



Research Paper

## Development of Chikankari industry in Uttar Pradesh in the Post-Independence Period (1947 - 2000)

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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 study demonstrates the historical origin of chikankari, its techniques, significance and the methods. This embroidery is a symbol of grace and intricacy inspired by Mughal and Persian 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. Moreover, today the government initiatives through various schemes and Self-Help Groups under NGOs are working for empowering these artisans. The fusion of traditional craft with new innovations has reinvigorated chikankari making it appreciable globally to preserve its originality.

**Keywords:** Chikankari, embroidery, tapestry, artisans, traditional, Self-Help Groups.

### I. Introduction

In India, there are countless handicrafts from every state and each has their own unique excellence. Chikankari embroidery is elegant and delicate embroidery which is deeply ingrained in India's cultural legacy. 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'. The beautiful craft of Chikan work, often referred to as Lucknow Chikan, is over 400 years old ethnic surface ornamentation with a remarkable presence in the Indian and global fashion arena. Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh is world famous for its ethnic Chikankari Embroidery. 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. 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".

**History of Chikankari:** There are different versions about the origin of Chikankari embroidery in India. As per the history, the famous Greek traveller, Megasthenes as early as 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC who described about the floral work on muslin clothes of Indians. As per other evidences Mughal queen Nur Jahan, being a good embroideress, was instrumental in spreading this art of embroidery in India. 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. Queen Noor Jahan developed intricate patterns of Indo-Persian embroidery, sometimes inspired by grandeur of Rajasthan and sometimes by the beauty of Kashmir. 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. During that time Chikankari embroidery was done on undyed white shazaada cotton or Dhaka ki Mulmul, sourced from the eastern ends of the Mughal Empire. At that time, the fabric lengths would largely be used for dupattas. Lucknow, the city of Nawabs takes the pride of being the exclusive hub for Chikankari embroidery and has received the prestigious Geographical Indication (GI) status

for Chikankari in December 2008. Lucknow Chikan embroidery enjoys wide-spread public attention. Apart from being a traditional, the art also found its way to the global ramp and glamour world. One of its first and most famous appearance of Chikankari on the Bollywood screen was in the Indian film “Anjuman”, starring Shabana Azmi and Farooq Shaikh, directed by Muzzafer Ali in 1986. The movie was set in Lucknow and nearby places, dealt with exploitation of women artisans and the problems faced by the local chikan embroidery artisans. 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.

**Role of designers in revival of chikankari:** Chikankari is classic and its embroidery techniques merge 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. 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.



**Figure:** Designer wears with Chikankari embroidery

**Role of women artisans in chikankari industry:** Chikankari is a big industry that employs 90% of women. It is a home based, unorganised industry and needle work is linked to the female artisans. The craft has been historically handed from mothers to daughters creating a family line of talented artisans. 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.

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.

**Global exposure:** Currently trending as Couture Chikan. The traditional embroidery from Lucknow, done with white cotton thread mostly on white fabric is staging a huge revival, but in a new designer avatar. From skirts to coats, corsets to kimonos, pants to sherwanis, chikan work is drawing a wider global clientele. It is also making an appearance on international ramp shows, high-end garment stores like Harrods and Selfridges where it is labelled "Indian lace" Indian fashion designers Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla have been dedicated to uplifting the status of traditional crafts in India and abroad chikankari has remained their specialty, with actress Judi Dench, of the James Bond series, wearing one of their majestic creations while receiving an Oscar in 2004. Another Hollywood exposure includes pop sensation Madonna wearing a Chikankari embroidered designer wear in her film, *The Next Big Thing*. MLK Exports is one of the leading export houses of India, famous for exporting Chikankari products since 1975 to various global brands. Indian fashion houses have also experimenting with innovative designs and concepts and taking the Chikankari to a new level.

**Challenges faced by the Chikan industry:** The chikankari industry boasts of 2.5 lakh artisans, one of the biggest artisan clusters in India. But now it is facing issues of falling market share in last few years. The industry is still strong enough and is bearing the losses but will not be able to carry this burden for long. Hence this seems to be the right time of identification of the problem, intervention and problem solving. The reasons to this problem are many. But the most important reasons include the problem of Chinese duplicity, lack of professionalism in the artisans, lengthy production process etc. All these problems get bigger because as the Chikan industry falls in a highly unorganized sector.

**Contribution of NGOs:** Now, Non- Government Organizations are taking care of this highly unorganized sector. Besides looking after the basic needs of Chikankari artisans, they also shoulder very critical role in the process of managing development activities at the rural level. They are also sharing various central or state government schemes for welfare of artisans of Chikan industry. There are more than 50 NGOs dealing with Chikankari industry on the list of Development Commissioner (Handicraft) Office, Lucknow. Most of the NGOs are financially assisting the artisans' participation in Chikankari craft. The NGOs also are trying to upgrade the skills of artisans by various vocational trainings that helped them to improve the quality of their work. The Self - Employed Women's Association (SEWA) developed by Padamshri Runa Banerjee in 1984 tops the list of various NGOs involved in the upliftment of Chikankari. SEWA has been extensively involved in engaging women in the Chikankari industry and has built up a great network of over 8,000 women who are supported by the organisation in securing minimum wages and creating a market for their products. SEWA is also involved in getting education for their children as well as providing better health services.

**Government initiatives:** There are various Central and State government organizations like U.P. Trade Promotion Authorities, Kanpur, Handicrafts Marketing and Service Center, Barabanki, Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI), Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts (EPCH), New Delhi, Handloom and Handicraft Export Promotion Corporation, New Delhi etc. involved in the upliftment of this ethnic craft. These organizations are making tremendous efforts for promotion of Chikankari of Lucknow. They also make various efforts to uplift the economic and social conditions of the handicraft artisans and providing assistance directly to them for conducting vocational training and also provide direct marketing outlets through various Craft Markets, National Craft Fairs and other small exhibitions across India and abroad. The Geographical Indication registration (GI Tags) given in 2008 should be used in a proper manner to increase the visibility of the Chikan merchandize. Hence having increased exports and increased revenues helping both the entrepreneurs and the government and giving a substantial amount of work and earning to the artisans.

**Future of Chikankari industry:** Innovation is the key of success. As per the growing demand for innovative Chikan stuff, the fashion designers have started using this awesome handwork for creating cushion covers, curtains and elegant drapes. You can also find exclusive embroidered lady's handbag, clutches footwear featured with traditional floral motifs, paisley and royal regalia of Persian designs. Thousands of traders and manufacturers are engaged in the business of Chikankari. Plenty of skilled and unskilled workers are involved in taking forward the rich handicraft tradition of Lucknow, which has not only found takers in the domestic market but has takers globally. The humble journey of art form which was started centuries ago has now gained a global platform. This art form is a very intimate part of Lucknowi culture and *tehzeeb* which depicts the legacy and way of life of the artisans. With ever growing global demand, chikankari garments have made major inroads in the US, European and UAE markets. It serves as an evidence for glorious past and bright future of this ethnic embroidery.

## **II. Conclusion:**

Chikankari industry is a shifting industry that has changed and adapted throughout the time. It is 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 colors 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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