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Evolution of chikankari industry: From traditional to contemporary fashion

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Abstract

Chikankari is an elegant art form deeply embedded in our culture which represents our country. The centuries-old tapestry of Chikankari's history is woven together with contemporary creativity, invention, patronage and cultural interchange. This paper deals with the historical origin of chikankari, its significance, techniques and the methods. This embroidery is a symbol of grace and intricacy inspired by Persian and Mughal aesthetics. It deals with the outstanding role of designers and artisans who have led to the resurgence of chikankari in a new look. However, the existing industry come across various obstacles related to socio-economic disparities, challenges related to working conditions of artisans and after-effects of covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, today the Self-Help Groups under NGOs and government initiatives through various schemes are working for empowering these artisans. To ensure the sustenance of traditional craft and support the artisans, efforts like skill development programs, financial aids and entrepreneurs startups measures have been introduced by the government. The fusion of traditional craft with new innovations has reinvigorated chikankari making it appreciable globally to preserve its originality.

Keywords: Tapestry, artisans, chikankari, initiatives, traditional, contemporary

Introduction

In India, there are countless handicrafts from every state and each have their own unique excellence. Every state in our nation has its own distinctive textiles such as Kasuti from Karnataka, Kashida from Kashmir, Phulkari from Punjab, Kantha from West Bengal, Chamba Rumals from Himachal Pradesh and the Applique from Orissa (Chantia, 2017) [2]. Chikankari embroidery is an elegant and delicate embroidery which is deeply ingrained in India's cultural legacy (Prajapati, 2021) [5]. Today everyone is enchanted with the charm of beautiful intricate embroidery of chikankari. The embroidery pattern captures the artistry and magic of needle work with their sheer beauty.

The inception of this embroidery can be traced from Mughal Era around 400 years back from a well-known 'City of Nawabs', Lucknow the capital state of Uttar Pradesh. Chikankari embroidery proliferated under the patronage of 'Nawabs of Awadh'. It is regarded as one of the best traditional embroideries and is a fundamental component of Lucknawi tradition. The name chikankari has its origin from Persian word 'chikan' which signifies needle work (Pandey, 2020) [7]. This art form has ended for over generations and exhibits vibrant fusion of Indian, Persian and Mughal inspiration.

In classical Chikankari, white thread is used on white muslin background as part of an unblemished, delicate work of art. A high-quality work is characterized by fine and even stitches, which combined with delicate floral designs, trailing stems and trellis patterns give a sense of lightness and sophistication. Chikankari embroidery has a refined and flowing stitch that is commonly known as "shadow work" or "beauty on whites" (Gupta, 2017) [4].

• Origin of chikankari

Chikankari first appears in the writings of Megasthenes, a Greek traveller from the first century BC, who detailed the use of flower-embroidered muslins by Indians (Pandey, 2020) [7]. Chikankari has a rich history rooted in myths and folklore. One of the most popular stories is about a traveller passing through a village near Lucknow being offered water and allowed to rest at a farmer's house. Thus, to show appreciation for the farmer's hospitality, the traveller

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taught him chikankari. Another story involves a princess of Murshidabad who had a professional background in handwork and was married to a Nawab of Awadh. Chikankari was born because of the gift of embroidered head coverings by a woman expressing love and affection towards a nawab.

Chikankari art form was developed and refined under the patronage of Mughal rulers who appreciated the elaborate craftsmanship. Noor Jahan, the wife of emperor Jahangir was thought to have popularised and polished the chikankari craft (Chantia, 2017) [2]. This beautiful intricate and graceful embroidery 'white on white' was traditionally done on fine cotton or muslin cloth which makes it distinctive.

With the advent of time the craft has changed, adopting modern stitches, motifs but keeping its original grace and elegance. Chikankari has changed significantly throughout the years. It has prospered, endured the loss of royal courts patronage and seen a terrible downturn at the beginning of the 20th century (Prajapati, 2021) [5]. But nowadays, the chikan industry has undergone a revolution due to the usage of many textiles. By embracing contemporary uses on a variety of produced goods, from daily wear to celebration wear, accessories to home furnishings, it has broadened its horizons (Chantia, 2017) [2]. Nowadays, the market for distinctive Chikan goods is not limited to apparel, it also encompasses a wide range of other products such as handbags, blankets, pillows and many more.

• Influence on chikankari embroidery

Chikankari manifest the cultural diversity of various locations. It is a tapestry of artistic expressions that express beauty and sophistication. The Embroidery reflects the influence of Persian concepts and Mughal aesthetics in beautiful indigenous designs. Chikankari has profound socio-cultural meaning. It represents grace, elegance and everlasting beauty. Chikankari symbolised dignity and was traditionally used for clothing like Angrakhas and Achkans for nobles and royalty.

• Evolution and adaptation of Chikankari

Chikankari has evolved and modified to compete the current fashion trends even though its roots are in traditional patterns and processes. To ensure the ancient crafts dignity in current fashion scenario designers have brought innovation through experimenting with colours, fabrics and ornatation along with various kinds of embellishments. Chikankari being a traditional embroidery has been refined over the generations and is more than just a needle work. It's dextrous and elaborate patterns provide witness to the talent and craftsmanship of the artisans who have carried on this tradition for many centuries. The ageless beauty of chikankari has enthralled the people for generations.

• Versatility in motifs

Chikankari needlework incorporates sophisticated historical motifs that represent social, cultural and creative influences over the course of its development. The designs of chikankari are versatile and embrace the assorted range of geometric patterns like triangles, hexagon, figurative elements like animals, peacock that symbolises strength and grace. Various other motifs like flowers, creepers, butis and paisleys etc are also used that enhances delicacy and intricacy in designs. This embroidery is not only an art form but a technique to express stories through stitches because each motif used has cultural meaning and symbolism.

• Versatility in stitches

The embroidery repertoire consists of approximately 36 stitches which are permutation of basic seven stitches. There are three main types in chikankari stitches depending upon the appearance -Flat, Raised and Embossed. The various stitches such Tepchi (running stitch), Bakhiya (back stitch), keel, kangan, Murri (knot), Phanda, Dhania patti, Hool, Zanjeera (chain stitch) Jalli work and many more are used to create pieces with unique appeal (Chantia, 2017) [2]. It is well known renowned fine hand embroidery that employees a variety of stitches to produce fragile and stunning designs on fabrics.

• Versatility in materials

Chikankari has evolved over time in terms of designs, patterns and techniques according to the consumer preferences and market demands keeping in mind the epitome of traditional art. The original white on white and pastel colour scheme of chikankari has been transcended in today's contemporary art. Now chikankari has evolved beyond cotton and for adopting the modern taste vibrant colour combinations have been used and experimentations with textile materials such as georgettes, chiffons, silks, modal, viscose, organza, chanderi is done. Innovation has been incorporated in motifs and designs which are influenced by nature, geometrical themes, abstract patterns which is liked by wider consumers. But traditional motif like paisley, florals vines have its own charm and are still very popular.

• Amalgamation with various techniques

The integration of chikankari with various other traditional embroidery methods like Gadha Parsi (Fig.1), mirror (Fig. 2), pearl (Fig.3), Gotta patti (Fig.4). Mukaish work (Fig.5), cut dana work (Fig.6) has resulted in exclusive items that appeal to a wide range of interest and preferences of customers. It is a perfect example of artistic blending of the beauty and delicacy of chikankari with extravagance and richness of amazing embellishment techniques. Amalgamation of these techniques with chikankari gives a visually arresting impact and depth to the products. The process gives the intricate designs a modern twist, adding brilliant essence and upright appeal that makes outfit appropriate for variety of events varying from celebrations to modern bridal wear. As a result of innovations and fusion of different motifs, designs, techniques it provides with endless possibilities.



(source:-www.365days.com)

Fig 1: (Gadha Parsi in chikankari)



(Source: in.pinterest.in)

Fig 2: (Mirror work in chikankari)



Fig 2: (Pearl work in chikankari)



Fig 2: (Gotta Patti in chikankari)



Fig 5: (Mukaish work in chikankari)



(Source: www.fabpersona.com)

Fig 6: (Cut dana work in chikankari)

• **Role of designers in revival of chikankari**

Chikankari is classic and its embroidery techniques merges very well with the traditional as well as with the modern or any kind of Western silhouettes. Designers have contributed a lot for the revival of chikankari from 1980's to give it a new designer 'Avatar or look'. Ordinary chikan has been transformed into a trendy garment making traditional designs more stylish, thanks to the efforts of fashion geniuses like Rina Dhaka, Vivek Narang, Sabyasachi, Manish Malhotra, Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla (Ahmed, 2020) [12].

Today designers have given a makeover to chikankari by blending new ideas and retaining old concepts and methods. By working with artisan's, designers have promoted the use of genuine materials, stitching and maintaining traditional workmanship in the face of contemporary modifications. These known designers have presented and promoted chikan through fashion shows, worldwide runways, partnerships and collaborating with multinational business. They have extended the Chikankari's reach to a broader audience both locally and internationally by employing their network and expertise in marketing.

• **Role of women artisans in chikankari industry**

Chikankari is a big industry that employees 90% of women. It is a home based, unorganised industry and needle work is linked to the female artisans (Sharma, 2016) [1]. The craft has been historically handed from mothers to daughters creating a family line of talented artisans (Kinot, 2017) [3]. The artisanal craft is continued by passing on the abilities verbally or through practical instructions. Chikankari needle work has been part of families and community in Lucknow and the surrounding areas. Women artisans frequently focus on complex hand embroidery and creating designs which are fundamental to chikankari. These artisans display their dexterity and inventiveness as they painstakingly create stunning patterns. As artisans work tirelessly to make each masterpiece gracefully, their fingers become harsh, rough and stiff.

These artisans' activity participates in the production of the craft. Women artisans become financially independent and have options to generate revenue by engaging in chikankari. Women contribute to household income, provide resources for the family and become economically empowered. It gives them the opportunity to become decision makers contributing to social change and challenging traditional gender roles. The

active participation of women artisans in chikankari is also essential to uphold the cultural legacy. The artisans ensure the ancient motifs, techniques are passed on to subsequent generations preserving the authenticity of the craft through skilled hand work.

- **Socio-economic conditions of women in chikan industry**

Chikankari artisans work from home, they can balance their domestic duties and work on their craft. Work from home provides flexibility for those who might find it difficult to work outside. They often counter with various financial difficulties regardless of their talent and commitment. Despite chikankari's long tradition as a craft many women artisans face challenges including low wages, little recognition and insufficient market accessibility. Many factors like unstable market needs, weak negotiating power, equipment requirements, working environment, health issues etc are the hardships faced by these artisans.

Several socio-economic factors can pose additional challenges to women artisans such as lack of education, lack of access to finances etc. Sometimes they encounter traditional social norms that inhibit their economic independence and mobility. Although this chikankari industry is dominated by women, gender disparity exists majorly. Women artisans contribute most of the work to the embroidery whereas middleman and traders typically dominate the industry. As a result, women artisans lack agency and there are imbalances in power.

- **Challenges faced by the artisans of chikankari industry in contemporary revival**

Chikankari hand embroidery often encounters with myriads of obstacles that affects the production and preservation. When tradition and current expectations collide, then contemporarisation of crafts like chikankari faces several challenges the lack of skilled artisans is a genuine problem and it is a long process acquire expertise. Moreover, it is a labour intensive, hand stitching process making large scale production a difficult task. Ensuring equitable salaries in the face of economics shifts is one of the challenges with the incorporation of technology no compromise is done with the handmade craft. Another reason is the retaining authenticity in the face of mass-produced knockoffs flooding the market. There is another challenge in passing on knowledge to new generation artisans and adjusting according to global development while preserving cultural heritage of chikankari. There is an urgent need to find sustainable way to get a genuine material and maintain quality in the face of growing demands. Thus, the challenge of preventing Chikankari unique characteristics from being imitated is multifaceted. Additionally, adaptability is necessary to recognise changing consumer demands without sacrificing the originality of the craft. It needs a well-rounded strategy that embraces innovation and honours tradition to overcome the problems. Hence, this progressive modernisation of chikankari depends on the cooperative efforts of designers, customers and the artisans.

- **Machine made products a challenge for chikankari**

The advent of machine-made goods has affected the chikankari sector. To meet market needs and increase productivity machines have made it possible to produce complex designs efficiently. The authenticity and originality of handcrafted chikankari are being threatened to machine produced products. As machine made products are popular,

reasonable and easily available but lacks grace and elegance as a genuine product. Moreover, it put traditional craftsman in different position because of less expensive alternatives are more popular and tend to value very high. Thus, prevalence of these goods may result in loss of jobs of trained artisans.

- **Restrictions on this elite craft**

Quality control is another issue and is dependent on the accuracy of the artisans. Sometimes the availability of raw sustainable materials also raises concern due to very high demand. Chikankari elite reputation results in high manufacturing cost and severe competition in the market. Thus. It becomes challenging in balancing the accessibility and profitability while setting prices. It is often found that designers don't give credit to the artisans or the honouring traditional craft. The authenticity of the craft can be put in jeopardy according to the customers preference which puts restriction on its preservation.

- **Role of NGOS in promoting SHGS in chikankari industry**

In recent times, Indian policymakers have become aware of the economic significance of women's profitable endeavours and the type of revenue production contribution they provide. By supporting SHGs at the local level through government-launched initiatives for domestic and home-based enterprises, several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have worked to improve wellbeing (Kinot, 2017) ^[3]. NGOs have played a crucial role for the development of SHGs in chikankari industry sector. SHGs composition, it's rules and goals are determine under the supervision of NGOs. They promote skill development initiatives, financial support and assist market to support the members of SHGs. They help in acquisition of resources providing access to high quality supplies and tools needed by the artisans. SHGs members are supported by NGOs by promoting entrepreneurship standing up for their liberties and building capacities which enhance their organisational and leadership skills. It provides a platform for them to communicate, share knowledge and to establish unity among the members of the group to enable networking opportunities, promote cooperation, sharing of experience as an exchange of best practices among them. NGOs are the driving forces for fostering and fortifying SHGs by offering their members an ample of opportunities for their development and empowerment. They help SHGs members becoming more economically empowered by offering loans for projects, lending money and saving plans.

The unorganised sector of chikan industry is labour intensive and highly exploitative in nature. Over one and half century ago there was involvement of both genders for embroidery but today it is dominated by the female artisans. Women embroiders lack awareness of the market and prices for the products they produce and have difficulty in asserting their identities because of gender based views. A significant portion of women work from home due to lack of suitable employment. All production phases are dominated by men except for the needle work where maximum of the artisans are Muslim women. Chikan craft women artisans are proficient in needle work, which forms the foundation of the craft. The job of all women artisans is consistently referred to as 'free labour' by the entrepreneurs.

- **Geographical indication (gi) status of chikankari**

Chikankari received its prestigious geographical indication (GI) status in December 2008 which represents its unique

'Heritage craftsmanship and authenticity' of the craft. Today Chikankari businesses has undergone a revolution with the usage of different textile materials. Chikankari has been incorporated in range of garments including dresses, jackets, sarees, kurta sets etc. The market for distinctive Chikankari now encompasses a white range of products not just the garments but also furnishings like bedspreads curtains, cushions, purses and other items.

- **Economic importance of chikankari**

Beyond its cultural significance chikankari needle work has significant commercial value. As chikankari is a major source of employment for women artisans in Lucknow and the neighbouring districts. It is a means of subsistence for thousands of talented artisans who support their livelihood and family. The exquisite designs made by these artisans range from embroiderers to pattern makers and contribute to financial stability of their households. It is a source of economic benefit for local businesses as craft holds artistic worth. This craft also promotes tourism and strengthens the foreign exchange profits to nations economy.

- **After effect of COVID -19 on chikankari**

After covid-19 pandemic lock down chikankari business had suffered a significant setback. It had caused delay and shortage of materials affecting the production and supply. Because of which artisans suffered decline in revenue and store closures. Today situation is under control, but the pandemic has left a long impact on lives of craftsmen and artisans. The workplace productivity was affected, which affected their livelihoods. Thou, there were obstacles with digital adoption, artisans shift their focus to online sales as a means of adapting. Government intervention including financial help and safety measures have help gradually in recovering the situation. However, consistent work need be done to overcome the crisis and return to pre-pandemic situation for the artisans. Thus, to encourage the talented hardworking artisans in earning a living obtaining opportunities and ending exploitation action must be taken.

- **Government approaches for artisans**

In recent times, the Indian government has implemented several initiatives aimed at safeguarding artisans' financial security and expanding their career, educational and other prospects. To fulfil this objective, the Indian government has launched several initiatives aimed at empowering these artisans.

- **National handicrafts development program (NHDP)**

National handicrafts development program (NHDP) is an initiative scheme by the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India. This scheme offers financial support, skill development opportunities and marketing support. It also helps craft to grow and flourish. The primary objective is to train artisans, host workshops and expanding access to domestic and foreign markets.

- **Technology upgradation scheme**

The main objective is to enhance the chikankari business by upgradation of latest technology and equipment for upliftment of age-old craft. Increasing output, improving quality standards are the main goal of this plan. The technology upgradation scheme is an essential bridge that connects traditional artistry with contemporary methods. This scheme supports training to artisans with new machinery and tools,

equipments and software facilities is also given to the artisans. This scheme offers grants to artisans, subsidies and financial assistance for their support. The adoption of the latest technology is a physical strain, it boosts the output and fosters the interest among the younger generations.

- **Marketing support and export promotion**

With the Government support and efforts of export promotion councils the increasing chikankari global footprint can be felt. This scheme fosters support through incentives, financial aid and subsidies for international market reach. Financial aid is given to assist chikankari products for marketing initiatives. These include advertising cost, trade shows, participation fees, promotional events and even travel expenditure for artisans. These initiatives facilitate networking opportunities among artisans and buyers, marketing campaigns and awareness. It also focuses on digital promotion of chikankari fostering its growth and sustainability in global market.

Government programs are essential to the success of chikankari business. Some major programmes that support the chikankari artisans in every possible way are:

- **One district one product (ODOP):** ODOP is an attempt by state government to promote regional craft that are exclusive to respective districts. The effort to revitalise traditional industry with the identification and promotion of items. Chikankari was chosen as pilot product and associations with designers is an attempt to enhance its market share globally. The main goal of government programs is to preserve chikankari as a cultural treasure. ODOP Campaign highlights the significance of chikankari in a region and its historical heritage by designating it as district craft from Lucknow.

- **Development commission for handicraft:** Plays an important role in framing policies, plans and initiatives for advancement marketing and export of handicrafts. This organisation aims at protecting age old techniques of chikankari by providing mentorship, platform and a concern for the artisans. Thus, it becomes a priority to preserve the traditional craft and such schemes helps in recognising and valuing the craft. The economic empowerment in the chikankari sector is strengthened by various other programs like Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana and India mission.

- **Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY):** This scheme was initiated in 2015 to encourage and promote skill development throughout the nation. It aims to increase worker efficiency and promote employability by standardising and recognising the skills. PMKVY help chikankari artisans to learn techniques and contemporary methods by imparting high quality training and cash benefits. Artisans can improve their socio-economic standing by expanding diversification in products, creating better items and access to profitable earning by upgrading their skills.

- **Skill India mission:** Under this initiative, the main aim is to train over 40 crore youngsters in skills with emphasis on women. Skill India programme offers a training course to improve needle work, pattern designs, quality assurance etc. With these skills it is easier for the artisans to adapt according to the changing market demands which guarantees employment in the same field.

- **Stand-up India:** For the entrepreneurship and financial assistance scheme like Stand-up India facilitates bank loan for SC/ ST as well as for the women entrepreneurs. The scheme facilitates loan from 10 lacs to 1 crore. It is a

government initiative that foster the growth of chikankari industry by empowering the artisans and entrepreneurs involved in this cultural legacy of chikankari. With the establishment of chikankari ventures, it helps in sustainability and growth of the industry. It also encourages women to become self-sufficient so that they can established their own enterprises.

- **The Atma Nirbhar Bharat Scheme:** Also known as the Self-Reliant India scheme is a relief program introduced by government of India in May 2020 in response to issues faced during covid-19 pandemic. The main aim of the scheme was to promote domestic production, lowering dependency on import and revive the Indian economy. Financial help is provided to different sectors like MSME'S, agriculture, health that are impacted by the epidemic and to keep business going, create jobs and stimulate the economy. The program encourages the use of digital technology in all areas of economy. The main goal of this scheme is to make India globally competitive. Moreover, it encourages promoting local product manufacturing and encouraging companies to join international supply chains.

Conclusion

Chikankari industry is a shifting industry that has changed and adapted throughout the time. It is a well-known renowned fine hand embroidery that employs variety of stitches to produce fragile and stunning designs on fabric. It includes weaving thread into predetermine patterns using needle to create textured look. Cotton, muslin etc materials used in chikan offers variety of canvases for this magnificent art form. The embroideries visual attractiveness is enhanced by the combination of light and shade created during the process which uses contrasting colours to improve the shadow effect. The positive of this industry is the dedication to preserve the ancient needle craft skills and designs to preserve cultural heritage and legacy. As women have been the guardians of chikankari traditional knowledge and skill for many centuries. Whereas the fusion of tradition and innovation has led to the revival of contemporary chikankari which has contributed to wide acceptance among consumers globally. The fashion icons have revived and preserved the traditional craftsmanship. Further there is a need for exploration of new markets and efforts for consumer awareness through social media, fairs, promotions, workshops etc. An urgent necessity is felt for craftsmen proficiency and consistency in quality control of products.

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