

Swan Song of the Badlas

Mukaish Badla is a form of embroidery, which flourished in the Indian city of Lucknow. In the 18th century, this craft form travelled to different parts of the world, although now is restricted to the bylanes of old Lucknow. The embroidery was introduced by the Nawabs (Muslim Kings) who ruled the Awadh region, to embellish a different kind of craft called Chikankari, still persisting in the Indian subcontinent. Mukaish, however, culminated into an independent craft, flourishing across the city in the past. This form of embroidery was initially developed for the ruling class as a part of their finery, originally using precious metals like gold and silver to make metallic wires.

The artisans involved in the creation of this craft were earlier referred to as Badlas. These artisans, who have devoted their lives to this craft form, make only a bare minimum of \$2–3 per day, working in extremely harsh conditions for up to 10 hours a day. The city once had more than 3000 Badlas, but now the number has plummeted to just 20-25, as told by the artisans themselves. The intricate art involves a lot of minute detailing and play. The long, tiring working hours, where Badlas are exposed to the light emitted from the shiny wires, have led to several medical conditions and ophthalmological problems like cataract, which tops the list.

Badlas also complain about the practised apathy of the government, which has led to further exploitation by their masters owning the means of production and their lives, says 75-year-old Sabir Hussain, who has been working as a Badla for nearly 65 years. The warehouses they work in are mostly dingy, crumbling rooms and spaces. As these Badlas are highly underpaid, fetching even two decent meals per day is also a tedious task. This condition drove their female counterparts, usually their wives, to learn the craft, making women equal participants in the creation of this craft form.

However, things are drastically changing now, not only with the craft but also the mindset of these Badla artisans, who do not wish their children and grandchildren to continue this tradition. According to Munna Ali, a veteran Badla artisan, Mukaish Badla is also dying due to the inclusion of machinery which reduces the work completion period to half and is economically cheaper. The craft and its artisans might soon fade away amidst the frenzy driven by economic exploitation and marginalisation of Muslims in India. The Badla community is gradually disappearing and, in the next two decades, may become a part of history, to be recalled only through a poignant daydream or as a visual imagery.