

# Embroidering Sustainability: A Review of Practices Aimed at Uplifting Chikankari Artisans in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

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**Abstract - India is a major supplier of various handicrafts to the worldwide market. The Indian Chikankari business is highly esteemed in the worldwide handicraft market. This is an ancient culture and heritage of India that highlights many traditional arts from different parts of the country. Chikankari goods have a wide international market because of their growing potential. The Indian Chikankari industry is distinguished by its heavy dependence on manual labor and its decentralized structure, with production facilities situated in various rural and urban areas around the nation. The industry employs almost six million artisans, with a significant number being women and individuals from underprivileged groups. The Chikankari Sector exerts a significant and pivotal influence on the country's economy. The craft sector in rural and semi-urban regions provides employment to a substantial number of skilled workers and makes a considerable contribution to the country's foreign currency earnings, while also preserving its cultural heritage. Chikankari holds significant potential since it plays a vital role in sustaining the existing population of artisans across the whole country. Nevertheless, the substantial expansion of the Chikankari sector is accompanied by certain obstacles. The study highlighted the complexity and several obstacles associated with the Chikankari industry in India.**

**Keywords: Embroidering Sustainability, Chikankari, Artisans, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh.**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The name "chikankari" originates from the Persian word "chakeen," which denotes an intricate pattern on fabric. Chikankari is a type of embroidery that entails the use of detailed and complex stitching techniques. In the past, the process was carried out on muslin garments using white thread. In contrast, this achievement has been shown on a wide variety of materials, including cotton, linen, nylon, georgette, chiffon, and synthetic textiles. Embroidery extends beyond garments and is frequently utilized on a diverse range of items such as curtains, bed sheets, table cloths, pillow covers, and cushion covers. Chikankari, also known as Lucknow Chikan, is an ancient kind of surface ornamentation that has been in existence for over 450 years. It is highly regarded in the fashion industry in India and beyond (Mukami, 2012). India stands out from other countries due to its profound cultural heritage, historical monuments, diverse fabrics, and exceptional handicrafts that are globally revered and admired. In the Indian economy, the Textiles & Apparels business has great importance in terms of output, foreign currency revenues, and employment.

### 1.1 Chikankari work

Chikankari work is a complex embroidery style that originated in Lucknow, India. Chikankari is comprised of a grand total of sixty primary stitches and thirty-six secondary circular stitches, with each stitch being designated a specific number. The list includes names such as Tepchi, Bakhiya, Hool, Zanzeera, Rahet, Jali, Pechani, Bijali, Ghaspatti, Makra, Kuri, Hathkadi, Banjkali, Sazi, Karan, Madrazi, Bulbul-Chasm, Tajmahal, Kangan, Razan, Mahakari, and others. The work required the utilization of white muslin or cotton cloth, in conjunction with white threads. In addition, the delicate pastel material was made using cotton and silk threads. Colored threads could be used, but only to a limited extent (Dash and Mishra 2021).

Chikankari embroidery is a sophisticated kind of exquisite stitching that pays homage to the beauty and refinement of Lucknow and the Mughal culture. Most of the patterns used in Chikankari are inherited from Mughal art. India is widely admired globally for its outstanding handicrafts, ethnic fabrics, historical sites, and vibrant culture. Chikankari needlework is generally recognized as the primary manifestation of this artistic tradition in the state of Uttar Pradesh,

namely in the city of Lucknow. Presently, a diverse selection of superior materials, such as Georgette, chiffon, cotton, and several others, are also being utilized. The Chikankari embroidery method, once used mainly to decorate clothing, has recently been extended to include a range of home design items such as cushion covers, pillow slips, table linen, and related things (Kumar et al., 2021).

The Chikan Embroidery Cluster in Lucknow has accomplished noteworthy achievements and demonstrated exceptional accomplishments. The ladies belonging to the noble Mughal households were given the responsibility of carrying out elaborate stitching, which continued to be practiced until 1860. Only members of the royal family utilized the items. From 1860 until 1947, the only product available for commercial purchase was topi palla. The primary purchasers were Muslim clientele, and the primary marketplaces were Dhaka (now located in Bangladesh) as well as certain areas in Pakistan, Hyderabad, and Lucknow. During this time frame, there was a notable surge in economic activity, and only a limited number of manufacturers have the ability to fulfill the demands of the whole market (Dalal et al., 2021).

### 1.2 Chikankari Embroiders

Chikankari utilizes a total of 32 unique stitches, most of which are developed from the six or seven fundamental stitches indicated below. Subsequently, the fabric is placed in a compact frame, with each part being addressed individually, while the stitching commences to replicate the patterns that were first imprinted using ink. The choice of stitch used by an artist is influenced by the design, motif size, and the skill of the region. After finishing the embroidery, the fabric is immersed in water to remove the outline of the pattern. Subsequently, the fabric is subjected to starching in order to achieve the necessary degree of rigidity, which is dictated by the cloth itself. It is customary to use a range of Lucknow Chikankari stitches together in a single motif. Makra, Kaudi, Hatkadi, Sazi, Karan, Kapkapi, Dhania-patti, Jora, Bulbul, and several other names are included in this list. The handicrafts industries in India are making an increasingly significant contribution to the rural economy (Datta and Bhattacharyya 2016).

1. **Flat stitches** (Delicate stitches that lie close to the cloth) include:-

- Tepchi
- Bakhia.
- Khatao
- Gitti
- Jamjira

2. **Embossed stitches** create a textured, grainy look:-

- Murri
- Phandu

### 3. Net-work or Jali work

- a) **Tepchi:** Tepchi, Taipchi, Tipchi, or tipkhi stitch is a running or darning stitch stitched on the right side of the cloth by crossing four threads and picking up one. Occasionally, bel-butti is made entirely with tapchi.
- b) **Bakhiya:** This herringbone-style stitch is also known as double back or shadow stitching. There are two techniques to construct the bakhiya stitch: (1) SeedhiBakhiya (from the front side) or Ulti Bakhiya (from the rear side).
- c) **Khatao:** This type of appliqué stitch is finer and resembles bakhiya stitching. Khatao stitch provides varying degrees of obscurity on a cloth.

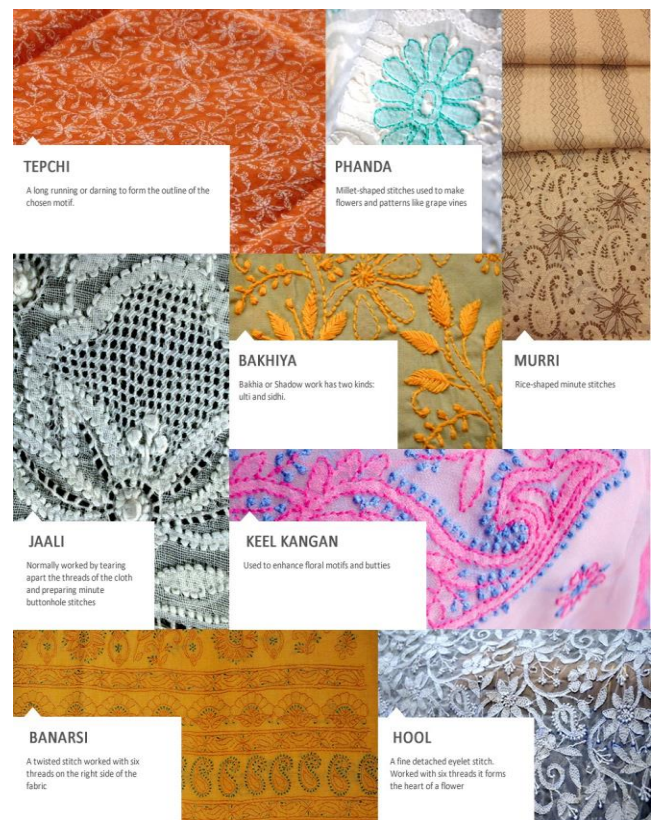


Figure 1: Chikankari Embroideries

(Source: De Munck 2019)

- d) **Gitti:** Creating circular designs that resemble wheels by combining buttonhole and blanket stitches.
- e) **Jamjira:** The motifs in these stitch types are outlined with a chain stitch.
- f) **Murri:** An embossed look is created on the cloth by employing an oval or rice-shaped French knot stitch in murri.

- g) **Phandu:** A type of millet stitch used to create designs and blossoms similar to grape vines.
- h) **Jali work:** This stitch creates the appearance of an open net or mesh. By using a needle to press the warp and weft strands apart, the technique creates a prison on the fabric. Becoming tiny holes and then tightening or making a tiny hole to give the fabric strength (Pradhan, 2019).

The art of Chikankari has deteriorated due to substantial alterations in patterns, designs, motifs, and a decrease in the number of stitches used. Manufacturers are producing things of subpar quality and designs without foresight due to a substantial rise in demand. Since its establishment as a recognized art form, Lucknow Chikan embroidery has undergone continuous changes. During the later years of British control, the kingdom underwent a substantial deterioration following a period of prosperity under the Mughals and Nawabs. The resurgence of chikan's popularity did not occur until the advent of the Industrial Era. It was quickly introduced to the market. The Bollywood Film fraternity, together with smaller design enterprises, played a crucial part in restoring the national recognition and adoration that Chikan's work has always deserved. Undoubtedly, the current abundance of Lucknow Chikan's work surpasses its previous range (Yang et al., 2018).

### **1.3 The Uniqueness of Chikan-craft and the Process**

Chikankari, a sort of manual embroidery, is widely regarded as a unique style of stitching that is unparalleled in any other part of the globe. Wilkinson-Weber (1999) states that skilled embroiderers possess a wide variety of stitches, ranging from twelve to seventy-five. Although there are notable similarities, highly skilled professionals do not agree on the terminology used to name sutures. Moreover, having a greater understanding of a larger variety of stitches does not automatically lead to improved skill. According to Arya and Sadhana (2002:2), Chikan embroiderers have a repertoire of around thirty-two stitches, each of which is given creatively descriptive names. This earring features a dual star pattern that is intended to mimic the appearance of a peacock. Some of the names in their local language include *sidhual*, *makra*, *mandarzi*, *bulbulchashm*, *Tajmahal*, *phooljali*, *phanda*, *dhoom*, *gol murri*, *zanjeer*, *keel*, *kangan*, *bakhia*, *dhania patti*, *lambi murri*, *kapkapi*, *karan phool*, *bijli*, *ghaspatti*, *rozan*, *meharki*, *kaj*, *chameli*, *chane ki patti*, *balda*, *zora*, *pachni*, *tapchim kauri*, *hathkati*, and *daraz* of various types. Upon further scrutiny, it becomes apparent that a substantial quantity of them are alterations created by merging a limited collection of basic stitches (Pant and Pandey 2015).

Chikankari is occasionally called "unity in diversity." This approach encompasses the integration of both fundamental and complex stitches, resulting in an aesthetic that is not only uncomplicated but also refined, fragile, and elegant. The Chikan method is presently employed in the production of various items,

such as saris, suits, kurtas, table coverings, bed sheets, pillow covers, and related commodities. The below flowchart depicts the sequential steps involved in manufacturing the final chikan product (Kebede, 2018).

### **1.4 Chikan Embroidery Cluster in Lucknow: Key Milestones and Performances**

The Chikan Embroidery Cluster in Lucknow has achieved significant milestones and has showcased exceptional performances. The innovative needlework in imperial Mughal houses was mostly carried out by the ladies, who had responsibility for this task until 1860. Only members of the royal family used the things. From 1860 until 1947, the sole commercially available product was *topi palla*. The main buyers were Muslim customers, and the main markets were Dhaka (now in Bangladesh) and specific locations in Pakistan, Hyderabad, and Lucknow. During this period, there was a significant increase in business activity, and only a small group of manufacturers were capable of meeting the demands of the whole market (Akhir et al., 2015). Due to the partition, Indians were unable to access the principal markets for *topi palla* and chikan embroidery, since these markets were deemed foreign. Consequently, the makers were obliged to provide novel products, such as kurtas and sarees designed for males. In addition to manufacturing luncheon sets, some producers also started selling ensembles for females, which might be with or without dupattas.

Chikan embroidery was also used in the prototypes and catalogues of several renowned fashion designers, so garnering recognition for the chikankari design method on a global scale. Chikankari products garnered favorable recognition from many media platforms, such as television serials and films. Fabric is the predominant raw material utilized in the manufacturing of chikan embroidered products, and it is readily available across India. The market's abundance of diverse textiles affords producers the opportunity to manufacture a broad array of items (Tripti et al., 2020).

The standard procedure employed in the manufacturing of chikan embroidered products involves outsourcing the work. Employees are remunerated based on a piece rate system. They then finish the manufacturing process, which includes cutting, sewing, printing, embroidery, and washing, generally from their own location. Moreover, a few of businesses have initiated their own internal production procedures. Chikan embroidered gowns are now fashionable, however producers do not employ designers to innovate or create new designs. Only a small number of manufacturers employ design specialists (Chudasri et al., 2012). Typically, the creator takes on the responsibility of creating alone, either by replicating patterns from fashion catalogues or by incorporating ideas provided by clients. The production of chikan embroidered products usually requires a duration of

three to five months. Depending on the intricacy of the design, the duration may occasionally extend to a period of seven to eight months. There is no clear correlation between the manufacturers and the individuals who sew. The task is acquired by a local contractor who subsequently delegates it to the craftsmen. The contractor, who often exploits them, is the main source of income for the craftsman. In addition, the contractor does not provide them with consistent work or a regular wage (Topimin, 2015).

### 1.5 Challenges Faced by Chikankari Artisans

#### ➤ Highly Underpaid

Chikan needlework is practiced by over 250,000 skilled artisans in five regions, with the most of them concentrated in and around Lucknow. This occupation is severely undercompensated. Amidst their daily obligations, the majority of them are destitute Muslim women who manage to find time to do intricate needlework. The workers receive a meager compensation of only Rs 200 for a standard woman's kurta, and it takes them about a week to finish producing the garment. Thus, the remuneration may vary based on the duration of the task and the artisan's level of skill. Most of the time, these workers are cognizant of their worth; nonetheless, they lack the necessary skills to initiate independent work and sustain their own position. The significance of marketing and managerial skills cannot be exaggerated (Shafi et al., 2021). Artisans should possess knowledge of the raw material suppliers in their near neighborhood, regardless of their financial capabilities. This is quite important since only with a substantial number of connections can you effectively choose the most dependable providers for acquiring the required resources.

#### ➤ Unhealthy Health Situations

Living in poverty is difficult enough without having to worry about how they will pay for treatment of serious health issues that they face on a daily basis. The women embroiderers suffer an alarming rise in health issues due to the long hours spent working in rooms with insufficient illumination. Due to the amount of exertion they endure, most middle-aged women get cervical and other backbone ailments. At an early age, some women start to have blurred vision.

Keeping up a comfortable standard of living is next to impossible with such a meager salary. The vast majority of people would rather live in a studio or one-bedroom apartment. Not only do 22% of people lack access to electricity, but 66% also lack access to bathrooms. According to Sarlawala and Adiwijaya (2019), the working circumstances are dreadful and harmful to the workers' health (Hassan, 2007).

➤ **Financial constraints:** Even if they are willing to begin over, they should be able to acquire the raw materials; this is one of the most significant obstacles that they will face.

➤ **Contacts for the procurement of raw materials:** The craftspeople should be aware of the raw material providers in their communities, even if they have the financial backing to acquire the supplies. When you have a large number of contacts, you will be able to select the suppliers of the highest quality to acquire the necessary products. This is a very significant consideration. The end goal is to attract clients, and if your items are not superior to those of your rivals, they will not be interested in purchasing them.

➤ **Client coverage:** Due to the fact that they just do the crafting aspect, they do not have a great deal of knowledge regarding the clients, including whom to contact, how to acquire consumers, how to keep them, and how to grow a large customer base.

### 1.6 Remedies for the Issues

#### ➤ Redefining the role of NGOs

The government has initiated a number of programmes with the intention of enhancing the lives of chikankari women artisans; nevertheless, it is the duty of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who are actively involved in this industry and interact with these individuals on an almost daily basis to bring all of these programmes to the grassroots level. At the Development Commissioner (Handicraft) Office in Barabanki, Lucknow, there were around 43 NGOs that were listed for Chikankari. Furthermore, non-governmental organisations are obligated to enhance the capabilities of craftsmen by providing them with consistent trainings that assist them in enhancing the quality of their handicrafts. Additionally, it is the responsibility of a variety of NGOs to give basic education to rural girls who are interested in chikankari, as well as to advise them in the areas of basic health and adequate sanitation (Shah et al., 2018).

#### ➤ Provision of basic education to woman

The vast majority of the women who work in the Chikankari industry do not have any formal education. The provision of fundamental education to women. Craftsmen and artisans need to have an understanding of the current market and the advertising methods within it in order to bring back art and handicrafts into the market and improve business. In order to determine the appropriate pricing for their items, they must first determine their position in the global clothing market and then adjust the price of their products accordingly (Kumar and Rajeev 2013).

#### ➤ Initiatives for Sustainability and Upliftment

The improvement of this ethnic craft is being supported by a number of organisations that are administered by both the central government and the state governments. On behalf of the Chikankari community in Lucknow, they are exerting a great deal of effort to promote and elevate the practice.

They also offer direct marketing outlets by way of a variety of Craft Markets, National Craft Fairs, and other small exhibitions all over India and the world. These efforts are aimed at improving the economic and social conditions of the artisans who work in the field of handicrafts. They also provide direct assistance to the artisans in order to conduct vocational training (Dixit, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

The development of Chikankari craftsmen in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, towards advancement and sustainability involves a harmonic union of community interaction, innovative ideas, and traditional values. This evolution is a step in the right direction. A significant amount of work has been made in the direction of protecting the future of these artists and their profession via the implementation of a variety of initiatives that encourage the advancement of skills, equal market access, and recognition of environmental concerns. The Chikankari community has been able to contribute significantly to the preservation of its cultural heritage and the maintenance of its economic stability via the collaboration and joint ventures of governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, and businesses that are committed to social responsibility. In spite of this, the amount of work does not decrease. Sustained allocation of resources towards education, infrastructure, and market entry, in conjunction with a steadfast dedication to environmental stewardship, will be imperative for guaranteeing the enduring viability and affluence of Chikankari artisans, not solely in Lucknow, but extending their efforts beyond Uttar Pradesh and beyond. As a demonstration of the usefulness of joint efforts in conserving conventional creativity and building a route towards a future that is marked by justice and ecological awareness, this voyage serves as proof.

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