

A close-up photograph of a dark red fabric with intricate white Chikankari embroidery. The embroidery features a repeating pattern of circular and floral motifs. The fabric is draped, showing its texture and the way the light catches the threads.

Chikankari

Source: New Cloth Market

Chikankari

By: B.R.Das & S.Hati

Source: New Cloth Market

Chikankari is an art, which results in the transformation of the plainest cotton and organdie into flowing yards of magic. The word 'Chikan' steps from a Persian word derived from 'Chic', which referred to the Jali' work done on marble or wood. It is also famous as 'shadow work' or 'white embroidery work', traditionally practiced in the city of Lucknow and its environs. This review article tried to bring out the presence and importance of Chikankari embroidery in domestic and international market. The origin & history and developmental initiatives undertaken for Chikankari embroidery are summarized. The various stitches & patterns of Chikankari embroidery utilized in the domestic and international market are discussed. The Chikankari production process flow chart is explained.

Introduction

Textiles are decorated by various techniques; embroidering, brocading, printing, painting and dyeing, but among all of these techniques, the embroidering is the protagonist. In India, there are many popular embroidery clusters like, 'Chikankari of Lucknow', 'Kantha of Bengal', 'Fulkari of Punjab', 'Kutch Embroidery of Gujarat' & 'Kashida of Kashmir'. Each style of embroidery differentiates itself from the others, based on its own beauty & significant value. The 'Chikankari of Lucknow' is considered to be the most popular amongst these and is recognized worldwide¹.

Chikankari is the name given to the "delicate art of hand embroidery traditionally practiced in the city of Lucknow and its environs". Its Lucknow origin is the strongest and the simplest element in the definition. Scholars have been defining and classifying Chikankari for almost a century. Their efforts span several changes in the kind of embroidery being produced and the conditions, in which it has been made. Several writers have tried to probe the word itself for clues as to the essential nature of Chikankari. But there is no certainty, and certainly no consensus as to what Chikan means. Some have described Chikan as Bengali word meaning 'very nice thing'.

Some have translated it as 'fine', while still others have termed it as a Persian word meaning 'to put in bold relief².. Paine gives a range of Persian possibilities, from the 1651 Burton's classical dictionary definition of "a kind of embroidery with gold thread, quilting" to "embroidery in various kinds of silk on garments and other items", in later dictionaries. She also writes of Richardson's 1806 Persian/English dictionary terms Chikan/Chikin 'a kind of cloth worked with the needle in flowers'.



Finally, she notes that Chikankari has possible linguistic connections to the physical barriers of purdah through the Persian word for 'a blind' (chik/chiq). Other definitions of Chikan include 'a form of embroidery done on some whitewashing material such as muslin, calico, linen or silk⁴' and 'embroidery done by white cotton threads on colourless muslin'.

The very range of embroidered textiles to which the word 'Chikan' has been applied in the literature no doubt contributes to the difficulty in settling upon its meaning. The category 'Chikan' is essentially the product of British classification of the last century and it is unclear at what point the analytic categories of British critics diverged from names and descriptions given by makers and consumers of embroidery. British and other subsequent writers' own prior ideas about how embroidery was to be understood and their familiarity with European styles of needlework were highly influential in shaping their

classification (e.g. use of terms such as 'satin-stitch', 'buttonholing' and so on).

In most lexicographical definition, Chikan appears as a class of objects, neither connected specifically with Lucknow nor entailing an entire distinctive form of embroidery. Watt's classification gives Chikan the status of a 'division' of embroidery with subdivisions of Chikan-work proper, satin-stitch on whitewashing material and kadambini or gold and silver embroidery on white cotton cloth and muslin. Watt therefore, writes about Chikan in such far-flung places as Peshawar, Madras and Calcutta as well as Lucknow, although the work differed in each location. Naqvi definition is almost the same as Watt's with addition of information about the thread that is used "white threads of bleached raw silks like Muga orTasar⁶".

History

The name Chikan has been derived from the Persian word 'Chakin' or 'Chikeen' meaning a kind of cloth wrought with needle work. Chikan is said to have originated as a court craft during the reign of Mughal emperor Jehangir, by his wife Noor Jahan. Traditionally, the Chikan embroidery was exclusive white items, decorations similar to the cotton, jamdani and woven traditions. The Nawab Shirajudaula of Avadh, great Jover of grace, style and beauty was greatly attracted by this craft. It was his keen initiative and interest, which promoted this craft in present day Lucknow.

Another record of the travelers of the sixteenth century describes that during the sixteenth century, white work from Bengal, was influenced by the Portuguese traders, the residents of the port Hugli, north of Calcutta of that time. This art of .surface ornamentation was brought to Lucknow by the Bengali migrants, who came from Dacca in eighteenth century to settle in Lucknow. Chikan work came into production by the nineteenth century. During this period similar work was also produced at Calcutta and Madras.

It is reported that earlier brass, bone, copper or iron needles were used, where as now only steel needles are used. Fine art originally embroidery , was done on white tanjeb; the muslin from Dacca, using only white untwisted cotton or some times tussar silk for embroidery.

A large number of men were practising this art of embroidery since nineteenth century. Trade is now predominantly practiced by woman in Lucknow and adjoining villages. Some of the popular motifs are: kairi (mango motif, generally made using taipchi stitch); dhaniya patti (corriander leaf); phanda is made and a straight stitch is done to make the base of the stem; dhum patti (leaf pattern made of cross-stitch); ghas patti (grass leaves V-shaped line of stitches worked in a graduated series); murri (grain motif - diagonal stitches are worked several times on a basic stitch to form a grain shape); kangan (bracelet-made by combination of keel, murri and jali stitch); joda murri (pair of grains); maharaki (close button hole is done around a hole and finished with murri); sadi-maharaki (no hole is made, the part made in the centre is finished with tapichi and murri); daraz/katub (two fabrics are overlapped, stitched and extra fabric is cut, the cutting is called katub); pechani (taipchi stitch is covered by entwining the thread over it in a regular manner to provide the effect of a lever spring); tanjire (for lining the motif, looks like a chain); gitti (circle is formed with minute hole in centre); phanda (single chain is made, then on its top 3-4 similar chains); keel (first phanda is formed then the needle is inserted over and over the chain stitch to form a keel); kangira (seam allowance of fabric folded such that. triangles are formed on the wrong side of the fabric).

Procedures after cutting the fabric in required length, the designs are traced on the marked areas with blocks of variety of shapes, sizes and forms. The block is dipped in neel (a chemical dye), which is mixed with glue and is soaked in cloth pads. The block is then printed on the desired area of the design. The embroiderer uses these printed outlines as a pattern and guide. These designs are embroidered by various stitches.

The stitches used for Chikankari are only that applied in regular embroidery. Tapichi (stem stitch) and bukhara (inverted stem stitch) are some of the popular stitches. Skill lies in rendering them in a specific way with the needles of the varying sizes. The stitches employed for this embroidery are pulled work, which create intricate patterns, locally known as jali work; the double back stitch; running and back stitch.

No hooks or frames are used while embroidering. The left hand has to continually stretch the cloth gently weft ways and warp ways to avoid puckering. The jali work in particular is done with wide blunt needle. This needle makes the holes in the fabric with ease.

Intricate floral designs are indigenously embroidered using white/coloured cotton thread, on sheer white or pastel coloured muslin, organza and these days some times silk. The ingenuity of Chikankari, the art of surface ornamentation lies in deploying up to thirty-five stitches to embroider the floral, geometrical and animal patterns⁸.

Stitches^{9, 10}

Tepchi is a long running or darning stitch worked with six strands on the right side of the fabric taken over four threads and picking up one; thus, a line is formed. It is used principally as a basis' for further stitchery and occasionally to form a simple shape.

Bakhiya, double back or shadow stitch in chikan work is done from the wrong side of the fabric and the design is rendered in the herringbone style. The shadow of the thread is seen through the cloth on the right side.

Hool, is a fine detached eyelet stitch. Herein, a hole is punched in the fabric and the threads are teased apart. It is then held by small straight stitches all round and worked with one thread on the right side of the fabric. It can be worked with six threads and often forms the center of a flower.

Zanzeera, is a small chain stitch worked with one thread on the right side of the fabric. Being extremely fine, it is used to finally outline the leaf or petal shapes after one or more outlines have already been worked.

Rahet is a stem stitch worked with six threads on the wrong side of the fabric. It forms a solid line of back stitch on the right side of the fabric and is rarely used in its simple form but is common in the double form of Dohra Bakhiya as an outlining stitch.

Banarsi stitch has no European equivalent and is a twisted stitch worked with six threads on the right side of the fabric. Working from the right across about five threads a small stitch is taken over about two threads vertically. The needle is reinserted halfway along and below the horizontal stitch formed and is taken out about two threads vertically on the right above the previous stitch.

Khatau is similar to Bakhia, but finer and is a form of applique. In Khatau, the design is prepared on calico material. That is placed over the surface of the final fabric and then paisley and floral patterns are stitched on to it.

Phanda and Murri are the forms of stitches used to embroider the centre of the flowers in ordinary Chikan work motifs. They are typically French knots, with Murri being rice-shaped and Phanda millet-shaped.

Jali stitch is the one, where the thread is never drawn through the fabric, ensuring that the back portion of the garment looks as impeccable as the front. The warp and weft threads are carefully drawn apart and minute buttonhole stitches are inserted into the cloth. Turpai and Oarzdari are also significant stitches in Chikan work. Turpai should have an effect of a thin thread. Darzdari have several varieties, the popular ones are Kohi darz, Kamal darz, Shankarpara darz, Muchii and Singbhada darz.

The various other types of legendary Chikankari stitches are: Pechani, Bijli, Ghaspatti, Makra, Kauri, Hathkadi, Banjkali, Sazi, Karan, Kapkapi, Madrazi, Bulbul-chasm, Taj Mahal, Janjeera, Kangan, Dhania-patti, Rozan, Meharki, Chanapatti, Baalda, Jora, Keel kangan, Bulbul, Sidhaul, Ghas ki patti etc.

Production Process

Chikan was started 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. Presently all types of fabrics, namely Voile,

Chiffon, Linen, Rubia, Khadi, Handloom cloth, Terry Cotton, Polyester, Georgette, Terry voil etc are used in Chikankari embroidery.

The pattern is Block Printed on de-starched fabric using temporary (not fast) dyes. Chikankari is something like unity in diversity i.e. it includes some simple and complex stitches giving it an effect which is simple, gentle, delicate and yet elegant. These days Chikankari work is being done on variety of items such as 'Saris', 'Suits', 'Kurtas', 'Table Covers', 'Bed Sheet' and 'Cushion Covers' etc. Chikankari is also available now in various colours. Sequin work is also done on the fabrics along with Chikankari to give it an exquisite and glittering look.

The fact that Chikankari embroidery has returned to fashion has resulted in the production of exquisite pieces, but also in products of very dubious taste.

The details of the process flow chart of Chikankari manufacture is demonstrated below.

Process flow chart (for ladies & gents suits): cloth-cutting-stitching-printing-embroidery-jali work-final stitching-washing-pressing-final product-sale.

Process flow chart (for sarees & suit lengths): cloth- cutting-printing-embroidery-jali work-pico (only in sarees)-washing-Pressing-final product sale.

The Chikan industry has five main processes namely cutting, stitching, printing, embroidery, washing and finishing. Cutting is carried out in the lots of 2050 garments. The layouts are done to minimize wastage of materials. Stitching, often done by the same person, may be 'civil' done exclusively for higher-priced export orders on 'commercial', which is done for cheaper goods.

Printing is carried out by the use of wooden blocks dipped in dyes like Neel and Safeda. After this, the fabric is embroidered by women.

The last process, which is washing and finishing takes about 10-12 days. This includes bleaching, acid treatment, stiffening and ironing.

Patterns¹⁴

Chikankari embroidered shirts and kurtas

Chikankari embroidered shirts and kurtas are very popular today not only among women but also among men. Infact, nowadays, Chikankari embroidered kurtas and shirts are specially designed for men, which can be worn all types of occasions. Chikankari kurtas and shirts have always been a "must have" item for those men, who believe in dressing up perfectly for great occasions. This pattern is highly appreciated all over the world for its cool feel and availability in various colors, designs and fabrics. Chikankari shirts and kurtas come in fine cotton fabric with traditional Chikankari embroidery o~ various types; like 'Aipchi', 'Sakhia', 'Phanda', 'Murri', 'Jali', 'Hathkati', 'Pechni', 'G has Patti', 'Chaana Patti' are specially attraction of summer and these are great day time outdoor casual clothing. The mostly preferred color patterns are in white, but other light color shades are equally popular. The representative image of Chikankari kurta is shown in Fig. 1.

Chikankari Salwar Kameez

One of the most popular, comfortable, among women, convenient and widely dress worn by Indian women is the salwar kameez. Indian salwar kameezes are available in an array of colors, styles and patterns. .They can be plain, printed and kurtas and shirts have always been a embroidered. Among the embroidered salwar kameezes, Chikankari embroidered salwar kameez is very popular.

The look of any fabric is enhanced with Chikankari hand embroidery - a combination of hand embroidery on the kurta, bottom of the salwar and dupatta. The representative image of Chrkan kari embroidered salwar kameez is shown in Fig. 2.



Chikankari Sarees



Indian saree has never lost its charm inspite of the emergence of varieties of Indian women wear. Saree is every Indian woman's desire of perfect attire, that stays forever in the fashion scene. Indian Chikankari work sarees are very popular for casual as well as formal wear, which it gives a very pure relaxing comfort. It is one of the most favoured sarees by Indian women.

Chikankari embroidered sarees can be worn on festive occasions as well as daily wear. Chikankari sarees are office wear saris, worn by teachers when going to schools/colleges, lady doctors and housewives in their daily wear.

Apart from traditional and contemporary collections of Chikankari sari for middle and old-aged women, trendy Chikankari sarees for youngsters are also available in the Indian market. Chikankari sarees give a sophisticated, feminine, graceful and elegant look to any lady. Cotton is the preferred choice of fabric for Chikankari saree. It is available in all shades of colors, but the most favoured ones are the light pastel shade colors.

Chikankari sarees in Voile, Organza, Polyester, Chiffon, Viscose, Georgette, Polyester georgette, Cotton crepe are also available. The designs keep on changing as per the market trends, with colors that perfectly match with the season. The stitches and the workmanship used in these sarees vary from light embroidery to heavy embroidery. The representative image of Chikankari saree is shown in Fig. 3.

Chikankari Home Furnishings

Today Chikankari embroidery has become a popular form of embroidery, which is not limited to dress and dress materials only, but it has extended to home furnishings as well. Chikankari home furnishings are fast gaining ground today. The representative image of Chikankari home furnishing item is shown in Fig. 4.



Recent Developments

A multi-pronged branding exercise is on the cards for the famous Chikankari fabric of Lucknow in order to make it more appealing. The branding tools would comprise a dedicated Chikankari website, ramp shows, online Chikankari trade fairs, buyer-seller meet, use of information technology to create virtual sample and shop-in-shop at leading retail chains. The exercise will be undertaken both by the Uttar Pradesh government and the Chikankari manufacturers.

Uttar Pradesh Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) has decided to develop dedicated websites to promote the traditional Chikan craft. EPB has plan of actions to organize Chikankari-centric ramp shows by roping in India's top designers and models to popularize the craft, as reported by the commissioner of EPB on the sidelines of a seminar on 'E-marketplace: Branding & Promotion of Lucknow Chikankari and Zari handcrafted products in the national and international market'. According to EPB source of information, the direct export of Chikankari apparels is estimated at Rs 60 crore. However, bulk of the material is exported indirect through buying agents and trading houses. Indirect export would be at least Rs 200 crore annually, which shows its huge potential.

The Chikankari industry is facing a tough competition from machine-made imitation of China that has flooded the international market due to low prices and intricate designs. Though Chikankari craft has secured registration under the Geographical Indication (GI) Act, the fabric has failed to attract the youth due to poor branding. Reliable sources from co-organisers and Chikan manufacturers inform that the Chikankari suffered from lopsided branding and marketing.

Unless we improve product development and design, the fabric would continue to operate on the fringes. Towards this, a Chikankari trade fair would be organized soon in association with the Confederation of Indian Industry, Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts and banks, which may serve both as a buyer-seller meet and a retail marketing platform. There is a facility of creating a virtual Chikankari sample for offshore buyers, in which the seller can create an online ramp show, where models wear the designs. This saves a lot of cost and time in sending physical samples and the buyers get to see the product worn by models and which creates a better impact.

Meanwhile, B2B portal for textile fibre2fashion has offered to help the Lucknow Chikankari industry in the branding exercise, provided the manufacturers form a consortium and produce in bulk. The Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) Development Institute, Kanpur, too has urged the state government to facilitate talks with leading retailers like Pantaloons, Shoppers Stop and Reliance Retail to showcase Chikankari creations¹⁵.

Imitating famous Chikankari art of Lucknow or selling the product with a similar brand name would no longer be easy. In a major filip to the handicraft form of Uttar Pradesh, which is also popular in offshore countries, it has been included in the Geographical Indication (GI) goods category under the intellectual Property Right. With the clause of GI certification, no person other than manufacturers and craftsmen from Uttar Pradesh would be permitted to use or sell their products under the brand name Lucknow Chikankari.

The certification will give a major economic boost to the craftsmen, who otherwise are being exploited by the middlemen selling their products in other states and exporting the same to foreign countries. GI certification means that Chikankari is a local art of Lucknow and Uttar Pradesh. It will provide legal protection to the craftsmen from imitation.

The GI certification will not only protect identity of the handicraft, but also benefit the artisans financially. Now whatever Chikankari cloth is exported outside the country, it will generate an additional premium of 13 to 15 percent.

Of this premium earned, a major part will be contributed to the craftsman¹⁶.

References

1. Diagnostic study artisan the chikan embroidery cluster, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, Available at <http://www.msme.foundation.org/folder/Diagnostic/80.pdf>.
2. Charm of chikan, Lucknow city magazine, September 1988.
3. Paine S, Chikan embroidery: The floral white work of India, Princes Risborough, Aylesbury, Bucks, U.K. Shire, 1989.
4. Watt S G, Indian art at Delhi 1903, being the official catalogue of the Delhi exhibition 1902-1903, London, John Murray, 1904.
5. Pande M C, Chikankari of Lucknow, Bulletin of museums and archeology in U.P. No 2, 1968.
6. Naqvi SM, Stitches employed in Lucknow chikan, Bulletin of museums and archeology in U.P. No 5, 1971.
7. Wilkinson W & Clare M, Embroidering Lives: Women's Work and Skill in the Lucknow Embroidery Industry, State University of New York Press, 1999, 12.
8. History of chikan embroidery, Available at http://crafts.indianetzone.com/chikan_embroidery.htm.
9. Stitches of chikankar., Available at <http://www.handembroidery.com/stitches-in-chikankarLhtml>.
10. Deulkar O, Household textiles and laundry work, Atma Ram & Sons, Kashmere Gate, Delhi-11 0006, 1998.

11. Dusenbury, Mary M, Flowers, Dragons and Pine Trees, In: Asian Textiles in the Spencer Museum of Art, Hudson Hills Press, Manchester, 2004, 42.
12. Manfredi P, Chikankari of Lucknow, In: Asian Embroidery, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 2004, 275.
13. Chikankari, Available at www.indiacrafts.com/textile/embroidery/chikankari.
14. Chikan patterns, Available at <http://www.indian-embroidery.com>.
15. Chikan set to get brand makeover, Available at <http://www.business-standard.com!india/news/chikan-set-to-get-brand-makeover/12/44/354421>.
16. "GI certification", Available at <http://www.navhindtimes.in/news/india-news/466-up-chikankari-gets-gi-certification>.

Originally Published in New Cloth Market, Jan-2011

About the authors

B.R.Das is associated with Department of Textile Technology, Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi-11 0016, India & S.Hati is associated with Utkal University of Culture, Bhubaneswar-751009, Orissa, India

Image Courtesy:

kurtabazaar.blogspot.com
maharastrabazaar.com
o3.indiatimes.com
wajidalicollections.com
pakhandmade.com