



FINAL REPORT

CollAsia Field Project 2021-2022



Rafoogari, Reviving the Dying Art of Rafoo

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PROJECT SUMMARY

Rafoo or darning, is the art of mending clothes by highly skilled craftspeople called *rafoogars*. They have inherited this skill from their forefathers. However, with the emergence of fast fashion, the demand for *Rafoo* has been on the decline. With the decline in employment opportunities, very few *rafoogars* have the expertise to skilfully repair clothing.

As Textile Conservators, who work on heritage textiles in the collections of museums, private collections and various organisations, we have often come across requests to 'repair' people's everyday clothing. This led to the realisation of demand for darning but finding skilled *rafoogars* is a challenge.

The purpose of this project was to train women from economically weaker sections of society in the craft of darning by expert darners. To provide them with an opportunity to work in a dignified working environment. To revive the traditional art of *rafoogari* and bridge the gap between the people and the *rafoogars*, thereby integrating them into the society. To document the process of *rafoogari* and make a glossary of the techniques of darning and stitches.

The target audience was women from low-income groups and collaboration with the *rafoogars* or darners and institution involved is Textile Conservation Studio.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

The main project activities of this field project are as follows:

- To conduct two-hour sessions, five days a week and train four women from low-income families in the craft of *Rafoo*.
- To document the process of Rafoo (darning). The various techniques and stitches are used on different fabrics and for different weave structures via videography, photography and print (Appendices 1)
- To make a glossary of the terms and stitches used in Rafoo on various materials.
- To integrate the expert Rafoogars and bridge the gap between their skills and the common man by providing work and employment opportunities.



PROJECT OUTCOMES

- In Indian society, even after knowing the skill, women are not considered skilled in this craft. The conviction that only men can master the craft and practice it professionally was changed after this workshop in the minds of instructors as well as the participants. The classes were taught by male teachers; and having all female participants, broke the stereotype. This workshop also led the participants to feel empowered.
- The various stitching techniques of *Rafoo* were documented by both photography and videography.
- A glossary of the terms and stitches used in *Rafoo* on various materials was prepared.
- Young women from low-income groups were provided with an opportunity to gain skills and work in dignified working spaces.
- The integration of expert rafoogars is essential in bridging the gap between their skills and the common man by providing work. Efforts have been made to provide them with employment opportunities.
- Plan is to establish a separate division for Darning wherein women from economically weaker sections of the society will be trained and absorbed in the organization.
- Participants were able to darn four textiles - *Kurta, Sari, Phiran*, and Suit.

PARTNERSHIP

Darners (Intekhab Ahmad and Sharik) and Textile Conservation Studio (Ms. Deepshikha Kalsi), were the key partners in this project.

Mr. Intekhab Ahmad and Mr. Sharik are renowned experts of *rafoogari* in India. Mr. Intekhab Ahmad is a fourth-generation *rafoogar* from the town of Najibabad which lies in the Northern state of Uttar Pradesh, India. We are very grateful for their time. The knowledge that these two experts shared is very valuable in keeping the craft of *rafoogari* alive. Sharik Bhai was the lead conductor of the workshop. They trained six young women in the project; imparting various techniques and stitches used in *Rafoo* on different fabrics. *Rafoogari* has predominantly been a male-dominated skill. With this project, there was an attempt to enable women to learn *Rafoo*.

Textile Conservation Studio, based in New Delhi is the leading institution in India concerning Textile Conservation. The studio was involved in the overall supervision of the project. It provided space and environment, where the darners could teach all the participants. Textile Conservation Studio handled all the coordination between darners and participants, including the delays and precautions required during covid restrictive times. It managed all the necessary expenditures required.

Participants exhibited extreme dedication, patience, practice and hard work to learn a new life skill that can provide them with professional opportunities.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

I. CHALLENGES

The Covid-19 pandemic was the main challenge for the implementation of this project. Restrictions such as social distancing, lack of means of public transportation, and an increase in cases led to a lockdown which halted the project for a month. The safety and health of the staff and *rafoogars* were the top priorities for conducting the project.

It was challenging to find enthusiastic women who would be keen to undertake the training classes. Women from low-income families are discouraged to work and are generally married off at 18. Therefore, during the first month itself, we had two dropouts due to personal reasons. However, more young women were recruited eventually and the project was completed in four months.

We would have loved to involve the neighbourhood had Covid-19 not been an issue. Most youngsters do not even know how to thread a needle and participating in an activity like this would have given them an insight into the world of darning and they would recognise and respect them for their work and the effort that goes into repairing a seemingly minor tear or a split.

Solutions:

We had to extend the number of working hours in March to cover up for the lost days and take extra precautions against Covid-19 precautions like wearing double masks and extra expenditure on hand sanitizers and cleaning supplies.

II. LESSONS LEARNED

Rafoogari needs practice and understanding of weave structures and threads that can be used for the repairs. Learning a new skill in itself is a challenge. Despite putting in the effort and extra hours, the darning felt that something that they have learnt in years could not be passed on in 60 classes. Only two main stitches were taught primarily and the girls practised. Over the last two weeks, he introduced how to address the tears, splits and holes. The girls, with their determination helped break the preconceived notion that girls cannot learn this skill. The girls continue to come and practice the skill to master it.

We now understand our traditional practices better and have great respect for the sustainable approach that our ancestors always practised. Just like one uses threads to darn the splits and the tears, this process brings people together from various walks of life as they engage in this activity of preserving the garments and bringing the community together. The participants are now confident to contribute back to society by practising this sustainable approach and which would help them economically to gain financial freedom. Textile Conservation Studio will try to absorb the participants of this workshop

QUOTES ON THE PROJECT

“Darning is a skill for dedicated individuals. It requires a lot of time, patience, practice and hard work to learn. It was a new skill for me to learn and helped me in understanding the intricacy of needlework. Darning gave me a sense and reason to appreciate our heritage even more than before. It made me see rafoogars and their skills with pride and help me understand how prestigious this skill is in the current scenario.” **Rashmi Kumari, Trainee**

“Learning a new skill always gives me happiness. Apart from happiness, darning gave me a sense of personal growth that was much needed in my current stage of life. I would love to carry on doing it and if possible would like to specialise in various darning techniques.” **Sudha, Trainee**

“I have a fascination with textiles, colour and patterns. After attending this workshop I learned different patterns used for mending textiles. I am looking forward to working on various textiles.” **Sapna Singh, Trainee**

Partners: Intekhab Ahmed and Sharik

Darner: *“Hume laga nahi tha ki ladkiyan sikh payengi.”*

Translation: “Didn’t think that the girls will be able to learn the skill”

Darner: *“Par accha laga maza aaya.”*

Translation: “But it felt good and enjoyed”

Darner: *“Kisi ko sikhane ka mauka mila.”*

Translation: “Got the opportunity to teach someone”

Darner: *“Aur zyada sikhaunga.”*

Translation: “Will like to teach some more”

Darner: *“Ladkiyon ne kar dikhaya.”*

Translation: “The girls proved themselves”

Partner: Deepshikha Kalsi, Textile Conservation Studio



This was an interesting experience to help conduct and supervise the workshop. There are more women in the field practising as professional textile conservators as compared to men and it's the reverse in the darning tradition. We realised that the darner initially had an apprehension that the girls will not be able to follow the darning tradition. He was pleasantly taken aback when over time he realised that the girls can also take up this profession, which is largely male-dominant till now.




FUTURE PLANS




- The next step would be to disseminate the documentation and a glossary of terms via a publication, research paper or presentation. The ultimate goal of the research is to share the knowledge gained with society. Textile Conservation Studio would like to create awareness in the community for preserving this art of *Rafoogiri*.
- Open studio days to invite people and generate interest and educate them about the art of *Rafoogiri*.
- We plan to conduct similar *Rafoogiri* workshops in collaboration with educational institutes.
- Plans would also include having a branch at the Textile Conservation Studio to address the needs of everyday garments that are not part of the museum collections and do not need conservation stitches to give a new lease of life and contribute to a sustainable environment.




APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Glossary of Stitching Techniques in *Rafoo*

No.	Images	Techniques	Face	Process
1.		Darning with <i>Kapar Lehar</i>	Front side	Participants started by pulling up a thread from a plain weave fabric and then infilling the voided area with the thread insertion, following the plain weave structure of the fabric. Going once over and once under the weft threads. The tail of the thread is visible on this side as it's the practice session.
2.		Darning with <i>Kapar Lehar</i>	Reverse side	This is the reverse of the same section of the fabric.

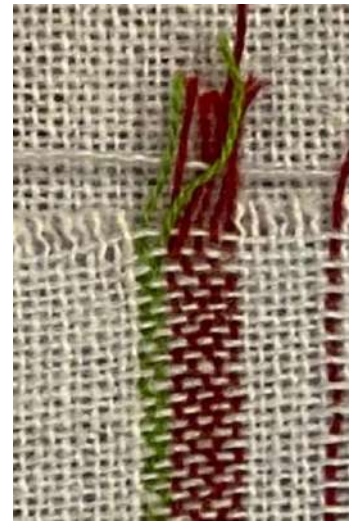
3.		Darning with <i>Kapar Lehar</i>	Front side	Once they became proficient in infilling a single thread, the participants then learned to take out multiple threads and infill them. Only one subsequent thread was pulled out at a time.
4.		Darning with <i>Kapar Lehar</i>	Front side	Then they became skilled in infilling while following the weave structure neatly. Also initially the participants learned to follow the weave in only one direction and they would cut off the thread at the other end to start again from the bottom but when they could handle the needle better they learned to reverse their needle and return to filling the void from the top, without cutting the thread .
5.		Darning with <i>Lehar</i>	Front side	The next stitch was <i>Lehar</i> . In this, the participants had to go under one and over two wefts and at the following infill, the thread had to start from a thread below the previous infill. This created a twill effect and is mostly used for darning the twill shawls. They started with creating a twill in the Z direction.

6.		Darning with <i>Lehar</i>	Front side	Once they became skilled in creating a Z twill effect, they learned how to create a chevron. For this they had to start moving one up, each time they pulled out a thread.
7.		Darning with <i>Lehar</i>	Front side	The participants followed the same practice of reversing the needle from the top once they practised the <i>Lehar</i> stitch in one direction.
8.		Darning with <i>Kapar Lehar</i>	Front side	After the participants mastered the <i>Kapar Lehar</i> and <i>Lehar</i> stitch, they were taught to pull out the threads in both warp and weft directions and infill the same with <i>Kapar Lehar</i> , without creating a hole or a tear. The next step was to cut out a square and darn the same without pulling out the thread but to weave along with the structure of the fabric.

9.		Darning with <i>Lehar</i>	Front side	Once the participants became comfortable with darning in the <i>Kapar Lehar</i> , they moved on to practice the same with the <i>Lehar</i> stitch (twill), first only by pulling out threads in both directions.
10.		Darning with <i>Kapar Lehar</i>	Front side	A darned practice patch in <i>Kapar Lehar</i> .
11.		Darning with <i>Lehar</i>	Front side	A darned practice patch in <i>Lehar</i> .

12.		Darning with <i>Kapar Lehar</i>	Front side	Thereafter the participants are now practising darning of losses in different shapes, apart from the regular slit, tear and a square, so they may be able to address all kinds of losses that they may have to darn in the fabrics later.
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Appendix 2 Types of Stitches



Documentation of different *Rafoo* stitches

Appendix 2 Project Activities



Women learning *Rafoo* techniques under expert *Rafoogars*

