

# Women, work and the imagination of craft in South Asia

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**ABSTRACT** *The conditions of production in women's handicrafts are related in complex and contradictory ways to discourses about them. The semblance of tradition and authenticity that surrounds women's craftwork masks the alienated production of handicraft commodities for the market. Indeed, commoditisation and commercialisation depend upon such constructions, just as home-based labour and hand-power, while fully consistent with capitalisation processes, tend to strengthen assertions about the survival of traditional practices in handicraft production. This paper focuses initially on the chikan embroidery production of Lucknow, India. Widely portrayed as a leisure-time activity, embroidery production employs poor, Muslim women workers on piece rates. The embroiderers' distinctiveness is used to shore up primarily urban, middle-class ideals about tradition and heritage that are necessary in order to create demand for handicraft products. Similar discrepancies between what is written about crafts and what it means to make them appear in other women's handicrafts in India. While women are heavily involved in handicraft production, their contribution is often masked by discourses that tend either to ignore or marginalise them, or portray their work as use-value production. Overall, there is very little critical analysis of women's handicrafts. While development projects involving handicrafts have been favoured by the state and non-governmental organisations as low-cost, low-risk interventions, their value is compromised by the persistence of exploitative forms of production.*

If you wear *chikan* [embroidery], you are wearing history ... it is a form of art that has been part of the Indian heritage for centuries. (Vishal Mehra)<sup>1</sup>

Projecting handicrafts into an imagined history is not unusual in the popular and even academic literature on crafts in South Asia. What is surprising is the comparative scarcity of anthropological or historical accounts that take a more critical approach, not only to the understanding of South Asian handicrafts as economic activity, but also to the kind of rhetoric that has arisen around them.

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Texts on handicrafts are remarkably rich sources for studying the articulation and expression of themes like tradition, authenticity and identity. Conditions of production in these handicraft industries, moreover, are related in complex and contradictory ways to discourses about them. It is not enough simply to look at the production and consumption of ideas as they themselves do not become truly meaningful until they are connected to the productive conditions and relations that underlie (and contradict) them.

This paper focuses on the construction of women's handicraft production. Using insights drawn variously from socialist-feminist and Marxist-feminist theory, it argues that the cultural value of women's work depends upon, and at the same time denies, the alienated production of handicraft commodities for the market. The paper starts with an example drawn from my own research on *chikan* embroidery production in Lucknow, India,<sup>2</sup> where analysis of the relationship between productive conditions and discourse provides a model and framework for the examination of other women's crafts.

### **A case in point: *chikan* embroidery in Lucknow**

*Chikan* is a major manufacturing industry in the city of Lucknow, located in north India, with an output made up mostly of embroidered garments. *Chikan* is made in stages. Male workers dominate all the stages but the embroidery itself, where over 90% of workers are Muslim women.<sup>3</sup> Female embroiderers are differentiated primarily in terms of skill. Inside the old city and in well-established *mohallas* (neighbourhoods) on the north bank of the river that transects Lucknow, a small number (less than one hundred or two hundred in all) of women make embroidery fine enough to have won state and central government awards for excellence in craftsmanship. Highly skilled embroiderers know many stitches, and they use complex mental and manual abilities to design and execute embroidery. They conceive of *chikan* in a completely different way from the low-skilled, deploying their knowledge and ability in a way not at all unlike the craftspeople whose integrated skills gave way to the fragmented labour processes of the European industrial revolution. None, however, relies solely upon sale of fine work to make a living: demand for fine work is a small component of the market, and is subordinated to forms of embroidery that can be rapidly mass-produced. This kind of work is entirely controlled by independent traders and shopkeepers, who pay piecework wages to craftspeople at all stages of production of *chikan*. Low-skilled women, who make up the vast majority of embroiderers,<sup>4</sup> learn to make one stitch only, an instance of de-skilling that is consistent with the intensification of production for a mass-market. The latter are relatively new to the industry, whereas the highly skilled have family histories of embroidering going back two to three generations, as far as the time when men (who remain a small minority of *chikan* embroiderers today) dominated the ranks of fine embroiderers. Embroidery knowledge is kept within families, and so the low skilled have few social opportunities to come into contact with, still less learn, higher level skills. Yet the core of skilled embroiderers' subsistence

come from subcontracting cheap work (using one kind of stitch) to women with lesser skills than their own, either in the neighbourhood, or in more far-flung communities.

Taking no account of these social variables—of which they are certainly not unaware—embroidery traders (those who coordinate production and sell the final product) persistently describe the work of all female embroiderers as ‘free-time’ labour, intrinsically incapable of rising to the heights of professionally-made (i.e. literally ‘man’-made *chikan*). They are not alone in this view; it is encountered among middle-class residents of Lucknow of all kinds, as well as government officials, and is printed in the pages of books and magazines about *chikan*. Its apparent plausibility stems from several distinct but related discourses about craft, women, and Lucknow itself: crafts have been corrupted by modernity and the market; contemporary Muslim, female embroiderers are incapable of matching their predecessors in the quality of their work; and Lucknow has undergone an absolute decline in its status as a cultural and artistic centre.

### *Chikan and the past*

Lucknow *chikan* is a visually distinct form of whitework embroidery in India,<sup>5</sup> and is the one of the most important industries of the city. But, just as Lucknow is described as a city in decline (sapped by the politic and physical devastation of the 1857 Uprising, and the later loss of its cultural elite to Pakistan in 1947), so too is *chikan* regarded as a debased art form. Embroidery is portrayed in mass-market books, tourist brochures, internet websites and even some academic volumes as a craft whose beginnings were intimately connected with the city’s celebrated past. Few of the stories of *chikan* embroidery’s origin can be positively dated (much less substantiated), but all seem to have been in existence by the middle of the twentieth century at a time when embroidery production was moving rapidly toward the completion of a significant labour restructuring through the recruitment of female workers. The stories with the greatest popular appeal are those that tell of *chikan*’s royal origins, alluding to aristocratic women (not men) as the originators of *chikan*. In one version, the Empress Nur Jahan (or Mumtaz Mahal) arranged for an industry to be formed just to recreate in stitchcraft the stonework tracery of Persian monuments.<sup>6</sup> In another version, a bored woman of the royal *zenana* (women’s quarters) in Murshidabad (located in present-day West Bengal) invented *chikan* as a hobby for herself.<sup>7</sup> If, in the former case, Nur Jahan is at least credited with creating a genuine industry, in the latter story *chikan* is transformed into a domestic pastime of women with no commercial associations at all. In both cases, however, the emphasis is upon elite, privileged originators intimately connected with the courtly life and society of pre-colonial India. The choice of female lead actors in these dramas of origin is significant. Women perhaps escaped the disapproval directed toward the decadence and indolence of court life by their being the accepted consumers of elaborate finery (a privilege lately inherited by contemporary middle-class women).

The ubiquity of the stories of the courtly origin of *chikan* in popular literature is no doubt related to the portrayal of Lucknow as a tourist destination, and *chikan* as a commodity, permitting the consumer the vicarious enjoyment of the privileged existence of India's erstwhile rulers. Some writers even project the beginnings of *chikan* back to the times of Hindu kings of classical Indian history, disavowing its Muslim roots altogether.<sup>8</sup> But these are exceptions to the general rule that *chikan* is associated with the high watermark of *nawabi* (kingly) rulership in India. Consumers are invited to enjoy the pleasures of courtly life in wearing *chikan* that makes 'you feel like a queen. Really, the great thing about this form of embroidery is that it never goes out of fashion. It suits women of all ages and strata of society. It is timeless!'<sup>9</sup> Or, to quote designer Vishal Mehra, who began his studies in Hyderabad then moved to Lucknow: 'I studied in one *nawabi* city, and work in another ... for me, ornate styling is a skill that comes naturally'.<sup>10</sup> Designer Ritu Kumar's webpage says of *chikan*: 'introduced to the Mughal court by Empress Nur Jahan this delicate embroidery traditionally done with white thread on white muslin creates a lacy effect on the diaphanous material'.<sup>11</sup> All of these remarks seem to assure the consumer that they can rely upon the supplier to sell them products that appropriately reflect the good taste of India's former rulers and art patrons.

Such texts appear to stress that one does not simply happen upon *chikan* of this degree of quality; instead, it must be discovered and revived. Despite its noble roots, the craft has become debased through the intrusion of modern tastes and lifestyles, as well as by Lucknow's cultural decline. Now, only enlightened critics and designers can revitalise *chikan*. As stated on Kumar's site: 'With the revival of forgotten stitches such as *tepci*, *ghas ki patti* and *bijli* the collection wafts across like a zephyr from long forgotten times'.<sup>12</sup> An article in the prominent Indian newspaper *The Hindu* describes designers Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla as having saved *chikan* from 'oblivion'<sup>13</sup> in the late 1980s. Several websites devoted to Indian fashion designers Meera and Muzaffar Ali (an architect and film director by profession, respectively) echo this theme:

Through a decade of detailing and upgrading craft of Lucknow and Kotwara, Meera and Muzaffar Ali have brought a centuries old tradition back to life.<sup>14</sup>

Meera and Muzaffar Ali made *Chikan* embroidery hot on the Indian ramps. Along the way, they saved the art, and artists, from dying an anonymous death.<sup>15</sup>

And yet the rush to revive *chikan* is not an innovation of the past 10 or even 20 years. Through training programmes, production schemes, and award competitions, the central and Uttar Pradesh state governments have been reviving *chikan* since 1947.<sup>16</sup>

In each generation, the struggle to salvage *chikan* from its condition of decline is invented anew, with previous efforts apparently forgotten. That the revival is never complete obviously has much to do with the each new discoverer's disregard for previous efforts. Fashion designers, for example, set themselves up as saviours of *chikan* in seeming defiance of a previous generation of folklorists

and scholars more strongly associated with state handicrafts programmes.<sup>17</sup> At present, independent claims of salvage and revival reflect competitive marketing among new entrepreneurs and designers using *chikan* in their fashion lines, each claiming a unique insight and relationship to the embroidery. No matter the context, in almost every instance government officials, textiles experts, fashion designers and others say they have discovered something that is (in their view) evidently unknown and unseen by embroiderers (or indeed by anyone else) in benighted Lucknow. All of these figures promoting revival offer to consumers the certainty of setting themselves apart from the mass of commodity consumers through obtaining the best and most distinct *chikan*. Guarantees, however, can only come from discerning, creative actors who are not at all like the women who do their work for them.

Discovery implies concealment. Patronage and enlightened design either locate the hitherto unknown (and unknowing) embroidering genius, or have to produce it. Because the patron's special knowledge or the designer's intelligence must be acknowledged and reproduced, re-affirming the class difference between patron or designer and embroiderer, so the embroiderer is typically said to need guidance in the production of quality *chikan*. Unsurprisingly, there is no pretence that the makers of contemporary *chikan* are the same genteel aristocrats who supposedly made it in the past. Instead, one finds once again the allusion to the tragedy of decline in Lucknow culture and society:

It [*chikan*] is not only a craft ... it is also an occupation, which keeps the kitchen fire burning in old city homes. The artisans are mainly craftswomen who work behind the *purdah* in their homes unlike ... years ago when master craftsmen embedded muslin with pure gold threads. The finely embroidered muslin came to be closely associated with the *nawabi* culture. The *chikan* ... tradition gradually filtered into the midst of common people.<sup>18</sup>

The versions of *chikan*'s origin offered by embroiderers, as well as those with the widest scholarly currency, contain quite different elements. Two stories of origin told to me by embroiderers situate *chikan* firmly in Lucknow. Neither makes any mention of the life of the court and the aristocracy. One story recounts the visit of angels to teach *chikan* embroidery to a man whose family continues to work in the embroidery industry today.<sup>19</sup> Another speaks of a washerman making the first embroidery by embellishing a cap after having washed it. The entrenchment of *chikan* among working people and its importance as an income source is brought to the fore in these stories. Significantly, in both these cases, the principal actors are male. However, neither story has a wide currency, nor are they encountered outside the milieu of the embroiderers themselves.

Textile scholars are most likely to attribute *chikan*'s appearance in Lucknow to the influx in the late eighteenth century of skilled male embroiderers from Bengal, a vigorous embroidery centre in its own right.<sup>20</sup> Gone from this version is any shred of the romance and glamour of the royal stories. Instead, we encounter a world of male professionals working to contract, albeit at a high

standard. Unsurprisingly, this version fails to appear in much of the popular literature or is told by embroiderers. Whatever the validity of this version, it does have the advantage of embracing an image of *chikan* as an industry, stories of Mughal queens and concubines notwithstanding.

Some nineteenth-century accounts suggest that Lucknow *chikan* was not made by embroiderers for their personal use, but primarily, if not exclusively, for exchange.<sup>21</sup> The differentiation of fine from cheap work was evident well over 100 years ago. William Hoey's account of northern Indian industries and George Watt's catalogue of the 1903 Delhi handicrafts exhibit some 20 years later allude to women (and children) as the makers of cheap work, meaning that all other workers, by default, must have been men.<sup>22</sup> Men appear to have made fine work to order in their *karkhanas* (workshops), while women and children worked at home under their direction on cheap piece work, typically containing only one kind of stitch (as the cheapest work does today). Possibly, early female embroiderers were upper-class women whose families fell on hard times following the Uprising of 1857, although whether they were applying a skill previously adapted to use value production or only encountered embroidery as exchange value production is unknown.<sup>23</sup> Fine work was made on a contract basis for an elite local clientele. Aristocratic men, ordering caps and *angarkhas* (long, embroidered coats) were important consumers of fine *chikan*.<sup>24</sup>

Oral accounts and scattered written sources suggest that a critical shift in *chikan* production took place in the 1920s. Workshops closed and embroidery production withdrew into the household, where the labour of male non-relatives was replaced by the cheaper labour of female relatives.<sup>25</sup> It is difficult to determine what caused this labour restructuring; however, that it coincided with a period of global economic depression is suggestive. There is little question that elite consumption declined. Most likely this was the result of a fall in spending power of elite consumers. The success of Mahatma Gandhi's campaign to enshrine *khadi* (homespun cloth) as the cloth and costume of choice for Indians over and above more luxurious textiles also may have dampened interest in *chikan* for at least some of its previous consumers.<sup>26</sup> In any case, elite consumption was not replaced by a growing mass market among Indian middle classes until the latter half of the twentieth century.

In support of this account, contemporary embroiderers report that their grandmothers were the first women in their families to learn to make *chikan*, invariably so as to earn an income. In the cases of the most highly skilled, grandfathers or great-grandfathers who were proficient in embroidery had begun instructing their daughters instead of their sons in the intricacies of fine work by the mid-twentieth century. Male embroiderer numbers have dwindled dramatically throughout the past 50 years or so. Some continue to work as agents, streaming piecework to their womenfolk, while others have moved into new occupations entirely. Accompanying, and probably driving this transformation, was the expansion of the market for affordable embroidered garments among the middle classes, and the loss of demand for expensive, labour-intensive, fine work. Since the 1970s, the continuing shift from fine to

cheap work can be seen in the replacement of more complex forms of work that use several stitches (collectively known as *murri*) by the simple and ubiquitous *bakhya* (a kind of reverse herringbone stitch). Indeed, *bakhya* has become the default *chikan* for most consumers, affirming to critics, old and new, the degeneracy of product, producer, and buyer.<sup>27</sup>

### *The female embroiderer*

The shift from male embroiderers to female embroiderers from the 1930s onwards is not part of *chikan* general knowledge. However, it is an often-repeated story among embroiderers, traders and government officials connected with embroidery development schemes. From a Marxist-feminist standpoint, what has happened is labour force restructuring, although no one outside of the embroidering community expresses it this way. Instead, it is regarded as an inevitable correlate of the decline of Lucknow, a cultural tragedy with no economic dimensions whatever.

Luckily, feminist research on household labour (also known as home-based work) allows us to penetrate this rhetorical fog. Cross-cultural studies collected in volumes written over the past 15 years reveal commonalities in home-based work and household subcontracting that apply with equal force to *chikan*.<sup>28</sup> Since women are home-based workers, their embroidery is regarded by men and officialdom as one of a range of subsistence practices. In contrast, male workers in the *chikan* industry are typically found in publicly accessible workplaces and the status of their work—as work—is unchallenged. Female workers execute the stage of production that makes the final product distinct, but they are rendered invisible because their efforts are not acknowledged in socially sanctioned ways. Their invisibility is compounded by cultural rules governing male–female interaction that limit the latter’s public participation in the work process. Female embroiderers are constrained to some degree or another by the demands of *pardah* (seclusion from, or veiling in front of, non-related men). Most women depend upon agents, the majority of whom are men, to bring work to them (a service for which a substantial portion of the wage may be extracted).

Publicly, debasement of the work and the worker can be framed in two ways: embroiderers are either naïve and ignorant, or they lack taste and discernment. In the first instance, portraying *chikan* as a domestic pastime rooted in the glorious days when Lucknow was ruled by *nawabs* (king, ruler; title of rulers of the province of Awadh) but that is now ripe for revival by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), government institutions and private designers, depends upon the public construction of a sequestered and simple embroiderer who needs to be told what to do. She unself-consciously practices a domestic art inherited without break from a remote, courtly ancestor, but now corrupted by commercialism. Even the highly skilled must be brought under the wings of sophisticated designers and development agents. Attempting to oppose this received wisdom does the highly skilled embroiderer little good. Officially, they are positioned as mere technicians who execute the designer or developer’s vision.

Unofficially, they are dismissed as uncouth harridans, unlike the putative originators of *chikan* in both their manners and their lifestyle. Even if they have the skills, the embroiderers' social position and cultural tastes indicate to the middle and upper classes that they lack the distinction to create art of the best kind.<sup>29</sup>

Significantly, when embroiderers appear in advertising or marketing media, they are depicted as overtly Muslim women (see Figures 1 and 2). *Chikan* work has been described as 'a hereditary craft practiced by the most backward Muslim classes in Lucknow ... [that has today] passed into the hands of the women folk of the backward Muslim communities, an additional labour in ill-lit rooms behind the *pardah*'.<sup>30</sup> The photograph reproduced in Figure 1 is evidently staged, since the embroiderer is shown working on an embroidery that has already been finished.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, portraits of women embroidering while wearing *burqas* (enveloping garments that conceal the body) are inherently odd since embroiderers wear the garment to go outside their homes, and embroidery, as home-based work, is rarely done out of doors. In these instances, the women are wearing *burqas* because they were out of their homes when they were asked to be photographed. However, such practical niceties do not constrain drawings. Why then is a similar situation depicted in the hand-drawn sketch of Figure 2? Like its equivalents in other parts of the world, the *burqa* communicates religious and community identity immediately and uncompromisingly. In 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 *pardah*.

Such portrayals essentially position embroiderers in impossible situations, staged to communicate about women and their work in ways that emphasise their profound connection to tradition. Portrayals of this kind directly sustain middle-class, urban and, ultimately, global stereotypes of heritage. The embroiderer's difference from the viewer is presented here as primarily religious and cultural in nature, rather than socioeconomic and class-based. These depictions entrench notions of embroiderer backwardness, of the guileless and ignorant embroiderer thoughtlessly acquiescent in the debasement of *chikan* work who must be educated in the authentic production of her craft. The result of a century's development of a manufacturing industry in which women have been deployed as the primary labour source for the advantages that their home-based labour provides to capital is reconceived as the retreat into backward homes of an art form once practiced at the highest levels of society.

### **Women in handicraft literature**

The convergence of a particular form of production (home-based production for wages) with a female workforce, and gendered notions of value and skill, is hardly confined to *chikan* embroidery. Given the broad relevance of home-based labour research to *chikan*, one would expect to find the same kinds of discrepancies between production and rhetoric that characterise *chikan* to appear in other



**Figure 1** A photograph of an embroiderer working on a piece of *chikan* (from a brochure on Lucknow published by the Government of India Ministry of Tourism, March 1987).

women's handicrafts in South Asia. To date, comparatively little attention has been paid to the contradictions between what is written about crafts and what it means to make them. The few studies that exist (cited as the argument proceeds in the following) support the contention that what has been described for *chikan* embroidery is by no means unusual in the South Asian setting, although the



**Figure 2** An illustration of an embroiderer that appears in *Lucknow Chikan's Matchless Beauty* (a pamphlet published in Hindi by the now defunct State Government of Uttar Pradesh Export Corporation, undated).

unique circumstances surrounding *chikan* embroidery—specifically, its feminisation—are not necessarily repeated elsewhere. Assuredly, male craftsmen are not immune to the idealisation and distortion of their work.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the gap between what women's craftwork is and what it is projected to be is particularly dramatic. The following section examines the most popular themes surrounding other varieties of women's handicraft production in India:<sup>33</sup> that it is leisure-time, occasional work, non-work or production for own use. It also identifies further instances of the call to rescue and revive handicrafts from decay. My goals here are to show how powerful and prevalent these themes are, and to suggest that, as was seen with *chikan* embroidery, they may systematically conceal complex relations of production.

Although women's involvement with craft is important and profound in South Asia,<sup>34</sup> their specific contributions in many industries are flatly ignored.<sup>35</sup> In handicrafts literature, the default artisan is typically male, and women's work is often overlooked. For instance, a 1957 volume on the arts and crafts of India and Pakistan fails to make any mention of women at all in any handicraft industry, with the single exception of embroidery (even then, more space is given over to accounts of male embroiderers in Kashmir).<sup>36</sup> Women are often described as 'helpers' of male artisans in crafts monographs.<sup>37</sup> For example, an account of pottery making in Gujarat starts by terming it 'a cooperative venture', but goes on to describe women's work of mixing clay, drawing water, rubbing and polishing pots, and painting them, as a form of assistance.<sup>38</sup> A website echoes these remarks: 'with the few turns of the wheel and expert flicks of the hand, village potters mould an ordinary lump of mud into ... well proportioned and useful clay utensils, embellished by their wives with paintings and colourful lines'.<sup>39</sup> Alternatively, women are characterised as 'part-time' workers, occupying their leisure hours on domestic pastimes such as spinning, quilting, and doll making, or making jewellery and weaving palm leaves.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, despite the Indian Census's claim to evenhandedness in accepting either males or females as head of the household, male and female labour are not equally represented.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, censuses in India (and elsewhere) are notorious for their failure to fully

account for female production in any domain.<sup>42</sup> Feminist scholars have repeatedly shown that undercounting women workers derives both from the preconceptions of those who collect official data, and also from the self-presentation of household producers in which female work is continually subordinated to male work.<sup>43</sup>

Of significance is the fact that Indian women (arguably at all levels of society) are primarily conceived of as wives. Defining female crafts workers as dependent homemakers conceals the fact that they are not just wage labourers, but wage labourers whose exploitation is rooted in patriarchal relations and misplaced ideals of domesticity.<sup>44</sup> If wives are dependent upon wage-earning husbands, their own work is invariably considered secondary, petty, and optional. Where crafts production is household based, women are more likely to be relegated to 'ancillary' jobs while men monopolise the 'crucial' jobs—but upon whose determination do such classifications rest?<sup>45</sup> Does women's lower status (and pay) truly reflect their ancillary significance in the labour process, or does the ancillary tag merely justify them? The relegation of women to support roles in production, no matter how cogently the division of labour is expressed, represents their exclusion from forms of knowledge that are monopolised (along with the position of artistic centrality) by men.<sup>46</sup>

When women are explicitly identified as crafts producers apart from men, their work is often described as use-value production (in other words, production for use by self or related others, and not for sale), with a special emphasis upon duty, fecundity and a desire for expression in a harsh world. While men may be constructed as autonomous professionals, women are homemakers and wives above all: 'It is through the comparatively unobtrusive art of embroidery that the Indian housewife gives expression to her innate love of colour and art'.<sup>47</sup> For example, almost the entire embroidery section of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya's 1975 book *Handicrafts of India* focuses on the specifically 'feminine' attributes of embroidery as use-value production: the 'domestic craft [of *phulkari*, a variety of embroidery forms found in contiguous areas of north India and Pakistan] ... can only be a leisure hour occupation, done with devotion and earnestness',<sup>48</sup> while *kasuti* embroidery is praised for its 'soft, womanly angles'.<sup>49</sup> Elsewhere, fleeting references to women producing for exchange fail to counterweight more lengthy discussions of female handicrafts dedicated to use by the family, or for ritual purposes.<sup>50</sup>

A sense of the gulf between these accounts and what can be achieved through an approach guided by critical theory may be gained by comparing Chattopadhyaya's benign account of lace-making in Narsapur, Andhra Pradesh,<sup>51</sup> and Maria Mies' detailed 1982 critique of the very same craft.<sup>52</sup> In keeping with the general intent of her book, Chattopadhyaya refers to lace-making in purely descriptive terms. That women make lace is imputed to an 'interest [that] ... may be traced to their familiarity with making nets'.<sup>53</sup> She remarks, in passing, that 'the agents collect the flowers and pass them on to the assembler on whose imagination and dexterity the success of the final composition rests',<sup>54</sup> but makes no further comment on their relationship. Finally, Chattopadhyaya's comment

that 'Narsapur women proudly boast that they can make 300 designs'<sup>55</sup> suggests a degree of control and autonomy. In Mies's hands, by contrast, lace making is shown to be an exploitative industry that systematically deprives female producers of fair wages and prospects. Mies sketches an elaborate system of subcontracting, hitherto staffed by women, but now increasingly drawing men who can then portray the business of middleman as central and lace-making itself only a secondary element in household production. It cannot be argued that Mies is simply describing an industry that has been subsumed by capitalism since Chattopadhyaya wrote about it, as the former sees its very roots and early development as part of an ongoing process of extraction.<sup>56</sup>

Another craft for which one can find a more complex literature is the Mithila painting of Bihar. Mithila painting is something of an exception, both in practice and in the literature it has generated,<sup>57</sup> to what is generally the case for Indian handicrafts. Elite attention to, and patronage of, Mithila women is relatively unique in the Indian handicrafts world. No other art or craft form has so effectively spanned the barrier between mass-produced craft and the kind of art that crafts connoisseurs and critics seek to promote. By the 1970s, women in Mithila had successfully been encouraged to transpose their wall paintings to paper, in the process creating a kind of handicraft hybrid that has become enormously successful both commercially and artistically. Women continue to make their ritual wall paintings and keep this practice relatively isolated, conceptually and pragmatically, from painting on paper, which is produced only for exchange.<sup>58</sup> A few women have been identified as exemplary painters, and their work has found its way out of India into American homes and galleries.<sup>59</sup> These facts notwithstanding, the nature of creativity, identification and systems of rewards among Mithila painters are ill-understood by outsiders.<sup>60</sup> Even assuming that the collectors and critics of Mithila art have any interest in knowing what it means to its makers, they do not seem to think that the makers have anything to say worth listening to.

In general, women's production for exchange is the most problematic category for handicrafts writers since their not working, merely helping or enjoying a leisurely pastime conforms more readily to ideals about traditional, authentic practice. Wage labour and production for sale is presented as a recent deviation from a base state in which use-value production prevails,<sup>61</sup> making rediscovery and revival a necessity. There is seldom any reflection upon the fact that revival is geared to creating and satisfying a market, and that the women who are being trained to produce crafts for the market no longer embody the ideal of use value production. Instead, attention is directed to the quality of the goods, integrity of the design (guided by enlightened outsiders), and empowerment of women so employed. Still, the assumption that wage labour occupies otherwise empty hours continues: for instance, according to the *Deccan Herald*, a revival of *kasuti* embroidery in the village of Beerwali, north Karnataka, means that 'instead of wasting all their time watching television, [girls] keep themselves busy throughout the day with Kasuti orders'.<sup>62</sup>

In tone and overall philosophy, the work of mainstream crafts scholars has not

been superseded, or even supplemented, by a new wave of critical accounts. Feminist research on women's work in South Asia rarely extends to the analysis of craft, despite assumptions that it surely must. Sustained historical and ethnographic accounts of women's shifting economic engagement with handicrafts production remain frustratingly scarce.<sup>63</sup>

### **Commoditisation and capital**

Contemporary Indian handicraft production based on hand labour and human power gives the appearance of being pre-colonial, even ancient. Upon such appearances have entire policies and programmes of central and state government been founded since India's independence in 1947.<sup>64</sup> A critical appraisal of Delhi's Crafts Museum concludes that '[I]t is evidence of continuity and survival within India's material tradition, rather than innovation, that determines whether an artefact is an acceptable addition to the collection'.<sup>65</sup> Where development in the modern sector was expected to move forward from the point of British disengagement, state patronage of handicrafts was intended to preserve supposedly pre-industrial labour-intensive techniques and methods so as to ensure continued employment in the informal sector.<sup>66</sup> Grafted on to this traditionalist foundation were programmes of the modern state to advertise, market, promote and publicise handicrafts, largely to the benefit of traders and crafts financiers.<sup>67</sup> Literature, some of it published under state auspices, has explicitly lauded the craftsman as the quintessential figure of traditional Indian life. Artisans are portrayed as ignorant of a world outside their own. Their lives are unchanging and their work part of a tradition reaching back to prehistory.<sup>68</sup>

Yet the existence of seemingly archaic forms of production does not mean they resist capitalism, or have not already been assimilated by it. It is vitally important to acknowledge that scarcely any handicraft production in South Asia has been unaffected by commoditisation. While the pace of capitalist intervention in crafts has increased in the past 15 years or so,<sup>69</sup> there is growing evidence that transformations were taking place in 'traditional industries'<sup>70</sup> by the end of the nineteenth century. The possibility that changes were also going on in other crafts is very strong. For example, from its inception *chikan* embroidery production has resembled what Marx termed 'industrial manufacture',<sup>71</sup> since all finished pieces of *chikan* embroidery are made in a multi-stage process where labourers at each stage rely upon workers in other stages to complete their own tasks. In other words, there are virtually no independent labourers in the industry. Manufacture entails the break-up of a production process into stages, a division of labour with interdependent workers, a decline in skilled labour and the systematic extraction of surplus labour. A single workplace is unnecessary for manufacture to take place. Indeed, dispersed workplaces afford many advantages to capital, including the need to comply with labour laws and workplace safeguards, likelihood of labour organisation and bypassing of fixed capital commitments.<sup>72</sup> The idealised form of handicrafts production—home or workshop-based, low technology, seemingly self-reliant artisans—coincides neatly with the very form contemporary capitalism dictates.

*Critics, designers, and handicrafts development*

The figure of the knowledgeable patron and collector has been an indispensable element in policy and rhetoric, defining for the handicrafts consumer and producer what handicraft is and ought to be. Patrons and connoisseurs have linked the integrity of the object to the authenticity of production practices, and celebrated the artisan as an essential and unchanging figure of the Indian landscape. At the same time, they have issued dire warnings about the effects of commercialism and cheapened products, while managing to avoid serious analysis of the transformation of craft under capitalism.

These contradictory discourses (opposing cultural identity and continuity to estrangement and rupture) can be found in the writings of British colonial collectors and critics from the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>73</sup> By steering production into traditional channels and preventing Indian craftsmanship from being expended upon the production of such items as 'salt-cellars and tie-boxes',<sup>74</sup> it was believed that handicrafts could be preserved. Even as unlikely a figure as Governor-General Lord Curzon weighed in on the subject, urging the collection of Indian arts and handicrafts untainted by European influence for the Delhi Exhibition of 1903.<sup>75</sup> Curzon's aim (and perhaps that of other British colonial figures involved with arts and crafts) was in part to enshrine the cultural difference of Indian subjects from British rulers. Indian nationalist concerns with handicrafts stemmed from very different perceptions and political goals. Yet the bureaucratic and entrepreneurial climate of handicrafts production that came into existence after India's independence was inherited largely without change from colonial times. The models for central and state programmes to reward and exhibit handicraft came directly from the great exhibitions of art in Europe and India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The challenges of reviving, preserving and, most importantly, marketing handicrafts are stated in much the same way from the Delhi Exhibition of 1903 to crafts shows of the past few years.<sup>76</sup>

While the enlightened connoisseur spearheaded the paradoxical task of preserving handicrafts continuity through ceaseless revival and intervention both before and after India's independence, the fashion designer, with little overt interest in development *per se*, is a more recent entrant to the field. In their fashion lines, crafts are subordinated to the vision and will of the designer in ways that have intensely irritated crafts devotees for whom the association of craft and tradition is paramount. Historically, it has been the second group that has headed projects specifically conceived as forms of development.

Handicrafts development has been attractive because it is a low-cost intervention that makes modest demands on resources. Also, because it rarely depends upon, or even recommends, radical social transformation, it is a socially conservative option. Founding itself upon existing relations of production, handicrafts development does not, as a rule, propose upsetting prevailing familial relations in which women are relegated to domestic roles; indeed, it might even support them.<sup>77</sup> That 'handicrafts and rural industries represent the best method

of providing gainful employment for women without disturbing the existing pattern of society',<sup>78</sup> conforms to this very philosophy.

The marketing of handicrafts may specifically target a certain kind of feminist sensibility through its endorsement of women's culture and women's uplift. For instance, Coralynn Davis, writing about the sale of Mithila painting in Nepal to first-world female tourists, argues that 'the crafts themselves are doubly meaningful ... their very existence represents the traditional and developing women imagined to be their producers'.<sup>79</sup> The allusion to women's empowerment has already been noted in reference to the revival of *kasuti* embroidery, where the same kind of marriage of tradition with development is effected.<sup>80</sup>

Many crafts advocates continue to argue that their development can be positive for women. Some important models for handicrafts development have come from the western state of Gujarat, where the NGOs SEWA Ahmedabad and Adithi have been active in promoting economic self-reliance among women.<sup>81</sup> Laila Tyabji, an advocate for craftswomen who is also a designer, regards the crafts sector as especially fitting for women's development, since it is not just a large (if not the largest) source of employment and income generation for Indian women, but it is an area in which women surpass men in skill and creativity: '[C]raft traditions are a unique mechanism for rural women entering the economic mainstream for the first time, but they also carry the stigma of inferiority and backwardness as India enters a period of hi-tech industrialization and globalization'.<sup>82</sup> Tyabji here refers to the same stereotypes about the ancient productive forms of handicraft that, in other circumstances, have made them seem special. Aiming directly at the negative associations of these stereotypes, she goes on to state that craft 'is an industry and profession often practiced in subprimitive conditions without the support of pensions, insurance, a fixed salary or medicare'.<sup>83</sup> This kind of candour is startling in handicrafts writing, yet Tyabji does not go so far as to point out that the wretched conditions of handicraft production are fully consistent with capitalisation processes. Instead, she holds out for the possibility that crafts production, properly conducted with an emphasis on women's empowerment, can resist them. Tyabji predicates these arguments upon a commitment to the intrinsic value of handicrafts (as opposed to technology), and to carving out a specific fashion market for handcrafted goods, since only production for an elite market can circumvent the stranglehold of male traders and investors upon mass-market production.<sup>84</sup>

Other feminists have criticised the focus of NGOs and cooperatives upon luxury items, arguing that the demand for them is bound to be limited and, by extension, the likelihood of social transformation occurring as a result of them slim.<sup>85</sup> Assuming handicrafts producers continue to be employed by cooperatives and government concerns, many would still remain dependent upon the flow of work from the commercial sector. Moreover, the appropriation of crafts by designers with little or no interest in development shows that even elite demand for cooperatively produced handicrafts has limits. What is more, the likelihood of social differentiation among women themselves, either pre-existing or follow-

ing upon development interventions, is hardly ever explored. The most radical suggestion is Mies's that, instead of reforming or reviving handicrafts, consumers should re-examine their need for goods that exist primarily to support bourgeois lifestyles.<sup>86</sup> In an academic and cultural climate where the uses of commodities to symbolise identities have provided the grist for many a mill, Mies's proposal seems heretical, if not simplistic in the light of the plethora of subsequent studies of consumption and identity construction. Yet her recommendation at least returns us to the heart of the dilemma; that is, can the preservation of heritage linked to commodity consumption be compatible with the kind of transformation of workplace conditions that would materially benefit female crafts workers? Or do capitalised processes masked as traditional ones serve as a necessary framework upon which to erect claims about the authenticity and value of handicrafts?

### **Conclusion**

This paper has tried to sketch the main features of the contrast between what is said about handicrafts in India and what ethnography might reveal about the conditions in which they are made. A brief review of women's handicrafts in popular and scholarly literature suggests that recurrent references to domesticity, use-value production and non-work seem more consistent with ideological projections of what women's work ought to be rather than what it is. My concern has been mainly with women, since their work seems to be especially subject to these kinds of representations. Arguably, the confluence of ideals about women's empowerment and Indian heritage may in part be responsible for the lack of detailed critical studies of women's handicraft production.

While home-working women are at a disadvantage all over the world, and in many different industries, handicrafts have the potential to work especially pernicious effects because of the ideological dimensions of the commodities themselves. The depiction of women's labour as part-time or use-value production, or women as mere helpers of men, permits an air of tradition and authenticity to attach itself to their work. The preservation of handicrafts in an idealised form cannot be done in any other way than by making them commercially successful.<sup>87</sup> Constructing a gendered domain of production obscures this paradox, because commodities are seen to be made in ways that are conceived as morally and culturally traditional. Such a construction also serves as the means by which any commercial success achieved can be kept from the very women who ensure it, by denying their status both as workers and intelligent creators. It is, in summary, impossible to efface the contradiction between crafts as symbols of tradition and their status as commodities produced by alienated workers. This contradiction lies at the very core of what contemporary craftwork is, and deserves more serious attention from South Asia social scientists.<sup>88</sup>

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## Notes and references

1. Vishal Mehra, quoted by Janaki Bhatt, 'Fashion, revival of chikan', *The Tribune*, [www.tribuneindia.com/2001/20010721/windows/fashion.htm](http://www.tribuneindia.com/2001/20010721/windows/fashion.htm), accessed 12 December 2003.
2. This research is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Lucknow in 1989–1990, and in Mumbai in 2002. On both occasions, research was funded by the American Institute of Indian Studies. The author also consulted numerous websites devoted to the sale and marketing of handicrafts, as well as descriptive accounts and essays available from online newspapers and the websites of prominent designers in India who have made explicit use of chikan in their work. In reference to *chikan* embroidery, a search of the exact phrase '*chikan* embroidery' on [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) yielded just over 600 hits. The author viewed the majority of these sites, selecting for analysis those with more lengthy descriptive detail on *chikan* embroidery over those that did not, and sites with multiple hits.
3. See R. S. Mathur, *Report on Chikan Handicraft, Lucknow: Technical Report no 2* (Lucknow: Giri Institute of Development Studies, 1975); and C. M. Wilkinson-Weber, *Embroidering Lives, Women's Work and Skill in the Lucknow Embroidery Industry* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p 68.
4. Estimates of the number of embroiderers are notoriously unreliable, since female embroiderers are not routinely counted in the Indian census. Their numbers range from 20,000 to 100,000, with the true figure probably hovering somewhere between the two.
5. A study of the extensive South Asia whitework collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, bears out this conclusion. See Clare M. Wilkinson-Weber, *Whitework Collections at the Victoria and Albert Museum* (unpublished report, 2001).
6. See 'Charm of chikan', *Lucknow City Magazine*, September 1988, p 16; and 'Chikan', *Indian Handicraft Trade Promotion Network*, [www.handicraft.indiamart.com/process/chikan](http://www.handicraft.indiamart.com/process/chikan), accessed 12 December 2003.
7. See Jasleen Dhamija, 'The survey of embroidery traditions: Chikankari', *MARG*, Vol 17, No 2, 1964, p. 25; and 'Textiles, the art of Chikankari', *India-crafts*, [www.india-crafts.com/textile\\_products/chikankari.html](http://www.india-crafts.com/textile_products/chikankari.html), accessed 12 December 2003.
8. See, for instance, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, *Indian Handicrafts* (New Delhi: Allied Publishing, 1963), p 8; D. N. Saraf, *Indian Crafts: Development and Potential* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1982), p 214; and 'Textiles, the art of Chikankari', *op cit*, Ref 7.
9. Savithri Devi, quoted by Bhatt, *op cit*, Ref 1.
10. *Ibid.*
11. 'Chikan', *Ritu Kumar*, [www.ritukumar.com/chikan/htm](http://www.ritukumar.com/chikan/htm), accessed 12 January 2004. This recently revamped page includes a cartoonish illustration of an elderly embroiderer, her head covered with her *dupatta* (scarf), juxtaposed with a photograph of Miss World 1994 wearing a *chikan* blouse with her head uncovered.
12. Some stitch names in *chikan* embroidery are visually connected to their referent; for example, embroiderers told me that *bijli* (earring) is acknowledged to resemble a piece of jewellery, and *ghas ki patti* is intended to imitate a kind of grass. *Tepci*, a kind of running stitch, has no obvious equivalent in English.
13. 'Partners in creativity', *The Hindu*, [www.hindu.com/thehindu/2001/02/26/stories/13260072.htm](http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/2001/02/26/stories/13260072.htm), accessed 12 December 2003.
14. 'Fashion designers', *Seasons India*, [www.seasonsindia.com/beauty/meera\\_sea.htm](http://www.seasonsindia.com/beauty/meera_sea.htm), accessed 12 December 2003.
15. 'Lifestyle, fashion zone', *Surat City Online*, [www.suratcityonline.com/Lifestyle/Fashion/style/masters/master17.asp](http://www.suratcityonline.com/Lifestyle/Fashion/style/masters/master17.asp), accessed 12 December 2003.
16. Mathur, *op cit*, Ref 3. Reference to the All India Handicrafts Board's efforts to revive *chikan* can be found in Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, 'Painting with the needle', *MARG*, Vol 17, No 2, 1964, p 4; and Dhamija, *op cit*, Ref 7, p 26.
17. Immersed in the world of business, commerce and fashion, designers embody the recent ideological-political trend away from socialist-tinged state projects of renewal to which the earlier generation were committed. They show less interest in handicrafts as objects of development, taking an instrumentalist approach to crafts as a means to their own, personal design ends.

18. 'Chikan embroidery', *Awadhcrafts*, [www.awadhcrafts.com/chikan.html](http://www.awadhcrafts.com/chikan.html), accessed 12 December 2003.
19. Retold to me by a descendent of the craftsman, recorded in Dhamija, *op cit*, Ref 7, p 25; and repeated on *India-crafts*, *op cit*, Ref 7.
20. See, for example, John Irwin and Margaret Hall, *Indian Embroideries* (Ahmedabad: Calico Museum of Textiles, 1973); Chattopadhyaya, *op cit*, Ref 8, pp 43–44; Dhamija, *op cit*, Ref 7, p 25; Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon* (New York: Noonday, 1964 [1913]), p 206; and T. N. Mukharji, *Art-Manufactures of India* (New Delhi: Navrang, 1974 [1888]), p 371.
21. See Meer Hassan Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmauns of Lucknow* (Delhi: Manohar, 1973 [1832]); William Hoey, *A Monography on Trade and Manufactures in Northern India* (Lucknow: American Methodist Press, 1880); and Sir George Watt, *Indian Art at Delhi 1903* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987 [1903]), pp 401–402.
22. See Hoey, *ibid*; and Watt, *ibid*, p 399.
23. See Veena T. Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856–1877* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p 165; and Amir Hasan, *Palace Culture of Lucknow* (Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 1983).
24. Elite demand for *chikan* was clearly important until—at the very latest—the mid-twentieth century. See Abdul Halim Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture* (London: Elek, 1975), p 172. Elite buyers were substituted only partially by the patronage of the state after that (e.g. encouraging the production of fine embroidery for award competition). That fine work is hard to find today is very little to do with what some women can imagine and execute, and everything to do with the transformation of production and consumption patterns in embroidered textiles.
25. S. Ghosal, *Uttar Pradesh District Gazetteer, Lucknow* (Delhi: Government of India, 1923), p 2.
26. See Susan S. Bean, 'Gandhi and *khadi*, the fabric of Indian Independence', in Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider (eds), *Cloth and Human Experience* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), pp 355–376; and Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
27. *Chikan* collections of designers like Ritu Kumar, Muzaffar Ali, Abu Jani, Sandeep Khosla and others, reject the *bakhya* stereotype and use *murri* instead. More research is needed to understand the nature of production in these instances, although the employment of female embroiderers is essentially unchanged.
28. See, for example, Andrea Menefee Singh and Anita Kelles-Viitanen (eds), *Invisible Hands: Women in Home-based Production* (New Delhi: Sage, 1987); Lourdes Beneria and Shelley Feldman (eds), *Unequal Burden: Economic Crises, Persistent Poverty, and Women's Work* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992); and Eileen Boris and Elisabeth Prugl (eds), *Homeworkers in Global Perspective: Invisible No More* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
29. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
30. Gowri Ramnarayan, 'Strength through SEWA', *The Hindu*, [www.hinduonnet.com/folio/fo9903/99030220.htm](http://www.hinduonnet.com/folio/fo9903/99030220.htm), accessed 12 December 2003. The article is a positive account of the local NGO, SEWA Lucknow, founded to support women embroiderers in Lucknow. Backwardness is understood in this context to indicate economic impoverishment. However, the repeated use of the term backward also reinforces the perception that embroiderers need guidance—not simply in social and business matters, but in other areas too.
31. A similar example can be found on the website of the retail company Fashion Temptations, where the embroiderer is pictured embroidering a length of printed fabric never destined for embroidery. See 'About chikan', *Fashion Temptations*, [www.fashiontemptations.com/about\\_chikan\\_embroidery.htm](http://www.fashiontemptations.com/about_chikan_embroidery.htm), accessed 12 December 2003.
32. See, for instance, Katherine Hacker's work on low-caste Orissan artisans and the construction of the 'tribal' artist in India in her article 'Displaying a tribal imaginary: known and unknown India', *Museum Anthropology*, Vol 23, No 3, Winter 1999, pp 5–25.
33. Research for this section comes mainly from books and articles written since India's independence by crafts patrons and arts critics who were motivated to survey and catalogue the handicrafts diversity of the country in the wake of the creation of the All India Handicrafts Board in 1951. The author also consulted newspaper articles and websites that promote the sale of handicraft items in India and abroad. There are three possibilities for the description of women's crafts: either women are not mentioned or are mentioned only in passing; women make crafts for their own pleasure or for the consumption needs of the local community; or women produce handicrafts for sale. See Kamala S. Dongerkery, *The Romance of Indian Embroidery* (Bombay: Thacker, 1951); Jasleen Dhamija, *Indian Folk Arts and Crafts* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1970); Pupul Jayakar, *The Earthen Drum: An Introduction to the Ritual Arts of rural India* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1980); Chattopadhyaya, *op cit*, Ref 8; and *Handicrafts of India* (New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1975).

34. A recent survey concluded that Indian women are more likely than men to be found working in lace making, embroidery, reed-weaving, leather craft, and papier mache. See S. Vijayagopalan, *Economic Status of Handicraft Artisans* (New Delhi: National Council of Applied Economic Research, 1993), p 27.
35. See, for instance, the case with women working on *zari* (gold thread embroidery) in Faridha Jalees, *Glittering Threads: A Socio-economic Study of Women Zari Workers* (Ahmedabad: SEWA Bharat, 1989).
36. Shanti Swarup, *The Arts and Crafts of India and Pakistan: A Pictorial Survey of Dancing, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Art Crafts, and Ritual Decorations, from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (Bombay: Taraporevala's Treasure House of Books, 1957), p 82.
37. See, for example, Jaya Jaitly, *The Craft Traditions of India* (New Delhi: Lustre Press, 1990), p 63 on weaving families; and Saraf, *op cit*, Ref 8, p 97 on Karnatakan toy makers.
38. Eberhard Fischer *et al.*, *Rural Craftsmen and their Work: Equipment and Techniques in the Mer village of Ratadi in Saurashtra, India* (Ahmedabad: National Institute of Design, 1970), p 117.
39. India Mart, *Arts and Crafts in Gujarat*, <http://www.indiantravelportal.com/gujarat/art-crafts/pottery.html>, accessed 12 January 2004.
40. See Jaitly, *op cit*, Ref 37, p 61; Fischer *et al.*, *op cit*, Ref 38, p 167; *ibid.*, p 181; and Saraf, *op cit*, Ref 8, pp 48, 84, 119.
41. Maitreyi Krishna Raj and Joy P. Deshmukh, *Women in Handicraft: An All-India Study for Data Base and Policy Analysis* (Bombay: Research Centre for Women's Studies, S.N.D.T. Women's University, 1989), p 206. Raj and Deshmukh call for a separate census category devoted to handicrafts production, as well as greater efforts to ensure that women get counted in the 'worker' categories.
42. For example, see Anita M. Weiss, *Walls Within Walls: Life Histories of Working Women in the Old City of Lahore* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp 73–75.
43. See, for instance, Daniel Miller's research on ceramics in the Malwa region of Central India where pots are moulded and fired by men, then painted by women. Despite the importance of painting to the completed product, women's painting is subordinated even in local discourse to men's potting. See Daniel Miller, *Artefacts as Categories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p 110.
44. See Nighat Said Khan, *Spinning a Yarn: women and handicrafts: development or marginalisation?* (Lahore: ASR 1989); Ela Bhatt, 'The invisibility of home-based work: the case of piece rate workers in India'. In Andrea Menefee Singh and Anita Kelles-Viitanen, *op cit*, Ref 28.
45. Ann Weston, 'Women and handicraft production in North India', in Haleh Afshar (ed), *Women, Development, and Survival in the Third World* (Delhi: Manohar, 1987), p 180.
46. See, for example, Katherine F. Hacker, 'From Dantewara to Delhi: making and marketing meanings', in *Maker and Meaning: Craft and Society* (Proceedings of the Seminar, Tamil Nadu, India, January 1999), p 79.
47. Dongerkery, *op cit*, Ref 33, p vi.
48. Chattopadhyaya, *op cit*, Ref 33, p 55. For a critical analysis of *phulkari* production, see Michelle Maskiell 'Embroidering the past: *phulkari* textiles and gendered work as "tradition" and "heritage"', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol 58, No 2, 1999.
49. Chattopadhyaya, *op cit*, Ref 33, p 59.
50. For example, Chattopadhyaya gives only one sentence to female commercial carpet weavers, while John Irwin and Margaret Hall give scarcely more to the Baroda washerwomen who embroidered quilts for sale in the late nineteenth century. See Chattopadhyaya, *op cit*, Ref 8, p 90; and Irwin and Hall, *op cit*, Ref 20, p 37.
51. Chattopadhyaya, *op cit*, Ref 8.
52. Maria Mies, *The Lacemakers of Narsapur* (London: Zed Press, 1982).
53. Chattopadhyaya, *op cit*, Ref 33, p. 65.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*
56. Nonetheless, present-day websites tend to follow Chattopadhyaya more than Mies. See, for example, 'Narsapur lace', *India Mart*, [www.indiantravelportal.com/andhra-pradesh/arts-crafts/narsapur-lace.html](http://www.indiantravelportal.com/andhra-pradesh/arts-crafts/narsapur-lace.html), accessed 12 January 2004.
57. See, for instance, Lynn M. Hart, 'Three walls: regional aesthetics and the international art world', in George Marcus and Fred Myers (eds), *The Traffic In Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp 127–150.
58. *Ibid.*
59. Jyotindra Jain's *Ganga Devi: Tradition and Expression in Mithila Painting* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 1997) engages the topic of one woman's artistry in a relatively unique way.
60. For a strongly worded critique of Yves Vequaud's highly romanticised *The Art of Mithila: Ceremonial Paintings from an Ancient Kingdom* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), see Carolyn Henning Brown, 'Folk art and art books: who speaks for the traditional artist?', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 16, No 3, 1982, pp 519–528.

61. See, for instance, 'Folk art', *Incredible India*, [www.tourismofindia.com/exi/folkarts.htm](http://www.tourismofindia.com/exi/folkarts.htm), accessed 12 January 2004.
62. 'The colours of Kasuti', *Deccan Herald*, [www.deccanherald.com/deccanherald/oct31/spt2.asp](http://www.deccanherald.com/deccanherald/oct31/spt2.asp), accessed 12 January 2004.
63. The recent book published by the Madras Craft Foundation, *Maker and Meaning: Craft and Society* (Proceedings of the Seminar, Tamil Nadu, India, January 1999), contains many very valuable essays that extend handicrafts research in interesting ways. However, longer, more sustained analyses are needed to redress the current deficiencies in the literature.
64. Raj and Deshmukh, *op cit*, Ref 41, p 171.
65. Paul Greenough, 'Nation, economy and tradition displayed: the Indian Crafts Museum, New Delhi', in Carol A. Breckenridge (ed), *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp 216–248.
66. See Weston, *op cit*, Ref 45, p 177; Rajeev Sethi, 'Toward a cultural policy: dialogues on continuity and change', in Carla M. Borden (ed), *Contemporary India: Essays on the Uses of Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), p 152.
67. Allyn Johnston Fisher, *The All India Handicrafts Board and Handicrafts Development in India*, Ph.D. dissertation (Indiana University, 1974).
68. See Jaitly, *op cit*, Ref 37, p. 7; and Nicholas Barnard, *Arts and Crafts of India* (London: Conran Octopus, 1998), pp 9, 63.
69. Judy Frater, *Threads of Identity: Embroidery and Adornment of the nomadic Rabaris* (Ahmedabad: Mapin, 1995), p 110.
70. Thirthankar Roy, *Traditional Industry in the Economy of Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
71. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), Vol 1, p 457.
72. See Weston, *op cit*, Ref 45, p 177; and D. A. Swallow, 'Production and control in the Indian garment industry', in Esther M. Goody (ed), *From Craft to Industry: The Ethnography of Proto-industrial Cloth Production* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
73. See, for instance, George C. M. Birdwood, *The Industrial Arts of India* (London: Chapman, 1880); and Watt, *op cit*, Ref 21.
74. Narayani Gupta, 'Introduction', in Watt, *op cit*, Ref 21, pp xi–xvi, xiii.
75. *Ibid*, p xv.
76. Watt, *op cit*, Ref 21.
77. M. K. Pal, *Crafts and Craftsmen in Traditional India* (New Delhi: Kanak Publications, 1978).
78. Comments of Jasleen Dhamija, as cited in Weston, *op cit*, Ref 45, p 177.
79. Coralynn V. Davis, 'The politics of purchasing power: feminist tourism and women's development in Nepal', *Michigan Feminist Studies*, Vol 12, 1997–98, pp 26–43.
80. *Deccan Herald*, *op cit*, Ref 62.
81. See, in particular, Kalima Rose, *Where Women are Leaders: The SEWA Movement in India* (London: Zed Books, 1992).
82. Laila Tyabji, 'The story behind the stitches: Indian women, indian embroideries', speech delivered to the Asia Society, 10 June 1998, *Asia Society 'Speeches'*, [www.asiasociety.com/speeches/tyabji.html](http://www.asiasociety.com/speeches/tyabji.html), accessed 10 January 2004. In her goals and ideals, Tyabji has more affinity with the old-style handicrafts connoisseurs and patrons than with contemporary fashion designers (although the former have never been comfortable with any link between craft and fashion).
83. Laila Tyabji, 'The story behind the stitches: Indian women, Indian embroidery', in *Maker and Meaning: Craft and Society* (Proceedings of the seminar, Tamil Nadu, India, January 1999), p. 116.
84. See Laila Tyabji, 'SEWA Lucknow and DASTKAR' (Talk delivered to the Crafts Council of India, Ahmedabad, 1990); and Laila Tyabji, *op cit*, Ref 83.
85. Raj and Deshmukh, *op cit*, Ref 41, p 212.
86. Mies, *op cit*, Ref 52.
87. Maskiell, *op cit*, Ref 48, p 377.
88. Kay Mohlmann, 'Craft-as-industry and craft-as-culture: analysing handicraft production in commercialized Asia and beyond', *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol 27, No 1, 1999, pp 113–126. Mohlmann distinguishes 'craft as industry' and 'craft as culture' approaches in the social scientific study of handicraft. While the former takes the process of industrialisation as its focus and looks at how craft production fits into what is a larger, global process of socio-economic development, the latter looks more on crafts as vehicles of meaning, and on crafts in the construction of social identities. I argue that it is essential to accommodate questions about skill, knowledge and identity within an analysis of craft as a productive form within a capitalist mode.