

Revival of Chikankari Embroidery

VEDIKA

Research Scholar

Department of Home Science, ML and JNK Girls College (Meerut University),
Saharanpur (U.P.) India

ABSTRACT

Chikankari in the eyes of the western world forms an integral part of the Indian fashion however, there is a lot more to it than what meets the eye. This hand embroidery is a part of the Indian culture and is worn by all during traditional festivities. Colloquially called Lucknow Chikan or Chikan Embroidery, Chikankari was introduced during the times of NurJehan, the wife of Mughal Emperor Jehangir and since those times this masterpiece of fine artistry has been gracefully admired by all around the globe. Today this majestic art has reached out to most of the corners of the world fashion industry as India plays the biggest contributor to this through the various fashion events.

Key Words : Chikankari, Lucknow, Fashion, Embroidery, Chikan artisans

INTRODUCTION

India is a country with rich textile and craft heritage which is the envy of the whole world, reflected in the expression of their art. Northern India is a land of great geographical contrasts, Punjab and Haryana to the south east, Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh to the north and Uttar Pradesh to the west. Due to diversified talents, interests and inspiration, each state and area is famous for their different traditional handicrafts, which is a unique expression of art that beautifully keeps the age old culture alive and maintains its exotic legacy and tradition.

In Uttar Pradesh, the city of Lucknow has a prominent place in the history of India, particularly for its art, historical monuments and rich cultural heritage. The rulers of Awadh, specially the Mughals, were very fond of art and cultural activities such as music, poetry, architecture and handicrafts. Besides being famous for its hot summers and a glorious past, Lucknow is also known the world over for its many fine handicrafts. Some of the most popular names in this list are *chikankari*, hand block textile printing, *zari/zardozi* (gold and silver embroidery), ivory or bone carving, terracotta and many others that are practiced by various artisans of Lucknow. *Chikankari* is the most popular amongst these and is recognized worldwide.

Chikankari is a fine and intricate shadow-work type of embroidery done by white yarn on color less muslins called tanzeb (tan meaning body and zeb meaning decoration). The

pattern, of predominantly floral designs, is stitched using untwisted white cotton or silk on the surface of the fabric. Chikan is thought to have originated in Bengal and to have been practiced in Dacca and Calcutta and has been brought from there to the Muslim courts of Lucknow, Delhi and Rampur during the later Mughal period.

There are two types of chikankari work-the flat style and the knotted embossed, e.g.; jalior netting in varieties of designs. The most skilled embroiderers possess a broad repertoire of twelve to seventy five stitches. Although there are major areas of overlap, there is no consensus among the most skilled over how stitches are named, nor does knowing more stitches necessarily translate into greater skill. Chikan embroiderers according to Arya and Sadhana (2002), claim a repertoire of about thirty-two stitches to which they give delightfully fancy names: double star earring, peacock feather's eye etc. some of the names in their local language are; sidhual, makra, mandarzi, bulbulchasm, tajmahal, phooljali, phanda, taipchi, khatawa, dhoom, golmurri, zanjeer, keel, kangan, bakhia, dhaniapatti, lambimurri, kapkapi, karanphool, bijli, ghaspatti, rozan, meharki, kaj, chameli, chanekipatti, balda, zora, pachni, tapchim kauri, hathkati and daraz of various types. Many of these are different combinations of the same few basic stitches.

History of chikankari :

The art of *chikan* embroidery in India is about 400 years old. It is believed that this is a Persian craft, which came to India with Noorjahan, the queen of Mughal Emperor Jahangeer being practiced by her and other *begams* (wives). *Chikankari* flourished under the patronage of the rulers of Awadh. Later when the capital of Awadh shifted to Lucknow from Faizabad, in the year 1722, the knowledge of the craft came to Lucknow. The Mughals found that hand block printing skills made it easy for them to practice this embroidery, as earlier the tracing of design was very difficult. This availability of easy process of drawing of base design encouraged them to teach this fine embroidery-work to their *kaniz* (servants), who in turn taught it to their family members and gradually this embroidery become a part-time earning source for many women of rural areas (Arya and Sadhana, 2002).

Chikankari artisans :

Since its conception, Chikankari has been inspired by the intricate and beautiful patterns and the linings on the marble jaali found during the Mughal era architecture. The Nawabs had their own personal artisans and their families trained to design Chikan Embroidery garments that suited the royal stature. With utmost devotion and passion for their masters, these artisans worked on angarkha and topi-palla creating delicate hand embroidery that was unmatched in style and charm. With time however, the encouragement and the patronage gradually diminished and these artisans were forced to look for other means of employment. With this, the art of Chikankari was passed on to the women of their community and till today, Lucknow Chikan is the main source of income for the Muslim women in and around the rural areas of Lucknow city. With around 2.5 lakh artisans presently in the business, Chikan Embroidery is by far the largest cluster of artisans in India. Workers from the stitching block printing, cutting, washing, jaali work and textile printing also form a part of this diverse cluster with all of them residing in or around Lucknow. It is surprising that this beautiful craft of hand

embroidery manufactured by hand within the 125 km radius of Lucknow and adjoining districts. The districts covered are Unnao, Barabanki, Lakhimpur, Hardoi etc. Some other villages where one can find few artisans of *chikankari* are in Raibareilly, Sultanpur and Faizabad (Arya and Sadhana, 2002). The women are mostly housewives and in most cases this work is their only source of personal income.

Chikan embroidery not only provides employment to about 250,000 artisans of different crafts, but people from non-craft base also earn their livelihood by associating themselves with this craft. Expected number of non-artisans earning their bread and butter from this craft is about one million (ibid.). They may be contractors, manufacturers, retailers, raw material providers or employees with manufacturers.

Strengths of chikankari cluster :

- Large domestic market
- Traditional handicraft
- Huge artisan base
- Can be done on a variety of cloths
- Availability of skilled artisans
- High competition among manufacturers
- Low-price hand-made garments
- Available in all price ranges
- Customized products can be made
- Exemption of Excise Duty, Trade Tax
- A brand name in itself
- Easy availability of raw material
- Availability of transport facilities

Weaknesses of chikankari cluster :

- No technological up gradation
- Lengthy production time
- No designer input
- Over production of low quality goods
- Manufacturers do not have technical qualifications
- Very less export
- No association among manufacturers
- No fixed time for return of goods from embroidery
- Unorganized artisans cluster
- Very less fund flow from financial institutions
- Very less advertisement in Foreign markets
- Very less use of modernized facilities such as computer, CAD, internet and e-mail etc.
- Products mainly treated as seasonal summer garments
- Undercutting practiced among Manufacturers

Opportunities :

- Big scope in domestic market
- Big scope in foreign market
- Scope for development of new products
- Scope for selling low price goods in Latin America (e.g Beach wear in Brazil, Chile)
- Various Central and State government schemes for benefit of artisans
- Schemes for benefit of Artisans
- Implementation of Baba Saheb Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojna under Office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) for welfare of artisans

Threats :

- Competition with printed and machine embroidered items
- Globalization might bring Pakistani embroidery or other similar products in India
- Change in government policies such as imposition of excise duty and trade tax

Institutions/NGO's involved in revival of chikankari :

Non-government organisations :

Chikanbarn Artisan Trust :

Chikanbarn artisan trust was started primarily as a for-profit venture with a social objective to promote the chikan industry on the global market and having a common platform for wholesalers and manufacturers, but what we wanted the most and what we have been working steadily towards is the cause of the artisans.

To this end chikanbarn announce the launch of the Chikanbarn Artisans Trust, a charitable, non-profit organization with a view to improving the socio-economic conditions of the artisans. It is trust's endeavor to connect and work in partnership with like minded people and organizations who want to contribute back in their own unique way but find only limited credible avenues for the same.

Self employed women association (SEWA) :

One NGO that has worked tirelessly for these people is SEWA (Self Employed Women Association). With the help of the development commissioner (Handicrafts) this NGO has completely transformed the way these women Chikankari artisans earned a livelihood using their needles and threads.

SEWA uplift the livelihood of Lucknow Chikan artisans, had Comitato, an Italian Company, as a major client for 10 years and the artisans supplied 2000-2500 pieces of Chikankari in a year. All these examples of global recognition of this unique and indigenous embroidery provide a clear picture of the exports.

National centre for design and product development (NCDPD):

Set up in 1999, under society's Act by Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India. The Board of NCDPD is represented by eminent exporters, policy makers and renowned people of trade industry. Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India was Ex-Officio Chairman of NCDPD

Board.

NCDPD was set up with the objective to fulfil the gaps in the handicraft sector of soft and hard goods in the areas of Design / Product Development and Technology. NCDPD works in close cooperation with Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) to undertake design and product development activities on pan India basis for clusters. It also works closely with Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts (EPCH) and its member exporters to create future linkage.

Kalatkam handicraft (Self-help group) :

Kalatkam Handicrafts (SHG) identify 50 artisans which are to be a group of embroiderers, pattern makers, dyer, block makers, tailors to make a complete product; starting from initial to final product stage.

Transporters and Cargo management service providers :

There are many transporters and Cargo Management Service providers. Usually manufacturers of the cluster prefer to send their parcels (Domestic) by Gati or SEF Express cargo management services. International Airport at Lucknow has cargo dispatch facility, which can be very useful for exports. Container depot for exporting goods is also there in Kanpur just 80 KM from Lucknow. For sending samples and materials abroad International Courier Services such as DHL are also available in Lucknow.

State Government Institutions :

District Industries Center (DIC), Lucknow :

This centre functions under the Director and Commissioner Industries, Government of Uttar Pradesh, Kanpur. It is the main coordinator between other Government offices and artisans. It recommends names of enterprises for various exhibitions, bank-financing, State/ National Awards for master craftsmen. It also implements the Prime Minister Rozgar Yojana for benefit of unemployed persons. The centre also provides Small Scale Handicraft Industry registration to Manufacturers of the area. Besides, a Central Design Center (CDC) and Craft Museum was also setup under the DIC of Lucknow. CDC is closed and in Craft Museum articles are getting dust because of no proper attention taken by state govt.

Export promotion bureau, Lucknow :

In 1999 the Export Promotion Bureau was formed under the Ministry of Small Scale Industries in U.P. The main functions of the bureau are monitoring and policy making. It also provides Marketing Development Assistance to small exporters in form of grants under different schemes. There are very few manufacturers/Traders of Chikan Embroidery products in the total list of members of Export Promotion Bureau. Out of these only four are actual exporters. Others are not even having any proper manufacturing or trading units.

U.P. Tourism :

The basic aim of this office of the Government of Uttar Pradesh is to promote tourism of state but it also gives an exposure to the craft and culture of state through organizing

festivals, publicity catalogues and website. .

Financial institutions :

There are many banks in the area but very negligible amount has been given as finance to the manufacturers of Chikan Embroidery goods. A total Rs. 5 Crores has been financed till now to about 300 manufacturers and that too mainly as a working capital loan.

State Government Institutions U.P. Trade Promotion Authorities, Kanpur :

Established under Commissioner Director of Industries, Government of Uttar Pradesh (UP), the organization is making efforts for promotion of trade from UP. It organizes fairs and exhibitions of different product groups. It is also responsible for setting up the U.P. Pavilion of Pragati Maidan, New Delhi for advertisement and marketing of products manufactured in the state. It also participates in international fairs.

Central Government Institutions :

Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) :

SIDBI has its head office at Lucknow and provides credit under Micro Finance Credit Scheme to NGOs who then sublet it to artisans for working capital. They also have some other schemes for artisans and manufacturers.

Handicrafts Marketing and Service Center, Barabanki :

This is the grass root office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) under Ministry of Textiles, Government of India. The main aim of the Office of Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) is to uplift the economic and social conditions of the handicraft artisans. It provides assistance directly to artisans for conducting training and also provides direct marketing outlets through various Craft Markets, National Craft Fairs and other small exhibitions. They also run many schemes through various NGOs.

In the Chikan Embroidery Cluster, there are three Craft Development Centers that are established by NGOs under sponsorship of the DC (Handicrafts). For publicity of Chikan Embroidery, this office has also sponsored two-three catalogues. Despite the scope of direct marketing of products through this office, very few artisans of Chikan Embroidery have got themselves registered as artisans with this office. Only 8000 artisans of different places are registered with this office out of which only 600 have received Identity Cards.

Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts (EPCH), New Delhi :

The Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, sponsors the EPCH council. Their main aim is to promote export of handicrafts from India. They undertake many activities for export promotion of handicrafts like participation in national and international fairs, organizing buyer sellers meet, trade delegations, seminars and workshops and publications etc.

Apparel Export Promotion Council (AEPC) :

The prime objective of the Council is to promote and regulate the growth of export of readymade garments from India and to project India's image as a reliable supplier of high

quality readymade garments and services.

Handloom and Handicraft Export Promotion Corporation, New Delhi :

A Central Government body that works for promotion of handicrafts through promoting participation of artisans and manufacturers in national and international trade fairs.

Indian Trade Promotion Organisation (ITPO), New Delhi :

This is the nodal agency under the central Government that works to develop and promote Indian exports in general. They also assist in up gradation of technology through participation in fairs held in India and abroad. They undertake publicity of Indian products through print and electronic media. ITPO is also running a Trade Information Center, which is engaged in procuring, processing and disseminating trade related information on all aspects of international trade for all commodities.

Chikankari ethnic wear in present scenario :

There are not many styles and trends in fashion that stand out and beat the passage of time. Popularity of different designs or styles changes from one period to another. The ones prevailing today will be upgraded and donned in a different manner tomorrow. Every generation adopts its own fashion in terms of clothing that is related somewhat to the trends of the earlier generation. Every occasion requires us to pursue the societal norms of trends and fashion. However, there is one fashion trend that is above all the societal whose-who and the trend setting that is always dynamic. It is Chikankari, the Indian art of embroidery.

This artistry originated as a court art during the Mughal period in the city of Lucknow but even after centuries Chikankari work remains a casual fashion trend as well donned as an ethnic wear by men women and kids alike. Not only in India but across the globe in several countries and in international fashion events, this stunning art of hand embroidery has shown its might. Indian Ethnic wear can surely be called incomplete without this masterpiece of hand embroidery. The embroidery in coloured threads that are contrasting or that bring out the richness of the base colour of the garment always make heads turn. The different life like patterns and designs and the intricate details the artists capture in their work is just amazing.

The Indian ethnic wear that has Ladies Chikan Work includes Embroidered Kurtas, Embroidery Kurtis clubbed with Churidars and Salwar. For ladies that are more mature, Embroidery Sarees and Embroidered suits which are more graceful and elegant serve the purpose. Chikan Sari, Chikan Suits and Chikan salwar kameez form an integral part of fashion.

For men as a casual fashion wear, men's short kurta are very popular. These can be accompanied with a nice pair of jeans, shorts or even trousers to give the perfect casual look. When going out with friends or just to the market, Chikan kurtas are a very good alternative to t-shirts for men.

Chikan embroidery for men is not limited to just kurtas. It is also found on hand embroidery shirts as well. These shirts are worn by men in parties and occasions that make them stand out from the rest of the crowd.

Today even kids see this as a great art and acknowledge not only the creative aspect of it in formal, ethnic wear but also fashionable attire that can be wore to dress up casually. Chikan embroidery finds much likability among kids these days than ever before. Be it ethnic wear for boys or ethnic wear for girls, kids kurta pyjama embroidered in Lucknow Chikan always imparts a smart sensibility of fashion. For girls and boys alike, there is such a wide range of collections of Chikan embroidery that are meant for every age group.

In the recent years, home décor items also have seen an increase in the chikan embroidered linens. Hand embroidered bed sheets have never gone out of fashion. To create an ethnic look and feel for the bedroom, one chooses embroidered linens. Bed sheets, pillow covers, bedspreads, table runners, curtains, etc., all come in various embroidered patterns. One can easily decorate ones house with embroidered furnishings. The manner in which these home are kept, speak much about the taste of the host. With embroidery works one has to be careful about the kinds of colour palette to engage in. Mixing and mashing too many styles of embroidery could be a catastrophe. From wanting to decorate your interiors, you might end up actually spoiling the look making it too crowded and showing uneducated taste.

Export of chikankari outside India:

A consumer's delight and the artisan's pride, Chikankari forms an integral part of the Indian Ethnic Wear. Be it Ladies Chikan Work or Ethnic Wear for men, Lucknow Chikan is adorned equally by both men and women. Since time immemorial, Chikan has been accredited as a masterpiece not only in India but in other parts of the world as well. Chikan Embroidery has been famous as Indian Embroidery in different countries. Chikankari has registered and witnessed global acknowledgment and this has proved as a catalyst for the export of not only Embroidered Apparel but also Embroidered Bed Sheets, Embroidered Table Cloth, and Embroidered Cushion Covers.

Lucknow is the birthplace as well as the largest exporter of this unique Hand Embroidery. Although the charm of the city might have pined away recently but a global celebrity like Madonna donning Chikan apparel is a clear indication of the popularity the Lucknow Chikan has outside the country. MLK Exports is the leading export company that is famous for exporting product of this Hand Embroidery. Since 1975, this company has exported Chikan Embroidery products like Dresses to global brands like Amina (Japan), Fashion Fuse (United States), Ghora Tabela (Uruguay), Jackpot (Copenhagen), Betina Gers (Argentina), HHG (Spain), Coline (French), etc. Many more such brands including the aforementioned have ordered stocks worth crores of Rupees and this indicates about the reach and the global appeal of this unique hand crafted artistry. Internationally acclaimed designers Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla have been using Chikan Embroidery in their designs for 20 years now.

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