

Chikankari- the white embroidery

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Abstract - Embroidery is considered as a passion of womens to express their creativity and spend their leisure time. The art of Chikankari had flourished under the reign of Awadh later the knowledge shifted to Lucknow but lost its patronage during the British rule. The artisans were illiterate and facing problems. Indian embroidery owe distinctive identity of their own. They are classified on the basis of technique and region of its origin. Chikanwork is pristine art of Central India, widely explored in apparels as well as home products ranging from pastels to bright colors. Following the legacy Muslim community is still dominating the Chikan industry.

INTRODUCTION

India is a treasure house of handicrafts, handloom weaves and textiles that could add new dimensions to the growing industry. Handicrafts speak a lot about history, rich culture and heritage, traditional skills of native people. Chikankari is one of India's popular and centuries old hand embroidery practiced by a large urban craft community in Lucknow.

Lucknow, the city of Nawabs is famous for art, culture, and cuisines, situated on the banks of river Gomti. The cultural life of the city is majorly dominated by music and dance. The exquisite architecture, poetry and delicious food is well known from every nook and corner of the city. The craft is considered as a symbol of Lucknow's tradition. It is believed that a visit to the city is incomplete without buying Chikan work.



The embroidery had been used to adorn from the smallest possession to the most sumptuous attire. A delicate and rich craft that had nurtured through its characteristics and fine details. It was used as an embellishment for garments as needle and thread work. The legendary stitches of chikankari is practiced in all parts of India having a distinctive feature.



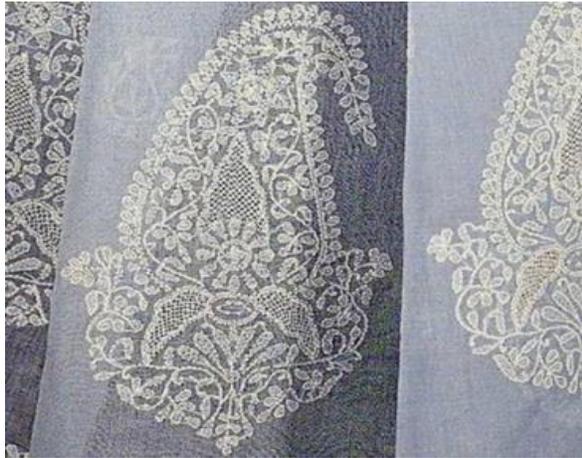
Over the years it has flourished, evolved, survived loss of patronage, declined, suffered commercialization. But now globally appreciated for its uniqueness. This art is hereditary that gives a classy and subtle look to the person carrying it. It is more than 200 years older craft that belongs to local Muslim community, executed by womens supplementing their family income. They get inspiration from art, tribal people, folk culture that forms a vital part in day-to-day life of people.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For research purpose, qualitative method was undertaken to analyze the values of chikankari work. Secondary data has been collected through reports, research papers and journal studies. The research has been done to evaluate the traditional handicrafts of Lucknow and acquire knowledge about its various aspects. Although it has not been carried out in form of one-to-one conversation due to pandemic, the primary data collection was inefficacious to collect.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chikankari is a very graceful and elegant embroidery that came into existence when Queen Nur Jahan, wife of Emperor Jahangir embroidered a beautiful Chikanwork cap for her husband that popularized as craft of white-on-white embroidery. Lucknow is heart of Chikankari, the famous Lakhnavi Chikankari is known for its glory and perfection. Later it became popular in number of cities of Indo- gangetic plains of Delhi, Agra, Kanpur, Banaras, Patna, Gaya. Although it has taken deep roots in Lucknow as its base and manufacturing hub but also spread in New Delhi, Jaipur, West Bengal, Hyderabad and even in Calcutta. Now it has established as a commercial commodity of north, west and central India, whose supremacy remained undisputed as local woven muslin- tanzeb.



Technique – Chikankari motifs are traced prior to embroidery on cloth with the help of design engraved wooden blocks and washable color. Stamping is done for printing the patterns through neel or dye then fabric is set on smaller frames. Needlework is applied to traced patterns with different types of common stitches like flat, herringbone, satin, back, stem, buttonhole, chain and raised stitches like burion and french knots. White and bright colored untwisted cotton and polyester threads are used create the designs. Pattern depends on the type of thread used, that creates a mesh-like section. When the Chikan work gets completed, the cloth is washed to remove the traced pattern, further bleached, acid treatment is applied to add stiffness. At last, the finished work is ironed properly to enhance the overall look.



There are more than 35 stitches in chikankari, out of which murri and phanda are most difficult and valued stitches as they constitute the shape of rice and millet grain respectively. Some of famous stitches are: taipachi, hool, zanzeera, khatau, pechavi, makra, keel kangan, rahet, turpai, bijli, kauri, kangan, bulbul, banarasi, darzdari, ghaspatti, hathkadi, dhaniyapatti, banjkali, kapkapi, bulbul chasm, rozan, sazi, madrazi, taj mahal, meharki, shidhaul, karan, chanapatti, badla and jora. These are some local names for stitches that holds uniformity and consistency in them. They are made by using different number of strands.

Style of Embroidery – The style used for Chikanwork is commonly known as shadow work that gives light and shade effect through herringbone stitch. The most beautiful part of embroidery is open work that is achieved by pulling the threads. The finest of work is done by mens through the Persian aesthetics. Every stitch needs to be perfect and neat. The embroidery is created on the wrong side of the fabric that creates shadow of light color on the right side of the fabric. It gives a beautiful outline on the right side developing a motif. Various embellishments are adapted like beads, mukaish, mirror work, badla and sequins to give a rich look. Flat and knotted stitches (embossed), both produces shadow appearance or a transparent effect.



Flat stitches Embossed work Jali work

Motifs – The motifs are generally inspired from nature, flora (flowers, creepers used as lace patterns, jaals and butis), fruits (mango and almonds for paisley motif) and birds like parrots, peacock that creates a

sense of unity in diversity. The vintage patterns signified the artistic skills of replicating an architecture. The Taj, Fatehpur Sikri and Imambara mosque jaalis and walls influenced the artisans for developing motifs.

It was started as a white on white embroidery that slowly evolved with colors. Introduction of colors is a recent innovation in Chikan embroidery. Earlier whites and pastels were often used, now created on a wider color palette. Chikan work is found on blouse, sari borders, caps, cuffs, cushions, curtains, mats and table runners for decorative purpose. Seen on male attires like kurta, bandi, chogas worn as summer wear.



Traditional motifs are harmoniously embedded into rich fabrics. Fine cottons, voile, mulmul, organza and net were mainly used. Chikankari gives its effect on sheer fabric. With emerging creativity and innovations in textiles, fabrics like crepe, silks, chiffons, georgettes, cotton- polyblends are included for developing new products range.

BACKGROUND

Chikankari was known in the 7th century A.D. when white embroidered muslin garments were worn by kings and high officials at royal courts. It was a part of Persian culture at the Mughal attendings. Ancient Mughal paintings also depicted the courtiers wearing embroidered garments. Queen Nur Jahan's personal creation generated the idea of using mulmul for weaving.

The origin of craft is considered to be very mysterious as found on the Ajanta rock paintings. It was said that the craft was taught by a mysterious traveler in 3rd century B.C. named Megasthenes, in return of hospitality offered to him by the villagers. It also had its origin from Chakeen, a village in district of Persia that means to create delicate patterns. It is a Turkish

inspired embroidery meant as a craft of luxury and extravaganza. 'Chikankari' also emerged from Jamdani weaving in Bengal which means very fine.

It became popular at the times of Nazir-ud-din Haider in 19th century. Kamorladevi Chattopadhyay was key figure behind this craft development. Lakhnavi Chikankari is mentioned in the book 'Indian Art of Delhi' as pure indigenous needlework of India. Faiyaz Khan and Hasan Mirza Saheb are some well-known people who explored chikankari embroidery at its best. After the downfall of Mughal empire, the art migrated to Lucknow under the rule of Awadh. The famous indispensable master craft was exported to Britain during the colonial period as covers, napkins, floor mats and table runners.



The decline began from 20th century, during the 1960s with the increase in shop dealers. Price component variedly dominated the craft market. Embroidery was a great art for local Muslim community people that was the only source of income generation that could make them creatively independent and bring their right potential. The artisans were illiterate and poverty ridden, the women's were following purdah system and staying in insanitary conditions. The SEWA organization revitalized the craft and began upgrading the skills of artisans on larger level to bring it to original level of refinement. Although, private productions have been set up by independent craft people.



METHOD

Chikan work is majorly performed by Muslim community. The embroidery part is taken up by womens as free time activity where as mens preform the entire process of Chikan work. It is a very time consuming process that has intricate patterns.

The process involves preparation of fabric, printng, framing, embroidery, washing, cleaning and finishing. It began with the block printing by the help of wooden blocks, the design is carved with blue ink or dye as temporary color that can be removed easily. Then framing is done to hold the cloth in place. Embroidery work is performed manually including multiple stitches practiced very finely, giving a clustorious effect. Once the embroidery is completed, the fabric is soaked in water and washed with soap, soda for cleaning the inked patterns and bleached to add brightness. Clipping of threads is done for the finishing purpose. It is ironed to give stiffness at final stage.



Tools and equipments :

- Cotton fabric
- Wooden blocks

- Indigo color
- Frame/ adda
- Cotton/polyester thread
- Needle
- Zari (optional)

Angrakhas, achkans, kurtas, chogas and topics were decorated as surface design using embroidery method.

RESULTS

There are number of tales that tells us about the origin of this art. It had been very popularized and gained a lot of patronage at the times of Mughal rule. With the presence of Chinese Chikan products and unfamiliar technology in the market, the artisans who were low skilled were exploited, they were paid less despite spending 7-8 hours daily that may weaken their eyesight.

The craft needs to be revitalized from its existing art form. Government should intervene with small enterprises, associations and large organizations for skill enhancement and providing fair wages, social security to artisans to keep the craft alive. There are presently more than 5 lakh artisans who are working under filthy conditions, measures need to be taken to bring change in existing situations of workers.

CONCLUSION

It is quite disturbing that the true potential of Chikan has still not being utilized and explored so far. It is claimed that Chikanwork is one of those embroidery that is impossible to imitate in other parts of world. It is widely known as a commercial activity that has a huge scope in voile and muslin. The design and motif innovations are gaining acceptance at the international ramps as well. It has sustained its originality and flourished over the time. Although the craft needs perseverance with the institutional intervention.





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