

## Issues of The Lucknow Chikan Handicraft Industry

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### ABSTRACT

Chikan craft is a traditional handwork of the Lucknow region. The work is renowned all over the world for its fineness, delicacy and elegance. The chikan craft industry is an unorganized industry and faces a lot of problems. This paper details all the problems faced by the chikan craft industry of Lucknow. Secondary data from various available sources have been used to study the problems. The study reveals that artisans are most suffered people who do the actual handwork by straining their eyes. These people are paid less and they are also developing health issues overtime. These artisans are ignored for the basic facilities such as hygienic place of work and living, social security, literacy and very low standards of living. The findings also reveal that the chikan craft entrepreneurs face problems such as the increasing presence of Chinese chikan products, technological obsolescence, fragmented processes, dwindling exports and no marketing measures undertaken to increase the awareness of the industry. The paper suggests that many of these issues can be solved by the mutual support of the government, private organizations and the Lucknow Chikan Handicraft Association. This would not only solve the problems under study but also increase the exports resulting in more revenues to the entrepreneurs and government. Moreover increased exports will give better recognition of the chikan products in the international markets.

**Keywords:** Chikan Craft, Chikankari, Handicraft, Lucknow, Embroidery.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Handicrafts of a place are unique. They tell about the history of that place, its richness of heritage and culture. The chikan work is an origin of Persia and came to India as the craftsmen migrated. During the extreme summer climate of India the kings and emperors could not wear all heavy works of gold and silver studded with pearls and stones. So exclusively to make them comfortable in summer chikankari was used. It is a pure needle work done on usually soft cotton cloth and called white work because of being done by white thread on white coloured cloth. Now days the work is available in various colours and also on various fabrics. The mindset of it being a summer-wear still continues.

Apart from Kurtas, saris, salwarsuits, topis, handkerchiefs and dupattas, chikan embroidery is being used on new items like table covers, tray covers, napkins, lehngas etc. The demand for these exquisite art pieces is ever increasing both in India and abroad. In Lucknow the main concentration of chikan work is found in the Chowk area of old Lucknow.

Chikankari had been accorded the geographical indication tag in December 2008. The GI tag has not brought any significant advantage or distinction of any kind to the work. The reasons have not been found out, they could have been many ranging from required innovation in design, fabric, and outfit of the apparel, skill development, health, education, awareness of the artisans to market development and penetration.

The sector is an unorganized one that exists because of the traditional skill and knowledge of the artisans passed on through generations, protects the cultural heritage of the region employing a large number of people. Now is the need for entrepreneurial intervention and innovation to revitalize the existing art form and solve the related issues.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

For Lucknow the history of chikan embroidery dates back to the time of Megasthenes 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC<sup>[1,2]</sup>, who mentions the use of flowered muslins by Indians. Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh is renowned for its chikankari hand work. The skill being centuries old originated in Persia, adds to the grace and delicacy of the person who wears it even today. Chikankari derived its name from the Persian word that means 'wrought with needle work'<sup>[1]</sup>. The chikan handwork was earlier done with white thread on white muslin cloth<sup>[3]</sup> though now-a-days it is done on a variety of cloth materials with colored as well as white threads of cotton and silk and also on various colorful fabric in accordance to the fashion trends. The embroidery is done on a light and transparent fabric so that the work is visible and the needle can easily pierce through the cloth. The uniqueness of chikan work lies in the fact that each stitch was used for one purpose only creating a discipline uncommon in European embroidery<sup>[3]</sup>. The work gained a lot of patronage and flourished during the Mughal rule especially during the

reign of Jahangir as his wife Nur Jahan was a great patron of the work form<sup>[4]</sup>. It was during this time that the work reached its heights and became common.

Handicrafts are products whose greater part is made by hand. Despite wide spread production there is no common definition for handicrafts. Handicrafts can be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally attached, decorative, functional, traditional, religiously and socially symbolic and significant<sup>[5]</sup>.

The work is done in a series of processes, which can be described as under: -

**Cutting:** The tailor cuts the cloth material into the shape required.

**Stitching:** Then a quick running stitch is done to give the block printer an idea of the placement of the designs to be printed.

**Printing:** The designs are printed on the semi-stitched garment with blocks using fugitive colours. The cloth to be printed is spread out on the table. Then, the printer dabs the block on the tray of color and places it on the fabric, banging it with his fist. He repeats the process as he moves along the fabric.

**Embroidery:** The embroidery is done on the printed designs. Different people specializing in different kinds of stitching contribute to the finished embroidery.

**Washing:** This is very important. After the garment goes through the preceding steps it becomes so dirty that the finer flaws are not seen unless it is washed.

**Finishing:** Clipping extra threads, fixing any flaws and putting finishing touches on garments are some of the final steps<sup>[6,7]</sup>.

The pictorial representation above depicts how the block printing is done on the cloth with the help of wooden block with design carved on it. Generally indigo or some temporary color is used to print the design. So that it can easily be removed while washing. Then the frame is put and the piece of cloth inside the frame is embroidered using the needle and thread. The work takes time to be completed as it is entirely done by hand. The thread used is generally cotton thread but threads of various other materials as silk, nylon, polyester, etc. are also used.

Chikan has changed from a professional activity of men to a cottage industry for women<sup>[3,7,8]</sup>. All the segments from block printing to washing are dominated by men except the work of embroidery done by hand, women dominate it<sup>[7,8]</sup>. In earlier days it was men who excelled in the needlework and won laurels. But now it is women who dominate it and win accolades for their work from the state government. They do this as a part time activity or leisure time work<sup>[7,8]</sup>. The state government wants to promote the sector as it is a heritage, increases export, helps in tourism and also increases employment opportunities for the state.

The artisans who work rigorously throughout the day using the needle to complete the main work of the



embroidery are in the worst condition of livelihood<sup>[3,9]</sup>. They are mostly Muslim women who do the work<sup>[3,7,8]</sup>. They are paid very meager amounts per piece<sup>[7,9]</sup>. A piece of good quality work takes a long time to complete. There are 35/36 types of stitches used in chikan craft<sup>[1,10]</sup>. Stitches namely murri, bakhia, jali, tepchi, tappa, dhum, katao are widely used to produce exquisite designs<sup>[7]</sup>. The major population of the artisans lives in villages around the main city of Lucknow in a radius of about 125km. The areas are namely Unnao, Hardoi, Barabanki, Sitapur, Lakhimpur, Raibareilly, Sultanpur and Faizabad<sup>[1,11]</sup>. They are uneducated people<sup>[7]</sup> having a literacy rate of less than 50%<sup>[12]</sup>. They live in unhygienic conditions, 15% use dry latrines which is banned by the government, 22.23 don't have a toilet, they either defecate on the road side or use public toilets, 66% has no bathrooms, 40% have no water supply at home<sup>[12]</sup>. They are not allowed to go out and work, because of the existing practice of purdah system. Hence have taken the option of working from home<sup>[3,7,8]</sup>. Some also work in basement factories in the Chowk area where they work for 7-8 hours daily, with only a thirty minutes break in between<sup>[9,13]</sup>. They are constantly abused and mistreated. They still do not earn enough to provide for the family. The sector is highly exploited and underpaid<sup>[9]</sup>. To solve the issue the U.P government has made guidelines for the amount of work done and the amount to be paid. Still the condition remains unimproved, as the norms are not followed strictly.

Chikan embroidery in Lucknow is the biggest artisan cluster of India<sup>[1,11]</sup>. There are about 5 Lakh artisans of hand embroidery associated with this cluster<sup>[14]</sup>

### **ISSUES FACED BY THE ARTISANS**

Through the study of secondary data from sources as research papers newspaper articles and websites the problems faced by the artisans of the industry have been studied. These problems can be listed as:

- ❖ *Highly under-paid*<sup>[7,9,11]</sup>
  - ↳ *Middlemen pay less*<sup>[12,15]</sup>
- ❖ *No concept of incentives*<sup>[9]</sup>
- ❖ *Low Standard of living*<sup>[12,16]</sup>
- ❖ *Medical issues*<sup>[9,12]</sup>
  - ↳ *No medical insurance*<sup>[4,9]</sup>
- ❖ *Illiteracy*<sup>[7,12]</sup>
- ❖ *Unaware of any association where they can register their complaints*<sup>[9]</sup>
- ❖ *Spare 7-8 hours of time*<sup>[9,13]</sup>
  - ↳ *Less time is left after completing all the household duties*<sup>[7]</sup>
- ❖ *No vocational training or skill enhancement training*<sup>[9]</sup>
- ❖ *No social security*<sup>[4]</sup>
- ❖ *Other problems*

The artisans seem to be facing the maximum issues in this industry and being the most underprivileged ones. These women who do the chikan embroidery are highly under-paid. It is said that only a few embroiderers can afford to buy the products they make. They don't even get 5 percent of the amount for which the embroidered piece is sold. Jafri (2011) says that the income of an entrepreneur is 35 times higher than that of an artisan. The middlemen take undue advantage of the situation and exploit them further. They pay less to the artisans in comparison to what they take from the entrepreneur for the artisan and keep a part of artisans share in their own pocket. The average income of a middleman is Rupees 21231pm and that of an artisan is Rupees 575pm. The business standard reports them taking 10-15% of the garments value. They also admit taking 50% or more for a piece at times. There is no concept of incentives of any sort in this industry, however good a piece one may produce or how much quantity of work one may give. Because of low wages the standard of living is very low, average income is rupees 575 pm that is less than rupees 20 in a working day of 8 hours. The majority 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. At times they bring the work to their place from centers that are located far away. Because of the distance the bringing and submitting of finished work is hectic and money is spend in the transport. The embroiderers develop a lot of medical issues because of continuously working for long hours over a period of time. These artisans start developing weak eyesight at an early age; many middle-aged women end up with cervical spindly it is and other backbone problems because there is a lot of exertion. The sector being an unorganized one the artisan has no medical insurance. The literacy rate is less than 50%. They don't know their rights. Even after facing such a lot of issues these women are unaware of any association where they can register their complaints and seek help.

Women manage to spare 7-8 hours of time from their daily work to make the chikan handicraft. If they spare less time they are not able to complete the chikan work on time and also they cannot earn enough. They mostly work from home, as the embroiderers are women who have to do the daily chores of their house along with the embroidery work. Chikan craft having been accorded the GI tag eight years back in 2008 there is no vocational training or skill enhancement training in this field. This could add to the work known to the artisans and giving an opportunity to people who want to learn this traditional art. Despite doing the renowned traditional work for generations these women have no social security. They may not get work the next time. The personal life of the possessors of this world renowned and delicate craft is filled with a lot of personal problems. Others problems faced are lack of family planning and polygamy, purdah system and household responsibilities, which restrict them to stay at home. The work is temporary in the sense that they are not sure of when will they get the work next time.

### **PROBLEMS FACED BY THE ENTREPRENEURS**

Entrepreneurs also face a lot of problems, which can be listed when the industry is seen from their perspective. These problems can be stated as:

- ❖ *A piece takes months to complete.*<sup>[13,15]</sup>
- ❖ *Use of Computer Aided Textile Designing (CATD)*<sup>[17,18]</sup>
- ❖ *Chinese chikan*<sup>[14,19]</sup>
- ❖ *Activities done in scattered locations*<sup>[8,14,17]</sup>
- ❖ *Exports dwindling*<sup>[14]</sup>
- ❖ *No awareness campaigns and marketing tools as packaging*<sup>[14]</sup>
- ❖ *Work form home makes space for middlemen*<sup>[17]</sup>
- ❖ *This craft is facing highest attrition rate of 38%*<sup>[11]</sup>
- ❖ *Wastage of garment*<sup>[15]</sup>
- ❖ *Productivity decreases with age and eyesight.*<sup>[9]</sup>

- ❖ *Many hands involved in the same unit of embroidery.*<sup>[13]</sup>
- ❖ *Shifting from skilled to unskilled work.*<sup>[4,11,14]</sup>

The embroidery takes a lot of time to complete, sometimes months. As the work is done by hand and each stitch is done one by one. Computer Aided Textile Designing (CATD) is the new trend in the textile industry. It is used for printing of the designs on the cloth. The reasons of its growth are compactness, uniformity, elegant appearance, faster, less laborious and user friendly. The manual designing is less flexible to edit, modify and replicate the design. A number of designs can be created and saved in the library and applied when required. The advantages include speed, pattern creation, editing, repeating, flexibility, variety, color ways and cost-effective. Chinese chikan is another look alike of handmade chikan that is machine made and very hard to distinguish for a layman. It is 30% cheap and takes less production time. The industry is highly fragmented as all the activities are done in different locations. Because of this transportation is a big issue and a lot of money is spent on transportation. The exports of chikan craft are dwindling and also there are no awareness campaigns or marketing and advertising done in any form. The level of packaging used in this industry is also very less. Since the work is done by middlemen, who take the raw material and bring the finished goods back. The work becomes easy but the cost of work goes up. The middlemen charge more from the entrepreneur and give less to the artisans. This money can be saved if entrepreneurs do the work. These chikankari artisans work from home and it makes space for the middlemen who take advantage of the situation. Their place is located far from centers. Because of the distance and transportation problems as work done in villages where there are no roads. The bringing and submitting of finished work gets delayed because of the personal issue of the women artisan. This craft is facing highest attrition rate of 38%. Because of the problems faced by the artisans and chikankari not being a life long source of earning artisans are leaving this work and shifting to other jobs. Wastage of the garment means that the garment is lost or if it comes back after embroidery it is cut or torn or in any such situation that it cannot be used. The rate of wastage is 20%. Productivity of the artisan decreases with age and eyesight becomes blurred. As the artisan gains experience and expertise with time, her productivity starts decreasing. This becomes a big issue for the entrepreneur to train women again and again to the best level after which they lose quality. Getting new embroiderers and training them to the desired level is a problem. A single person may not complete a piece but the expert of each stitch may do that particular stitch. This may cause the rejection of that piece, as many different stitch patterns may be visible. It takes an even longer time to complete when done by specialist artisans. A large number of skilled craftsman have shifted to unskilled work because of huge loss of demand of these products in global market. Such a shift can result in deskilling of the workers in the long run. Their focus is on completion of work and not the quality of work. It causes a great loss to the heritage. Skilled artisans do so to earn their daily bread and survive in the situation when they get no work. This condition is caused by a constant decline in the turnover affecting this cluster since 1999, because of decreasing market demand in the global market. The artisan focuses on completion of work instead of good quality of the work in the run for earning more for a piece.

## **CONCLUSION**

The government in partnership with private sector should encourage integrated enterprise development by providing support services such as local centres for skill training, product adaptation, vocational training and entrepreneurship development.

The Central and State organizations like UP Handicraft Board and UP Export Corporation in association with the private organization and the Lucknow chikan handicraft association ensuring fair wages, provide sustained and vocational training by setting up local centres for skill training, provide proper marketing channels, work on product adaptation. In the skill training centres chikan is taught, free material made available, activities for entrepreneurship development be done. But these measures should be exhaustive of the entire community. Steps should be taken to ensure that majority of the community is benefitted by the measures taken to help them. The measures should actually bring a change in the present conditions. It should ensure stopping workers exploitation and should provide them motivation to continue the craft.

The GI registration should be used in some way to increase the visibility of the product. 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 SCOPE**

Strategies should be formulated to bring an end to the existing problems faced by both entrepreneurs and artisans. Automation is needed in all stages except embroidery as washing, printing, dyeing and stitching. Measures should be taken so that the industry can be transformed from an unorganized to an organized one. Ways to use the GI tag and stop the selling of duplicates would help chikankari maintain its uniqueness. Other necessary steps to preserve the art should be taken as the art is dying and only a handful of people can do all the 32 stitches.

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