

Becoming an “*Asli Karigar*”

The Production of Authenticity among Old Delhi’s Muslim Artisans



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Abstract

Fieldwork for this thesis was undertaken with Muslim artisans who live and work in Old Delhi, India, between July 2006 and October 2007. These artisans are skilled in a form of embroidery, done with gold and silver metallic wires, known as *zardozi*. This craft emerged in India in conjunction with the rise of so-called Islamicate states beginning in the 13th century and *zardozi* was essential to the production of luxury goods of exquisite quality. Today, the high quality and intricate form of the craft is rarely patronised, while sub-standard work is being produced in the name of *zardozi*. With the liberalisation of India's economy in the early 1990s, competition from abroad and new opportunities afforded by the growing export market for handicrafts have accelerated the decline in high quality craftsmanship. These recent trends have meant that many highly skilled artisans are losing their sources of livelihood or are forced to produce low quality goods for a mass market. In my thesis, I argue that the marginal position of urban Muslim artisans runs much deeper than recent shifts in the global marketplace. This marginalisation can be located in their exclusion from the broader narratives of the Indian nation-state, whereby the rhetoric embedded in colonial and post-colonial discourses locates the authentic artisan and authentic crafts production in primarily rural and "Hindu" communitarian settings.

In this context of marginalisation, I pose the following research question: How do urban Muslim artisans constitute themselves as real, authentic craft producers or, in their own words, as "*asli karigar-s*"? The broader theoretical objective of the thesis is to recover the possibility of "becoming subjects" in the spaces whereby normativity is aspired to and not necessarily where it is subverted or resisted. In the thesis, I locate various "sites" of performance where the real, authentic artisan is constituted,

including the construction of the “Other” through language that distinguishes authentic from inauthentic; the incorporation of Islam into conceptions of ideal work practices; constructions of lineage through narratives situated in both linear and non-linear temporal frameworks; and relations with the state – the largest patron of crafts in India – through encounters with government sponsored exhibitions and award competitions.

This thesis is dedicated to my mother and father

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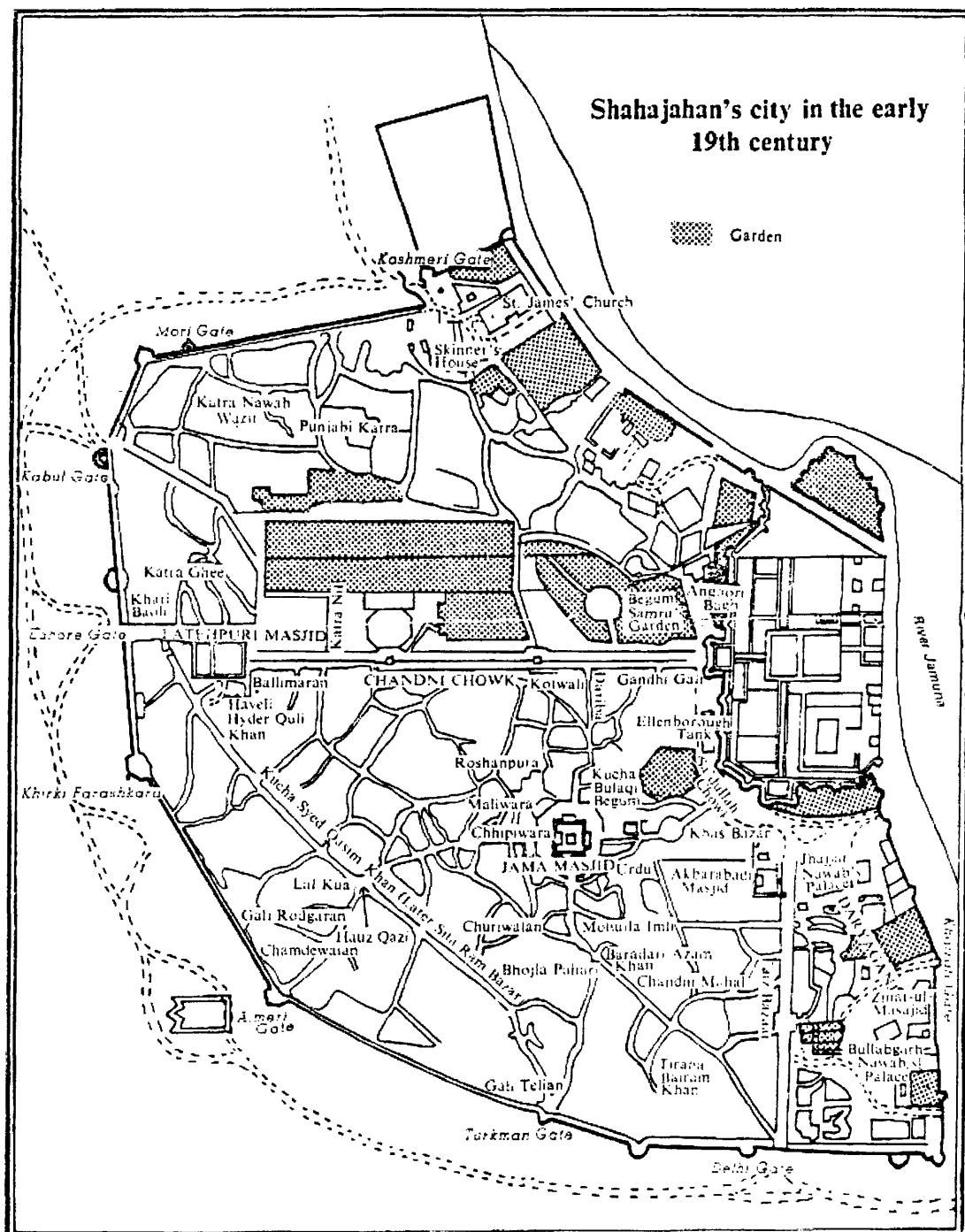
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**All photographs were taken by the author unless stated otherwise

Maps

1. Map of Old Delhi in the Early Nineteenth Century



Source: Narayani Gupta (1981) *Delhi between two empires 1803-1931: Society, government and urban growth*, p. xvi-xvii.

2. A Representation of Shahjahanabad in 1857



Source: <http://www.britishempire.co.uk/images4/delhi/fullmap1857.jpg>

3. Current Map of New Delhi and Old Delhi



Source: Eicher Map

Chapter 1

Life and Agency on the Margins: Introduction to a Study of Urban Muslim Artisans in India



1. INTRODUCTION

“On the Margins: The Sachar Report reveals the extent of Muslim marginalization...”

- Headline from *Frontline* Magazine, December 15, 2006

The Sachar Report, which was commissioned by the government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and headed by Justice Rajender Sachar, was published in November 2006. The report “is the first systematic study of the Muslim community in independent India” (Ramakrishnan 2006:4) and makes critical assessments on the social and economic conditions of Indian Muslims. The report concludes that the Muslim community is marked by acute marginalisation, particularly evidenced by education levels as “Muslims have fallen behind on every educational parameter since Independence in spite of being more urbanized than most communities.” (Hansen 2007: 50) And it is urban poverty among Muslims that has been on the rise; according to estimates from 2004-05, for the first time, urban poverty was recorded as being higher than rural poverty. The bulk of urban Muslims, according to the findings of the Sachar Report, are “either self employed or employed in small and informal

businesses and enterprises. Many of these are traditional artisan occupations of Muslims (weaving, carpentry, metal work, mechanics, etc) and in petty trade. These businesses are small, low-investment and as a whole outside, if not wholly excluded from, the new economy in India.” (Hansen 2007: 51) India’s new economy is by and large a product of liberalising reforms, which have been occurring over the past two decades. The associated political-discursive processes have produced a new group of consumer-citizens – the Indian middle-class – by way of a “politics of forgetting” that excludes India’s poor and working classes from national political discourses (Fernandes 2004). However, as I will argue throughout the course of this thesis, Indian Muslims, and especially those from the ranks of the lower classes and urban poor, have experienced a much longer period of systemic marginalisation.

Indian Muslims in general have endured a long history of being castigated as the “Other” – often seen as either foreign invaders or as Hindus thinly disguised as Muslims – in both Orientalist representations and Indian nationalist historiography. With the rise of Hindu nationalist movements and events such as the destruction of the Babri Mosque in 1992 and the Gujarat riots in 2002, when thousands of Muslims were killed in collusion with the state and police, it is quite evident that Muslims are being systematically excluded from nationalist narratives that envisage India as a predominantly Hindu nation-state, with often violent consequences (see Hansen 1999, Van der Veer 1994). Especially since the September 11, 2001 attacks in United States, the December 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament, and more recently the Bombay¹ terrorist attacks in 2008, Indian Muslims have felt the repercussions of the ensuing political climate. Many who are self-employed or engaged in petty trade are finding it

¹ Throughout the thesis, I use the non-official spelling of city names, such as “Bombay” and “Calcutta”, because this is how my research respondents called them.

more difficult to conduct business, since fewer buyers/patrons are now willing to work with Muslim producers. Indeed, all over India there is a heightened suspicion of Muslims in general, with police raids on Muslim businesses and organisations becoming more wide-spread.

My thesis focuses on urban Muslim artisans who are marginalised not only from India's new economy – which has been euphemistically called “India Shining” – but more broadly they have been excluded from becoming subjects within the constructs of the nation-state. As such, the formative question that this thesis addresses is how agency can be recovered from such sustained positions of marginalisation. It is with this general objective in mind that I attempt to comprehend, to the greatest extent possible, the lives and experiences of urban Muslim artisans in India today.

Fieldwork for this thesis was conducted between June 2006 and October 2007 in Old Delhi. I carried out research with artisans who engage in a craft generally known as “*zardozi*”, a form of embroidery that uses metallic wires to create often intricate designs on a range of textiles. There is an important caveat to my work however and it is important to spell it out at the very outset. I do not situate my research within studies of craft production *per se* that focus on the objects made nor is my intention to elaborate on the techniques of *zardozi*. Instead I follow Henry Glassie's approach by “letting their [artisans'] work set the agenda for inquiry” (1998: 1) and, I would like to add, the ways in which artisans emphasise and articulate their relationship to their work. Thus, I am first and foremost interested in the people who are a part of this predominantly informal craft-based industry and how certain forms of personhood

and agency are produced through a variety of modalities, of which the objects they make is only one such modality (cf. Gell 1998).

2. CHANCE ENCOUNTERS AND RE-ADJUSTMENTS

My introduction to this form of craft and its production in an urban setting occurred only by chance. Although I had come to India to conduct research on artisans, I never thought my fieldwork site would involve staying in one of the largest metropolitan areas for over eighteen months. All of my preparation for conducting research with artisans had been situated in the literature that viewed craft production as primarily a rural-based activity. Going back to the beginning of colonial rule, this vast literature suggested that the predominant Hindu caste system structured the relations of exchange between producers of craft objects, such as potters, and others in the community who required such goods and services – a system otherwise known as *jajmani*. Indeed, this was the “received wisdom” that I had carried to India: the general tendency in anthropological literature to locate craft production in isolated and static communitarian villages, framed by a rigidly defined caste system that precluded individual initiatives and that was supported by the *jajmani* system or its other regional variations (see Fuller 1989, Raychoudhuri and Habib 1982, Wisner 1988). Within the framework of this received wisdom, I wanted to understand how these mechanisms of exchange that were so rooted in notions of “community” had changed due to the displacement of entire craft communities and due to the increasing industrialisation of certain craft clusters, such as the pottery cluster in Khurja and the brassware cluster in Muradabad, both located in the state of Uttar Pradesh. So when I arrived in Delhi my intention was to stay there only for a couple of months in order to gain an understanding of the players involved in craft promotion and revival, but then

I was to move on swiftly to peri-urban and rural areas that I believed would be more suitable as fieldwork sites. But my initial fieldwork plan changed very soon after my arrival in India.

One of the first organisations I visited in Delhi was the Craft Revival Trust, which had been founded as an online information and documentation resource for handicraft production in South Asia.² The small office of this organisation was located in one of Delhi's so-called "urban villages". I had secured a meeting with the director of the Trust and we initially discussed my research agenda. However, the topic of discussion quickly turned away from peri-urban and rural based craft production to the plight of urban artisans. The director told me that many people are aware of the state of weaving in the city of Banaras (Varanasi), where Muslim weavers are the lowest paid producers even though their products (i.e. Banarsi saris) go on to sell for thousands, if not lakhs, of rupees. She suggested that if I wanted to see the state of crafts in India today, I must not overlook what is happening in the urban areas. And this is when she suggested that I go to an area called Seelampur – widely considered an "urban slum" and located in east Delhi just across the Yamuna River – and visit the artisans who work in the *zari* workshops. I agreed to her suggestion, and as I had no one to introduce me to these artisans, she printed off a government list of addresses of artisans in Delhi who had either won or qualified for the state or national handicraft awards for embroidery. With this list of addresses I left the office of the Trust, having decided to overhaul completely my previous research agenda and start fieldwork in Delhi – a decision that led me to work primarily in Old Delhi with numerous trips to Seelampur as well.

² See <http://www.craftrevival.org>

Once I began to conduct fieldwork with *zardozi* artisans in Old Delhi, a series of inevitable “readjustments” in my outlook on artisans and craft production took place, whereby: (1) I changed my focus from rural artisans to urban artisans, which (2) led me to focus on Muslim artisans and their historical emergence and (3) cumulatively allowed me to explore the formation of Muslim subjectivities among the lower classes and urban poor. As these changes in my outlook took place over time, I began to conduct fieldwork in Old Delhi with *zardozi* artisans. I was able to glimpse inside their world and engage in countless discussions about their role as artisans in today’s rapidly changing and globalising context and how they not only envisage the state of their craft, but also their sense of self as artisans, Muslims and Indians.

3. ZARDOZI AND ARTISANS

3.1 *Details of the Craft*

The word *zardozi* is derived from the Persian language: “zar” means gold and “dozi” means sewing (Miandji 2003). Thus, *zardozi* is a kind of embroidery typically using gold and often silver coiled metallic wire. Today, however, wire made of pure gold and silver is rarely used and instead it is commonplace to use copper-based or plastic wires that are coloured to look like gold and silver (as well as other colours). These wires are generally called “*zari*”. In a recent article in The Financial Express, three broad categories of *zari* are described: “real, imitation and plastic. Real *zari* is made of flat silver wire electroplated with gold. *Zari* made from these precious metals is used in ceremonial saris priced between Rs 10,000 and Rs 10 lakh per piece. Imitation *zari* is made from copper wire while plastic *zari* is produced from chemically-

coloured metallic yarn. In fact, *zari* is produced in more than 20 colours.” (Jayaramiah 2009). In addition to these categories, there are a number of specific terms that artisans employ when describing *zari* (see Gupta 1996; see also Chapter 4 for a discussion of terminology used among *zardozi* artisans). For example, the terms *dabka*, *kora*, *kichcha*, *gijai*, *naqshi* are used to describe the differences between *zari* wires. *Dabka* is a tightly coiled wire (usually copper-based) that has a shiny finish, whereas *kora* is similar to *dabka* except with a dull finish. *Kichcha* has looser coils and is often made of clear plastic so that a coloured thread can be inserted into the coiled wire. *Gijai* is a thin, stiff coiled wire and *naqshi* is a shiny wire that is much more angular than the others and is not tightly coiled (see Figure 1.1).

Artisans also use various terms to describe the actual implements needed to do the embroidery, such as *ada* or *karchob*, both of which refer to the wooden frame on which embroidery is done.³ The wooden frame is usually rectangular in shape and varies in dimensions depending on what type of product is being made.⁴ When a piece of cloth is ready to be placed on the *karchob*, the ends of the cloth are pierced with holes and a thick string is weaved through these holes and then tied tightly to the frame. The frame itself is raised about 3 feet above the ground so that the artisan can sit with his or her legs under the frame with arms placed above the frame (see Figure 1.2).

³ Throughout this thesis, I use the term *karchob*, since I noticed this term was used more frequently than *ada*.

⁴ The largest frame I saw was probably 10 feet by 4 feet. On this wooden frame, 6-7 girls were sitting around the frame doing *zardozi* on a *lehnga*, or long skirt (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.1: Different types of *zari* wires

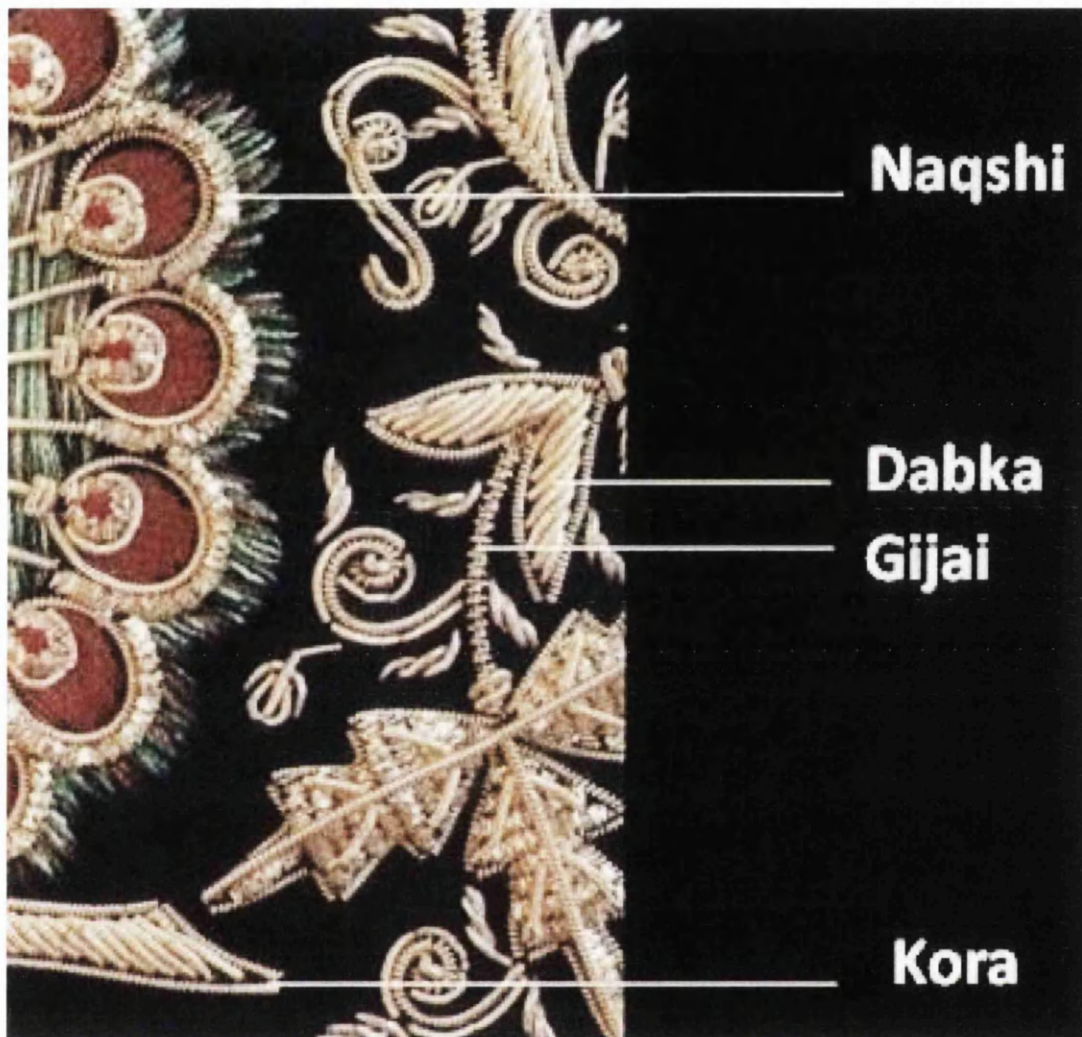


Figure 1.2: A large *karchob*



The *khaka* is the drawing or blueprint of the design and is an essential part of the embroidery process. Often it consists of a pencil-drawn pattern on wax paper. Once the design is set, the artisan will pierce equidistant holes (*naqa, nuqta*) in the wax paper, along the pencil marks (see Figure 1.3). After the wooden frame is ready and the cloth is tied to the frame, the artisan can use the pierced *khaka* by placing the design on the cloth and sprinkling chalk powder over the wax paper. This leaves an imprint of the design on the cloth. Since the process of piercing holes in the *khaka* is laborious and time consuming, artisans sometimes trace the design directly from the *khaka* onto the cloth by using a hot iron to make an imprint of the design.

Zardozi can be done on various kinds of cloth, but it is most often found on velvet, satin and silk. According to Gupta (1996), the three most common categories in which to find *zardozi* work are: furnishing items and accessories; costumes and related accessories; and miscellaneous artefacts. In the first category, objects such as wall hangings, carpets, and cushion covers are embroidered with *zari*. Costumes such as saris, lehngas (a long bell-shaped skirt), dupattas (a stole like garment made of light fabrics), shawls, kurtis (knee-length shirts) and accessories such as badges and purses will also have *zardozi* work (ibid: 49-68).

Figure 1.3: Example of a pierced *khaka*



Zardozi is done by hand using a normal sewing needle. After the artisan inserts the needle into the *zari*, one hand pierces the cloth downwards while the other hand pierces the cloth upwards. Although this motion is simple to conceptualise, mastering the motion can take many years. During many conversations with artisans, the process of learning *zardozi* was a regular topic of discussion and different views were expressed regarding the best ways to teach and learn the craft. An artisan whom I visited regularly explained one day the difficulty of learning the motion described above. He described the difficulty of piercing the cloth with the needle in a downward way and then bringing the same needle upwards by making a hole very close to the first one. The challenging aspect of the exercise, he said, was that the *karigar* (artisan) does not look below the frame, and thus learning this technique is about intuitively knowing where and how to bring the needle upward.⁵

As mentioned, *zardozi* is done with a standard sewing needle, but another type of embroidery called *hathari* or simply *ari* is often done in tandem with *zardozi*. The *ari* needle is longer than the one used for *zardozi* and has a small hook at the end, which resembles a crochet needle (see Figure 1.4). The advantage of using an *ari* needle is that the stitching can be done faster and it is also easier to learn than *zardozi*.

However, there is a stigma attached to *ari*: it is widely regarded as the poor man's

⁵ The learning of craft skills (Urdu: *hunar*) was a popular topic of discussion among Old Delhi's *zardozi* artisans. They told me the length of time it would take to learn one type of stitch (it could be up to a year) and how they would learn as young children by simply being around elders at home who were doing the craft. However, when I asked them to describe the learning process, artisans could not articulate *how* they learned the skill. One artisan *demonstrated* the technique by moving an imaginary needle in the air with his arm, while others said they learned by watching and observing. In his study of minaret builders in Yemen, Marchand (2001) observes a similar inability to articulate learning processes and argues that "the building labourer's training in disciplined comportment teaches him *how to act*, but not necessarily *how to understand*. . . knowledge is sedimented in his bodily performances, but this type of know-how does not necessitate a consciously aware form of reflection." (ibid: 24) On processes of learning and education in Islamic contexts see Eickelman (1985), Marsden (2005), Starrett (1998).

zardozi. This aspect of *ari* was often conveyed to me by comparing the length of time it takes to learn *ari* versus *zardozi*. I was told that *ari* can be learned within six months, whereas learning the techniques of *zardozi* can take years. For the purpose of this section, it will suffice to say that although many artisans I met could do both *ari* and *zardozi*, there is much greater prestige associated with being trained in and talented at *zardozi*.⁶

Figure 1.4: *Hathari* Work (4 long crochet-like, or *ari* needles can be seen)



3.2 The Zardozi Industry in Old Delhi

As an industry, *zardozi* is marked by heterogeneity, both in terms of the variety of people who take up the craft and the multiple forms of the craft. Therefore, it becomes

⁶ I discuss the differences between *ari* and *zardozi* in greater detail in Chapter 4

impossible to speak of a singular “zardozi artisan”, especially in the context of Old Delhi. To illustrate the complexities of the *zardozi* industry, it may be instructive to compare my research field with Clare Wilkinson-Weber’s (1999) ethnography of the Lucknow embroidery industry, which is known as “*chikan*” embroidery (*chikan-kari*).⁷ Both *zardozi* and *chikan* industries share certain similarities – both are situated in urban centres and both employ a majority of Muslim artisans. The production processes of both types of embroidery are fragmented and middlemen play an often exploitative role, often resulting in the exploitation and marginalisation of artisans. It is quite common for both groups of artisans to take up home-based piecework, 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, whereas the *zardozi* industry in Old Delhi does not have a similar 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 factories of high-end designers who often cater to the film industry. However, what is common among *zardozi* production in these diverse places is its association with Mughal courtly culture and a perceived Muslim aesthetic.

⁷ I discuss Wilkinson-Weber’s work in more detail in Chapter 3.

In addition to the differing ways in which the two styles of embroidery are related to place, there are also differences in how artisans conceptualise 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 artisans, 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 the origin of the craft 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, most artisans stated in a factual manner 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.⁸

The third distinction between the *chikan-kari* and *zardozi* industries is the gendered aspect of production. In Lucknow the craft 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 “sell” 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*. She 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 cannot be so easily typified

⁸See Chapter 6 for a discussion of narrative forms that invoke “the time of the Mughals”.

and categorised by aspects of gendered 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 realised during fieldwork was that the composition of craftspeople involved in *zardozi* is extremely heterogeneous. This is partly due to the nature of Delhi as a magnet for people in search of work and partly due to the state of *zardozi* as a semi-industry, with characteristics of both commercialised and home-based production. The people involved in the craft also came from diverse backgrounds. 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 artisans 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 of *zardozi* had been passed down for generations. I met migrants (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 highly skilled artisans, both 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 artisans 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 artisans, usually men, who had successfully made the transition from crafts-person to business-person and presided over a large portion of the supply chain or had opened their own businesses. I knew artisans who specialised in doing embroidery on handbags, belts, saris and cushion covers, and I met artisans who seemed to be competent in many styles of embroidery. The only commonality I could discern was that most of the artisans, whether businessmen, home-based, from Bihar or Delhi, were predominantly Sunni Muslims.

As a result of this plurality and difference, it is impossible to subsume all the various people involved in the industry under a homogenising identity. Even the label “artisans of Old Delhi” can be misleading and contentious because not all people who produce *zardozi* work are referred to as artisans, or *karigar* in Urdu. For example, some of the women I knew who did *zardozi* as a supplement to the family income referred to themselves as labourers, or *mazdoor*, instead of artisans, even when they were highly skilled. This was most likely because they saw themselves as only doing *zardozi* temporarily until the family could be sufficiently provided for by the husband’s or son’s income. Once the supplemental income was no longer needed, the women would not take any more piecework orders, even though many would continue to do the work for leisure or in their spare time. However, it was quite clear that when they did the work for a wage and were aware of being part of a supply chain, they considered themselves as labourers and not artisans.

In the next section, I will consider some of the methodological issues that came up while conducting fieldwork in this complex and highly diverse context.

4. METHODOLOGICAL POINTS

Discussions on methodology allow an introspective space in which to convey some of the dimensions of ethnographic research by considering not only the conditions of the place, or the “site”, but also the impact and positionality of the researcher’s own role. Dedicating liberal amounts of writing space to reflexive encounters in the field is not merely an exercise in stating one’s opinion about the field experience – such a narrative, I believe, would be better suited to a different genre of writing such as a

memoir or an autobiography. Instead, I want to intentionally focus on certain emergent methodological points, because these not only impacted the type of research I was able to conduct, but they also present a commentary on the dynamics of what it means to be a Muslim in India today. This is a fundamental question that underlies my research with artisans in Old Delhi and through this methodological discussion, I hope, a contribution will be made to understanding how certain aspects of identity can be understood and constituted.

4.1 Naming

First let me begin on a personal note. My name is Mira Mohsini. I was born in Canada to middle-class Muslim parents – my father was born in India and my mother was born in Pakistan. Although my parents received some religious education, both came from families who had opted for the “secular modernist” position during the pre- and post- Independence period. Thus two generations down the road, there was very little inclination to instil formal religious training into my hybrid French-Canadian-American education. My consciousness as a Muslim was latent, but, at the most optimistic reading, it was probably nearing extinction.

This near lack of consciousness was jolted during my fieldwork in Old Delhi. I was suddenly confronted with the prospect of being entirely consumed by a religious identity that I had inadvertently projected. This assumed religious identity was initially not even Muslim, but a Hindu one, because in my early meetings with artisans, I would casually introduce myself as Mira, a fairly common Hindu name. At the initial stages of fieldwork, as I was preoccupied with navigating the unfamiliar and often uncomfortable aspects of gaining access to artisans, I was unaware that

certain kinds of claims and judgements were made based on my name. However, this unawareness quickly gave way to a very acute awareness of what my name could mean for others in a particular context at a particular time. Thus initially I conducted my fieldwork amongst Muslims in Old Delhi giving the impression that I was Hindu. Whether this may or may not be problematic is not one of my concerns, but what I want to stress is that the perceptions of a researcher's role and biography can have a considerable impact not only on access, but also on the kind of information imparted (see Marcus 1999, Mosse 2006, Owen 2003). Allow me to give two brief ethnographic examples of how I experienced a marked shift in my relationships with people in Old Delhi when my perceived identity changed from Hindu to Muslim.

Najma was one of the first women artisans I met in Old Delhi. I visited her joint family home a number of times and on our third meeting she had arranged to take me to a workshop where *zardozi* was done. She told me quite a few times that this workshop was owned by a Hindu woman. So I accompanied Najma and her son for the short walk to the workshop. I spent a few hours there and observed the work being done and interviewed "the Hindu woman". By this time I had become fairly comfortable around Najma and since her teenage son walked either behind or ahead of us at a fair distance, I spoke openly with her. On our walk back from the workshop, we were casually chatting about my stay in Delhi, as she was intrigued by the fact that I was here alone and my parents were far away. I told her that my mother may come to visit me while also making a trip to see her father in Karachi. I noticed immediately that Najma's footsteps became shorter and her pace slowed down. She asked me if my mother was Pakistani, to which I said yes. Then she stopped and asked me if I'm Muslim, to which I hesitated and said yes. Najma broke out into a wide grin and

slapped me on the shoulder while making a sound that can only be translated as “hey stupid, why didn’t you say so before!” After the minor shock had subsided (or at least it looked to me as if Najma was shocked by the revelation), a barrage of invitations came my way. She told me that I must come back to visit her and that whenever my mother comes to India we must stay with her, or at least have dinner at her home. She offered any assistance she could provide with my research and stay in Delhi. All I could say at that time repeatedly was *shukriya* (thank you), smile and nod my head with appreciation. Even without the benefit of hindsight, at the time I sensed a definite change in the way Najma related to me. Of course I took up as many of her invitations as possible after realising I had acquired from Najma one of the most elusive, contingent and sought-after dimensions of fieldwork: trust.

In another incident around the same time, I was visiting a large *zardozi* workshop off one of the main bazaar roads in Old Delhi. This area is commonly known as Jama Masjid (Friday Mosque), although the famous mosque is not very close by. Yet, because the residents of this locale are predominately Muslim, as opposed to other areas of Old Delhi like Chandini Chowk or Sadar Bazaar, it has acquired the ubiquitous label of “Jama Masjid”. I was visiting the workshop to meet the owner for a second time, since our first meeting was cut short due to his departure for evening prayer at the mosque. This time I came in the afternoon in the hopes of speaking with him for a longer period, but when I arrived he was not there. So my research assistant and I (more about this later) decided to wait in the shop adjacent to the workshop for the owner to arrive. This shop sold intricately embroidered textiles – usually wedding *lehngas* and *saris* – mostly for the local market. We sat on one of the low benches, facing the stacks of folded clothes that mostly came in varieties of red, orange and

purple. There was a young man in the shop – I later found out he was the owner’s son – who was cordial towards us, although I sensed he was not entirely comfortable with our presence. The young man made attempts to talk with us, but these were short-lived and awkward. Luckily he was spared having to interact with us for much longer because a group of burqa-clad women walked into the shop and he immediately attended to them.

While I was sitting on the bench and progressively getting bored, I started to flip through my notebook where I had jotted down some words and sentences in Urdu. While I was reading what I had written and practicing my Urdu script writing, the owner returned and greeted us. He saw my open notebook and with a hint of surprise he asked me if I could read Urdu, to which I replied yes. He looked very happy and settled down comfortably in front of us and began chatting in a far more casual way than before. Although, unlike Najma, he didn’t ask me outright if I was Muslim, I did notice a marked difference in his posture and the way he spoke to us. He was much more forthcoming to answer the questions I had prepared and our conversation became less of an interview and more of an informal chat. He offered some interesting insights from the perspective of a businessman and workshop owner (*karkhandar*) and agreed to let us observe and talk to the artisans in the workshop next door. I cannot say for certain if the owner’s change in attitude towards me was because of my possible “qualifications” as a Muslim, but I can say for certain that, as with Najma, a higher degree of trust and openness was established after this meeting.

Over the course of my fieldwork there were many similar incidents where my perceived identity as a Hindu was exposed as false and my “true” Muslim identity

surfaced. This shift in the way people related to me made me aware of how much a projected identity – even one projected simply by a name – could so clearly determine the basis of inclusion or exclusion, familiarity or unfamiliarity. This is nothing new, but considering the context of Old Delhi, these observations could point to the broader implications of how Muslim artisans perceive their own positionality amongst a larger non-Muslim, predominantly Hindu, population. Whether this positionality arises from a sense of alienation and insecurity about their situation in Indian society at large or from pragmatism that is a part of living an “informal life” (Bayat 2007) will be examined in more depth in the following chapters.

4.2 *Research Assistant*

I decided to hire a research assistant during my fieldwork because very early on I realised the difficulties of gaining access to families in Old Delhi as a single woman. It was not only my status as a single woman that initially proved a barrier to gaining access, but also the fact that it was my first time in Old Delhi. I had no contact there to introduce me to the area, let alone to artisan families, so I resorted to making my own introductions by simply knocking on people’s doors. Doing fieldwork, I very soon realised, is not as enchanting as one may imagine. I was equipped with no more than a list of addresses of artisans who had won the state or national award, which I had obtained from the Craft Revival Trust, and a notebook with few basic questions. This potentially awkward approach to gaining “access”, by knocking on people’s doors and hoping for the best, was certainly made easier with the company of a female research assistant. Although arriving randomly as two female students conducting research on *zardozi* did not dispel a level of awkwardness and anxiety at

first meet (or even at subsequent meetings), I was certain that I had maintained a level of decent reputation that may have been more likely questioned had I arrived alone.

Moving around Old Delhi in twos proved to be beneficial because of another rather mundane issue that unwittingly dominated my fieldwork experience: getting lost, often for hours, in an attempt to locate a residence. It was less about safety and more an issue of proper comportment. Rarely did I see single females going around by themselves in those neighbourhoods that I frequented. On occasions when I did go on my own, I drew far more attention to myself than usual and it was not long before I realised that my comings and goings did not go unnoticed. Thus, as much of my fieldwork was spent roaming the lanes of Old Delhi searching for people's houses and *zardozi* workshops and then eventually meeting families, I decided not to pursue this endeavour alone. I was also acutely aware that as a person who could be identified as Indian, albeit not "local", I would need to be cognisant of and adhere to certain expectations. To be known as someone with "*izzat*" or with an embodied sense of respectfulness, was crucial in order to gain access to artisans and their families.⁹

At the time of fieldwork, my research assistant, Sinjini, was a student at Jawaharlal Nehru University. As both of us were students of around the same age, we were accepted by many artisans as what we were: probing students who were conducting research for university purposes. This facilitated our work since our questioning posed no threat and our reasons for continuously returning could be well understood,

⁹ Sarah Caldwell discusses the trials of being a woman conducting fieldwork in Kerala. She writes that visibly being a good citizen was crucial in order to be accepted by the community and in this effort she modified her behaviour by "adopting the dress, diet, and habits of an upper-class educated Malayali woman." (1999: 55) But nonetheless, she writes, "I could not fully achieve the desired effect...as my work required me to travel, be out at night, and have much more contact with men than would be acceptable for any Kerala female." (ibid)

although after a few months, I resorted to saying that we were doing long-term research in order to write a book about *zardozi* artisans. As has been discussed by other anthropologists who employ research assistants (e.g. Visweswaran 1994), this dynamic can also be advantageous as there are more eyes and ears to observe interactions and the surrounding environment. After meeting with artisans or en route to a workshop, we would usually discuss the bigger themes that were developing or plot newer lines of questioning.

Sinjini was not only my colleague but became a good friend and an invaluable resource during fieldwork. She had grown up in Calcutta and her first language was Bengali. Sinjini's positionality, especially vis-à-vis language and regional affiliation was to become an asset, which I had not foreseen. Together we visited a number of workshops where some *zardozi* was done, but which were predominantly engaged in *ari* embroidery, a technique that requires lesser skills and training than *zardozi*. Many of these workshops employed young men who had come to Delhi, mostly from Bihar and West Bengal, as migrants in search of work. Although they spoke Urdu, many of these young men's native language was Bengali and hence they were quite keen to speak with Sinjini once they found out that she was from Calcutta and spoke Bengali more easily than Hindi. Accessing and making contacts with these migrant men was one of the most challenging aspects of my fieldwork, since the owners of workshops had complete control over who could speak with their employees. When access was granted, the all-male environment proved to be another barrier to talking easily with younger men, although most of the older men were more willing to talk to us. In such an environment, Sinjini's knowledge of Bengali and the fact that she was from West Bengal was often an ice-breaker that allowed conversation to flow more easily. This

way, I was able to interact with young men who came from villages on the Bihar and West Bengal border and who had entered the *zardozi* industry from a young age. I discuss the migrant experience at greater length elsewhere in the thesis (see Chapter 4).

5. RESEARCH QUESTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Given the heterogeneity of the *zardozi* industry in Old Delhi I had to make a decision about which aspect of craft production I wanted to focus on. I decided to look at the predicament of urban Muslim artisans from the perspective of those who are considered by themselves and others as real, authentic artisans. This choice came about after reflecting on many of the conversations and interactions I had with artisans and noticing the regularity with which certain terms were used. These terms alluded to notions of what is considered real and authentic (*asli*) versus what is fake and inauthentic (*naqli*). Why was this distinction being made? What were the conditions in which it emerged? As I learned more about the lives and aspirations of artisans, I also learned that it was, above all, their acute marginalisation as both artisans and Muslims that created the conditions in which conceptions of authenticity had emerged. As Charles Lindholm writes, “it is more likely that the quest for a felt authentic grounding becomes increasingly pressing as certainty is eroded.” (2002: 337) While dealing with uncertainty was a large part of being an artisan – it was almost impossible to obtain work consistently and there was a great deal of competition among artisans to secure work – there was a bigger issue at stake that pertained to the process of marginalisation. Urban Muslim artisans, I will argue, have been almost wholly excluded from the constructs of the nation-state and are denied the possibility of becoming subjects within this broader, normative construct. As this predicament became clearer, I eventually realised that the choices of terms used, who used them

and how they became embodied in the person speaking them, profoundly indicated how these artisans aspired to present themselves from positions of marginalisation. Therefore, the primary research question of this thesis is: *How do urban Muslim artisans constitute themselves as real, authentic craft producers or, in their own words, as an “asli karigar”?*

Posing this research question brings up a series of secondary themes that are related to current debates on the formation of Muslim subjectivities, thereby expanding the relevance of this study beyond artisanal groups.¹⁰ Within this body of scholarship, much of the work has focused on piety, morality and the embodiment of rituals (see Hirschkind 2006, Mahmood 2005), with less attention paid to the “everydayness” of Muslim lives and experiences (see Marsden 2005, Schielke 2009). In studies of Muslims in India, we see a scholarship that tends to focus on the role of Islamic reform movements, such as the Jamaat-e-Islami or Tablighi Jamaat, or the role of Sufi shrines in the lives of Indian Muslims.¹¹ But what are the aspirations and experiences of Muslims, such as the artisans I worked with, who do not overtly assert their affiliation to so-called Islamic “reform” movements or do not engage in ecstatic Sufi “shrine worship”? By looking at the lives of urban Muslim artisans, we get a sense of the strategies and discourses in the everydayness that constitutes the formation of subaltern Muslim subjectivities. Such everydayness is often part of living an “informal life” from the margins whereby presentations and performances of self are characterised by flexibility, pragmatism and self-development (Bayat 2007), in

¹⁰ Recently, numerous studies have been conducted in a range of Muslim contexts that look into the constitution of Muslim subjectivities. For example, see Deeb 2006, Henkel 2008, Mahmood 2005, Marsden 2005, Osella and Osella 2009, Simon 2009.

¹¹ For work on the Jamaat-e-Islami see Ahmad 2008; on the Tablighi Jamaat see Metcalf 2002, Sikand 2002. For a discussion on the impact of Islamic reformism on the weaving community in Banaras, see Searle-Chatterjee 1994. There is a vast literature on the role of Sufi shrine worship in South Asia. See Eaton 1978, Ernst 1992, Ewing 1997, Green 2006, Van der Veer 1992, Werbner and Basu 1998.

addition to moral-ethical dispositions informed by Islamic practices and rituals. Thus, the broader theoretical position of this thesis focuses on subject formation and the location of agency from spaces of marginality. It is this theoretical position that I will elaborate in the following section, as it sets the groundwork on which I approach the primary research question – how is the real, authentic artisan constituted?

5.1 *On Locating Agency*

What happens when people are so marginalised and excluded from the broader constructs of history that even normative discourses about them are not extant?¹² I will argue that Muslim artisans in particular are in such a position for two reasons. Firstly, the objects these artisans produce for the marketplace become fetishised because they are disembedded from the context of their making, and, in many cases, disembedded from their historical relevance. Unlike Gell's theory of agency (1998), whereby objects of art can often imbue their maker with agency, the *zardozi* embroidered objects do not necessarily imbue artisans with agency through the materiality of the objects they make. The people behind the material objects remain often invisible and unacknowledged.¹³ Secondly, the discursive and rhetorical accounts of history in postcolonial India have borne the legacy of colonial and Orientalist fictions about Muslims and thus have nearly written them out of the progressive story of nationhood. I will discuss these processes in more detail in the next two chapters. Both of these reasons have culminated in a situation whereby

¹² Here I employ the concept of the norm, as Foucault (1989) has, to suggest the historically-specific discursive production of distinctions that set out what is acceptable and what is not.

¹³ An exception to the invisibility of artisans and lack of agency transferred from object to maker is during the annual State and National award competitions for highly skilled artisans. In this competition, artisans are named as winners in their craft category based on the piece they submit. However, these competitions are also spaces of contestation whereby the agentic relationship between object and maker is not clear cut. I discuss the various ways artisans approach these government sponsored competitions in Chapter 7. For a discussion on the ways that interactions between artisans and the state lead to forms of agency see Venkatesan 2009a. For a discussion of the multiple and competing discourses surrounding the award competitions see Bundgaard 1996.

Indian Muslim artisans are barely attributed agency as producers and are even less acknowledged as agents producing their own discourses of normativity. While it is certainly true that normativity and hegemony go hand-in-hand, as the former cannot come into existence without the power of the latter, to deny, nevertheless, a group's aspirations to produce structures of normativity is to limit severely the spaces of agency. To recover these aspirations is to recover voices yet unheard, but the question is where to locate such spaces of agency?

I suggest that we look towards aspects of performativity in order to locate spaces of agency. Judith Butler most prominently put forth a theory of performativity with particular reference to the formation of gendered subjectivities (see Butler 1999 [1990], 1993). The premise of the theory is that there are already existing norms, such as gender and race that have been constructed by the repetition of certain "performances". Butler draws from one classic example of a "performance" – the Althusserian interpellation – where a person becomes a subject (or inhabits a "subject-effect") when he or she responds by turning around after being called to stop by the police. Butler proposes that the possibility of subverting established norms can be realised through a different set of iterative performances. The example she gives is the performance of drag as a way to "trouble" the (hetero) normativity of gender (Butler 1999 [1990]). Here Butler wants to "expose the tenuousness of gender 'reality' in order to counter the violence performed by gender norms." (1999 [1990]: xxv) The case for troubling gender is to emphasise the instability, partiality and contingency of identities that, because they constitute normative constructs, appear to be stable, fixed and reified (cf. Kondo 1990, Strathern 1988).

Although the presumed reality (of hetero-normativity, in Butler's case) becomes exposed as unstable, the premise still remains that such a "reality" or normative construct exists, albeit one that is brought into existence through a set of routine or "ritualized" performances.¹⁴ However, where can one locate agency when the referential sign of the "norm" has not yet even been produced? Challenging Butler's theory of performativity, Saba Mahmood (2005) suggests, in one of her most important arguments, that agency can also be located in spaces where certain dispositions are cultivated through embodied practices and not necessarily in the spaces geared towards resistance of norms. Instead of necessarily locating agency in acts of resistance or subversion of norms, Mahmood wants to "think about the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, *aspired to, reached for, and consummated.*" (2005: 23 my emphasis) Coming back to the case of Muslim artisans and the question of how to locate spaces of agency, I suggest that the presentations of a real, authentic self can be read as performances that *seek to establish the meaning of the normative.* In this case, if we accept that the normative is an ideal – or something that is acceptable and something that is not – then there is an accompanying *aspiration* in order to attain that ideal. But, in the case of Muslim artisans, their marginalised status has led to a situation whereby their aspirations are undefined and unknown within the constructs of the nation-state and therefore there is little understanding of how such aspirations are being realised. Without knowing the particulars of aspirational discourses – those that set the parameters of normativity, however temporary and unstable these may be – we are then at pains to appreciate manifestations of agency that do not necessarily take their point of departure as forms

¹⁴ Amy Hollywood (2002) provides a critique of Butler's under-theorisation of the term "ritual" as a crucial aspect of performance. Hollywood elaborates on Derrida's important insight that repetition has a temporal dimension, whereby the presumed sameness of the act occurs in different places and at different times. Therefore, ritual is repetition with difference and it is this difference that creates spaces of "slippage" where, according to Butler, the possibility of agency (as resistance) is located.

of resistance. In this thesis, I will demonstrate that the process of realising normativity is also the process of cultivating a real, authentic (*asli*) self that is marked by performativity.

With reference to the *process* of cultivating an ideal, Mahmood writes that, “instead of innate human desires eliciting outward forms of conduct, it is the sequence of practices and actions one is engaged in that determines one’s desires and emotions. In other words, action does not issue forth from natural feelings but *creates* them.” (2005: 157 original emphasis) Mahmood’s point is crucial for two reasons: First, it asserts that the self is produced – essentially through the inversion of cause and effect – and secondly that the body is critical to the production of self, rather than being subordinated to the mind. The Cartesian distinction between mind and body, between interior and exterior, is demonstrably untenable according to this theoretical perspective. In other words, the body cannot be understood as a mechanical instantiation of the will of the mind.¹⁵ Thomas Csordas developed early on his “paradigm of embodiment” (1990) as a way of rethinking how the body comes to be appropriated in anthropology. He writes that, “to understand the body as the biological raw material on which culture operates has the effect of excluding the body from original and primordial participation in the domain of culture, making the body in effect ‘pre-cultural’ substrate. Mind is then invariably the subject and body is an object either ‘in itself’ or one that is ‘good to think.’ Little space remains to problematize the *alternative formation of body as the source of subjectivity*, and mind as the locus of objectification.” (Csordas 1994: 8-9 my emphasis)

¹⁵ Many anthropologists and theorists have argued against such a distinction, e.g. Bourdieu 1977, Connerton 1989, Csordas 1994, Jackson 1989, Marchand 2001, Merleau-Ponty 1962, Stoller 1995.

The body as the source of subjectivity becomes a concern in Foucault's later works where he focuses on the bodies upon which discourses work to discipline (i.e. technologies of the self). He argues that a marked historical shift occurred in the way bodies were perceived, beginning with a movement away from the Aristotelian notion of "care for oneself" towards "knowledge of oneself". To "care for oneself" involved the entire immersion of the body into the activities at hand and the incorporation of *techne*, or skilled practice, into everyday life. It entailed, as Foucault writes, "not abstract advice but widespread activity, a network of obligations and services to the soul." (1988: 27) On the other hand, "knowledge of oneself" implied firstly acquiring knowledge *about* one's self and then holding such knowledge to be true. Therefore, it entailed the concept of *a priori* whereby the "progressive consideration of self, or mastery over oneself, [was] obtained not through the renunciation of reality but through the acquisition and assimilation of truth." (ibid: 35) Foucault argues that what we have inherited in our modernity is the primacy of the concept of "knowledge of oneself" (cf. Asad 1993, Gillespie 2008) This shift from the generative capacity of embodied knowledge to the distinction between knowledge and self (where the former is an *a priori* condition for the latter) has been raised as a cause for concern and re-evaluation, as demonstrated by the philosophy of theorists such as John Dewey's pragmatism and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology (Dewey 1938, Merleau-Ponty 1962). For example, Dewey's pragmatism is based on the principle of "learning by doing" that re-appropriates the generative possibilities of embodied knowledge and dissolves the distinction between knowledge as precedent to experience. Instead, according to Dewey, knowledge is generated through and by experience.

Drawing on the Aristotelian notion of *techne*, or skilled practice, Tim Ingold exposes the artificiality of the mind/body dichotomy, which has nonetheless driven ideas of industrialisation and mechanical production (Ingold 2000; also see Ingold and Hallam 2007). He discusses the etymology of the word “technology”, which has become a central concept in the industrial (and post industrial) era. From its Greek derivation of *techne* and *logos*, the meaning of these two words when combined was the art of reasoning.¹⁶ But the contemporary re-appropriation of the word “technology” has in fact reversed its prior meaning to be “the rational principles that govern the construction of artefacts – or more simply, the reason of art rather than the art of reason.” (Ingold 2000: 294) This radical reformulation implies that before one can engage in skilled practice there must necessarily be a prior design (i.e. reason or rationality). Skilled practice is reduced to merely a mechanical reproduction of a pre-existing design, in which the design – not the process of production – is the source of creativity (see Benjamin 1936; cf. Ingold and Hallam 2007). In his essay titled “On weaving a basket”, Ingold argues that such a formulation is not tenable because rather than the *a priori* being generative (i.e. the mind-centric design, knowledge or reason), it is embodied practices, gestures and actions and their repetition that are generative of form and thus knowledge (this is similar to the Deweyan concept of “learning by doing”). With reference to weaving a basket, Ingold writes,

“According to the standard view, the form pre-exists in the maker’s mind, and is simply impressed upon the material. Now I do not deny that the basket-maker may begin work with a pretty clear idea of the form she wishes to create. The actual, concrete form of the basket, however, does not issue from the idea. It rather comes into being through the gradual unfolding of the field of forces set up through the active and sensuous engagement of practitioner and material. The field is neither internal to the material nor internal to the practitioner (hence external to the material); rather, it cuts across the emergent interface between them. Effectively, the form of the basket emerges through a

¹⁶ For a discussion on the distinction between the concepts of *techne* and *episteme*, see Marglin 1990.

pattern of *skilled movement*, and it is the rhythmic repetition of that movement that gives rise to regularity of form.” (2000: 342 original emphasis)

At this point I would refer the reader back to Csordas’s contention that it is the body that is the source of subjectivity and Mahmood’s argument that feelings and desires are created through actions. Thus, my own position bears on these theories, whereby the self is not a bounded stable object, “unproblematically given, or as an essential, preexisting sense to be fashioned.” (Battaglia 1995: 1) Instead, the cultivation of agency – a process of becoming – is generated through actions, gestures and practices, or in other words, through embodied performances.

Butler writes, “[t]o claim that the subject is itself produced...is not to do away with the subject, but only to ask after the conditions of its emergence and operation.”

(Butler 1993: 7) This, of course, begs the question as to what are the conditions in which the self emerges and operates. Michael Jackson (1996) has argued that subjectivity is first and foremost cultivated and produced in relation to others, intersubjectively, and is a matter of “inter-experience”. He writes that a “person becomes a subject herself by first becoming an object for others – by incorporating the view that others have of her. The self arises in social experience...which is why one’s sense of self is unstable and varies from context to context.” (Jackson 1996: 26) The social experience in which the variable self is produced in relation to others occurs in a broader context and, as such, it becomes imperative to describe this context in which norms are aspired to and realised. To describe this situated context in all its complexity, I prefer to use the concept of “lifeworld”, a term used in phenomenology. Jackson defines the lifeworld as “that domain of everyday, immediate social existence and practical activity, with all its habituality, its crises, its vernacular and idiomatic

character, its biographical particularities, its decisive events and indecisive strategies, which theoretical knowledge addresses but does not determine” (1996: 8). The lifeworld, however, is not coterminous with normative structures. The emphasis of the lifeworld is in its complexities and tensions, in its heterogeneity and its inability neither to be consolidated theoretically nor to be determined conceptually. The lifeworld, then, can incorporate normative structures, but cannot be reduced to them. In the next section, I attempt to capture the inter-subjectivity involved in the production of self by recounting a saying told to me by an artisan in Old Delhi. In this example, I use an aspect of the lifeworld – the vernacular – in order to situate the condition of the emergence of the subject.

5.2 *The Rafoogar Condition*

The following saying was recounted to me by Gulzaar, a highly skilled artisan who I will introduce in more detail in a later chapter of this thesis.

“If you are wearing a shawl and rats eat part of it and then you touch it up with work that is not as good as the original, you will know it is not up to the mark and other people will know too.”

The importance of this saying is that it metaphorically demonstrates the broader theoretical position that I have discussed above. In the saying, the shawl in question has been eaten by rats, making the fabric of the piece un-whole, fragmented and partial. The value and authenticity of the piece has diminished due to an attack by voracious assailants. However, this could be a mere contingency, a historical one if you will, since textiles are particularly vulnerable to the ravages of time and all that such conditions entail. According to the saying, the real cause for lament is that the re-stitching and re-making of this shawl has been done in such a sub-standard manner that not only is the agent of the re-making cognisant of the deficiency, but so is

everyone else. Not only is the shawl a poorly reconstructed version of the formerly pristine version, but also, in the shawl's deficiency, others who view the object have produced the agent of its reproduction as sub-standard (*chalu*). In the saying, the re-stitching of the shawl by the *rafoogar*, or a highly specialised darning¹⁷, is essentially about the continuous re-making of the self. The conception of self is constituted not only through reflection on one's own performances or "knowledge of oneself", but also comes into being in relation to others.

The "*rafoogar* condition" is essential to addressing the focal question of this thesis, namely, how is the real, authentic artisan, or the "*asli karigar*", constituted? In the particular way I have posed the question, its core concept, the "real, authentic artisan" is a translation of the Urdu term, *asli karigar*, which many *zardozi* artisans employed to make specific distinctions. These distinctions will become clearer through the various discussions in the thesis and will help to unpack the concept of the real, authentic artisan. For the present it should suffice to explain that my appropriation of the terms used by the people I worked with in order to develop the central question for this thesis is not simply a tactic to imbue forms of authority to "indigenous" or "folk" concepts. Rather, I follow Mahmood's (2005) position that such an appropriation allows for the opening up of spaces of agency, which would otherwise be less visible for analytical examination. Mahmood quotes philosopher Ian Hacking regarding the issue of analysing concepts: "[A] concept is nothing other than a word in its sites. That means attending to a variety of types of sites: the sentences in which the word is actually (not potentially) used, those who speak those sentences, with what authority, in what institutional settings, in order to influence whom, with what consequences for the speakers" (quoted in Mahmood 2005: 180) The importance of paying attention to

¹⁷ A *rafoogar* is often a specialist in re-stitching old and worn fabrics. *Rafoogars* have been most commonly known to re-make very old and intricate Kashmiri shawls.

the different types of sites that concepts come to inhabit is incumbent to the question of how the real, authentic artisan is constituted. The various sites that Hacking includes resemble the contours and constituent aspects of the lifeworld. What I have called the “*rafoogar* condition” is derived from one such site of concept formation – the idiomatic realm of the saying (*kahavat*). The saying alludes to the inter-subjective performance of presenting an aspect of self through the skilled (or in this case less skilled or less careful) practice of repairing/re-producing an object. By not dismissing sites of concept formation and other particularities of context, I seek to recover the possibility for urban Muslim artisans to become subjects in the spaces where normativity is aspired to and not necessarily where it is subverted or resisted. I use each of the ethnographic chapters to elaborate on the various sites (contexts) in which the cultivation of a particular kind of self is performed.

5.3 On Locating Authenticity

Before moving on to outline the structure of the thesis, there is one concept that remains to be discussed. This is the concept of authenticity. As mentioned above, the driving research question of the thesis arose from the terminologies employed by artisans themselves to differentiate characteristics associated with what is considered authentic versus inauthentic. These various terms were used quite regularly in different contexts, but one word that most stood out was *asli*. In Urdu, *asli* is translated as real, original or authentic. The term, as it was used by artisans, conveyed a sense of excellence in skill and a thorough knowledge of *zardozi*. However, becoming an “*asli karigar*” meant much more than learning the skills to do intricate embroidery; the “real, authentic artisan” was also cultivated in various other sites of performativity.

In the above discussion on the production of the subject, the notion of authenticity becomes inherent to such a production. To become authentic is to aspire to an ideal. The concept of “*asli*” is a norm or standard to be achieved; however, what constitutes “*asli*” is contested and therefore is produced in relation to others. Jonathan Shannon’s work with musicians in Syria clearly demonstrates how authenticity is created in the performer by virtue of the audience’s reactions and gestures. If the audience is emotionally moved or becomes ecstatic by listening to the music, then the audience confers on the performer the necessary qualities of authenticity, such as sincerity and a so-called “Oriental spirit” (Shannon 2006). Another example of the conferral of authenticity through inter-relations is exemplified in public performances of Islamic moral virtues, or what has been called, “authenticated Islam” (Deeb 2006). According to Deeb, “authenticated Islam” is about visibly showing *others* that one knows how to practice an “authentic” Islam, such as daily prayer, avoiding shaking hands with non-kin and wearing modest clothing, including the veil.¹⁸ So-called Islamic “reform” movements have emphasised the actions and deeds that are necessary in order to live a morally upright Muslim life. However, many of these reform movements that differentiate authentic Islamic practices from inauthentic ones provide grounds for contestation. By separating “real Muslims” from “other Muslims”, they serve to fragment claims to an all-encompassing and unified Muslim community (Schulz 2008; see also Simon 2009). Such contestations and public performances of morality suggest that authenticity, as an aspirational discourse, is produced in relation to others, and particularly in relation to what is deemed inauthentic. Shannon has called the discourses of authenticity “anti-discourses” because they “tend to be negative, that is,

¹⁸ For scholarly discussions on public displays of Islamic piety, see Brenner 1996, Schultz 2008, Soares 2004.

made through assertions about the inauthenticity of certain other cultural practices and less often via assertions about any specific attribute of the so-called ‘authentic’ practice” (2006: 171).

That authenticity is a *produced* modality of the self challenges received understandings of not only authenticity, but also conceptions of self that are derived from Western European philosophical traditions. In Western thought, the discourse of authenticity is premised on the notion of “knowledge of oneself” (see above; Foucault 1988) whereby the self is thought to be a bounded and fixed entity. In this formulation, living an inauthentic life means not having access to one’s true self and it connects authenticity with the drive for greater individuality, which “allows people to locate ultimate reality within themselves.” (Handler 1986: 3) Psychoanalytic theory, which has greatly influenced the practice of anthropology (cf. Ewing 1997), is premised on the notion of an existing universal and essential self that experiences the notion of repression or the notion of “lack” (the classic example is the Oedipus Complex). In this theoretical framework, the ego develops by repressing the desires of the Id, and as a result the inauthentic self is produced. Language is insufficient for giving access to the true self because from the early childhood repression of desires, humans have lost the means to articulate the authentic self, apart from when utterances such as the “Freudian slip” emerge (see Weiner 1999). What remains fundamental to the discovery of the elusive human essence is that in order to locate authenticity within one’s true self, one must struggle and resist the constraints that form part of social experiences. Many European philosophers situate authenticity within resistance to norms and conventions that inhibit the realisation of one’s authentic self as well as resistance to the alienating and universalising facets of modernity, particularly

following the Industrial Revolution. “The demand for individual authenticity requires a struggle against the forces that betray one’s nature, originality, creativity, and being.” (Lee 1997: 32) Within such philosophical traditions, the most extreme formulations of the true self locate authenticity in death (e.g. Heidegger).

In opposition to such formulations of authenticity, I argue that authenticity is produced through action-based, outward-oriented performances. Whether a performance is authentic or not is gauged in relation to others by virtue of being an “anti-discourse” and as such this performance of authenticity is never stable. Instead, following Deleuze (1994), the performance of authenticity is a *becoming* where fixity and a cause-effect continuum are displaced by possibility and difference. In addition, this conception of authenticity is based more on *techne*, or skilled practice – doing something with “consummate excellence” (Mahmood 2005: 129) – than on a desire to locate authenticity in a true and essential self. Thus authenticity, as a form of subjectivity, arises “in the dimension of processual creativity” (Guattari 1995) and, again following Deleuze, bears on the transformative quality of life, “which through encounters, constantly opens up new possibilities.” (Crang and Thrift 2000: 20) The cultivation of a real, authentic self also challenges Western based assumptions that authenticity can only be located out of resistance to normative structures, conventions and constraints (cf. Mahmood 2001). In the case of Muslim artisans with whom I worked, their discourses of authenticity were marked by aspirations towards realising conceptions of self that were not based on one true and stable self, but instead based on constantly and iteratively generating one’s self into becoming an “*asli karigar*”. One could become a real, authentic artisan through a multitude of means and could use different resources at one’s disposal. Some looked to historical narratives and

recounting family genealogies, others became authenticated through their cunning with the state, while others presented themselves as authentic by recounting all the places they had been invited to as a skilled artisan. During my fieldwork, I noticed that discourses of authenticity were produced on a daily basis, thus eliciting the “everydayness” of the formation of subaltern Muslim subjectivities, whereby performances of self were marked by both moral-ethical practices and by living an “informal life” from the spaces of marginality.

6. OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

The thesis is structured in a manner that reflects the marginalisation that urban Muslim artisans encounter today. However, while the core ethnographic chapters describe the current conditions of this segment of the urban poor and their involvement in the largely informal economy, no justice would be done to their current predicament without a historical account of their emergence. Therefore, Chapter 2 traces the emergence of urban Muslim artisans as an established group in North India. The latter part of this chapter then discusses the unmaking of Muslim identities beginning in the early colonial period, the legacy of which continues to have an impact on the lower classes and urban poor.

Chapter 3 is called “Urban Muslim Artisans in the Postcolonial Predicament” and picks up where Chapter 2 ended. Here I situate urban Muslim artisans in the positions of marginality with reference to the emergence of the nation-state. As I have argued, this group in particular has been excluded from the metanarratives of nation building. This chapter also serves as a literature review of ethnographic studies on artisanal groups in India, but out of this review it is clear that very little research has been

conducted on urban Muslim artisans. I conclude Chapter 3 with a discussion of how this artisanal group embodies alternative ways of studying “lived Islam” in South Asia, which casts aside analytic categories such as “syncretism” as ways of describing the everyday and lived experiences in the formation of Muslim subjectivities. The next four chapters constitute the main ethnographic chapters of this thesis.

Chapter 4 is called “The Real, the Fake and Others in between”. It introduces language and terminologies as a site of performance in the constitution of the “*asli karigar*”. The chapter is intended to illustrate the diversity of the *zardozi* industry in Old Delhi by looking at the ways in which certain relational distinctions are made from three different perspectives: From the perspective of the “*asli karigar*”, the migrant, and women – all of which form a part of this informal sector.

Chapter 5 is called “Embodying Ideal Work Practices”. Here I discuss a second site of performance where the “*asli karigar*” is produced: an artisan’s relationship to work. I discuss the ways in which artisans construct ideal work practices with reference to notions of cleanliness and worship. I suggest that the Islamic concept of *zikr*, or remembrance of God, provides the pedagogical basis whereby the real, authentic artisan comes to embody ideal work practices.

Chapter 6 is called “Narrative Performances: Temporality and the Making of an ‘*Asli Karigar*’”. In this chapter I locate another site of agency, namely different narrative forms that imbue the speaker with authenticity. The first type of narrative is one that refers to an idealised past, often articulated in the phrase, “the time of the Mughals” (*Mughalon ka zamana*). Many artisans look back to this historical period – often

described with reference to the last Mughal ruler, Bahadur Shah Zafar – as a time when their work was valued and held in high esteem. I suggest that such narratives are more about negotiations with present conditions of marginalisation and therefore are situated in a temporal framework defined by linearity. The second narrative form is articulated in sayings and stories with moral messages. This type of narrative is often invoked by artisans in order to provide a moral commentary with respect to their work and daily lives. The impact of these morally imbued narratives is that in their articulation, the linearity of time collapses and past and future time is transcended.

Chapter 7 is called “Contingent Lives: Engagement and Disengagement from the Margins”. In this final ethnographic chapter, I discuss a fourth site of performance when artisans encounter the largest and most influential patron of crafts today: the state. In the lifeworld of artisans, the search for patronage is marked by struggle and uncertainty, yet encounters with patrons also serve to reinforce the production of one’s self as an “*asli karigar*”. In this chapter I argue that the production of self as real and authentic rarely arises from stable or fixed trajectories and instead the “*asli*” self comes into being through performances within spaces of contingency. Reflecting on one’s life in the face of many other *possible* life trajectories often creates the context in which one’s self as real and authentic is realised. As uncertainty permeates the lives of artisans, this sense of impermanence leads to constructions of self that are based on contingency and shaped by improvisation. This improvisation means that artisans are constantly readjusting the ways in which they are oriented to that which is unfamiliar.

Chapter 8 is the concluding chapter where I bring together and summarise the main themes and findings of this thesis.

Chapter 2

The Emergence and Decline of Urban Muslim Artisans



1. INTRODUCTION

“A city may be defined as a place where artisans (*pisha-var*) of various kinds dwell.”

- Abu al-Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*¹⁹

The objective of this chapter is to provide a historical account of the rise and development of Muslim artisans in India and also to account for their ever deepening marginalisation. The chapter is structured in two parts.

First I describe the conditions of the rise of urban artisans and their crafts, especially with reference to Muslim artisans who historically formed the core of urban crafts production in India since the emergence of so-called Islamicate states in the thirteenth century. I argue that, historically, a combination of factors, from the rapid urbanisation of many cities in the subcontinent to the specificities of Muslim expansion and rule, combined to create the conditions where urban crafts were a vital part of the political economy of empire-building. Also essential to the growth of urban artisans was the establishment and popularity of Sufism among the lower classes and

¹⁹ Quoted in Blake 1991:105.

urban poor. With their often antagonistic position towards the ruling elites, the Sufis often aligned themselves with the lower classes and urban poor and instilled the ideologies and praxis of a work ethic that continues to this day.

The second and lengthier part of the chapter is dedicated to tracing the conditions whereby Muslim artisans became increasingly marginalised. I situate this marginalisation within colonial representations of the “Other” and in particular the creation of the Muslim “Other” in India. I discuss two forms of colonial praxis that adversely affected Muslim artisans. The first I call the “Colonial-Orientalist Praxis”, which characterised the early ambitions of British officials to gather facts about India, particularly through the use and interpretation of religious texts resulting in the strict division of “Hindu” and “Muslim” codes of practice. The second form of colonial praxis I call “Colonial-Scientific” to illustrate the shift in British attitudes towards acquiring knowledge about India. In this late form of colonialism there is a greater drive to classify the “natives” and an emergence of a discourse on origins. Finally, I conclude the chapter with two examples of how the British represented Indian Muslims as being corrupt, despotic, and an embodiment of the “mystic East”. In particular, I focus on the British stagings of imperial assemblages or *durbars* and then discuss the production of so-called “curiosities” by looking into the history surrounding one such *zardozi* embroidered object.

2. THE EMERGENCE OF URBAN MUSLIM ARTISANS IN INDIA

20 March, 2007. Chitli Qabar, Old Delhi. On a fairly mild evening, I was sitting with Mansoor, a well-known and highly skilled artisan, and his friend Ghulam, another artisan who often helped Mansoor with embroidery work. It was our regular meeting

spot – the floor of Mansoor’s tiny workshop where he would do most of his embroidery along with the odd tailoring jobs. The three of us sat cross-legged on square pieces of cloth, under the harsh white brightness of a buzzing tube light. The bookbinders across the narrow covered alleyway were working quietly, gently laminating each page of an eighteenth century manuscript delivered to them by a middleman working for the Embassy of Iran. The workshop, with its blue-grey walls spattered intermittently with dark stains, had an atmosphere of conviviality. The workflow was sometimes broken by bits of conversation accompanied by tea served in small plastic cups. Today, Mansoor was taking a break from embroidering while Ghulam was working on the small karchob [wooden frame], sewing semi-precious stones with an ari needle onto the satin cloth. Mansoor and I were engaged in conversation about the origins of zardozi in India. He explained that before the time of Humayun [the second Mughal Emperor], Muslims brought two things to India: first was the skill to draw a naqsha [map or blueprint] and second was the knowledge of how to build from the naqsha. Mansoor elaborated on this pointed: “Look at the way the Ala-i-Darwaza in Mehrauli was built” he said. “It’s the same with zardozi. First we have a naqsha and then we build from this naqsha.”

The Ala-i-Darwaza is located in the famous Qutb Minar complex in Mehrauli, which today constitutes the southern fringes of Delhi. The “Darwaza”, which means door or gateway, was built in the early fourteenth century by the third sultan of Delhi, Alauddin Khalji (Peck 2005:42). The architectural style of the gateway was based on Islamic principles and gave rise to an Indo-Islamic aesthetic. The reign of Alauddin Khalji was part of what is generally known as the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526), and it is in conjunction with the formation of this first Islamicate state in the thirteenth century that we see the emergence of Muslim artisans in northern India.

The term “Islamicate” was first coined by Marshall Hodgson (1974) in order to rectify earlier assumptions regarding the spread of Islam and the political configurations that ensued. Hodgson used “Islamicate” to emphasise the cultural dimensions that set apart the numerous splinter states, which emerged in the eastern and western dominions of the Muslim Caliphate following its virtual demise in the ninth century. To fully represent this “Islamic” cultural and religious diversity, Islamicate refers “to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims” (Hodgson 1974: 59). From the very beginning of their existence, the early Islamicate states in India faced these social and cultural complexities, and it was such conditions that had transformative impacts on urban artisans in northern India. Let us take a more detailed look at this development of the “making” of Indian urban artisans, before they were “deconstructed” by British colonial interventions (to be discussed in part 2 of this chapter).

The historical contingencies that led up to the formation of the Delhi Sultanate can be traced back to the early eleventh century when nomadic groups moved from the Central Asian steppes in a general westward direction. Amongst these nomads were the Seljuks and they settled and ruled over much of Persia and Anatolia. But it was the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century that had the greatest impact on the development of the Delhi Sultanate. With relatively small but mobile armies, the Mongols managed to overthrow Seljuk power and dominate vast areas of Central Asia, into Afghanistan, Iran and then further west into Iraq (with the sacking of Baghdad in 1258), Syria and Anatolia. There is no doubt “that the Mongol invasions were unprecedented disasters with long-term effects.” (Wink 1997:14) Nevertheless, both the Seljuks and then the Mongols adopted Persian political and cultural

sensibilities (exemplified in the pre-Islamic Sassanid Empire) and created a Turko-Persian synthesis (Canfield 1991), which would later influence the aesthetic preferences of the ruling elite of the Delhi Sultanate. Indeed, “Iran survived as a political concept, although it was profoundly transformed in substance and effectively had become part of Central Asia.” (Wink 1997: 16)

While the Mongol invasions devastated vast areas from Central Asia to Syria, the lands to the east, namely parts of what is today Afghanistan and Pakistan were fairly successful at warding off the Mongol threat. In these regions, Turkic groups known as the Ghaznavids and later the Ghaurids ruled and eventually made Lahore their capital city (see Jackson 1999; cf. Asher and Talbot 2006). The rulers of these Turkic groups in Afghanistan had been soldier-slaves who rose to power through the military ranks (Jackson 2006). It is from the Ghaurids that a slave by the name of Iltutmish rose to power and established the Sultanate in Delhi. When considering the making of urban Muslim artisans, there are four important factors that must be noted regarding the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate.

The first point to consider, one which has been well documented, is the protection offered by the Delhi Sultans, starting from Iltutmish, to all sorts of immigrants fleeing east from the Mongol invasions. “The court of Iltutmish, in particular, became a haven for refugees... These refugees included renowned maliks and amirs, wazirs, traders, artists, craftsmen, and learned elites, poets and Islamic devotees, and many others...” (Wink 1997:191) As a result, Delhi was known as “the centre of the circle of Islam” and became rapidly urbanised and cosmopolitan, hosting a diversity of people from all over *dar ul-Islam* (the lands of Islam). Many of these émigrés were artisans seeking refuge and patronage or artisans attached to the retinue of kings and

other elites who sought safety with the Delhi court.²⁰ The organisational traditions that came along with these immigrant artisans provided longer term sustenance of urban crafts. Such traditions included a centralised production system consisting of royal workshops (*karkhana*) controlled by the court (see Verma 1994). Initially crafts that required expensive materials were produced in the royal workshops – for instance silk, gold and silver to produce ceremonial items such as gold embroidered robes (Raychaudhuri and Habib 1982:80). During Muhammad Tughluq’s reign (1325-1351), for instance, the workshops at Delhi employed four thousand silk workers who would weave and embroider different kinds of cloth for robes of honour and garments (Siddiqui and Ahmed 1971). Also, many urban artisans, except for master craftsmen, were slaves acquired from Iran and parts of Central Asia as well as Indians captured on various raids and campaigns, since slavery played an important role during the early Sultanate period. According to Raychaudhuri and Habib, “Sultan Ala’uddin Khilji (1296-1316) had as many as 50,000 slaves in his establishments; the number reached 80,000 under Firuz Tughluq (1351-88)... [and his] slaves included 12,000 artisans at court.” (1982:90; see also Jackson 2006)

A second point to consider is that the establishment of Muslim rule in the subcontinent led to the rise of an urbanism that amalgamated the Turkic nomadism of the earlier rulers (such as the Ghaznavids and Ghaurids) with the sedentary world of agricultural production, which was prevalent in thirteenth century India (Wink 1997:170). This urbanism provided the conditions for the demand for luxury goods

²⁰ Wink states: “Delhi became the ka’ba of seven climates (*haft iqlim*) and the whole region became the home of Islam... Later in the thirteenth century refugees continued to arrive at Delhi. By 1258, the year that Baghdad was taken, there were at Delhi ‘twenty-five Shahzadas of Iraq, Khurasan and Ma ‘wara’ an-nahr with their retinues’, who had sought persecution from the disturbances of the Mongols. It was said that it was one of the greatest sources of pride of Balban’s reign that upwards of fifteen of the unfortunate sovereigns from Turkestan, Ma wara’ an-nahr, Khurasan, Iraq, Azarbayjan, Iran and Rum, who had been driven from their countries by the Mongol armies, were enabled to find an honourable asylum at his court.” (1997:191)

and the vital patronage networks that allowed artisans to flourish in urban centres (see Miller 1992; cf. Metcalf 2009). In addition, the widening of patronage networks was used by the sovereign as the foremost strategic tool to maintain his power, which was always bestowed with the unequivocal understanding that it could also be withdrawn. Within this accord, the sovereign was expected to be generous and ingenious with his gifts, just as it was expected of his court to set a very high standard of spectacle, splendour and largess. Indeed, these expectations could never be ignored, because beyond their awe inspiring attributes, they also served an important economic purpose: they “made the sultan the biggest customer and his court the store-house of the rarest and most valuable goods... [they] stimulated the merchant[s] to collect and the craftsmen to produce the best...[and] made the provincial governors look for all that was rare and precious.” (Mujeeb 1967:202) Therefore this new kind of urbanism that took root in India created the conditions for the demand for luxury goods, which were predominantly produced in urban centres and supported patronage networks.

A third important factor contributing to the emergence of urban crafts relates to methods of governance and the securing of legitimacy for the ruling Sultans of Delhi. As alluded to earlier, one of the basic conditions of Islamic society was the recurrent concern for maintaining legitimate political authority, especially following the demise of the Caliphate (Lapidus 2002:81-82). For instance, while it was expected that the sovereign will be succeeded by his son, there was no religious law that could ensure such continuity. Indeed, a sovereign lost all claims to obedience and loyalty as soon as he was removed from the throne by someone yielding greater violent power or successfully conspiring to remove him from office (Mujeeb 1967:31). In the case of the Delhi Sultanate, patronage was one of the means through which the Sultan

could assert authority. Thus, patronage not only sustained the livelihoods of poets and artists working for the court, but it also sustained the Sultan who “needed to patronize poets, scholars and artists in order to conform to Islamic ideals of proper *adab*, or behaviour befitting the all-generous king.” (Miller 1992:10) The patronage of luxury goods in particular, for purposes of court pomp and ceremonial, was critical in order for any dynasty to uphold power. In addition, the legitimate establishment of the Delhi Sultanate depended on the revival of the pre-Islamic Iranian model of monarchy, whereby the king was considered “the shadow of God on earth”. This kind of monarchical legitimacy was “[I]nspired by the Sassanid traditions of distance between royalty and the *ryot* [peasant], [and] the Turkish Sultans of Delhi also emphasized the dignified parts of kingship and looked down upon all contact with the people as derogatory to the dignity of kingly office.” (Nizami 2002:103) This form of governance was supported by a class of elite bureaucrats, noblemen and religious scholars, which made for a composite of Persian lettered traditions and Turkish military-administrative genius, indeed a Turko-Persian synthesis (Canfield 1991). Although such a model of governance secured wide-ranging networks of patronage, Nizami (2002) notes that it also resulted in being thoroughly cut off from the lower rungs of the Islamicate society in India, which included Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The stark division between the ruling elite and the masses created a space in which welfare and other provisions needed to be provided to the lower classes and urban poor.

This brings us to a fourth and final consideration, one that has had a lasting impact on urban Muslim artisans, even up till the present day. The establishment of two influential Sufi orders (*silsilah*) in India – the Chishtiyya and Suhrawardiyya – occurred in tandem with the founding of the Delhi Sultanate (Nizami 2002). Indeed,

Delhi became the most influential Chishti Sufi centre, in addition to being the stronghold of Islam at the time (Aquil 2008).²¹ The Chishti order had an especially profound impact on the lower classes and urban poor during the thirteenth century in the Indian Islamicate domains. Nizami writes that the initial establishment of the Chishti *silsilah* was based on the ability of the Shaikhs (the spiritual leaders of the order) to get a feel for the local people and by translating many of their practices to complement the wider non-Muslim environment. They looked to social service and helping the poor as “the supreme object of all their spiritual exercises.” (Nizami 2002:252; see also Aquil 2008, Eaton 1993, Nizami 1992) Part and parcel of the early Chishti service to the poor and lower classes was their positionality in opposition to the state, a position which was based on three tenets: abstaining from the company of kings, refusing endowments and rejecting government service (Nizami 2002:255-263; cf. Aquil 2007:9).

Reflecting on the spread of Chishti influence, Simon Digby brings up an important question: “How is it that the Chishtis, from a relatively obscure lineage outside India, attained their position of dominance in the Delhi Sultanate, which has in turn led to their legends, their tombs, and shrines exercising so great an influence on the historical imagination of South Asian Muslims for several centuries down to the present?” (2003:251) Digby argues that the popularity of the Chishtis was not due to the number of devotees nor to the charisma of its shaikhs. Instead, the Chishtis gained prominence at that particular historical moment when Delhi was a flourishing capital city and its literary, cultural and institutional traditions were spreading across vast

²¹ On the founding of influential Sufi orders in Delhi, Aquil writes that the city emerged “as a major Sufi centre and sanctuary of Islam as well as the seat of political power. If Ajmer was the Mecca of Islam in Hindustan, Delhi emerged in the 13th and 14th centuries as its Medina. Three out of the first five ‘great’ Chishtis of the Sultanate chose to live in Delhi and their tombs have subsequently contributed to the sacralisation of place, appropriating it as a Chishti *wilayat* or spiritual territory and, indeed, providing it the respectable sobriquet of ‘Hazrt-i-Dehli’ or the venerable Delhi.” (2008: 23)

areas of the subcontinent (2003:251). For example, contributions such as the poems of Amir Khusro, the various written biographies of Chishti saints, treatises on moral conduct, and parables and songs greatly helped to translate the Chishti message to the lower classes and urban poor (cf. Digby 1983, Nizami 1992).

The message of the Sufis, and in particular of the Chishti *silsilah*, was based on their overall acceptance of the doctrine known as *wahadat al-wujud*, which was popularised by the 12th century Spaniard, Ibn al-Arabi. The doctrine asserts that “God is the sole real existent and that the world in all its aspects is an epiphany of the One Real Existent...” (Hardy 2008:287) From this doctrine, a particular Sufi pedagogy emerged that was based on the concept of *ibaadat* or worship: if one approached one’s work with *ibaadat*, then this form of being would be a path to achieving oneness with God (cf. Eaton 2000). One did not have to be a learned scholar of Islamic texts in order to live a pious life. The Sufis, therefore, brought the practice of piety to the lower classes through the notion of *ibaadat*. It is this form of pedagogy that was cultivated throughout the centuries of Islamic rule in India and became constitutive of an “ethic” that was particularly salient among urban Muslim artisans.

The initial historical survey of the establishment of early Islamic states in India serves to provide a broader context in which urban Muslim artisans thrived. With the founding of the Delhi Sultanate in the thirteenth century, a new kind of urbanism developed and took root on Indian soil (Wink 1997). The cosmopolitanism of early north Indian cities not only added a dimension of ethnic diversity to these urban centres (Gilmartin and Lawrence 2000), but also created the demand for certain luxury goods that required wide-ranging patronage networks. Many of the in-demand

luxury goods were not based on local aesthetics, due to the preference for Persian derived styles among elite segments of society.

The weakening of the Delhi Sultanate in the late fourteenth century led to the formation of breakaway kingdoms throughout India. With the ascent of Mughal power in the sixteenth century, the patronage of urban artisans remained an integral part of the political and economic landscape and the system of imperial workshops reached its zenith (see Verma 1994).²² And with the increasing presence of Europeans and their interests in establishing trading rights with India, Indian court culture, both Muslim and non-Muslim, became even wealthier thereby patronising diverse craft forms often to meet ceremonial requirements (Asher and Talbot 2006:186).

The story so far has traced the rise and development of urban-based crafts and Muslim artisans that occurred in tandem with the establishment of Islamicate states in India. It is important to see the two as vitally linked, as artisans provided the essential goods that were so deeply embedded in the political economy of the Delhi Sultanate and its successor ruling regimes. And it is equally important to keep in mind that during this period an identity was cultivated amongst the lower classes and urban poor, particularly based on a certain ethical disposition towards work. The second part of this chapter takes a historical leap in order to address the conditions in which urban Muslim artisans became marginalised, beginning under British colonial rule, where

²² On the status of imperial workshops during the reign of Akbar, the court chronicler, Abu-Fazl, notes: "His majesty pays attention to various stuffs, hence 'Irani', 'European' and Mongol articles of wear are in abundance. Skilful masters and workmen have settled in this country to teach the people an imperial system of manufacture. The imperial workshops in towns of Lahore, Agra, Fatehpur, Ahmadabad, turn out many masterpieces of workmanship and figures and patterns, knots and variety of fashions which now prevail, astonish experienced travelers." (1927: 93-94)

representations of India and the construction of the Muslim “Other” have had a lasting impact on Muslim artisans. In Chapter 3, I address the continued marginalisation of urban Muslim artisans in the post-colonial predicament.

3. THE MAKING OF THE MUSLIM “OTHER”

From the first decade of the 18th century till the middle of the 19th, when the last remains of the Mughal court in Delhi were finally disbanded by the British, the one hundred year long decline of the Empire affected almost in equal measure urban artisans and their crafts. In order to understand the context in which this group, a generally overlooked segment of the population, suffered a devastating deconstruction of not only their livelihoods, due to the dispersal and weakening of patronage networks, but also their identities, we must begin by reviewing the epistemological grounding showing how India was variously represented and known through the lens of Orientalist constructions.

In addition to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), the work of Bernard Cohn most inquiringly focuses on Victorian colonial representations of India by looking at the late nineteenth century censuses and the elaborately staged imperial assemblages, both through an ethnographic lens (Cohn 1983, 1996). The core of Cohn’s argument is that the British colonial administration produced forms of knowledge, or procedures for knowing the “Other” – depicted as the inert Indian subject (Prakash 1990) or the essentialised, spiritualised, and fundamentally exoticised subject (Inden 1990) – through mechanisms such as law and bureaucracy (the censuses are good examples) as well as symbolic and ritual performances, such as the imperial assemblages, museums and world exhibitions (see Breckenridge 1989, Prakash 1992; see also

Cannadine 2001). With regard to Cohn's work, Prakash writes, "Such earlier work of clearing and criticizing essentialist procedures anticipated the contemporary trend of making cultural forms and nationalist knowledge in constituting the objects of inquiry." (1990:401-402) Concerns for how the British should represent their colony and produce knowledge about it had a very real and long lasting impact on the diverse segments of the Indian population.

As I am most concerned here with the making of the Muslim "Other" in India, two distinct periods of praxis are especially relevant for this purpose. The first is embedded in the British Orientalist discourse and was primarily concerned with understanding Indian legal arrangements. This was facilitated by full access to the material pre-conditions of the subject itself – texts and manuscripts, and cultural and artistic artefacts – in order to construct the "Other" so as to sustain both colonial hegemonic ambitions and desire for legitimacy. The second form of praxis, which was informed largely by metropolitan ideologies of anglicising evangelicalism and utilitarianism (Mackenzie 1995, Porter 2004), was premised on India's need for a new form of knowledge, as opposed to understanding India, which lay at the heart of earlier Orientalist projects. There was a "scientific" pursuit that would utilise modern instruments such as censuses and ethnographic-anthropometric tools in order to accumulate "facts" about the "natives".

Following an overview of these two broad forms of praxis, I will focus on two instances of late colonial representations that have had lasting implications for Muslim artisans in India. The first instance of representing the "Other" occurred during the British orchestrated imperial assemblages, or the *durbars*, which emulated

the pomp and grandeur of the Mughal court assemblages (see Trevithick 1990). Considering that most of the British *darbars* occurred after the Rebellion of 1857, when the Mughal Empire was thoroughly dismantled and the inhabitants of Delhi in particular were either killed or expelled from the city, the reconstitution of these imperial assemblages in Delhi would leave an indelible mark on the identities and memories of many of the city's inhabitants for generations to come.²³ In addition, I argue that the British *darbars* fulfilled their own imaginings of the "East" and the "Oriental Despot" by misrepresenting the institution of gift-giving, which was central to the performative aspect of the *darbar* (Cohn 1983). The second instance of representation that was instrumental in projecting the Muslim "Other" was the accumulation of curiosities that were sent to Europe and America and displayed in the newly established museums and World Fairs, which flourished in the late nineteenth century (see Prakash 1992, Jenkins 1994, Gosden and Knowles 2001). I illustrate this form of representation by discussing my own encounter with *zardozi* embroidered textiles stored at the Victoria and Albert Museum, reconstructing the genealogy of one particular textile as it was collected and sent to England by a British official in India. I use this story as another example of how Muslim rituals and customs, including ceremonial gift-giving – which can be encapsulated by the concept of *adab*, or a system of cultivated and appropriate behaviour and comportment (Metcalf 1983) – were taken out of a particular context and often represented as evidence of the mystic and despotic "Other".

²³ In chapter 6 I address the issue of how Muslim artisans today evoke their connection and sympathies with the Mughal era, particularly as embodied in the last Mughal ruler, Bahadur Shah Zafar. I suggest that, while many artisans trace their genealogies back to some ancestor who practiced the craft during the time of the Mughals, many of these lineages actually trace back to one of the British *darbars*.

3.1 Colonial - Orientalist Praxis

The British praxis of Orientalism, especially with reference to Indian Muslims, ruling elites and artisans alike, is quite extraordinary for both its contradictory as well as transcending effects over the life of the colonial administration in India. This early praxis, roughly spanning from 1770 until about 1830, is regarded by some as “traditional Orientalism” and describes the body of scholarship and administrative policy influenced by the first Governor-General Warren Hastings and the East India Company judge Sir William Jones (Rocher 1993). The administrative policy during this period purported to govern the country according to its traditional laws and customs, while the scholarship claimed to immerse itself in the languages and cultures of the subjects of the Company’s Indian territories (Mackenzie 1995, Menski 2003). In spite of the professed inclination of the colonial authorities to establish mutual appreciation between the British and Indians, the interventions nonetheless led to the production of Orientalist knowledge for colonial administrative purposes.

The defining project of “traditional Orientalism” was to rule the country according to the local laws and customs as defined and understood by the British administrators. General Hastings sums up the project with the following statement: “in all suits regarding inheritance, marriage, caste and other religious usages, or institutions, the laws of the Koran with respect to Mahometans [Muslims] and those of the *Shaster* with respect to Gentoos [Hindus] shall be invariably adhered to” (quoted in Rocher 1993:220). Rocher suggests that three distinct decisions came together within the framework of this approach to governance. Firstly, the insistence on administering Indian laws to the “natives” rather than English common law. Secondly, applying “native” laws solely for religious usages and institutions and leaving lay matters

directly under the jurisdiction of British laws and regulations. Thirdly, understanding so-called native law through the consultation of law in texts, rather than in local customs (Rocher 1993:220-21). All three decisions were instrumental in replacing localised practices – sometimes called *wajabi* (see Sahai 2005) – with legal texts.²⁴ This may have been in response to the complexity and diversity of the subject, but what the colonial administration codified more often than not reflected British preoccupations and tended to be completely alien to its intended subjects (Anderson 1993).

With reference to the codified law that was essential for the “traditional Orientalist” endeavour, two observations are particularly relevant from the present urban Muslim perspective. Firstly, in line with Bayly (1983), a single Islamic religious code, derived from the Qur’an and applied to all people adhering to Islam, “violated both Islamic theory and South Asian practice” (353) because it wrongly assumed the Qur’an to be a code of law. According to Bayly, “The Qur’an, and even more specifically legal texts such as *al-Hidaya* had never been directly applied as sources of legal precept. Their legal relevance had always derived from a properly authoritative *qadi* [judge] whose moral probity and knowledge of local arrangements could translate precept into practice.” (1983:353) In the case of craft communities in eighteenth century Jodhpur that retained their localised institutions, practices and customs, the settlement of disputes depended on the pre-colonial political system of *wajabi* at the local or community level, often in deviation to the strict application of the Shari’a (Sahai 2005). Also with reference to local customs, Menski notes that pre-Islamic practices

²⁴ In his discussion of the early colonial formation of Hindu legal codes, Menski notes two prevalent trends: “on the one hand, early British involvement sought to preserve and respect this ‘religious’ element, however ill-defined. On the other hand... colonial administrators like Macaulay assumed that Hinduism was so absurd and backward that contact with Western concepts would sooner or later lead to its abandonment.” (2003: 158-159)

were widely recognised and in an example from northern India, he writes, “in what later became Pakistan, Pathans, Baluchis and Panjabi Muslims followed local customs and codes of honour apart from Islamic legal principles.” (2006:366)

The inclusion of all indigenous legal arrangements under the binary categories of “Hindu” and “Muslim”, as stated clearly in Hastings’s statement above, was seriously insufficient at capturing the entire spectrum of the country’s religious diversity. With reference to “Muslims”, the codification of law based on religious texts not only failed to recognise distinctions between Shi’a and Sunni schools of thought, but “it also failed to address adequately the practices and beliefs of the many groups that adopted an eclectic approach to Islam and various forms of Hinduism.” (Anderson 1993:176; cf. Viswanathan 1998) This “eclectic approach to Islam” most probably refers to the widespread influence of Sufism in India. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the Sufis had long been established within the folds of the lower classes and urban poor in India and had developed their own pedagogy and religious practices. But with the growing influence of Protestant influenced ideologies in both Britain and its colonies (Porter 2004), which tended to emphasise Victorian ideals of propriety, modesty, and other “civilised” codes of conduct, Sufism was perceived as a mixture of superstitious, and often corrupt, cults existing on the margins of Islam. The latter was perceived to be in stark contrast to a more “universal” and orthodox Islam embodied in the text-based knowledge of the *ulama*, or religious scholars (see Green 2009). In addition, the various Sufi orders were envisaged as “secret societies” and it was the fear of these orders that,

“...inspired colonial administrators to actively support and then institutionalise a form of a more controllable Islamic orthodoxy, which was based on *ulama*-scholarship and their focus on law and scripture, while Sufi practices...were defined as outside of the Shari’a, and then

branded as heterodox. As a result, the construction of Sufism as either heterodox subset of Islam or as a separate movement, entirely detached from the roots of Islamic orthodoxy was a very virulent perception until only very recently.” (Christmann 2008:60)

Thus, the colonial interventions that defined and reified communities as “Muslim” and “Hindu” based on legally codified religious texts, also served to delegitimise practices that did not conform to such essentialised categorisations. These interventions constructed both religious traditions as unchanging monoliths and, thereby, set the groundwork to justify colonial ambitions.

The binary categorisation of Muslim and Hindu as derived from the detailed study of classical texts leads on to another early colonial project that would have pronounced and prolonged effects on Indian Muslims. Within the broader context of Muslim rule in India, such an orientalist reification of religious-based identity sought to divide Indian society, and in particular marginalise the Mughal ruling elite, by grouping everyone who was not “Muslim” into the overarching category of “Hindu”. This had the desired effect of producing a Hindu majority that was even more prominent and thus justified moves to enfranchise the latter (Rocher 1993:222). Indeed, Rocher argues that

“British sympathies tended to be on the side of the Hindus against Muslims in the eighteenth century. There were evident political reasons for this. Not only had Europeans a heavy baggage of fear of, and hostility toward, Muslims that went back to the struggle for Spain and the Crusades, in India the British were primarily displacing Muslim powers... It was natural that the British try to recruit Hindus to their side, all the more since Hindus constituted a majority of the people. The British cast themselves as the protectors of a vast and suppliant majority that had been held under the thumb of the Muslim oppressors.” (1993:222)

Even though the incongruity of the colonial policy of draping Indian Muslims in the robes of the Middle Eastern “Other” rested on certain assumptions on the part of

colonial classicists of the Indian religious context, the long term impact of this policy was detrimental to the already declining Muslim polity. The enfranchisement of Hindus, in turn, assisted the colonial administration in vigorously developing indigenous Orientalist literature that constructed Indian Muslims as the “Other”.

3.2 Colonial-Scientific Praxis

The praxis that began in the early decades of the nineteenth century was dominated by two ideologies, namely anglicising evangelicalism and utilitarianism. These seemingly conflicting ideologies were not always comfortably situated within imperial expansion. According to Porter (2003), until 1840 there was discomfort on both sides, particularly manifest in the ambiguous relationship between the colonial government and European missionaries. It was only after the mid-nineteenth century that the two moved closer together, and the government viewed missionary activities to be “much more ‘respectable,’ their societies well known, their supporters drawn far more widely from the middle and upper classes...Government officials with little local knowledge welcomed the influence and contacts the missions had already forged with local society.” (Porter 2003:564) Thus, jointly these movements opposed earlier Orientalists’ view that Europeans should assimilate themselves into their surroundings through the sympathetic study of Indian customs, languages and cultures.²⁵ The opposing belief that Indians should become acquainted with Western knowledge and the English language was primarily championed by the evangelical movement, which in the last two decades of the 18th century was becoming increasingly influential in the East India Company, in Parliament, and generally in British public life (see Porter 2004). This form of praxis was particularly influential following the Rebellion of

²⁵ William Dalrymple’s novel, *The White Mughals*, provides a historical-fictional account of this early praxis of British Orientalists.

1857, when colonial rule was transferred from the East India Company to the Crown in an effort to exert more central control over their Indian subjects.

The advent of missionary work in India was also coupled with an impetus to gather information about “natives” in the most scientific capacity. The nineteenth century colonial discourses were less worried about legitimacy and more concerned with establishing “facts” about a myriad of issues such as Muslim expansion into India, explanations of origins, mechanisms of conversions and writing India’s official sociology (Viswanathan 1998). It is within this framework of establishing facts that the first censuses were organised, whereby “enumerated communities” came into existence that allowed colonial administrators to control and wield power over their Indian subjects (Appadurai 1993, Cohn 1983, 1996). Appadurai writes that “[T]he linkage of empirical statistics and the management of the exotic was the basis for a more general policy orientation to the effect that much of what needed to be known about the Indian population would become intelligible only by detailed enumeration of the population *in terms of caste*.” (1993:328 original emphasis) Viswanathan (1998) points out that the enumeration of India’s populations was used to redraw the boundaries of religious communities with reference to empirically derived explanations about the expansion of Muslim population. She writes, “[w]hile Muslim groups are identified as separate from the Hindu community and therefore also a separate political entity, a large majority of Muslims is also recognized for the first time in British discourse ... as originally having been Hindus who had converted for reasons other than direct force or spiritual illumination. For the first time, the discourse of nationalism is processed through a discourse of origin.” (Viswanathan 1998:156)

This drive to categorise and enumerate communities during the last quarter of the nineteenth century was especially concerned with the issue of conversion and how Indian Muslims were to be categorised: as descendents of Muslims of Arab, Persian, Afghan and Turkish ethnicity (“hereditary” Muslims) or as descendants of Hindus who had converted to Islam. This primary binary categorisation was then further refined according to racial origin, customs and law. Indeed, the superintendent of the 1872 census, H. Beverly, asserted that “[t]he real explanation of the immense preponderance of the Musalman [Muslim] religious element in this portion of the delta is to be found in the conversions to Islam of the numerous low castes which occupied it...” (quoted in Viswanathan 1996) An important outcome of the census reports of 1872 and 1901 on the Muslim population’s self image, fabricated or not, was the splitting of the community into “original” Muslims, consisting of the higher classes or “*ashraf*”, and the converted Muslims or “*ajlaf*”, where the latter were systematically identified with the lower classes and castes. Vishvanathan (1998) points out that this search for origins had an important consequence. It accentuated differences between Muslims on the grounds of foreign or native descent, which replaced the very unity that a profession to Islam implied with hierarchical categorisations in terms of social class. This professed unity of Islam may have been seen as a serious threat to British power in the region, especially following the Rebellion in 1857 when, according to Metcalf, “the British hand fell particularly hard on Muslims who were stereotyped as ‘fanatics’ seeking to restore Mughal rule.” (2009:22) The dismantling of Indian Muslim identities via discourses of origin is clearly exemplified in a late colonial publication by William Crooke called *Islam in India*, where he states that Indian Muslims are “unauthentic, not ‘real’ Muslims, but

Hindus with an Islamic ‘veneer’ that, for most of them, is paper thin at best.” (Vatuk 2008:209)

So, on the one hand, Muslim and Hindu communities were reified and essentialised, initially through the legal codification of classical religious texts and then later by scientifically enumerated communities via censuses and other bureaucratic tools. On the other hand, Muslim identities were fragmented by the binary construction of foreign versus converted Muslims. Rather than viewing one historiography as more true than the other, both outcomes were part and parcel of the multiple ways in which the British constructed colonial knowledge (Vatuk 2008). Nonetheless, as Gyan Prakash has argued, during the latter stages of British colonialism, India was fertile ground for scientific pursuits, as it offered unmatched diversity to extract knowledge, while its status as a colony presented a context in which to conduct unimpeded science. The colonial administration was of the opinion that India needed a new form of knowledge and that to know was to name, identify and compare. The project of gaining understanding of India placed emphasis on natural history, classification, and re-presenting the order of nature. More importantly, however, at the very core of this discourse lay “the colonial conception that India was close to nature: its inhabitants lived close to soil; it was home to numerous ‘tribes and races’; and the state of knowledge was chaotic...requiring persistent classification.” (Prakash 1992:156)

Having outlined the broader context in which colonial constructions of India, and in particular the Muslim “Other”, were produced, I will move on to discuss two examples of how such forms of knowledge were practically instantiated and propagated: the British staging of imperial assemblages, or *durbars*, and the collection of “curiosities” for the World Fairs.

3.3 Staging the Durbars

“The Durbar at Delhi is expected to be a very brilliant affair, and great preparations are being made for the coming event” (Birmingham Daily Post, 30 March, 1875 British Library)

“Rarely has a more imposing State ceremonial been witnessed even in British India than the reception of Lord Northbrook at Delhi on his arrival to hold the great Durbar of last March. The chief feature of the reception was a procession of nearly a hundred elephants carrying the native Rajahs, princes, and chiefs, who had assembled to welcome the representative of their suzerain... The Viceroy’s elephant was a splendid fellow, clothed from head to foot in deep yellow gold, and bearing on his back a chair of State exquisitely wrought in silver.” (The Graphic, 12 June, 1875 British Library)

“It is impossible, of course, to predict the art value of the imperial statue which is to commemorate the big show at Delhi; but of one thing we may be certain, that it will be one of the most curious pieces of work in the world. Round the base of the statue there will be sculptures symbolising the suppression of the Thugs, of human sacrifices, and of infant murder; the introduction of railways, of the electric telegraph, and of the printing press; and in general, ‘the spread of education, learning, and science’ as a writer in the Times puts it... India has advanced considerably... but the nature of her progress, and the kind of work which a Viceroy of Lord Lytton’s temperament and genius is, in these days, called upon to accomplish, will be lost sight of if the Delhi durbar is to be only an occasion for proclaiming a title, authorising extra guns for native princes, and sprinkling C.S.I.’s over the land.” (The Examiner, 9 December, 1876 British Library)

The excerpts above are taken from late nineteenth century newspapers in order to illustrate some of the representations of the *darbar* in the British press. Three major *darbars*, or British imperial assemblages (Trevithick 1990), were held in Delhi in 1877, 1903 and 1911 (although there is mention in the British press of an earlier *darbar* that took place in 1875 during the tenure of Lord Northbrook as Viceroy).

Overall, the descriptions of the three *darbars* evoke the imagery and symbolic capital of Mughal royal courts, whereby their appearance and function suggested the pomp,

grandeur and spectacle associated with constructions of the “Orient” or the “East”, as well as the invention and propagation of “tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

The *darbar*, and generally the courtly culture of Muslim empires in India, has been a popular topic of writing, with many examples coming from travelers. Tracing this genealogy of representations of the *darbar*, one can go as far back as the travelling dignitaries from China who were guests of the King during the Sultanate period. The famous Moroccan traveler, Ibn Battuta, wrote about the Sultanate court culture and intrigues (at times at the expense of his own safety), particularly under the Tughlak dynasty during the fourteenth century (Dunn 2005). Francois Bernier, who was appointed as a royal physician and closely attached to the Mughal court in the seventeenth century, also provided descriptive accounts of opulence and grandeur of the ruling elites. In his description of stately ceremonies of the court, Bernier describes similar scenes to the ones reported by the nineteenth century British press; the procession of elephants covered with embroidered cloth and the King wearing an intricate vest embroidered with gold (Bernier 1934:28-32). Indian travelers to Delhi who were guests of the court or upper-class noblemen also left accounts of their experiences. One such account is that of Dargah Quli Khan, who spent many years in Delhi and described scenes of debauchery and highly sexualised dance and song performances that were part of the culture of *mirzas*, or noblemen (Butler-Brown 2003). In the case of Dargah Quli Khan, Butler-Brown argues that he was after all a travel writer and probably exoticised and essentialised much of what he saw in Mughal Delhi.

The self-proclaimed Orientalists, particularly from the German tradition, also provided accounts of the splendour of the *darbar*. Bagchi writes that German Orientalist and traveler, Richard Garbe expressed “unreserved admiration in his travel diary for the architectural feats of Muslims in India,” despite his antipathy toward Islam. Garbe continues by observing that “it was mainly the pomp and splendor of the Mughal courts, as described by European travelers, that have given India its reputation as ‘land of wonder.’ The impression had spread mistakenly, however, that the entire country was as fabulous as the Mughal courts.” (Bagchi 2003:318)

Colonial imaginings and representations of an exotic “East” were often encapsulated in symbolic and performative rituals of the *darbar*. But as argued above, these representations were not devoid of political agendas that went hand-in-hand with colonial projects. In her study of French colonial agendas in Morocco, Gwendolyn Wright argues that the monarchy and its associated symbolic capital was upheld as a beacon of “tradition” as opposed to French “modernity” and this in effect reinforced a hierarchy. Although not explicitly mentioned in the following quotation, race was often a key component of this hierarchical categorisation (cf. Cooper and Stoler 1997). She writes, “...the French resident-general then explained, ‘reviving around the [new] sultan the ancient traditions and old ceremonies of the court,’ as well as building and maintaining opulent palaces for the ruler. Such officials hoped to preserve an established sense of hierarchy and property, buttressing it with what they perceived to be traditional rituals, spatial patterns, and architectural ornament, believing that this would reinforce their own super-imposed order.” (Wright 1997:323)

Of the scholarship on Orientalism and colonial forms of representation, the work of Bernard Cohn stands out, particularly for his research on the British imperial assemblages. He focuses on the role of authority in understanding ways in which underlying Orientalist assumptions led to “invented traditions” of a particular genre (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). He argues that the British imperial assemblages were public performances of rituals that in effect misunderstood the value and context of the Mughal court, which was based on the concept of “incorporation”. This was a profound, embodied relationship, through the medium of gift-giving, between the representative authority (i.e. the Emperor, Nawab or Prince) and the subject. The process of incorporation occurred via the main “ritualistic” aspects of the Mughal *darbar*, including the presentation of gifts to the Emperor in the form of *nazar* (usually gold coins) or *peshkash* (animals, such as horses and elephants, jewels, and other appropriate objects relating to the rank of the presenter). In return, the Mughal Emperor would give *khelat*, which “narrowly construed, consisted of specific and ordered sets of clothes, including a cloak, turban, shawls, various turban ornaments, a necklace and other jewels, arms and shields, but could also include horses and elephants with various accoutrements as sign of authority and lordship.” (Cohn 1983:168) Particularly through the idiom of clothing, the receiver of this *khelat* was incorporated in a close bodily way to the ruler and into all that entailed in the system of rule.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, colonial rule in India had authoritatively made the shift from so-called “classical orientalism” to a “scientific utilitarianism” (or as described in the previous sections, a shift from the Colonial-Orientalist praxis to the Colonial-Scientific praxis). The latter was brought about by

evangelical fervour that was expressed in the work of the East India Company official, Charles Grant, who believed that the introduction of Western education and Christianity would transform a morally decadent society. These views are apparent in his influential treatise, *Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain* (1792), which was written to support the evangelical campaign to persuade Parliament, prior to the company's charter renewal, to open India to the proselytising and educational activities of the missionary societies. Within this framework, the activities of the Mughal *darbar* – in particular *nazar*, *peshkash*, and *khelat* – were interpreted in a utilitarian and instrumental paradigm of market value where such transactions and exchanges were construed as a system of trade rife with bribery and tribute payment – basically practices defined as corrupt (Cohn 1983; see also Raheja 1988). I would propose that couching the three British orchestrated *darbars* as “Imperial *Assemblages*” indicates the particular view outlined above that these events were matters of assembly, bringing people and things together for whatever utilitarian and instrumental purposes.

For the Orientalist and colonialist, the *darbar* was one of the foremost essences of the “East” in general, and of the ruling Muslim culture as embodied in the figure of the “Oriental Despot”. The “fabulous” Mughal courts that Garbe wrote about in his diaries, with a focus on ornamentalism (Cannadine 2001), pomp and grandeur, and by extension irrationality and wastage, were categorisations through which the British represented their colony (in addition to caste, which was the the other major category of Orientalist representation and obsession). But the three imperial assemblages, modeled after the Mughal *darbar*, were also “ritual idioms” (Patil 2006) that were thought to be the only way the “native mind” could understand the orders of hierarchy

- as subjects of the British Crown. Trevithick argues that the Imperial Assemblages represented the dual nature of political ritual, as firstly seeking consensus from the masses, or the “native mind”, and secondly as “an ideological and aesthetic social construction that is directly and recursively implicated in the expression, realization, and exercise of power.” (Tambiah quoted in Trevithick 1991:561) Thus, the staging of the British *darbars* was also a means by which imperial power could be consolidated, especially in the context of recent dissent following the Rebellion of 1857. The making of the Muslim “Other” was also achieved through the staging of these *darbars* in Delhi, because the point of reference (and comparison) for such performative staging was the deposed Mughal Empire and its associated courtly culture.

3.4 Collecting Curiosities: The Case of the Yarkandi Saddle Cloth

By a twist of chance and a little outside-the-box fieldwork, I found myself in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London digging through large metal cases of 19th century *zari* embroidered textiles. Most of these pieces were collected and stored by the long defunct India Museum, as well as the India Office, later to be consolidated by the V&A. The pieces included throne covers, saddle cloths, hookah mats, wall hangings, or pieces simply labeled as “textiles”. While most pieces were recorded in the museum database, only a few pieces had information about their date of manufacture or place of origin. After taking copious descriptive notes and photographs of many of the textiles, I was ushered upstairs to the archive department, where I had the opportunity to cross check the record numbers attached to the actual textiles with old colonial registers in the hopes of acquiring more information about individual pieces.

The registers kept in the V&A archive date back to the mid nineteenth century and are records of all the objects and “curiosities” received either by the East India Museum or the India Office.²⁶ These records contain a variety of information about each object, including descriptions of the piece, the date received, the official in India who collected the piece, the port city from which the piece was dispatched from, and often the place of origin. A very helpful curator at the V&A provided useful insight on how to “read” the registers and how the information contained (however sparse) in these colonial documents could provide useful fragments in reconstructing a relevant historical narrative.

One fragment of the story emerged from scrutinising more closely the dates when the pieces were received in London. Many of the heavily embroidered *zardozi* pieces I was interested in were received in the year 1855. According to the curator, one could fairly confidently come to the conclusion that these pieces were being sent over to be displayed at one of the World’s Fairs in Europe, most likely the 1855 Exposition Universelle in Paris. On further investigation, it seemed that most of the dates entered into the registers corresponded with one of the large World Fairs held in Europe or the United States (see Breckenridge 1989, Cannadine 2001, Mitchell 1988). Apart from the significance of these dates, another important clue emerged when I came across one entry in the register documenting a saddle cloth, which I had seen and photographed earlier that day. According to the information in the register, this was a piece that originated in Yarkand (located in present-day Sinkiang, Western China) and was collected by Sir Douglas Forsyth (see Figure 2.1). Upon later consultations with other register books, I noticed that nearly three hundred pieces were collected and sent

²⁶ For a historical account of the various attempts to organise Indian “curiosities” into British museums, see Metcalf 1989:141-148; see also Desmond 1982.

back to London by Douglas Forsyth. Who was Douglas Forsyth and what could his story tell me about colonial representations of India through these “curiosities”? It turned out that Douglas Forsyth’s story would provide a necessary backdrop in which to situate the contemporary state of Muslim artisans.

Figure 2.1: A Yarkandi saddle cloth collected by Sir Douglas Forsyth, held in the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Asia Reading Room



Douglas Forsyth was a senior official for the British Raj during the latter half of the nineteenth century. At the apex of his career, he was the Commissioner of Ambala in

Punjab and broadly given the responsibilities of “managing” the Sikh populations in this northern part of India (cited from his obituary in the *News of the World*, 26 December, 1886). During his tenure in Punjab, considerable shifts in the geo-political landscape were occurring, particularly in the north-western frontier areas of the British Empire in India. There was scarce information about these frontier regions, but what was becoming clearer to the British government was the looming threat of Russian incursions from the northwest (Hopkirk 1991).

Around the same time, the countries to the north and northwest of the British Indian Empire were going through a wave of “Muhammadan revival”, as described by Dr. H.W. Bellew, who accompanied Douglas Forsyth on his second mission to Yarkand and Kashgar. In his preface to *Kashmir and Kashgar: A Narrative of the Journey of the Embassy to Kashgar in 1873-74*, Bellew writes, “[T]hat great Muhammadan revival which, during the past sixteen or eighteen years, has disturbed the peace of the Chinese Empire to the extent of seriously threatening the stability of its ancient regime...In this place it concerns us only to trace very briefly the progress and consequences of that widespread movement in the westernmost frontier province of the Empire...” (1875:vi-vii) The “Muhammadan revival” to which Bellew referred was primarily concerned with events that culminated in the overthrow of the Chinese government in Kashgar by Yacoub Beg, who later became known as the Atalik Ghazi. With these regional shifts and the imminent threat of Russian incursions, a once reluctant British government decided to open up lines of communication with these emerging Islamicate kingdoms. In addition, there was a new urgency to deploy fact-finding reconnaissance missions to these “uncharted” areas. In this way, Britain entered what has come to be famously known as the Great Game (Hopkirk 1991).

In Peter Hopkirk's book, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia* (1991), which describes in detail the geo-political manoeuvrings of imperial powers in Central Asia, Douglas Forsyth's name first appears in the chapter titled "Spies Along the Silk Road". This is quite telling because, although Forsyth led two missions to Kashgar officially in order to strengthen trade relations with Yacoub Beg, the underlying reason for both missions was to gain intelligence about an area formerly uncharted by the British and to understand the Russian threat. Although the two Forsyth missions never achieved the goal of solidifying ties of alliance with Yacoub Beg, the written accounts left by Forsyth and his companions reveal interesting details about their encounters at the various courts along the way. It is these details that I wish to focus on in this section, because these are often omitted in favour of macro movements and power-plays between Empires. Within the context of elaborating on the details, I hope to piece together fragments that can shed light on the making of the Muslim "Other", and as such can provide a better understanding of the current marginalisation of Muslim artisans in particular.

As far as my preliminary research is concerned, I have identified four texts that in different ways describe the Forsyth missions to Yacoub Beg's country. These include, (1) *Report of a Mission to Yarkund in 1873, Under Command of Sir T.D. Forsyth, K.C.S.I., C.B., Bengal Civil Service with Historical and Geographical Information Regarding the Possessions of the Ameer of Yarkund* by Sir Douglas Forsyth (1875); (2) *Lahore to Yarkand: Incidents of the Route and Natural History of the Countries Traversed by the Expedition of 1870, under T.D. Forsyth* by George Henderson and Allen O. Hume (1873); (3) *Kashmir and Kashgar: A Narrative of the Journey of the*

Embassy to Kashgar in 1873-74 by H.W. Bellew (1875); and (4) *Autobiography and Reminiscences of Sir Douglas Forsyth, C.B., K.C.S.I., F.R.G.S* Edited by His Daughter (1887).

The first three texts are examples of the late colonial drive to gain “scientific” knowledge about the Empire’s territories and its “native” populations. The information in these reports and narratives include temperature measurements along points of the route, geological and botanical surveys. These accounts also include ethnographic descriptions of local customs and accounts of urban bazaars and street scenes. An examination of these descriptions of local customs is worthwhile, as these accounts demonstrate the importance of certain customs and rituals that have been cultivated over hundreds of years in the Islamicate domains of the region (see above for a discussion of the term Islamicate).

While en route to Yarkand and then eventually to Kashgar to meet the King, a description is given by Forsyth regarding the arrival of a letter from Yacoub Beg. Forsyth writes, “I mention this [arrival of the letter] to notice the manner in which such letters are received. The recipient taking it in both hands raises the letter to his forehead, and stands with his face in the direction whence it was sent, while he reads it most respectfully. He then presses the seal upon both eyes and having folded it up, places it in his turban. This is the literal fulfilment of the Persian saying, ‘on my head and eyes’ and seems to have been a custom in Eastern Turkestan from a very early time.” (1875:3) Bellew, in his narrative of the journey to Yarkand and Kashgar, also recounts a similar letter opening ritual.

Throughout the descriptive pages of these accounts, the British officials describe one recurring event or custom, which is initially welcomed and looked upon favourably, but then during the latter stages of the mission, is written about with irritation. This event or custom is the *dastarkhwan*, which is akin to a ceremonial feast where a clean mat is laid out on the ground and a variety of food is placed before the guests. During Forsyth's missions, a *dastarkhwan* would always be the welcoming custom, from the smallest camps along the way to Yacoub Beg's elaborate court. In his account of the journey, Bellew writes, "Shortly after arrival in camp, Ali Murad, the Beg or 'governor' of Sanju, appeared at the envoy's tent with a long array of men bearing the trays of a sumptuous *dasturkhwan*. There were soups, and pillaos (here called *ash*), and roasts and ragouts. There were dry fruits and fresh fruits, and there were bread in different forms, and sweets of different sorts – all savouring more of European tastes than Asiatic, as they are seen south of the passes at all events." (1875:219-220) For Bellew, however, the novelty and splendour of the *dastarkhwan* soon wears off, as is apparent by the growing frustration with this custom: "The *dasturkhwan*, which we faced herewith, to our hosts, such disappointing inability to cope with the variety and abundance of its dishes, confronted us at every stage, and at every halt; and daily increased in proportions and delicacy till, at Yarkand it reached to a hundred trays, and at Kashgar attained the plenitude of its richness and variety in I don't know how many more. Nothing was done without the *dasturkhwan*, and at last, the novelty wearing off, the very mention of the name grated disagreeably on the ear...if we made a ceremonial call upon a magnate of the land, this irrepressible custom formed the most important part of the interview." (1875:220-221)

The *dastarkhwan* seems to become another character in the narratives of Forsyth as well as other members of the mission. As Bellew indicated in his increasing frustration with the custom, the *dastarkhwan* would be readied in every small village camp and every excursion the envoy would make. The custom was widely practiced throughout the princely states and former Mughal territories, and so the British officials were familiar with it. Initially there was a sense that although it was rooted in “oriental” ways, the *dastarkhwan* as practiced in the north-western frontiers was more suited to “European tastes than Asiatic”. However, the euphoria was soon to dissipate and the essentialised Orientalist tropes of the “Muslim despot” are peppered in the writings of these officials. Again, Bellew writes, “But for the development of these natural sources of wealth the country wants a secure and just government and for a more enlightened administration that is to be hoped for from a Muhammadan ruler such are the ignorant despots of the petty states of Central Asia – those sinks of barbarism, iniquity, fanaticism and oppression that form the crumbling barrier between the civilised and Christian governments of Great Britain and Russia.” (1875:12)

What is clear from these kinds of statements is that the fundamental “Other” for Europeans has always been encapsulated in Islam, even though the Russians posed the greatest threat in terms of breaching the integrity of the British Indian Empire. This inherent othering of the Muslim kingdoms to the north becomes a key issue and, I argue, is one directly related to the way in which objects that were presented from the court of Yacoub Beg were received by the British mission. The descriptions of the British envoy’s arrival at the two courts of Yarkand and Kashgar deserve some mention, and in particular descriptions of courtly customs are worth considering in

detail. In Bellew's account of Yacoub Beg's court in Kashgar, he makes the following observations:

“When all were seated the Atalik, with true Oriental solemnity, welcomed the envoy to his country in a few short words, the while folding his hands in the overlapping sleeves of his *juba*. The envoy [perhaps referring to Forsyth] gracefully acknowledged the compliment, and presented a rifle for the acceptance of our host. It was received with a bow, but no curious examination or inquiry was permitted to disturb the narrow current of etiquette so rigidly observed in this Court, and then a glance from Atalik Ghazi towards the Tora, who stood inside the door at the further end of the hall, was the signal for the *dasturkhwan*.” (1875:297)

With reference to the presentation of gifts at court assemblages, Forsyth observes the following during an audience with the Governor (*Dadkhwah*) of Yarkand in his palace: “After the interchange of the customary compliment and ceremonies, the presents were brought in, admired and examined.” (1875:5)

There are two broad observations to be made from this exercise in looking at the details of Douglas Forsyth's mission to Yarkand and Kashgar. The first is the prevalence of certain customs that constituted wider networks of patronage and their widespread use throughout the so-called “Turko-Persian Islamicate culture” (Canfield 1991; cf. Hodgson 1974). The second observation to make is that these objects, such as the Yarkandi saddle cloth, which began the above inquiry into Douglas Forsyth's missions, were embedded in a system of *adab*, which has been defined as “codes of behaviour and values as well as methods of personal formation... *Ādāb* in all its uses reflects a high valuation of the employment of the will in proper discrimination of correct order, behavior, and taste...” (Metcalf 1984:2-3) However, when these objects were decontextualised from that system and solely brought into the sphere of commodity through colonial appropriation, they represented “corrupt” practices of Muslim “despots”, all the while becoming spectacles of “curiosity”. These objects

eventually found their way into Europe's fairs and exhibitions and consequently into museum curios and cabinets. These objects were crucial in constructing images of the "mystical" East and provided the concrete and scientific evidence for producing a particular kind of colonial knowledge about "the natives". The repercussions of this shift still resonate in the contemporary "lifeworlds" of Muslim artisans in Old Delhi, particularly with regard to manufactured goods that were part of the system of *adab*.²⁷

4. CONCLUSION

The scope of this chapter is broad. The objective has been to trace the rise and fall of urban Muslim artisans in India. The first section elaborated on the establishment of urban centres of rule in the region, which created the conditions in which urban crafts would not only thrive, but would be crucial to the political economy and governance structures that were part of Islamicate society. Such conditions, in particular, entailed the development of vital patronage networks that sought the production of luxury goods based on "Persianate" aesthetics. Initially artisans were brought or migrated from the Central Asian and Persian regions and eventually became trained locally. Thus a stratum of Muslim artisans entered the ranks of the urban working classes. The Sufis, who had also become established in India during the early formation of Islamicate states, worked closely with the lower classes and urban poor and promoted a form of piety that was more based on devotion to work as a path to God, as opposed to a primary emphasis on textual learning. Through their sympathies with the working classes, the Sufis became central to the constitution of a particular "ethic", one that was not based on caste or any discourse of origin. This very identity of the urban Muslim artisan was to be dismantled with the advent of colonial projects that sought

²⁷ For an ethnographic elaboration on this theme, see Chapter 6 "The Cow Bell Syndrome" and Chapter 8 "A Final Story".

initially to comprehend Indian customs and law by reifying the “Muslim” and “Hindu” communities, and then later by seeking categorical knowledge through the enumeration of communities primarily based on caste affiliation and through relying on discourses of origin to “prove” certain sociological facts. Such endeavours in representation were detrimental to the position of Indian Muslims, who were, and continue to be castigated as the “Other” with often violent and corrupt connotations. In the next chapter, I examine the post-colonial predicament whereby urban Muslim artisans have been relegated to the margins in multiple ways and their status as real, authentic artisans has been undermined.

Chapter 3

Urban Muslim Artisans in the Post-Colonial Predicament



1. INTRODUCTION

19 May, 2007. Lal Kuan, Old Delhi. *Getting off the cycle rickshaw on Kucha Pandit was a challenge in itself. The busy lane was narrow, yet still accommodated two-way traffic consisting of pedestrians, rickshaws, motorcycles and vegetable carts. But finding Maheen Bano's haveli [a large house] was considerably more challenging. The lanes got significantly narrower and maze-like. When veering into the residential areas that lie between the major bazaar roads, recognition of bearings is often mediated by doorways. Houses are all oriented inwards, so at street level only doorways may display some outstanding feature. This is how I eventually found Maheen Bano's haveli – I remembered from my previous visit that the entrance to the haveli was marked by a rather grand looking Mughal archway. Moving beyond the archway into the open courtyard inside the actual haveli – which once must have been occupied by a fairly well-to-do resident of the city – was now a crumbling remnant of its previous avatar. This initial feeling was substantiated by a subsequent conversation.*

Maheen Bano is the daughter-in-law of Mohammad Tahir, a well-known master artisan. She is also skilled in zardozi. I, however, was meeting Maheen Bano's two sisters-in-law, Mohammad Tahir's daughters, who had both been trained by their father in the craft. Maheen Bano and her family occupied one room with a small attached courtyard, a space where the karchob is typically set up, while the two daughters occupied a similar space next to Maheen Bano. The rest of the haveli was occupied by other unrelated families, many of whom do embroidery work, as evidenced by the variously sized karchobs set up in the courtyard. The greater part of my conversation that day, however, was hijacked by one of the daughters' husband, Waseem, who decided to tell me the history of the place. According to Waseem, until before partition the haveli, which is located on vakeel wali gali or Lawyer's Lane, was owned by the remnants of an old family that once-upon-a-time were prominently associated with the royal court. After Independence and then Partition in 1947, most of the family members moved to Pakistan and in the chaos that resulted from Partition, the haveli, like many other Muslim owned properties in Old Delhi, was left disowned and uninhabited until the government took it over. It was probably the government, Waseem explained, that put up the dividers in the haveli so that different families could live in them.

Since handicraft production is largely part of the informal sector and mostly home-based, many urban artisans live and work in large sectioned-off old houses like the one described above from an excerpt from my fieldnotes. More often than not, an extended family or *biradari* – a type of affiliation that is commonly based on vocation rather than kin – occupies the entire *haveli*. Furthermore, as it is not uncommon for a large family to occupy a part of the *haveli* that is no larger than two adjoining rooms,

the limited space is often used for multiple activities, such as eating, sleeping, working and leisure. The rationale of beginning this chapter with an ethnographic description of the living condition of urban Muslim artisans is to highlight the very real and marginal position that they occupy. The dilapidated *havelis*, once the home of wealthy families and a testament to a wholly different way of life, have morphed into congested living spaces for the lower classes and urban poor. It seems that the crumbling *haveli* is a fitting descriptor for those who are left outside the fold of the modernising, cosmopolitan city and thereby invisible to the greater aspirations of the nation-state. With this preamble in place, the rest of the chapter is devoted to situating urban Muslim artisans in the post-colonial predicament, whereby they have been neglected both in academic scholarship and in the broader project of nation-building.

There have been few studies of urban Muslim artisans, whether dealing with their current context or looking into the historical development of urban-based craft production in India (cf. Vanina 2004). As a consequence, there is little understanding of the everyday lives and experiences of this segment of the lower classes and urban poor in India. Although the “subaltern studies” group of historians has done much to rectify the gap in our knowledge of the subaltern classes, since the publication of the first volume in 1982 there has only been one out of twelve volumes to date that has focused on Muslim “subalterns” in South Asia (Mayaram 2005). In addition to the under-representation of Muslims subalterns in Indian historiography, one of the most sustained critiques of this approach to recovering subaltern voices is that it romanticises the predominantly “peasant” consciousness of the subaltern as being necessarily “oppositional” (Loomba 2005:198). Spivak’s (1988) early critique of the subaltern studies group is disapproving of this presumption and challenges the

homogenisation of “the subaltern” through the romanticisation of a selective “subaltern” consciousness. She argues that under such an essentialised category of the subaltern, what tends to be ignored is that some can and do use hegemonic discourses to speak and be heard (e.g. elite Indians who collaborated with colonial officials) and these same so-called “subalterns” can silence others.²⁸ She argues that we must not subsume all those who are considered oppressed under the notion of subaltern. Those elite Indians who collaborated with the colonials may be oppressed under the colonial regime (as “the colonised”), but they were not subaltern. Although, in the end, Spivak proposes that the subaltern cannot speak and thus cannot be heard, I suggest that agency can indeed be recovered by looking beyond the reified and assumed “oppositional consciousness” of the subaltern in the sites where aspirational discourses and performances are produced (see Chapter 1 “Research Question and Theoretical Framework”). In addition to the romanticisation of a subaltern consciousness as being necessarily oppositional, another problem with this body of scholarship is its bias towards the so-called rural peasant and predominantly “Hindu” movements. As a result, this has virtually left out the experiences of urban Muslim subalterns and they have become the “forgotten” citizens of India.²⁹

To provide a background and context to the current situation of urban Muslim artisans in the post-colonial nation-state, the present chapter has a four-fold construction.

Firstly, I will summarise some of the studies that document the state of the craft

²⁸ Spivak illustrates this double silencing with the example of the *sati* or even the double marginalisation of what she calls the “brown female”.

²⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty acknowledges that, with particular reference to Bengali historiography, there has been a “forgetting of the Muslim”, which is deeply embedded in the way history is taught. He writes that “[f]or more than a hundred years, Muslims have constituted for Hindu chroniclers what one historian once memorably called the “forgotten majority”... Indian-Bengali anticolonial nationalism implicitly normalized the ‘Hindu’.” (2000: 21). For an account of the “politics of forgetting”, which have excluded the working classes in favour of India’s growing middle-class consumer-citizens, see Fernandes 2004.

industry and artisans in India today. This will provide a general background in terms of how the craft sector has been variously written about and analysed, including the numbers of people that work in this predominantly informal sector and where they live. Secondly, I will review some anthropological studies on crafts and artisans in order to draw out the emergent themes related to craft production. These include: (1) examinations of “local” knowledge systems; (2) formation of identity among artisanal groups; and (3) the marginalisation of artisans, especially women, in a context where the terms of production are often dictated by globalisation and neo-liberal orthodoxies. Following an exposition of these themes in the anthropological literature, the chapter will continue with a discussion on the convergence of handicrafts and nationalism in India, which has resulted in the construction of a romanticised conception of the Indian artisan as a symbol of the nation-state. This rhetoric that has arisen around handicraft production is beginning to be addressed, but it is an issue that deserves further exploration in order to understand the marginalisation of many artisans in India today. Finally, I will conclude the chapter with a discussion of how understanding the experiences and lifeworlds of urban Muslim artisans can have important implications for our knowledge of Islam in the Indian context. Here I am referring to the ongoing debates about the usefulness of understanding Indian Islam – or indeed “lived Islam” – through the metaphor of syncretism (cf. Ahmed and Reifeld 2004). Within these debates, it is often assumed that the so-called “popular” (working/poor) classes have adopted syncretic, folk or “vernacular” forms of Islam, which are embodied in practices of Sufism, such as visiting shrines and participating in saint worship. My work with Muslim artisans, who form a sizeable segment of the lower classes and urban poor, challenges such overly deterministic assumptions.

2. CRAFTS IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW

A plethora of reports and surveys blame colonial predatory interventions for disproportionately and negatively affecting so-called traditional craft communities (e.g. Erdman 1988, SRUTI 1995, Halder and Pandey 2001, Kak 2003).³⁰ This view is particularly salient with reference to handloom weavers, both past and present.

Typically, the argument goes that Britain extracted raw materials from India in order to bolster its own nascent industrialisation resulting in the prominence of textile centres in Manchester, Leeds, etc. With rapid industrialisation in Britain, cheap manufactured goods flooded the Indian market, thereby especially disenfranchising handloom weavers.³¹ The reports also suggest that post-colonial development policies in India have resulted in a long standing neglect of the sector, particularly on the part of policy makers, and that the impact of globalisation has resulted in the declining social and economic status of artisans, leaving many struggling on the margins of society. The situation is further exacerbated in recent decades by declining markets for a growing number of traditional crafts in the age of globalisation and local governments' often inept and haphazard interventions, such as removal of entire craft communities from their traditional habitats in the centre of towns and cities to the periphery (cf. Scrase 2003, Tarlo 2000). Cumulatively these continued assaults have not only impacted on artisans' daily life and working practices by weakening their economic and social networks, but also on their sense of self, the future of their crafts and livelihood and the continued existence of their communities (cf. Elyachar 2005).

³⁰ For a critique of the notion of "traditional craft community" see Venkatesan 2006.

³¹ This argument, however, has been challenged, particularly from the field of economic history. Tirthankar Roy writes that the assumed high costs of industrialisation seem to be undermined by the survival of "several hundred thousand handloom weavers" in India and he 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; for a related historical account of the relationship between commercialisation and artisan production during the colonial period see Roy 1996).

In their wide ranging report, “Handmade in India: Preliminary Analysis of Crafts Producers and Crafts Production in India”, Liebl and Roy (2000) make a clear differentiation between crafts producers in today’s developed countries and India. They suggest that in developed nations, traditional crafts producers have long been replaced by the “studio craftsperson”, whose identity most often merges and overlaps with fine artists. In India, on the other hand, Liebl and Roy contend that “there are only a handful of individuals who would correspond to the ‘studio crafts person’... [while] literally millions of people possessing traditional skills and knowledge of traditional techniques [are] more or less making a living by producing handcrafted goods.” (ibid:35)³²

The handicraft sector in India is the second largest employer following the agricultural sector. The demand for handcrafted goods has been on the rise, particularly because of increased export opportunities (see Liebl and Roy 2003), and, as a result, large numbers of people are newly entering the sector by taking up short-term apprenticeships and learning basic craft skills. The effects of this influx of new labour into handicraft production are that wages are steadily decreasing as are levels of skilled craftsmanship, a process referred to as de-skilling. The percentages of both male and female artisans constituting varying age groups (e.g. from 15-25, 26-40, etc.) are approximately equal, although there tends to be a higher proportion of women working with textiles, particularly embroidery (Ameta 2003; see Mies 1982, Wilinson-Weber 1999). As such, the sector is marked by immense diversity and is not amenable to an easy definition. Liebl and Roy (2003) suggest that the difficulty of

³² For a discussion on studio crafts people in India, see Khosle 2002.

defining the constitution of the handicraft sector is in large part due to the variety of government agencies involved in its promotion. Putting these complications aside, Liebl and Roy have used the following definition: “handicrafts are products produced with: (i) manual labour with minimal or no input from machines; (ii) a substantial level of skill or expertise; (iii) a significant element of tradition; and (iv) history of survival in significant scale.” (2003:5367). But however it may be defined, the crafts industry is still of considerable value. The size of its market till 1998-99 was estimated to have grown to \$5.6 billion (£3.5 billion), of which one third consisted of exports while the remainder represented production for the domestic market. Even at a very conservative estimate, at least 9-10 million craft workers are employed in this industry, including part-time workers, while a more liberal estimate will place the number of artisans at 20 million (Venkatesan 2009b:34).

In 1993, one of the first comprehensive surveys was conducted on the handicraft sector³³ and it identified 10 distinct craft mediums: Textile (carpets, other floor coverings, other textiles); cane and bamboo; wood; metal; stone; straw, grass and leaf; leather; glass; clay and ceramics; ivory, bone, horn and shells. Many of the craft products are not just aesthetically valuable artefacts but are also functional objects for domestic household use or for ritual use during various ceremonies and festivals (see Hacker 2000). The production of crafts has been traditionally group specific, hereditary and often subject to the myriad of observed codes of inter- and intra-group relationships specified by caste and other group-specific customs. The survey on the handicrafts sector indicates that approximately 70% of artisans are Hindu, while Muslims (23%), Sikhs (2%), Christians (4%) and others (1%) constitute the rest. Of

³³ The “Census of Handicraft Artisans – Phase 1” was commissioned by the Office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), Ministry of Textiles and carried out by National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER).

these, over two thirds belong to the lowest castes (see Ameta 2003). Also according to the survey, artisans are spread throughout the country, though the rural areas account for about 76.5% of all artisans, while the urban areas comprise 23.5% of all artisans. Most significantly, 98% of all handicrafts units and 96% of all artisans form part of the so-called “unorganised” household sector; that is, all but 4% of artisans are household members practicing their crafts jointly in their homes. Barely 3% of household units employ non-household artisans, which accounts for just about 3% of the total artisan work force (Ameta 2003).

What is quite clear in attempting to define the parameters of the craft industry is that it primarily constitutes India’s so-called “informal economy”. The informal economy can be defined as flexible labour practices, irregular employment, the lack of social security, and its peripheral location vis-à-vis state regulatory mechanisms – although the informal economy does not completely evade the purview of the state (De Neve 2005) and has been referred to as a “shadow-state” (Harriss-White 2003). In India today, the informal sector is marked by the prevalence of home-based self-employment, where the use of family labour is common and networks of community and kin often form primary relations of exchange (Sanyal and Bhattacharyya 2009). Indeed scholars are now suggesting that the informal sector is no longer a transitional phase between pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of production, but instead is an entirely separate economic system based on its exclusion from circuits of capital, whereby there is “a clear trend towards self-employment as the main source of livelihood for the informal labour force.” (Sanyal and Bhattacharyya 2009:40)

3. ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTS OF CRAFTS AND ARTISANS

Studies on craft and artisans in India range from a variety of perspectives and disciplines, such as development oriented studies, surveys and sociological studies, anthropological and ethnographic accounts, and “coffee table” glossies, to name but a few. This research project primarily focuses on anthropological and ethnographic accounts of artisans and their crafts, although some of the literature from development oriented studies has been useful.³⁴ Currently I am not aware of any comprehensive attempt to review the scholarly literature on the lives and experiences of people who are part of the craft industry, perhaps due to the lack of research done on this topic. De Neve states that “the informal sector still constitutes the least researched part of India’s economy” and that “while agricultural labour (which still constitutes a large part of this work force) has received a good deal of scholarly attention over the past decades, India’s industrial workshops and factories remain by and large unexplored.” (2005:8). Recently there have been quite a number of studies on India’s industrial working classes, where fieldwork has been conducted in factory and workshop settings (Cross 2007, Parry 1999a, 1999b). But when it comes to understanding the predominantly home-based artisanal informal sector, research is often limited by notions of an ideal rural village where the movements and agency of artisans (or the subaltern in general) are often absent or romanticised. This shortcoming has led to a myopic view of crafts and artisans in India, an issue I will discuss in further detail in the next section. Before doing this, I will review some of the contemporary work on craft and artisans in India that will add to the general overview of crafts I have discussed above. However, as my endeavour here is limited to foregrounding some of

³⁴ By “development oriented studies” I am referring not only to reports published by NGOs, the Government of India and multi-lateral agencies (i.e. United Nations), but also articles that propose to “revive” or “rejuvenate” traditional crafts. For examples of the former, see Liebl and Roy 2000, SRUTI 1995. For examples of the latter, see Qureshi 1990, Frater 2003.

the focal themes that have emerged from studies of craft and artisans, the review is not exhaustive and concentrates mostly on anthropological studies that are situated in villages, towns and urban centres.³⁵

Perhaps what best encapsulates the first major theme in anthropological studies of crafts and artisans – examinations of “local knowledge” systems – is the following passage by Fredrik Barth: “Our [anthropologists’] focus... should be on the work of social and cultural construction of reality: those are the crucial processes that generate our object. Yet most of the anthropological interest, and most of the anthropological conceptions, focus only on how cultural knowledge within some domain or other is patterned, and how it is instantiated – *not how it is generated*... Instead, we should focus on how cultural knowledge is produced, the processes of its ‘construction’ read as a verb, not as a substantive” (1993: 6-7, my emphasis).³⁶ This focus on the production of cultural knowledge, rather than the object itself, and the meanings attributed to such knowledge in specific contexts has been one approach to the study of craft production. Jan Brouwer’s ethnographic study (1995) of an artisan caste constituting mostly goldsmiths, known as *viswakarma*, in the state of Karnataka, sets out to understand the worldview of this varied group of artisans from their own forms of local knowledge and concepts. For example, within the cosmology of the *viswakarma*, the attribute of completeness and perfection can only lie with the divine, so there is no place for such qualities in the world, as this would be akin to death. Therefore, goldsmiths will often present their patrons with incomplete objects, which

³⁵ Although my review here is limited to the Indian context, studies of craft and artisans in other parts of the world are valuable comparative resources, particularly for understanding how globalisation and neoliberal economic policies have tended to further marginalise artisans and their communities. For a review of this literature, see Scrase 2003.

³⁶ I was pointed to this quotation by reading a footnote in Christensen (1995), however, I have included more of Barth’s text than Christensen includes in her article.

they will complete only once they have begun creating a new object. Thus, the production of work is never continuous but instead is fragmented based on local conceptions of completeness and perfection (Brouwer 1999). Brouwer argues that it is imperative to understand the local knowledge systems of these producers, who often engage with economic and global processes in their own terms, if any sort of development programs are to be effective. Similarly, albeit with a focus on material culture, Christensen (1995) has worked with a community of potters in south India in order to understand modes of expression through the production of craft. She focuses on the cultural significance that artisans attach to the processes and various stages of creating material objects. In a sense she is not only interested in the production of cultural knowledge from the perspective of potters, but also in the social life of things (Appadurai 1986) and how material, crafted objects are also imbued with agency (Gell 1998). In another study of artisans in north India, Deepak Mehta's (1997) ethnography of Muslim weavers, known as *Ansaris*, in rural Uttar Pradesh, demonstrates how a coherent reality is culturally constructed by the interweaving of work and non-work activities, particularly through Islamic idioms. Prayers that are recited during the production of cloth are also recited at important life-cycle ritual ceremonies, such as circumcisions and funerals, thereby reinforcing the communal identity of this weaving community. However, with such a strong focus on local conceptions that constitute the weaver's lifeworld, the ethnography lacks an engagement with processes beyond localised knowledge systems, such as the impact that local and global economic process have had on weaving practices (cf. Ciotti 2007, Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

The second broad theme of anthropological studies of crafts and artisans in India concerns the formation of identities among artisanal groups. The famous weaving and sari production centre of Banaras has received a fair amount of scholarly attention. Nita Kumar's study of the artisans of Banaras (1988) seeks to interpret how the identities of this working class group have shifted over a one hundred year period, between 1880 and 1986. Kumar situates her study of artisans in Banaras within the scholarship of subaltern studies, which seeks to recover forms of agency of non-elite actors throughout India's colonial and post-colonial history. The objective of the study, therefore, is to "recover the fullness of lower-class life" in Banaras (Kumar 1988:7). Kumar accomplishes this by using the lens of "leisure" to discuss the emergence of a class consciousness defined as *banarsipan*, or Banaras-ness, that transcends the fact that some artisans are Muslim and others are Hindu. In another study of weavers in Banaras nearly two decades after the publication of Kumar's pioneering work, Christopher Lee (2005) further nuances aspects of identity formation among this group of artisans. With particular reference to Muslim sari weavers in Banaras, Lee argues that Kumar generally falls into the trap of essentialising the Muslim identity as "a largely undifferentiated, monolithic group; any differentiation is treated simply as a result of Sunni-Shia differences or as a by-product of economic class, wherein wealthier, educated Muslims practice a Salafi-inspired Islam and working-class Muslims practice a 'local Islam'." (2005:178). Lee suggests that beyond essentialised religious identities, which are often promoted by homogenising nationalist discourses to substantiate "communalism" (cf. Pandey 1992), the formation of other subjectivities based on adherence to cultural codes of etiquette (*adab*) and ways of remembering the past also constitute "ways-of-being" artisans in Banaras. Another recent study that focuses on the Banaras weaving

industry has also looked into the emergence of working-class identities. Manuela Ciotti's (2007) ethno-history of a *Chamar* (leather-workers) community outside Banaras describes how this group of so-called "untouchables" became upwardly mobile by learning weaving from Muslim artisans in Banaras in the mid nineteenth century. In the period before independence, these *Chamars* were able to learn the craft in workshops owned by Muslim weavers, since the latter did not practice the norms of purity-pollution restrictions. However, with the sharp decline of the weaving industry in Banaras since the 1990s, both Muslim and *Chamar* weavers have seen a significant decline in their socio-economic positions and both groups have either abandoned their craft or live a marginal existence as weavers.

Aside from the work on artisans in Banaras, there are few other ethnographic accounts that seek to study current conditions of urban artisans. Of the limited urban-based studies of craft production, the majority focus on the third broad theme – the marginalisation of artisans in contexts often dictated by globalisation and neo-liberal orthodoxies. Clare Wilkinson-Weber's ethnography (1999) of the Lucknow embroidery industry, known as *chikan*, is one of the most comprehensive studies of urban artisans in India to date. Taking a Marxist-feminist perspective, Wilkinson-Weber argues that over the past two decades the terms of production within this industry have markedly shifted from highly skilled male artisans doing intricate embroidery work to low-skilled women who are paid meagre piece-rate wages. These formerly high skilled male artisans have either left the craft in order to pursue other jobs and trades, or have become middlemen within the industry, since businesses are increasingly established to sell *chikan* for the tourist market. On the other hand, Wilkinson-Weber argues, women have been relegated to household production where

they are considered second-class artisans (and citizens). These women “learn to make one stitch only, an instance of de-skilling that is consistent with the intensification of production for a mass-market.” (2004:288). In another study of urban-based artisans and craft production, Peter Knorringa’s (1999) work with leather artisans in Agra’s footwear industry discusses the threats faced by this informal sector. Until the 1990s, the footwear industry functioned quite effectively within the realm of the informal economy, in which both home-based and workshop production was prevalent. With India’s market reforms and liberalisation during the 1990s, this industry has been adversely affected by competition from mass-produced plastic foot-wear and loss of export markets. As a result of such threats, fewer workshops are in operation and artisans are forced into overcrowded home-based production, where wages are meagre and employment is not secure.

The characteristics of the informal handicraft sector in Lucknow and Agra resonate with what Jan Breman (1996) has called the increasing “casualization” of labour and with Geert de Neve’s (2002) study of the incorporation of household production units into global economic production regimes (in this case, weaving rugs for the furnishing company, IKEA), of which the tourist economy is an important aspect. Maria Mies’ (1982) account of lace-makers in Andhra Pradesh, while not urban-based, takes a Marxist-feminist framework to understand women’s work in the handicraft sector, which is often described as “invisible labour”. Mies refers to the trend of women producing for the global economy from the household as the “housewifization” of the economy. Similarly, Maskiell (1999) observes that, with regard to women’s embroidery work in Punjab, known as *phulkari*, the shifts in capitalist relations of

production during the colonial period resulted in increased informalisation and segregation of women in this handicraft sector.

To conclude this review of ethnographic work on artisans in India, I will sum up the major themes which emerge from these studies and introduce a fourth theme that has begun to be addressed by scholars in the field. The first theme to come out of studies on artisans is a focus on local knowledge. It is argued that artisans, as creators of objects that are imbued with aesthetic value (cf. Coote and Shelton 1992), organise their world according to conceptions that are not separate from the processes of creation and production. Thus, as anthropologists, if we are to understand the worldview of others, then we must consider not only, as Barth would have it, the instantiation of cultural knowledge but also the processes by which it is generated. A second broad theme to emerge from studies of artisans is the ways in which multiple identities are formed, and in particular a working-class consciousness. The conjunction of history and anthropology proves to be a fruitful method for teasing out the nuances of artisan identity, whereby artisans are portrayed as actors with agency, but who can still coalesce under a working-class ethic (De Neve 2005). This kind of agency has been denied to artisans in both past and current writing, since this group is portrayed as silent and marginal contributors to economic production and is often subsumed under the homogenising category of “craft community” (see below; Venkatesan 2002, 2006). The third broad theme to emerge is related to the increasing marginalisation of artisans and their crafts, which is attributed to the changing relations of production in an era of commercialisation and globalisation. Within the blurred boundaries of this informal economy, it has been observed that women’s work in particular is increasing but their skills and work-value are decreasing resulting in

their further marginalisation. With the prevalence of a tourist economy, along with competition from cheaper manufactured products and greater reliance on export markets, artisans' work is pushed towards the uncertain edges of an already uncertain informal economy.

Within research conducted on crafts and artisans in India, another theme is emerging in ethnographic studies that seek to problematise certain categories such as “traditional Indian craft” or “craft community”, which up till now have not been seriously interrogated. In her ethnography of the Lucknow embroidery industry, Wilkinson-Weber has pointed to one of the major insufficiencies in current research on handicrafts in India. She writes, “[w]hat 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.” (2004:281) Similarly, Soares and Osella remind us that it is imperative “to pay attention to the genealogies of discourses (academic, state, ‘official’, global, as well as those of our research subjects and interlocutors), which might become authoritative and normative” (2007:S2). To date only a limited number of studies have explored the ways in which the rhetoric of crafts production in India has become authoritative and normative. These studies challenge concepts such as “craft community” and address the various levels of discourse that are involved in craft promotion and revival initiatives (Bundgaard 1999). Soumhya Venkatesan argues that the discursive production of categories such as “craft community” and “traditional Indian craft” serve, above all, to deny agency to artisans, whereby the latter are viewed as being in need of development interventions based on craft revival initiatives. These categories have been produced within

domains of what Venkatesan calls the “craft world”, which is similar to Bundgaard’s (1999) notion of “art worlds”. The craft world is a space consisting of “development practitioners, government officials, museum staff and buyers, as well as...politicians” (2006:83) who often come from elite segments of Indian society. It is the actors within the craft world who have defined what constitutes both “traditional Indian craft” and “craft communities” and as such both categories become “a romantic fiction bearing little relation to the ways in which craft producers conceptualise their identities and interact with each other.” (2006: 64) Craft worlds, then, are discursive spaces set apart from artisans who have no voice or power when it comes to defining such spaces. However, Venkatesan argues that some artisans do appropriate the language of the craft world in order to pursue their own goals. From her ethnography of Muslim weavers in rural Tamil Nadu, Venkatesan provides an example of artisans negotiating the discursive spaces of the craft world by looking at how two artisans, who both won the prestigious national award for highly skilled artisans, differently approached the state for further assistance. In a letter asking the government for monetary assistance to build a house and a shed for training weavers, one artisan used the kind of language that appealed to the sensibilities of the craft world by presenting herself “as someone who is struggling to preserve an age-old industry for the sake of future generations.” (2009a:90) A second artisan also wrote a letter seeking monetary assistance to purchase land in order to build a house, but unlike the first artisan, he equated his national award and his skills with monetary entitlements and the right to live a better life – he did not seek assistance in order to save a dying craft. With reference to the second artisan, Venkatesan writes that he “was acting against the spirit of the traditional Indian craft.” (2009a:91) The result of both letter writing campaigns was that the first artisan who engaged with the discourse of the craft world

received money from the government, while the second artisan did not. Thus what emerges from Venkatesan's study of a south Indian mat weaving community is the interplay between actors constituting the elite craft world and artisans who attempt to engage with the discourse of the craft world. Artisans are portrayed as actors with agency, who can act effectively, and not simply as passive and voiceless producers succumbing to an overwhelmingly globalised world. In addition to presenting artisans as actors with agency, Venkatesan (2009b) also inquires into the history and rise of the Indian craft world, a genealogical exercise that interrogates the rhetoric of handicrafts production and demonstrates the close connection between nationalism and crafts in India. It is to this very important theme that I devote the next section.

4. INTERROGATING THE RHETORIC: ARTISANS AND THE NATION-STATE

In the heart of South Delhi, there is a venue where artisans, tourists, families, food vendors and government officials can be found mingling in the confines of a large outdoor space. This venue is called Dilli Haat and it is architecturally designed to mimic the rural marketplace (or *haat*), with permanent stalls built out of red brick and temporary stalls built like tents. It is a well-known place to purchase handicrafts directly from artisans who come from all over India. In any one trip to Dilli Haat, the visitor can see shawls from Kashmir, paintings from Bihar and Orissa, carpets from Mirzapur, woodwork from Saharanpur, saris from Tamil Nadu, and embroidered textiles from Assam. Artisans from all over India can rent stalls for a period of two weeks and have the opportunity to interact with consumers who are mostly middle-class Indian families and foreign tourists (see Favero 2007) – the types of consumers that most artisans otherwise have little interaction with. The simple idea behind Dilli Haat, which is a government initiative, is to cut out the middlemen and thereby allow

artisans to earn more income. Overall, Dilli Haat has been a success both in terms of generating revenue for Delhi tourism and providing an urban-based venue for artisans to sell directly to buyers. But above all, the fact that so many artisans are willing to go through the laborious bureaucratic procedures of applying for a stall at Dilli Haat – a procedure that is not exempt from bribery and corruption – and then bearing the costs of travelling to Delhi, often from thousands of miles away, is testament to the powerful position of the state as the foremost patron of crafts in India today.

Dilli Haat is not the only venue where artisans can interact directly with urban Indians and foreign tourists. The Crafts Museum in Delhi, which is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Textiles, is an older example of the government's efforts to promote Indian handicrafts. The museum was established in the 1950s and was built in a manner to evoke Indian village life, so as to provide visitors a context in which handicrafts are produced (Greenough 1996). For a period of one month, artisans from all over India can take up residence in the museum and provide visitors with "live" demonstrations of their skills, as well as sell their products.³⁷

Both Dilli Haat and the Crafts Museum seek not only to promote Indian artisans and the variety of their crafts, but also Indian culture and heritage by placing its diversity on display for both domestic and foreign consumers. Indeed, ever since the beginning of the anti-colonial struggles in the nineteenth century and especially after independence in 1947, the state has been a key player not only in promoting handicraft production, but also in constructing an ideal and often romantic notion of

³⁷ It is interesting to note that having artisans demonstrate "living traditions" within a museum is not only a post-colonial phenomenon. The nineteenth century World Fairs in Europe displayed, in an often grandiose fashion, the "curiosities" from the "Orient", and also brought artisans together to demonstrate their crafts, thus depicting "an India of timelessness and romance" (Metcalf 1989: 148).

the Indian craftsperson as a symbol of the nation-state. And although the monopoly of the state as patron of the crafts has been somewhat “democratised” since the 1980s due to increased export opportunities and the globalisation of the handicrafts market (see Liebl and Roy 2003), such gains have tended to benefit entrepreneurs and businessmen at the expense of artisans, who still remain at the very bottom of the production chain: poorly paid and dependent on often exploitative middlemen. Given this reality, it is not surprising that most artisans still look to the state as the main source of patronage.

The confluence of crafts and representations of the nation-state, however, stretches much further than the founding of Dilli Haat or similar craft exhibitions and fairs that are part of the post-colonial landscape in India today. The discursive relationship between artisans and the nation-state is most clearly demonstrated in the anti-colonial movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Specifically, one may point at Gandhi’s adoption of the notion of self-sustainability, or *swadeshi*, which upheld the artisan as the catalyst of rural development. The idea of *swadeshi* was crucial to the development of village industries, especially those that utilised the spinning wheel and the handloom to spin yarn and make indigenous cloth, or *khadi* (see Bayly 1983, Chakrabarty 2002, Tarlo 1996). The symbolic power of spinning and weaving *khadi* and its synonymy with the nation’s struggle against colonialism is evidenced in one of the early post-colonial projects set out to revive crafts: the National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum in Delhi, which was established in 1950. Greenough writes that “hand-loomed cloth (*khadi*) had a privileged place in the museum’s conception, reflecting the unique role of hand spinning and weaving in nationalist practice...” (1996:218) However, a major implication of the anti-colonial

movement's promotion of homespun yarn and handloomed cloth (*khadi*) and then the national campaigns to promote village industries was that it necessarily excluded those artisans and crafts that had historically resided in and produced from India's urban centres. With reference to the decline of *chikan* embroidery in Lucknow, Wilkinson-Weber succinctly argues that "[t]he 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." (2004:292)

During the anti-colonial struggles in India, a group of writers, poets and activists in Britain coalesced to form the Arts and Crafts Movement as a reaction to and condemnation of the alienation of the worker due to industrialisation. In turn, the movement also romanticised non-industrial work, and the plight of the Indian artisan was taken up as a cause for concern among the movement's proponents (see Venkatesan 2009b). Ananda Coomaraswamy, who was part of the Arts and Crafts movement, produced numerous written works on South Asian art that also captured the pre-Independence nationalist view of the synonymy between crafts and the nation. He viewed traditional Indian crafts as specifically bound to caste society, which for Coomaraswamy symbolised as a kind of organic solidarity (Greenough 1996:232-233). 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, both of which were held in stark opposition to traditional values, but the craftsman should also be upheld as representative of India as a nation (Coomaraswamy 1909). Venkatesan writes that for Coomaraswamy, "Indian craft was timeless, materializing, not an individual's vision but a community's, indeed an entire nation's." (2009a:80) Thus, as an

alternative to the liberal conception of empire, which emphasised “English education, social reform and individual enterprise,” the arts and craft movement “found justification for England’s mission in the East in the preservation of India’s ‘traditional’ society.” (Metcalf 1989:154)

The notion that artisans and their crafts exist as “timeless” cultural artefacts in traditionally bounded “communities” was echoed in ethnographic studies of Indian villages. The early anthropological pursuit in India, which was initially conducted under the aegis of classifying “the natives”, imagined India as primarily constitutive of so-called village republics, organised in concert with the principles of a Brahmanical Hindu worldview (Inden 1990). These early anthropological studies had buttressed this imaginary ideal of India through village ethnographies (e.g., Mayer 1960, Srinivas 1952) that described and rationalised the logic of the caste system within bounded villages, without paying much attention to the impact of colonial policies and interventions on the construction of caste identities (e.g., Asad 1973, Cohn 1999, Dirks 2001).³⁸ In addition, these village-based ethnographies refused to engage with the Muslim presence in Indian society and history (Van der Veer 1993). With reference to such early anthropological research conducted in India, particularly as exemplified in the work of Louis Dumont, Van der Veer writes that

“It is striking that Dumont can discuss the Hindu notions of kingship and dominance in his analysis of the caste system without taking into account the crucial historical fact that large parts of India over long periods of time have been ruled by Muslim rulers. The assumption seems to be that there is not much difference between Hindu and Muslim conceptions of kingship or those differences did exist but did not have great consequences for society.” (1993:33-34)

³⁸ In *Imagining India*, Inden writes, “Nearly every book that tries to capture the fundamental characteristics of India for its readers in whatever sphere of human activity includes a statement about the Indian village. It is one of the pillars of these imperial constructs of India.” (1990:132)

Within such early studies, depictions of the Indian craftsman were central to describing the purported cohesiveness of the caste system, since the relationship of the low caste craftsman to others in the village exemplified the idealised conception of a system based on the exchange of goods and services, or *jajmani*. Mandelbaum describes *jajmani* with the following example: “a family of farmers gets its metal tools from a particular family of blacksmith jati and in return the blacksmith family gets a share of the farmer’s crop at harvest. The relationship is supposed to be – and often is – durable, exclusive and multiple.” (1970:162) The prevalence of such a system was primarily based on the notion that Indian village life was sedentary and immobile.³⁹ In subsequent historical and anthropological work, however, it has been shown that the *jajmani* system was perhaps an invented tradition and certainly not a pristine marker of the “traditional village”. The *jajmani* system, some scholars argue, was not even a system at all, but instead was infused with tensions between groups and had been incorporated into a cash economy since at least the seventeenth century (see Fuller 1989, Mayer 1993).

Nonetheless, it was incontrovertible for many that the most authentic and real India was to be found only in its villages, because cities had already succumbed to the corruptions of modernity and industrialisation.⁴⁰ Similarly, a romanticised notion of

³⁹ Ludden writes that theories depicting India’s agrarian economy as immobile and isolated from urban economies do have a purpose: “to render pre-colonial India stable and unified, and thus to highlight the enormity of change after 1800. It...organises the world around colonialism, and to that end, turns traditional India into a sedentary, self-reproducing social formation, a stable, unified culture.” (1996: 108)

⁴⁰ In 1998, when India’s ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), performed underground nuclear tests in the deserts of Rajasthan, Prime Minister Vajpayee’s famous slogan was “Javaan, Kisaan, Vigyan” (“Youth, Farmer, Scientist”). According to Geeta Patel, it was the farmer that represented not only India’s past, but also the nation’s salvation. “He was rural India, the real India whose life had been evoked in the struggle for freedom by nationalist figures like Mahatma Gandhi...The farmer’s salvation was the nation’s future; the successful resolution of his salvation as the nation’s future fulfilled the dreams of a wholesome self-sustaining agricultural base...[H]e was the antithesis of the urban householder attached to his own distinctive technological prosthesis.” (Patel 2000: 51-52)

the rural artisan was etched into the nation's consciousness as a symbol of the real and authentic India. The rural artisan was also someone who needed to be protected from modernity, whether in the form of colonialism or later in the form of globalisation. Although Gandhi's vision for India's development was not adopted, his philosophy of promoting village based cottage industries was incorporated into national policy after Independence. One of the leading women in the independence movement and a follower of Gandhi, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, led the way in establishing many of the leading government and non-governmental organisations involved in the advancement of the handicraft sector, including the Central Cottage Industries Emporium and the Craft Council of India. The postcolonial state seems to have adopted the view that craft production and its revival is first and foremost an issue of rural development, focused on the promotion of village-based industries. For instance, the preamble of a brochure published by the Ministry of Textiles in 2007 states that handicrafts "started as part time activity in rural areas". Greenough contends that it is predominantly village industries that have featured quite prominently in the government's successive five-year plans, such that they are "allowed to persevere more or less unmolested by industrial competition." (1996:243) Thus, the government has focused on the revival of village based industries and their "timeless" aesthetic qualities, as well as, paradoxically, bringing these rural industries into the mainstream economic sphere. Similarly in the development-oriented literature that seeks to revive traditional India crafts, artisans are "both representative of the 'real and traditional India', to be protected from the evils of capitalism and faceless mass production, and as someone who needs to be encouraged to join the mainstream economy and compete within it." (Venkatesan 2002: 2)

It is important to recognise the development of the so-called Indian “craft world” and its close affiliation with anti-colonial struggles and then, following Independence, with the rise of nationalism, in order to ascertain the position of artisans in modern India. While many artisans struggle to sustain a craft-based livelihood, the politics of representation and the rhetoric of handicraft production continue to promote the artisan as a symbol of both the diversity and unity of the Indian nation-state through national award schemes, exhibition venues and various country-wide and international craft fairs that showcase “traditional Indian craft”. This form of promotion is particularly geared to encourage middle and upper-class Indians to buy “ethnic-chic” and to decorate their homes with traditional handicraft objects and wear handcrafted textiles. Venkatesan suggests that many Indian consumers buy handcrafted objects because they “seek to resolve their feelings of unease and disquiet about the world in which they live – of industries, alienated labour, lifestyles that leave no time for the simple pleasures of making – through the consumption of objects made by ‘traditional craft producers’.” (2009b:7) But the homogenising and reifying tendencies of the Indian craft world, through the construction of static categories such as “traditional Indian craft”, not only denies the agency of artisans but also denies relevance to those artisans who do not fit into such idealised narratives and normative constructs. This brief interrogation, I hope, brings to focus two glaring implications of this persistent and myopic rhetoric: firstly, that it excludes an understanding of the history and current predicament of urban artisans; secondly, as the majority of urban artisans also happen to be Muslim, it serves to erase this group even from the imagined community of the nation-state (Anderson 1991).

5. URBAN ARTISANS AND LIVING ISLAM

As discussed in the sections above, there is an overall lack of scholarship on urban Muslim artisans in India and while this in itself warrants more research, I will add another reason why this group deserves much more attention than is currently accorded to them. Focusing on urban Muslim artisans will also nuance our knowledge of the varied and multiple ways in which Islam is lived in South Asia, instead of assuming that the working and lower classes are somehow naturally swayed to local, folk or “vernacular” forms of Islam. Thus, in an effort to underscore the agentive constitution of urban Muslim artisans, I would also look to the varied and different sites of performances where Muslim subjectivities are cultivated. With such an endeavour in mind, this section will engage with emerging debates on how Islam is lived and the various considerations involved in the formation of Muslim subjectivities (see Brenner 1996, George 2009, Henkel 2008, Mahmood 2005, Marsden 2005, Schultz 2008, Simon 2009, Soares 2005).

The topic of “lived Islam” has been fraught with contentious debates on how to study Islam in various contexts. And often such debates hinge on analytic categories that may or may not be useful or relevant to the people being studied. Nile Green summarises this problematic:

“One of the perpetual dilemmas of scholarship is the creation of descriptive or analytical categories to define the phenomena that scholars observe in their data. When such categories are accurate and pertinent, they enable us to understand quickly and holistically the phenomena to which they apply and to relate these phenomena to features of the world around them. The opposite is also true: inaccurate or impertinent categories conceal aspects of what they are meant to elucidate and confuse us when we try to understand the connections of the phenomena in question to their surroundings.” (2008:1044)

Especially with reference to the study of Islam, Green goes on to argue that since the rise to power of so-called reform movements in the nineteenth century, many of the analytic concepts and categories used in the scholarship on Islam are derived from such movements, which also tend to be more Arab-centric.⁴¹ From an anthropological perspective a “consequence of such an approach is to assert that those who do not follow the cultural practices of Arabs are somehow not good Muslims. This is the position of some contemporary Muslim reformists; again anthropology takes a theological position.” (Lukens-Bull 1999:9) In the anthropological study of Islam, and the subsequent search for a paradigm that could define the disciplinary practices of an “Anthropology of Islam”, it has been argued that anthropologists often take a theological position in trying first and foremost to determine what Islam is. In his famous defining paradigm of Islam as a “discursive tradition”, Talal Asad (1986) argues that there is only one Islam defined by the tradition of the Qur’an and Hadith (Prophetic sayings).⁴² However, Asad’s position has been called a “proto-theological paradigm” (Marranci 2008:42) because it assumes that all Muslims look and relate to the texts in similar ways; it holds textual scholarship above any other forms of knowledge and experience and it seeks to document “the degree to which religion is a disciplinary order” (Marsden 2005:26). While understanding Islam within Asad’s paradigm of a “discursive tradition” may be relevant to the women who form part of the mosque movement in Egypt (Mahmood 2005) or those who are part of and follow the Tablighi Jamaat, and other so-called “revivalist” or “reformist” movements in South Asia, it does not capture the diversity of other Muslim experiences that do not

⁴¹ Osella and Osella define reformism as those “projects whose specific focus is the bringing into line of religious beliefs and practices with the core foundations of Islam, by avoiding and purging out innovation, accretion and the intrusion of ‘local custom’.” (2008:247-248)

⁴² In his emphasis on one Islam, Asad was in a critical dialogue with another anthropologist, Abdul Hamid El-Zein. El-Zein argued that in the face of diverse Muslim contexts and experiences there are multiple “islams”. See El-Zein 1977.

conform to such a paradigm of religion.⁴³ As I hope to show in the course of this thesis, ideals of moral selfhood can also be produced in diverse realms of lived social experience, such as encounters with localities, the market and the state, as well as varying conceptions of time.

The debates surrounding studies of Indian Muslims have tended to focus on *how* to study Islam in an Indian context, where the majority of the population is non-Muslim. Are both Islam and those who profess to the religion to be considered as always foreign elements within an essentially Hindu nation? Or have both Islam and its followers become assimilated and indigenised into the Indian, Hindu landscape? In most of these debates, the question of how to study Islam in India has been presented as an “either/or” predicament. Considering that the first proposition – Islam as always foreign – advocates a perceived “illiberal” position, most scholarly studies have tended to support the second proposition – Islam as syncretic and therefore tolerant. Within the latter, studies have particularly targeted Sufism. Barbara Metcalf summarises this trend in the study of Indian Islam:

“At times, in this formulation, ‘Islam,’ raised or comes to raise barriers around itself and remains distinctive. Or it ‘assimilates’ and shows itself to be truly Indian, maybe not even Islamic. To the extent that scholars have accepted the initial premise, and are interested in the latter variation, they have turned above all to studies of Sufism. And in those studies, metaphors like ‘syncretism’ and ‘assimilation’ have been particularly strong.” (Metcalf 2005)⁴⁴

⁴³ For examples of such experiences that do not conform to reformist tendencies within Islam, see Bayat’s (2007b) examination of the “politics of fun” and Schielke’s (2009) examination of ambivalence among Egyptian youth.

⁴⁴ This over-emphasis on Sufism is not only prevalent in the study of Islam in South Asia, but also in the study of Muslim societies in general. One of the earliest ethnographies conducted among Muslims was Evans-Pritchard’s (1949) study of a Sufi brotherhood in Libya. Many of the seminal texts that constitute the so-called “Anthropology of Islam”, such as Geertz (1968), Gellner (1969) and Eickelman (1976) focus significantly on Sufi practices. Indeed one anthropologist writes: “Anthropologists researching Muslim societies have for a long time studied Muslim societies within Islamic countries, and often the Muslim was the Sufi or the Bedouin” (Marranci 2008).

But even the term Sufism is not a neutral analytic category that can be employed to understand certain facets of social life, since the category of Sufi tends to conceal more than it reveals. Green notes that Sufism was “a term first used by such British soldier-scholars as Sir John Malcolm and James William Graham in the early 1800s...and today by academic and increasingly non-academic commentators on the Islamic world.” (2008:1044) It was initially employed as a means to define an essentialised and universal “mysticism”, but then this definition was displaced in favour of Sufism as a version of Islam corrupted or modified by local customs and practices. Sufism, then, became the anti-thesis of a so-called “pure” Islam that was often propagated by Islamic reform movements. The Osellas see four problems with the distinction between Sufi practices and so-called reformism that particularly informs the scholarship of Islam in South Asia. They write:

“Firstly, it naively suggests a tension between ‘little’ (read popular) and ‘great’ (read *ashraf* or scriptural) traditions...Secondly, it assumes ‘reformism’ and ‘traditionalism’ to be substantial categories, rather than being produced discursively – and rhetorically – in the context of public debates...Thirdly, it insists on the particularism of certain practices which, in fact, are not at all particular to South Asian ‘popular’ Islam but are found in many Muslim societies...Fourthly, it attributes such practices [Sufism] with fluidity, negotiation and openness, while reformism is characterized as closed, rigid and dogmatic.” (2008:250-251).

Thus, such moves to distinguish Sufism from reformism tend, above all, to reify and essentialise both categories. As such, the study of Muslims in South Asia also tends to compartmentalise people’s everyday lives into either one of these analytic categories. This kind of limiting analysis certainly conceals experiences of lived Islam, all the while projecting categories that may not be relevant to the lives of those being studied.

One such category is “syncretism”, which is often associated with Sufi practices.

Early studies that emphasised the co-called syncretic elements of Muslim daily life

focused especially on topics such as caste among Indian Muslims (Ahmad 1978, Ahmad 2003). It was suggested that Muslims had adopted mechanisms of social stratification, contrary to Islamic principles of equality, in similar ways that Hindus were socially stratified according to an occupationally based caste hierarchy.

However, many of these studies on Indian Muslims were embedded in the political rhetoric of the newly founded Indian and Pakistani nation-states, whereby Muslims who did not migrate to Pakistan sought to legitimate themselves as Indian citizens through the “syncretic” metaphor. But to a large extent, the studies of Islam among Indian Muslims were to be located in analysing the role of Sufi shrines in daily life and the practice of Sufi shrine worship (e.g. Ahmed and Reifeld 2004, Eaton 1978, Ernst 1992, Ewing 1997, Green 2006, Jeffery 1979, Troll 2003, Werbner and Basu 1998).

5.1 Rethinking Islam in South Asia

Visiting and paying respects to a saint’s shrine has been studied as the quintessential example of syncretic Islam. The Sufi shrine complexes, known as “*mazār-s*” or “*dargah-s*”, are typically where renowned Sufi saints are buried along with ruling elites and other notables.⁴⁵ As the veneration of a saint occurs usually due to his charismatic powers and his ability to perform miracles, this Sufi veneration is often referred to as a tomb cult.⁴⁶ The main annual festival at each shrine is known as the ‘*urs*’ and this is when pilgrims come from afar to commemorate the anniversary of the

⁴⁵ Delhi has three of the most important Sufi *dargah-s* of the Chishti order. These are the *dargah-s* of Bakhtiyar Kaki, Nizam ad-Din Auliya and Chiragh i Dihli. Around Nizam ad-Din Auliya’s shrine complex are also the tombs of Amir Khusro, the famous fourteenth century court poet and disciple of Nizam ad-Din Auliya and of Jahanara Begum, the daughter of Shahjahan.

⁴⁶ I do not agree with the designation of “cult” for visiting Sufi shrines, not only because of its derogatory connotations in a Western context but also because such a designation assumes that people’s rational capacity to understand their own devotion is diminished by a saint’s charisma or magical powers.

saint's death. Apart from the large gathering during the *'urs* period, the shrine is also visited on a daily basis by a variety of people, usually to pay respects to the saint or to pray with the intention of influencing some personal issue, for example a childbirth, or in particular the birth of a son. In both *'urs* festivals and daily visits, Sufi shrines attract Hindus, Muslims and others who participate in the ritual and devotional practices associated with the shrines. It is these types of practices that have been interpreted as the signs of syncretism and hybridity in South Asian Islam. The various practices associated with Sufism have been thought to appeal to the masses regardless of religion, as opposed to the formal realm of Islamic learning that maintains its authoritative base within the ranks of the religious scholars, or the *ulama* (see Robinson 2001, Zaman 2002).⁴⁷

This dichotomy arises from distinctions made between the supposedly syncretic, orthoprax, "little traditions" that have been part of lived Islam in South Asia (see Ahmed and Reifeld 2004) as opposed to the reformist, orthodox, "great traditions" that have arisen in South Asia from the influence of foreign Islamic elements.⁴⁸

However, such simplistic dichotomisations of lived Islam have been challenged (e.g. Marsden 2005, Metcalf 1982, 2004, Osella and Osella 2007, Van der Veer 1994). For example, Van der Veer questions the often referenced participation of Hindus in Sufi shrines as evidence of "syncretism". With reference to a shrine complex in Gujarat, he writes that while Hindus did visit the shrine complex and also participated in the *'urs*

⁴⁷ In his study of Muslims in northern Pakistan, Marsden argues that the Sunni *ulama* are not simply "one-dimensional founts of puritanical 'Islamic' authority" (2005:157) as evidenced by his account of the amulet-making *ulama*, a practice typically associated with the Sufi *pir*. For an earlier study of the blurred boundaries between Sufis and the *ulama*, see Metcalf 1982.

⁴⁸ The distinction between "great" and "little" traditions in Islam was borrowed from the same distinction made by Robert Redfield in his study of Mexican peasants. Redfield famously wrote: "In a civilization there is a great tradition of the reflective few...and there is a little tradition of the largely unreflective many." (quoted in Varesco 2005: 4)

processions, they nevertheless did so on their own terms and remained marginal in the devotional activities of the shrine and procession. On the topic of the *'urs* celebrations, Van der Veer writes,

“The saint’s day provides a theatre in which the saint appears as a sacred center, an icon of devotion. While in general his knowledge and behavior set an example to the followers, special emphasis is given to the power inherent in his body. Muslims and Hindus come to see and touch the saint in the same way they come to see and touch the tomb. The participation of Hindus is often taken to be a sign of syncretism, but there is reason for caution in using that term. What is crucial in my observations is that Hindus and Muslims appear to have rather similar ideas about power and saintliness but that the participation of Hindus in the celebration is restricted. The saint’s day is an occasion of power, and Hindus are permitted to benefit from it, but only within clearly defined limits.” (1994:36)

Similarly, other ethnographic accounts have challenged the overtly essentialised analytic framework under which Muslims in South Asia are studied. Marsden’s ethnographic accounts of young Muslims in the Chitral region of Northwest Pakistan problematise assumptions about Muslim subjectivities in the face of “Islamisation” trends, particularly in the form of the Taliban. He argues that people’s experiences of what it means to be Muslim in this part of the world are a far cry from choosing between either reformist tendencies in line with the Taliban or more liberal and tolerant forms of religious practices. Marsden convincingly argues that Muslim subjectivities are formed through intellectual pursuits and debates, through travel (Marsden 2009) and through emotional engagements and inquiries (Marsden 2007).

Reflecting on my own experiences in Old Delhi and my encounters with many artisans there, I found myself questioning the different ways in which one can be Muslim. It seemed to me that while most artisans I met visited Sufi shrines in Delhi,

and some even travelled to the famous Chishti shrine in Ajmer as well as smaller shrines in places like Jaipur, the ways in which they articulated the convergence of religion and everyday life and work could not so easily be subsumed under the categories of syncretism or reformism. And this is especially surprising because artisans in particular have had strong historical connections to Sufism (see Chapter 2). Thus, if syncretism was indeed a valid metaphor to encapsulate “popular” Muslim experiences, then artisans surely would have been the embodiment of such a metaphor. But, on the other hand, if syncretism is not an appropriate analytic category and only narrows our understanding of lived Islam especially among the lower classes and urban poor on which this research is focused, then moving beyond unhelpful dichotomies, I suggest, requires a historical and ethnographic understanding of the formation of Muslim subjectivities.

5.2 Shifting Paradigms: Looking Beyond “Syncretism”

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the lives of urban artisans are often marked by characteristics of living an “informal life” (see pp.38, 42), whereby certain practical and pragmatic considerations are taken into account, along with how to live authentically and “virtuously” as a Muslim artisan. Thus, instead of beginning with Islam as the dominant conceptual frame (Green 2008), which organises people’s lives (Geertz 1968), or is conceived of as a “discursive tradition” (Asad 1986), it may be more fruitful to “depart from the strategic use of ‘Islam’ as an explanatory paradigm” (Schielke and Stauth 2009:9) and look at the ways in which Muslims themselves speak about and relate to their experiences. Others have suggested that if the object of study is limited to Islam, then “we’ll miss the relevant processes, existing in identity formation as well as community identification, which can disclose the dynamics of

Muslims lives.” (Marranci 2008:8) For instance, Muslim artisans have much to say about ideal work practices. Their experiences of work and producing craft objects in a rapidly changing world and an increasingly globalised handicraft market, often inform their perceptions of the convergence of work and certain Islamic practices. I will conclude this chapter by looking briefly at the dynamics of such a convergence in order to illustrate other ways of understanding lived Islam and moving away from essentialised conceptions of religious beliefs and practices.

In the West, work has been conceived as the main axis upon which industrial capitalism developed and it is particularly within the realm of work that religious beliefs and practices have been purged. The classic treatises by Marx and Weber on the development of capitalism in the West consider alienation and disenchantment as the necessary processes leading to the formation of a class of workers and a working-class consciousness. The disenchantment of the world, which Weber saw as part and parcel of the rise of industrial capitalism, meant “the increasing systematisation of religious ideas and concepts, the growth of ethical rationalism, and the progressive decline of ritual and ‘magical’ elements in religion.” (Morris 1987:69) Indeed religious beliefs were castigated as “modernity’s estranged self” (Viswanathan 1998: xiii-xiv). According to these conceptualisations, without the eventual elimination of religious belief and its associated social relations from modern systems of production, European modernity, in conjunction with capitalist development, may never have come into existence (cf. Carrier 1992).

Inherent in processes of disenchantment and alienation, and thus in the formation of a working class consciousness, is a conception of time relating to work and labour. As a

part of European modernity, and in similar manifestations around the world that emulated such modernity, capitalist development placed the factory as the quintessential space of production. In this space, workers' bodies could be strictly monitored and disciplined, particularly through a rigid regime of time management. Work and a particular conception of time management were intimately linked (Thompson 1967). The subsequent disentanglement of social and economic spheres of life made a person into a worker, who was managed by a strict time regime, but outside the factory, in the realm of the social, a person could be a father, husband, sister, etc. E.P. Thompson writes, "Mature industrial societies of all varieties are marked by time-thrift and by a clear demarcation between 'work' and 'life'." (1967:93) In such conditions, "labour becomes a commodity measured out in units of time". (Ingold 2000:328)

However, this model of capitalist development does not always prove sufficient for understanding working lives and experiences. Even in highly industrialising contexts, the regimentation of time does not necessarily produce workers who suffer complete anomie and alienation, as suggested by Parry's (1999a) research on steel plant workers in Bhilai, India and by Ingold (2000:323-338) in his discussion of railway workers in Britain. Subramanian argues that workers in the factory often manage their own regimes of work, thus restoring workers' "role as agents who shape the distinctive character of the workplace." (2009:185; cf. Rofel 1999) In the case of urban Muslim artisans, I suggest that the estrangement of religious practice from productive capacities has never occurred and I will argue that a particular working "ethic" has emerged due to the conjunction of work and religion, and in particular

through religiously inflected notions of time⁴⁹, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

If we look into the historical links between artisans and Sufis within the context of Indian Islamicate states, beginning as early as the 13th century, we find that the Sufis, and especially the Chishti order, initiated a very mindful and sustained approach to consolidate a work ethic among the working population. Their approach was not necessarily rooted in disenchantment, whereby alienation and anomie was part of the process of transformation, but instead their vision was rooted in the cultivation of a conception of time, albeit different from that cultivated in a European context. Just as the transformation of the working classes in Europe incorporated a particular ideal conception of time linked to factory-based production, the elements of piety and worship in the creation of a work ethic for artisans also incorporated conceptions of time. For many Sufis who mingled intimately with the lower classes and urban poor⁵⁰, time was conceptualised not in terms of hours committed to labour nor as a measure of maximal efficient production, but instead time was related to the Islamic concept of *tauhid*, or the oneness of God. In other words, one's labour was a way in which to achieve a state of being one with God – a state defined by the collapse of time, where the present and future become one lasting moment. Furthermore, the Sufis turned the concept of becoming one with God into a pedagogical narrative, whereby work, ritual

⁴⁹ Rudnyckyj's (2009) recent anthropological study on the convergence of work and piety in a factory setting in Indonesia provides fascinating insights into the way belief and economy (and neoliberalism) cannot be treated as distinct realms of analysis. With professional training in Islamic piety given to factory employees, Rudnyckyj refers to this approach as "market Islam", which focuses on "spiritual economies". He writes that "Market Islam...is designed to inculcate the kind of ethical dispositions deemed conducive to greater competitiveness in a global economy. Rather than expecting miracles as the result of previous economic exchanges, market Islam emphasizes an ethics of hard work, responsibility, and accountability as the means to economic well-being." (2009: 187)

⁵⁰ Nile Green (2008c) provides a historical account of an Indian Sufi – a disciple of a branch of the Chishti order – who travelled to South Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to spread his message among Indian indentured labourers and among a growing class of urban poor in Natal.

and faith were inseparable. One special element of this pedagogy through which one could achieve the inseparability was the notion of *zīkr*, or remembrance of God.

The way in which *zīkr* is still used as a pedagogical tool will be discussed in a later chapter (Chapter 5). What I would like to emphasise here, however, is that the emergence of an urban Muslim artisan subjectivity is firmly embedded in pedagogical narratives where alternate renditions of Islamic piety and worship became essential instruments in the formation of an ethical and moral consciousness, particularly setting conceptions of work among this artisanal group apart from their European counterparts and from the norms of Islamic orthodoxy. Indeed, through the articulation of different conceptions of time, and how they mingle with certain ideals such as work – and also narrative forms, as I discuss in Chapter 6 – it is possible to access other ways in which subjectivities are formed (cf. Boellstorff 2007, Patel 2000). Boellstorff argues that what is needed in anthropological inquires is the radical “queering” of time in order to “forge possibilities for deploying time in ways other than reproducing hierarchy along the trajectory of straight time – a trajectory that climaxes in an implicit modernist vision of progress” (2007:24).

In this section I have touched upon very broad and complex issues and have only begun an inquiry into analysing the formation of Muslim subjectivities related to urban artisans. The ethnographic chapters that follow will add much more scope to the ideas I have outlined above. What I also hope to demonstrate is the nuances of lived Islam among the lower classes and urban poor, whereby simplistic dichotomies between “little traditions” and “great traditions”, Sufism and reformism, orthoprax

and orthodox, are analytic categories that rarely prove meaningful in the everyday lives of Muslim artisans.

6. CONCLUSION

The broad objective of this chapter has been to situate urban Muslim artisans in the postcolonial context of the Indian nation-state. In Chapter 2, I traced the historical emergence of this group in north India and then discussed the processes that constituted the unmaking of Muslim identities, particularly of the lower classes and urban poor. As a follow-up to that chapter and before introducing the core ethnographic material, this chapter has laid out the conditions in which handicrafts are produced and reviewed the types of ethnographic studies that have been conducted on artisanal groups in India. The lack of scholarship on urban Muslim artisan groups demonstrates their wider marginalisation within the narratives of the nation-state – they are indeed forgotten citizens. In response to the gap in knowledge about this group, I suggested “interrogating the rhetoric” that has been (and continues to be) constructed around artisans and craft production. Embedded in this rhetoric is the notion of the real and authentic artisan, one who is representative of the Indian nation-state and who is located in rural “Hindu” communitarian settings. Such rural bias still forms a large part of development and craft revival initiatives promoted by the so-called craft world. Finally, I concluded this chapter with a discussion of how ethnography relating to the lives and experiences of urban Muslim artisans can allow for a rethinking of the ways in which Islam is lived in South Asia.

The next four chapters form the core ethnography of this thesis. Keeping line with my theoretical objective, each of the following chapters discusses different sites of performance where the *asli karigar* is constituted.

Chapter 4

The Real, the Fake and Others in between



1. INTRODUCTION

Old Delhi's *zardozi* industry is, above all, epitomised by the diversity of artisans who engage with the craft in a variety of ways. This chapter is intended to highlight this diversity through detailed ethnography that focuses on the many different actors that comprise this urban craft sector and the way they live and enact identities from an experiential point of view (Retsikas 2007). As such, the chapter is divided into three sections that discuss the most prominent types of producers in the *zardozi* industry: (1) Those who are considered by themselves and their peers to be real, authentic artisans (*asli karigar*); (2) migrants who arrive in Old Delhi in search of any type of work and end up becoming apprentices in *zardozi* workshops; and (3) women artisans who are mostly home-based producers and often move back and forth between being identified as artisan and labourer.

In the first section, I take various ethnographic examples to look into the language and terminologies that form part of the experience of being an *asli karigar* and how these are used in relation to those who are not considered real, authentic artisans. The use of terminologies becomes a strategy in order to construct boundaries between the authentic self and the inauthentic other. Recalling Shannon's (2006) definition of

authenticity as an “anti-discourse”, what is authentic is formulated through assertions about the inauthenticity of other practices and ways of being. Performances of authenticity are thus discourses of exclusion. I explain how the constitution of the *asli karigar* is often discursively produced and performed with the frequent use of particular words that construct the “other” according to binaries such as real/fake, rooted/transient, artisan/labourer, man/woman, to name some of those discussed in this chapter.

In the second and third sections, the focus moves away from the *asli karigar* to those who become incorporated in the “anti-discourse” of authenticity: those who are considered inauthentic. These “others” are primarily migrant workers and women. Thus, in order to capture the diversity of the *zardozi* industry, I not only want to discuss how the “other” is constructed from the perspective of the *asli karigar*, but also to examine how these constructed “others” perceive and articulate their own sense of self and their own experiences of working in this craft sector. From the ethnographic material presented in these sections, it will become clear that performances of self can be contingent on a number of factors allowing for ambiguity and positions of liminality with regard to how “not real” or inauthentic artisans, as well as how the *asli karigar*, become constituted. The purpose of discussing at length the experiences of those who are considered inauthentic is to demonstrate the tenuousness and instability of such labels in the first place. Although I explain the terminologies employed by informants, I do not situate these within fixed meanings that tend “to treat words as a reliable guide to conceptual formation” (Parry 1991:269); instead, following Parry (1991), I view such terms as “fuzzy concepts”. Through ethnographic descriptions, the lifeworld of artisans living and working in Old Delhi’s

zardozi industry and the various sites of concept formation are elucidated (cf.

Mahmood 2005; also see Chapter 1). Emphasising the “fuzziness” and tenuousness of concepts also suggests that those who make claims about being authentic must do so iteratively, taking up multiple strategies and thereby constantly confirming themselves as real, authentic artisans.

2. FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF “REAL, AUTHENTIC” ARTISANS

2.1 *Ahmad and Zainab: Identifying the “Useless Artisan”*

I first met Zainab’s family in the early days of my fieldwork. Her joint family home was located in an area of Old Delhi known as Haveli Azam Khan.⁵¹ Finding Zainab’s home was an arduous mission, but once my research assistant and I found the correct lane, her house was easily identified due to a rather large signboard that hung over a doorway, which read:

APPRENTICESHIP TRAINING SCHEME IN ZARI EMBROIDERY UNDER
MASTERCRAFTS WOMEN [sic] SMT ZAINAB SPONSORED BY
DEVELOPMENT COMMISSIONER HANDICRAFTS M/O TEXTILES (GOVT of
India).

Walking through the doorway under this sign and up a dark, narrow staircase, we reached an open landing. To the left of this landing was a small courtyard and one

⁵¹ The haveli in which Zainab’s family lives is mentioned in some of the historical accounts of Old Delhi. Of course, these former mansions have been fragmented into smaller sections so that more people can live in them. The fragmentation of *havelis* in general predominantly occurred following Independence in 1947. For a historical account of havelis and also specific mention of Haveli Azam Khan, see Blake 1991; for discussions on the social history of *havelis* see Hosagrahar (2001).

bedroom, while in another room straight ahead a number of young men were cutting stones to be placed in items of jewellery. We followed the narrow staircase up to the second floor as directed by one of the young men. At the top, there were two more rooms; one of which was used for cooking while the other was a work space and bedroom. Standing at this level, I could see the roofs of other houses, but we were not yet standing on the roof. There was still another staircase to climb in order to reach the roof terrace.⁵² Here, we entered the work space/bedroom, which was scattered with piles of cloth and little plastic bags of wires, beads and sequins.

Zainab was a skilled artisan whose family was from Agra but had been settled in Old Delhi for at least two generations. She had won the prestigious national award competition for highly skilled artisans and subsequently had travelled all over India to exhibit her work at crafts fairs. She was also successful at obtaining money from the government in order to run training programmes in *zardozi* for young women. Zainab and her family were very knowledgeable about the craft, but they were also quite sceptical about the prospects of making a livelihood solely from *zardozi* work and therefore had expanded into other lines, such as making jewellery for the local market.

It was during one of my early visits to the family home that I first heard the numerous terms I would hear many times again during the course of my fieldwork. I was talking with Ahmad, Zainab's husband, and what struck me most during our conversation was how he described the stratification that defined the *zardozi* industry today. In Urdu, he used the words *asli* (real, authentic), *naqli* (fake, imposter), and *bekar* (useless) with reference to the well-known Delhi attraction, Dilli Haat – the government initiative that provides a space for artisans from all over India to

⁵² Multi-level houses are common features in the old cities situated across South Asia. These kinds of upward housing provide shade to the public lanes. For a detailed account of the old walled city of Lahore, which was built contemporaneously with Old Delhi, see Weiss 2002.

showcase their craft directly to consumers for a rotating period of two weeks.⁵³

Ahmad recounted that when he and his wife first started exhibiting their craft at Dilli Haat, the government used to pay them to be there. At that time Dilli Haat was primarily set up to promote the artisan, but now, Ahmad said, the situation is different.

In order to rent a non-permanent stall one has to pay 400 rupees per day. Many artisans struggle to produce this fee; instead, well-to-do business people who pretend to be artisans have penetrated Dilli Haat to take advantage of the opportunity to sell their fake wares to foreign tourists and middle-class urban Indians seeking to buy authentic handicrafts directly from artisans (see Favero 2007). Ahmad's point was that nowadays there are people who call themselves artisans (*karigar*), but they know nothing about the craft and have no knowledge about its technical aspects. He said bitterly that these so-called artisans would not even know the names of different implements used to do the embroidery and he therefore referred to them as useless artisans (*bekar karigar*). Moreover, Ahmad contended that in addition to lacking both skill and knowledge, the *bekar karigar*, who is really a businessman, tends to sell low quality goods produced by semi-skilled workers. Whether Ahmad was exaggerating the situation or not, he was certainly successful in identifying the tension between the *asli karigar* (such as him and his family) and the *bekar karigar*, the impostor, who promotes fake or poor quality products made of cheap material (*naqli maal*). The *bekar karigar* will sell goods in places like Dilli Haat at a lower cost in competition with the *asli karigar*, who, in turn, is forced to reduce his or her production costs by making cheaper things in order to prevent being pushed out of the market. This is why, Ahmad continued, we *asli karigar* have to produce things like this! He reached for a plastic bag and removed a colourful handbag that was embroidered only with beads

⁵³ I also discuss Dilli Haat on Chapter 3 (see pp. 116-118). For an article on Dilli Haat, see Rajan 2004.

and sequins – there was no *zardozi* work on this bag. Indeed, a couple of months later, when I visited Ahmad and Zainab’s stall in Dilli Haat, the display table was full of these kinds of bags, whereas the real (*asli*) *zardozi* was nowhere to be seen (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1: Ahmad and Zainab’s stall in Dilli Haat.



2.2 Mansoor: Distinguishing Excellence

As my fieldwork progressed and I met more artisans who did *zardozi* work, I came across many more terms used to distinguish the varying levels of craftsmanship. One of the most prolific artisans I met in Old Delhi was named Mansoor. He inducted me

into the world of a real, authentic artisan especially by his use of certain terms in order to describe his craft. During a visit to his workshop, Mansoor showed me two bags embroidered with similar peacock motifs. He pointed to one bag and said that it was *kaccha* (literally means raw) while the other bag was *pucca* (literally means cooked).⁵⁴ Through his use of the raw/cooked distinction, he was referring to the differences in quality of workmanship, where an object described as “raw” was of low quality and an object described as “cooked” was of high quality. Even to my relatively untrained eye, the differences between the two bags were quite apparent. The “raw” bag had noticeable gaps between the different wires that were sewn onto the velvet and the motif was not centred properly on the bag. On the other hand, the stitching on the “cooked” bag was closer together and, according to Mansoor, much more intricate and fine (*baariq*) as opposed to the “raw” bag which had crude and “fatter” (*mota*) stitching on it. In order to test whether I had learned the differences, Mansoor showed me four *zardozi* embroidered belts – long thin pieces of velvet with *zari* work all along the length and two golden tassels sewn on each end for tying the belt around the waist (see Figure 4.2). He asked me if I thought these belts were *kaccha* or *pucca*. I thought the *zardozi* work looked quite fine, so I said I thought they were *pucca* belts. He said I was wrong and that in fact they were “still *kaccha*” because the pattern was not uniform and lacked precision: overall, as Mansoor explained, the work was not “clean” (*saaf*). It is important to note, however, that by categorising the work on the belts as still “raw” (*abhi kaccha hai*), Mansoor was

⁵⁴ The differences between *kaccha* and *pucca* refer to a versatile range of distinctions, which include descriptions of housing, where the former refers to temporary or slum-like dwellings and the latter to permanent dwellings usually made of brick or concrete, to descriptions of food restrictions particularly between caste groups (see e.g. Parry 1970). With reference to food restrictions, Parry writes, “The rules of commensality are determined not only by caste but also by the sort of food served. *Nali rasoi*, food boiled in water, can only be eaten if it has been cooked by someone of your own ritual status or by a superior; whereas *suji rasoi*, which is cooked in *ghee*, can be eaten, within strictly defined limits, from inferiors. This corresponds with the distinction made elsewhere in India between *kacha* and *pucca* food.” (1970: 98)

implying that there could still be room for improvement and that the *zardozi* work on the belts could still become *pucca kaam* (high quality work).

Apart from the terms *kaccha* and *pucca*, which are used to distinguish variations in craftsmanship, another often used term was the Urdu word for clean, or *saaf*. This word can have varying meanings depending on the context in which it is used. *Saaf* can literally mean clean, but it can also mean fair complexion when talking about perceptions of physical beauty (cf. Burke 1996). In the context of *zardozi*, *saaf* is used to comment on the quality of workmanship; with regard to a particularly exceptional piece of embroidery, I have heard people say that it is “*safae ka kaam*” (meaning a work of clean nature). More specifically, *safae ka kaam* connotes stitching that is done with clean and precise lines or refers to superbly embroidered patterns that are symmetrical and intricate (see Figure 4.3). The conception of cleanliness also refers to aspects of an artisan’s lifeworld, where the artisan’s body and the spaces where he or she works must also be clean (*saaf*). As I will explain in Chapter 5, cleanliness of body and space is related to the way work and worship (*ibaadat*) comprise one and the same act. The quality of craftsmanship as characterised in terms of *saaf* can be understood within the framework of worship for one’s work.

Figure 4.2: The *zardozi* embroidered belts that Mansoor described as “still *kaccha*”



Figure 4.3: An example of “*safae ka kaam*” made by Mansoor



2.3 Greater Demand, Lower Quality, Lesser Pay

Another term commonly used to describe work of a lesser quality is “*chalu*”. When I first heard this term, it confused me. I had only heard the word *chalu* used in the context of fixing something or turning something on. For example, when I bought a sim card for my mobile phone (which would provide me with a local number in Delhi), the shopkeeper said to me that my phone would become *chalu* in about one

hour. By this he meant that my phone number would be activated in an hour. When the toilet broke in my flat, the plumber, after fixing it, said that it was now *chalu*.

While the definition of *chalu* is cunning or spoiled, it seems to have become a colloquial term or has perhaps entered the realm of slang. With reference to *zardozi*, the term is only used in the context of demonstrating a lower skill set or a lesser quality product.

The prevalence of *chalu* work was explained to me in a conversation I had with an artisan-cum-workshop owner (*karkhandar*), Sikandar. He lives in a neighbourhood of Old Delhi known as Lal Kuan. Sikandar says that his family has been living in the same neighbourhood in Old Delhi for the past two hundred years and his family has been doing *zardozi* for generations. Prior to settling in Delhi, the family traces their roots to Amritsar in Punjab. Sikandar has owned a fairly large workshop for the past eighteen years where he produces embroidered shoe straps and also organises the final fitting of shoes (see Figure 4.4). Although Sikandar has a direct relationship with buyers in a large market in West Delhi, he is concerned that business is never consistent. In the workshop, which is adjacent to his home, Sikandar employs about 6-8 artisans who come from Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. During one of our conversations, he was of the opinion that the main culprit in the decline of real (*asli*) *zardozi* was the export market, because the demand of the export market was heavily biased towards *hathari* work, which is also known as *ari*.⁵⁵ Sikandar explained that the export market was primarily focused on quantity, not the quality that artisans who specialise in real *zardozi* work take for granted. Accordingly, such artisans have either been pushed out of the market or are now forced to do lesser quality *ari* work in order to make a living. Furthermore, as the prevalence of *ari* work grows, so does the

⁵⁵ For more details on *hathari* see Chapter 1 (pp.28-29).

temptation among most artisans to do *chalu* work. It is noteworthy that although Sikandar considered himself to be an *asli karigar*, the shoe straps that were produced in his workshop would be considered *chalu*. Indeed, I met numerous other *asli karigar* who were no longer doing “real” *zardozi*, but instead had opened up workshops that catered exclusively to the export market (see Figure 4.5).⁵⁶ These types of workshops would often cater to bulk orders, such as Christmas decorations destined for Europe. In such workshops, artisans will spend weeks hand embroidering the same pattern, usually utilising the *ari* needle because it allows the artisans to work faster.

Figure 4.4: A shoe strap embroidered in Sikandar’s workshop



⁵⁶ I visited an export-oriented workshop, which was owned by another family who had been skilled artisans for generations. The father had died and the eldest son, who was highly trained, decided to open a commercial workshop in Old Delhi. The workshop employed around 12-15 artisans (who were again migrants) and on one of my visits all the artisans were doing *ari* work on the same design. This design was a blue and pink cupcake that was to be made into Christmas decorations to fulfill an order from Germany (see Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5: Example of *hathari* work done in an export-oriented workshop in Old Delhi



(Photograph courtesy of Tripti Lahiri)

Yet, among the artisans whose families have been doing *zardozi* for generations, many insist that *ari* work is *chalu*. In fact, in the beginning of fieldwork, I was confused as to why *zardozi* was called “hand work” (*haath ka kaam*) while *hathari* was not, even though the latter was also done by hand. It turned out that it depends on who is speaking and the general consensus is that *ari* is like a poor man’s *zardozi*, where lower cost and the ability to produce large batches is prized. Except for the odd cushion cover or table mat, the bulk of items including picture frames, clothing, Christmas decorations, purses, and mobile phone covers, just to name a few popular items made for export, are done with *ari* work.

Let me refer back to Sikandar's point about the decline of real *zardozi* and the increase in *chalu* work as a result of export. While this is certainly the case, *ari* work has also become dominant on Indian clothing, such as saris and *shalwar kameez*, which are primarily made for the local market. The niche where so-called real *zardozi* is still predominantly used is on wedding outfits for both men and women and on the signature lines of high-end designers.⁵⁷ But the case still remains that *ari* is considered *chalu* work for two prominent reasons: Firstly, because it is easier and quicker to learn than *zardozi* and secondly, it is associated with the kind of work that formerly unskilled migrants learn to do – a stigma that is most often placed on migrants from Bihar. This stigma was most clearly articulated by a highly skilled artisan, Razia Begum, whose family is renowned for making intricately embroidered badges that are most commonly found on police or military regalia. She said, “The Biharis have ruined this line of work for us. They work long hours for less wages.” For the badge-makers, such as Razia and her husband, there was no option for them to diversify into using *ari*, because of the high level of intricacy needed for their work. Unlike many other artisans who had also learned *ari* work, Razia and her husband had not. Even though they were highly skilled in badge-making, the wages in the industry as a whole had fallen due to the increased numbers of people entering the trade. This impacted the badge-makers to such an extent that they could no longer sustain a livelihood from their craft.

⁵⁷ Many prominent Indian fashion designers have marketed their clothing and designs within the discourse of “revival”. With reference to *chikan* embroidery, Wilkinson-Weber discusses some of the rhetoric designers use to promote such fashion trends by citing two separate passages from the website of fashion designers, Meera and Muzafar Ali. The first passage reads, “Through a decade of detailing and upgrading craft of Lucknow and Kotwara, Meera and Muzafar Ali have brought a centuries [sic] old tradition back to life” and the second passage reads, “Meera and Muzaffar Ali made *Chikan* embroidery hot on the Indian ramps. Along the way, they saved the art, the artists, from dying an anonymous death.” (2004: 290) Note that this kind of rhetoric falls within the sensibilities of the craft world as discussed by Venkatesan (2009b). For a discussion of the concept of the craft world in this thesis, see pp.114-116.

2.4 Verdict: A Painful Condition

Even though it is generally agreed that demand for hand-made embroidery work is quite high, most artisans will add the caveat that this demand is not for real (*asli*) *zardozi* work. Instead, there is an increased demand for either a combination of *zardozi* and *ari* or just *ari* work on its own. Many artisans told me that they prefer to do real *zardozi*, especially the type of designs from the olden days (*purane zamane*), described most commonly as “the time of the Mughals” (*Mughalon ka zamana*).⁵⁸

While in Delhi, I had asked Mansoor if he could make some handbags for me with the most intricate designs from the olden days. He agreed and showed me his voluminous collection of old designs (*khaka*). The designs, some made by his father and grandfather, were imprinted on large sheets of wax paper, rolled up and stored high on the shelves of his workshop. As he unrolled the paper, he told me that he has not seen these in a long time and this was evidenced by the yellow-stained edges of the wax paper. In his collection, Mansoor had numerous designs that his father and grandfather had also made. We spread out at least thirty different designs and I was astounded by the level of intricacy that went into making them – all carefully done in an old technique of piercing tiny holes in the wax paper along the pencil-drawn design.

In order to fulfil most of his *zardozi* orders, Mansoor relied on his network of artisans that extended beyond Old Delhi and he often travelled to Agra to get embroidery work done. For the kinds of handbags I wanted, Mansoor told me that he would have to go to Agra, because more *asli karigar* worked there. He told me that the only artisans who still do this type of work are *buzurg*, a term that literally means “noble” in Urdu, but in the context in which Mansoor was using the term, it referred to esteemed elderly artisans. He talked about how extremely pleased these elderly master

⁵⁸ See Chapter 6 for a discussion on “*Mughalon ka zamana*”.

craftspeople are to do traditional *zardozi* work that utilises their skills, in spite of their weakened eyesight that required them to wear very thick glasses. Indeed, regardless of their old age and frailty, many of them, he suggested, will be ready in a heartbeat to travel as far away as Bombay, even to work in factories, if they are called to do “fancy work”⁵⁹ instead of staying in Agra and doing *chalu* work.

Perhaps as an acute awareness of the increasingly vulnerable position of the *asli karigar* that the decline in demand for real *zardozi* is bring about, Mansoor said that many artisans, including himself, now referred to their craft as “*dard-dozi*”. Here, instead of pre-fixing the word “*zar*” (gold) with “*dozi*” (to sew), the word “*dard*” is used, which in Urdu means “pain”.

3. FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MIGRANTS

With the prevalence of so-called *chalu* work in the *zardozi* industry, many *asli karigar*, or those who consider themselves to be real, authentic artisans, mark themselves apart from people who produce this low quality, sub-standard work (*chalu kaam*). And it is migrants, usually young boys and men who come as unskilled labour from villages, who are targeted as producers of *chalu kaam*. In this section I look at how migrants are situated in the landscape of Old Delhi and their experiences of the city’s *zardozi* industry.

3.1 *Setting the Scene of a Zardozi Workshop*

Along one of the main bazaar roads in Old Delhi is a well-known shop that sells elaborate wedding outfits, which are marked by bright colours and heavy embroidery

⁵⁹ Because of the demand from the movie and fashion industries, Bombay is one of the few places where real *zardozi* or “fancy work” is in demand. Therefore, skilled artisans from all over the country seek employment there.

work. The shop is named after its owner, who is referred to as “*zariwallah*” on the bright pink sign outside the shop. What is unique about this business is that all the embroidery work is done on the premises, in a workshop situated adjacent to the shop.⁶⁰ The workshop consists of a large room that accommodates about six large wooden rectangular frames (*karchob*) on which embroidery work is done. The walls of the workshop are a dull blue-grey colour 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. A few ceiling fans would be switched on during the hotter months, but would remain off during the winter season. On most occasions when I visited the workshop, four or five artisans would be seated around each wooden frame. Some of the older artisans would be doing *zardozi*, while most of the younger boys would be working with the *ari* needle. The bulk of production in the workshop consisted of *lehngas*, *saris* and *shalwar* suits, which would then be sold in the shop next door. The workshop was a clean and tidy space and the only clutter to be found was on the shelves. A small pile of *zari* wires, beads and sequins would be placed next to each artisan, either next to him on the floor or on top of the wooden frame.

Most of the artisans who worked in the workshop were migrants who came from two or three villages in Bihar and a few came from an area near the West Bengal-Bihar

⁶⁰ I have described in detail the layout of the shop in Chapter 1 (see pp.36-37).

border. There were also two older men who worked in the workshop, one from Ghaziabad in Uttar Pradesh and the other from Delhi. The latter was the “resident” *ustad* (master craftsman) who would train the younger boys in the workshop. Beyond the purview of the *ustad* 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 akin to 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.

Whenever I visited the workshop, the two older men would always be doing *zardozi*, as opposed to *ari* work. Although I was lucky to have had the opportunity to visit the workshop on numerous occasions and spend a fair amount of time there talking with artisans or sitting back and observing, my presence did eventually create problems, which made it very difficult for me to return. One issue that may have been perceived as problematic was the presence of two females, my research assistant and myself, in an all-male environment. In addition to the gender aspect, our inquisitiveness may have made some of the artisans uncomfortable with my presence. After a few months of visiting the workshop, I was told one day by the owner (*malik*) that I probably should not come back to the workshop anymore because I was disrupting the workflow and productivity of the artisans. It would have been very hard for me to argue with him on this point. However, although I may have perceived my gender and role as a researcher as being a problem, the artisans themselves (including the *ustad*) never said that my presence was problematic and in fact told me enthusiastically to come back anytime I wanted to ask any questions. Even though I was not able to spend as much time in the workshop as I initially had wanted, I was able to get to know some

of the artisans who had come from Bihar and West Bengal and hear their stories of migration.

3.2 Atif: From Bengal to Bollywood

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) artisans and made 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 Sitamohi⁶¹. In addition to speaking Urdu, he also spoke Bengali. He was 25 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 the course of 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 to fifteen years ago, when labour was in shortage – or he would arrive in Old Delhi and ask around for who was looking for work. I was told that people 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 migrants 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

⁶¹ In their study of young men in rural Uttar Pradesh, Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffery (2008) write that many young Muslim men, who are excluded from educational and work opportunities, turn to embroidery work in the cities as a reputable source of income.

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.⁶²

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 returned 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 factory that produced clothing designed by the famous Indian designer, Manish Malhotra, who was known to dress many Bollywood actresses.

Atif came back to Delhi after working in Bombay because he decided to open his own workshop in New Delhi with another artisan friend (who was also from Bihar). Atif and his friend had decided they wanted to produce for the export market, so they saved some money and had even chosen the space that they would turn into a workshop. Unfortunately the deal went sour, but Atif did not explain the details, and I got the impression that he felt embarrassed by the incident. However, so that I would

⁶² With reference to his research on migrant workers in the Bhilai steel plant in central India, Parry observes that "most migrants follow a path already well-trodden by others in their network." (2003: 230)

not mistake him for a quitter, Atif told me with confidence that once they have made enough money again, they will open an export workshop.⁶³

3.3 *Transient Lives*

While Atif remains optimistic that continuing to work in the *zardozi* industry will bring him benefits, others are more pessimistic about their prospects. Many migrants from Bihar come to Delhi with the intention of staying for a few years and then returning to their villages once they have made enough money.⁶⁴ The following conversation took place with a group of young Bihari men who were working in a *zardozi* workshop in a neighbourhood in the western fringes of Old Delhi. The area in which the workshop was located is a small enclave set back from the busier lane, a layout generally known as *phatak*. In this enclave there is a large open space around which three, four, and five storey buildings have been built. Most of these structures are houses and a few of them have a shop or workshop at ground level. The workshop I was intending to visit was accessed by walking up a steep, dark staircase. Upon reaching the first floor landing, my guide made a right turn into a narrow, dark hallway that led to a room with a few wooden *zardozi* frames (*karchob*). At the time of the conversation, the master artisan (*ustad*) was not there, which allowed me to speak freely with three or four of the young men who were sitting at the wooden frames doing embroidery work. As all of my questions were geared towards the group,

⁶³ Parry (2003) argues that the migrant experience can be felt as a transformation of self, where stories of migration emphasise a rupture with one's past and reflect "the individual's experience of migration as a kind of metamorphosis, and his (or her) sense of having become in the process a different – and perhaps more autonomous – person." (Parry 2003: 230) Similarly, Shah (2006) argues that instead of seeing migration as an act of desperation driven by poverty, for many migrants the experience is one of freedom from the constraints of village life.

⁶⁴ Much of the recent literature on labour and migration challenges the perception of migration as a one-way process – from rural to urban. For example, Kapadia (1999) has written about factory workers in a gem cutting plant in Tamil Nadu who are returning to their villages. Joshi (1999) writes that with the decline of the Kanpur jute mills in the 1990s, many workers have been forced to return to their ancestral village as well as make the shift from factory work to home-based work, or so-called "domestic industries".

different people would answer the various questions. Thus, I've labelled the multiple respondents as simply "Karigar".

Anthropologist: Are all of you from Bihar?

Karigar: Yes, from Bihar

A: And how many people work here?

K: Around 10

A: All from Bihar?

K: Yes.

A: Which parts of Bihar do you come from?

K: We come from three districts (*zilla*). Some from Sitamohi, some from Muttihari, some from Kishangarh.

A: Is this kind of work done where you come from?

K: No no, this doesn't happen there.

A: Where did you learn this?

K: Here.

A: How long have you been living here?

K: A year, year and a half.

A: How did you come to know this kind of work is done in Delhi?

K: From the village, our uncle (or father) came here and found out that this work happens and that you can learn it here.

A: Does your family live here?

K: No, they are all back home, except a brother and sister-in-law who live here.

A: Where do you all live?

K: We live in this workshop, we work here.

A: Who taught you how to do this work?

K: We have an *ustad*, but he's not here right now [laughing]. Whoever has been a *karigar* the longest here will teach everyone else.

A: What does your family do in Bihar?

K: They are farmers.

A: How many times a year do you go back home to Bihar?

K: Two or three times in a year... We go back during Bakr Eid, Muharrum, or Eid.

Everyone's getting ready to leave now [for Bakr Eid].

What these young men say about their experience of working in Delhi provides a better understanding of the multi-faceted nature of how the craft is practiced. As a group defined by temporality, they come to the big city in search of work. Through the experience of other family members or through word of mouth they land into an apprenticeship at a workshop. One Bihari artisan named Shamim, told me that his uncle dumped him in Delhi when he was a young boy and was told to earn an income. Shamim had no idea why he was going to Delhi and certainly did not anticipate learning *hathari/zardozi* and becoming an artisan. The following excerpt from our conversation illustrates the temporality of work done by many migrants in Delhi:

Anthropologist: Do you come to Delhi solely to earn an income with whatever job comes your way?

Shamim: Yes, with whatever comes our way.

A: Does it ever enter your mind that you may leave this work and go back to your village?

S: Yes, I do think about this sometimes. This is because nowadays it's difficult to find employment. In this work, we don't get proper wages and we don't get much work.

This temporality and transience is a common defining feature of the migrant experience, as also evidenced by the Atif's story above. It is also one of the features that differentiate the ways in which *asli karigar*-s present themselves apart from those artisans who do *chalu* work. As opposed to the transient lives of migrants, many "asli" artisans conveyed a sense of rootedness in Delhi, even if their presence in the city only dates back one or two generations or to the period following Partition in 1947. They spoke about their craft and their knowledge in terms of its association with an eminent past, one rooted in a Mughal heritage and Persianate culture and aesthetic values (see Chapter 6). The sense of historical continuity and an awareness of one's lineage serves to differentiate the *asli karigar* from those who could not employ the trope of "rootedness" as a credential of authenticity. But many migrants who do become artisans are not at all interested in presenting themselves as authentic or *asli*. They regard their skills first and foremost as a source of opportunity and income and not as a marker of identity or potential source of symbolic capital.

With the continuing arrival of migrants into Old Delhi in search of work, many *asli karigar*-s feel a deep sense of loss that has resulted from the declining quality of workmanship that goes into producing things in the name of *zardozi*. As mentioned above, many artisans now refer to their craft as "*dard-dozi*" signifying the pain felt with the decline of the authentic craft. Many artisans frame the current predicament in the following way: Since there is a greater demand for *hathari* work, which is often equated to *chalu* or lower quality work, there is more opportunity for employment because learning *hathari* requires less skill and training. More people working in one sector means that there is always someone willing to do the same work for a lower wage. And those people who do the work at a lower wage tend to be migrant workers. The consequence is that now the *asli karigar* has to compete within the framework of

lower wages, which means he or she must also produce things of lesser quality.

Migrants, and particularly those from Bihar, are often singled out and blamed for the steady decline in quality of workmanship and the de-skilling of artisans.⁶⁵

3.4 *Shafiq: "Labour" in Seelampur*

On the eastern bank of the Yamuna river is an area known as Seelampur. I came to know about Seelampur early on in my fieldwork because it was known to have many *zardozi* workshops. Some artisans I knew in Old Delhi had connections with Seelampur as well, because many outsourced work to the so-called "labourers" whose wage rates were cheaper. Some also rented workshop spaces in Seelampur due to the severe shortage of space in Old Delhi. Also, many artisans from Old Delhi preferred to make contacts in Seelampur because of its sizeable Muslim population. However, Seelampur is very different from Old Delhi. My first impression of the place was shaped by the extent to which poverty was visible. Open sewers and piles of rubbish were everywhere, which demarcated Seelampur as an urban slum.⁶⁶ I will briefly describe my first trip to Seelampur and encounter with an artisan there.

The shiny chrome, cool, open metro station of Seelampur, with its Café Coffee Day kiosks serving Nestle tea and egg sandwiches, seemed like a world away from the inner lanes of Seelampur itself. Exiting the metro station and walking across a surprisingly vast swath of concrete, the visitor is first struck by the massive flyover ahead. On the roadside, cycle rickshaws line up to take metro-goers to their onward destinations. On the first day my research assistant, Sinjini, and I went to Seelampur, we had no idea where to go. Unlike for our fieldwork in Old Delhi, I had not obtained

⁶⁵ See Wilkinson-Weber (1999) for another account of de-skilling with reference to women's work in the Lucknow *chikan* embroidery industry.

⁶⁶ For an ethnographic account of an area similar and in proximity to Seelampur, see Tarlo 2003.

any addresses of *zardozi* workshops in Seelampur. As a result, we decided to try our luck and asked the rickshaw driver to take us to a place where we could find *zardozi* work being done. Although the rickshaw driver did not know of such places, he was willing to ask around in return for our business. After stopping a few times to ask shopkeepers about where to find *zari* workshops, we found the lane where we were told there was a possibility of finding such work being done. We paid the rickshaw driver and got out into the narrow lane. Flies were everywhere and a smell, which could have only come from the open sewers, was ubiquitous. We spotted a place that looked like a workshop and walked inside. There were mostly men sitting on the floor and piles of cloth all around the room. We asked one man if *zari* work is being done here. He seemed suspicious. He asked us where we came from and if we were reporters. We told them that we were university students doing research for a paper about *zardozi* artisans. Once we convinced them that we had no intention of closing them down, they sent us to the house next door. There we saw our first *zari* workshop. There was a mix of boys and young men sitting around four large wooden frames. They were all sewing patterns onto a bright blue silky fabric. After some initial explanation of what we were doing (and after being asked again if we would shut them down), we started talking to an older man who was doing embroidery work. He told us that he was doing *hathari* work, which is similar to *zardozi*, but in this case he was using silk threads instead of metallic wires. His name was Shafiq and he was very friendly, not hesitating to oblige us when we asked him to explain what he was doing.

Shafiq had moved to Delhi from his village near the town of Rampur in Uttar Pradesh. He was not very interested in studying, so his parents sent him to a master craftsman (*ustad*) in the village who taught children how to do *hathari* work. Shafiq proved

quite talented in embroidery and learned the skill faster than most. After some years, Shafiq's *ustad* bestowed upon him a kind of formalised certificate to become an *ustad*, which licensed Shafiq to teach others the craft. So when Shafiq's nephew, who had completed his English-medium education, bought a workshop in Seelampur, Shafiq moved to Delhi to teach other migrants how to do *ari* work. The work that Shafiq and others in the workshop produced was sold in different bazaars all over Delhi, including Gandhi Nagar in Seelampur, Lajpat Nagar in New Delhi, Chandini Chowk in Old Delhi, and Karol Bagh in West Delhi. Shafiq did not consider himself as a "labourer" (*mazdoor*) because he said he had intensive training as an artisan; instead, he considered himself to be skilled in both *hathari* and *zardozi*. He said that he was lucky to learn *ari* first because he could then learn *zardozi* with not too much difficulty. According to Shafiq, those artisans who are first trained in *zardozi* techniques learn a particular way of moving the needle that makes it difficult for them to learn *hathari* at a later stage. However, for artisans who live and work in Old Delhi, someone like Shafiq who lives and works in Seelampur and predominantly does *hathari* work would be considered "labour" (*mazdoor*), and most definitely not an *asli karigar*.

4. FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A FEMALE ARTISAN

The question of who is considered "labour" and what constitutes "labour" is a key aspect of constructing the "Other". As suggested in the previous section, the concept of "labour" (*mazdoor*) is not a fixed category, but one that is produced discursively and in relation to others. While it was common for highly skilled artisans to refer to those with less skill or those who produce *chalu* work as merely labour, sometimes many of these skilled artisans would perceive of themselves as "labour" or engaging

in so-called “labour-work” (*mazdoori kaam*). The point when an artisan becomes a labourer and engages in “labour-work” as opposed to “real work” (*suchcha kaam* or *asli kaam*) is often correlated with one’s position in the hierarchy of production. A labourer is always situated in a position of least control and is merely given work to do, with no say in the matter, and paid a low wage.

4.1 Labour and Women

In the context of the *zardozi* industry in Old Delhi, being a *mazdoor* usually means someone who is not skilled to a high level in the craft. The term “labour” also tends to imply a transient relationship to the craft, whereby the *mazdoor* who enters the trade does not have a family history of doing this kind of work. The “typical” labourer is usually a male migrant who comes from Bihar, West Bengal or Uttar Pradesh to find any kind of work, so that he can either send back money to his family or sometimes to pay off a debt (cf. Breman 1996). In some cases the labourer may get “dumped” into a workshop (often by a relative) and then proceeds to learn the trade. However, the period of apprenticeship usually lasts between six months to one year, and the level of skill obtained is usually just enough to do mass produced, hand embroidered work – usually *hathari* work.

Although the women with whom I met were not labour in this “typical” way, they still often referred to themselves as labour or as participating in labour-work (*mazdoori kaam*). The women who I spoke with recognised that they were at the bottom of the production chain. As producers from home and being dependent on a series of middlemen who would bring the exact designs and raw materials, these women had

very limited control over what they produced. And it was clear to them that when they worked to supplement the family income, they were working as “labour”. Once the family no longer needed the extra income, then these women stopped producing piece-rate work for middlemen. Thus as is almost obviously apparent, referring to oneself as a labourer is a direct commentary that one is producing for a wage, but also that one is part of a wider chain of production where the labourer is at the bottom.⁶⁷

Many women who do *zardozi* fall into a kind of temporary position where they often do the work as a supplement to the family income. They are part of a network of put-out work, where male members of the family, or other known men from the neighbourhood, act as liaisons between home-based women and the buyers. These men will bring the designs and the raw materials to the women, give them a time-frame within which to finish the work, and then the women will get paid per piece. The women who are part of this putting-out system will refer to themselves as labour or doing labour-work (*mazdoori kaam*), even if they are highly skilled artisans and the skill of doing *zardozi* has been passed down in their families for generations (usually through the women in the family). As a result, women artisans are often considered as labour for two main reasons. First, because most women work from home where they are dependent on either male kin or other middlemen to bring orders to them, therefore women rarely have a say in what kind of work they can do. Secondly, since there is a greater demand in the market for *ari* work, most women who work from

⁶⁷ Wilkinson-Weber (1997) also notes a similar condition among female embroiderers in Lucknow. Most middlemen refer to women’s work as “spare-time work” thereby downgrading their wage labour. “In spite of this,” Wilkinson-Weber writes, “many embroiderers have penetrating insights into their status as workers and into the shared nature of their exploitation, although they have made little headway in changing it.” (1997: 51)

home cater to this demand and are labelled as doing *chalu* work (see Figure 4.6).⁶⁸ It is often in their spare time that women produce “real” (*asli*) *zardozi*, such as outfits for personal use or for family weddings.

All of the women I met in Old Delhi either exclusively produced from home or, in some cases, left the home to outsource work elsewhere. When going outside of the home, women observed some form of seclusion or *purdah* and most would wear a *burqa*, the full-body veil. As the bulk of my fieldwork was carried out during the day, my visits to homes were set amidst women of varying ages doing embroidery on the wooden frame (*karchob*), cooking a meal, resting, praying or doing some other house or family-related work.

⁶⁸ This is a picture of the sister of a female artisan I came to know well. Here she is doing so-called *chalu* work. She is embroidering a skirt, which was part of a bulk order from Germany. She told me that for each skirt she finishes she will earn Rs.10 and since the embroidery work on the skirt is relatively light, she can finish about 8-10 skirts a day.

Figure 4.6: A skilled artisan doing “*mazdoori kaam*”



In Old Delhi, homes are generally oriented inward, away from the street (cf. Jeffery 1979). Typically, homes are entered by climbing a dark, narrow stairway leading to an open space, either in the form of a courtyard or a landing. Many single rooms or a series of linked rooms, which are occupied by one family, branch off this open space. Generally, houses are at least two stories high, but can be built up to four or five stories. I was informed that having a high house was an asset because it improved the chances of winning at *patang bazi* (competitive kite flying) and *kabootar bazi* (a game where people try to attract as many pigeons as possible to their roof).

4.2 Highly Skilled Labour

The story of Najma is fairly typical of how many women experience the process of becoming “labour” even though they may come from a family skilled in the craft for

generations. After completing 10th standard at the local government school, Najma started learning the craft at the age of 15 from her maternal aunt (*khala*). The skill of embroidery had been passed on in the family for generations, mostly through women.⁶⁹ 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. She was not trained to use the *hathari* needle, but instead she says she was very good at doing "*haath ka kaam*", or hand work, which implies doing *zardozi*. From the age of 15 till about 45, Najma had been producing from home. She would receive daily orders and get paid on a piece-work basis. She said that she could work quite fast and for this reason she was given a lot of work, but she referred to this work as *mazdoori*.⁷⁰ She was never clear about who brought the orders, except for saying that it was always a man who brought the cloth, *zari* and design template to her home. Sometimes her family and immediate neighbours would share work amongst each other, but it would normally be the men who would actually carry the orders between the homes.⁷¹ And since many of the families in the neighbourhood (*mohalla*) were skilled in embroidery, work orders would be passed on within this network linked by occupational status.⁷²

⁶⁹ From an economic history perspective, Tirthankar Roy writes: "In northern India, embroidery work was more than a commercial skill, it was part of the education of girls in Muslim families, rich or not-so-rich... When under economic pressure, adult women formed a team and carried out job-work for urban merchants." (2005: 160)

⁷⁰ I noticed stark differences in the ways people spoke about doing *zardozi*. Some called it *mazdoori*, or labour, and the connotation was more often than not negative. I sometimes heard highly skilled artisans call what they do "*mazdoori kaam*", or labour work, but only when they were referring to making low quality items (*chalu kaam*) in order to secure an income. If a craftsman did *asli* (real, authentic) *zardozi*, then it was never couched in the term *mazdoori*.

⁷¹ Wilkinson-Weber refers to these men as "agents". She writes, "Agents locate, recruit, and control labor that is otherwise inaccessible to the holder of capital. The agent is often a relative, or at least a neighbor of the women he employs, family members usually having preference in the allocation of work." (1997: 59). For an ethnographic account of the working lives of women in the old walled city of Lahore, including aspects of the gendered division of space, see Weiss 2002.

⁷² Najma's family, and many of the families in the neighbourhood, are known as Ansari, which denotes affiliation to the weaving community, or *biradari*.

Najma did piece-work for middlemen for about twenty years, after which she produced without intermediaries. She was able to make the shift because she obtained a government issued identification card, which recognised 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.⁷³ This was around 1994 – Dilli Haat had recently opened – and in order to obtain the ID card, Najma had to travel about 170 kilometres north of Delhi, to Rourkee, in the present-day state of Uttarkhand. With the added incentive of exhibiting *zardozi* products at government sponsored venues, Najma was able to pool together resources and become a small-scale producer, as opposed to a labourer (*mazdoor*).⁷⁴ 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, which are the most well-known places for procuring materials for *zardozi*. However, she was also in a position by that time to outsource some production to other artisans (*karigar*), although she did still receive piece-work intermittently. She told me that during her days as a “middleman”, the artisans she employed for outsourcing work tended to be unreliable and they would “get up to no good” (“*karigar to nakhray karte hain*”). This manner of talking about artisans was quite common among people who had perhaps once been in a similar position themselves – the position of doing *mazdoori kaam* – but who had managed to

⁷³ For the tenth anniversary of Dilli Haat in 2004, the online edition of The Hindu newspaper reported, rather optimistically, that “Dilli Haat...demolishes all stereotypes of Government-run corporates. A joint project of the Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation and the New Delhi Municipal Corporation, with the support of the Ministry of Textiles, it is a fine example, says an official, of the bureaucracy joining hands for the benefit of society. With monthly festivals and a craft bazaar that changes every fortnight, it is a vibrant arena showcasing India's rural crafts for an urban audience.” (Rajan 2004)

⁷⁴ Wilkinson-Weber (1997) also notes that women in the Lucknow *chikan* industry sometimes become so-called “agents”. These agents are often middle aged, urban-based women who are relatively more mobile and less restricted by purdah than younger, rural-based women. Also, female agents, like Najma, are more skilled in embroidery and are more likely to have won a government award for skilled craftsmanship (see Chapter 7 for a discussion of these awards).

diversify their activities so that they were no longer at the bottom of the production chain and more importantly, were no longer “labour”. Najma maintained her independence for a few years, but then went back to working from home at the behest of her sons once her government issued ID card had expired. She again returned to the domain of being “labour”.

Najma repeatedly told me that she pursued *zardozi* production as a means to supplement the family income. She said that because she worked from home, she could also look after her two sons and maintain the household while earning some money. Now Najma’s sons were in their late twenties and took over a business that their father had started, who had since died. They were in the business of producing bathroom and kitchen fixtures, and had progressively become successful enough that the family owned a small factory in New Delhi and a wholesale outlet near Ajmeri Gate (Old Delhi). The space that Najma’s family occupied in the joint family house was redone using the fixtures they produced (including bathroom and kitchen). They have also been able to take advantage of recent export opportunities and have begun exporting the fixtures to South Africa. As a result of a prospering business, Najma told me that her sons do not let her do *zardozi* production for an income anymore. She does, however, continue to embroider clothing for herself and for family weddings and still makes trips to the wholesale bazaars in Old Delhi to buy the material and pre-made designs (*khaka*).

Although Najma is a highly skilled artisan, at various times in her life she presented herself as a “labourer” due to the nature of the work she was given and her positionality vis-à-vis the chain of production. Although she gained independence

through her connections with government schemes, this was short-lived and she returned to home-based production. Women's work in the handicraft sector is often portrayed as being "invisible labour", whereby an increased informalisation (Bremner 1999), or "housewifization" (Mies 1982) of work means that women become further marginalised producers. This marginalisation of women is thought to be a consequence of their position as home-based producers and also because of a widespread assumption that women are less skilled than men. Women producers are thought to contribute to the de-skilling and de-valuation of the craft (see Wilkinson-Weber 1999), a sentiment also shared by many predominantly male "*asli karigar*" in Old Delhi. With the prevalence of *chalu* work and the decline of real *zardozi*, it is often women and migrants who are castigated as "labour" regardless of their capacity and agency to both enact and subvert such a label.⁷⁵

5. CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have attempted to describe, above all, the diversity of people who are a part of the *zardozi* industry in Old Delhi. As mentioned elsewhere, one of the first things to strike me about the composition of artisans in Old Delhi was the heterogeneity of experiences conveyed to me and the multiple ways in which people related to the craft and industry. From the perspective of the *asli karigar*, a voluminous range of terms were used to differentiate aspects of quality in workmanship, but also to differentiate "types" of people. It was a focus on this language, which constituted the anti-discourse of authenticity that formed a crucial site of performance where the *asli karigar* is produced. For these artisans, it was the migrant worker, personified in the stereotype of "the Bihari," who had not only ruined

⁷⁵ Recent historical and anthropological studies on the growth of India's industrial factories have challenged essentialised and unified categories such as "labour" (Gooptu 2001), "class" (Chandavarkar 1994) and "working class" (Kapadia 1999, Parry 1999b).

the craft, but also ruined the livelihoods of people who depended on the craft. Thus “the Bihari” was constructed, from the perspective of the *asli karigar*, as the ultimate *naqli*, an imposter and a fake.

Moving away from a focus on the category of the *asli karigar*, I described some of the encounters I had with people who had migrated to Delhi as predominantly unskilled workers (although the story of Shafiq demonstrates that not all migrants come to Delhi as unskilled labour). They start out as apprentices in a workshop, usually for six months to a year, in order to learn *hathari*, but sometimes also *zardozi* (cf. Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffery 2008). However, those who came as migrants did not necessarily conform to the image of a labourer or *mazdoor*, as many had aspirations of their own that involved moving beyond “labour-work” (*mazdoori kaam*). Atif, for example, had become a highly skilled artisan and had hopes of owning his own workshop with the money and experience he had gained from working in a Bombay factory for a high end fashion designer. Shamim, who had become an *ustad*, was more interested in returning home to Bihar than carrying on in the industry. Unlike Atif, he did not see many opportunities as an artisan.

Finally, women artisans were often constructed as predominantly doing *chalu* work and therefore were not generally considered to be among the ranks of an *asli karigar*.⁷⁶ However, women’s own perceptions of their role within the industry are often contingent on the ways they perceive work. As described in Najma’s case, although she is a highly trained and skilled artisan, she would at times consider herself as a labourer because she could only engage in piece-work at the behest of her family. Before becoming a labourer, however, Najma was quite active in sub-

⁷⁶ A widely cited exception to this was of course the badge-makers, many of who are women. I discuss the badge-makers in more detail in Chapter 5. For discussions on gender and handicraft production, see Wilkinson-Weber (1999, 2004), Mies (1982), Maskiell (1999).

contracting work and in this role she herself would refer to other artisans as labour or even useless (*bekar*). But when I met her in 2006, she was neither sub-contracting nor doing piece-work, because her husband's business provided enough income for the family; thus Najma's role within the *zardozi* industry made numerous shifts, defying any sort of unitary label.

The remaining chapters of the thesis focus on the category of the *asli karigar*. I elaborate on the ways in which these artisans present themselves as real, authentic artisans in the context in which so-called *chalu* work is increasing in demand. In the next chapter, I examine how these artisans talk about and envisage the notion of ideal work practices, and how by engaging in such praxis one becomes an *asli karigar*.

Chapter 5

Embodying Ideal Work Practices



1. INTRODUCTION: CONCEPTIONS OF PIETY

The ways in which work is both conceptualised and practiced constitute one of the sites of performance whereby an artisan becomes an *asli karigar* or a real, authentic artisan. In this chapter, I will engage with two concepts that were often proclaimed by the *asli karigar* as foundational to their notions of ideal work practices and therefore are crucial aspects of their lifeworld. These are conceptions of cleanliness (*saaf*), as a mark of both quality of work and quality of environment, and worship (*ibaadat*). I argue that these terms constitute conceptions of piety that have developed into a particular kind of work “ethic” among artisans.⁷⁷ The way in which these concepts are related to each other is critical to understanding the formation of a particular embodied subject, i.e. the *asli karigar*. This kind of embodied subject is conceptualised and generated in a manner that I have called “Sufi Piety”, which is different from another form of piety, one that is promoted by the so-called Islamic “orthodoxy”. Before proceeding to outline the differences between the two forms of piety, the terms I have employed, “orthodoxy” and “Sufi”, must be qualified.

⁷⁷ I first discuss the cultivation of a work “ethic” in Chapter 2 (see pp.67-70).

Nile Green (2008) notes that many of the descriptive and analytical categories used in the scholarship today are often inaccurate and derived from certain epistemological groundings. In particular, the reification of the term “religion” itself, as well as the creation of “Islam”, “Hinduism” and “Christianity” as monolith religions, is a product of mainly nineteenth century scholarship that constructed the category of “religion” based on the study of classical texts and therefore also initiated the “World Religions” model (Green and Chatterjee 2008; cf. Asad 1993). The so-called Islamic reform movements of the nineteenth century appropriated such analytical categories to promote a version of “religion” (and “Islam”) that was certainly not separate from political agendas and power grabs.⁷⁸ Similarly, the term “Sufi” also bears with it certain reified ideas about a universalising “mysticism” based on textual sources and high theory (Green 2008). However, the conceptions of Sufism as universal mysticism were sidelined in favour of a version of Sufism that is “composed of miracles, rituals and filthy lucre” (ibid:1048; see also Green 2009). This shift in the way Sufism has been perceived has been attributed to a particularly Protestant interpretation of religious belief. The version of Sufism as “filthy lucre” was also promoted by the so-called “orthodoxy” in order to reify its notion of a “pure” Islam.⁷⁹ The notion of the “orthodoxy”, then, was constructed out of particular historical and political movements that marginalised other practices that fell out of monolith constructions of “religion”. And this analytic category of “religion” has been appropriated in the scholarship as well. Green and Chatterjee write, “In the case of

⁷⁸ It has been argued that Islamic reform movements grew in reaction to colonialism and modernity, while also appropriating the tools and technologies of such encounters. Robinson (2000) argues that print media had a profound impact on the spread of ideologies associated with reform movements. With regard to the changing role of the ulama, or the so-called “orthodoxy”, Zaman writes, “The ‘ulama’s tradition is not a mere inheritance from the past, even though they often argue that that is precisely what it is. It is a tradition that has had to be constantly imagined, reconstructed, argued over, defended, and modified.” (2002: 10)

⁷⁹ For a discussion of this trend in India, see Van der Veer 1994.

Islam, the World Religions model has led to an acute and unanticipated collusion of academic and 'reformist' Muslim discourses in that almost without exception the form of religion presented in academic primers on Islam is indistinguishable from the textualist, normative, and Arabocentric vision of Islam promoted by many Muslim reformist groups" (2008:2).

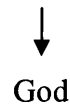
By creating two analytical categories of piety, "Orthodox" and "Sufi", I am differentiating between conceptualisations of "religion" where the former is based on a "theological system of dogmas shared between adherents of ultimately global 'World Religions'" and where the latter is reflective of "small-scale allegiances based on the face-to-face reciprocity of protection and devotion." (Green 2008:1057). In other words, these two models of piety illustrate the differences between conceptions of religion as a system of beliefs as opposed to the "materiality" of religion (Keane 2008), or those set of practices informed by the things people do and say. In the "orthodox" formulation, a pious person is one who is learned about systems of belief and skilled in the rituals that demonstrate one's adherence to the textual sources. Therefore, worship (*ibaadat*) is a pre-condition to becoming a pious Muslim – a conception of piety that is captured in the term "authenticated Islam" whereby the performance of certain prescribed beliefs authenticates one as pious Muslim (Deeb 2006; also see chapter 1). On the other hand, in the Sufi conception of piety, instead of adhering to prescribed rituals of worship, it is worship itself that is the outcome of skilled performance. Thus worship (*ibaadat*) is not a pre-condition to piety, but instead worship is generated through and by skilled praxis. What both "Orthodox" and "Sufi" formulations of piety have in common is that the ultimate end result is to present oneself in a most favourable way to God. However, the means to such an end

create a schism between these two notions of the ideal personhood. I will explain the differences between the two conceptions of piety with reference to artisans and their work (see Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1: Sufi and Orthodox Piety

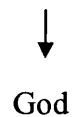
Orthodox Piety:

Cleanliness (clean work/clean space) + Worship (*ibaadat*) = Muslim Artisan



Sufi Piety:

Artisan + Cleanliness (clean work/clean space) = Worship (*ibaadat*) → *asli karigar*



In the “Orthodox” version of piety, the means to pleasing God is by cultivating one’s self as a *Muslim* artisan, whereby one follows the rituals of Islamic worship (*ibaadat*) in addition to producing work of exquisite quality (*saaf kaam*). In the “Sufi” version of piety, the means to pleasing God is by becoming an *asli karigar*, whereby worship is a manifestation of skill and devotion to one’s work. In this formulation, *ibaadat* is not a separate set of actions one performs in addition to producing skilled work, but *skilled work is in itself a form of worship*. The artisan *becomes* real and authentic (*asli*) when he or she has cultivated a level of worship (*ibaadat*) in the work he or she

produces. The cultivation of *ibaadat* can only come into existence when the artisan produces “clean work” (*saaf kaam*), which assumes a high degree of intricacy and excellence in craftsmanship. According to this paradigm of piety, the path to God is not dictated by becoming a more learned *Muslim* artisan, but instead the path is founded upon becoming a *real, authentic* artisan whereby the artisan’s quest for quality is part of *ibaadat* and the artisan’s quest for continued improvement in performance is the ultimate offering he or she presents to please God. Therefore, skilled work – or doing something with “consummate excellence” (Mahmood 2005:129) – and worship are one and the same thing.

The ethnographic sections of this chapter illustrate how artisans articulate and embody *ibaadat*, which is central to the constitution of a real, authentic artisan. I describe the spaces where artisans carry out their work because devotion to one’s work is also a function of the quality and character of spaces in which “real” work (*asli kaam*) occurs. Also, attending to the spaces that people inhabit is crucial in order to understand how ideas about one’s self come into being in relation to the surrounding environment (see Ahmad 2006, Ingold 2000, Merleau-Ponty 1962). Indeed, here it may be instructive to recall the statement by the Mughal Emperor Akbar’s court historian, Abu Fazl: “A city may be defined as a place where artisans (*pisha-var*) of various kinds dwell.” To describe the city is also to better understand the experiences of those who inhabit it (Certeau 1984).

Following the ethnographic sections, I will return to the terms described above (i.e. cleanliness and worship) to analyse how “Sufi piety” leads to the formation of an embodied subject. In particular, I will invoke the Islamic concept of *zikr* or

remembrance of God, especially in its Sufi interpretations and praxis as a pedagogical tool, and suggest how it can provide insight into the “materiality” of religion, and how work, ritual and faith are simultaneously embodied in the constitution of the *asli karigar*.

2. MANSOOR

2.1 *Traversing Delhi*

An artisan whom I visited regularly, Mansoor, lived and worked in a part of Old Delhi called Suiwalan, the “needle worker’s lane”. In order to reach his home and workshop – both located in the same area, within a few seconds walk of the other – I would have to traverse the diverse landscapes that made up Delhi. First, I would travel from residential South Delhi where I lived to the shiny chrome metro station of the Central Secretariat, the hub of Indian bureaucracy in Sir Edwin Lutyens’ New Delhi, with its wide boulevards and Imperial edifices. Descending into the gleaming chrome station – an air-conditioned respite from the city’s heat – and passing through the metal detector and security checks, the metro train would transport me, within ten minutes, to another shiny metro station at Hauz Qazi, where upon ascent I would emerge into the heart of Old Delhi. Once outside the station, a few moments were needed to reorient myself to the very different milieu in which I stood. The narrow street was always bustling with activity, with motorcycles, rickshaws, carts of varying sizes, and people all trying to navigate the congestion. Hauz Qazi is configured like a roundabout, with a number of streets running in different directions off the main circular. Apart from a few cigarette vendors and tea stalls, the area is dominated by small shops selling hardware and tools of all sorts. Outside the metro station, a line of

cycle rickshaws await to take passengers to their destinations. And thus quite some time is spent outside the station, haggling with cycle rickshaw drivers over the price of a trip.

Once the right fare was agreed, the cycle rickshaw would take me and my research assistant along the Chawri Bazaar – a well-known destination for buying wedding cards – then turn right into a narrow lane towards Churiwalan. The turning into another lane called Churiwalan always marked for me a distinct change in religious and symbolic landscape. In Chawri Bazaar the shop names reflected a Hindu dominance over the wholesale paper market, with wall-to-wall outlets such as “Ram Mohan Lal Cards” or “Gupta Fancy Wedding Cards” often written in both English and Hindi. The farther away we travelled from Chawri Bazaar, however, the names of shops as well as the street scene changed. Instead of stalls with Durga shrines, we would pass barber shops and tiny bakeries with Qur’anic verses hanging on the walls. Goats freely roamed the lanes alongside the rickshaws or else they were tied to shop fronts. The sweet shops at the intersections were especially popular gathering sites for children and adults alike. Women in hijabs or burqas would be going about their daily business, browsing the bangle shops or sifting through the fresh vegetables on the open air carts. Men in white kurta pajamas or jeans and t-shirts would be out socialising with other men, attending afternoon prayers at the mosque, or doing some kind of shopping in the bazaar. Passing through Churiwalan, we would head towards Chitli Qabar, a predominantly Muslim area (and incidentally the main location of my fieldwork), which was always bustling with shops, restaurants, people and traffic.

2.2 Reaching the Workshop

Mansoor's workshop was located in one of the inner lanes off the main Chitli Qabar bazaar road. I always asked the rickshaw driver to drop us at an intersection, known as the *hauz*, which was marked by one of the very few outwardly "Hindu" businesses in the area— a shop that kept buffalos and served tea. Walking past this shop and around the corner towards the local mosque and then veering left into a narrower lane, we would find ourselves at a junction where the only way to walk was to the left.

Following the lane we would reach a dark entrance of a covered alleyway, which was rarely lit. On both sides of this very narrow alley, where only single file traffic was possible, were workshops specialising in various trades, including jewellery-making and bookbinding. Altogether, there were six workshops, all measuring about ten feet by twelve feet in size, on each side of the dark alleyway. Below the workshops was an underground level consisting of a much larger space that housed a printing press.

When in operation, the printing machine made considerable noise, which struck me as being in stark contrast to the quiet nature of the other trades in this covered workshop complex. I later found out that whether spaces were noisy or quiet was an important distinction made by artisans when talking about ideal work practices – a point I will return to towards the end of this chapter.

Mansoor's workshop, like the others, was raised about three feet from the ground, making it akin to a platform. Shoes were always removed in the alleyway before hopping up onto the workshop platform. The interior of the workshop was lit with two buzzing tube lights and the three walls of the workshop were of a light blue-gray colour with random patches of black soot. One corner was recessed and in this little enclave Mansoor kept a range of heavier items including a small wooden frame on

which he did his *zardozi* work. Above the recess and also along the length of the wall were shelves filled with piles of fabric, a variety of plastic and glass bottles, variously sized scissors, some old picture frames and handbag samples. Just below the clock, which hung crookedly from the wall, was a small poster with verses of the Qur'an written in gold letters on a black background.

2.3 Work Meant for Kings

I came to know Mansoor very well during the course of my fieldwork in Old Delhi. He was one of the most knowledgeable and articulate people I met among the city's *zardozi* community. Not only was he a highly skilled artisan who maintained a wide network of contacts with all kinds of artisans within and beyond Delhi, he was also proud of his family's long association with *zardozi* and of the historical roots of the craft as he knew them.

On a fairly mild winter afternoon, while sitting cross-legged in his workshop, Mansoor recounted his version of how *zardozi* developed in India. According to him, the craft was intimately associated with the Mughal expansion of Persianised courtly culture throughout India. He especially emphasised that during the time of the Mughals, people would do *zardozi* while sitting in clean spaces and produce embroidered *sherwanis* (long jackets worn by men), crowns, *topis* (caps), robes and other garments worn by "amir log" (wealthy people). At that time, parents would enrol their children at a very young age in renowned *zardozi* workshops to learn the craft under the tutelage of master craftsmen. Throughout their reign in India, the Mughals continuously expanded their dominions to the farthest parts of the sub-continent and thereby were instrumental in transplanting their arts and crafts

throughout the country. Mansoor's forefathers, who had learnt this art in the Mughal workshops, carried on the tradition even after the Empire's demise. Mansoor concluded by saying that this particular work (*zardozi*) is only found in those places where the Mughals had settled – Lucknow, Agra, Delhi etc.

What struck me most about Mansoor's narrative was the commentary about the work conditions during the time of the Mughals – particularly his contention that *zardozi* was done in workshops where artisans would sit in clean spaces. On other occasions, Mansoor mentioned that *zardozi* is *clean work* and the environment in which it is done (*mahol*) must also be clean. It was only much later, after labouring through hours of voice recordings and written field notes, that I was able to reflect upon what Mansoor had said. I asked him what he meant by “clean” and what he would consider dirty work. He answered that, unlike many other kinds of work, *zardozi* is clean because it does not require large machinery that would make dirt and noise. Everything that is needed to do *zardozi* can be put into neat piles around the artisan, so there is no clutter. He also remarked that because *zardozi* is considered *shahi kaam* or royal work – traditionally patronised by kings and the upper classes – and is also very intricate in its execution, the artisan needs to surround himself by a clean and proper environment that is conducive to making such elaborate work. He added that it is also necessary for the artisan himself to be clean while doing the work, particularly by wearing clean and preferably white clothes. And, indeed, Mansoor lived by this dictum – he almost always wore an impeccable white *shalwar*, *kurta* and *topi* while doing *zardozi* work.

Although Mansoor could do *zardozi* on all kinds of textiles, his specialty was embroidered handbags and belts, typically on velvet or silk. On my regular visits to his workshop, I often observed him while he was working. He owned a small wooden frame, which was ideal for embroidering handbags. He would place the frame near the centre of his workshop and sit with his legs crossed under the frame while his arms moved in a rhythmic up and down motion. He would have one hand above the stretched piece of cloth and pierce it precisely in a downward fashion with the needle, while his other hand would be waiting below the frame to receive the needle and bring it back up. His hands would never deviate from the rhythm nor would they quiver with uncertainty. Mansoor told me that he was taught the craft in such a thorough way that he had to spend nearly one year perfecting just one type of motion with the needle. While doing *zardozi*, his posture was upright and he would never lean against the wall while working. The bony parts of Mansoor's ankles were darkened from sitting in the same cross-legged position since he was young, and they would usually be exposed because of the slightly raised manner that he wore his shalwar, which is quite typical among Sunni men. Mansoor's darkened ankles reminded me of what are often called "marks of piety," dark, permanent bruises that can be most commonly seen on people's foreheads due to the repetitive performance of Muslim ritual prayers (*salat*).⁸⁰

3. INTERLUDE: CLEAN SPACES/DIRTY SPACES

In Mansoor's narrative of ideal work practices, cleanliness is crucial in order to

⁸⁰ This connection between the dark marks I noticed on many artisans' ankles and "marks of piety" only occurred to me after a friend returned from Hajj in December 2008. She showed me the marks on her knees that she had obtained from praying throughout the day in the mosques on hard marble floors. It was then she told me about people who also get marks on their foreheads from praying. For a discussion on the political economy of prayer and "marks of piety", see Soares 2004.

produce work of exquisite quality. Cleanliness, thus, is a part of the everyday lifeworld of the *asli karigar* and it also forms a necessary element of *ibaadat* or worship. However, popular perceptions of both *zardozi* and Old Delhi do not often conform to these discourses of cleanliness. In fact, discussions about craft production in India and elsewhere almost invariably tended to characterise such activity as “dirty” because of its association with child labour. The infamous “*zari* factories”, where scores of young boys worked, were described as dark spaces without ventilation or proper hygienic facilities. Although similar factories were strewn all over Delhi, the workshops based in Old Delhi were especially targeted for “rescue” operations. These operations would be spearheaded by a combination of non-governmental agencies and the police, and raids would be carried out in places suspected of employing child labour.⁸¹ Indeed, as these frequent raids were also prominently showcased in the media, the entire *zardozi* industry was thrust into the public’s consciousness as being dirty, backward and extremely corrupt.

While the *zardozi* industry carried the stigma of being “dirty”, Old Delhi as a space distinct from New Delhi was characterised in a similar fashion. During the course of my fieldwork, I often encountered the following question: “You work in Old Delhi? Isn't that place really dirty?” This was a common perception and a point of concern among many New Delhiites with whom I discussed my fieldwork. For many people, Old Delhi’s “dirtiness” was often derived from its association with the neighbourhood of Pahar Ganj, an infamous area adjacent to the New Delhi Railway Station and known for its cheap hostels, shady bars, tourist traps and “red light” districts. In

⁸¹ The headlines of articles in Indian newspapers and on the internet read: “Fashion’s dirty secret: 3p-an-hour child labour” (The Sunday Times, October 15, 2006); “Biggest ever operation against child labour” (The Hindu, Monday, November 21, 2005); “129 child labourers rescued from *zari* units in Delhi” (<http://www.globalmarch.org/news/zariraidnewdelhi.php3> accessed 23 January, 2010). All these articles report on the collaboration of government agencies and NGOs to “rescue” children working in *zari* factories and workshops, typically working in sub-standard conditions.

addition, Old Delhi's perceived grime was pointedly related to the decrepit nature of its buildings, its congested lanes, open air meat markets, and the overall semblance of backwardness and non-modernity. Yet others referred to Old Delhi as an urban slum and a dangerous place to venture because of so-called "communal" tensions that were rife in the old city. In other interactions with New Delhiites and so-called expats who worked in New Delhi, I gained the distinct impression that for them Old Delhi was also a curiosity – a place to be visited in order to experience something completely different from New Delhi. Those same distinctions that marked colonial urban planning, as evidenced by the layout of Lutyens' New Delhi in stark opposition to Shahjahanabad (Old Delhi), still remained entrenched in perceptions of the old city – modern versus traditional, scientific versus superstitious, progressive versus backward. And added to these distinctions was also clean versus dirty. For the purpose of this chapter, I would especially like to take up discourses of cleanliness as they relate to notions of progress and modernity that tend to set certain norms and assumptions from positions of power, which are often incongruent with the people and places these discourses are imposed on.

The link between notions of cleanliness (or lack thereof) and perceptions of progress is articulated in various ways in different contexts. In his study of the consumption of Western models of hygiene in both colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe, Burke (1996) argues that Europeans perceived African bodies to be dirty and diseased, which provided the needed "evidence" for ideologically-backed racism that brokered colonial institutions geared at "saving" morally depraved natives. Similarly, the connection between dirt and immorality was thought by European colonisers to be manifest in the perceived nakedness of their colonial subjects, whereby nakedness was not only a projection of immodesty but it was also believed to attract all kinds of

pollutants (Masquelier 2005). The antithesis of European conceptions of progress and modernity was embodied in the image of the unclean “native” who had to be educated in modern conceptions of hygiene and morality.

In the context of the postcolonial nation-state, discourses of cleanliness remain linked with conceptions of progress and modernisation. In the post-socialist context of Eastern Europe, the consumption of a variety of cleaning products and new patterns of cleanliness are perceived as indicators of progress and engagement with “the market” (Drazin 2002). In postcolonial Egypt, elementary school books, which are sanctioned by the state, provide scientific evidence for the benefits of Islamic notions of hygiene and cleanliness as manifest in the practice of *wudu*, or ablutions (Starrett 1998). Here, the practice of cleanliness is related to the progressive attributes and advancement of Islamic civilisation. However, the assumed connection between cleanliness and order (and by extension progress and modernity), whereby “dirt is essentially disorder” (Douglas 1966:2), has been challenged in recent scholarship (see Masquelier 2005, Rosin 2000). Rather than accepting universal understandings of cleanliness that reify the dualities of clean/dirty and progressive/backward, recent studies have sought to situate concepts such as “clean” and “dirt” in the contexts in which they are generated. For example, Rosin (2000) argues that in India, the accumulation of dust on the road is not uniformly thought to be polluting; in fact, he argues, dust located in the middle of the road is considered pure and used as a cleaning agent.

Indeed, my own fieldwork does not support the constructed dichotomies between who is modern and who is backward, based on perceptions of cleanliness. In the context of *zardozi* artisans in Old Delhi, I found there was a great deal of consciousness about

cleanliness of bodies and spaces, which became apparent in people's narratives and actions. As argued at the beginning of this chapter, conceptions of cleanliness in the lifeworld of artisans are closely connected to producing things with consummate excellence and thereby to the level of worship (*ibaadat*) with which one approaches work. Accordingly, the context in which such notions of cleanliness are situated is important; therefore in the next section I will recount my visit to Anjuman Haveli, which is renowned for its highly skilled resident *zardozi* artisans, who by all standards are considered as *asli karigar-s*.

4. THE BADGE-MAKERS OF ANJUMAN HAVELI

In North India, a haveli is generally defined as a mansion or a large "courtyard house" (Hosagrahar 2001), which used to be typically owned by wealthy families. Many of Old Delhi's havelis were abandoned at the time of Partition in 1947 and since have been re-configured by subdividing the large houses into smaller units for lower income families.⁸² Anjuman Haveli is one such form of housing where a number of artisan families reside, but its most well-known residents are the so-called "Ansari badge-makers".

Anjuman Haveli is reached by traversing the neighbourhood (*mohalla*) of Pahari Bhojala, which, as the *mohalla* name suggests, requires a steady upward climb through the very narrow lanes of Old Delhi. As the climb gets steeper the lane

⁸² For discussions on havelis in Old Delhi, see Blake 1991: 44-51, 71-82, Hosagrahar 2001. The social history of havelis in Old Delhi shows the way in which society was organised under Mughal rule in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Artisans, among other service trades, could find patronage with wealthy haveli owners, or *amirs*. Hosagrahar writes, "Merchants, traders, moneylenders, artisans, musicians, poets, calligraphers, physicians, and astrologers who owed their patronage to the *amir* were all part of the community. The hierarchy and complexity of spaces, activities, and inhabitants within the *haveli* complex, as well as their sense of community and identity, made the mansions more like *muhallah*, or neighborhoods...[W]orkshops for clothing, carpets, goldwork, and fine embroidery were included in each of the self-contained neighborhoods that formed the *haveli*." (2001: 29)

becomes more and more narrow and the traffic becomes exclusively pedestrian. The hill levels off eventually at an intersection of sorts and the bustle of cycle rickshaws and motorcycles resumes. “Bhai saab, do you know the whereabouts of Anjuman Haveli?” I tentatively asked the shopkeeper perched on a stool behind a counter full of chewing gum and vertically displayed packets of paan. The shopkeeper nodded and stood up to give us directions, which materialised in a flurry of words and vigorous arm gestures. The shopkeeper's directions were accurate and in less than one minute my research assistant and I were standing in front of an archway, peering into a dark hallway that we would have to follow in order to reach the interior of the haveli. I knew we were at the right place because of the small computer typed page taped to the inner wall, which announced in both English and Urdu that this was Anjuman Haveli and orders for embroidery work could be placed here. An odd sort of sign, I thought to myself, because this was the first time I had seen any advertisement for *zari* work that was not part of a formal business.

The archway, which was quite ornate in style, and the walls that led to the inner courtyard of the haveli were pale blue in colour and stained with black soot and other forms of debris from the public lanes. Upon reaching the inner courtyard, I was struck by the clutter of *things* in the central part of the space: clothes hanging on lines to dry, a few large red gas canisters strewn about, hot plates and other paraphernalia used for cooking, shoes in a variety of styles, slabs of wood, plastic buckets and a watering hose. However, the clutter encountered in the courtyard was limited to that communal space. All the spaces around the courtyard – segmented areas usually divided further into two rooms and occupied by different families – were orderly and clean. The haveli itself had two levels with more families residing in the upper quarters. When

we walked into the courtyard, some women were cooking food in the central area and the floor was wet as someone had obviously just hosed down the floor with water to channel the cooking waste into the drain.

4.1 *Living in Anjuman Haveli*

I was first introduced to the families who lived in Anjuman haveli by Nusrat, an entrepreneurial *zardozi* artisan who had taken me under her wings as her “very own” daughter. She had prior business dealings with some of the women in the haveli who made *zardozi* objects mainly for the export market; the objects were primarily done in bead and sequin work and mostly consisted of Christmas tree decorations, mobile phone covers and keychain holders. With first introductions already facilitated by a member of the community, especially a woman (since the majority of artisans at the haveli were women), my subsequent visits were not met with much suspicion. However, I was often questioned about the nature of my research and what tangible results it would bring to them.

On one of my later visits to Anjuman haveli, I had gone with the intention of meeting a particular family that lived on the ground floor. I was keen to meet Mohammad and Razia Begum, a husband-wife duo, who were highly skilled *zardozi* artisans. Their specialty was making badges, which would most commonly be found on the regalia of military, police or other related professions. By this time – the later stages of my fieldwork – I had met many artisans and seen the various spaces in which they did their work. Many of these were workshops that were located away from their homes and were primarily the dominions of male *zardozi* artisans. Work that was done at home, on the other hand, was generally the province of female artisans. Anjuman

haveli, and particularly the family I was visiting, was a special case as here both the home and the workshop had merged and men and women worked side by side.

Stepping inside Mohammad and Razia Begum's home, the space we entered was one continuous room, with one doorway located in the second room along the left hand wall, it seemed more like an outer veranda and was used as a working space. The space also separated the inner living area from the work area and it was the first part of the residence that a visitor would enter. There was a low concrete wall, no more than three feet high that separated the home from the main courtyard, although one could still peer over the wall to see what was going on in the communal area of the haveli. The entrance to the work space and subsequent living area was not a door but instead a gap in the low wall. Once the threshold was crossed, immediately to the right one saw two wooden frames (*karchob*) aligned neatly, one behind the other, with enough space for two people to sit on the floor at each *karchob* (see Figure 5.2). Moving further inside, beyond this "outer veranda" was the inner sanctum of the residence. I was surprised by how neatly things were arranged inside, especially considering how small the space was. A colour television was perched on a high shelf in one corner and along the wall on the right hand side was a raised single bed that accommodated a fair amount of storage space below. The TV and the bed were the two main features of the room. The rest of the space was covered with a carpet; that was where the children sat to watch TV. The cooking was done in the remaining free corner, which was nearest to the "outer veranda" where the *zardozi* work was done. Although there was another room adjacent to the one described here, it was always rather dark and mostly used for storage. In this entire space, a family of two adults

(Mohammad and Razia Begum) and four children lived, worked, slept, ate, studied, and socialised.

Figure 5.2: Mohammad and Razia Begum seated at their *karchob* making badges



4.2 Skilled work, Marginal Positions

On most of my visits, I found both husband and wife making badges, mainly destined for the uniforms of police officers in Canada (see Figure 5.3). I learned from other artisans and by observing the technique, that badge-making required a very high level of skill because the badges are small in size and each stitch of *zari* is intricately sewn onto the cloth, which is typically velvet. Indeed, the “badge-makers” were often

invoked as the prime exemplars of the *asli karigar* who did *asli* (real) *zardozi* work. During my interactions with Mohammad and Razia Begum, I learned about their family's involvement with *zardozi*. They both came from families who had been doing the craft for generations and hence referred to their work as "*khandani kaam*" or family work. Mohammad told me that for four generations his family had been living in Anjuman Haveli. Presently, his two brothers also lived and worked in the same haveli, which he thought was beneficial; he said, "When it comes to *zardozi* work, it is mostly kept in the family (*aapas main*)."⁸³ In other words, whenever there was extra work, Mohammad would first inquire as to whether his relatives could accommodate the excess. Only when this was not possible, he would seek out the help of his *biradari*. Literally, the term "*biradari*" stands for brotherhood, but for Mohammad and Razia, as well as the other occupants of Anjuman Haveli (relations and non-relations), it referred to the Ansari *biradari*, or the larger community of occupational groups associated with weaving.⁸³

The process by which Mohammad and Razia would acquire orders for badges was vaguely explained; no matter how much I tried to solicit the details, these were not forthcoming. At first I thought perhaps there was an element of secrecy involved and they did not want to disclose particular information to someone they did not yet trust. Over time, however, I realised that their hesitation was not in reaction to my inquisitiveness, but instead was an indication of their longstanding and systemic marginalisation. One day, Mohammad summed up their circumstances as follows:

⁸³ "Ansari" is a kin and non-kin based group affiliation (*biradari*) that is commonly associated with the weaving occupation. For a sociological discussion of caste among Muslims in India, see Ahmad 1978. On the concept of *biradari* in a South Asian context, Nadvi writes, "Biraderi identities...have an important function in regulating social and political behaviour even in urban surroundings where kinship loyalties have begun to weaken. Moreover, where individuals come together in sectorally specialised clusters, working in industries associated with traditional occupational groups, biraderi identities often overlap with economic and trade identities." (1997:12)

“There are at least four levels of people who come between the *karigar* [artisan] and the exporter; the *karigar* is always at the bottom.”

Figure 5.3: Example of *zardozi* embroidered police badges made by Razia Begum



They told me that each small badge requires 8-10 hours of work on the *karchob* at a piece-rate of eight rupees per badge. Sometimes they were given larger orders and a lump sum of money, no more than three hundred rupees, out of which they would have to buy the raw materials as well. They explained that these rates were barely enough to get by, and there was an acute sense of disillusionment in the way they spoke about their predicament. Razia explained the situation as follows: “*Chamars*

[leather workers] do a job in five minutes and get five rupees, but we do a job that takes hours to finish and hardly get ten rupees.” She added that “it is the Biharis who have ruined this line of work – they come and work long hours for less wage.” In addition to exploitative middlemen, the large scale influx of migrant workers to Delhi was repeatedly cited as the source of decline of both skills and income by numerous *zardozi* artisans during the course of my fieldwork.

With regard to the government assistance for craftspeople, they seemed similarly disillusioned. Mohammad recounted the following incident: Thirty years ago, an exporter came to Anjuman Haveli with one substantial order – a large wall hanging with an eagle motif embroidered in *zari*. After completing the order, Mohammad’s family found out that this piece was submitted for a national award competition sponsored by the Ministry of Textiles and later sold in the United States. While the exporter who commissioned the work from them received the award (usually in the form of a certificate and cash payment) as well as the money for selling the item, the artisan received no recognition whatsoever. In my meetings with other craftspeople, I heard similar stories with regard to the corruption surrounding government award schemes that are supposed to acknowledge highly skilled artisans.⁸⁴ A real sense of disempowerment was omnipresent in most of my conversations with Mohammad and Razia. This was especially the case when they told me that the badge-makers of Old Delhi, especially in Anjuman Haveli, were so well-known and reputed for their mastery of *zardozi* that many camera crews and photographers from the United Kingdom, Canada and Japan had already come to interview them. But none of this has

⁸⁴ I will discuss engagements and disengagements with the state in Chapter 7. For ethnographic work pertaining to government sponsored awards for artisans, see Bundgaard (1996) and Venketesan (2009a).

made the slightest improvement in their livelihoods and, Mohammad added, the government schemes aimed at helping craftspeople were equally useless.

4.3 *There's No Question, This is Clean Work*

I have described both the setting of Anjuman Haveli and the Ansari badge-makers' sense of disillusionment in order to contextualise one more conversation I had with Mohammad and Razia Begum regarding aspects of cleanliness and craft production. The outcome of this encounter, which was to be my last with them, was probably one of the most difficult moments during my fieldwork. It was certainly a "failure" (cf. Viswaswaren 1994), but out of this came a greater understanding of the apprehensions that are very much part of the consciousness of skilled artisans who know that their skills can no longer provide them with a worthwhile or sustainable livelihood. However, what Mohammad and Razia Begum told me about the relationship between notions of cleanliness and *zardozi* was certainly indicative of broader conceptualisations of the link between Islam and craft (cf. Marchand 2001).

When I asked Mohammad and Razia about the significance of many artisans' assertions of *zardozi* as clean work and, in particular, that the spaces in which the craft is done must be clean, their response was quite straight forward. They said that in this line of work there is no dirt or soot (*kala pan*) or any other kind of litter (*kooda*) around. Razia said that all work is done by hand so there is no question of it being dirty ("*gandagi ka koi sawal hi nahin hai*") and Mohammad added that since this work is done at home, it can not be anything but clean work. However, when I asked them a similar question that was couched in more religious terms that suggested a pure/impure (*pak/napak*) dichotomy, they become visibly irritated by my line of

questioning. In a raised voice, Razia asked me directly, “*Maqsad kya hai?*” (“What is your intention?”). And then she continued,

“What is the aim [of your questions]? Ask us questions related to work. Don’t ask us other types of questions, like those related to ‘our Qur’an’ or work that people in the olden times used to do. We don’t know such things. We only know about the work we do today. You ask us about cleanliness. Well, we tell you that this is clean work, we work at home so of course we work in a clean environment.”

I believe that what Mohammad and Razia Begum’s sharp reprimand taught me was that their notions of cleanliness were neither exclusively associated nor disassociated from work or religion. All three were part and parcel of a particular embodied ethical disposition that constituted a real, authentic artisan. This sentiment was made clear by their frustration towards my seemingly frivolous questions regarding the history of *zardozi* and its links to religion. Their insistence that I just ask them questions about work was further summed up in the following proverb that Razia Begum said several times: “*mehnat mazdoori kari daal roti khahi*”, which roughly translates to “we work hard to get our daily bread”. Accordingly, if working hard does not pay off (*koi fa’ida nahin hai*), especially as an *asli karigar* – a predicament they currently face as their marginalised position unequivocally reminds them – then they say they will simply not pass on the skills to their children. Any other way would be a betrayal of their ethical outlook.

Part of this ethical outlook is a consequence of living an informal life – “a social existence characterized by autonomy, flexibility and pragmatism, where survival and self-development occupy a central place” and where “strategies and associations...are directly immediate, meaningful and manageable...” (Bayat 2007:580). But this ethical

outlook, I would contend, is also part of a historically cultivated sensibility that has been fostered due to the close connection between urban artisans and Sufi ideologies and practices. As mentioned in Chapter 2 when I discussed the Sufi influences on the lower classes and urban poor, beginning from early fourteenth century, a range of methods and devices were utilised to convey the Sufi message, from poetry and songs (see Eaton 2000) to books on moral treatises. One such treatise from the fourteenth century, written by Yousuf Gada and called the “Gift of Counsels” (*Tuhfa i nasa’i*), employed a style that utilised simple mnemonic verse forms. Digby writes that one reason why this treatise was so popular was that “it provided South Asian Muslims with a lower level of education, and especially for the children of such Muslims, a comprehensible guide to the good life in an easy mnemonic verse form.” (1984:98). The message from these verses is quite clear. For example,

Eat from your own labor, and from the toil of your hand;
Do not beg anything from anyone, and you will become like sugar and honey.

Work immediately, for laziness is like unbelief;
Consider a man who is idle like an ox or an ass.” (Digby 1983:115)

In these early verses and in numerous other similar Sufi treatises that came later, we can observe a continuing effort to instil an ethical outlook among the working poor that emphasises hard work, so as not to regress into beggary. If the current skill is not paying off, one must find other work, since being idle cannot serve any good. This is a cultivated sense of pragmatism, one that is succinctly captured in Razia Begum’s maxim: “*mehnat mazdoori kari daal roti khahi*”.

Until this point I have discussed the ways in which the *asli karigar* articulates and embodies notions of ideal work practices. Both Mansoor and the badge-makers of

Anjuman Haveli (Mohammad and Razia Begum) are highly skilled artisans who come from families in which *zardozi* has been passed on for generations. They spoke about how cleanliness of work (*saaf kaam*) and of space was crucial to generating a particular ethic that constituted ideal work practices. The cultivation of this disposition towards work was a large part of becoming a real, authentic artisan. In the next ethnographic section, I discuss how a high level of devotion to one's work, which is another aspect of worship (*ibaadat*), is also part of the discourse of the *asli karigar*. Here I introduce an artisan, Gulzaar, who explicitly recounts the differences between the haphazard ways in which artisans approach their work today as opposed to a more idealised time in the past when artisans were more devoted to their work.

5. GULZAAR: DEVOTION AND DISCIPLINE

I came to know of Gulzaar because his family was recognised by the government as being highly skilled artisans and his father had won the prestigious national award for excellence in craftsmanship. It was usually very difficult to schedule a meeting with Gulzaar, as he was always busy managing his workshop or attending to family business. However, unfortunately for him, he had recently broken his leg and therefore was home-bound for a few weeks. In spite of his misfortune, I could not resist seizing this opportunity and visited him regularly. It was on one such visit that I sat with Gulzaar in his home while he recounted his family history and how he ended up learning the craft. Gulzaar's entire family was trained in *zardozi*, both men and women. On each of my visits to his home, Gulzaar or one of his sisters would show me an old textile embroidered with "*asli*" *zari* that they kept stored away in suitcases. This kind of work, they explained, could nowadays only be found in museums.

Like the artisans of Anjuman Haveli, Gulzaar identifies himself with the Ansari biradari. Gulzaar's father was famed throughout Delhi and beyond as a master artisan (*ustad*) and a specialist embroider of saris. Many of his apprentices (*shagrid*), including females, came from cities as far away as Bareilly, Rampur and Lucknow – a testament to the skill and fame of the *ustad*. Gulzaar often repeated a story told to him by one of his father's former apprentices, named Gul, who had become a highly skilled artisan in his own right. Gul remembered that when he was learning the craft, Gulzaar's father had broken his hand. But still this did not stop him from showing the apprentices the correct techniques of *zardozi*. Gul and his fellow apprentices dubbed their *ustad*'s technique as "*toota tariqa*" or "the broken method"! Gulzaar was also boastful of the fact that he had in his possession some very old designs that had originated in the time of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal Emperor. These designs were kept in "registers" which had been salvaged from his great-grandfather's workshop after it was set alight during the riots following Partition in 1947.

Gulzaar's family lived in the area known as Lal Kuan, located in the western part of the old city, around Ajmeri Gate. His father had owned a workshop there, which Gulzaar's older brother took over when their father died. Gulzaar continued to work there until he was able to buy a workshop of his own. He employed several other artisans who came from different parts of UP and produced embroidered items for the local and export markets, but was rarely ever commissioned to do the "*asli*" form of *zardozi*, which was according to Gulzaar "*saaf sutra kaam*" or clean work. Like many other artisans, he too lamented that there was an increase in demand for "*chalu kaam*" (sub-standard work), which mostly consisted of bead and sequin work. He missed doing "*asli*" *zardozi* work that utilised traditional patterns from the time of the

Mughals. He recalled that for his family, *zardozi* was a craft of the highest quality, even worthy of a place in heaven. He said, “When I was young and learning the craft at home, the elders (“*buzurg*”) used to say that ‘whenever there is a *darbar* [court] in heaven, all the cushions are embroidered with *zardozi*’.”

For Gulzaar, doing *zardozi* demanded a high level of devotion from artisans. But nowadays, he saw a lack of devotion in the type of work that was being done in his workshop. In the olden days, he mused, the artisans in the workshops would invoke the name of God before commencing with *zardozi*, whether Allah or Ram. Artisans would then sit for hours and work in silence. The master craftsman would monitor each artisan’s work to make sure there was a level of *ibaadat* or worship going into each stitch. These days, he complained, if you go into a workshop the environment will be noisy because instead of quietly remembering and invoking the name of God, artisans now sing along to Bollywood tunes on the radio. According to Gulzaar, artisans today do whatever is necessary to get through the day. Sometimes they will only turn up to work if they need money. Artisans today have neither the same kind of discipline as they used to, nor any sense of devotion or worship (*ibaadat*) when it comes to their work.

6. THE SUFI CONNECTION

Drawing from the ethnographic material presented above, I argue that two dominant narratives emerge from the various experiences of highly skilled *zardozi* artisans, or those who would be considered *asli karigar* or real, authentic artisans. These

narratives relate to conceptions of worship (*ibaadat*) and cleanliness and can be best contextualised within the idiom of *zikr* (*dhikr*).⁸⁵

6.1 *Zikr, or Producing the Embodied Subject*

The Islamic concept of *zikr* is commonly defined as the act of remembering God by reciting His various names or through prayer. It is commonly associated with Sufi devotional practices; in the early Islamic period, Sufis were distinguished by ascetic practices that, they believed, would lead them to become one with God. According to Lapidus, such practices entailed a “retreat from the assaults of everyday life...where the Sufi can concentrate on renunciation of worldly attachments, and by *dhikr*, repetition and remembrance of the name of God to empty the mind of all distracting passions.” (2002:200). With reference to the performance of *zikr*, it can be an act of both collective and individual devotion, whereby the specific manner in which *zikr* is performed depends on the particular Sufi devotional path or *tariqa* (Esposito 2003).

Since the primary function of *zikr* is to remember God, usually accompanied by the repetitive motion of the body, the ways in which a person performs and embodies remembering become crucial. Anthropological analyses of memory provide insight into how remembering is an embodied process (e.g., Stoller 1995, Cole 2002) that mediates between collective social memory (e.g., Connerton 1989) and individual remembering. As the body is increasingly studied as the site of memory, it is no longer viewed as an object but instead as an agent in its own learning processes (see Csordas 1994, Haraway 1991, Ingold 2000). The embodiment of remembering, then, moves the analysis beyond where Bourdieu’s (1990) notion of habitus left off,

⁸⁵ Throughout the text, I use the spelling, *zikr*, which is the Persian transliteration and a more common pronunciation in South Asia. The Arabic transliteration is *dhikr*, which is used in some of the quotations in this chapter

because while it may be useful to understand that ideologies are inscribed onto bodies, particularly through mimetic learning, the concept of habitus does not take into account the pedagogical ways in which habits become embodied (see Mahmood 2005, Starrett 1995).⁸⁶ Both Eickelman (1978) and Starrett (1995) challenge the perceptions that mimetic learning – especially with reference to the way children learn the verses of the Qur’an by heart through the repetitive motion of the body – is rote memorisation, that is inscribed onto bodies in “thoughtless” and unreflective ways. Starrett argues that “rather than perceiving of hexis primarily as a wordless, unconscious, and practical transmission of bodily habit, we might instead read ‘the embodiment of ideology in habit’ as a set of processes through which individuals and groups consciously ascribe meaning to – or learn to perceive meaning in – bodily disposition” (1995:954). Focusing on the formation of an embodied subject is to move beyond the experience of the body towards exploring the processes and performances in which an experienced body is produced (Mahmood 2001, 2005; cf. Butler 1990, Ingold 2000). In Saba Mahmood’s analysis of women’s participation in the mosque movement in Egypt, the embodied subject is produced through her performance of prayer, or in other words, a pious disposition is created by ascribing meaning to certain ritual forms of worship. In the case of Muslim artisans, I am arguing that the formation of an embodied subject arises from *the performance of work as zikr*, where *zikr* is a form of worship.

⁸⁶ On the question of habitus, Boudieu writes, “As an acquired system of generative schemes, the *habitus* makes possible the free production of all the thoughts, perceptions and actions inherent in the particular conditions of its production – and only those. Through the *habitus*, the structure of which it is the product governs practice, not along the paths of a mechanical determinism, but within the constraints and limits initially set on its inventions. This infinite yet strictly limited generative capacity is difficult to understand only so long as one remains locked in the usual antinomies – which the concept of *habitus* aims to transcend – of determinism and freedom, conditioning and creativity, consciousness and the unconscious, or the individual and society.” (1990: 55)

6.2 Time and Pedagogy

The processes through which *zīkr* becomes embodied remembering occur “through its connection to the physical positions and postures” whereby the posture of the body can become the moment of *zīkr* (Sells 2010). It is here, in the moment of *zīkr*, that a particular conception of time comes to be embodied during the repetitive performance of *zīkr*.⁸⁷ In his essay titled “Ideas of Time in Persian Sufism”, Gerhard Böwering writes, “The moment that perdures is the result of recollection (dhikr); it focuses the person and makes him forget the world to come.” (1992:84) This particular notion of the perduring moment as experienced during *zīkr* is a particularly Sufi form of praxis that blends “seemingly contradictory conceptions of the temporal into an integrated understanding of human experience” (ibid: 77).⁸⁸ This contradictory conception of the temporal is elucidated by an aphorism believed to have been said by Abu Bakr Shibli, a 10th century Sufi Shaykh: “A thousand past years in a thousand coming years, that is the moment” (ibid: 82). *Zīkr* becomes thoroughly embodied once the practitioner experiences that lasting moment, through profound concentration and perseverance – experienced as closeness to God.⁸⁹ So the conception of *zīkr* as the moment that lasts, or the moment where past and future time collapses, provides insight into what Mahmood (2001) refers to as the pedagogical moments and practices in the process of acquiring habitus.

⁸⁷ See Chapter 3 for a discussion on the relevance of conceptions of time in the convergence of piety and work.

⁸⁸ For an elaboration on the notion of “temporal frameworks” within different Islamic practices, see Deeb 2009, Green 2004, Nasr 1991.

⁸⁹ The notion of the instant, as a discrete moment in time, is a particular conception of time that has been expounded within the domains of Islamic philosophy. In fact, the instant is defined as “timeless” (*waqt*). John Renard defines the Sufi concept of the moment as a “dimension of mystical experience...in which one is aware most acutely of one’s spiritual state. A Sufi is known as the ‘son of the moment’ (*ibn al-waqt*), that is, one who is perfectly attuned to the condition that God has chosen for him or her. The moment, or instant, is thus a kind of intense focused spiritual imperative that requires the individual’s complete and undivided attentiveness.” (2005:159)

The question that arises is how does the performance of *zikr* actually lead to the formation of an embodied subject, or in other words, how does *zikr*, as a pedagogical style, cultivate a particular kind of habitus that is infolded into the artisan? If we look at the very nature of *zikr*, its fundamental characteristics are breathing and concentration, which allow for the repetitive and rhythmic movements of the body.⁹⁰ With reference to the techniques that arise from *zikr*, William Chittick writes that “[p]erserverance in remembering God...will eventually entail a certain concern with the technical aspects of controlling one’s thoughts and focusing one’s attention, and this cannot ignore posture and breathing.” (2000:53) With such an inevitable bodily expression, we can quite easily understand how *zikr* can be translated onto learning craft skills, which also require similar rhythmic bodily movements and mental concentration in order to produce intricate work with precision. Richard Eaton writes that *zikr*, as it was translated to the lower classes by the Sufis, became devotional and corresponded to certain everyday work practices such as operating the grindstone or the spinning wheel (2000:196). Thus it is through the performance of *zikr*, with its very specific conception of time as the perduring moment, that work and worship (*ibaadat*) come to be one and the same act and, thereby, work can be conceptualised as a form of submission to God (cf. Rudnycky 2009).⁹¹

6.3 *Artisans and Piety*

I began this chapter with various ethnographic accounts of different artisans and the ways in which ideal work practices are both articulated and embodied. What was central in this respect was the cultivation of a particular ethical dispositions towards

⁹⁰ For an account of the history and politics of breathing in colonial South Asia, within the realm of Yogi and Sufi knowledge, see Green 2008b.

⁹¹ In his ethnography of a large factory in Indonesia, where employees receive training in Islamic piety in order to become better workers, Rudnycky writes that an employee “enjoined the workers to ‘remember that work is worship...our work is part of our service to Allah!’” (2009: 184)

one's craft. For example, cleanliness was often brought up as an important aspect of one's ethical disposition towards work. Creating and maintaining a clean environment and wearing clean clothes was part and parcel of maintaining a form of *ibaadat*. Mansoor would emphasise the fact that *zardozi* always used to be patronised by the elite, including nobility; therefore in order to produce "clean work" (*saaf kaam*), or work of exquisite quality, the work environment also had to be clean. A product suitable for kings could never be produced in a dirty or noisy space, since all of this would distract the artisan from producing the requisite quality work. Thus, the space in which work was done was also part of one's *ibaadat* because it facilitated highly skilled work where the precision by which each stitch was executed was crucially important. The artisans in Anjuman Haveli also commented on the clean aspect of *zardozi* work by pointing out that it neither creates litter nor noise in the surrounding spaces. Accordingly, cleanliness was an important part of the daily life and work of artisans as the upkeep of one's self (clean clothing, hygiene, etc), one's home and one's work space (if the two are separate) is all part of devotion to God by producing a certain kind of ethical disposition towards work. Such a disposition, therefore, was to a large extent what it meant to be an *asli karigar*.

There is a fairly common saying among the *zardozi* artisans that is taught by elders to children who are learning the craft: "If you keep working at something, you will become an expert."⁹² The scriptural magnitude of this saying – that knowledge is gained through persistence and patience – is well echoed in the notion of *zikr*. The Qur'anic injunction "to be patient and remember" links patience with *zikr* "in a manner that can suggest that one will result in the other, that they are aspects of a

⁹² In Urdu, this saying was conveyed to me in the following way: "*Badhey logon ki kahavat hai: jis kaam kay andhar aadmi ghus ta hai, beyt ta hai, us ka knowledge ho hi jati hai.*" ("This is a saying told by grown-ups: whatever work a man enters and "sits" with, he will inevitably attain knowledge.")

single act, or that they are two distinct acts.” (Sells 2010:373) Thus, an emphasis on patience is both a valued characteristic of piety (Mahmood 2005) and craftsmanship (Isik 2008). In her work with women weavers in Turkey, Isik argues that patience (or *sabir* in Turkish, *sabr* in Urdu/Arabic) is an important part of the constitution of these crafts-women. She writes,

“Quite unlike the assumption of passivity when it comes to the practice and meaning of *sabir*, for women weavers in Konya, *sabir* entailed conscious, continuous cultivation and is an important part of the habitus of being a pious Muslim *as well as an effective, professional worker*. In Islam, *sabir* is considered to be one of the best and most valuable virtues of life; for the Konyan weavers the practice of *sabir* as an attribute of pious character was closely intertwined with the work they performed as weavers. *Sabir* must be conceptualized as a form of nuanced ethical practice that is consciously and seriously adopted and valued by the women weavers.” (2008:525, my emphasis)

Similarly, the convergence of patience and effectiveness in work is part of being a *zardozi* artisan. The act of doing embroidery depends not only on repetitive motions but also on the patience to perform a few motions of the hand over and over again for long periods of time. But what I want to stress is that patience, as an aspect of *zikr*, is also manifest through the cultivation of a particular bodily disposition or hexis (Bourdieu 1977; also see Lee 2005). For example, Mansoor’s posture of sitting upright, never leaning against the wall, with legs crossed in the same position for hours on end, can be construed as *zikr* and/or patience – a kind of moral ethic – sedimented in the body of the artisan.

Another aspect of *zikr* is captured in the following statement: “The *dhikr* of the heart resembles ‘the buzzing of bees, without a loud or disturbing noise...’” (Gardet 2010: 226) When young children learn to perform *namaaz* or prayers, another form of *zikr*,

they are often instructed to recite the verses in a soft whisper so as not to disturb the person praying in close proximity. As mentioned above, one of the reasons why Mansoor considers *zardozi* to be clean work is because the environment in which it is done is quiet, as opposed to other types of work that utilise loud machinery, which is inevitably distracting. Mansoor was told that in the past *zardozi* was done in large open air courtyards (*angan*) where they would work with natural light and not need to rely on buzzing tube lights or noisy generators to maintain electricity. Thus there is quite a stark difference in the current set-up of many workshops like Mansoor's, which are situated in cramped space and often in close proximity to noisy machines. Gulzaar also explicitly mentions the value of *zikr* when comparing the conditions of the workshops that existed during the time of the Mughals with today's workshops. Gulzaar commented that today the radio is turned on and instead of invoking the name of God during work, artisans sing along to Bollywood tunes as the radio blares in the background. In Gulzaar's narrative, the loss of *zikr* implied the loss of devotion for one's work and thereby the loss of excellence.

The artisans whom I have discussed in this chapter are referred to as *asli karigar* or real, authentic artisans by themselves and others. The *asli karigar* is not only perceived to have inherited the skills of generations, but also to have within him or her the elements of worship, not only by formally remembering the names of God in each movement of the needle, but also by adopting other moral and ethical attributes, such as ideas about cleanliness and patience that transform their work into an act of devotion to God. In a sense, the embodiment of piety through the combination of work, ritual and faith can also be understood as the cultivation of a particular form of *ādāb* that, I would argue, is particular to this group of artisans. Metcalf defines *ādāb*

as “codes of behavior and values as well as methods of personal formation... *Ādāb* in all its uses reflects a high valuation of the employment of the will in proper discrimination of correct order, behavior, and taste... *Ādāb* means discipline and training.” (1984:2-3)

7. CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued that one of the most crucial sites of performance in becoming an *asli karigar* is in the articulation and embodiment of ideal work practices. This particular disposition to one’s work is cultivated through the praxis of what I have called “Sufi Piety”. In such conceptualisations, work, ritual and faith combine into one performance whereby the artisan’s ultimate goal is to please God by doing something with “consummate excellence” (Mahmood 2005:129). Above all, two notions emerged in my interactions with artisans, namely cleanliness and worship, which were part and parcel of the formation of an embodied subject. Delving deeper into these two notions, I suggested that the Islamic concept of *zikr*, or remembrance of God, in its Sufi forms and praxis provided the pedagogical link between acquiring habitus, particularly through mimetic learning, and becoming an experienced embodied subject.

Chapter 6

Narrative Performances: Temporality and the Making of an *Asli Karigar*



1. INTRODUCTION: TEMPORAL FRAMEWORKS

In the previous ethnographic chapters, I discussed two sites of performance where the *asli karigar* comes into being: namely the construction of distinctions between authentic and inauthentic through the deployment of various terminologies (chapter 4), and the articulation and embodiment of ideal work practices (chapter 5). In this chapter, I discuss another site of performance – the various kinds of narratives that constitute the artisan as real and authentic. The ethnographic material in this chapter discusses two broad forms of narrative: invocations of an idealised past and sayings with moral messages, both of which also relate to ideal work practices. I suggest that these narrative forms are recurrent performances of self and can be understood within elaborations of varying “temporal frameworks” in order to explain conditions of being or existing in time as articulated through narrative (Deeb 2009).

The chapter is structured around two types of narratives that are situated in different temporal frameworks, which I will discuss in detail in the next section. The first part of the chapter will focus on the stories and experiences of artisans who invoke an idealised past, but in doing so they also inherently make a commentary on present

circumstances and uncertainties. Negotiations with the present through the mediating capacities of the past are often experienced by artisan-residents of Old Delhi, especially when they traverse the landscapes between the old city and New Delhi. The past, I suggest, is like ruins that people are left with, where the focus tends to be on “what remains, to the aftershocks of empire, to the material and social afterlife of structures, sensibilities, and things. Such effects reside in the corroded hollows of landscapes, in the gutted infrastructures of segregated cityscapes and in the micro-ecologies of matter and mind.” (Stoler 2008:194) As such, the first part of the chapter is an ethnographic journey through the hollows and infrastructure of segregated cityscapes, which accompanies the artisans of Old Delhi as they negotiate with what they are “left with”. For many artisans, the often disorienting effects of such journeys, the remnants of which become a part of one’s self, are offset by recollecting and reiterating a particular past that reaffirms their position as an *asli karigar*. The second part of the chapter makes a different commentary on the ways in which artisans appropriate narrative forms. In the kinds of sayings and anecdotes that have been passed down, another sense of time emerges that is not based on linearity and continuity of time, but instead time-frames are collapsed and characters and spaces become imbued with the moral authority of the perduring moment. This type of narrative is often invoked by artisans in order to provide a moral commentary with respect to their work and daily lives. The next two sections introduce the two temporal frameworks that artisans situate themselves, both of which serve to produce the artisan as an *asli karigar*.

1.2 Linear Time

Up till now I have mentioned only in passing certain references that artisans made to

an idealised past, one articulated most frequently as “the time of the Mughals” (*Mughalon ka zamana*). Much of my fieldwork in Old Delhi was spent with artisans listening to their stories, which, in one way or another, invoked “the time of the Mughals”. These stories could take the form of reciting the family genealogy, which was traced back to “the time of the Mughals”, or recounting how an intricately embroidered wall hanging was based on a design from this period. These narratives tended to authenticate the artisan as “*asli*” (real, authentic) by invoking a lineage that linked the artisan to an idealised past encapsulated by the notion of “the time of the Mughals”. This time period represented an era when Persianised aesthetics were dominant (cf. Marsden 2005), when artisans and their products were held in high esteem and were vital to the political economy of the ruling regimes (see Chapter 2). These narrative forms demonstrate that certain kinds of stories are most effective because they hinge on linear time, such that the reiteration of the past is a commentary on the present. But getting history “right” or verified, as Stoller sums up, is “beside the point” (1995:194).

When artisans speak about the high quality of a design because it is from “the time of the Mughals” they situate themselves in a temporal framework that imbues the present with authority and authenticity derived from a perceived lineage. Situating one’s self in this type of temporal framework is all the more significant when the current predicament of urban Muslim artisans is defined by their marginalisation from the broader narratives of the nation-state and its historical *imaginaire*. This kind of marginalisation sets many Indian Muslims apart from other Indian subjects that speak “within a metanarrative that celebrates the nation-state” and that comes into being through the mimicry of the European “modern” (Charkbarty 2000:40). Although it

has been acknowledged that Indian Muslims constitute “forgotten” subjects (see Chakrabarty 2000), I want to take this assertion further and suggest that their position outside the fold of the ideological nation-state (the “metanarrative”) means that for many, such as urban Muslim artisans, representational mimesis is not geared towards the European “modern”, but instead towards other “metanarratives” such as “the time of the Mughals”. As such, stories of a glorious Muslim past “are all the more significant when seen against the background of the generally low social position of Muslims...that forms the living context of their telling.” (Green 2004:425) Within this framework, the recasting and remembering of the past shapes negotiations with present conditions (Cole 2005, Deeb 2009, Lowenthal 1985).

1.3 Time as Re-membering

“There are parameters of Islamic time that give its culture and religion cohesion and structure in theory and practice”

- Gerhard Böwering 1997: 66

Not all narratives that recall a particular ideal of the past can be cast within a temporal framework defined by linear time. Many narratives and “re-memberings” of past events (Green 2004) occur in a temporal framework where linearity is irrelevant and “coevalness” becomes a defining characteristic of time (Fabian 1983).⁹³ This is a characteristic of time experience or time consciousness that replaces the “lineal-sequential-causal bias” with a focus on simultaneity (Qureshi 1994). Furthermore, Qureshi suggests that in order to achieve an understanding of time experience that is apart from linear time, it is essential to understand the time experience of others

⁹³ For an earlier review of anthropology’s interest in the study of time, see Munn 1992.

experientially, whereby “the realm of the oral/aural...[is] a domain of shared experience par excellence” (1994:494). Looking into the narratives of Muslim artisans with this perspective on time provides insights into other possible ways of living Islam or being Muslim.

In the lifeworld of artisans the importance of stories and parables serves as a reminder of the historical linkages between urban artisans and Sufi practices (see chapter 2). As Nizami (1992) reminds us, even the famous Chishti saint, Nizamuddin Auliya used stories, anecdotes and parables to address the problems and concerns that people would bring before him. These stories conveyed a morally sanctioned approach to a problem and were recounted in a manner so that historical characters and places became incorporated into the “perduring moment” of the narrative. It is through the creation of the perduring moment in narrative form that both the story and its conveyor attain authority. It may be recalled from Chapter 5 that the Sufi concept of *zikr*, or remembrance of God, also places the practitioner in a temporal framework that collapses the linearity of time – the moment of *zikr* is a perduring moment that transcends both past and future.⁹⁴

In a similar collapse of time and space, Nile Green (2003) argues that the narrative traditions associated with Sufi shrines articulate the varied and distant geographies that saints traversed in the past, thereby bringing a saint’s life and charisma into the moment, in terms of both temporal and spatial dimensions.⁹⁵ Thus, narratives that are

⁹⁴ In a very similar way, the transmission of *hadith*, or stories and anecdotes told by or about the Prophet, often collapses the sense of linear time in order to convey the moral message. For an interesting discussion on *hadith* as narrative form that serves to establish social networks, see Senturk 2005.

⁹⁵ Green also discusses the concept of “absent geographies” with reference to Sufi shrines as well as Sufi narratives. The Sufi shrine – along with its associated hagiographical traditions – is not conceived

situated in this temporal framework, that is, set apart from “straight” time (Boellstorff 2007), produce a particular subjectivity through the articulation of “other possible times” (Patel 2000:47; cf. Chakrabarty 2000). Here I want to suggest that “re-memberings” of this sort, ones that do not follow linear time, are pedagogical styles that cultivate certain ethical dispositions particularly towards work, thereby forming a sense of “work ethic” among artisans.

Before moving on to the ethnography that examines the ways in which artisans inhabit different temporal frameworks, I would like to elaborate on the second temporal framework that I have introduced above, one that I have called “re-membering”. As mentioned earlier, this kind of time consciousness is based on the notion of the perduring moment, a moment that imbues authority and, I would argue, authenticity, to the person inhabiting it. The perduring moment is a crucial aspect within the notion of time in Islam. Gerhard Böwering has written about conceptions of time in both Islamic philosophy and in Sufi, or so-called “mystical” renditions and experiences of time. According to Böwering (1997), early Muslim philosophers sought to resolve the seeming paradox of the immutability of reality and the changing and evolving quality of nature, without reneging on the belief that God is the creator of all. They found the explanatory framework for such a resolution within early Greek

as a fixed space, but instead connects that shrine and the surrounding community with the wider Islamic world (*dar al-Islam*). The simultaneous connection to local region and the wider Muslim world is primarily achieved through the corporeality of the saint. Green writes, “Sufi shrines bridged geographies principally through the semantically powerful medium of the human body. Ultimately the most widespread means by which shrines tied different geographies together was through the corporeal presence of a saint who had originated in those regions regarded as being intimately connected to the region in which he was buried.” (2003: 496) Green (2008c) has also written an article about the creation of sacred spaces among indentured and migrant workers in nineteenth century Natal. Here, distant geographies are connected through the migrations and travels of sacralised saints (who were once indentured labourers) or Muslim missionaries from India to South Africa.

atomic theory.⁹⁶ In the formulations of these philosophers, reality is “composed of simple and unchangeable minute particles, called atoms. The atoms and their accidents exist only for an instant. In every instant, God is creating the world anew; *there are no immediate causes.*” (Böwering 1997:59 my emphasis) Thus as opposed to the linearity of time, in this temporal framework there is actually no continuity because God creates each instant anew; when there is a semblance of continuity it is due to the grace of God. Indeed what is often thought to be a miracle, according to this theory of time, is God’s interruption of the seemingly continuous flow of events (Böwering 1997:60; see also Goodman 1992). Thus, to achieve that perduring moment, or to inhabit that instant of God’s creation as opposed inhabiting time’s perceived continuity, is to be close to God. In Sufi praxis, such closeness is achieved through *zikr*.

2. LINEAR TIME: MUGHAL PASTS, UNCERTAIN FUTURES

To begin an exposition of narrative forms based on linear time, where the past is invoked in order to make a commentary on the present, I briefly recount a part of history most pertinent to Muslim artisans today. The time when the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, ruled from Shahjahanabad (what is now Old Delhi) is thought of as a golden age when high value was placed on crafts, and artisans were respected for their talent and skills. The end of Bahadur Shah Zafar’s rule and the establishment of hegemonic British power marked, for many artisans, the beginning of the decline of their livelihoods and craft. Following this brief historical sketch, I

⁹⁶ Goodman (1992) explains the early Islamic interest in Greek ideas and philosophy: “The Islamic conquests of Iran and its rich holdings in Iraq, and of the Byzantine possessions in Egypt, Syria, and the Levant within decades of the death of Muhammad, brought the Arab conquerors into contact with a sophisticated and polyglot subject population among whom Greek traditions of learning in the arts and sciences survived intact. The integration of these populations into an Islamic order could not be achieved without response to and a large measure of integration of their intellectual traditions as well.”

would like to set a present day scene in which Old Delhi is very much situated on the margins of an expanding metropolitan city. The stark differences between New and Old Delhi form the context that many artisans must negotiate on a daily basis.⁹⁷ After setting this present-day scene, I will introduce Hamida Begum, an artisan who frequently articulated her relationship to an idealised past within a context of uncertainty. Although she was an award winning artisan, she had struggled for years to make a livelihood from the craft she knew so well and then had to “retire” from producing for middlemen. Hamida Begum’s efforts to sustain a craft-based livelihood meant that she had to traverse the varied and unfamiliar landscapes between Old Delhi and New Delhi in order to collect and deliver *zardozi* work for one middleman. Her invocations of an idealised past, particularly by referring to the time of Bahadur Shah Zafar, served to anchor her sense of self to a lineage that she perceived to represent something worthy and authentic. Following Hamida Begum’s story, I zoom in on the lanes of Old Delhi, where a multitude of artisanal and other types of work occur and where links to history, and in particular “the time of the Mughals”, are found everywhere. After the walk through history’s lanes, I narrate one artisan’s experience of how being denied historical relevance becomes the undoing of his sense of being an authentic artisan and therefore his sense of self.

2.1 The Time of Bahadur Shah Zafar

Bahadur Shah Zafar was the last Mughal Emperor. By the time his rule as the “Emperor” began in the early nineteenth century, the Mughal Empire had already disintegrated to such an extent that its ostensible influence was limited to Delhi and its titular Emperor had to survive on a modest pension handed out to him by the

⁹⁷ For another descriptive and vibrant account of life between the new and old city of Dhaka, see Henry Glassie’s *Art and Life in Bangladesh* (1997).

British East India Company. While the British allowed the continuation of the ritual and ceremonial aspects of Mughal court culture, the Mughal elite were essentially disempowered to a level that the “court found it impossible to run the royal kitchen, much less concern itself with the administration of an empire that was by now a figment of the imagination.” (Jalal 2000:29) Although throughout his long reign, Bahadur Shah Zafar was maintained as a symbolic figurehead of Mughal rule, his courts or *darbar* sustained some semblance of pageantry and prestige of the erstwhile empire. Bahadur Shah Zafar was known to be a generous patron of the arts and was a poet in his own right. His court patronised some of the finest artists and most well-known and beloved poets of Delhi, including Mirza Ghalib and Mohammad Ibrahim Zauq.

Following the Indian Rebellion of 1857, Bahadur Shah Zafar was forcibly removed from his seat by the British and exiled to Burma where he spent his last remaining days. The official British version of the events was that the king was collaborating with the rebellion to reinstate the Mughal Empire and thus had to be dismissed and exiled. Indeed, according to the British and Indian English language press of the time, Muslims were singularly accused of inciting the revolt and of persuading Hindus to rebel as well (Jalal 2000). The aftermath of 1857 not only saw the complete demise of the Mughal Empire, but Delhi in particular witnessed much of the ensuing violence, where many of the residents of the city were either killed or forced to leave.⁹⁸ In Ahmed Ali’s famous novel *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), he writes about the fall of the Muslim aristocracy in Delhi following 1857. In a poignant passage, a young girl asks her grandmother about the Mutiny:

⁹⁸ There is a vast literature on the events of 1857. For an overview of the “Indian Uprising” see Anderson 2007: 2-13.

“Amma, tell us what happened in the Mutiny. You were once telling us how the Farangis had turned all the Mussalmans out of the city. Why did they do that?”

“It’s a long story. I will tell you some other day,” the old lady replied.

What happened in the aftermath of 1857, I suggest, is a revealing commentary on the fragments and ruins that people, and in particular artisans, are left with even today.

The events of 1857 changed the entire walled city of Shahjahanabad; not only was Bahadur Shah Zafar exiled, but most of the people, at all levels, associated with the Mughal court were suddenly left without any source of livelihood because the patronage networks that sustained so many were shattered. There was a mass exodus of people who sought employment in places where the British interventions had not been so severe. The symbol of Mughal power and culture, the Red Fort, was occupied by British troops and large barracks were erected on the inner grounds of the Fort; ten years later, the railway came to Delhi with its tracks piercing through parts of the Red Fort. Narayani Gupta captures the breadth of the changes in the following passage:

“The events of 1858 made many of the former aristocrats paupers, *karkhandars* and schoolmasters, and led many of them having to live in a few rooms in the *imambaras* that had formally belonged to them. Their distress evoked pity and philanthropy, not contempt. One of the features of the earlier part of the century – the extravagant style of living which was symbolic of the last days of the Mughals – continued to be seen in the behaviour of these *nouveau pauvres*, symbolic now of the uncertainty of their own lives.” (1981:51-52)

Stories about the aftermath of 1857 still widely circulate among the inhabitants of Old Delhi today. In a discussion about my fieldwork in Old Delhi with an artisan, I was warned not to believe the various things people say about their genealogies and identities. He recounted the following story:

“She said she is Pathan? Ha! Have you ever seen a Pathan who is so dark? Mira, let me tell you something. When Bahadur Shah Zafar was exiled by the British and the royal family was being hunted down and

killed, some of them escaped by hiding near a sewage canal in Sundar Nagar. Eventually members of the royal family set up houses in that area, and today many of their descendents still live there. Ever since the trauma of that event, descendents of the Mughal family have acquired the habit of keeping a low profile. Don't be fooled when someone claims to be a direct descendent of the Mughals – these are probably descendents of the stable hands who use the name for their own advancement. People say all kinds of things.”

In popular stories, the time of the Mughals and especially its embodiment in Bahadur Shah Zafar, has come to represent everything that was demolished following the 1857 revolt. Of these inhabitants, artisans in particular look back to Bahadur Shah Zafar's time as an era when their craft was valued and held in high esteem. It is emphasised that their position in Mughal society was marked by being producers of items of luxury and great beauty for the upper and noble classes – some artisans still refer to their work as *shahi kaam* or high-class work. The elaborate royal court assemblages, or the *darbar*, were the stages upon which the highest quality of craft production would be displayed, appreciated and rewarded. Today, many artisans in Old Delhi link their family histories to those *darbar*-s by claiming that a family member witnessed or participated in one of Bahadur Shah Zafar's courts or that their particular line of work has been in the family since the time of the Mughals.

The significance of the complex of identities and representations of self by artisans who invoke a relationship to a Mughal past through their stories, narratives and life-histories, I suggest, is situated in the way such invocations constitute the aspirations of artisans to develop a sense of a continuous and consistent self (Sokefield 1999), one which is encapsulated in the *asli karigar*. This particular notion of selfhood is cultivated within a context where many artisans are, “exiles in their homeland, painfully holding on to closeness in a world that has already deserted them” (Stewart

1988:235). It is not only an idealised Mughal past that constitutes a deserted world, but also the spaces of Old Delhi that are becoming deserted due to the modernising aspirations of the nation-state.

For many artisans, narratives of place and the spaces of Old Delhi also become a re-affirmation of self as an *asli karigar* because of the old city's connection to a Mughal past. Old Delhi is in many ways an embodiment of the “aftershocks of empire”, which constitute the “material and social afterlife of structures, sensibilities, and things.” It is to these aspects of place and the contours of Old Delhi that I turn in the following sections.

2.2 Interlude: (Re)turning to Place

Any focus on place and place-making, until fairly recently, was swiftly cast aside in favour of more global-oriented discourses that emphasised the de-territorialisation, hybridisation and ultimately ephemeral conceptions and experiences of place. In a world increasingly defined by flows and movements of people, goods, and capital (see Appadurai 1996, Hannerz 1989) meanings of the local and what it means to be “emplaced” have been largely ignored. Indeed much of the work on global flows and connections was in reaction to the ways in which place was conceptualised in anthropological research – as the bounded and reified location of “culture”, existing in isolation from wider global processes (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Wolf 1982). The concept of globalisation could be taken up as a corrective to the parochial nature of earlier anthropological studies. In addition to this reactive factor, however, it is important not to forget the positionality of anthropologists in accounts of space and place. As Simpson and Kress succinctly ask, “just whose view of space and travel are

we presented with in such accounts?” (2007:10) In an age when anthropologists themselves are increasingly becoming part of the jet-set, participating in conferences all over the world, collaborating on projects internationally and often conducting multi-sited fieldwork, we must question whether our own mobility and sense of space, and our notions of cosmopolitanism, are projected onto our theorising of others’ experience of space and place (cf. Tsing 2000). What is certain is that this “globalisation craze” has resulted in the “erasure of place [that] has profound consequences for our understanding of culture, knowledge, nature, and economy.” (Escobar 2001:141)

Nonetheless, recent work on the meaning of the local has begun to re-appropriate conceptions of place and made it a central concern for research (e.g. De Neve and Donner 2006). Increasingly the focus of such research is to address how people come to constitute and are constituted by place and locality. As such, place is crucially envisaged as made up of ever shifting social relations, whereby “*spatial configurations produce effects*” (Massey 1999:162 original emphasis) within and beyond a locality. Such effects, in turn, continuously produce subjectivities (Rofel 1992) that are in some way or another connected to place (or even placelessness, as Escobar (2001) argues). This attachment to notions of place can be seen in a variety of contexts. For example, De Neve (2006) argues that the liberalising reforms in India during the 1990s, which effectively opened the domestic market to global flows and movements, had the effect of reinforcing boundaries and identities. Small-scale producers in Tamil Nadu, who were members of low caste communities, relocated their newly acquired factories into their own neighbourhoods and thus spatially and discursively produced boundaries that consolidated their caste and community

identities. Simpson argues that during the reconstruction phase in Gujarat following the earthquake in 2001, residents of an urban neighbourhood “invested considerable effort in reconstructing the symbolic and physical boundaries of their neighbourhood” (2006:209). In a fascinating account of mobility around the Indian Ocean, Simpson and Kress (2007) argue that for a region commonly defined and connected by its centuries-long maritime trade, regional differences and traditions have remained. Such examples of “place-making” can be seen in the way that ships built in Gujarat, Dubai or Tanzania have retained their particular local designs instead of becoming hybridised vessels with little regional variation. Thus contrary to the mantra that globalisation dissolves the boundaries of place in an environment of increased mobility, what these studies demonstrate is that the politics of space and place-making “(re)creates rather than dissolves boundaries and localities.” (De Neve and Donner 2006:13)

For many artisans, the place of Old Delhi is a constant feature in the production of subjectivities, because artisans often look to the characteristics of place in order to assert themselves as real and authentic. The meaning of the local is produced through the mobility of artisans and their negotiations with the spaces both within and beyond the locality of the old city. Such negotiations often involve traversing the boundaries of Old and New Delhi. Thus in an effort to (re)turn to place, I devote the following three sections to focusing on the effects that the spatial configurations of Old Delhi have on artisans, with the intention of relating the effects of space to how artisans situate themselves in a temporal framework defined by linearity. In the next section I set the scene of both Old and New Delhi, and then turn to two artisans, who in

different ways, assert their connection to Old Delhi and thereby produce themselves as an *asli karigar*.

2.3 Setting Places: Old Delhi and New Delhi

History is reinforced everywhere in Old Delhi – it’s name *Purani Dilli* suggests that it could not feign to be anything other than old. Even in places where modernity tries to wedge its way into the narrowest of lanes or the most congested of markets, it gets seemingly overwhelmed by history and by the old. New Delhi, by somewhat severe contrast, is sprawling; mega-malls and gas stations are popping up like dandelions on speed. In New Delhi, ruins are exactly that - ruins and ruined. Most of them can barely breathe or have endured a long death, and the few on life-support are largely sustained by injections of foreign currency and tourism’s packaged India - Incredible India! Marvel at the Taj Mahal; experience the Red Fort; take an elephant ride up to Amber Fort. But just before one might start to slip into nostalgic yearnings for harems, hookahs and dancing girls, one is reminded not to be fooled. India is not trapped in the past - India is indeed shining. Literally! Step into five star serendipity and you will not fail to notice the shiny, spotless, marble floors that exude lemony freshness before heading to the Chanel store to ogle at handbags; wander over to the pool because the thumping house beats are enticing enough to throw back a few margaritas while watching the half-naked beautiful people frolicking around; and finally, reserve a table at the swish restaurant with an easily pronounceable Sanskrit name and order the beautifully arranged “street food sampler” for a little taste of India.

New Delhi, the capital city of the British Raj, was built to project authority and to demarcate the new European from the old Indian. It is marked by sprawling white

bungalows and wide, tree-lined boulevards, whose linearity is broken only by roundabouts, the epitome of organised choice: smooth, easy, organised flow. No narrow, messy lanes, no crowded markets. New Delhi was built to be an oasis of modernity, where history was kept at the margins - the Old Fort to the east, Safdarjung's tomb to the south, and Shahjahanabad in the north. The new city was the modernist vision of urban planning and it was also fresh ground on which to experiment with the new technologies and techniques of this modernist vision. Rabinow writes that the "colonies constituted a laboratory of experimentation for new arts of government capable of bringing a modern and healthy society into being" (1989:32). Along with such forms of experimentation in urban planning came the separation and differentiation of coloniser and colonised. Yeoh argues that the built environment, which was a reflection of the colonial consciousness, "was segmented in such a way as to manifest and re-create the separation of the inhabitants of the colonial city into racial containers, and the division of their activities along a multiplicity of lines such as public/private, sacred/profane, and progressive/offensive." (2003:18) And with such racialised segregation of the colonial city came displays of power and hierarchy, of which New Delhi is a prime example. By building colonial cities in this way, not only are the boundaries between new and old clearly defined, but the boundaries between modernity and tradition, hygiene and filth (see Chapter 5), science and superstition are also marked by differences in the built urban environment. As such, an established sense of hierarchy is preserved, buttressed by what is "perceived to be traditional rituals, spatial patterns, and architectural ornament" (Wright 1997:323), all of which are purportedly characteristics of Islamic "old cities" (cf. Abu-Lughod 1987).⁹⁹

⁹⁹ In her study of French colonial projects in Morocco, Gwendolyn Wright argues that the French

Old Delhi is the seventeenth century capital city of Shah Jahan, the fifth Mughal ruler. He built the walled city to accompany his new Red Fort, which was constructed on the banks of the Yamuna River. Many of the gates that provided access to the city were named after prominent cities and regions located in those directions: Ajmeri Gate, Lahori Gate, Kabuli Gate, Kashmiri Gate. For centuries, the names of neighbourhoods communicated some characteristic of the place, usually by commenting on its occupational affiliation; Churiwalan for bangle-making, Gali Vakeel Wali for its resident lawyers, and Gota Wali Gali where gold thread would be spun.

The walled city has endured numerous traumatic events, from its sacking by Nadir Shah's army in the eighteenth century to the devastating purge by the British in the nineteenth century to the riots and mass exodus following Partition in the twentieth century. In his comparative history of Old and New Delhi, Legg (2007) argues that both cities were not completely isolated from each other, as the "*cordon sanitaire*" typification might otherwise suggest, and that the old city also sustained the rationalising forms of governmentality of the colonial state. Today, the old city bears many of the scars of history's assaults. The walls of the old city, which used to protect its semi-circular perimeter, have now crumbled and those remaining gates are cordoned off by metal fences while emphasising their status as mere relics. The neighbourhood of Darya Ganj (literally river market), which is adjacent to the

preserved old cities (*madina*) while they built modern cities around the *madinas*. "The habous districts [*madinas*] are Western stage settings for Moroccan life, evoking the supposed harmonies of a traditional way of life that, in the Westerner's eyes, did not change overtime... Aesthetic predilections therefore had a definite political aspect, freezing Moroccan economic and political development at an archaic level of the picturesque, in sharp contrast to the visible advances and opportunities available to Europeans." (1997: 331)

sprawling Red Fort, is no longer on the banks of the Yamuna, as the river has shifted its path. The Delhiwallas say that the Yamuna has turned its back on the Red Fort because Delhi is no longer the beautiful city it once used to be. Today, Darya Ganj is flanked by the busy thoroughfare that allows traffic to penetrate the old city perimeter, but without realising one has done so. The monotony and scale of urban sprawl – with its high volume of vehicle, cycle and people traffic, its metallic barricades and concrete jungle, its cigarette vendors and restaurant chains – is encroaching upon the semi-circular fringes of the old city.

But no matter how much the old city has faded and decayed under the incessant assaults of *laissez faire* modernity¹⁰⁰, the past looms everywhere, above the opaque diesel fumes, behind the dense networks of exposed electrical wires and unwieldy billboards. Just as history can be constructed from ruined mosques, forts, *havelis*, tombs, and markets, it can also be gleaned from people's memories, stories and descriptions (cf. Tarlo 2003). Amidst the uncertainty of change and its manifestations in everyday life and hollowed landscapes – cracked walls and tube lighting; motorcycles, blind beggars, fruit vendors, and migrant labourers; burqa-clad women, maulvi's in flowing white kurtas, teenagers in jeans and bandanas; *nihari*, *sheermal*, Fanta and Nestle – solace and often pride emerge from remembering one's connection to the past.

2.4 Hamida Begum: Negotiating the Present, Holding On to the Past

I encountered Hamida Begum at the very beginning of my fieldwork in Old Delhi in

¹⁰⁰ Vidal, Tarlo and Dupont note that "Shahjahanabad's architectural heritage has this century suffered more from the neglect of planners and the haphazard commercialization that comes with unrestrained economic development than from the dramatic transfers of population and ownership that accompanied Partition." (2000: 19)

much the same way I met most of my other research respondents: through an old list of State and National award winners compiled by the Craft Revival Trust. At that time in 2006, she was no longer practicing her craft, but instead owned a marriage bureau and made her living as a match-maker. Even before showing me her then defunct state-issued artisan ID card, she handed me one of her marriage bureau business cards.

Hamida Begum lived on the ground level of a one room flat nestled away in the narrow lanes of Darya Ganj. The private indoor living space and the outdoor public lane were separated by a floral sheet that hung in the doorway, flimsily functioning as a door. Inside, the room was dark even during the day; there was a little area for cooking in one corner with one gas burner, a flat iron skillet to make *rotis* and various spices and ingredients contained in small plastic jars. The longer gray wall that constituted the back of the flat was dominated by a bed with storage cupboards above and below it. One single bed was placed adjacent to the back wall and was raised quite high off the ground so as to leave enough space to accommodate items like piles of cloth, a small *karchob* (wooden frame for *zardozi*), and other household goods. When I met Hamida Begum she was a widow in 50s and she shared the one room flat with her sole surviving sister. While seated cross-legged on the floor of her flat, wearing thick glasses and a loose shawl draped around her shoulders, Hamida Begum described her situation as follows:

“We have no livelihood left. There are no men at home - only the two of us. All this tension has brought us bad health. All our brothers have also passed away. It's just the two of us left, and now we have no livelihood. Without any *patron*¹⁰¹, no one looks after us.”¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ She uses the word *benisar*. Its etymology is significant. Nisar = helper; Ansari = those who helped the prophet in Medina; benisar = without helpers.

Throughout my interactions with Hamida Begum, she talked very openly about the status of the craft as she perceived it and her experiences of the people and places in New Delhi where she would often travel to get orders. She especially spoke about her encounters with a middleman who had an office just off Connaught Place (CP) in New Delhi. Although CP was not very far in distance from her home in Old Delhi, for Hamida Begum, as for many artisans living in the old city, it might as well have been in another time and space. The circular construction of Connaught Place, with inner and outer ring roads built up with imposing white colonnaded structures, is a testament to how the British Raj sought to represent their power as juxtaposed to the displaced Mughal rulers' capital city of Shahjahanabad (Old Delhi). Today CP is a popular place where young people come in groups and shop for a variety of things ranging from expensive saris and designer jeans, to pirated movies and handicrafts geared to attract tourists. But not long ago, before the residential areas of south Delhi attracted the emerging wealthy inhabitants of New Delhi to the newly developed markets and shopping malls, CP was one of the major destinations of the city and nothing short of awe inspiring.

Aside from the stately white colonnaded structures that are rapidly darkening from pollution and spattered with *paan* residue, Connaught Place also has a number of other markets, which exist on the fringes of the outer circle. One such market is called Shankar Market and this is where Hamida Begum often travelled to meet her middleman, Ravi Gupta. Before Hamida Begum became *benisar*, or without a patron,

¹⁰² "Humara koi zariya-i mash nahin hai. Ghar main humare koi aadmi nahin hai - bus hum do hi ghar main hain, bus. Preshani main itni tabiyat kharab ho nay lagi. Jo bhai the, voh bhi Allah koy pyare ho gay hain. Ab hum do hi rehey, ab koi hamara zariya-i mash nahin hai. Humara benisar koi nahin dekh raha hai."

she worked with Ravi Gupta and was often commissioned to make *zardozi* pieces for him. But reaching Shankar Market and her patron's office was perhaps not such a clear and straightforward journey. One day, I asked Hamida Begum if I could visit Ravi at his office to which she said yes. However, when I asked for directions, she recounted with uncertainty the way to his office: "So here's Nizamuddin and you just go a bit ahead. From there you get to Connaught Place, and when you turn there - don't turn this way - you'll reach his office. It's in Shankar Market. Just ask anyone where Ravi Gupta's office is and they will tell you."

I have discussed this small detail of direction-giving to highlight the point that, regardless of the countless times Hamida Begum visited Ravi Gupta in Shankar Market – as it was inconceivable that Ravi Gupta would have come to Old Delhi to visit Hamida Begum – there was still a profound sense of unease and unfamiliarity in narrating the spaces she had to traverse between Old Delhi and Connaught Place. Hamida Begum's directions to reach Ravi Gupta's office in Connaught Place were not marked by street names or even landmarks that could indicate where to make turns, but instead were anchored in memories of landmarks that still played a central role for her. Hamida Begum's critical landmark in her way-finding to CP and Shankar Market was Nizamuddin, a place not directly en route to CP from Old Delhi, but one which Hamida Begum visited regularly to pay respect to its famous Sufi saint, a figure who, along with other Sufi sites, exercises "so great an influence on the historical imagination of South Asian Muslims" (Digby 2003:251). Seemingly banal details of direction-giving can be used to "connect to other, bigger stories" (Osella and Osella 2006: 569), and in the case of urban Muslim artisans, the "biggest story" is about the degrees of marginalisation that have become incorporated into personal negotiations with present situations, such as navigating the unfamiliar (Ahmad 2006). It is in such

conditions of uncertainty that artisans make certain claims, whereby the past becomes a dependable truth to which references are made in order to instil what it means to be real and authentic.

One such reference to a dependable and ideal past was made by Hamida Begum when I visited her home in Darya Ganj. She was telling me about the lowly predicament that many artisans in Old Delhi find themselves, and like many others, she blamed this condition on the middlemen. In her own words, Hamida Begum explained the situation simply: “The middlemen never let artisans prosper. They tell people not to give us work. He [the middleman] will take all the orders and make sure we don't get any work.”¹⁰³ According to Hamida Begum, Ravi Gupta was not only a middleman but a very “big man” by virtue of having a fancy office in Connaught Place. She had visited his office dozens of times in order to get more orders from him. But the association came to an end because Hamida Begum would not give him one of her finest pieces of work. She showed it to me with considerable pride, as the design represented “the time of the Mughals” (*Mughalon ka zamana*). The piece was a wall hanging made of brown-gray raw silk and on it, embroidered with *zari* and colourful sequins, were two peacocks perched on a branch of a tree, facing each other, with their elaborate tails hanging below the branch in a symmetrical fashion (see Figure 6.1). I asked her to tell me more about this piece and especially about the design. According to her, the design was from the time of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal ruler, and she had made the piece about twenty years ago. When Ravi Gupta first saw the wall hanging, the *zari* had already started to lose its shine, which ironically is the one of the defining characteristics of “*asli*” or real *zari*. He insisted

¹⁰³ “*Karkhandar karigar ko kabhi nahin badhney dey ta. Bohot jagha mana kar dey ta hai key yeh maal nahin deyna. Yeh ap ney aap to leta hai aur tumhara rasta bandh kar de ta hai.*”

that Hamida Begum should sell the piece to him so that he could sell it to buyers from abroad, claiming that it is an “antique” piece made in Bahadur Shah Zafar’s era. He tried to convince her that by selling it as an antique, they would both make much more money. But try as he might to convince her, Hamida Begum never sold the piece to Ravi Gupta. She told me that she did not trust him because although he had become too successful through the efforts of artisans, all the while artisans never progressed or prospered. She said that if she had sold him the piece, he would have cheated her on the price. The wall hanging, of which she was so proud, had remained folded away in the dark crevices underneath Hamida Begum’s bed until she took it out to show me.

Figure 6.1: From the time of Bahadur Shah Zafar: A wall hanging made by Hamida Begum



For Hamida Begum, the wall hanging was authentic because its design was from “the time of the Mughals”, a time in the past that represented richness in work, but above all, bestowed dignity and respect (*izzat*) to those who demonstrated high quality and craftsmanship. The object also produced Hamida Begum as a real, authentic artisan and as such it represented much more than its value as a commodity or a tourist “curiosity”. Regardless of Hamida Begum’s need for the money that she could have received by selling the piece to Ravi Gupta, she kept it as a reminder of what she and the craft had been in the past – an ideal of what was real and authentic. In a sense, by keeping the old and worn wall hanging under her bed, Hamida Begum kept close to her a piece of her self and her past that had now more or less disappeared.

2.5 Zooming In: A Walk through History’s Lanes

The inner lanes of Old Delhi are teeming with activity at almost any time of the day or night. Work is not necessarily regulated by “normal business hours” that one encounters in the office buildings of Connaught Place and South Delhi. In Old Delhi, work patterns often revolve around the customary timings of the daily prayers, when shop fronts are closed and locked for periods of half hour to an hour, four or five times a day. Lately, modernity has also crept into these centuries old time routines. Now, additional work stoppages are determined by the availability of electricity. In some neighbourhoods, residents know fairly accurately when the power outages occur (up to six times a day) and schedule their work accordingly.

One evening, I was visiting Mansoor to discuss the designs for some of the bag samples he was making for an importer in the United States; however, we ended up

discussing a range of issues, from Pakistan to religion to the time when he went to a temple in Calcutta. I had completely lost track of time, and when I looked up at the clock, hanging unceremoniously from a crack in the gray wall, it was nearing 10:30 pm. Considering that I had to take a cycle rickshaw to the metro and then a metro to Central Delhi, I cut short our conversation and told Mansoor that I had to leave because it was getting late. I got the impression, however, that he wanted me to stay longer – I think he found it amusing and intriguing that I would sit there for hours on end just listening to him tell me stories, laughing at his jokes, and being interested in whatever he could tell me about his craft. So when I told him that I had to leave, he said that before he got me a rickshaw to the metro he would like to introduce me to some of the other artisans in the neighbourhood and show me all the different types of work happening just in the lanes nearby. I could not possibly give up such an opportunity, so I walked out with him.

The first small work-space where we stopped was just two shops down from Mansoor's. The size of the space was almost exactly the same as Mansoor's, and inside there were two men busy at work. There was a machine to the left (which I later found out was a lathe) and the two men were sitting on benches with magnifying glasses and tweezer-like instruments in hand, placing stones on what looked like a brass or copper pendent. To my surprise, Mansoor introduced one of the men to me as his older brother, who was trained to use the machine to make copper-based objects. Mansoor's brother made these jewellery items and sold them to the wholesale shops near Turkman Gate. Mansoor asked me if I knew about Turkman Gate, to which I replied yes. I had visited the wholesale jewellery shops many times and even bought a few samples for myself.

As we walked out of the narrow covered passage where both Mansoor's and his brother's shops were located, we turned left onto the outside lane and then followed this lane as it curved around to the right towards the neighbourhood mosque. We were walking in the direction of Mansoor's home, which could have been reached by turning left again into another dark lane, but we kept on walking straight ahead.

Mansoor stopped in front of one shop, the layout of which was quite typical of shops in Old Delhi. The front of the shop faced the street and was open for all passersby to look in. The only partition that could segregate the inside of the shop from the outside lane was the metal shutters. Like Mansoor's shop, I guessed these would only be drawn when the owner or workers stopped work or went to the mosque. There was no door as such where one could formally enter the shop, only one large opening. Thus entering the shop would mean stepping over the slightly raised threshold directly into the workspace. This type of integrated urban spatial configuration, where a workshop or a shop is barely separated by a threshold from the street and shop life which would often mix and mingle with it, is quite common in Old Delhi.

The interior of the shop was packed full of wooden slabs of varying sizes. It was night time and one solitary light bulb hung from the ceiling and emitted a soft yellow light that bounced off the brown wooden slabs, illuminating the tiny shop in a golden halo. Amidst all the wood, sitting right at the back of this small space were two men - one man was hammering slabs of wood together, while the other man was concentrating on carving a piece of wood. As Mansoor and I stood in the street looking into the shop, we both greeted the men. Mansoor started explaining to me that these two men came from a family that had been wood carvers for centuries. The

family had once produced intricate and magnificent objects for the Mughal courts and other upper-class patrons. He said that the shop had been in the same location for hundreds of years, and they still produce beautifully carved boxes. He then asked one of the men to bring and show a finished piece. The man brought a finely carved wooden box from the back of the shop and placed it in front of me. He asked Mansoor if I wanted to buy something, but Mansoor explained that I was just a student and he was showing me all the work that happens in the “*gullies*” (small lanes) of *Purani Dilli* (Old Delhi).

I was then taken to the shop directly adjacent to the wood-carvers’ workshop. It had exactly the same space as its neighbour, with a metal shutter perched on the outside of the large shop window and a 60 watt light bulb hanging from a single wire. The golden halo that had so luminously defined the previous shop was not present inside this second shop. Unlike the wood-carvers’ space, where the dominant colours were more or less uniform, this shop was filled with all kinds of small objects like utensils, implements, radios, but predominantly stone. Inside, a man wearing large, thick glasses was sitting cross-legged on a piece of gray cloth. All around him were stacks of stone-made objects indiscriminately piled and creeping up towards the ceiling.

Mansoor introduced the man sitting inside as a master craftsman in *meena-kari*, inlay work that was done famously on marble but also on other types of stones. He made little boxes with different motifs, but mostly variations of floral and peacock designs. He showed me a small jewellery box he had just finished with a floral design on the cover. Again, Mansoor told me that this man’s family has been in the *meena-kari* trade for generations and their family is renowned for this type of work. He added

that the craft was particularly popular during Mughal times and the elites would have these kinds of objects made for their homes.

It was at this point that I insisted I had to catch the last metro back to Central Delhi, so Mansoor walked me to a part of his neighbourhood where the cycle rickshaws could be found. I felt as if he wanted to show me more, but it was nearing 11:30pm and I asked him when all of these artisans stop working in Old Delhi. He said in a jovial way that people work here till two in the morning, mostly due to the fact that the electricity goes out at regular times during the day, sometimes up to six times. In the late evenings, the electricity is more regular, so that is when work tends to be more stable. For many, it has become a habit now, he said. Indeed, whether day or night, in Old Delhi someone will always be doing something, he added just as I got onto a cycle rickshaw. We said goodbye and I thanked him for showing me around his neighbourhood.

Reflecting on the boundaries and characteristics of neighbourhoods, Simpson writes that for its residents, the neighbourhood “constructed their routines as much as their routines constructed the social life of the neighbourhood.” (2006:207) For Mansoor, the inner lanes of his *mohalla* (neighbourhood) formed a significant part of his daily routines and everyday life. He has lived and worked within these same lanes all his life. He knows the histories of each little shop, each family, and each person. Indeed, the various urban neighbourhoods that fall within the boundaries of Old Delhi are “sites for individual and collective memory...all urban neighbourhoods are places of remembered pasts and imagined futures.” (De Neve and Donner 2006:10) The memories that Mansoor and his fellow artisans, like Hamida Begum, are “left with”

are like fragments – bits and pieces of history that may come across as nostalgic narratives to outsiders, but for artisans living in the midst of galloping uncertainty and change, such narratives anchor their present and everyday life in a larger continuity and lineage represented by the idealised history, embodied in “the time of the Mughals”.

2.6 The “Cow Bell Syndrome”

Mansoor is the most central persona in this thesis and as such he figures quite prominently throughout the ethnography. His central position is not only because I spent a great deal of time with him, but also because he is an artisan who epitomises so much of what it means to be an *asli karigar*, or a real, authentic artisan. My conversations with Mansoor made me acutely aware of the ways in which artisans, particularly urban Muslim artisans, have become marginalised. In these conversations, he rarely went into the details of the supply and demand dynamics of crafts production, but instead he told me stories about his family, how they got into this line of work, how his friends, who are also artisans, viewed the decline in quality and craftsmanship. He recounted his experiences of travelling to various fairs and exhibitions around the country, about how he wanted to educate his children and about his often antagonistic relationships with middlemen. These were the issues that mattered to Mansoor and my intention is to express these through my representations of him (and others) in this ethnography.

How Mansoor became a highly skilled *zardozi* artisan in the twentieth century, more than a century after “the time of the Mughals” was buried and all but forgotten for the

vast majority of his fellow citizens, needs some explanation. I begin by recounting Mansoor's family history as he told it to me one day while sitting in his workshop.

“Family history? Well, this line of work goes back to Mughal times. It is work that was done for the royal courts. It has been in my family for a very long time, but I'm not sure exactly how long. Let me see. My elders would tell me stories of my great-great grandfather, Abdullah, who was renowned for making velvet shawls and caps embroidered with *zari*. According to the elders, Abdullah participated in the *darbar* of Bahadur Shah Zafar. These *darbars* were big occasions and the streets of *purani dilli* [Old Delhi] would be filled with people. Before Abdullah, the family history becomes vague. But this line of work has remained in my family since his time. My great grandfather, Azmatullah learned the craft from his father, Abdullah. Then my grandfather, Mustafa Khan learned from Azamtullah and my father Riyaz learned from Mustafa Khan. It has been passed down like that.”

As a highly skilled artisan, Mansoor was certainly proud of his family's involvement with *zardozi*, which goes back many generations. His ancestors were skilled artisans who initially produced luxury items, such as robes and caps (*topi*) for the various courts (*darbar*) of Bahadur Shah Zafar, and then later specialised in embroidery on saris and skirts (*lehnga*). Mansoor, however, was specially trained in the embroidery of handbags and belts and it was Mansoor's uncle, Iqbal, who had introduced this new line of work into the family. Mansoor narrated the following story about his uncle.

Iqbal was trained as an artisan by his father, but became a master of the craft under an *ustad*, or teacher. He learned to do *zardozi* on more traditional forms such as skirts (*lehnga*) and saris. Iqbal's father was a successful craftsman and owned his own workshop and as such he was known as a *karkhandar* (someone who owns a workshop). His workshop was located inside a mosque, where children, including Iqbal, would come to learn the craft. Iqbal, however, had a tense relationship with his father, because he drove himself into debt after spending the monthly stipend he

received from his family. One day, after a rather charged encounter with his father, Iqbal decided to leave home and move away from Delhi in search of work, so that he could repay his debts and avoid being dependent on his father. Iqbal ended up in Bombay and found work in a factory that produced *zari* embroidered handbags. After paying off his debt, Iqbal returned to tell his father that while in Bombay he had seen work that was not done in Delhi. This led both father and son to embark on a business to produce embroidered handbags in Delhi. Being more skilled and experienced, Iqbal's father created the handbag designs while Iqbal did the embroidery and trained others in the techniques of handbag embroidery. This is how Mansoor, Iqbal's nephew, learned to make *zardozi* handbags. The quality of these handbags, Mansoor told me, was so high that they were displayed in Delhi's five-star hotels and the family got commissions to make handbags from a variety of patrons, including the Indian government's Central Cottage Industries Emporium, businesses and middlemen based in Connaught Place – Delhi's commercial hub – but most of the orders for embroidered handbags came from overseas buyers, particularly from the Soviet Union and its satellite states in Central Asia.

But at the time of my fieldwork, in 2006-2007, this was a story that seemed to belong to a bygone era rather than a story from a few decades ago. Where had these intricately embroidered handbags gone today? I was certainly unable to trace them in any marketplaces, emporiums, or even five-star hotels that I had visited. During many trips to various handicraft emporiums, tourist attractions, hotels and craft fairs, I realised the extent to which the sort of embroidery that Mansoor talked about had disappeared from the public's view and memory. It was on a trip to the Red Fort that I was able to see for myself the prevalence of so-called sub-standard work (*chalu*

kaam), which had nearly flooded the market. I will briefly describe this visit to one of Delhi's foremost tourist attractions.

In order to access the main areas of the fort, the visitor entering from the Lahori Gate must first pass through a covered arcade, which from the seventeenth century till 1857, when the Mughals were removed from power, was perhaps the most exclusive bazaar in India. Embedded in the Mughal style arches on both sides of the walkway are souvenir and handicraft stalls, most of which come with a dedicated “spokesperson” to entice the tourist with “exotic” goods at the best prices. As I walked through the passageway, I stopped at numerous stalls to inspect the items on sale that were embroidered with *zari*. On the shelves and in the cabinets were a few handbags, mostly velvet and rectangular in shape. These bags were mostly embroidered with possibly one of the most distinctive Mughal inspired motifs: one or two peacocks perched on a branch. By this time, my eyes were quite trained to discern the intricate from the run-of-the-mill work, or, in the language of many artisans in Old Delhi, to differentiate between *pucca* and *kaccha kaam* or *asli* and *naqli kaam*.¹⁰⁴ These bags were definitely run-of-the-mill, and quite frankly of low quality, as the stitches were unevenly distributed, while the symmetrical precision for which Islamic art is renowned was sorely lacking in these handbags. I asked one shopkeeper if any of these bags were made in Delhi, a question which seemed to surprise him, and he responded by saying that he believes they come from Calcutta.

After many similar encounters, my improvised scan of the handicraft market in Delhi proved to be disappointing, as it was truly rare to find “*asli*” (real) *zardozi* work. In

¹⁰⁴ In Chapter 4, I discussed in detail the terminologies used by artisans to distinguish quality in workmanship. Also, much of the terminologies were employed to make distinctions between the real artisans and those who are fake (*naqli*), or “useless” (*bekar*).

one of my regular meetings with Mansoor, I asked him what happened to the types of handbags his uncle had taught him how to make. Initially he told me that the decline in demand for these bags was related to the fall of the Soviet Union. Many of the overseas orders came from the Central Asian and Balkan states, but after the fall of the Soviet Union – Mansoor referred to it as “partition” – the orders for bags dwindled. After a few moments of reflection and some hesitation, Mansoor told me a story about one of his first trips to Calcutta to showcase and sell his work in a government sponsored craft fair. It was this story that revealed a greater cause for concern as to why real and authentic work is in decline and why the *asli karigar* is in a precarious position of uncertainty.

While in Calcutta, Mansoor was particularly keen to display the intricately embroidered handbags and belts, since he thought these would fetch the best prices. He told me that the trip went well – it was his first time in Calcutta and a new friend he had made in the city showed him many of the sites, including a memorable visit to a temple. But, despite the fun time he had discovering the city, he returned to Delhi having made little profit from selling his craft items. And one encounter with a customer particularly stood out for Mansoor. While he was standing behind his stall at the craft fair, a group of young men approached the stall to take a look at the things on sale. Mansoor had brought a range of items, from run-of-the-mill picture frames and bags that were made with sequins and beads to some of his best work, such as *zardozi* embroidered handbags and belts. One of these high quality belts was hanging on the side of the stall, and one of the young men took this belt in his hand and started mocking it. He turned to Mansoor and asked him, “What is this, a cow bell? Who would ever buy this?” To which Mansoor attempted to explain that it’s not a cow bell,

but a belt that used to be worn around the robes of noblemen during the Mughal period. But the young men were not interested and Mansoor was not able to fully explain the context of the belt. Mansoor told me that the trip to Calcutta and the attitude of the young men who visited his stall had made him realise that consumers nowadays do not appreciate high quality work or are only looking for the best deals.

Perhaps to the usual consumer a belt is just a belt, no different from a cow bell or an outdated relic that serves no function. But for Mansoor the belt, and the handbags, represented much more than material objects or commodities. These were objects that defined Mansoor's sense of self; they constituted his identity by the fact that they represented a link to a past where an artisan's worth was measured by the display of superior skills through intricate craftsmanship. Although the past may be a scarce resource (Appadurai 1983), it is one that holds meaning and authenticates constructions of self. The re-iterations of Mansoor's association with the courts of Bahadur Shah Zafar through his family history must be understood not as a longing for a bygone time, but instead as a continual assertion of identity through performance (Butler 1990), particularly in the face of others who continually deny his perception of self as a rooted and authentic artisan.

3. COLLAPSING TIME: MORALLY IMBUE NARRATIVES

In the second part of this chapter, I shift the focus in order to discuss other types of narratives that were conveyed to me by artisans. So far, I have elaborated on the ways in which many artisans constitute themselves as real and authentic by invoking "the time of the Mughals". In such narratives, I suggest that artisans situate themselves in a "temporal framework" that is defined by linear time, by appropriating the past in

order to negotiate with present conditions. However, other types of stories, which form sites of performance in the lifeworld of artisans, are narrated by artisans who situate themselves in an alternate temporal framework that collapses past and future time in order to imbue the moment with moral authority. These types of stories, which are often told in the form of parables and anecdotes, provide a morally sanctioned approach to an issue, often with reference to ideal work practices that constitute a large part of what it means to be an *asli karigar* (see chapter 5). The ability to recount these stories – or “allegorical tales” which are common forms of storytelling in the Sufi tradition (see Hamid 1999) – through the articulation of “other possible times” (Patel 2000:47) is an attribute of a real, authentic artisan. The recounting of such narratives suggests that the speaker has an embodied sense of “work ethic” that is cultivated by living and learning in a particular environment (*mahol*) characterised, above all, by elders (*buzurg*) passing down stories and sayings. It is an environment that thrives on lineage as the conduit for knowledge (cf. Marchand 2001). The narratives I present in this section are seemingly “timeless” and as such the weight of these stories is not that they invoke an idealised past, but in the way they seem to collapse the conception of past and future time in order to punctuate the moment of their telling with authority and authenticity.

I conclude this chapter with a story known to many people. It is a story that contains many morally sanctioned messages, particularly referring to artisans. Although it is set in the past, the story demonstrates the fluid nature of time, where characters from one time are found to exist in other times. In a subtle way, what this story can suggest is that time, especially in its linear form, becomes irrelevant and the transcendence of time imbues the perduring moment with authority and authenticity.

3.1 *On Skills, Work Ethic and Knowledge*

Let me begin with some old sayings told to me by artisans in Old Delhi. These sayings, known as *kahavat* in Urdu, convey a range of messages such as how to make sure one is truly devoted to one's work; expanding one's network and knowledge; and knowing the importance and worth of learning a skill.

One afternoon I was sitting with Mansoor in his workshop and we were chatting about his children's education. His two sons were teenagers and his daughter was ten years old, at the time of my fieldwork. He told me he was very proud of his eldest son, who had almost finished his religious education in the madrasa and was soon to become a *hafiz*.¹⁰⁵ He was also pleased that his daughter was doing well in school and was also learning embroidery work in her spare time. However, Mansoor was very concerned about his middle son, Obaid, who was not performing well in school and, according to Mansoor, was not really interested in anything except acting like a "hero" all day. Obaid had failed class 8 and Mansoor was contemplating whether he should retain a private tutor or even send his son to a boarding school (even though both options were beyond Mansoor's financial means). In the end, Mansoor discounted the second option because he could not bear the thought of being separated from his son. Instead, he decided that during the school's summer break, he would force Obaid to sit with him in his workshop and learn *zardozi* in order to acquire discipline and most importantly, to learn a skill. As he made this decision in front of me, he recounted the following saying that he remembered from his own childhood: "When your career is no longer providing gains, you should be able to fall

¹⁰⁵ A *hafiz* is someone who has memorised the Qur'an and has passed an oral recitation "exam".

back on the knowledge and skills of your ancestors (*buzurg*)". He said that if all else fails with Obaid, he would have something to fall back on that could at least earn him some income. What is interesting in this saying is that the word used for ancestor in Urdu is *buzurg*, which could also be translated as nobility and virtuous action. Thus learning the skill of one's *buzurg* was not only noble, but also akin to acquiring dexterity that comes via discipline and devotion to a work ethic.

A number of other sayings and parables conveyed the importance of learning a skill and instilling discipline. In another conversation with Gulzaar, a highly skilled artisan who had young children between the ages of two and five, he told me that he was considering the benefits of sending his children to an *ustad* to learn *zardozi* when they are older. He recounted a saying that had been passed down in his family with regard to learning a craft with a master. The saying goes, "The flesh is yours, the bones are ours." Gulzaar explained that when a child is sent to be taught a skill, the responsibility for that child's learning is fully transferred to the *ustad*. The master is sanctioned to use any kind of disciplinary methods, since it is assumed that this is part of the learning process. To follow up with this saying, Gulzaar told me another story regarding the relationship with an *ustad* and his *shagird* or apprentice. This story was not set in any specified time period, but was one that became authoritative in its very telling.

A young boy was sent to learn a skill from an *ustad*. In order for the boy to learn from his mistakes, the *ustad* would slap the boy on his wrist, much to the dislike of the boy. One day, the boy decided he had had enough and went back home to his parents. The parents immediately returned the boy to the *ustad* and insisted that the boy must learn

a skill. Upon his return, the *ustad* was not happy with the boy's lack of discipline and respect for work. The next morning, before giving the boy his assignment, the *ustad* told the boy that if he wanted to learn the craft he must first finish one special task. The task was simple: to fill a large vat to the brim with water. However, the *ustad* did not mention to the boy that he had pierced a hole at the bottom of the vat. So the boy spent days doing a task he thought would only take a few of hours. Finally, after a week of letting him try to fill the vat to the brim, the *ustad* told the boy that he had acquired the right amount of discipline and was ready to learn a skill. The moral of each saying was that in order to cultivate a "work ethic" the young apprentice must have an embodied sense of devotion and worship towards work (also see chapter 5).

The importance of learning a skill has been part and parcel of Sufi pedagogical praxis from the earliest establishment of Sufi orders (*silsilah*) in India. For example, a fourteenth century treatise on moral conduct written by a man known as Yousuf Gada, used parables in order to convey the importance of learning skills. The popularity of this treatise, especially among the urban lower classes, is attributed to Gada's connection with the Sufi order of the Chishtis and especially, Gada's spiritual master, the famous Chishti *shaikh*, Chiragh i Dihlawi, who in turn was a disciple of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya (Digby 1984). In his treatise, Gada writes,

"Do not be ashamed or modest at pursuing a trade, my soul;
Learn a trade and also *'ilm*, become a master of arts, possessor of more
than one accomplishment.

Learn *'ilm* and also a skill, so that you will not go round many doors
[begging];
The man who has skill will not ask for bread from door to door."
(Digby 1984:115)

It is interesting to observe the extent to which the early Chishti Sufis played down the utility of religious knowledge (*ilm*) in comparison to acquiring skills (*hunar*). For Gada, *ilm* can lead to beggary, whereas an acquired skill will not.

Finally, many artisans discussed the value and importance of networks among reliable and reputable artisans or between *asli karigar*-s. The reliance on networks has been mentioned in previous chapters, as many artisans would look to their *biradari*, or network of kin and non-kin relations connected by virtue of occupational affiliation. Apart from the *biradari*, I asked artisans about how they form networks amongst themselves, whether they share information about designs or even share work, and how artisans get to know about where to find work. Many explained that families who have been doing *zardozi* for generations have earned a reputation for being knowledgeable about the craft; therefore, artisans in search of work will know which families to seek out. But while certain details were explained to me explicitly, one saying came up often to describe the flow and exchange of information among artisans: “Knowledge is like a flame; it gets passed on from candle to candle (from *dia* to *dia*)”. Through the metaphor of light and passing on the flame, artisans conveyed the ways in which craft knowledge spreads and also the way innovation can occur by connecting and discussing ideas with others. The flame is a well-known symbol in Sufism, as particles of light are thought to enshrine the ever-lasting lineage of “prophetic ancestors” (Böwering 1997:61). Thus light also becomes a metaphor for an enlightened lineage of knowledge, whereby knowledge can inhabit the perduring moment as embodied in the flame.

3.2 Being King for a Day: The Elusive and Transcendent Nizam

Throughout my fieldwork I asked artisans to recount any stories or sayings about *zardozi* or craft production that they could remember. Not many were forthcoming, but the following story, set in the early Mughal period, was known to many people. It is a common story and many versions of it exist. The version recounted to me places emphasis on the cunning and wit of artisans.

Humayun, the second Mughal ruler of India, fled Delhi due to the machinations of his brother, Kamran, towards the river Yamuna. While trying to cross the river, Humayun got caught up in the strong currents and being a weak swimmer he almost drowned. On the banks of the river sat a water carrier [known in Urdu as saqqa], called Nizam. The saqqa saw Humayun in trouble and saved him from drowning. In the safety of the fort, Humayun said to Nizam saqqa: "When I am back in power, you must come to me and I will grant you whatever you wish". After many years and after fighting many wars, Humayun rose once again to power (takht par aagay). Nizam went to visit the king, but after being refused audience many times, he said to convey to the king that Nizam saqqa was waiting to see him. When Humayun was told that Nizam saqqa requested an audience with him, the king said that everybody should pay respect to this Nizam and let him in. Nizam saqqa came before the king and Humayun said to him, "You saved my life and my family's life, and I will grant you whatever you wish". Nizam said, "I want to rule your kingdom for one day." Without any hesitation, Humayun granted Nizam his wish and for one day, Nizam saqqa became king. While on the throne, he proclaimed, "On this date, I am ruler. And from this day, leather coins [siqqay] will be circulated." So all the saqqas cut up their water vessels [mashq] and made them into coins. The next day, when Nizam's rule was over,

all the saqqas were proud that they had been in power for one day, and they teased the julahas [weavers], with whom the saqqas had an old rivalry. To outdo the saqqas, the julahas decided to make an exquisite carpet for the king, and when they presented the gift, Humayun asked what they wanted in return. The weavers said they wanted to sit on the king's throne [takht] and use it as a toilet!

This story focuses on two different artisan groups, leather workers and weavers. There are possibly two meanings, or moral outcomes that can be derived from this story. The first revolves around the rule of Nizam saqqa. The word saqqa denotes members of an occupational group who are essentially leather workers that make water vessels out of leather. Until recently, saqqas could be found in both rural and urban areas, where they provided the service of bringing water to those who would pay. Although the word itself is of Arabic origin, in the South Asian context, a saqqa is often depicted as a low caste convert to Islam because of the association with leather work, or depicted as being from the ranks of the lower working classes. With this in mind, for a person from the lower classes of society to become the most powerful ruler for a day is an unthinkable feat.¹⁰⁶ But while in power, Nizam saqqa proved not to be greedy; instead he called for the minting of coins made of leather, so as to benefit his entire community. The message from this part of the story, as in Gada's verses, seems to be that only those who come from the "popular" or working classes possess the moral and ethical responsibility to understand the needs of the poor people. Certainly this was a common theme that Sufi saints and disciples from the Chishti order adopted. It is probably no coincidence that Nizam saqqa's tomb is inside the shrine complex of Mo'inuddin Chishti at Ajmer.

¹⁰⁶ However, what is interesting to note is that many of the early Islamic dynasties, from the Mamluks in Egypt to the early Turkish sultanates in Northern India, were known as "slave dynasties" because former slaves had risen through the military ranks to become rulers (see Jackson 2006).

A second moral outcome that can be derived from this story is with reference to the reaction of the weavers. In other versions, the story concludes with the end of Nizam saqqa's rule. Similar to saqqa, the term julaha is an occupational signifier associated with weaving, however it is often considered as a derogatory name (cf. Ahmad 2003, Pandey 1983). The point here is that, in terms of caste position, the julahas are considered one of the lowest and in the story their urge to use the throne as a toilet indicates the high level of antagonism among the lower working classes towards the ruling and elite classes. Whether the ending of this story is an example or remnant of Sufi influences, since many orders and in particular the Chishtis had at various times shunned any close contacts with the ruling classes, could be a point of conjecture or debate. I will argue, however, that such a story demonstrates an ideal for a work "ethic", whereby one looks out for others in the community and does not succumb to the clutches of greed and power.

Aside from the moral message of this story, I want to emphasise an aspect of temporality in this story that became apparent when I was discussing it with another artisan. I asked him about the character of Nizam saqqa and if he really existed in history. I was told that whether this character existed or not was not important; in fact, Nizam saqqa could very well have been the famous Sufi saint, Nizamuddin Awliya. I thought about this possibility for some time, but then realised that the saint lived more than two centuries before Humayun came to power. I never brought up this discrepancy – or what I thought was a historical error on the part of this artisan – and it was only when I began to think in alternate temporal frameworks that I realised it was not a discrepancy at all. That time can be compressed and characters living in one

era can pop up in another era is common in both Sufi hagiography, as discussed by Green (2003, 2004), and various anecdotes and parables. The fact that such miracles can occur seems to substantiate a theory of time, and especially a form of time consciousness whereby each moment is created anew by the divine and continuity and ““lineal-sequential-causal” perception of time is not a “natural” given.

4. CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have situated performances of self in various forms of narratives expressed by artisans. I suggested that narratives take on different temporal frameworks and thus serve to constitute the *asli karigar* in different ways. In the first part of the chapter, I looked at the ways artisans refer to an idealised past particularly by invoking “the time of the Mughals”. Here, the temporal framework is defined by linear time, whereby the past is constructed in order to imbue the present with authenticity in conditions marked by uncertainty, unfamiliarity and the deepening marginalisation of urban Muslim artisans. In the second part of the chapter, I have suggested that stories and sayings passed down through generations rely on a different temporal framework defined by the “coevalness” or simultaneity of time. By this I mean that the collapse of linear time sustains the impact of the moment. Just as in the practice of *zikr*, where past and future time is transcended and the perduring moment becomes the moment of remembering and closeness to God, the stories and sayings recalled by artisans convey their moral message in the moment of their telling. Therefore the moment, as opposed to the invoked past or purported future, is loaded with moral authority and the articulation of other possible times serves to produce other forms of subjectivities. Through the iterative performances of re-remembering and the re-telling of sayings (*kahavat*) and stories, which rely on both linear and non-

linear temporal frameworks, other subjectivities are produced and sites of agency are recovered based on various articulations of how the real, authentic artisan is constituted.

Chapter 7

Contingent Lives: Engagement and Disengagement from the Margins



1. INTRODUCTION

In this final ethnographic chapter I elaborate on encounters between artisans and the state – the largest and most influential patron of handicrafts in India – as yet another site of performativity where the *asli karigar* comes into being. In the lives and experiences of artisans, the search for patronage is often fraught with contingency and uncertainty. The story of Hamida Begum, which I recounted in Chapter 6, is a fairly common example of such uncertainty. After years of producing high quality *zardozi* embroidered items for a businessman in Connaught Place, Hamida Begum had become *benisar*, or without a patron.¹⁰⁷ As a result, she was unable to sustain a livelihood as an artisan and, as her husband and brothers had also died, Hamida Begum had to find alternative sources of income. In her own words, “Without any patron, no one looks after us”. For many artisans like Hamida Begum it is a constant struggle to avoid becoming *benisar*. The struggle to find and then retain a patron has become even harder with increasing numbers of people, mostly rural migrants, entering the industry without any skills and tradition of high quality work (see

¹⁰⁷ It is interesting to look at the Urdu word *benisar*, which can be broken into two parts, *be* and *nisar*. The prefix *be* is used to negate a word. The dictionary definition of *nisar* is assistants, helpers and it is the same root word for *ansar*, which is defined as friends, helpers. Of course in Islam, the word *ansar* has special historical significance because when the Prophet Mohammed had to flee from Mecca to Medina (the *hijra*, which begins the Islamic calendar), he was provided safety and refuge in Medina by a group of people who became known as Ansari.

Chapter 4). Although in recent times the numbers of possible patrons have expanded and include local businessmen, exporters and the state, these opportunities have two major drawbacks, particularly for those who aspire to become an *asli karigar*: Most patrons are only interested in the production of “*chalu kaam*” or low quality work and most patrons do not employ or retain artisans for long periods of time. In addition, even if an artisan is not *benisar*, this does not necessarily mean that there is a direct link between patron and artisan, as was clearly illustrated by the situation of the badge-makers of Anjuman Haveli (see Chapter 5). Even though Mohammad and Razia Begum are highly skilled artisans, they are poorly paid for their work due to the numerous middlemen involved in the production process who take large cuts of the money for themselves.¹⁰⁸ Therefore having a patron does not always assure stability in the lives of artisans.

Within this background, I will argue in this chapter that the production of self as real and authentic rarely arises from stable or fixed trajectories. Instead the “*asli*” self comes into being through performances within spaces of uncertainty and contingency. Reflecting on one’s life in the face of many other *possible* life trajectories often creates the context in which to affirm one’s self as real and authentic. As uncertainty permeates the lives of artisans, particularly in their search for patronage, there is a constant sense of impermanence, which leads to constructions of self that are based on contingency and often shaped by improvisation (Shannon 2006). This improvisation means that artisans are constantly readjusting the ways in which they are oriented to that which is unfamiliar (Ahmad 2006). In the ethnography that follows, I demonstrate how artisans relate in different ways to the state as a patron. In particular,

¹⁰⁸ For a nuanced discussion on the interplay between artisans and middlemen that challenges simplistic assumptions about the exploitative nature of the latter, see Venkatesan 2006.

I will focus on an annual event, the State and National award competition for highly skilled artisans, in order to understand how artisans choose to engage or disengage with the state, and thus differently constitute themselves as an *asli karigar*, both in relation to their peers and in relation to their perceptions of the state.

2. THE STATE AND THE MARGINS

Within the heavily brocaded fabric of Old Delhi, the state seems to be both present and absent. It is at once imminent and elusive, tactile yet other-worldly, substantive yet normative. The obvious face of the state is most often seen in the uniformed police officers standing around Jama Masjid. More recently, the state has become visible in the form of the Delhi metro, which has surfaced in two of the busiest markets in the old city. Within this new face of the state, passengers must pass through metal detectors guarded by brown suited, gun wielding government employees and endure searches of their possessions before boarding the trains. But in the overall landscape of Old Delhi the state is marked by its seeming absence.

For many artisans, encounters with the state, as with most patrons today, transpire most often by crossing the boundaries of Old Delhi into New Delhi. Such experiences with the state occur in face-to-face encounters with government officials or in office block waiting rooms seated for hours on end. In such encounters, the state is a “site” to be called on, approached or visited, similar to visiting one of the many Sufi shrines dotted all over Delhi. Just as the sprawling government compound in RK Puram in South Delhi is the site of the Ministry of Textiles, the sprawling shrine complex in Mehrauli, also in South Delhi, is the site of Khwaja Bakhtiyar Kaki's *dargah* in the jungle. I mention these two sites because they both constitute significant aspects of an

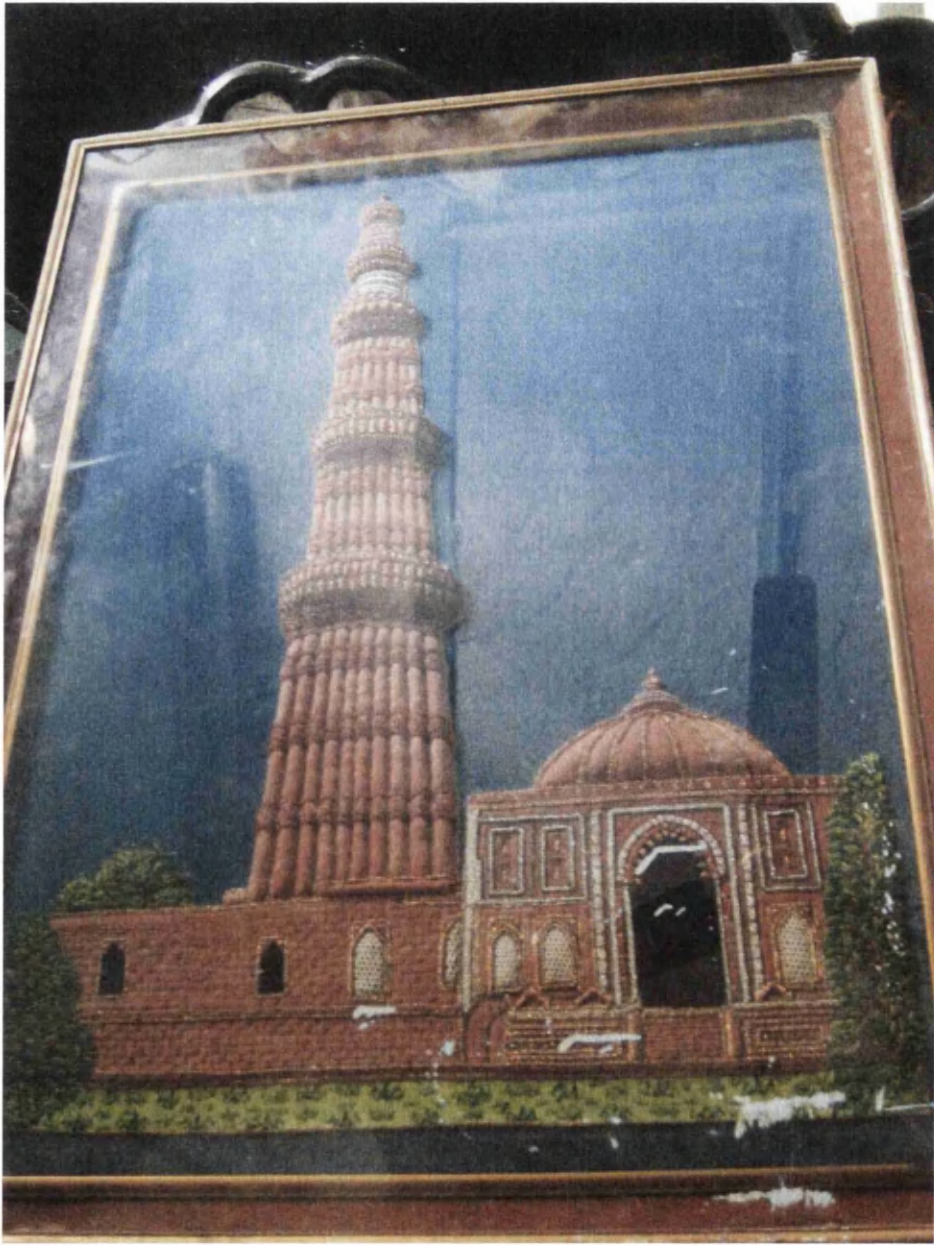
artisan's daily life and both inform when, where and how the boundary between Old Delhi and New Delhi will be traversed.¹⁰⁹

But the state has many faces and is not only relegated to the institutions that typically form its "sites" and boundaries (Navaro-Yashin 2002; cf. Gupta 1995). For many artisans, whom I came to know well, the state lived in their homes and in photo albums; it hung crookedly above their doorways and accumulated dust and obsolescence in dark corners and high shelves. The state was very much present in the lives of these artisans as official letters and expired government ID cards; laminated photographs of national and state award winners clutching their official certificates in one hand and shaking the President of the Republic's hand with the other; framed *zardozi* embroidered wall hangings of the Taj Mahal or Char Minar were hung on walls or piled high among stacks of random household items – reminders of winning or losing the award competitions (see Figure 7.1); faded yellow banners with large block letters that were placed on top of doorways, hidden behind exposed electrical wires, which authoritatively announced that an apprenticeship scheme was sponsored by the Ministry of Textiles. But, embedded in the photographs, government certificates and embroidered wall hangings of national monuments is also a narrative of the state, part of a story, like a fragment. In the materiality of these objects, the state, on the one hand, becomes something desirable, like a fantasy (Navaro-Yashin 2002), something that will give status and recognition to an artisan. But, on the other hand, these objects remind artisans that the state is also something with which to be

¹⁰⁹ The most visited Sufi shrines are located in what is now referred to as New Delhi. The three famous Chishti shrines are those of Nizamuddin Auliya, Chiragh-i-Dilli and Bakhtiyar Kaki. Many artisans from Old Delhi would attend the Thursday evening musical performances (*sama*) at the shrines, particularly those held in Bakhtiyar Kaki's shrine complex.

simultaneously wary and cunning. Nonetheless, the state comes into existence through people's conversations and stories just as it is situated in people's imaginations.

Figure 7.1: A zardozi embroidered wall hanging that won the National award for highly skilled artisans. The piece depicts the famous 13th century Qutb Minar located in Mehrauli, South Delhi



Gupta and Ferguson argue that “states are not simply functional bureaucratic apparatuses, but powerful sites of symbolic and cultural production that are themselves always culturally represented and understood in particular ways” (2002:981). As such, states can be described as “imagined” constructions. Taussig, for instance, describes the state as a gigantic fetish, an invented abstract entity that looms large over us, as opposed to a Weberian ideal-type (1996:3). But even if the state is imbued with the capacities of symbolic production and has become an “ideal” (Abrams 1988), it nevertheless comes into existence through very real and everyday encounters (Fuller and Benei 2001). Artisans in Old Delhi have also come to “see the state” (Corbridge 2005) in context-specific ways defined by their particular conditions of marginality.

2.1 Margins and Official Documents

If an artisan’s everyday encounters with the state are mediated by his or her position of inhabiting the margins, then the question arises as to how the margins are conceptualised and what constitutes their existence. Often the margins are conceptualised by boundaries that demarcate their situatedness as peripheral spaces from those of economic and social “progress”. For example, Muslim communities in India are conceptually relegated to the margins of society, because they are perceived as not embodying the ideals of progress and modernity that the metanarratives of the nation-state aspire to. The depiction of Muslims as inhabiting spaces in the margins defined by backwardness is illustrated clearly in the contrasting images below:



The image on the left depicts a “modern” Indian family, dressed in Western clothing, listening to music; the woman is positioned at the front and centre of the image, displaying an idealised “mimesis” of European modernity. In contrast, the image on the right depicts a Muslim family, dressed in much more traditional clothing. The boy in the front is holding a reel of string and a kite depicting a “traditional” toy (as opposed to his counterpart on the left), and the men are donning *topis* (caps) and beards; the Muslim woman is relegated to the background, wearing a full black veil and her eyes are wide open – giving the impression that she is scared and/or timid. These two images were featured side-by-side in a 2006 issue of the *The Hindu*, one of India’s most widely read English language newspapers.

With reference to boundaries, the margins are often demarcated in relation to the state. In the Foucauldian tradition, the state and its bureaucratic apparatus has the power to determine who inhabits the margins, an early example in India being the colonial censuses that categorised and enumerated communities in order to classify and discipline bodies of the population (cf. Inda 2005, Cohn 1987). In this conceptualisation, the state comes into being by discursively inscribing bodies with manifestations of power. Of course, one of the classic cases of the state coming into

being through its projection of power is the all-seeing panopticon (Foucault 1977), whereby bodies are censured, disciplined and thus marginalised through systematised quarantines and containment. In this case, the boundaries between the power of the state and its “subjects” are clearly demarcated. However, the use of such analytic frames that focus on the discursive practices of the state in order to understand the margins is limiting due to its “strategic or instrumental character” (Riles 2006:13). In other studies, a call has been made to look more critically at the boundaries between the margins and the state, whereby such boundaries are in fact not so clear cut and often blurred (Gupta 1995).

Although such studies assist in re-thinking the role of the state, particularly at the so-called “vernacular” levels, I suggest that a shift away from conceptual “boundaries” may be warranted in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the margins, as well as the interplay between the margins and the state. Rather than seeing the margins as only stories of exclusion, Veena Das (2004) proposes that the margins can also be conceptualised as relating to legibility and illegibility of practices, documents and words. To conceptualise the margins as a space where certain practices, documents and words can be constructed as being legible or illegible, valuable or worthless by a set of actors, is an important lens through which to view experiences of the state. In this way, the margins become “zones of unpredictability at the edges of discursive stability, where contradictory discourses overlap” (Tsing 1994:279). Seeing the margins through this lens allows the observer to understand better how the state, simultaneously an imagined, abstract idea *and* a lived, experienced reality is continuously created and recreated from the margins. Mitchell identifies this process as a “structural effect” whereby the state should be analysed “not as an actual

structure, but as the powerful, apparently metaphysical *effect of practices* that make such structures appear to exist.” (1999:89, my emphasis)

In an effort to reconceptualise the margins in meaningful ways and to highlight the margins as “zones of unpredictability”, I want to focus on a particular set of documents that relate to artisans and their practices. As Das suggests, the majority of the population encounters the state through documents such as identity cards and thereby what is of interest is how “these documents become embodied in forms of life through which ideas of subjects and citizens come to circulate among those who use these documents.” (2004:16) Just as documents are produced by people in institutions, documents also have the structural effect of producing people. Emma Tarlo describes documents as a particular type of material artefact that embody social relationships because “they have producers and consumers; they circulate between individuals and representatives of institutions; they are rich in symbolism just as they are concrete in form.” (2003:9) She suggests that we must view documents not only as background information, but also as “paper truths” whereby official documents come to have an “aura of irrefutability” (ibid). In addition, what actors may do with documents and how documents may be “good to think with” for both anthropologists and their subjects (Riles 2006:13) is necessary in order to conceptualise the margins as spaces of agency.

The two documents presented in this chapter are the artisan ID card and the certificate granted to winners of the State and National award competitions for highly skilled artisans. Both documents take on different forms of life and meaning, since these documents become legible or illegible from the perspective of artisans who engage

with them. Keeping in line with the notion that artisans act within spaces of contingency, I suggest that through the interface of these documents, alternate and multiple experiences of the state become imminent and these inform differing ideas about one's self, others, and generally of being-in-the-world. Within this framework, I draw on ethnographic material that specifically focuses on the perceptions and experiences of the state from the perspectives of two artisans.

3. ENGAGING WITH THE STATE

Nusrat was one of the most mobile artisans I met in Old Delhi. At the time of my fieldwork, she was in her mid-40s, divorced, and had a daughter who was married and lived in South Delhi and a son in his early twenties who lived with her. Nusrat was not one to stay at home and do house-work. Perhaps this was because she was a divorced woman and the same kinds of familial obligations and restrictions did not apply to her. Although she rarely divulged any details about her ex-husband, except to say that it was a bad marriage, she did tell me that he had left her to pursue a career in the Gulf, never to return. Nusrat told me that after her husband left, she immediately started working part-time for a women's non-governmental organisation, which was located in Lajpat Nagar, an area in South Delhi that was quite a distance from Old Delhi. Initially, Nusrat recalled, she would leave her home wearing a full burqa in order to reach her place of work. But that was a long time ago and today she leaves the house without even needing to cover her head. She often wears a simple *shalwar kameez* and *dupatta* when leaving the house. It seemed to me that Nusrat's circumstances did not dampen her entrepreneurial spirit. She was always on the go or planning her next move. When I accompanied her on numerous occasions around Old Delhi, her strides were so relentlessly brisk and I often found it hard to keep up. When

she stopped at the local bazaar to check out the latest clothes, she would not meander around with indecision. Rather she would directly ask the shopkeeper the price and, if she found it unreasonable, she would usually throw the item back onto the pile of clothes in an exaggerated way and walk off in a huff. Nusrat was certainly a woman with many plans.

In terms of mobility, she not only travelled out of Old Delhi to various places in other parts of the city, but she also attended fairs and exhibitions throughout India, accompanied by her son and mother, to showcase her craft. She displayed at places close to Delhi, such as Surajkund, but also travelled to far off cities such as Udaipur, Jaipur, Madras, as well as Colombo. Indeed, towards the end of my fieldwork, she had been invited by the state as a highly skilled artisan to travel to the United States to showcase the traditional crafts of India and to exhibit her own work. Most notably, Nusrat's mobility revolved around the state – in other words, it was through the state's sponsorship that she was able to leave Old Delhi. However, Nusrat's relationship with the state and the spaces it predominantly inhabits – in this case New Delhi – was often fraught with uncertainty and unfamiliarity. Let me elaborate on this point.

3.1 Unfamiliar Spaces: A Visit to the Ministry of Textiles

One afternoon, while sitting on the floor of her Darya Ganj home in Old Delhi, I mentioned my interest in talking to someone in the government about the various schemes they implement with regard to *zardozi*. She told me that she knows someone at the Ministry of Textiles who would be the right person and she would be glad to make an appointment with him. Of course I jumped at the opportunity without fully

thinking about the implications. A few days later, Nusrat had arranged to meet me at the Ministry of Textiles where she would introduce me to her contact there. The Ministry of Textiles, along with a number of other government ministries and offices is located in the South Delhi neighbourhood called RK Puram, far removed from Delhi's political heart as well as from Old Delhi. I later found out that Nusrat had to take two buses to reach RK Puram, which must have resulted in a journey of at least one, but probably closer to two hours. What I also did not realise at the time of agreeing to this arrangement was that Nusrat had especially travelled to the Ministry to meet me, and not, as I had assumed, just to take care of some business of her own.

When I met her outside the door of the office, she ignored all the pleasantries of greetings, and swiftly took me by the arm and ushered me inside the office and straight to the desk of her contact. In Urdu, she introduced me to the man sitting behind the desk as a student from London. The man addressed me and started speaking to me in English. He told me to sit down while Nusrat remained standing, as he did not offer her a place to sit. During our conversation, Nusrat stood on the side with an eager expression on her face, occasionally nodding her head, but not understanding the conversation that was taking place in front of her. Although I was extremely uncomfortable with the situation I was participating in, I managed to inquire about the details of various schemes. Nusrat would frequently interject in Urdu, instructing me to tell this man about all the good work she was doing in the community, especially through her *zardozi* training programmes for girls, which allowed them to earn a little income. I obliged her by telling the bureaucrat that I had indeed visited Nusrat's training centre and that it looked like she was doing great work. She then instructed me to tell him how clean and well-kept the training centre

was. By this time I realised that I had been taken to the Ministry by Nusrat so that, in my American English, I could provide references to contact about all the good work she was doing. Indeed, I later found out that she had also submitted an application to that officer to extend the funding for her training centre.

When the interview was over, Nusrat and I, along with her son Mohsin, who had been sitting this whole time in the waiting room, walked out of the building together. It was a hot spring afternoon and the sun was relentlessly beating down on the dusty road and groups of men outside the office buildings were sitting under trees to escape the heat. As we were walking on the fairly quiet lanes of the government compound, Nusrat commented on how well the meeting had gone and hoped that her funding application would be successful. Upon leaving the compound through a set of gates, we reached one of main roads that linked RK Puram to the rest of the city. The road was typical of New Delhi: A wide dual carriage-way, buzzing with traffic consisting of cars, motorcycles, large public buses, green and yellow auto-rickshaws and cyclists. The thought of crossing this busy road was daunting. As I walked with Nusrat and Mohsin, we all had a sense of disorientation, which was apparent in the way our eyes darted from right to left, uncertain as to which direction we should take our next step.

In the midst of the heat and our growing uncertainty of where to go, I asked them how they would get back to Old Delhi and they said they would take the bus. They asked me the same question to which I replied that I would hail an auto-rickshaw. Whenever I told them I travelled around Delhi in an auto-rickshaw, they always inquired as to why I never took the bus? They would invariably say that the bus is much cheaper and

that there is a direct route from where I lived in Malviya Nagar to Ajmeri Gate in Old Delhi. I would usually reply by saying that I was not comfortable with the bus routes and since I would often travel at night I did not feel safe. On this afternoon, I asked from where they would catch their bus. To this question, Mohsin gave a most intriguing reply: He said they have no clue about South Delhi and the only reason they come down to this part of the city is if they have some business at the Ministry or if they are going to Dilli Haat. Then he turned to me and said, "This is *your* part of town, so you should tell *us* where to go." Not fully realising the significance of his statement at the time, I replied by saying that I am also new to this city, and am equally unsure where one might catch the bus. So we walked a little further down the busy street until we came to a bus stop, which also happened to be an auto-rickshaw stop.

Although Mohsin hailed an auto rickshaw for me and even initiated the standard dialogue about destination and cost, I was surprised to see how unsure and lacking in confidence he was when speaking to the driver. On numerous occasions, when I visited Nusrat in Old Delhi, Mohsin would find me an auto or a cycle rickshaw that would take me back to the metro station. With confidence bordering on hubris, Mohsin would speak to the driver and haggle with harsh words over a matter of a couple of rupees. If the driver asked for two rupees over the perceived cost of the journey, then Mohsin would make a grand gesture with his arm indicating to the driver that he can be on his way - without passenger or fare. On that day in South Delhi, outside the Ministry of Textiles, Mohsin uncharacteristically did not haggle with the auto driver about the fare and kept looking at me for reassurance during his

dealings with the driver. It seemed to me that for Nusrat and Mohsin, being in South Delhi was probably just as foreign as being in Bombay or Calcutta.

For Nusrat and Mohsin, travelling to New Delhi was not just a simple act of stepping out and beyond the boundaries of Old Delhi; it yielded a sense of uncertainty and lack of confidence, yet at the same time this very uncertainty was a reiteration of their identity. This became clear to me when Mohsin stated frankly that South Delhi (i.e. New Delhi) was beyond their comprehension – it is not their place. Old Delhi, on the other hand, was the place they knew well and felt they belonged. It was a place they felt “comfortable and at home in the streets and the alleys they...[knew] so well.”

(Simpson 2006:207) But because for many artisans New Delhi is almost synonymous with the state, which is like any other “site” that people travel long distances to visit, becoming successful at negotiating with it imbues a sense of value and worth. Setting oneself apart from New Delhi – as Mohsin so aptly did when he said that this is not *his* place – but also proving to be adept in the face of uncertainty served to reinforce perceptions of self. Despite her unfamiliarity and discomfort with the spaces of New Delhi, by engaging and “getting in” with the state Nusrat became an *asli karigar*. All those contacts she had made, all those numerous documents that she carried in her bag, and above all, the recognition she had received from an important bureaucrat, had validated her sense of self. It is to the latter that I now turn.

3.2 Winning the State Award

The first time I met Nusrat in her joint family home in Darya Ganj, she was eager to show me her artisan ID card and a folder with various documents on government letterheads. She told me very proudly that she had won a state award winner in 2001.

She showed me photographs of when she received her official certificate and then went on to show subsequent photographs of all the fairs, *melas* and exhibitions she had travelled to in order to showcase her work.¹¹⁰

Over time, I developed a close relationship with Nusrat. I met her many times while she was exhibiting at Dilli Haat, a government initiative where artisans can sell directly to buyers. She told me that because she was a State award winner, she received special invitations from Dilli Haat, allowing her to secure a stall inside the venue without going through the labourious application procedure. Still, she did complain that Dilli Haat had been taken over by businessmen, particularly Kashmiris, pretending to be artisans.¹¹¹ She seemed to imply that because these businessmen could pay for their *pucca* (permanent) stalls, which were located in the nicer, shadier parts of Dilli Haat, the reason that real artisans now had to pay a fee of Rs400 per day for their stalls. She remembered a time not long ago when artisans did not have to pay and could simply make profits without having to think about recovering their costs.

Nusrat would display at Dilli Haat for two weeks. Her stall would usually consist of a rectangular table at the front, while on the sides and at the back the stall would be enclosed with “walls” made of thick plastic. On these three walls, Nusrat usually hung

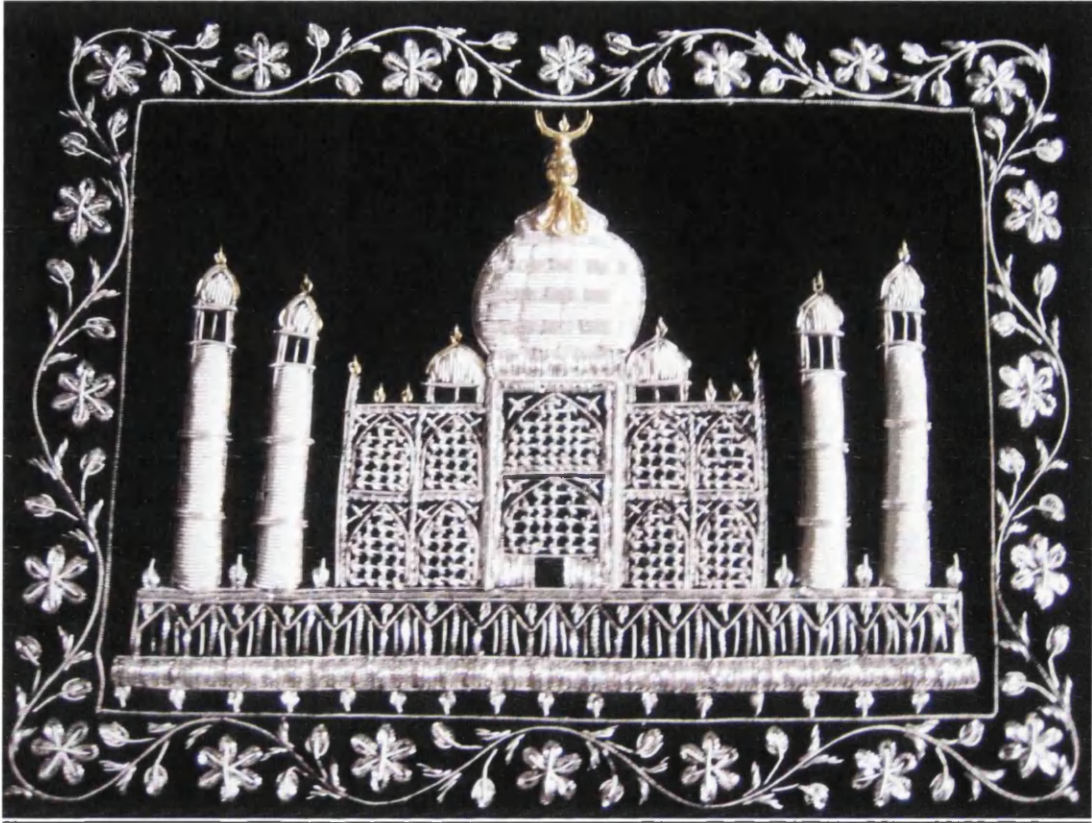
¹¹⁰ With reference to the incentives for winning the award for skilled craftsmanship, Venkatesan writes, “In keeping with their imputed role as social leaders and their superior skill, national award winners are deemed suitable to teach others in the craft through special ‘apprenticeship training schemes’ funded and overseen by the Office of the Development Commissioner, Handicrafts. As the trainer has a say...in who joins the scheme as a trainee, a certain amount of power is vested in him/her. Additionally National Awardees are given preference for participation in National Craft Melas (Fairs) and at international events, they therefore become visible in the wider world that is interested in crafts and are given the opportunity to take up trading. At awards ceremonies, bazaars and craft melas, they are interviewed by members of the local and national press. They become the public face of the craft industry in question. It is thus advantageous in more ways than one to receive a national award.” (2002: 11)

¹¹¹ For a similar discussion on this perceived “sabotage” of Dilli Haat, see Chapter 4 where I introduce Zainab and Ahmad.

items of clothing that were embroidered with *zari*, such as women's tops, *shalwar-kameez*, and perhaps the odd sari. However, it was the table that was the main attraction. On it would be black velvet hand bags embroidered with floral or peacock motifs, wall hangings and cushion covers with an embroidered image of the Taj Mahal or birds perched on branches, colourful accessories such as sequinned mobile phone covers and key chains, light shawls with some embroidery but mostly stitched with sequins and mirror-work, and *zari*-embroidered Christmas decorations shaped as peacocks, hearts, stars, and disco balls.

Despite her grievances against the recent rules and regulations, Nusrat continued to exhibit at Dilli Haat, because through this channel she had met a direct buyer from Germany with whom she had developed a sustained relationship for three years. She knew that more than selling an odd piece to the casual consumer, Dilli Haat was a place where buyers, suppliers and exporters came to make contacts with artisans. The year I was in Delhi, Nusrat had also met a buyer from Italy and had started producing wall hangings and Christmas decorations for him (see Figure 7.2).

Figure 7.2: A wall hanging made for Nusrat's contact in Italy



Overall, Nusrat's perception of the state was positive, although she did make numerous remarks relating to the difficulties of gaining access to certain state sponsored initiatives, particularly those geared toward export promotion. She was aware that her credential as a State award winner did grant her access to certain other government schemes, as well as the ability to travel beyond Old Delhi. When I was preparing to leave Delhi to return to London, Nusrat was constantly calling to update me about her pending trip to the United States on a government sponsored scheme to showcase the crafts of India. By late September 2007, she had submitted all the necessary paperwork to the Ministry of Home Affairs through a government contact of hers, but she said that it was typical that the paperwork would get stuck there

because nowadays the government was extra strict with regard to Muslims.

Nevertheless, Nusrat was hopeful and told me that she was going to pack a large suitcase full of *zardozi* embroidered things to sell in America, even though she knew that the purpose of the scheme was to showcase traditional crafts, not to sell them.

4. THE “TWO FACED” STATE: DISENGAGEMENTS WITH THE STATE

Many other artisans I met had very few encounters with the state, but in conversations I often got the sense that if only one could “get in” with the state, then that would increase their hopes and chances for a better livelihood. On one of my many visits to a large *zardozi* workshop off one of the main bazaar roads in Old Delhi, I was sitting with a group of older male artisans, one of whom was the *ustad*, or teacher. I asked Nasir, the teacher, if he had ever displayed his work at Dilli Haat. To my surprise, he had never even heard of Dilli Haat. How could this be? Unlike many of the other artisans in the workshop who came from Bihar or West Bengal, Nasir was born and grew up in Delhi. Until now, every artisan I had come across in Old Delhi had at least heard of Dilli Haat and many had rented stalls and displayed their work at the venue. So I back-tracked a little bit and asked Nasir if he had an artisan ID card issued by the government. Again to my surprise his answer was no. Nasir must have suspected my confusion and said very frankly that “the government is not very helpful to the artisans. Sometimes we hear about this or that scheme on the radio, but I have no idea where to go or how to apply. The government should have better policies. They should give us direct grants or assistance because we are at the bottom and don’t get any help from anyone.” Although I was taken aback by Nasir’s lack of exposure to any government scheme, such as Dilli Haat or the artisan ID card, it was not the first time I had heard such grievances against the state. For many artisans there was a high

level of uncertainty when it came to matters of the state. It was not only unclear to them what the state sponsored programs entailed, but they also had no idea as to how they might access the state. And yet, there was no doubt in their minds whatsoever that it was the state's role to do *something* proactively for the arts and the artisans. As Navaro-Yashin states succinctly, "the very people who critique the state also reproduce it through their 'fantasies' for the state." (2002:4)

To illustrate the importance artisans placed on at least the idea of the state, let me return to my friend Mansoor. At the time of fieldwork, Mansoor was in his early-40s and married with three children. His oldest son was seventeen years old and attended an eight month program at the *madrassa* to become a *hafiz*; the middle son was enrolled in a local private school, but much to the chagrin of Mansoor, he was more interested in having fun than being studious; and Mansoor's youngest daughter, who was eight years old, was also in school and a very eager student.

As mentioned before, Mansoor did most of his embroidery and tailoring in a tiny workshop, which was set back from the busy lanes in the inner reaches of Old Delhi. Although his workshop was just about a minute's walk from his home, he regardless spent many hours working in his shop, sometimes till the early hours of the morning. I spent many hours sitting with Mansoor in his work space, where he indulged me with stories of his family's long association with *zardozi* and how the skill had been passed down for generations. He often reminded me that *zardozi* was always patronised by the upper-echelons of the society and that members of his family, going back many generations, had made *zardozi* items for the royal court when the Mughals ruled from Shahjahanabad (Old Delhi). Mansoor was extremely hard-working, patient, and soft-

spoken – characteristics that are relevant to notions of ideal work practices, which I discussed at length in Chapter 5. When he would sit at the *karchob*, or wooden frame, engrossed in his embroidery work or impressing an elaborate design on cloth, his hand would never quiver.

Mansoor was proud of his craft and its history. And as a highly skilled artisan, he understood how much the craft had declined in quality in recent times. He had a voluminous collection of terms that he deployed to describe the low quality of things being made in the name of *zardozi*.¹¹² In addition to being aware of the increase in *chalu*, or sub-standard, run-of-the-mill work, he was also very cognisant of the fact that the various government schemes aimed at helping skilled artisans were in fact not really targeting people with high skills, but instead attracting those who did *chalu* work. Whenever I mentioned some of the other artisans I met, he was very critical of them, saying that they all produce *chalu* work. When he asked which artisans I had visited, I told him that I have seen Nusrat display her embroidery work at Dilli Haat. Mansoor nodded and said that he knew Nusrat quite well, but she deals with *chalu kaam* and is basically a supplier (*tekidar*). Mansoor emphatically said that she is not an *asli karigar*. I decided to be a little provocative and told him that she was actually a state awardee. He laughed and said “it’s all about money”.

The full story of why Mansoor expressed this opinion emerged during one of our discussions, which was prompted by my inquiring whether he had a government issued identification card. Mansoor did in fact have such a card. Because of his family’s long standing reputation, there was no problem for him in obtaining the card.

¹¹²For a discussion on the uses of various terminologies, see Chapter 4.

The advantage of possessing the artisan ID card, in addition to providing access to government sponsored exhibitions, lay primarily in allowing him to compete in the prestigious State and National award competitions hosted by the Development Commissioner of Handicrafts and the Ministry of Textiles. The winner of either the State or National Award received a substantial cash prize (sometimes up to Rs. 50,000) and an official certificate acknowledging the artisan as a State or National awardee. Mansoor, however, refused to compete in any of these competitions. He claimed that the entire process was rife with corruption and bribery. What ends up happening, he told me, is that someone competing for one of the awards – who may or may not be a skilled artisan – gets the *zardozi* done by some skilled artisan and then strikes a deal with one of the judges. If the artisan wins, then the cash prize will go to the judge and the so-called artisan will keep the government issued certificate. Mansoor contended that the reason this deal is a win-win scenario for the people submitting *zardozi* pieces for an award is that by having a certificate acknowledging one as a State or National awardee gives unlimited access to all the government sponsored exhibitions around the country. These are lucrative places to sell directly to consumers – who are often urban middle and upper-middle class Indians and foreign tourists and/or buyers – and in the long-run the money one can make from attending these fairs is far more than the cash prize given up as a bribe for obtaining the award.

During the eighteen months I spent in Old Delhi, observing, following and documenting Mansoor's professional life, I came to know that he did regret not playing the game of bribery for that one certificate. Mansoor told me that nowadays he only gets one-off orders, and sometimes these do not come to fruition and he is left with piles of samples that are never sold. By chance, Mansoor did manage to establish

one regular contact with a woman from the United States for whom he makes high-end handbags that go on to sell for thousands of dollars at Saks Fifth Avenue and Barney's. But she placed orders only three or four times a year and he could not rely solely on her for a livelihood. It is important to note that Mansoor's contact with the American woman did not occur through state-led channels, but instead materialised by cutting out a profiteering middleman, much to the chagrin of the latter.

Mansoor believes that if he had submitted a piece for the award scheme, he would be in a much better position financially and would not be living from order to order. I gathered that because his government ID card had expired, he was no longer eligible to submit pieces for the award schemes (although this is only my guess, I am not really sure why he has not submitted a piece for the award). How this has affected Mansoor as a skilled artisan, one can only guess. He told me repeatedly that he does not want his children to learn the craft.

From Mansoor's story, we get some idea of an honest and conscientious artisan's perceptions of the state. There is angry revulsion at the rampant corruption defining the space where everyday encounters between artisans and the state take place, which in turn lead many to drop out and gradually slide into oblivion. But there is also a rueful acknowledgement that life *could* have been much easier if one had manoeuvred the state apparatus with enough cunning. In turn, this becomes a situation akin to riding a tiger: "simultaneously desirable, deceptive, and dangerous" (Nelson 2004:122).

5. CONTINGENT LIVES: SOME THOUGHTS ON CONTINGENCY, EXPERIENCE AND IMAGINATION

Why do some lives turn out radically different from others even when the circumstantial conditions are similar? What can the possibility of alternative lives tell us about people and their social conditions? How does the knowledge of multiple alternatives shape perceptions of others and one's self? The core concept that all these questions touch upon is that of contingency, and it is this concept that can provide an analytical tool from which to understand experience.

The concept of contingency resides within the realm of the indeterminate and it assumes multiple possibilities, where the outcome cannot be pre-determined. Perhaps some outcomes are more likely than others – and here we must necessarily take into account those structural conditions, such as class, gender, caste, etc – however, even when certainty assumes the stronger hand, the possibility of alternative outcomes looms over any construction of certainty (cf. Latour 1993). Michel Serres's notion of *la randonée* is a contingent thing that “adapts itself to the landscape and is radically opposed to Descartes's straight line, the necessary path.” (Saint-Armand and Hawkes 1997:102). Thus, contingency repudiates the assumptions of our Enlightenment heritage, which privileges certainty (read scientific rationality) over indeterminacy (read superstition) and which holds to high esteem teleological implications for progress and modernity.

The notion that our lives are contingent is something not often reflected upon. Perhaps we are only confronted with contingency when we see the alternative possibilities that

could have been manifest *if* we had made a different choice. Our experiences of self, then, are often shaped in conditions of alterity. As Irving writes,

“...there is no such thing as a pure life experience, only experiences that are imagined in relation to the other possible lives one could have lived. The radical discrepancy between the alternative imagined life and the one someone currently lives offers a dialogic framework for interpreting the experiences and material conditions of the present. As such, imaginative life-narratives and day-dreams of other lives are not abstract or wishful fantasies but are constitutive of people’s material lives and embodied experiences of being-in-the-world.” (Forthcoming:28)

This dialogic framework, as Irving writes, puts one lived conception of selfhood in relation to all those conceptions that *could have been*, or in other words, in relation to the imaginative. Thus, contingency depends on the imaginative capacity and as such it is a central and contested feature of social life (Malaby 2003) because it shapes perceptions of selves, of others and generally of being-in-the-world.

In this chapter I addressed how different artisans experience the various avenues of patronage from positions of marginality. I suggest here that the concept of contingency can be employed as an analytical tool to understand how such experiences impact perceptions of self and others. By looking at the experiences of these artisans, and in particular the case of Nusrat who submitted a piece for the competition and won the award and Mansoor who decided not to submit, I explain how vastly divergent life-work trajectories have emerged and how such contingencies have led each to reflect on their own being-in-the-world with relation to others and *possible* others. In order to understand what constitutes an *asli karigar* I contend that it is imperative to appreciate the ways in which artisans “become oriented to given situations” (Ahmed 2006:6), which in and of themselves are contingent, through improvised performances of self.

After Nusrat received the certificate acknowledging her as a State award winner, she was easily able to exhibit in venues all over India and potentially abroad. She also had great faith in the state as a patron and in its capacity to provide her and her family with a better life. I went to see Nusrat on the same day that I visited the large workshop where Nasir, the *zardozi* teacher, explained that he had never heard of Dilli Haat and expressed his utter dismay at state policies and schemes. I asked Nusrat if she felt any ill will towards the state, since so many other artisans in Old Delhi were not reaping the benefits. Her explanation was straight forward: “All these *karigar* (artisans) are lazy and uneducated. They take so many breaks during the day, don’t work hard, and then expect *sarkar* (the state) to help them.” Nusrat felt no ill-will towards the state because of all the positive outcomes that had come her way as a result of winning the State award and being acknowledged by the state through her award certificate. As opposed to these “lazy” and “uneducated” artisans, she saw herself as being entitled to the benefits, because she was hardworking and worthy of such state patronage. For Nusrat, the tangible, legible and meaningful government issued award certificate especially legitimised the role of the state as patron to artisans. Thus, Nusrat’s experience of the state, as manifest in the award competition and resulting certificate, has shaped quite rigid perceptions of self and others (in the form of the “lazy, uneducated artisan”), as well as how she goes about being-in-the-world.

Mansoor’s relationship with and perception of the state is different from Nusrat’s. He is clear and explicit about its “double-faced” condition, because the state, and in particular these award competitions for highly skilled artisans, are rife with corruption and bribe-taking. Artisans pay off judges in return for their vote in the hopes of

receiving the highly valued certificate, and often the pieces submitted are not even made by the competitor. According to Mansoor, most of the people who win these awards do *chalu* work anyway, while the *asli karigar* (real artisan), such as himself (and Nasir), remain unacknowledged. For Mansoor the award certificate becomes devoid of meaning, because it acknowledges individual cunning and manipulation rather than craft skill, and the “state-idea” becomes a sham. But nonetheless, Mansoor has come to regret not playing the bribe game, because he realises this certificate can provide easy access to lucrative buyers and a steadier livelihood. Mansoor’s orientation to the contingencies involving the state, particularly his understanding of the alternate life he could have led if he had submitted for the competition, sheds light on important issues of authenticity and the value and meaning of skilled work – all crucial attributes to becoming an *asli karigar*.

As the largest patron of artisans and crafts, I have focused my concluding remarks on the role of the state in the lives of urban artisans. I suggested that the experiences of the state from the margins are at once an abstract “ideal”, a grandiose fetish, as well as something quite tangible that people encounter on a daily basis. The state as an amorphous entity that *should* provide help and support and *should* come up with better policies is juxtaposed onto the state that is embodied in buildings that become “sites” to be visited and in documents that inhere properties of legibility and illegibility. It is precisely these documents and the practices associated with them that are crucial in defining and conceptualising the margins and how the margins are situated with relation to the state (Das 2004, Mitchell 1999). From this perspective, because the margins are conceptualised as spaces where practices, documents and words are produced, then these spaces can also be defined as “zones of

unpredictability” (Ong 1994). In the case of artisans residing in Old Delhi, there are high levels of uncertainty and doubt about the state and many opinions about what the state *should* do and whether to engage or disengage with the state. Contingency seems to be particularly amplified in conditions of marginality, and as such, looking at the ways artisans perceive and experience the state gives access to how notions of self are constructed, particularly in relation to constructions of others and in relation to *other* alternatives and possibilities. More specifically, contingent experiences of the state illustrate how multiple perceptions emerge regarding what is real, authentic craft and what is not; who is a skilled artisan and who is merely a labourer; and what is considered worthwhile, legitimate and valuable and what is not.

Chapter 8

Conclusions



1. ENGAGING WITH CULTURES OF CREATION

“To study art, we need not sneak about like spies or thieves or detectives, wheedling for information or bullying our companions into uncomfortable confessions. We stand with them, letting their work set the agenda for inquiry. We look together at what they have done, using it to discover what they think and intend. Learning to be fascinated by what fascinates them, overcoming our separation in a oneness of interest, we find in art a courteous entry to the life of the creator and the culture of creation.”

- Henry Glassie, *Art and Life in Bangladesh*, p.1

When I returned from the field, one of my first exercises in acclimatising to the “writing-up” phase was to make a list of all the themes I could excavate from my notebooks and voice recordings. Based on this list, I could have chosen to write a very different thesis to the one presented in the preceding chapters. For example, I could have written about the shifts in relations of production between artisans, middlemen and buyers from the perspective of an increasingly global, neo-liberal context. Or I could have chosen to focus more on the urban spaces of Old Delhi, once central to the political, economic, commercial and aesthetic life of the country, but now relegated to the margins of Indian society and often viewed as an anachronistic curiosity. But none of these potential themes seemed quite adequate to capture my experience of

observing and participating in the lives of artisans. None of these themes could express all of those occasions, during my 18 month stay in Delhi, when I was courteously invited to share the life of artisans and engage in *their* culture of creation through conversations that were deemed important in their lifeworld. I did not want to impose foreign concepts in order to present neatly the complexity of a long-standing, historically urban and currently informal industry. Therefore, I threw away my organised list of themes and went back to my field-notes, interviews and voice recordings. I listened to the voices and words of artisans, to what was implicitly and explicitly conveyed through the recounting of stories and sayings, of family histories and latent memories, of descriptions of craft and feelings of loss.

2. PERFORMANCE AND AGENCY FROM THE MARGINS

In the end, I wanted to write a thesis that explored, as Glassie writes above, what artisans thought and intended and to allow their voices to set the agenda for my own inquiry. Language, thus, became my point of entry in the attempt to organise a coherent way of presenting urban Muslim artisans. Within language and words, the concept of authenticity, or that which is reckoned to be true, real and original, formed a significant part of artisans' daily life. Ian Hacking argues that "a concept is nothing other than a word in its sites" (quoted in Mahmood 2005:180) and attending to the sites of concept formation is where an anthropological lens is most effective. What was considered real and what was considered fake? Who was authentic and who was not? How and where did one become authentic? These were the types of questions that I started asking after reflecting on my interactions with artisans in Old Delhi, because the words that artisans used pointed to these very distinctions and sites of concept formation. Words such as *asli* (real), *naqli* (fake), *bekar* (useless), *saaf*

(clean), *sachcha* (true), *chalu* (sub-standard) formed part of the everyday vocabulary and thus the context in which artisans lived and worked.

The use of these words and their frequent reiteration, I realised, also indicated an aspiration to become a certain kind of person that was captured by an often used term: the *asli karigar*, or the real, authentic artisan. The ways in which the *asli karigar* is constituted became the central question and also framed many of the themes I had initially listed (but then subsequently thrown away), such as patron-client relations in an era of globalisation and perceptions of and negotiations with space. To become an *asli karigar* was a constant performance where one negotiated the terrain of modern life and also relied on resources from the past, as well as ideals and practices from religious belief, in order to produce one's self as real and authentic. Thus, unlike the idealised and romantic notion of the artisan as a bounded self who produces material culture and is accorded little agency (cf. Venkatesan 2009a), the *asli karigar* as a person is always in the process of becoming, where authenticity is continuously being performed. The process of becoming, then, displaces boundedness and fixity with possibility and difference (Deleuze 1994). Throughout the chapters of this thesis, my primary objective has been to emphasise the instability, partiality and contingency of identities that are assumed to be stable, fixed and reified (cf. Bulter 1990, Kondo 1990, Strathern 1988).

One of the central and crucial conditions of urban Muslim artisans is their marginalisation from both the discourses of the modern nation-state and from India's new economy (see Hansen 2007). Urban-based Muslims in particular are bearing the brunt of increasing rates of poverty and diminishing educational opportunities (see

Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffery 2008; see also Sachar 2006). But this marginalisation cannot solely be blamed on the post-colonial global economic restructuring that India has partaken, especially over the last two decades. There is a long systemic history that has castigated Indian Muslims, in general, as the suspicious, irrational, fanatic, and despotic “Other” in both colonial/Orientalist representations and Indian nationalist historiography. Today, as in the past, Muslims in India are often defined as being bound to “religion” and tradition, as being “communal” and living in backward ghettos. They continue to form the “Other” of rising middle-class consumer-citizens (see Fernandes 2004) and they are portrayed as the antithesis of the liberal and secular Indian nation-state. With the rise of Hindu nationalism and violent events such as the destruction of the Babri Mosque in 1992 and the Gujarat riots in 2002, it is evident that Indian Muslims continue to remain excluded from the Hinduising ideal of the nation-state (Hansen 1999, Van der Veer 1994), which is being forged and supported both domestically and in the Indian Diaspora (Bhatt and Mukta 2000). Indian Muslims are, thus, largely excluded from the normative discourses of the nation-state and are depicted as being outside the fold of modernity and progress. In general they have been described as “forgotten citizens” within India’s modernising ambitions (Chakrabarty 2000). As Rofel reminds us, “modernity is a story that people tell themselves about themselves in relation to Others. It is a powerful story because nation-states organize the body politic around it.” (1992:96)

But the story of modernity is also accompanied by another powerful story of tradition and heritage, one which also creates normative discourses that hinge on nationalist sentiments. Indeed the Indian nation-state was created out of this duality to be modern and also to retain “Indian tradition” (Chatterjee 1993). It is within the ideal of the

latter that the powerful norm of “traditional Indian craft” has been produced (Venkatesan 2009a). In the section called “Interrogating the Rhetoric” in Chapter 3, I discussed the emergence and synonymy of craft and the nation-state and concluded that urban Muslim artisans have been left out from this powerful discourse and norm. Although some Muslims artisans have been able to gain a certain amount of access into this discursive domain – one example being the Muslim mat weavers described by Venkatesan (2009b), who were officially classified as a “traditional craft community” by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay in 1953 – most Muslim artisans remain outside the narratives of the nation-state (and the closely associated “craft world”) in which the rural and predominantly Hindu artisan has been accorded a long genealogy of being representative and symbolic of the real and authentic India. Confronting such acute marginalisation, the question that arises is how can agency be recovered and accorded to those who are denied even the possibility of becoming subjects within the prevalent norms already established and constantly reproduced?

In recent literature, agency has often been located in those spaces whereby the marginalised resist and subvert already existing norms (see Butler 1990). This is, however, a limited view of agency, albeit one that has been promoted by a group of prominent scholars who have sought to give voice to the subaltern. In the writings of the Subaltern Studies Group, the marginalised (the subaltern) as a group are made visible only through acts of resistance, or by demonstrating an essentialised subaltern consciousness that is “oppositional”. In contrast to such arguments, I have grounded my own theoretical position from the perspective that agency can also be located in the ways in which norms are aspired to and inhabited, and not only through their subversion and resistance (Mahmood 2001, 2005).

Within this alternative framework, the core ethnographic chapters of this thesis have explored the ways in which agency can be recovered from the various sites where Muslim artisans produce their own meanings of normativity. Specifically, I suggested that it is within discourses and actions characterised as aspirational that agency can be located. A failure to acknowledge such aspirations is to deny the voices of those who are already silenced and excluded from becoming subjects within the constructs of the nation. In the next section, I will summarise the main findings of this thesis, which are elaborated as the “sites” of subject formation, where urban Muslim artisans constitute themselves as real and authentic craft producers.

3. ASPIRING TO THE NORMATIVE: SITES OF PERFORMANCE

In Chapter 4, I introduced the first site of performance, which is situated within the discursive realm of producing one’s self in relation to others. I suggested that the role of language is crucial in distinguishing the *asli karigar* from those who are considered inauthentic artisans, namely migrants and women. As a type of performance, authenticity is an anti-discourse (Shannon 2006) that is formulated through assertions about the non-authenticity of other practices and ways of being. In the end, what such performances of authenticity point to are the tenuousness and instability of self in the first place. I must restate Charles Lindholm’s argument that “it is more likely that the quest for a felt authentic grounding becomes increasingly pressing as certainty is eroded.” (2002:337) Urban Muslim artisans, who are faced with a barrage of “de-authenticating” forces, must constantly reiterate their position within the industry as not only producers of fine and exquisite handicrafts but also as authentic *persons*.

In Chapter 5, I located a second site of performance where the *asli karigar* becomes constituted. This is the realm of work practices. I situated the articulation of ideal work practices, both verbal and embodied, within the domain of so-called “Sufi Piety”. The long historical connection between urban artisans and Sufism was discussed in Chapter 2, where I argued that it was the Sufis, and in particular the Chishtis who often settled in urban areas, that brought the practice of piety to the lower classes and urban poor. A particular kind of work ethic was developed among these groups, whereby devotion to one’s work was akin to being a pious person. I contrasted “Sufi Piety” with “Orthodox Piety” in order to foreground some fundamental differences in the ways in which Islam is lived and practiced. I argued that “Orthodox Piety” is the generally accepted way that Islam should not only be lived, but also how Islam has been studied within the paradigm of “World Religions”, which has been influenced by the relatively recent rise of Islamic “reformism” (cf. Green and Searle-Chatterjee 2008, Osella and Osella 2008). With reference to urban artisans, “Sufi Piety” does not focus on textual learning and knowledge in order to become a good and conscientious Muslim. Instead, it focuses on the presentation of one’s self as an *asli karigar* who produces intricate and beautiful works that bear the quality of “refined-ness” and are also produced in “clean” spaces, all of which will ultimately please God. I suggested that the way in which “Sufi Piety” was translated to the lower classes and urban poor could be understood through the Islamic practice of *zikr*, with its emphasis on embodied learning via the remembrance of God. This focus on *zikr* as a pedagogical style through which one acquires knowledge is accompanied by a particular notion of time. The ultimate objective of *zikr* is to occupy the so-called “perduring moment” where both past and future time collapse – or as one Sufi aphorism states “a thousand past years in a thousand coming years, that is the moment.” (Böwering 1992:82)

Alternative notions of time or time consciousness, thus, become one of the ways in which other kinds of personhood, or subjectivity, are cultivated. I carry on with the theme of time in the next ethnographic chapter.

The ways in which artisans recall the past and articulate various stories and sayings in order to constitute themselves as an *asli karigar* was elaborated in Chapter 6. I suggested that if we are to understand the complexity and multiplicity of experiences, then we must take into account alternate and multiple perceptions of time or various “temporal frameworks” that people can inhabit (Deeb 2009). It is insufficient to assume that every human being inhabits a temporal framework defined by linearity, a framework which has become the backbone of modernity and ideas of progress and thus has become the predominant and normative way in which to think. Doing so limits the possibility of other subjectivities emerging from other conceptions of time (Boellstorff 2007; cf. Munn 1992). The artisans who shared their life histories and stories with me constituted themselves in at least two very different temporal frameworks. When recounting “the time of the Mughals” and their links to an idealised notion of the past, where skilled craftsmanship was valued and held in high esteem, artisans were responding to their de-valued predicament in the present and to their uncertain future. Nile Green writes that stories of a glorious Muslim past “are all the more significant when seen against the background of the generally low social position of Muslims...that forms the living context of their telling.” (2004:425) In such conditions, artisans situate themselves in linear time, where the *asli karigar* is someone who has a long and distinguished lineage of craft production that stretches back to “the time of the Mughals”. It is common for artisans to trace their family history to an ancestor that produced for the great courts of Mughal rulers or to assert

that an intricate and well executed design is from “the time of the Mughals”. The second temporal framework that artisans inhabit is articulated through stories and sayings that evoke a moral message. In these types of stories, time does not exist in a linear fashion, but instead is characterised by being “coeval” and by residing in the imaginative capacities of both narrator and listener. Time-frames can overlap and the past and future can collapse into the “perduring moment” – the moment of narration when the moral message obtains its force and the narrator becomes imbued with authenticity. These types of “re-memberings” that are set apart from linear time are pedagogical styles that cultivate certain ethical dispositions and also give artisans a particular work ethic. This chapter envisages the relevance of other forms of time consciousness and other temporal frameworks that people can inhabit, in order to indicate fuller possibilities of human agency.

In the final ethnographic chapter, I looked at the ways artisans become real and authentic through their interactions with the state. As the largest and most influential patron of crafts, artisans often seek ways to engage with the state; but the relationship is not straightforward and the search for patronage is marked by uncertainty. Even once a patron has been secured there is a high level of impermanence in such relationships and artisans are constantly re-orienting themselves to the unfamiliar and unstable, whether this is negotiating the spaces of New Delhi or dealing with the laborious procedures of a large bureaucracy. Here I return to the theoretical positions articulated in Chapter 1, where I argued that the self cannot be conceptualised as a bounded and fixed entity, but instead as an entity in flux, trying to manoeuvre instability by continuous and iterative performances that set out to establish the norm. Contingency becomes critical to understanding the lifeworld of artisans and I argue

that because of their marginalised positions, urban Muslim artisans face “the ‘raw’ contingency of the social world” (Hansen 1999:63) on an everyday basis. I demonstrate this “raw contingency” by illustrating the divergent work trajectories of two skilled artisans whose livelihoods depend on the continuous search for patronage. One artisan who engages with the state and its various schemes has come to see herself as an *asli karigar* because of the recognition, particularly through the medium of official documents, and sponsorship she has obtained from the state. The second artisan chose not to engage with the state because of the perceived moral bankruptcy of obtaining such patronage: he was not willing to engage in the bribery and corruption associated with the state. His perception was that the state does not reward real artisans, but instead only those who are cunning enough to manoeuvre within state channels. Thus, his very disengagement with the state reinforced his perception of himself as an *asli karigar*. But often the aspiration to present one’s self as an *asli karigar* and the reality of needing to sustain a livelihood are not compatible and thus disengaging from the state proved to be detrimental. Without state patronage artisans find it difficult to gain access to lucrative craft fairs, where they can sell directly to buyers and where longer-term contacts with domestic and foreign buyers can be established. The very different life-work trajectories of these two artisans illustrate how contingency becomes particularly apparent when faced with alternative possibilities that could have been manifest had different choices been made. Thus experiences of self are shaped in the realm of possibility and difference, and often depend on acts of improvisation (Shannon 2006) and the imaginative capacity to envisage other possibilities.

4. LIVING ISLAM

When I first set out to conduct fieldwork in Old Delhi among artisans, my research was not contrived in such a way that I went looking for “the Muslims”. It was simply the nature of my project – a thematic focus on urban-based artisanal groups – that allowed me to work with Muslims. As such, studying “Islam” was never the primary inquiry of my fieldwork. Instead, the topic of religion came up not as a matter of direct questioning about belief or religious practice among artisans, but instead as a matter of everyday life: For example, it was part of my fieldwork experience when I would often wait for artisans to return to their workshops from the local mosque; it was in invitations to Bakhtiyar Kaki’s *dargah* to listen to *qawwalis* (devotional music played at many Sufi shrines); it was in accompanying women artisans from their homes and seeing them gradually loosen and shed their shawl-cum-veils as they moved farther away from their neighbourhood; it was in feelings of belonging to Old Delhi, because the old city was the “Muslim” part of Delhi; and, above all, it was incorporated into conversations, often as remarks about devotion to work and excellence of skill, sometimes embedded in sayings about *zardozi* and at other times as lengthy narratives about “the time of the Mughals”. Indeed, the way the category of “Islam” emerged through my interactions with artisans was very much within the context of the everyday. I did not prompt artisans to explain their religious views or practices. Artisans offered these views on their own terms and in their own language, verbal and embodied, in the intricate, but often implicit, details of their everyday experiences. The mundane nature of the everyday is, ironically, often obscured by its very banality. It is such obfuscation that often hinders recognition of forms of agency and alternate ways of cultivating subjectivities.

For this reason, in Chapter 1, I suggested that a secondary theme to be addressed in this thesis is the cultivation of Muslim subjectivities, which challenges analytic categories, such as “syncretism”, that attempt to describe so-called “lived Islam”. While the category of syncretism has had a long genealogy in the study of Islam in South Asia – with its most effective proponent being the study of Sufism and “saint worship” – I argued that such an analytic category proves to be quite meaningless for many Muslims in the way that Islam is lived. Keeping in line with a focus on aspirational discourses I wanted to inquire into the aspirations and experiences of Muslim artisans in Old Delhi (i.e. “performances of authenticity”) who do not overtly assert their affiliation to so-called Islamic “reform” movements nor engage in Sufi “shrine worship”.

Nile Green has argued that when analytic categories are inaccurate they “conceal aspects of what they are meant to elucidate” (2008:1044). Indeed one of the main problems of studying Islam as practiced and lived is that the overall conceptual framework of “Islam” becomes both the point of departure and objective for studies conducted among Muslims and in Muslim societies. I follow Schielke and Stauth in attempting to “depart from the strategic use of ‘Islam’ as an explanatory paradigm” (2008:9) as well as Marranci who succinctly writes that anthropologists “should start from Muslims, rather than Islam.” (2008:7) Whereas Schielke and Stauth’s point of departure is the study of locality in Muslim contexts, I have attempted to present “lived Islam” through the lens of “performances of authenticity” and the accompanying subjectivities that are cultivated when alternate ways-of-being are acknowledged. Deeb (2006) discusses “authenticated Islam” as being outward and public performances of a certain kind of piety, which show *others* that one is

following “authentic” Islam, such as performing daily prayers in the mosque or wearing the veil. While this is one way to perform authenticity in an Islamic context, it certainly cannot claim to have a universal orthopraxy. For example, Marsden has described the multiple ways in which Muslims in northern Pakistan locate spiritual authority that challenge “the long held scholarly assertion that Muslims first of all submit and, therefore, expect a moment of surrender in their strivings to meet God’s expectations” (2005:261). Instead, Marsden observes that Muslims cultivate subjectivities that are constituted creatively and often through experiences of travel (Marsden 2009) and other intellectual and emotional pursuits (Marsden 2007).

In this thesis I have attempted to present the lives of people who define themselves as Muslims and artisans, where one attribute does not necessarily outweigh the other, and where perhaps, in the lifeworld of the *asli karigar*, one attribute is at pains to exist without the other. I suggested that by looking into the experiences of this urban-based group, we can observe other kinds of praxis based on religious belief, where belief – thought to be modernity’s estranged self – is no longer that estranged. Indeed, when looking into the working lives of artisans or into the ways they present themselves to others, aspects of belief are incorporated into ways-of-being and are present in forms such as a historically cultivated and embodied work ethic (Chapter 5) or in the articulation of different “temporal frameworks” through various kinds of narratives (Chapter 3 and 6). I also suggested that focusing on the concept of contingency can point us to alternate and nuanced ways in which subjectivities are cultivated among marginalised Muslim groups – ways-of-being that emphasise improvisation and the imaginative capacities of human beings. Here I come back to an earlier concept I

mentioned in the Introduction of this thesis, namely the “informal life” which is characterised by pragmatism and flexibility, and a complementary part of living Islam.

5. A FINAL STORY

The *zardozi* industry in Old Delhi is marked by complexity both in terms of the quality of work produced and the diversity of people who engage in this informal sector. It would have been impossible to capture this diversity in the scope of a thesis, and as such I primarily focused on a subset of artisans who are considered by their peers to be the most real and authentic. But the marginalisation of these artisans from both the economic growth of India’s economy and from the discourses of the nation-state – ones that powerfully establish the norms of inclusion and exclusion – has left many artisans struggling to sustain a craft-based livelihood.

The *zardozi* industry can be seen as a reflection of the broader changes occurring in urban India today, and many artisans explained these changes in a multitude of different ways. For some, the beginning of the sharp decline in demand for *asli* (real) *zardozi* and the rise of so-called *chalu kaam*, or sub-standard work, occurred in tandem with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which I was told was a major buyer of *zardozi* embroidered handbags, in particular. Others cited the rise of production in China for so-called hand embroidered items, which for the most part were actually machine-made, as one of the reasons why so many artisans entered into low paid and low skilled work. The steady influx into Old Delhi of young boys and men from UP, Bihar, and West Bengal was seen as another major factor for the decline in quality of the craft. An *ustad*, or teacher/master artisan, who worked in a large workshop in Old Delhi, said that just ten years ago he would have to go to the train station to recruit

boys to become apprentices, but these days there were so many people looking for work that he had to turn away many. In the winter of 2006, a few months before I started fieldwork, some large non-governmental organisations in collaboration with the police began campaigns, particularly in Delhi and Bombay, to raid *zari* factories and “rescue” children who were forced to work in poor conditions. Thus the industry as a whole was thrust into the public’s attention as corrupt, dirty and thriving on child labour, in spite of the fact that most of the industry is family-based and most artisans aspire to send their children to formal schools in addition to learning craft skills. It is no wonder that many artisans initially suspected that I was a journalist or working for some government agency, perhaps gathering information that would result in the closure of their workshops.

Even though the state is by far the largest patron of crafts and actively involved in craft revival programs and interventions, many artisans conveyed deep suspicions about the effectiveness of state policies towards helping artisans. Finally, one event – September 11, 2001 – was especially mentioned as the most recent reason why Muslims were becoming disadvantaged in the handicrafts industry. I was told that orders from overseas buyers had significantly decreased, due to a general aversion to doing business with Muslims in India. Even Nusrat, perhaps one of the most optimistic and entrepreneurial artisans who I introduced in Chapter 7, told me that whenever she puts forth an application for a government sponsored scheme intended to benefit artisans, she expects her paper-work to be delayed because she is Muslim. These words indicated to me the continuing marginalisation of Muslim communities, perhaps felt even more, I would argue, in the urban margins of Old Delhi.

Feelings of loss can be discerned in the words that artisans speak when they confront the declining prospects of *asli zardozi*. Many artisans I spoke to referred to their craft as *dard-dozi*, which is meant to convey the pain (*dard*) felt with the declining demand for the intricate and exquisite craftsmanship. The limited “revival” of *asli zardozi* in the film and fashion world seems too distant from the reality of Old Delhi and the everyday lives of its artisans. Nonetheless, artisans did convey a sense of pride at knowing that their craft is being displayed in big budget Bollywood films; during the end of my fieldwork one of the biggest news stories focused on the wedding outfit worn by Ashwariya Rai – one of Bollywood’s most famous actresses. An artisan told me that this was one of the few examples of *asli zardozi*. But along with the pride they felt, there was also a sense of loss conveyed in such statements, similar to when artisans told me that today *asli zardozi* can only be found in museums. The “felt authentic” was like a relic or a one-off show of extravagance – such as a famous wedding outfit or, going back one century, the elaborately staged British durbars in colonial Delhi – that would soon constitute a deserted and forgotten world, a distant memory, relegated to accumulating dust in a dark corner.

On a warm September afternoon, I was sitting in Mansoor’s workshop waiting for him to return from mid-day prayers at the local mosque. Usually he would close the steel shutters of his shop, but on this day they were open since the bookbinders across the narrow covered lane were keeping an eye out. I was paying a visit to Mansoor because he had finished a few intricately embroidered *zardozi* handbags that I had asked him to make for me. The workshop, as usual, was clean and orderly and I saw the bags in a neat pile in the corner. Next to these was a group of other bags, which were embroidered in a completely different style than the ones he had made for me.

Yet I immediately recognised that the other bags were also made by Mansoor for his contact in the United States – a woman who supplied high quality embroidered handbags to up-market department stores and boutiques in New York and Chicago. When Mansoor returned from the mosque, he was happy to see me and eager to show the *zardozi* bags he had made for me. These bags were in the form of pouches and I asked Mansoor how someone would carry or wear a pouch like this one (see Figure 8.1). He picked up one of the pouches from the stack and demonstrated. He pulled the two strings at each side of the pouch and then wrapped the long ends of the string around his wrist while the pouch dangled below his arm. While he was “wearing” the pouch, he said that during the time of the Mughals, or as he put it “*nawabi zamane main*”, people would own pouches like this and carry *paan* in them. Then he said that I only have to watch the old films depicting that era, like *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Pakeeza*, or *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*, in order to see such finely embroidered things. All of these films that Mansoor listed depicted Muslim life and customs in India prior to Independence. Nowadays, mainstream culture has moved on and big budget Bollywood films often depict Indian life as a middle and upper-middle class fantasia of “modern” lifestyles coupled with a homogenising conception of “Indian tradition”. The way of life that Mansoor so simply represented by tying two strings around his wrist was already subsumed by national amnesia; it is such a context that threatens to place urban Muslim artisans on the edge of becoming irrelevant.

Figure 8.1: Zardozi embroidered pouches with a design from “the time of the Mughals” (R) next to finely embroidered handbags to be sold in the United States (L). Both types of bags are made by Mansoor



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