



Crafting Sustainable Fashion: Chikankari Embroidery as a Cultural Legacy

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Abstract

Chikankari is a delicate traditional hand-embroidery from Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India. This is famous for its intricate beautiful designs, heritage value and cultural significance. Chikankari is a centuries-old craft also known as white embroidery or shadow work. Chikankari embroidery reflects the Indian aesthetics and rich cultural heritage. This study analyze chikankari embroidery as a representation of cultural, heritage identity, observing its transformation from a local craft to a global contemporary fashion. It explore how contemporary fashion designers integrate chikankari embroidery motifs and stitches into modern design, preserving its authenticity while adapting to global markets. Further, this study highlights the challenges faced by craftsmen in preserving its originality, sustain their livelihoods, including mass production machine imitation, cultural appropriation. By emphasising the importance of sustainable practices and collaboration between artisans and



contemporary designers, the paper aims to uplift the sustaining and appreciation of chikankari as an immortal art form and cultural heritage symbol.

Keywords: Chikankari, cultural identity, hand embroidery, craft, Indian craftsmanship, sustainability

1. Introduction

The chikankari is traditional, authentic, heritage embroidery of India, originating in Lucknow during the Mughal period near about 400 years ago, combining Persian influences with Indian motifs to create a beautiful craft. India is diverse in many traditional textiles, but chikankari embroidery holds a special place due to its rich cultural legacy and fine delicate art work. Traditionally chikankari work was done on white muslin fabric with white thread.

The beauty of timeless chikankari embroidery lies in its delicate intricate motifs inspired from nature, architecture, and everyday life. Traditionally this craft was practiced by women of royal court during their leisure time but now this craft transform into a professional craft, today thousands of artisans depend on this craft for their livelihood. However, the International status of chikankari has brought both opportunities and challenges, as the very intricacy of the international fashioning business is dealt with.

This paper going to analyse the role of chikankari embroidery as a cultural identity and explore its transformation from traditional attire to contemporary fashion style. This research also identify critical issues, such as the originality of hand-embroidered chikankari when a large number of machine versions are produced and the socio-economic status of those artisans who are struggling to keep this art alive. The aim of this study to understand how chikankari embroidery continues to serve as a bridge between tradition and innovation, resonating with audiences globally.

Objectives

1. To trace the historical evolution of chikankari embroidery.
2. To analyze its cultural significance in India.



3. To study its representation in modern fashion.
4. To explore challenges in sustaining this traditional art form.

2. Historical Background of Chikankari Embroidery

Chikankari is one of the most beautiful hand embroideries in India. This craft originated during Mughal era in the 17th century, blooming under the patronage of Emperor Jahangir and his wife, Nur Jahan. It is believed that Queen Nur Jahan introduced this craft. She was very artistic and love intricate handicrafts. The word *chikankari* is derived from the Persian word *chikin*, meaning “embroidered flower”, which reflecting the Persian influence on this Indian craft. Traditionally, this embroidery was a leisure activity of royal court women. Later on, it evolved into a commercial craft done by artisans in the region of Lucknow.

In this embroidery near about 32 different stitches are used. These stitches add delicate aesthetic appeal to the final product. In the olden days this embroidery was done on white fine muslin fabric with white thread but now a days this embroidery is done on varieties of fabrics like georgette, chiffon, knitted fabric, viscose or even on silk with colourful threads.

2.1. Evolution During the Mughal Period

Traditionally, Chikankari embroidery was done on fine white muslin fabric, also known as *mulmul*, famous for its lightweight, delicate and translucent quality. In this embroidery mainly featured floral, vine and geometrical motifs, resonating with the Mughal aesthetic architectural and nature-inspired designs. During this era, this craft was predominantly done by women of the royal court during leisure time.

2.2. Transition to Artisan Communities

After the decline of the Mughal Empire, this chikankari craft transitioned to the artisan communities in the region of Lucknow. Then, it became a professional skill of Lucknow artisans, which was passed down from generation to generation. Male artisans majorly participating in this craft production. Now a days, Chikankari is done on various fabrics like silk, georgette, viscose, chiffon and cotton, making it adopt for a majority of audience.



2.3. The Technique and Its Unique Features

In chikankari embroidery variety of different hand-stitching are used, including Bakhiya (herringbone stitch), Tepchi (long running stitch), *phanda* (knotted stitches), *jali* (net-like patterns), and *murri* (rice-shaped stitches), Hool (small hole with straight stitch), *Zanzeera*, *Rahet*, *Banarsi*, *Khatau*, *Turpai*, *Darzdari*, *Pechani*, *Bijli*, *Ghaspatti*, *Makra*, *Kauri*, *Hathkadi*, *Banjali*, *Sazi*, *Karan*, *Kapkapi*, *Madrazi*, *Bulbul-chasm*, *Taj Mahal*, *Janjeera*, *Kangan*, *Dhania-patti*, *Rozan*, *Meharki*, *Chanapatti*, *Balda*, *Jora*, *Keel kangan*, *Bulbul*, *Sidhaul*, *Ghas ki patti*. These stitches are very fine and done with remarkable precision. These stitches create a three-dimensional effect.

The chikankari embroidery start with finalised the design, the design then engraved on wooden block. After this with indigo washable block printing is done onto the fabric, which artisans then embroider using fine threads. The final step involves washing to remove the printed outlines, revealing the intricate embroidery.

2.4. Post-Colonial Revival and Recognition

In the post-colonial time, Traditional chikankari embroidery faced challenges as industrialisation and machine made textiles over power traditional handicrafts. However, people showed interest in India's cultural heritage craft during the late 20th century that's why revival of chikankari begin. Government took many initiatives for the revival, including the granting of Geographical Indication (GI) status in December 2008 to protect its authenticity, helped preserve the authentic traditional craft and promote its global recognition.

Today chikankari embroidery is thriving world-wide which shows the essence and hardworking of Indian craftsmanship. Now a days chikankari embroidery is practiced on different fabrics and silhouettes while preserving its cultural and historical essence, making it a classical timeless India's textile heritage.



3. Chikankari as a Symbol of Cultural Identity

Chikankari embroidery is not just a craft, it is a great symbol of cultural identity. This craft reflecting the tradition, heritage, values, local craftsmanship of the Indian. The Roots of this craft is in Lucknow, this craft blending Persian influences with Indian traditional artistry. The traditional chikankari craft's motifs mainly inspired by nature and architectural pattern, symbolise harmony and simplicity with Indian values.

3.1. Representation of Syncretic Culture

The motifs and techniques of chikankari express the seamless blending of different cultural elements. In this craft inspired floral and geometric motifs of Persian blend with Indian traditional techniques which highlight the different cultural exchanges that shaped the region. As this craft originated in the Mughal era, chikankari embroidery also reflects the royal essential and artistic sophistication of that period. Elaborate fine intricate designs of this craft shows that society valued craftsmanship and aesthetic expression.

3.2. Embodiment of Indian Aesthetics

Chikankari embroidery is rooted in Indian aesthetic with simplicity and harmony. The themes of this crafts are prosperity, peace, happiness and growth, which are deeply connected in the Indian way of life. Mainly motifs are inspired from nature. Nature holds a very significant place in Indian cultural philosophy and art. As comparison to other Indian traditional embroidery chikankari hold a very prominent and sophisticated craft which has a unique identity within.

3.3. Community and Heritage

Chikankari embroidery is more than just a source of income for artisans and who practice this, it is their legacy. This traditional craft is interwoven with the socio-economic and culture of the Lucknow region and developing feeling of pride and belonging in artisans. This traditional craft skill and knowledge passed through one generation to other connecting artisans to their traditional roots while adapting the contemporary changes in it.



3.4. Cultural Symbol in Contemporary Fashion

In contemporary fashion chikankari embroidery become a symbol of rich heritage and cultural identity. This embroidery is practiced on both traditional and contemporary silhouette, which shows its versatility. Designers use this embroidery in global fashion market. They present and sell this craft in international platform in variety of silhouettes while retaining its cultural identity.

3.5. A Bridge Between Tradition and Modernity

Chikankari embroidery can be adapt in variety of silhouettes and product without losing its cultural essence and authenticity, it plays a role as a bridge between tradition to modernity. This craft perform as a cultural artifact that communicates the heritage values of its past while connecting with the present contemporary trends. Chikankari embroidery representation in modern fashion industry not only preserves its identity but also encourage global appreciation for India's traditional textile heritage.

4. Representation in Contemporary Fashion

Chikankari embroidery has transform from traditional origins to contemporary fashion. Earlier this craft was reserved for local and ceremonial wear, but now this craft can seen in international market and luxury collections. The seamless transformation of this craft into modern design highlights its versatility and timeless appeal while preserving its authentic identity.

4.1. Chikankari in Indian Fashion

Indian fashion designers have played a very important role in reviving and popularising chikankari embroidery in contemporary fashion. Contemporary fashion designers like Abu Jani-Sandeep Khosla, JJ Vallaya, Manish Malhotra, Sabyasachi Mukherjee and Meera-Muzafar Ali have include this craft into bridal, haute couture and formal collections, combining heritage with modern innovation. Intricate patterns and delicate textures of chikankari



embroidery make it a perfect choice for wedding lehengas, sarees, formal suit- dupatta which shows elegance and cultural pride.

The adaptability of chikankari craft into contemporary fashion like skirt, pants, kurtas, tunics, stole, scarf and even Indo-Western fusion wear make it favourable choice to younger audiences. Indian fashion designers have also include chikankari embroidery in ready to wear collections which is lightweight, easy to handle, stylish, machine washable and good options for daily wear.

4.2. Global Presence and Recognition

Chikankari embroidery has also gathered international attention, this is used by global fashion designers and high-fashion international platforms. By collaborating of international brand and Indian traditional chikankari artisans, they shows this craft as a symbol of heritage authenticity and luxury. Fashion designers Tarun Tahiliani have highlighted chikankari craft on global runways, presenting it as a sophisticated and adaptable embroidery technique in modern way. This international presence of this craft has not only inflated its aesthetic value but also highlight it is sustainable fashion movements.

4.3. Modern Adaptations and Innovations

Contemporary adaptations of chikankari embroidery shows its versatility and relevance in modern fashion market. Fashion designers have experimented with different fabrics, including silk, crepe, denim, organza, and tulle, to create a innovative articles while preserving it is traditional essence. Chikankari embroidery also incorporation into fashion accessories, such as handbags, pouch, stole, scarves, footwear, jewellery etc further highlights its adaptability. These innovations in this craft ensure that it is adapting according to modern fashion in fashion industry.

5. Challenges to Sustainability

While chikankari embroidery has gained popularity and recognition but this craft faces many challenges in sustaining its authenticity, originality, cultural significance, and the livelihoods



of its artisans. The pressures of contemporary fashion, mass production, and buyers preferences threaten its originality, authenticity as a traditional art form. These challenges are critical to securing the craft's survival and continued adapting in the global fashion market. Besides its cultural and artistic value, chikankari embroidery faces many challenges:

5.1. Mechanization and Loss of Authenticity

With the introduction of machine embroidery traditional handcraft sector effected a lot. Machine-made copies are cheaper and faster to produce but lack the intricacy, individuality, authenticity and cultural essence of handmade embroideries. These copies saturate the fashion market, making it difficult for authentic chikankari artisans to compete. The loss of authenticity not only damage the cultural significance of the handicraft but also minimizes its value in artisanal product. Because of less knowledge Consumers may purchase machine made mass-produced products and contributing to the erosion of traditional chikankari embroidery.

5.2. Economic Exploitation of Artisans

Infact the demand for chikankari embroidered products are in high demands but artisans often struggle with low income and exploitative practices. Middlemen mainly got the major profits but leaving artisans with less wages for their labor-intensive work. The lack of formal recognition or financial insecurities new generations do not want to opt this craft as profession. Mant artisans work in informally without access to education, or social benefits. This situation limits their ability to sustain their craft as a viable livelihood for them and their families.

5.3. Cultural Appropriation and Misrepresentation

Global exposure of chikankari embroidery has raised concerns about cultural appropriation and misrepresentation. Contemporary fashion designers and brands adopt this traditional embroidery without giving the good wages to the artisans who are behind it. These practices dilute the cultural value of chikankari embroidery, they use them as aesthetic element devoid of its historical and cultural value. This misrepresentation not only detach the craft from its roots but also cheat artisans and communities of the recognition and respect they actually deserve.



5.4. Competition with Fast Fashion

The fast fashion modern industry famous by its focus on low price and speed, which has direct challenge to traditional crafts like chikankari embroidery. Hand embroideries are very time consuming which makes it difficult for artisans to match the low prices and get high profits of mass-produced fashion garments. Today young consumer preferences lean toward quick and affordable fashion, the demand for authentic chikankari embroidery may decline, further affecting the livelihoods of artisans.

5.5. Environmental and Social Sustainability

The environmental sustainability of chikankari is also a major concern. Artisans mainly depend on natural dyes and traditional fabrics, which are very expensive and natural dyes process is very time-consuming as compare to synthetic alternatives. Cost of eco-friendly materials are high and the lack of access to sustainable resources artisans often adopt non friendly environmental practices. The lack of structured support systems for artisan communities complicate social sustainability issues, as many artisans remain disconnected from markets, policy initiatives, financial aid, Government support and advantages.

5.6. Government and Policy Gaps

While government took many initiatives, such as the Geographical Indication (GI) tag for chikankari craft to protects its originality, authenticity but these implementation remains limited. Many artisans are unaware about such policies. There is also a lack of government schemes that focus on providing financial aid, training programs, and market access for artisans of chikankari.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Chikankari embroidery, as a symbol of cultural heritage identity, bridges the difference between tradition and modernity. To save its authenticity and cultural heritage significance, the following measures are suggested:



1. Developing artisan cooperatives to secure fair wages
2. Apply strict rules for the use of "authentic chikankari" labels.
3. Promoting collaborations between contemporary fashion designers and local artisans.
4. Raising awareness about the handicraft's cultural authentic heritage through craft fairs, exhibitions and educational initiatives.

By addressing these issues, chikankari craft can continue to thrive as a living art form, embodying India's rich cultural legacy while contributing to contemporary fashion narratives.



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