

Children robbed of childhood in zari units

From a dimly lit room to a flashy showroom, and from under the nimble fingers of thousands of children to a sophisticated woman, the journey of a zardosi (embroidered) sari is long and heart wrenching.

The rich zari saris are a must have in the wardrobe of the fashion conscious. And if the wedding season is just round the corner, the demand is only bound to increase.

However, the hands that work on that fabric for 16-18 hours every day belong to young children. According to a survey by the Bachpan Bachao Aandolan (BBA), an NGO working for child rights, there are 5,000-7,000 zari units functioning in Delhi with 25-30 children employed in each of them.

This would amount to over 100,000 bonded child labourers in Delhi's zari industry alone. And all these children are in the age group of 8-14. Seelampur, Mongolpuri, Sarai Kale Khan, Badarpur border and Okhla are the main pockets of zari units in the capital.

In one of the first raids conducted by BBA in 2004, 12 children were rescued from a zari unit in Govindpuri Extension in south Delhi. Since then, 1,976 children have been rescued in several raids carried out by the BBA and the police in zari units in Delhi.

The narrative of one such rescued child fills one with horror at the inhuman treatment inflicted on the kids, many of whom are still prisoners in the misery dens.

Hari, an eight-year-old boy from Bihar was lured away to Delhi in hope of a better existence and education. However, what met him was a dimly lit, ill ventilated room where nearly 25 young boys sat huddled working with their needles on a piece of fabric.

When he was rescued in one of the raids along with 11 other children in 2004, the officials found them all tonsured, from head to toe.

'We are shaved completely and made to wear just our underwear so that we don't complain of the heat in that small room,' Hari said innocently.

Most of the children working in these units are from Bihar, mainly from Sitamarhi and Saharsa districts, besides areas of Uttar Pradesh. Lured by the middlemen, directly or through their parents, the kids are brought to the city after the parents pay a sum of Rs.500 to Rs.1000.

'Most of the times parents don't know where their children have been taken. Even if they do, they don't know the appalling conditions that they are in. The middleman promises them an education for their children as well as a daily wage of Rs.100 for some minor work. But the reality is far from that,' Sandhya C.H., a BBA member told IANS.

Kneeling low over their worktables, the kids sew beads and coloured threads on metres and metres of long fabric. They work, eat and sleep in the same room. A small and dirty toilet adjoins the room.

For all the work they do, the kids get paid a paltry sum of Rs.50 a week. In contrast to this amount, the product of their hard work - a zari sari - gets sold in the market for as much as Rs.15,000!

Most of the rescued children are found to be young Muslim boys and there are hardly any girls.

'Children are picked up because of their nimble fingers, which can do intricate work with considerable speed and that too for free most of the time,' said Sandhya.

Zari workers are split into shagirds (apprentices), karigars (workers) and owners. Most of the young boys are shagirds. Apart from doing some basic embroidery, a shagird does the cleaning and washing of clothes and cooking for the unit.

Eight-year-old Mohammad Nirale who was rescued from Subhash Vihar recounted the injuries that he suffered while doing embroidery.

'The needles are slightly hooked so it would get stuck in the fingers while stitching. Then they have to be twisted to be removed from the skin, leading to some flesh coming out along with the needle. But we get no medical attention for this,' Nirale said meekly.

Physical abuse at the slightest pretext and sometimes even sexual abuse are rampant in these units.

According to BBA activists, the problem should be tackled by the consumers and export houses. In a letter to export houses and fashion hubs, BBA urged them to take contracts only from those units that don't employ child labourers.

Well-known designer J.J. Vallaya is one of the few to have responded to the letter and ensured that their products are child labour free. Stringent laws and accountability are two other factors that BBA stresses on.

For the rest of the people, please think twice before you pick up a gorgeous zari-bordered sari. It could be the product of blood and sweat of a hundred children.

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