

Chikan – A Way of Life

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Chikankari is an ancient form of white floral embroidery, intricately worked with needle and raw thread. Its delicacy is mesmeric. For centuries, this fine white tracery on transparent white fabric has delighted the heart of king and commoner alike. It is centered mainly in the northern heartland of India, namely Lucknow, the capital of a large state, called Uttar Pradesh. It is a complex and elegant craft that has come down to us, evolving, over the years into an aesthetic form of great beauty. That it has survived the loss of royal patronage, suffered deeply at the hands of commercialization, lost its way sometimes in mediocrity and yet stayed alive, is a tribute to the skill and will of the craftspersons who have handed down this technique from one generation to another.

There exist several kinds of white embroidery in Europe and across the world, each unique and distinct. Students of this craft like to believe that all forms of embroidery, in some way influence, imitate or complement each other. That may be true to some extent, but right at the onset, let me say that Chikankari is a genre quite unique from other embroideries. Chikankari is at once, simple and elegant, subtle and ornate. This heavy embroidery intricately worked on fine white muslin created a magical effect uniquely its own. The light embroidered fabric was most appropriate for the heat and dust of the North Indian summers. From the time of its inception, Chikan garments spelt class and craft. They implied a particular richness without appearing to be showy and ornamental. The whispering whites became quietly symbolic of a very gracious and sophisticated way of life. Chikan craft had the power of understatement. You've got to see old Chikan to believe what artistry was possible through nimble fingers and some raw skeins of thread.

Today, this delicate form of embroidery is traditionally practiced in and around the city of Lucknow.

Lucknow is a lovely old city, a city of old gardens and palaces, fine architectural conceits, mosques, temples and aging monuments, a city so favoured by European travelers once upon a time, that it was popularly called 'the Constantinople of the East'. Like Marseille, it has a great deal of historicity. It is synonymous with architectural elegance, cultural finesse, social warmth and an enduring love for gracious living.

Lucknow also has the distinction of being today, the cusp of a very beautiful, very aesthetic form of white floral embroidery, unique to this geographical location. Chikankari has been practiced in Lucknow for almost more than two hundred years. But it did not originate in Lucknow. It flourished in the Mughal Court at Delhi in the 16th and 17th centuries. When the Mughal courts disintegrated the artisans scattered across the country. Some of them came and settled in Awadh. They brought this craft with them and gave it roots.

Chikancraft is rooted in antiquity. The origins of Chikan are shrouded in mystery and legend. Some historians opine, that Chikan is a Persian craft, brought to the Mughal courts of the Emperor Jehangir by his beautiful and talented consort Mehrunissa. The queen was a talented embroiderer and she so pleased the king with this ethereal, white floral embroidery that it was soon given recognition and royal patronage. Workshops were established wherein this embroidery was practiced and perfected.

The word 'Chikan' is probably a derivative from the Persian word 'Chikin' or Chikeen which means a kind of embroidered fabric. In all probability the word Chikan is used for the white floral embroidery that Mehrunissa brought with her from Persia. This form of embroidery became very popular with the king and his nobles and was embroidered on the finest Daccai mulmuls or muslin garments which were most appropriate for the hot, tepid climate of Delhi.

There are some very fine Mughal miniatures that depict the Emperor Jehangir in white flowing muslin garments. Historians believe this could be chikan.

After the decline and fall of the Mughal court, the artisans and craftsmen scattered across the length and breadth of India. Some settled in West Bengal, so for some time chikan flourished in Calcutta, though it is no longer practiced there. Some fled to the Northern state of Awadh and settled in the royal courts of the descendents of Burhan ul Mulk, a Persian nobleman, who had found favour with the last Mughal King, Bahadur Shah and was appointed as the Governor of Awadh.

Under the cultured, sophisticated influence of the rulers of Awadh, chikankari began to flourish yet again. It is interesting to note that Chikan was brought to India, supposedly by a Persian lady and later, it was given patronage and impetus in Awadh under rulers of Persian origin.

There are, however, other opinions on the origin of Chikan craft. According to one historian, there is evidence of embroidered muslin apparel depicted in the famous paintings in the Bagh and Ajanta caves dating back to the 5th century A.D. He suggests that this could be early trace of the presence of chikan. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya opines that Chikan can be dated back to the time of King Harsha, who is said to have had "a great fondness for white embroidered, muslin garments, but no colour, no ornamentation, nothing spectacular to embellish it." Bana, a contemporary of King Harsha refers to this skillfully embroidered white muslin. We would like to believe that this form of embroidery was Chikan but cannot say it with certainty. Megasthenes, dating back to the 3rd century B.C. has written of the use of 'flowered muslin' by the Indians in the court of Chandragupta Maurya. It could have been chikan. We are not sure.

The origins of Chikancraft, therefore, remain shrouded in the mists of time. But we can say with some justification that it gained a meaningful presence in Lucknow and its surrounding areas sometime during the late 18th and early 19th century when it was brought to the Lakhnawi

courts of the nawabs. It was patronized by the self-indulgent, pleasure-loving nawabs, favoured by local rajahs, sultans and zamindars and became a very intrinsic part of Lakhnawi grace and culture.

The Mughal influence is strongly evident in the development of Chikancraft. It can be traced back to the great Islamic empires of the 16th and 17th centuries, such as those of Safavid Persia, India and Turkey. All three empires were affluent and encouraged the development of art and craft. The Mughal kings set up workshops in their courts based on the Persian Karkhanas. Here artisans and skilled craftsmen were encouraged to produce works of great art, such as paintings, textiles, jewellery, and objects of art in stone, wood, marble and mother-of-pearl.

Dr. Rahul Shukla in his book on the Taj Mahal, entitled *Art Beyond Time*, talks about Chikan as being an offshoot of the Taj. This is very likely because, Chikan motifs show a strong influence of the motifs and screens (jaalis) present in the Taj Mahal. 'At present, the Taj motifs are freely used in Lucknow's chikan work and most of its glory springs from the Taj pitra dura.' (1) The Persian fondness for floral patterns greatly influenced the Mughal rulers who adopted these patterns in their architecture, their paintings and even their garments. The Indian artists used more flowing designs rather than the stiffly formal Persian styles. Sheila Paine feels that 'the floral designs of chikan share the same heritage.' (2)

The history of chikankari is richly anecdotal. One interesting story says that one of the courtesans in the nawab's court embroidered a prayer cap for her master. This so impressed him that he ordered workshops to be set up in his courts so that the craft could be taught and practiced.

Though Chikankari originated as a courtly craft, patronized by the rich and influential, today it "has become a widely practiced tradition and an important commercial activity." (3)

Development

Chikankari used the finest of white cotton fabric called muslin or mulmul. This gossamer light muslin fabric has found mention in the writings of many visitors to India, even as far back as the 3rd century B.C. Megasthenes writes about white flowered muslin worn by the courtiers in the reign of Chandragupta Maurya, which was subtle and rich in design and texture, though colourless. Ancient Europe has been greatly enamoured of Indian fabrics from Greek and Roman times. So fine and delicate were the Indian fabrics that the Romans romantically called them 'textilli venti' or woven winds. (4)

A great deal of muslin was produced in and exported from Bengal. Dacca was the main region where cotton was cultivated due to the high humidity of the region, which prevented the delicate thread from breaking on contact with the air. The cotton spun was very white since the Brahmaputra and the Ganges Rivers have bleaching properties. The chikan workers in Bengal used this fine muslin for embroidery.

Some very fine muslin was also produced in and around Lucknow. Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, in her book, *A Fatal Friendship*, makes mention of it. ‘ During the seventeenth century the East India Company decided to send two factors or employees to live in Lucknow and buy bales of ‘dereabauds’, a kind of muslin which was made in the Hasanganj area of Lucknow on the northern bank of the Gomti.’(5) This muslin became the base material for the production of good chikan embroidery. There are two/three categories of fine, white fabric that are used for chikan craft, namely Addhi, Tanzeb and Girant. These were the traditional chikan fabrics. Their sheer texture was just right for the fine white needlework

During the 18th and 19th centuries several Europeans settled down in Lucknow. Those men of considerable import were the mercenaries Madec and Gentil in the court of Shuja-ud-daula (mid 18th century) and Major Claude Martin in the 19th century. Historians find a most unusual link between chikan craft and French white embroidery. It seems possible that French white embroidery had some influence on chikan. .

At this time there was another white cotton fabric being produced in Lucknow and Faizabad at that time. This fabric was called Jamdani. S.P. Steingass in his *Persian English dictionary* defines Jamdani as very fine woven fabric of delicate texture and patterns of white on white. This is woven fabric and has a fine detailing of regular and irregular floral motifs .It is very possible that Chikan craft was inspired by Jamdani, the only difference being that Jamdani is woven and chikan is pure embroidery.

Abdul Halim Sharar, in his book, *Lucknow; The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture* gives a very graphic description of male attire and specifically mentions the presence of chikan. According to him the people of Lucknow, ‘covered their heads with chau goshia topis of chikan work, their bodies with angarkhas, their legs with wide pyjamas, and over their shoulders they draped scarves of light muslin or tulle. This was the accepted fashion of the upper classes and elegant people in Lucknow.’(6)

Technique

Sheila Paine, who has done much significant research on chikan craft says that chikan is primarily ‘white embroidery on white fabric, with predominantly floral designs executed on fine white cotton with untwisted threads of white cotton’ True chikan has the unique property of being limited to a fixed repertoire of six basic stitches (five of which are common to other forms of embroidery’ (7) Actually chikan craft has 32 different stitches, they are used separately or in combination with one another. The six basic stitches are: Tepchi, (Running stitch), Bakhiya (double back stitch), hool (Eyelet), Zanzeera (chain stitch), Rahet (stem stitch) and Banarsi.

Chikan craft has some unique features, not found in any other form of white embroidery, whether it is the eighteenth century lace-like embroidery known as Dresden, or the finest white-work of the 19th century located in Scotland known as Ayreshire embroidery. Sheila Paine speaks of the presence of the Dresden influence in the early 19th century chikan craft. Chikan has specific patterns for specific stitches. The chikan stitches may be completely flat, running through the

fabric as in the stitch called Tepchi. This technique calls for an almost woven effect, wherein the stitches run through the fabric as if woven through it. At times, the stitches are repeated at the same spot several times to create a pearl-like effect. This is known as phanda. There is another stitch called Murri, which is derived from a grain of rice. Chikan embroidery makes use of several different techniques to create different kinds of stitches. Basically they can be classified into two main categories: one having a flat surface using a single thread and the other having an embossed effect using as many as 12 threads. 'The best work combines the delicacy of one with the chunky quality of the other'(8)

Application

To begin with, chikancraft was used primarily to embellish garments. For the men here were long flowing angarkhas and chogas (tunics), Achkans and kurtas, topis, skullcaps or chau goshias. The men also used scarves or cummerbands (sashes). For the ladies, chikankari was used to adorn Lehengas and odhnis (long skirts and veils), kurtas and angarkhas (Tunics), prayer cloths and scarves. Ensembles of the most incredible beauty were created with this subtle white on white embroidery, translating its very simplicity into an exotic fashion statement.

Chikancraft did not limit itself to garments alone. Chikan was basically a way of life. It permeated the court and entered the homes and domestic life of the people. It could satisfy the fashionable as well as the domestic instinct. It shifted from garments to the domestic line seamlessly. The Lakhnawis used chikan to grace their homes in the form of bedspreads, pillowcovers, palanquin curtains and drapes. With the advent of the British, however, the application of chikan increased manifold. Soon it was used in table covers, runners, mats and napkins, tray and tea-cozy covers. The English simply loved the flowing white drapes embellished with Chikan work. It soon became a way of life for them. In fact, in the 19th century, under the British rule, Chikan was given great impetus. It provided excellent trade opportunity for them. They quickly replaced the fine, old Daccai muslin with British mill-made voiles, which were imported in large quantities.

Deterioration

The dissolution of the royal courts of Awadh spelt the doom of the Chikan industry. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was deposed and went to live in Matiya Burj, Calcutta. Without royal patronage the master craftsmen could no longer pursue their craft as there were no indulgent takers for their exquisite but expensive workmanship. Once the nawabs lost their power and wealth Chikan degenerated from a fine art into a commercial activity. The male artisans sought other, more lucrative sources of livelihood. Chikankari was reduced to a domestic economic activity practiced by Muslim women out of sheer necessity and survival. Consequently a swift process of degeneration began.

With the passage of time, there was a qualitative degeneration in chikancraft. It began with firstly a change in the fabric. The Daccai muslins were no longer affordable. They were replaced by inexpensive mill manufactured voiles and terivoiles. Secondly, the fine and complex

stitches of pure chikan were relegated to memory and simpler, less ornate stitches were now used, which were actually crass reproductions of the earlier stitches. In fact, at this time a lot of shadow work was introduced into chikan and though it was not originally part of the repertoire of the chikan stitches, today it passes for chikan.

Once the process of commercialization set in, the thrust was on quantity and not quality. There are today approximately one million people involved in the Chikan industry, working at various levels of production. There are nine stages in the production of a single piece, namely:

- 1 purchase of fabric
- 2 cutting
- 3 stitching
- 4 printing
- 5 embroidering
- 6 washing
- 7 finishing
- 8 packaging
- 9 marketing

The chikankar, therefore does not work in isolation. There is a whole group of people who are involved in the production process, even though embroidery is the most significant one. The cutter and the tailor are responsible for the styling. The printer is part of the designing strategy. The block maker is an extremely important member of the work team. In fact, the blockmaker is almost an artist, highly skilled in the art of carving and chiseling blocks. The old blocks have an amazing amount of artistry in them; unfortunately, we no longer have artisans who can translate these blocks into embroidery. Last but not the least we have the washerman. A perfectly beautiful piece can be damaged if the washing is poorly done. And yes, the most exquisite piece can sit forever on some dusty shelf, if it is not marketed.

Unfortunately, there is a gap between the embroiderer and the market. This is bridged by the middlemen who get the embroidery done by the chikankars at very low wages and markets it at a good margin for themselves. This has caused much grief and deprivation to the poor chikankars who have been terribly marginalized by the middlemen and brokers. Thus commercialization has not only exploited the chikanworker, it has also led to complete deterioration in the quality of the work.

Revival

Today, there a handful of craftsmen and women who practice the true chikankari, but they are almost a vanishing breed. The central and state government is making valiant efforts to sustain their craft by opening workshops where chikankars are trained to produce quality work, if not exactly reproduce the earlier aesthetic glory of chikancraft.’ State government organizations like the U.P. Export Corporation and the U.P. Handicraft Board are trying to ensure fair wages to

the chikan workers, and prevent the exploitation of the chikankar but their efforts do not cover the entire gamut of the chikan workforce (10).

After independence, the U.P. Government tried to revive Chikancraft by setting up government schemes and government centers where chikan is taught, free material made available, infrastructural facilities provided free of cost and finally the product marketed by the government agencies so that the chikanworker would benefit economically and chikan itself would improve qualitatively.

In the last twentyfive years the central and state government has made a conscious effort to revive chikancraft. It has done tremendous work to organize the chikan work force, ensure good wages and encourage proper marketing and ultimately produce a good quality chikan. The U.P..Crafts Council under the inspiration of the late Ms. Sarla Sahni did great service to help the chikankar and give a promotional thrust to this craft. The history of the revival of chikankari would be incomplete without a reference to Ms.Sahni, who sought to change the lives of many chikanworkers. There are other agencies, like SEWA, the Self Employed Women's Association, who have played a major role in reorganizing chikancraft and giving it a new life force and direction. Today, many top designers are involved in reviving chikankari. They have managed to give chikan global recognition and acceptance; Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla, Rina Dhaka and Vivek Narang have all contributed to the transformation of ordinary chikan into a fashion statement. Then there are people like Ashok Rai who have made Chikan an integral part of their Life Styles export line and given Chikan a place in some of the most fashionable homes across the world.

There are small units that are doing highly specialized work and have played a major role in giving the chikankar the dignity that is due to her. The mood is upbeat. Chikancraft has a global presence, albeit a very slender one. It requires a great deal of economic interest and economic thrust to metamorphose it from a small but significant cottage industry into a commercially viable international enterprise, wherein the beauty of the craft is not sacrificed on the alter of mechanical necessity, but the Chikan workforce, made up largely of women are adequately compensated for their efforts and the aesthetic spirit of the beautiful whispering whites restored to some semblance of their former glory.

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