

Chikankari Sector of Lucknow: Challenges faced by Woman Artisans

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Abstract: India is a unique country with rich culture and heritage, historical monuments, ethnic textile, great handicrafts which is admired and appreciated globally. Indian Textiles and Apparels industry is one of the largest and the most important sectors for the Indian economy in terms of output, foreign exchange earnings and employment. The textile & apparel industry contributes approximately 4% of global Textile and Apparel market, 7% to industrial output in value terms, 2% to the GDP and 15% to the country's export earnings.

The beautiful craft of Chikankari, often referred to as Lucknow Chikan, is over 450 years old ethnic surface ornamentation with a remarkable presence in the Indian and global fashion platform. In this research paper, I will discuss the state of the women artisans and issues and challenges faced by them in the various small clusters of the Chikankari.. Also explain the role of NGOs and benefit policies that have been announced so far by the central and state government to neutralize the problems and issues women karigars are facing.

Index Terms- Chikankari, Challenges, Handicraft, Solutions. Unorganized sector, Women artisans.

I.INTRODUCTION

India is a unique country with rich culture, historical monuments, ethnic textile, great handicrafts which is admired by the whole world. Indian Textiles and Apparels industry is one of the largest and the most important sectors for the Indian economy. The fashion industry contributes approximately 4% of global Textile and Apparel market, 7% to industrial output in value terms.

Lucknow has a prominent place in the history of India, particularly for its art & craft, tehzeeb and exquisite cultural heritage. Besides being world famous for its language, Lucknow is also known globally for its many fine handicrafts like Chikankari, fabric block printing, Zari & zardozi embroidery, ivory carving, terracotta and many others. The beautiful handicraft, often referred to as Lucknowi Chikan, is over 450 years old ethnic surface ornamentation with a remarkable presence in the Indian and global fashion platform.

The versatility of the Chikan wear is truly unparalleled. Whether it is a simple college girl look or a very glamorous and stylish red -carpet look, this handicraft has managed to create a stunning appearance that can make every head turn. As per the historical evidence, the Chikankari industry has witnessed many ups and downs but due to its uniqueness, always resurfaced with more vibrancy than before. But this time it is facing the aftereffects of unknown enemy named COVID19, which severely affected poor artisans who make our clothes.

II.HISTORY OF CHIKANKARI

The Chikan embroidery has its origin shrouded in mystery and legend. There are different versions about its origin in India. As per the available evidence, Mughal queen Nur Jahan was instrumental in spreading this art of embroidery in India. She brought in embroiders from a village in the Koh Mehr district of Persia. These artisans were entrusted with teaching their craft to families in Awadh. Another story says that a traveller, when passing through a village in Lucknow, stopped over to drink some water and was highly impressed by the hospitality shown towards him by the peasant and taught him this art of embroidery. Lucknow Chikan craft flowed smoothly since its initial emergence. After enjoying golden era in the period of Mughals and Nawabs, Chikan embroidery witnessed a major downfall during British regime. Only during the Industrial Era, this great embroidery re-surfaced with the same popularity it had enjoyed earlier.

III.PRESENT STATE OF CHIKANKARI

Lucknow, the city of Nawabs takes the pride of being the exclusive hub for Chikankari and has received the prestigious Geographical Indication (GI) status in December 2008. Lucknow. The versatility of the Chikan wear is truly unparalleled. From college girl look or a

very glamorous and stylish red -carpet look, this handicraft has mesmerised all.

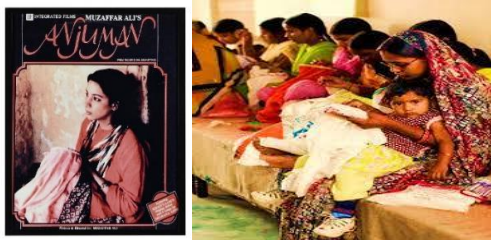


Exclusive Chikan Furnishing & Apparels

Currently, besides garments, the market for innovative Chikan merchandise like fashion accessories, cushion covers, bedspreads and elegant drapes are very much in demand and consistently growing. Now along with exclusive Chikan garments, Fashionistas can also find exclusive handbags also. Perhaps that is why visitors who come to Lucknow always want Chikankari garments for themselves. As Lucknow is the hub of the Chikankari industry, the apparels are also known as Lucknawi chikan.

IV. WOMEN ARTISANS

As of now, the artisans of Chikankari form the biggest cluster in India where they contribute about 3 lacs artisans associated with this craft, approx. 5000 families earning their livelihood by doing Chikankari embroidery in and around villages of Lucknow. Nearly 90% of work is done by women artisans and the skills got passed down the generations. Apart from working in the factories, sometimes they bring these pieces in their homes. There is a huge divide between the karigars and the market which is bridged by the middlemen. An average woman artisan earns a paltry sum of Rs. 800-1000 every month. Sustaining the livelihood remain a key issue.



“Anjuman, Movie on Chikankari Artisans

The well-known Bollywood director Muzaffar Ali, involved in this Chikan trade named “Kotwara Collections” has understood the exploitation and plight of Chikankari women artisans. In 1986, he directed movie “Anjuman” set in and around Lucknow, dealt with problems

and exploitation and the issues faced by the local artisans by agents and middlemen.

V. CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMAN ARTISANS

The Chikankari industry is one of the biggest artisan clusters in India. But presently it is facing issues of falling sales in last few years. The reasons include the problem of Chinese duplicity, lack of education, insensitive middlemen, low wages, lengthy production process etc. All these problems get even bigger as the Chikan industry falls under highly unorganized sector.

A. Highly Underpaid –

Chikan embroidery is done by around 2.5 lakh karigars in majorly five districts of in and around Lucknow. Most of them are poor Muslim women who find time to do the intricate needlework in between their day’s housework. They are paid peanuts, around Rs 200 for an ordinary woman’s kurta which would take around a week to finish. Basically, the payments can be lower or higher depending on time consume and the skill of the artisan.

B. The Middlemen Menace –

This industry is full of middlemen who take undue advantage of the situation and exploit them further. They pay less to the artisans in comparison to what they take from the entrepreneurs. They collect direct orders from the factory owners and based on their cut, distribute to the artisans and take big share in their own pockets. These women don’t even get 5 percent of sale price. The average income of a middleman is approx. Rs 20,000/- pm and that of an artisan is approx. Rs 700/- pm. The middlemen take undue advantage of this situation and exploit them further.

C. Chinese Challenge –

This chikankari craft is also facing tough competition from the Chinese manufacturers. Though the chikankari works of China and Lucknow look identical at the first sight, a closer view and analysis would reveal a vast difference in the quality. The Chinese-chikan is done by machine whereas; Lucknowi chikankari are hand crafted. Despite the quality aspect, Indian market is flooded with Chinese products. Easy

availability and very low prices are the reasons of; the Indian markets being stuffed with Chinese-chikan garments. Quality is not a considered by most of the buyers see only the price tags hence, this craft is facing a stiff challenge from low quality Chinese stuff.

D. Poor Health Conditions –

Unfortunately, apart from the everyday problems brought on by poverty, they must contend with serious health issues for which they have no money for treatment. The women embroiderers develop a lot of medical issues because of continuously working for long hours in poorly lit rooms over a period. These ladies start developing weak eyesight at an early age; many middle-aged women end up with cervical and other backbone problems because there is a lot of exertion. Because of low wages the standard of living is very low. Most of the population lives in a single roomed house. 22% people have no toilets, 66% have no bathrooms, 33% have no electricity. The workers live in penury and unhealthy environments.

E. Lack of Education / Awareness –

Most of the woman karighars of Chikankari are uneducated. To understand promotional strategies and government schemes, basic education for artisans irrespective of age is extremely important. Lack of awareness together with dearth of skilled manpower is severely affecting the growth of this delicate craft, as a result, most Chikankari master-craftsmen earn as less as Rs 300/- a day.

F. Personal Problems –

The personal life of the chikankari artisans is filled with a lot of personal problems. The problems faced are huge families due to lack of family planning, unhygienic dingy houses, polygamy and purdah system. Since majority of them are from below poverty line, they need to earn money through this craft. but the work is temporary in the sense that they are not sure of when they will get the work next time.

G. COVID 19 –

Since November 2019, the world is facing this pandemic named COVID19, and like any other industry, the handicraft industry also has suffered heavy losses. The Chikankari industry with yearly turnover of pprox. 3500 thousand crores is

struggling with over millions of artisans, businessmen and retailers. The chikankari woman embroiders were sitting idle with no income. They faced many challenges for the necessities like food, clothes and shelter. Indeed, this pandemic has proved fatal for poor artisans.



COVID 19 Deserted roads at Lucknow

Due to this pandemic, the business of summer 2021 & 2022 had gone for a toss. The stocks were piled up in the factories and showrooms. Domestic consumption of garments was also affected due to many all-India lock downs. There was no new store opening and even retail stores faced an inventory build-up due to apparel sources for the upcoming summer season, hence there was absolutely no production in the upcoming seasons.

VI. REMEDIES FOR THE ISSUES

A. Redefining the role of NGOs—

The government have launched various schemes for the upliftment of chikankari women artisans but taking all these schemes to the grassroot level is the basic responsibility of NGOs who are involve in this business and dealing with them on almost daily basis. There were approx. 43 NGOs for Chikankari on the list of Development Commissioner (Handicraft) Office, Barabanki, Lucknow. The NGOs are also required to upgrade the skills of artisans through regular trainings that helped them to improve the quality of their handicraft. Besides, It is also the duty of various NGO's to provide basic education to village girls involved in chikankari, guide them for the basic health and proper sanitation.

B. Provision of basic education to woman—

Most of the women karighars of Chikankari sector are uneducated. To bring back art and handicrafts into the market and increase the business, craftsmen and the artisans need to understand the modern market and its promotional strategies. They must understand their space in the global apparel market and then fix the price of their products as per the demand.

C. Eradication of middlemen –

The women artisans are facing the maximum issues due to middlemen and being the most underprivileged ones and are highly under-paid. The middlemen pay paltry amount to the artisans and keep major share in their own pocket. The government should make strict rules regarding the middlemen and should fix percentage of their cut. Besides factory owners should make maximum effort to directly contact these artisans for the orders.

D. Need to increase interaction with the consumers & Designers—

The Chikankari Woman Artisans need to interact with the consumers and tell them all about the intricacies of this ethnic hand embroidery and the amount time and effort spend behind it. This interaction will also help the artisans know what the consumers want or need, followed by better sale and profit. To uplift the craft of Chikankari, Fashion designers need to mix old and new designs to strike a balance between the couture and the traditional designs. As a result of these kinds of interactions with designers, we can promote our traditional craft globally. These initiatives and awareness programmes will initiate collaborations between the artisans and the urban designers.

E. Skill Enhancement Workshops –

To enhance the trade, workshops on Skill and design education, product development workshops can be organized followed up with pricing, marketing, branding, micro-finance etc. These workshops can help artisans eradicate the communication gap between the two stake holders of society and bring in a better equilibrium of demand and supply.

VII. INITIATIVES & OPPORTUNITIES PROVIDED BY THE GOVERNMENT

There are various Central and State government organizations involved in the upliftment of this ethnic craft. They are making tremendous efforts for promotion and upliftment of Chikankari of Lucknow. They also make various efforts to uplift the economic and social conditions of the handicraft artisans and aiding directly to them for conducting vocational training and provide direct marketing outlets through various Craft Markets, National Craft Fairs and other small exhibitions across India and abroad.

A. ODOP (One District One Product) –

The micro, small and medium enterprise (MSME) department has identified 6 product-specific traditional industries for promotion under the ambitious One District One Product (ODOP) plan of Uttar Pradesh government to revive the handicraft industry of state.



The famous Chikankari industry of Lucknow is the first product selected to be promoted under ODOP. Lucknow Management Association, SEWA, a few fashion designers, NIFT Delhi, etc have joined hands to understand how chikankari can be given a more universal appeal.

B.. Development Commissioner for Handicrafts—

The office of Development Commissioner for Handicrafts is the national agency which was established for the development, promotion and export of Indian handicrafts. This comes under the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India

C. Skill India Mission –

The main objective of the Skill India mission is to provide adequate training in market-relevant skills to over 40 crore youth, especially women by 2023. It also aims to create various opportunities for the development of talent within the young women population of India and improve the overall scope for underdeveloped and unorganised sectors.



D. Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana

PMKVY is a skill development initiative scheme of the central government for recognition and standardisation of skills. The main aim of the PMKVY scheme is to encourage general attitude towards employable skills and to increase working efficiency of probable and existing daily wage earners, by giving monetary awards and rewards and by providing quality training to the artisans etc.



E. Stand Up India Scheme

Stand Up India Scheme facilitate bank loans between 10 lakhs to 1 crore to at least lakhs scheduled caste (SC) or Scheduled Tribe borrower and at least one woman per bank branch for setting up an enterprise. Preserving the skills of traditional crafts is a humongous growing challenge. So, through this scheme, traditional art and crafts are revived and awareness spread in urban world. There should be a world where handicrafts are given due respect and the artisans also get the recognition they deserve for their art and skills.

F. Atma Nirbhar Bharat Scheme –



Hon'ble PM Shri Narendra Modi announced a special economic package of Rs 20 lakh crore for making the country independent against the tough competition in the global arena and to help in empowering the poor artisans who have been adversely affected by pandemic COVID 19. The government has planned to provide some amount per month for minimum of 6 months for handicraft artisans along with basic ration. They were also contemplating for a moratorium period of 3 years

from paying GST on handicraft sector to survive this calamity.

G. Converting this Unorganized sector into Organized sector

The government has made many strategies to bring an end to the existing problems faced by both entrepreneurs and artisans and transforming the industry from an unorganized to an organized sector. Government facilitation for creation of niche markets for Chikan apparel and merchandize, opening showrooms in selected countries according to their current demand, import values are some of the key suggestions to improve exports of Indian Chikankari craft.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Presently, Chikankari is hailed as the heartbeat of Lucknow, becomes a Lucknow tradition. The Chikankari industry has been facing various challenges like insufficient information, illiteracy, unorganized market, scarcity of raw materials, growing competition from Chinese imitation, GST and latest to add is COVID19.

The steps like Entrepreneurship development, building Brand Image and conducting Craft shows should be organized to ensure that majority of the artisan community is benefitted. This would provide them motivation to continue this beautiful craft. The Geographical Indication registration (GI Tags) given in 2008 should be used in a proper manner to increase the visibility of the Chikan merchandize.

The humble journey of art form which was started centuries ago has now reached a global platform. With ever growing global demand, chikankari garments have made major inroads in the international markets. It serves as evidence for glorious past and bright future of this ethnic embroidery. And remember, no two pieces of Chikankari are identical, each garment is different. This is the uniqueness of this beautiful and ethnic embroidery of Lucknow.

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