

Reminiscing the Supremacy of the Traditional Embroideries of India

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ABSTRACT

The manuscript is framed to invoke the supremacy and craftsmanship associated with the traditional embroideries of India. Among the various styles Chamba rumal, chikankari and Kantha are discussed in this paper. It will enlighten the new graduates at under graduate level to gain knowledge about ancient textile crafts of India. This will also motivate the post graduate students to think of research areas in utilizing the craft for the latest trending styles.

Key Words : Traditional embroidery, Chamba rumal, Chikankari, Kantha

INTRODUCTION

Embroidery is an art and handicraft that is done for decorating fabric or any flexible material using needle and thread. Materials such as metal strips, cut tube, zardozi, glass, pearls, beads, quills, feathers and sequins will be used as a part of value addition. Machine embroidery started in the early stages of the Industrial Revolution (19th century) that mimics hand embroidery not in construction but in appearance. Indians are world famous for their magnificent workmanship and most beautiful textiles especially the embroideries. Unity in diversity can be observed not only through culture, custom, but also in costume and decoration. Each state has its unique embroidery expressing the life style of the people inhibited their occupation, custom, thoughts, beliefs and likings. There are many such traditional embroideries from India namely Kantha, Banjara, Kathi, Soof, Aari Bharat, Rabari, Ahir Bharat, Banni, Kasuti, Kashmiri, ChikanKari, Zardozi, Phulkari, Bidri and Mirror Embroidery.

The use of embroidery to decorate clothes has been around since man began to wear clothes and its origin can be traced far back to the Iron Age. This journey began when primitive man discovered that he could use thread to join pieces of fur to make clothes. As a natural progression, he also discovered that the same thread could be used to make decorative patterns on the clothes. He also used colorful beads, stones and bones to add to these decorations. Several excellent examples of beautiful embroidery work survive in Ancient Egypt, China, Persia, India and England. Each country has its own distinctive style of embroidery, which incorporates the culture and imagery from their history and tradition.

Embroidered clothing was also considered to be a symbol of wealth. Many scenes from

history are often found embroidered onto fabric; a wonderful example is the Bayeux Tapestry, which is 231 feet long and portrays the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

Chamba Roomal of Himachal Pradesh :

Chamba is a village in Himachal Pradesh, noted for its exquisite style of Pahari and Kaugra school of painting. The style of painting influenced the embroidery of the place too. 'Chamba rumal' is a pictorial craft that represents unique embroidery which originated and flourished in Chamba district in 17th and 18th centuries. Outlines of 'Chamba rumal' are made with fine charcoal and brush by painters well-versed in Pahari painting. The Chamba 'Rumal' or handkerchief about 2 to 6 feet in length and is an important part of a Chamba bride's trousseau. The handkerchief is embroidered with the technique of double satin stitches known as "do-rukha-tankha" making the designs on both sides look equally identical in content. This handkerchief is also known as 'Kashida'[1]

The designs retain an almost painting kind of an appearance and are an ideal gift from the region. Rumals were also used to cover offerings to the gods and while presenting gifts to the ruler or other high officials. It was a notable moment when the Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh Prem Kumar Dhumal presented 'Chamba rumal' to the Ex-President Pratibha Patil during her visit to the city. [2]

Chamba is a hybrid phulkari having a series of wavy creepers, stylized leaves and flowers. Besides this, designs inspired by various day to day items, fauna and flora like sunflowers, peacock, red chilies and ace of diamonds. The tradition of Chamba Rumal is still alive in Chamba and a number of young girls are engaged in producing beautiful Rumals. Efforts are made to reproduce some rumals from the collection available at the Museum which will help to create awareness among the general public. The name 'rumal' means handkerchief, but these are not used to be kept in the pocket. These are generally used for covering gifts placed on metal & bamboo trays and baskets on any special occasions as birthdays, weddings, festivals or fairs. [3]

Materials :

Hand spun thin fabric like Mulmal/ malmal or hand spun hand-woven khaddar which is white or cream in colour since its generally unbleached for the raw look. Thread- used is untwisted silken floss in a variety of colours which gives the appearance of smooth and glossiness.

Motifs :

Samples of chamba rumal depicting a couple of dancing ladies around a plaitain tree is a common one. The embroidery style is referred as a kind of painting on cloth done with the help of needle and thread and various themes are depicted on these. Commonly seen motifs are scenes from Indian mythology, Ramayana, Mahabharat, Ras Lila, Krishna Lila, Pahari paintings, hunting, marriage scenes, and game of dice. Rasamandal was the famous subject of the Rumal however, hunting, Nayika Bhed, Shiva family and Mahabharata were other popular themes. As in the paintings, the 'Krishna Lila', is also a favoured theme. [4]

Hunting expeditions, battle scenes, architecture, and a wealth of geometrical and floral designs have been deftly transferred onto cloth. Raslila in an old Chamba rumal. The central space is occupied by the figures of deities, especially of Lord Vishnu in multiple forms. Some pieces have writings on them. Trees, birds, human figures and animals were also depicted. Bird motifs include parrots, peacock, duck and swan. Animal motifs include leaping tigers, horses etc. Tree Motifs



Fig. 1 : Chamba Roomal of Himachal Pradesh

include the cypress and the plaintain tress bent, laden with flowers and fruits to show the fertility.

Colours :

Chama rumal is full of colors, one sample with one color cannot be seen. However, blue was predominant in earlier samples. Other colors are green orange and yellow. If a motif of the figure of Lord Krishna was used, the body was embroidered in blue and the hands and feet were embroidered in crimson or mauve (shades of red). Colors were chosen based on variety (colours were never repeated) rather than appropriateness.

Stitches :

The stitch employed in the embroidery is called “Do-rukha” means Double satin stitch which comes out exactly identical on the both sides. The intricacy of the work on both sides of the fabric is such that you cannot tell the right side from the wrong. Stem Stitch is used when necessary and buttonhole stitch is used to finish the edges. [5]

End products :

The rumals are mainly used as a covering piece on the figures of deities. At its simplest, the Chamba Rumal was literally as handkerchief or a piece of cloth that is used as a small drape or scarf. Steadily this embroidery began covering a range of items for daily use - caps, hand fans, pillowcases and wall hangings. The traditional designs and sizes have adapted to present-day requirements- napkins, tablecloths, wall decorations and bed sheets [6]

Chikankari Embroidery of Lucknow :

The word Chikan comes from the Persian word ‘Chikan’, ‘Chikin’, ‘Chikeen’ “Chakeen” meaning making delicate patterns on the fabric. Chikankari is a fine and intricate shadow-work type of embroidery done by white yarn on colorless muslins called “tanzeb” (tan meaning body and zeb meaning decoration). Chikankari nurtured in Uttar Pradesh (primarily in Lucknow) is the centre of chikan embroidery, which is renowned for its timeless grace and its gossamer delicacy, a skill

more than 200 years old. Chikan began as a type of white-on-white (or white work) embroidery. Traditionally, white threads were used on semi-transparent muslin cloth. However, with the advent of newer fabric types, and changing demands and fashions, chikankari is now also being done on a variety of fabrics including synthetic ones. Chikankari is also available now in various colours. [7] Sequin work is also done on the fabrics along with chikankari to give it an exquisite and glittering look. With the British influence, designs became more formal and items other than ethnic apparel began to be created. This brought a formalization of designs to a large extent, which resulted in a good export market. The art is said to be introduced by Noorjahan, the beautiful queen of Emperor Jahangir who is said to be an expert in embroidery and inspired by the Turkish embroidery and she initiated this art. The craftsmen believe that the origin goes back to the time of Prophet. It is believed that while he was passing through a village in Uttar Pradesh, he requested a villager for water. On being offered that, he gave the art of Chikankari to the poor villager as an art that will never let him go hungry. [8]

Process:

Chikan embroidery is a very laborious and time-consuming task. The craftsmen are trained for 15 to 20 years and sometimes it takes 10 to 15 days to make an outfit with hand embroidery as they fill in the designs with threads with detail work. This is why Chikan work is so expensive as compared to machine embroidery. But it is worth it as you really do feel like a queen when you wear it - a Chikan suit is a royal treasure in any fashion expert's wardrobe. The chikan industry has five main processes namely cutting, stitching, printing, embroidery, washing, and finishing. The patterns and effects created depend on the types of stitches and the thicknesses of the threads used in the embroidery. Cutting is carried out in the lots of 20-50 garments. The layouts are done to minimize wastage of materials. [8-10]



Fig. 2 : Chikankari of Lucknow

Stitching may be 'civil', done exclusively for higher priced export orders or 'commercial', which is done for cheaper goods. The needle is held in the right hand while inserting it into the fabric; the left hand supports and controls the thread so that the stitches take the right shape.

Printing is carried out by the use of wooden blocks dipped in dyes which is later washed after the embroidery has been done. After this, the fabric is embroidered by women. It takes an artisan at least 4 to 5 days to embroider a Fashion Temptations chikan ensemble. Each piece has to be completed by one artisan as the handiwork of each artisan differs. Only those with artistic and

quick handiwork can master the art of chikan. The last process, which is washing and finishing, includes bleaching, acid treatment, stiffening, and ironing.

Materials required :

Earlier white muslin was used but now a day's light tinted fabrics are also used as the base fabric however the thread is preferred mostly white.

Motifs :

The most common motif used is that of creepers. Floral motifs may enrich the entire garment or just one corner. Among the floral motifs embroidered, the jasmine, rose, flowering stems, lotus and the paisley motif are the most popular. There is simply no match for the shadow work involved in the chikan. In this the herringbone stitch or Bakhiya as called locally is worked on the wrong side of the cloth. Looking on the right side the effect is that of the shadows between the double running stitch. Another variation of shadow work is created by cutting the patterns in the same fabric as the base material and stitching it on the wrong side. [11]

Stitches :

Chikan embroidery has a range of about 40 stitches of which about 30 are still being used. They cover almost all the embroidery stitches of the country and have interesting and descriptive names. The stitches used in Chikan Kari work of Lucknow are basically of three categories, namely

- Flat Stitches (Subtle stitches that remain close to the fabric)
- Embossed Stitches (they give a grainy appearance)
- Jali Work (Created by thread tension, it gives a delicate net effect)

There are other stitches like stitches resembling French knots, back-stitch, chain stitch, hemstitch, simple stem stitch (Rahet), buttonhole stitch (Hool), running stitch and chain stitch (Zanzeer). The main flat stitches are

1. Taipchi - Running stitch worked on the right side of the fabric - cheapest and the quickest stitch.
2. Pashni: minute vertical satin stitches.
3. Bakhia: commonly referred to as shadow work.
 - (a) Ulta Bakhia: The floats lie on the reverse of the fabric underneath the motif. The transparent muslin becomes opaque and provides a beautiful effect of light and shade.
 - (b) Sidhi Bakhia: Satin stitch with criss-crossing of individual threads. The floats of thread lie on the surface of the fabric. This is used to fill the forms and there is no light or shade effect.
4. Katava is cutwork or appliqué - more a technique than a stitch.
5. Jangira: Chain stitch usually used as outlines
6. Gitti: A combination of buttonhole and long satin stitch usually used to make a wheel-like motif. [12-13]

End products :

Earlier garments were so fragile that they had to be discarded after a few washes —this explains why early samples of chikan garments are not available. Chikan work is applied in chudithar materials, summer shirts, Casual wear, cushion covers, pillow covers, table linen and partition curtains; the latter is fast gaining ground.

No two suits are alike - each one is a labor of love in fact, the craft is alive and struggling to regain some of its former beauty and elegance. Originally, chikan embroidery was done with white thread on soft, white cotton fabric like muslin or cambric so called “White Embroidery” of Lucknow, today chikan work is not only done with coloured threads but on all kinds of fabrics like silk, crepe, organdie, chiffon, and tassar. This makes it very suitable for the seemingly hot climate of the northern plain region. [14]

Kantha of Bengal :

Gujarat is known for its Kutch, Sindhi and Kathiawar embroideries. One of the most pleasing and best-known forms of folk art in Bengal is the Kantha or the embroidery quilt. Any garment or cloth with kantha embroidery (which forms or outlines decorative motifs with running stitch) is a kantha garment. Kanthas are associated with rural women of Bengal (housewife), who RECYCLED worn out sari, dhoti and other garments by sandwiching layers of clothes and then quilting them with simple running stitches. The traditional form of Kantha embroidery was done the soft dhotis and saris. Kanthas are extremely soft to touch, since they are made from old fabrics. In short Kantha for the Bengali folk means embroidered quilt. Kantha is also called as “do-rukha” meaning turning the worn out and old textiles and fabrics to things of beauty. It is the way it has been used that makes it extra ordinary. This beautiful quilting stitch is actually done using simple running stitch. The cloth was given layers that were kept together by the stitches and the cloth had multiple uses. [15-18]

History of Kantha :

Kantha evolved out of necessity to drape or protect against cold. Kontha on Sanskrit means “rags”. It can rightly be called the recycling art. The precious silks and muslins when became worn-out, women instead of throwing them away, piled them in layers and stitched. Another legend relates kantha origin to Lord Buddha and his disciples. It is said that they used to cover themselves with the thrown away rags patched and stitched together. The oldest reference to Kantha is in Sri Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita” by Krishnadas Kaviraj which was written some 500 years back which explains Kantha as a means of lady’s self expression, where the real kantha narrates a story, the emotions and the life of the artist.

Process and Stitches of Kantha :

The process involves laying the worn clothes in layers and stitching them together. Though the stitch used is variations of running stitch, the motifs can range from being simple to very intricate. It is a typical example of how a simple stitch can create elaborate motifs. Usually the motifs are gods and goddesses, flowers, animals or geometric patterns that mean it can be anything the worker can relate to. There are seven different types of kantha based on how it is made and the end use.

Archilata kantha are small covers for mirrors or toilet accessories with wide, colorful borders, Baiton kantha are square wraps used for covering books and other valuables. They have elaborate borders Durjani/thalia these are quilted wallets made out of rectangular kantha pieces. Lep kantha are rectangular wraps heavily padded to make warm quilts. The whole piece is stitched in a wavy pattern. Simple embroidery is done on the finished quilt. Oaar kantha are pillow covers in simple designs. A decorative border is sewn afterwards. Sujani kantha are decorative quilted kantha used as blankets or spreads during religious rituals or other occasions. This started in 18th century in Bihar. Rumal kantha are used as absorbent wipes or plate coverings. They also feature a central

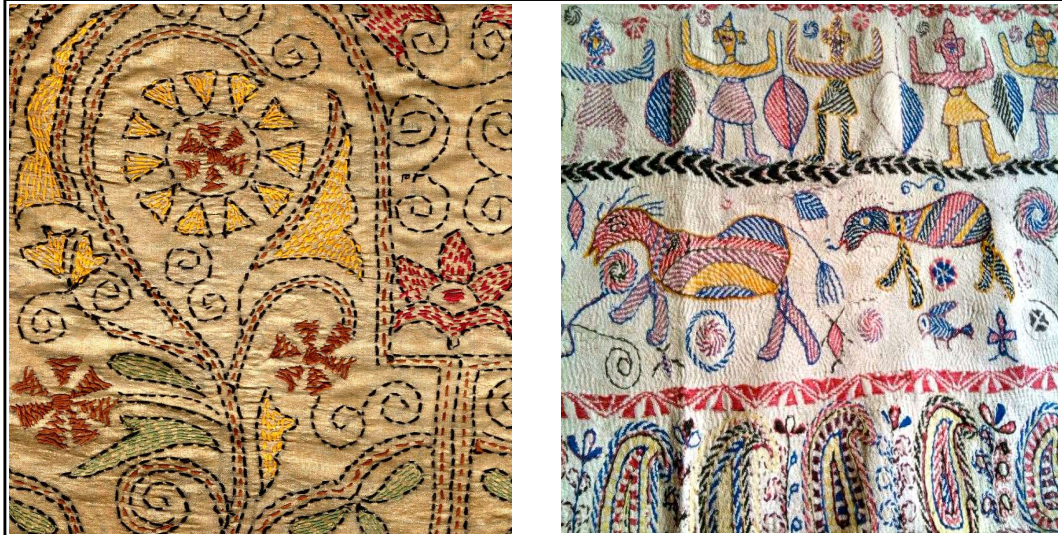


Fig. 3 : Kantha of Bengal

lotus with ornamented borders. [19]

Stitches:

The running stitch is the most commonly used in Kantha. The outline of the design is generally in dark blue, filled with stitches of the same color or in contrasting color. After the design is embroidered, the area around is filled with white running stitches parallel to the outline of the motif. The other stitches occasionally used are chain, herringbone, satin and cross stitch to give wide textural effects.

Colour:

The colours used for this embroidery are black, deep blue and red, symbolizing the three basic aspects of nature i.e., space, sky and earth.[20]

Fabrics:

The base fabric is usually colored in blue, yellow, red, white, turquoise or green. The women of Bengal mostly wore white cotton sarees. Hence the base material was always old sarees and discarded dhotis for Kanthas. Traditionally the tussar silk was used for trade. Today, silks such as Kancheepuram, Tussar or raw silk, in fact any fabric is used as the based material. The contemporary Kantha is not necessarily done on old multiple layered saris or dhotis. For these fabrics and dresses the base fabric used is cotton and silk. Silk floss and colorful cotton threads are used for the embroidery. It even contains appliqué and beadworks in the items meant for daily use.

Threads:

Traditionally the threads were pulled out from the colorful border of the saris, dhotis, material of the fabric and used as embroidery threads. Today threads are bought in bright colors of cotton or silk.

Motifs:

The running stitch is the most commonly used stitch in Kantha. Some of the common motifs used are folk motifs, floral motifs, animal, bird figures, geometrical shapes, Chariots, floral scrawls and creepers. Everyday life motifs like combs, mirrors and umbrellas also feature in this embroidery. Themes from day to day activities are also a common subject for the embroidery. The entire cloth is covered with running stitches and usually has beautiful.

End products:

Traditional form of Kantha embroidery was done the soft dhotis, saris, stoles for women and shawls, covers for mirrors, boxes, pillows etc. It can also be seen on the present-day garments like the sarees, dupatta, shirts for men and women, bedding and other furnishing fabrics.

Both chikankari and kantha embroidery are flourishing craft forms. Today the untiring efforts of individuals, activists and voluntary organizations working for craftspeople. Above all, due to the dedication and sense of aesthetic integrity of the traditional Indian embroiderer who has kept these centuries-old crafts alive.[21-22]

Conclusion:

In India, natural colors used for dying distinguishes the work done in India from the others and also the Indian embroider never uses too many colors in any one piece. Each state in India has a style unique to its tradition. The satin stitch is used in Kashmir. The darn stitch, which produces the 'bagh' and 'phulkari' stitch of Punjab, is vibrant like the people of the state. The interlacing white on white 'chikan' work of Uttar Pradesh is breath-taking and requires a lot of skill. The silk embroidery done in Surat has exquisite patterns. Stitches of Kutch and Kathiawar is as beautiful as they are intricate. The 'kasauti' stitch of Karnataka too is popular due to its traditional value.

Embroidery as an art form has enhanced our civilization, making it more aware of the beauty that can be created with a needle and a thread. Intricate designs and brilliantly coloured patterns have infused a beauty of their own onto fabrics, adding to their value and worth. Government is now taking many initiatives to promote these ancient crafts, in this era where modernization is of upmost welcoming, it is also important to get regional and promote the crafts, tradition and culture of our country.

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