

## Historical Development Of Crochet Lace At Narsapur

M. Hari Prasad

**Abstract :** *Lace work was introduced in 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Godavari delta area by Christian Missionaries. From 1928 onwards, lace secured a pride place in the life of many foreign countries. For centuries, Indian handicrafts have been distinguished for their great aesthetic and functional qualities and values. All India Handicrafts Board established in 1952 recognized that lace among other handicrafts would be a key for rehabilitation of Indian craftsmen and artisans.*

*The Dutch and the English merchants opened Europe as a market for hand-woven and hand painted cotton goods from the Coromandel Coast. These Indian textiles were so cheap and popular in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries that imports constituted a threat to the English weavers and manufacturers. The British Crown replaced the East India Company in 1857. In the mean time Dutch people also left Narsapur and moved towards Goa. With the leasing of the Foreign Companies, Narsapur lost its previous importance. But soon, lace-work brought Narsapur again into prominence. Messrs. Jonah and Josef organized the production of lace along the classical and putting-out system. They employed several agents who visited the artisans at certain intervals, gave them the thread and the designs chosen by their customers abroad and after a certain time they were collecting the finished articles. Jonah and Josef, who for a long time were the biggest lace exporters at Narsapur.*

### INTRODUCTION

Lace work, started long back, in remote Narsapur in West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh has grown into an internationally recognized handicraft and hence it demands the attention of the historians. It has grown from the status of mere skill, imparted to supplement family income to that of a full-fledged trade catering to the needs of foreign market. It provides employment to nearly two lakh middle class women at their own homes.

Lace work was introduced in 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Godavari delta area by Christian Missionaries. Wives of Missionaries began to teach the skill to the local women with a view to provide part-time employment. These laces were sent to friends and relatives abroad as gifts and they were highly appreciated. Though only a dozen designs were introduced by those missionaries, the ladies with their art and skill have developed more than 300 designs which speak of the high artistic standard of the people of this region in particular and the Indian people in general. Lace products require a hooked needle and thread. The thread used for production of these lace goods is twisted mercerized cotton yarn made out of superior grade Egyptian cotton.

For a fairly long time lace products were patronized only by foreign missionaries. From 1928 onwards, lace secured a pride place in the life of many foreign countries. For centuries, Indian handicrafts have been distinguished for their great aesthetic and functional qualities and values. All India Handicrafts Board established in 1952 recognized that lace among other handicrafts would be a key for rehabilitation of Indian craftsmen and artisans. Indian Handicrafts have continued to remain as an integral part of the life of the people, providing a means of livelihood to millions of families by generating productive employment to the people

in the rural areas. Handicrafts always inspired a spirit of constant innovativeness, using the cultural cross currents from time to time.

The history of the Crochet Lace in and around Narsapur in West Godavari District can be traced to the history of colonial penetration into this area. Narsapur situated on the banks of the Vasishta Godavari, six miles from the sea has long been an ancient cultural and trading center on the coromandel coast. It was famous as a place of the manufacture of teak boats and ships. The boats carried goods from Narsapur which is connected to sea through Godavari river to all important ports in the Bay of Bengal, Burma and also to Malaysia. Both the Dutch and English companies had their settlements here.

Narsapur seems to have reached the zenith of its prosperity in the last quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the English East India Company had opened a factory in Palakol and chose Narsapur as their port in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Narsapur had been an important trading point, mainly for the export of textiles produced by the spinners and weavers in the hinterland. The Dutch people entered India almost simultaneously i.e., in the year 1602.

The Dutch and the English merchants opened Europe as a market for hand-woven and hand painted cotton goods from the coromandel coast. These Indian textiles were so cheap and popular in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries that imports constituted a threat to the English weavers and manufacturers.

The British Crown replaced the East India Company in 1857. In the mean time Dutch people also left Narsapur and moved towards Goa. With the leaving of the Foreign Companies, Narsapur lost its previous importance. But soon, lace-work brought Narsapur again into prominence.

The beginnings of the lace work in this region can be traced to the entry of the Christian Missionaries. There are several versions about its origin in and around Narsapur region. There is a version that the Irish sisters introduced the art of crocheting around 1860. Another version tells us that lace-making was introduced by Mr. & Mrs. Macrae from Scotland who had joined the Godavari Delta Mission.

Mrs. Cain had started lace work in Dummugudem in 1882. Lace making became a regular production process under her initiative. Mrs. Cain paid daily wages to the lace workers of Dummugudem. The lace exported was qualitative. She sold it first in India, later in England, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. The marketing of the lace was organized through friends and well-wishers in India and abroad. Though she was succeeded by Miss C. Wallen, the Dummugudem lace industry came shortly afterwards to an end.

In the early phase, the missionaries gave thread to the women and taught them some patterns. Then they collected the finished goods and sent them as gift parcels to friends and dignitaries in Scotland, England and Ireland in order to collect donations from them for missionary work. Probably, crocheting was also taught to the girls who attended the schools which had been founded by Beer in 1854 in Narsapur and by Macrae in 1875 in Amalapuram.

Mrs. Uhl visited this region and toured the whole of the East and West Godavari fields, along with Miss. Hollerbach. She talked with all lace makers at all centers and explained them

about the necessity of superior clean lace. She showed her deep interest in the women and the industry, by showing them many new patterns and by giving several suggestions. Thus there was an even stauncher friend at home.

Messrs. Jonah and Josef organized the production of lace along the classical and putting-out system. They employed several agents who visited the artisans at certain intervals, gave them the thread and the designs chosen by their customers abroad and after a certain time they were collecting the finished articles. The agents or middle-women sometimes also did the finishing work-stretching, sorting out etc., of lace in the house of the exporters. They as well as the artisans were paid piece rates. Jonah and Josef, who for a long time were the biggest lace exporters at Narsapur. They exported to Ireland, England, New Zealand, etc., and won prizes at various exhibitions.

### **Lace work (1920-1960)**

There seems to be quite an expansion in the 1920s. The census of India reports that there were 15 lace merchants at Narsapur and Palakol in 1921-24 and that they exported lace worth Rs.5,00,000 per year. Their number had gone down to 8 in 1931. The big exporters, however, remained in the market.

The government imposed certain restrictions on the industry during World War II. The supply of thread was affected by these, but there were also curbs on the export of lace from India. After the War, however lace exports expanded rapidly. Many more countries all over the world became customers of the lace merchants at Narsapur. The production between 1942 and 1946 was to the record figure of Rs. 60 lakhs.

In 1953, many importing countries imposed high import duties on lace. As there was more demand for lace products, the importing countries wanted to impose more tax on the lace products. It coincided with the rise of machine-made lace in the foreign markets. With the decline of the industry due to import restrictions and the raising competitiveness among exporters, a new effort was made in 1952 to form an Exporters Association. It was called the Narsapur All India Crochet Lace Exporters Association. At the beginning it had 36 members. In 1960, there were 57 and in 1961, the registered rose to 66. At present they are 75 members.

The Crochet Lace at Narsapur seems to have been a fairly stable business since Messrs. Jonah and Josef started to export lace. The only slump in industry was around 1933 due to the general crisis in the world economy. But changing fashions did not affect the production of lace to a large degree, particularly since the exporters got their designs from their foreign customers and gave these designs to some skilled crafts women to make the new patterns or articles which were required by the foreign buyers.

### **Lace Work (1960-2011)**

In the year 1960, the government took various steps to develop and organize handicrafts in Andhra Pradesh including the lace industry. In and around Narsapur the main farmer communities are Kapus, Settibalijas, Kshatriya and Kammas. Among the above communities Kapus are numerically strong and dominant community and it has entered the lace business. Only the women of these communities undertake lace making. They are successful in lace

exporting business. Apart from making quick money in lace exports, the Indian government has also given export incentives. In addition to this, the banks gave loans to the persons who wanted to invest in lace business on the security of their properties. All these factors have changed the caste and class composition of the lace merchants and lace business. Mainly the agriculturalist class i.e. Kapus began to assume the role of lace merchants by financing the work, collecting it back and exporting it to other countries.

### **Present Scenario of Crochet Lace - 2018**

Lace currently runs behind the iron curtain of a few private exporters. Most of the lace workers are un-organized and desperate. Women are pursuing this work and are producing laces in different designs according to the orders of exporters. They are not aware of the actual cost of the raw material used for the production of lace and the value added after the lace is prepared and the rates at which the finished lace is sold in the market. In other words, their work is totally restricted to their labor only and hence they are ignorant of the profits made by the agents.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is observed that the employment conditions of lace workers are not as expected due to middlemen. As the workforce is predominantly female, the major reason for taking up the lace making work is to supplement family income. The nature of work of female includes hand work, joints, bordering and lining. In case of male workers the work includes checking, repairing, finishing, washing, ironing, packing and forwarding. It can be stated that the lace making is dominated by women workforce with a marginal number of male workers.

Lace currently behind the iron curtains of a few private exporters and most of the lace women workers are un-organized and desperate. The crochet lace industry has potential for women employment and foreign exchange earning. The lace cluster at Narsapur has tremendous business potential. It is being considered as one of the mega clusters in the country where about two lakhs artisans, all women, live and depends for their livelihoods.

### **REFERENCES**

1. Maria Mies (1982): *The Lace Makers of Narsapur*, London: Zed Press.
2. Dolbeer, M.L. (1959) : "A History of Luthernism in the Andhra Desa 1842-1920", Board of Foreign Missions, New York.
3. John Ratnam T. (1992): "Lutheran Sangham" (Telugu) Lagos Printers & Publishers, Guntur.
4. M. Hari Prasad, Dr. Gandham Sri Rama Krishna, Dr. N.G.S. Prasad(2011), *Crochet Lace Industry: Narsapur* , LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, Germany, ISBN: 978-3-8465-9019-5.
5. Dr. Gandham Sri Rama Krishna, Dr. N.G.S. Prasad(ed.)(2013) *HRD Climate in Crochet Lace Park, Business Management Trends*, Paramount Publishing House, New Delhi. ISBN: 978-93-82163-08-4.

6. Dr. Gandham Sri Rama Krishna, Dr. N.G.S. Prasad(2010) “Role of Women Artisans in Crochet Lace Industry”, *Journal of Indian Economic Panorama*, New Delhi, Vol.20, No.2. PP 40-43.
7. Dr. Gandham Sri Rama Krishna, Dr. N.G.S. Prasad(2014), “Crochet Lace Industry, *Commonman Indian Journal of Commerce and Management*, Vol.2, Issue.3, PP.66-69. Print ISSN: 2348-4934, Online ISSN: 2348-6325.
8. Rev. B.D.P. Rao (1993): “The Good News of Rajahmundry in brief”, *St. Peter’s Lutheran Church Silver Jubilee Souvenir 1968-1993*, Rajahmundry.
9. Swavelly, Ch. (1942): *One Hundred years in the Andhra Country 1842-1942* Diocesan Press, Madras.
10. Rev. M.L. Dolbeer (1950): “Hundred years of Lutheran Society 1842-1950” (Telugu), Rajahmundry.
11. Bromley(1937), E.B. *They were men sent from God*, Bangalore, Madras District Gazetteers, District of Godavari 1907, supplement, Madras, 1935.

---

**M.Hari Prasad, Lecturer in History, SRR & CVR Govt. Degree College (A), Machavaram, Vijayawada, Krishna District.**