

## COMBATING COVID-19 PANDEMIC LOCKDOWNS – CONCERNS REGARDING HEALTH AND LIVELIHOOD OF CHIKAN CRAFTS WOMEN

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### ABSTRACT

Unprecedented fear psychosis for lives and livelihood has traumatised mankind across the globe and signals undeniable manifestation of hopelessness. C-19 pandemic has infused extreme vulnerability in every strata of society, particularly Daily-wage and Migrant workers. MSME's, readymade garments, chikan craftswomen and entire supply chain have been severely impacted by long lockdowns. This article focuses upon health and livelihood problems of Chikan craftswomen, amidst exploitation by manufactures and middlemen.

Stimulus packages announced by Central and State Governments appear inadequate in mitigating their problems. Trade Bodies and Associations have put forth sector-specific solutions to revive the economy. Unlock 1.0 appears to be spreading the virus in some parts of the nation.

**KEYWORDS :** Fear psychosis, Daily-wage earners, Chikankari craftswomen, health and livelihood problems, lockdown effects, stimulus packages.



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## FEAR PSYCHOSIS – THE MORBID ENEMY

With almost all nations in Lockdown, mankind is passing through unprecedented trauma of uncertainty, that has accentuated this fear of a bleak hope of lives and livelihood, both pitted against each other. This psychosis is gnawing the very foundations of hope, that is being eclipsed by fear and despair among all sections of society.

Such magnitude of morbidity and fear signals and undeniable manifestation of hopelessness of future prospects for protecting lives and livelihood.

Unfortunately, social and mainstream media, have become catalysts to instill this fear and has succeeded in creation of divisions amongst the ‘lucky and the not so lucky one’s’ leaving almost everyone to feel vulnerable.

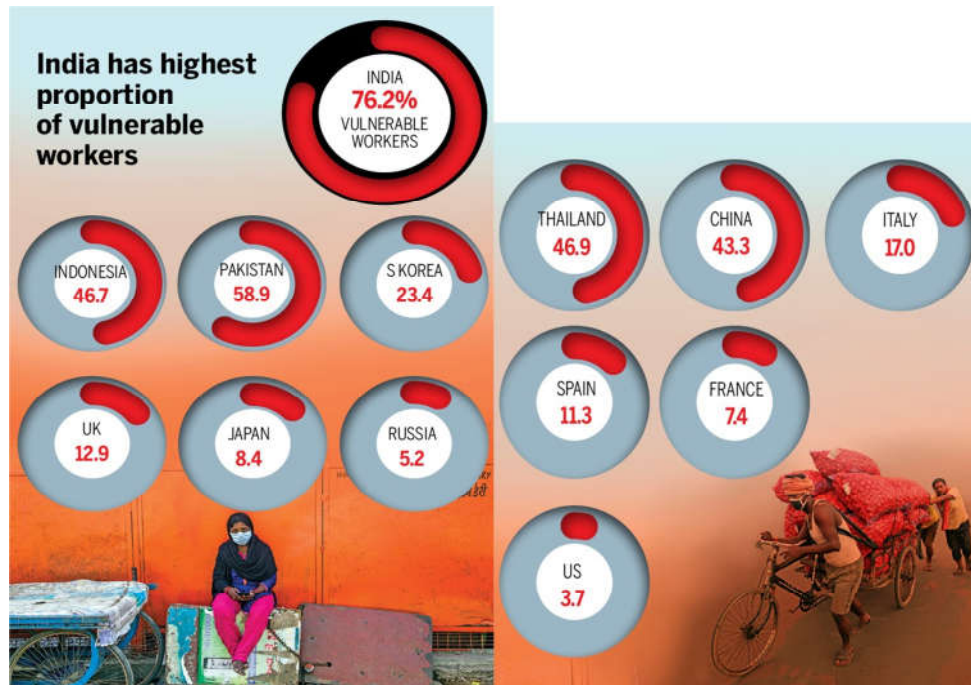
For not without reason; with over four million confirmed cases and over 3 lakh deaths World Wide and no respite in sight, the future for most, looks like the ‘Black hole’ in the constellation above.

Giving wind to this are also the various electronic media, that is depicting that Doomsday is not very far away. Yet, a handful are also engaging themselves in unsubstantiated ‘Blame-Game’ as ‘Culprit-in-Chief’.

Accepted that, countries that are ravaged by this unseen enemy are mostly economically resourceful and mighty.

## INDIAN SCENARIO

Almost all strata of our society and specially BPL, Low-wage and Daily-wage earners find themselves most vulnerable in this Lockdown due to this pandemic. They stare at an uncertain future – are fearful of poverty, disease, unemployment and death. For not without reason; according to World Bank and ILO data, India has one of the highest number of ‘Vulnerable workers’- 76.2% of total employment (see chart 1) T01 –March 27, 2020. These remain the hardest hit as only 2 in every 10 such workers are guaranteed minimum wages.



*Note: Data as of March 26 at 8pm. Only countries reporting more than 500 confirmed cases as of March 25 were analysed Graphics: Sajeew Kumarapuram*

*Source: Johns Hopkins, World Bank, ILO, Global Findex database*

### Chart 1

They remain in perennial hardships due to such pandemics and other natural calamities Arguably so and truly then, India has a mere 22.1% of total salaried employment (see chart 2) – one of the lowest in the region. Whereas, majority of large economies have above 80% salaried workers in total employment (see chart 2)

## Only 22% of Indians employed are guaranteed minimum salaries/wages

CONFIRMED CORONA CASES (TILL MARCH 26, 8PM)		SALARIED WORKERS AS % OF TOTAL EMPLOYMENT		CONFIRMED CORONA CASES (TILL MARCH 26, 8PM)		SALARIED WORKERS AS % OF TOTAL EMPLOYMENT	
INDIA	694	22.1		BRAZIL	2,567	67.8	
PAKISTAN	1,128	39.8		SOUTH KOREA	9,241	74.9	
INDONESIA	893	49.8		ITALY	74,386	76.9	
THAILAND	1,045	50.2		SPAIN	56,188	83.6	
ECUADOR	1,211	51.1		UK	9,642	84.7	
CHINA	81,782	53.6		CANADA	3,404	84.8	
IRAN	29,406	55.2		SOUTH AFRICA	709	84.8	
PHILIPPINES	707	62.7		FRANCE	25,604	88.4	
GREECE	821	66.1		JAPAN	1,307	89.7	
TURKEY	2,433	67.6		GERMANY	40,421	89.8	
				RUSSIA	840	93.4	
				US	69,210	93.8	

Chart 2

Note: Data as of March 26 at 8pm. Only countries reporting more than 500 confirmed cases as of

March 25 were analysed Graphics: Sajeew Kumarapuram

Source: Johns Hopkins, World Bank, ILO, Global Findex database

Understandably, no economy can ill-afford a continuous and long Lockdowns, Least of all, the Indian economy-given its inherent diversities.

### IMPACT OF LOCKDOWN OF CHIKAN APPARELS AND WORKERS/ARTISANS

One of the flagship forms of ethnic wear has been the 'Chikan' embroidery in its subtle and varied designs that has been attracting millions of tasteful buyers across India and abroad since many decades.

Importantly, men folk were the masters in 'Chikankari'. The downfall of Avadh Rulers and Nawabs also witnessed downfall in patronages to this Art. Craftsmanship of that class was replaced by commercial activity, involving women workers mostly, 'Pardahnashin', who were ill-paid and often exploited. Manufacturers used middlemen to exploit the situation.

Exquisite Art of the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw a spurt in its revival. Changing tastes, habits and fashion trends compelled the artisans to undertake subtle changes in the dying ethnic art. Acknowledging this 'Renaissance', connoisseurs, fashion houses and designers started eying this Art, only from the economic and commercial motive. Craftswomen continued to survive in absolute penury.

## **Critical Issues concerning Craftswomen in Chikan manufacturing – Journey from penurious Gloom to Despair –**

This research endeavour is to depict the past conditions for them and analyse the impact on their livelihood in this current pandemic and lockdowns. This article is devoted primarily to assess on parameters of preserving ethnicity, health-care and income.

Notably, this Ethnic art work still remains in the unorganised sector. It is mainly confined to old Lucknow city and in clusters around the city namely Kakori etc. An Article in Times of India dt. April 16, 2014, aptly dwells on the scenario wherein, these artisans are in thousands, yet there is no medical insurance or social security. While boutiques and showrooms sell these exquisite apparels at very high prices, yet these unfortunate neglected workers are forced to sell their previous skills at throw away rates, (T01-16/04/2014). Repeated assurances from successive governments have never helped in improving their pathetic conditions.

### **CRITICAL HEALTH PROBLEMS –**

The article further accentuates the adverse impact on the health profile of these artisans. It quotes them that –continuous work hours of atleast 08 hours a day, adversely impacts them with weakening eye-sight, cervical spondylitis and backbone problems. And, as this aggravates, they become jobless. According to an article published in *www.the citizen* – July 15, 2015, poor wages belie the increasing demand of Chikankari, nationally and internationally. The appeal of Chikankari is global today. There is huge demand for Chikan dresses from Middle East, US, UK and other countries. On the opposite, “apart from everyday challenges, brought on by poverty, they have to contend with serious health issues, mostly weakening eyesight and painful cervical, spondylosis, for which they have no money for treatment.” Further, the article quotes Ms Runa Banerjee, CEO of Self Employed Women Association (SEWA), “Since the Chikan Craft industry is unorganized, it’s the entrepreneurs who thrive even as women workers silently bear the exploitation.” She further added that “We are doing our bit by organizing them and ensuring them a better marketplace for them but we have our limitations.”

### **ADVERSE IMPACT ON HEALTH:**

Further research finding on adverse impact on health of crafts women in Chikankari embroidery was recently published in *Journal of Pharmacognosy and Phytochemistry* -2018: 7(4): 1169-1174 wherein authors highlighted new health issues of different age groups of such workers. Unfortunately, “some of the most prevalent problems faced by these workers are : poor lighting , lack of

ventilation, inadequate work space and working tools and exposure to hazardous long hours of work.”

These findings further reveal that majority of these craftswomen are in the category of 36-45 years and majority of them being illiterate and married, with family to support. Again, majority of these workers have commonly reported ‘body ache’ and ‘arthritis’ owing to awkward posture of working. They have also reported problems of Diabetes, BP problem, Respiratory and Heart disease and Tingling in hand. These workers have to cope with these chronic ailments and work for 8-10 hours everyday. No wonder – their health issues have been due to occupational hazards.

### **Devastating Impact of Lockdown on Livelihood –**

As if, the aforementioned issues highlighted, were not enough, the lockdowns imposed across states has aggravated the misery, sufferings and dented livelihood of these chikan craftswomen. Enduring meagre returns for their talent, the current Lockdown resulted in shutdown of these small earnings. Findings and responses, published in *^vej mtkyk\**, May 4, 2020 depicts sufferings of all in the manufacturing and marketing supply-chain. Workers, engaged in embroidery/weaving, colouring, washing have no work/ no earnings - staring at serious starvation. Wholesellers and Retailers are facing unprecedented scarcity of financial resource-across the board. Even, the entire apparel sector has been in doldrums since March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Expectations and forecasts during festive seasons have not shown any results. This scenario encompasses all types of Readymade Garments. Traders are perplexed, what to do next? Unfortunately, many craftswomen have been forced to shift from Chikankari to other menial occupation—purely for livelihood. If this continues, this sector may witness shortage of experienced chikankari craftswomen in the future-leading to scarcity of eauthentic chikan apparels.

Stimulus packages announced by Finance Minister for many MSME’s may sound music to the ears, but this unorganized sector needs immediate booster of economic package to bring it back to its past glory. Exporters of chikan apparels are very worried and were keenly expecting focused support from various government agencies. *^vej mtkyk\**, May 4, 2020 carries a similar report wherein President, U.P. Garments Manufacturers Association confessed that Kanpur being the main centre for manufacturing and trading of Readymade Garments, had received huge orders for the festival and marriage seasons; but, sudden lockdown has wiped-out over Rs. 500 crores of business’. Again, entire supply-chain workers are on the verge of begging or shifting to menial means of livelihood.



## Findings :-

- All manufacturers and Traders associations are unanimous in opining that Covid 19 pandemic has unleashed wide spread disruption and devastation in economic activity.
- Current Lockdown has jolted earnings of all sections of the society.
- Stimulus Packages announced by Central and State Government have yet not demonstrated the booster-effect to revive sectors.
- Precarious situation prevails, where, Governments and Policy makers are divided – i.e., to protect lives or livelihood.
- Unlock 1.0 , seems to be aggravating the pandemic.
- Desperation is driving majority of vendors and consumers to disregard precautions and fulfill their needs.
- Unfortunately, mismanagement and blame-game and allegations between rival Governments is compounding to the fatality due to covid 19.

## Suggestions-

- 1- Firstly, Central and State Governments must have one uniform strategy for controlling the pandemic as well as providing economic stimulus packages for all stakeholders.
- 2- Secondly, marginal farmers and daily wage earners be given 'Direct Benefit Transfers' through the Nationalised Banking Network.
- 3- Thirdly, Chikan craftswomen, being out of work, be given financial support for few months, till demand for their produce gains momentum. Otherwise, they may switch to other means of earning livelihood. Later on, there will be dearth of such skilled workers.
- 4- Fourthly, interest on loan be waived for atleast six months.
- 5- Fifthly, vigorous promotional efforts to establish MSME's in Tier-II cities be done by State Governments so that it opens employment opportunities in villages too.
- 6- Sixthly, Special incentives be announced for those MNC's wanting to set-up manufacturing base outside China.

## Limitations

During the prolonged lockdowns and disruption in manufacturing and trading activities, the researchers have been unable to contact workers, manufacturers and supply-chain linkage for collecting primary data on these issues highlighted.

## Conclusion:-

Bringing out such a huge workforce from the fear psychosis, be the first priority of the Governments. Analysts and observers world over affirm that shutdowns

and lockdowns have an almost equal '**killing-effect**' as of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, kickstarting the economy with caution and safeguards is the need of the hour; because, strictest Lockdowns as in India is killing the economy too. Understandably so, COVID pandemic and Lockdown are both killing. The leadership must analyse causes of excess mortality, other than the virus. RBI intervention through printing and circulating more currency can ease the situation with minimal impact on inflation. Economists opine that stimulus packages for reviving economic, specially manufacturing, mining and trading activities is risky but necessary. Today, nation is in a 'Catch 22' situation.

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