large wooden rectangular frames on which embroidery work is done. The walls of the workshop are a dull blue-grey color and the old age of the building can be seen in the deteriorated state of the walls and ceiling. Shelves have been built along the length of the walls and contain piles of material, plastic bags full of beads and sequins, scissors of varying sizes, and a collection of empty plastic teacups. The room is lit with a few tube lights, but these mostly remain switched off during the day, since the street-facing wall is entirely made up of windows. The bustle of the street is a constant source of noise in the workshop. On most occasions when I visited the workshop, four or five young boys would be seated around each wooden frame. There were usually two older men seated next to each other doing "real" zardozi, while most of the younger boys would be doing hathari work. The bulk of production in the workshop consisted of *lehngas*, *saris* and *shalwar* suits, which would then be sold in the shop next door.

Most of the young boys who worked in the workshop had migrated from two or three villages in Bihar and a few came from an area near the West Bengal-Bihar border. The two older men were the workshop's resident master artisans, who would also teach the boys the skills. One had come from the adjacent state of Uttar Pradesh while the other was from Old Delhi. Beyond the purview of the master artisans and the workshop owner, many of the young boys and men I encountered expressed their sense of camaraderie when it came to describing their work environment. Some told me that it was like living in a hostel at college, because at night they slept right there in the workshop. Sunday was their day off, and the boys would often head out as a group to play cricket or watch a film.

One of the more talkative and boisterous young men in the workshop was Atif, who was known as the "hero" of the workshop. He often teased the other younger (and older) boys and would make sexually explicit jokes with his peers, but only in the absence of the owner. He had come from an area on the Bihar-West Bengal border called Sitamohi.¹⁷ In addition to speaking Urdu, he also spoke Bengali. He was twenty-five years old at the time of my fieldwork and had already been in Delhi for twelve years working in various workshops across the city. His family in Bihar were farmers and he had been brought to Delhi by a relative so that he could earn money to send back to the family. Atif's story of arriving in Delhi was quite typical of many migrants I spoke with during my fieldwork. The story goes that some relative, perhaps an uncle or

cousin, would travel to Delhi in search of work and either be “recruited” at the train station by someone from a workshop—a practice, I was told, that was common ten or fifteen years ago, when labor was in shortage—or he would arrive in Old Delhi and ask around for who was looking for work. Those from Bihar often preferred to look for work in Old Delhi because this was known to be one of the few “Muslim” parts of Delhi, an important point of consideration since all of the immigrants from Bihar and West Bengal I met were Muslim. The relative who had initially come to the city would make one or two trips a year back to the village in Bihar and use the opportunity to bring other members of the extended family to Delhi in order to work for a wage. This is how Atif came to work in Old Delhi, initially as migrant labor.¹⁸

Prior to working in Delhi, Atif had no knowledge of the craft and was put to work as an apprentice under a skilled artisan, or *ustad*. He first learned to do *hathari*, but because he was a quick learner, the *ustad* also taught him *zardozi*. When I met Atif, he was considered quite skilled and even taught some of the younger boys how to do *hathari* work. Atif’s story, however, was met with tragedy. After some years of working in Delhi as a boy, he went back to Bihar to get married. He was married to his wife for just a year, when she suddenly died. Atif told me that he was so distressed that he decided to leave his village and return to Delhi to work. The second time he came to Delhi he did not find the kind of work he wanted to do so he moved to Bombay. He had heard that in Bombay there were many more opportunities to work in *zardozi* workshops that require highly skilled artisans. He ended up working in a workshop that produced clothing designed by the famous Indian designer, Manish Malhotra, who was known to dress many Bollywood actors and actresses.

After spending over a year in Bombay, Atif came back to Delhi because he decided to open his own workshop in New Delhi with a friend who was also from Bihar. They decided they wanted to produce for the export market, so they saved up some money and had even chosen the space that they would turn into a workshop. Unfortunately the deal went sour—Atif did not explain the details—and I got the impression that he felt embarrassed by the incident. However, Atif told me with confidence that once they have made enough money again, they will open an export workshop. It is likely that had Atif opened his workshop and began producing for the export market, which while lucrative is often associated with low-quality work, he would have gone back to the category of labor from having been an artisan.

Atif’s story, like Najma’s, is not an uncommon narrative about the ways in which people navigate various positionalities with regard to their working lives. By looking at their life and occupational trajectories we get a sense of how the categories of artisan and labor are flexible; at multiple times in a person’s life, they can be labor or artisan. Thus, while it was common for

highly skilled artisans to refer to those with less skill or those who produce *chalu* work as merely labor, sometimes many of these skilled artisans would themselves become or be perceived as labor, engaging in “labor-work” (*mazdoori kaam*), like Shafiq, who I introduced at the beginning of the chapter. The point when an artisan becomes labor and does labor-work as opposed to “real work” (*suchcha kaam* or *asli kaam*) is often correlated with their position vis-à-vis the wider economy and hierarchy of production. The stories of both Najma and Atif point to this distinction: When one becomes labor one loses independence and is merely given work to do. Their experiences as “artisans” on the other hand entailed a certain amount of control over their work—as an officially recognized artisan Najma travelled to craft fairs to showcase her work and she also essentially became a “middleman”; Atif was able find employment in a famous designer’s workshop.

Conclusion

The philosopher Ian Hacking writes that “we constitute ourselves at a place and time ... in quite specific, local and historical ways” (2004: 3). With this in mind, the primary aim of this chapter has been to foreground such locally specific and internally differentiated ways that people engaged in craft work inhabit multiple positionalities, sometimes conflicting, over the course of their working careers. Beginning with the insights of Rancière (1989) who challenges the stability of the category of the “artisan” and Talib (2010) who draws attention to the homogenizing category of “labor,” in this chapter I have used their insights to trouble these rigid categories. Who is considered an artisan and who is labor is an ethnographic question, although in much of the literature it has not been treated as such. Instead, “the artisan” has often-times become an over-determined, reified category, which has at varying times served colonial, nationalist, and global capitalist objectives. “Labor,” on the other hand, tends to be singularly associated with unskilled work. Instead of taking these categories as a pre-existing social fact, I examined them through an ethnographic lens, foregrounding the spatial, temporal, and historical conditions that made inhabiting multiple positionalities—artisan and labor—possible.

There is no denying that embroidery workers face precarious working conditions. India’s economic liberalization has been a boon to very few in the industry, while the majority survives by traversing the tenuous boundaries that separate the real, *asli* artisan from labor. Both the state and the market are powerful institutions that deeply affect the life- and work-trajectories