

Indian Horizons

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April-June 2016



Indian Council for Cultural Relations

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) was founded on 9th April 1950 by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the first Education Minister of independent India.

The objectives of the Council are to participate in the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes relating to India's external cultural relations; to foster and strengthen cultural relations and mutual understanding between India and other countries; to promote cultural exchanges with other countries and people; to establish and develop relations with national and international organizations in the field of culture; and to take such measures as may be required to further these objectives.

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Editor
Subhra Mazumdar

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Errata: In the Article "Through the Eyes of Vasily Vereshchagin" published in the Indian Horizon, Vol. 63, No. 1, January-March-2016, the writer name is published Savita Devi. The correct name of the Writer is "Dr. Savita Kumari".

The current issue owes its beginnings to a telephone conversation with a perfect stranger. Usha Hooda, the voice at the other end, I gathered was a keen trekker and that was reason enough for her to relocate in Himachal, I reasoned. But no! It was Aari work, a form of needlework done with fine needle-like hooks and which had select band of collectors. Her findings led me into discovering the many styles of needle art prevalent and thriving countrywide and which have been a defining component of our culture.

One of the first researchers in this field has been Judy Frater, whose work with the tribal women in Kutch, has received accolades widely. She was gracious enough to pen a complete saga of her findings, her bonhomie with the women makers, and the economic resurgence which the simple tools of coloured threads and needles have brought into their lives. Judy's article also updates readers about their graduation from handwork to machine work, all the time keeping the creativity angle paramount.

Though each one of us has had at least one brush with the art of Chikankari either as a personal garment or as an item of linen, prior to Paolo Manfredi's exhaustive research reflected in her contribution in this issue, I had given scant thought to the historicity of the art. Laced with catchy anecdotes and backed by photographic specimens of exquisite finery in the Chikankari mode, I am now better informed, particularly about the different levels of finesse that Chikankari can be classified into.

A veteran guru in the matter of Indian textiles and weaves, Jasleen Dhamija has graciously

penned an elaborate account of Punjab's signature needlework tradition in her essay on Phulkari. Her vast research has given readers an insight into the many varieties of the phulkari chadar and the significance behind every motif that is created on the base cloth. Besides giving us readers an in depth knowhow, it was also a discovery of sorts to learn of the nomenclature of the finished product.

Travelling south in this journey of threads and needles, I learnt of the tradition of making Kasuti work, an art form practised by generations of women to adorn trousseau wear and special wear. I was specially impressed to learn of the generational bonding this work has led to, where eighty-year-old grandmothers sit along their granddaughters plying this art, for the elitist market. The motifs, one can see, are culled from associations round their homesteads and their aspirations, and adorn the cloth so closely that one can barely see the background.

Back in the hills once again, one was introduced to the tradition of making rumaals or large pieces of embroidered cloths as ritual covers for the carrying offerings to temples or for special occasions at home. What struck as eye opener was the closeness between the miniature painters and these specimens for what the women had created was a throwback to the figures and settings one can identify in a Pahari painting. This closeness, one gathers in Purnima's Rai's account was due to the royal patronage that the two groups had received from the royals of the kingdom.

My special takeaway from the issue was the account of the growth and development of two major needlework enterprises based in two different regions of the country. In Alwarpet in Chennai, is a thriving needlework outlet under the Vastrakala logo, which has been making needlework as an unbroken tradition, for elitist clients the world over, recreating specimens of needlework culled from portraits of Napoleon 1, embroidering the hanging, upholstery and curtains of the Ashoka Dining Hall at Rashtrapati Bhavan and innovating fresh specimens based on the Zardosi tradition to simulate a Nizam-era bedroom. More than just propagating an Indio-French needlework connection that goes back to 1860, this venture is a role model in craftsmen's welfare initiatives as staff are not migrants but dedicated workers from a traditional needlework community, who enjoy social and economic benefits, health insurance as part of their employment terms.

Shabnam's enterprise around the Murshidabad kantha is more than a success story around needlework. It is a saga of social upliftment not of the individual woman worker but an entire community, who are now the proud owners of

a cooperative enterprise that runs a flourishing school for children of the village and a kantha making outfit where every worker is employed in an aspect of kantha that she is best suited for. Thus the end product that comes forth is a coveted item of export to the West as well as Iran and elsewhere. In the midst of a kantha centred bonhomie, it is not uncommon to see baklava and cookies passed around as buyers bring gifts that everyone shares.

Sreoshi Chatterjee's shots of vintage items commonly in use in middle-class Indian homes, narrates a lifestyle around needlework, dating back a few decades. One learns of how in her grandmother's time, the convents made needlework a part of school curriculum and trained their charges with the characteristic forms of European embroidery prevalent in their native countries.

All this and more has gone into making this issue a colourful read of success stories hemmed and adorned by generations of women across the country.

Happy reading.

Editor



Subhra Mazumdar

Foreword

Amb. C. Rajasekhar
Director General, Indian Council for Cultural Relations

This volume of Indian Horizons is dedicated to a study of Indian embroidery, a long-time integral aspect of Indian culture, which is visible in every corner of the country. The outlay of this issue has been an attempt to portray how Indian embroidery has now become a continuous success story for its makers. While the tools for its perpetration continue to be basic and rooted, notably needles, hooks and threads, the outcome of its production has triggered a revolution of sorts in the country. At a time when some craft forms are seeing a setback, the progress of embroidery in India is unearthing fresh outlets and innovative uses for both domestic and international consumption.

To document this transformational role the volume records the findings of persons who have been dedicated researchers and workers with a hands-on engagement with their chosen form of embroidery. All of them have kindly and exhaustively recounted the saga of development, the trials on the way and the onward vision they have envisaged for their chosen forms of needlework. The ICCR is grateful to all of them for their painstaking effort to share their know-how with our readers.

Besides documenting various styles and their methodology of production, these essays strive to give a glimpse of the economic and social derivations that are hinged to that form of embroidery production. Noteworthy observations include how embroidery has brought dignity and pride among its makers as also stemmed the migration of workers to menial options at the cost of neglecting these age old heritage productions. The economic benefits that accrue, as embroidery becomes a lucrative item of export, is given due importance by our writers.

The volume also contains exhaustive pictorial evidence of embroidered varieties garnered from the various regions. The contents are thereafter rounded off to a delightful tinge of nostalgia by the inclusion of a few archival shots of ICCR happenings over the years, in the starting pages of the issue.

The attempt to provide a well researched and viable reading experience has remained paramount in our minds all through this production process. This dedication has enabled us to present a truly iconic salute to Indian embroidery through our efforts, into your hands.



Amb. C. Rajasekhar

From our Archives



Scene from Alladin puppet play performed by Calcutta Pupper Theatre during their visit to Poland in May, 1980.



Yaksgana : Sonar Chand Troupe visited F.R.G., Holland, U.K., Czechoslovakia, Belgium and France in June, 1980.



Scene from Garud Vahan: Mayur Bhanj Chau Troupe visited Portugal, Spain, Netherlands, Italy in October, 1980.



Geeta : Mayurbhanj Chau Troupe visited Portugal, Spain, Netherlands, Italy in October, 1980.



H.E. Mr. Heinz Birch, Ambassador of G.D.R. along with Secretary, ICCR and Secretary AIFACS inaugurating the Exhibition of Paintings by Karl Eric Mueller from G.D.R.



Smt. K. Chattopadhyay, Vice-President and Mrs. M. Bhalla, Secretary, ICCR in conversation with the artist, Mr. Manjusri.



Mr. Manjusri (artist) explaining and showing one of his works to Smt. K. Chattopadhyay.



Foreign students' performances at Kashmir Camp-I.



Foreign students' performances at Kashmir Camp-I.

Vastrakala: The French Connection with Embroidery in India

Malavika

The tradition of Indian embroidery and its appeal beyond native shores can be traced back centuries. One such link goes back to the entrepreneurial spirit of a French family of traditional embroiderers, who have kept up the embroidery link with this country down four generations. **Francois Lesage** belongs to the fourth generation of a family of traditional embroiderers in France. The House of Lesage,

founded in 1862, were the embroiderers for Napoleon III and his court. His grandfather Albert Lesage and father, Francois Lesage, supplied embroidery to the best *Couture* houses—Vionnet, Schiaparelli, Chanel, Balenciaga, Christian Dior, Yves St. Laurent, to name only a few. Their links with India was part of a family decision involving an expansion of their business interests.



Anti-Chambre Moritzburg castle, Germany



Napoleon's throne embroidery

"I was born in a family which started embroidery in 1860. We have always been travelers—my grandfather went to Chicago at the age of 19, my father went to Hollywood at the age of 18 and I, to India, at the age of 19 for the first time, and finally settled in Chennai (formerly called Madras) at 27. I have been staying in the city for nearly 25 years now.'

Although a casual read of this statement would invariably lead one to assume that Francois' Chennai stay, impromptu at the start, could be dismissed as a touristy fascination for this country, his continuation of the dialogue definitely puts things in place.

'When I came to India during my early days, I was struck by the sight of the same tradition of embroidery in

both India and France. It was passed on to these countries from China and Persia during the 12th century. I decided to continue with my family legacy and embroideries here in India and found a language to express myself.'

Looking back on that vital decision taken nearly 23 years back, **Jean-Francois Lesage** has much to congratulate himself for. Not only did he find his calling but along with partners—**Patrick Savouret, Malavika Shivakumar** and **Sandeep Rao**, decided to create together a centre of hand embroidery in Chennai which today is dedicated to excellency and high quality exclusively, and which is manned with the help of a community of artisan-embroiders from Sriperambadur, themselves descending from an embroidery tradition dating from the late 18th century.

'Vastrakala' as this set-up is called, employs more than 170 local craftsmen and trains them to create embroidery of the most refined quality, one that would be considered fit for kings. Their clients include the rich and famous—the Royal Houses from England to Thailand to Morocco, actress Catherine Deneuve and the Rothschilds, Tamil actor (late) Sivaji Ganesan, steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal, the well known fashion houses of Europe, America's leading stores such as Bergdorf Goodman and Neiman Marcus, not to forget their collaboration with French footwear designer Christian Louboutin.



Embroidered chair, synetic motifs

Today, the repertoire of the company has widened even further and its client base ranges from palaces in France to operas, museums and mansions across the planet. 'Interestingly, in most of these cultural heritage landmarks of the world, the samples of the workmanship of our embroiderers have begun to co-exist with the most exquisite paintings and artworks of the world,' is their justified claim.

What Francois had identified a quarter century ago and which has led to his enterprise standing on firm ground, is the fact that right from the start he had awakened to the fact that both India and France have been nations of embroidery since centuries. The tools of embroidery are the same in the two cultures; the embroidery frames are the same and those two cultures have been deeply linked together since many centuries through trade. In fact, it was the Indian link which gave this embroidery tradition its greatest boost. What we deem the luxury market in Europe since the 60's, is basically a throwback of the very



Hommage to Pollock



A Partners Portrait

old Silk Road trading route. This vital business thoroughfare of yore had its foothold on Indian soil and became the conduit for the passage of Indian techniques which enriched European techniques. Workmanship in precious stone carving, enamel work in silver or gold, filigree work, extraordinary intricate weaving of brocades and other metal and silk thread weaves and for sure the fantastic thick embossed embroideries from India and Persia are some core examples in this list of endless largesse.

Thus when Jean-Francois arrived in India, from a Europe that was going through the period of the Renaissance, he discovered in India nearly at the corner of every street, extraordinary artisans who still knew fabulous ancestral techniques and who had largely disappeared elsewhere.

“What a feast! I wanted to be part of it, by joining together the brilliant and spontaneous knowhow of India with the organised knowledge of my French roots.”

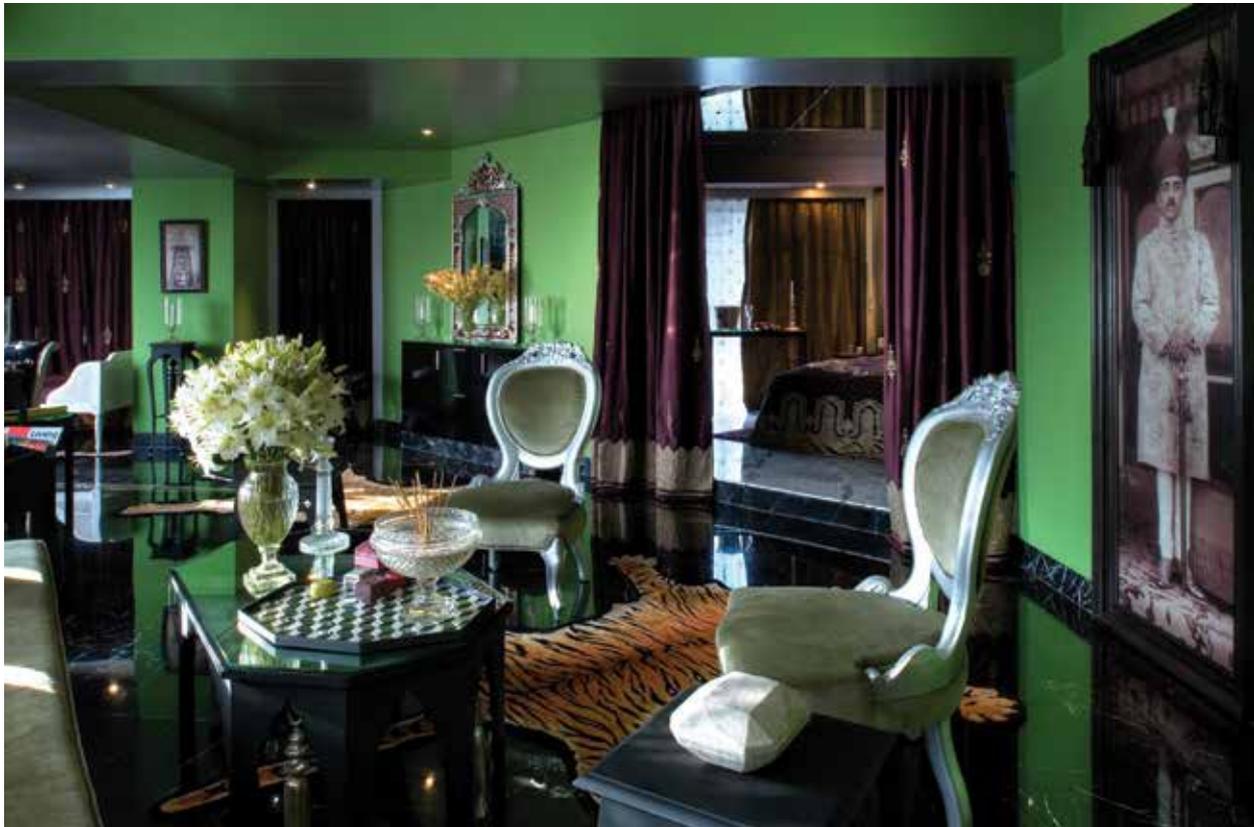
Tracing this intrinsic artistic and cultural path to the 21st century one finds a shift in cultural attitudes between the two groups. While the French embroiderer sees herself as a stylist in embroidery, she needs a creative work, nothing repetitive, and always re-invented. Her Indian counterpart on the other hand, still worships the long and slow process of time consuming embroidered works. They are not intimidated by the millions of stitches that they need to execute to cover a large panel which will become a curtain. They welcome anything intricate, complex, and the challenge does not affect their patience. It is nearly like a facet of yoga.

The valuing of this painstaking underbelly of embroidery is still intact when it comes to the thousands of stitches existing in works in the Indian tradition. What this Indo-French house of embroidery in India has managed to bring about is the restoration of the sense of confidence in our craftsmen. Over the years they have begun to gain self-awareness and are now convinced about the importance of their talent even in the 21st century.

Combined with ensuring a working space that acknowledges the primary role played by the embroiderer in the scheme of things, the organisation has banked on another crucial input from the Indian tradition which over the course of time had been severely eroded. A strict training about the importance of quality, a much neglected aspect of embroidery workmanship nowadays, has gone hand in hand with the

workers' personal grooming. The dual combine of training and grooming has paid dividends in this quarter century and helped the company produce in India the most incredible works for Indian and international clients who are fastidious about getting the best in the world.

At the outset, when the fledgling company was scouting for talent from the surroundings, the choice was gradually contained to a particular community of embroiderers only because unlike other regions of India where the embroiderers are mostly migrants workers, these workmen preferred to go back home to their villages every evening, have a very stable life, and thus be convinced more easily about the importance of keeping up the tradition compared to others in India who wouldn't mind changing professions, as long as it would bring them back to their village.



Osmania Suite at The Park Hotel Hyderabad



Panel for the Rashtrapati Bhavan

The execution plan thereafter was hinged on an easy outlay: pride and transparency. The company had to be truly Indo-French, celebrating the best of the two embroidery traditions. The company in Paris was called from the beginning, 'Lesage Interieurs, Paris-Madras', stating openly the fact that all that is done under this label is made in Chennai. Presently, say the founders, 'During every visit to the office by what one calls "VIPs", we encourage exchanges between them and our craftsmen to convince the latter about the importance of what they do.'

Despite these efforts at integration and social welfare of the workforce, at Vastrakala, in the early days, the founders had to spend hours every week reconnecting the artisans with their dignity, explaining to them the magic of their hands, the importance of their knowledge, the fascination people abroad had for their talent. These men had no clue about that and they

thought they belonged to the past and would drop their ancestral profession as soon as an opportunity arose to join any so called ordinary modern job, celebrated by their families and friends as the ultimate achievement to face the future. Alongside the core training in their art form, it took the founders a long time to convince them back about the importance of high quality, which would be appreciated and recognized worldwide whether Indian or otherwise, as long as it belonged to the best.

The team also made the decision to reward the workers financially from the beginning and at par with the best they could offer, even if this meant that they were viewed by their competitors as "spoiling" the work force with their indulgent ways. In concrete terms it meant that above the mandated PF & ESI, health insurance, the organisers improved on these by adding private group health insurances along with other

advantages. The company acquired an SA 8000 certification for it.

It is presumed that South India embraced embroidery probably only 250 years ago, influenced by their rulers who integrated in their customs a few "latest musts" en vogue at the elegant courts of Delhi, Lucknow, Bidar or Hyderabad. That was a part-story for in that period the trading relations with the East India Company had opened opportunities to propose embroidery as an ultimate ornamentation on palampores, kalamkaris and other exotic luxury products exported from the Coromandel Coast for the British or French markets.

In this amalgam of demand and supply, the orientation process has not been a one-sided game. The south Indian embroiderers because of their foreign clientele, became used from an early time to adapt to a more generalistic demand, forcing the craft people to mix techniques from

all around India and reinterpret them to suit their clients abroad and to show a great flexibility which fortunately, has endured into our times. A fitting example can be drawn from the Indian adaptation of the earlier "Persian" tradition of Zari and Zardosi which has helped to create amazing golden tri dimensional embroideries which had an immense success with the Asian royal courts. This work was often made using gold Zari and could create elegant impressive pieces on garments or thrones, canopies, drapes, pelmets and sofas, diwans, cushions, flags, even horses or elephants used as adornments—delightful, fascinating symbols of joy and abundance, dignity and elegance—used by royalties and affluent patrons to impress upon the laity their dignity and power.

A beautiful challenge a few years ago at Vastrakala was to recreate the Zari, Zardosi embroidered ornamentation for one of the six thrones of Napoleon. A private collector in Paris, passionate about the Emperor Napoleon I, was able to acquire one of the nearly forgotten thrones of



Processional umbrella, Tiruvannamalai



SRK's eye on a cushion at Gauri Khan's store

his hero Napoleon; the embroidered upholstery of red silk velvet was entirely destroyed. The only trace of what it used to look like was featured on a portrait of the Emperor standing beside his throne.

The team enlarged the specimen to a life size photograph of the portrait focusing on the throne so they could slowly re-trace each detail of the embroidery, rediscover the imperial symbols, the bee, the laurels, the oak leaves and decorative borders inspired by the Roman era to finally recreate an authentic empire style embroidery, using real zari, gold bullion, gold sequins which were approved by the curators and historians

and currently revered as holders of the Empire's historical truth. Says its discoverer, "I love the fact that an originally Indo-Persian embroidery technique, adapted in Europe in the 17th century and largely used by Royalties like Napoleon in the 19th century, finally came back to the golden fingers of our Indian embroiderers for a magnificent rebirth."

Closer to home, Ms. Priya Paul, the well-known and innovative hotelier requested us to reinvent our embroidered version of the Nizam era in Hyderabad at a luxurious suite of her futuristic hotel. She gave us total freedom to reinterpret luxuriously all the strong symbols of the grand

days of the Nizam's era. The team embroidered a regal bed, mixing modern black vinyl used as canopies for auto-rickshaws, treated it as a 'noble' material, mixing it with silver, grand Zardozi volutes and sculptural embroideries, to finally create an incredible bed which would have impressed the Nizam himself. To complete the ambience, there were tiger rugs that were made using crewel work in a hyper realistic manner in order to recreate the ambience of the time, without endangering the life of any royal feline. As an icing on the Nizami cake, using contrasting electrical colours the embroideries, managed to re-create in embroidery life-size portraits of the Nizam and his wife, a fashionable pastime of yore when embroiderers would use the prints of Raja Ravi Verma photographs, circa early 20th century, as their base for creating embroidered portraits of royals and dignitaries. This clever adaptation worked and gave to the suite an incredible ambience sketched successfully between a dream and reality, between the past and the present.

For the Vaux le Vicomte palace near Paris, it has been about recomposing a royal embroidered

puzzle, as one-third of the décor was still existing while the rest had been destroyed by the ravages of time. Once again, the conceptualizers scrupulously, recomposed the entire décor, found back the original techniques and materials, discovered hidden embroideries lying under the most recent ones and the embroiderers loved this "embroidered Sherlock Holmes adventure" and adapted the project as theirs fully. They asked questions about the palace, wanted to see photographs, to understand exactly what the work was about; at the end of the process once again, the artisans managed to recompose the large number of missing elements so well that the owner of the castle, the Vicomte de Vogue and his curators, could no more distinguish the new from the old.

The marvel when it comes to craft and embroidery is that, the techniques having been confronted along the Silk Route since so long, are then reinvented and adapted by Indian craftsmen who have the uncanny skill and dexterity to express their talent in any complex decorative register, from Europe to the Far East, using the technique and implements that are essentially the same:



Vastrakala samples



Vaux le Vicomte - bed curtains for Mme Fouquet's chamber

the needle, and the hook. Any other variations have to do with specific materials indigenous to each area which are manipulated through similar techniques, with local accents.

One of the more recent projects that is cherished the most and of which we are very proud, is made of giant-sized, three dimensional gilded embroideries which adorn the walls, curtains and pelmets of the State Dining Room of the Rashtrapati Bhavan. The iconography of the embroideries portray India's diversity, shown through the floral décor—each one different from the other and unrepeated. The golden embroidered Ashoka emblem thrones are positioned proudly on the central panels of the room. Placed at a height of 7 metres, the embroideries had to be 5cm thick and refined at the same time! The final outcome is like a bas relief made with specially manufactured gold threads from Surat.

In the last two years, Vastrakala has had the pleasure of collaborating with a legendary name

in contemporary India, linked equally with the fascinating universe of cinema and now with design: Gauri Khan.

Gauri Khan incarnates the vivid, energetic, sharp and modern India—in the formidable spirit she gives to her interior design projects. It all started two years ago with a collaboration between Gauri Khan and Jean-Francois Lesage, to build together a collection of stunning, embroidered contemporary textiles, accessories, panels, which she presented at the famous Maison et Objet exhibition in Paris and further to that, many interior projects, including sharp, modern embroideries all over India.

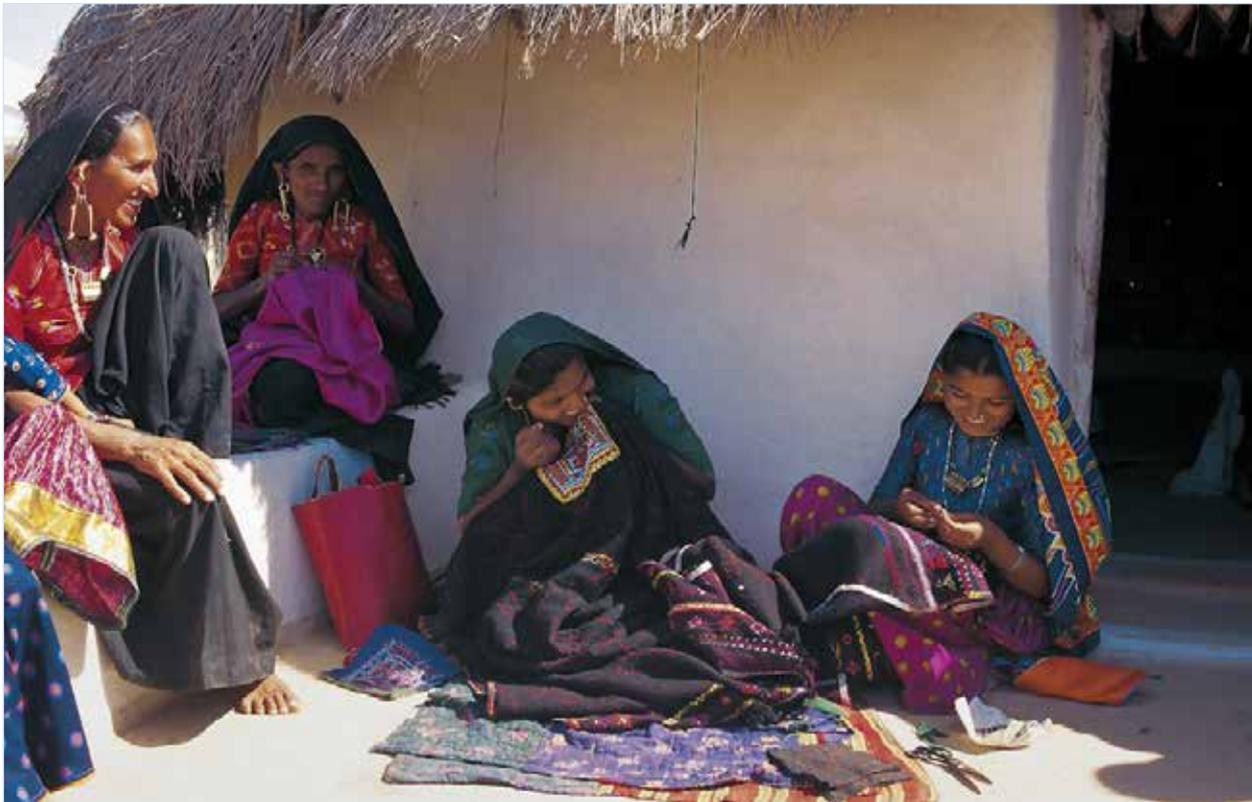
As we progress from one success story to another, at Vastrakala, we believe firmly that in a world that gets more and more standardized, where quality Indian craft has a brilliant future it has manage to structure and organize the formidable potential inherited from the past; where embroidery can restore a feeling of singularity, identity and modernity. ●●●

Embroidery : A Woman's History of Kutch¹

Judy Frater

“Where did embroidery come from? It was 200 years ago... our subject was herding. There was no business as such. We drank milk and buttermilk. We took needles and embroidered. In that way, someone intelligent must have come up with the idea... For seven generations we knew this embroidery!” Harkhuben, a Kachhi Rabari of Kutch, is explaining her tradition to a film crew.

She picks up an orange silk *kanchali*. “I made a blouse like this, for my dowry—more than forty years ago,” she says. “It was traditional. Then I embroidered a green one with four *nala*, a purple one with a half flower... a black one with *kanchphuli*. I made five *kanchali* and each of them was different!” she proudly exclaims. “Otherwise people would say she only did one thing!”



Kachhi Rabari Women embroidering in Tunda Vandh, c. 1994



Kachhi Rabari Dowry displayed in Tunda Vandh, c. 2010



Sameja women in Dumado wearing pako and muko kanjara, c. 1995



Marvada Meghval woman wearing a kharek kanjaro, Ludia, c. 2013

Kutch is a unique pocket in the Great Thar Desert that spans from the Indus Valley of Sindh through western Rajasthan. Its rugged windswept land, once site of one of the earliest civilizations, in centuries thereafter hosted traders and warriors from Central Asia, Western China, the Near East, the Arabian Peninsula and Europe. Cultural influences of these peoples contributed to the growth of a vital artistic heritage, and the dry and barren environment fostered rich and colourful textile traditions.

Harkhuben is over 60, and she remembers every detail of her dowry. Deviben, two generations younger, elaborates, “Craftsmanship is the ability to do. An artisan is someone who can design, do any work, compose. You have to think what goes where. There has to be balance. If you don’t compose, it won’t look good—no matter how good your technique is.”

In Kutch, embroidery has played a major role in women’s lives. Village women stitched colorful sparkling garments and household decorations, bags, animal trappings and even games—portable decoration suited to mobile life—to create festivity on auspicious occasions, to honour deities who granted boons, or to generate wealth.



Suf embroidered tepai posh (table cloth) c. 1950. Kala Raksha Museum collection SR-57

They stitched for themselves and their families. Embroidery was never assigned commercial value. However, it was recognized as a cultural asset. Using hours of time available after essential chores, women pastoralists and agriculturists, Hindu and Muslim, all transformed inexpensive available cloths and threads to highly valued currency. Embroideries contributed to the substantial economic exchange required for marriage. The pieces also fulfilled other social obligations. They were gifts to children, family, and fiancé. In a



Sodha Rajput Puthiyo (child's jacket) embroidered with suf and bavaliyo made in Nana Reha, c. 1960. Kala Raksha Museum collection SR-115



Kachhi Rabari wedding in Tunda Vandh, c. 1995



Dhaneta Jats migrating, c. 1992



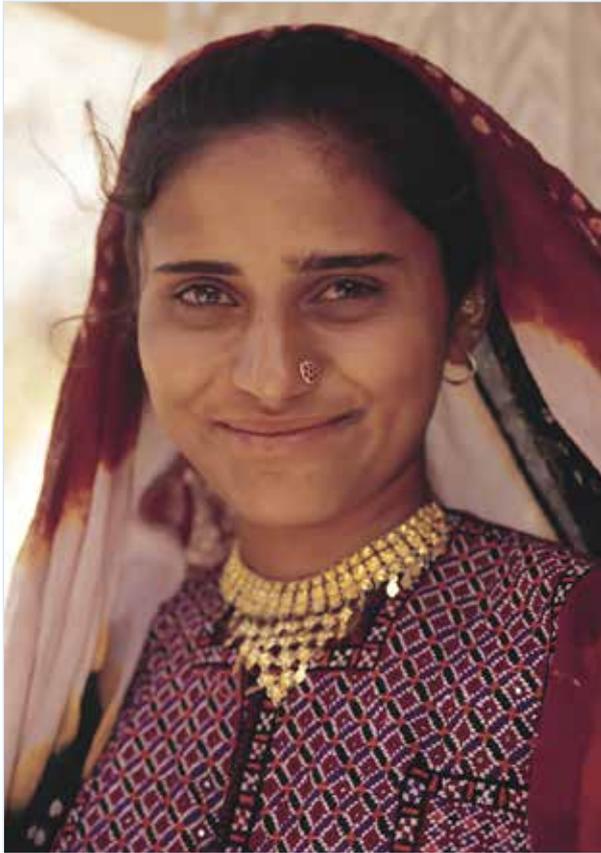
Detail of Mutava kanjaro made by Sarabai in Panavali, c. 1990. Kala Raksha Museum collection MSC-57

world of arranged marriages, a girl's embroideries are her introduction to her in-laws, demonstrating her creativity, intelligence, and love. Through embroideries ritually exchanged, relatives become known and new relationships are built.

Above all, embroidery proclaimed identity. In Kutch, identity is hierarchical; a person first belongs to a region, then an ethnic community, a family, and finally is an individual. To artisans, embroidery styles eloquently expressed this cultural hierarchy. Far more than technique, traditions

were design languages comprising stitches, colours, motifs, patterns, and composition. Each style articulated the community, sub-community, and social status of the wearer, and each was understood as cultural property. Yet, each piece was unique. Because of the personal nature of embroidery, innovation was an intrinsic part of creation. No artisan would ever make the same piece twice; nor would two pieces from different artisans ever be the same. Innovation breathed the essential life into a tradition. Thus embroidery style conveyed not only the historical evolution of region and community, but community members could also distinguish an individual's work, like handwriting.

To us, the myriad embroidery styles of Kutch² present a richly textured map of regions and ethnic groups. Each style, a distinct combination of stitches, patterns and colours, and rules for using them, was shaped by historical, socio-economic and cultural factors. Each has regional elements, shared by several different communities, and ethnic distinctions to varying degrees. Traditional but never static, styles evolved over time, responding to prevailing trends.



Garasia Jat woman c. 1999

A Regional Map of Styles

Viewing the contemporary distribution of embroidery styles, we find that style expresses cultural connections. Kutch is indigenously divided into four sub-regions: Garada in the west, Banni and Pachham in the north, the heart of Kutch, from north of Bhuj east to Bhachau and south to Mandvi and Mundra, and Vagad in the east. The embroideries of each sub-region illustrate and elaborate this cultural division.

Banni and Pachham: the Northern region, and Garada: the Western region

The border areas of Banni-Pachham and Garada, though separated by the Great Rann of Kutch from Pakistan, are both culturally connected to Sindh. The predominant populations of Banni

are Muslim Maldhari cattle herders, and Hindu Meghval leather workers. In Garada the main settled populations are Jadeja and Sodha Rajputs, Bhanusali farmers, and Lohana traders. All of these peoples originated in Sindh and speak Kutchi, a language similar to Sindhi. In these sub-regions, predominating embroidery styles are regional, common to Sindh³ and named for technique. Regional styles are practised by different ethnic groups with only subtle distinctions, a tribute to the remarkable syncretism of communities here.

Regional Styles: Paako and Khaarek

Paako style, once concentrated in Samroti, southern Sindh east of the Indus River, was brought to Banni-Pachham by Meghvals and Islamic pastoralists who migrated from Sindh in



Aari embroidered Ghaghara from the collection of the Raj Mata of Kutch c. 1880



Detail of Zardozi embroidered bandhani blouse

the 16th or 17th centuries. *Paako* and *Khaarek* were brought to Garada in the dowries of Rajput brides from Sindh.⁴ Lohanas and Bhanusalis brought a variation of *Paako* with architectural forms in couched and herringbone stitching.

*Paako*⁵ literally solid, is a tight square chain and double buttonhole stitch⁶ embroidery, often with black slanted satin stitch outlining. The motifs of *Paako*, sketched in mud with needles, are primarily floral. However, the *Paako* design logic is more geometric than floral. Flowers are laid out in geometric patterns. Motifs may be arranged in a line or a grid, depending on the shape of the object. The most common composition is square arrangements of four motifs.

Paako artisans decorate their compositions with details, usually worked in white. Detached Romanian or chain stitches, buttonhole and running stitches outline mirrors or flowers, and sometimes fill empty spaces.

The other quickly defining characteristic of *Paako* work is colour. Nearly always, *Paako* is executed on a red background. Thread colours are also prescribed. Black outlines patterns, sometimes followed by a white outline in newer embroideries. Flowers are white and red. Other motifs are worked in red-indigo and green-gold patterns.

Khaarek was originally an embroidery style practised in the Nagar Parkar region of Sindh. Geometric, counted on the warp and weft of the cloth, *Khaarek* is characterized by short bands of satin stitching. In

older *Khaarek* work, cross stitching was also used.⁹ The *Khaarek* practised in Banni, not counted, were probably adopted by *Paako* embroiderers.

Khaarek nearly always covers the background cloth with geometric patterns. As with *Paako*, patterns are generally composed in square shapes. Colour is an important method of patterning in *Khaarek*. Though it rarely shows, the background cloth was traditionally red. Red or pink and green dominated the threads used. Blue and golden yellow complimented. Popular patterns combined green and deep magenta with blue and red, and golden yellow was used at pattern centres.

Both *Paako* and *Khaarek* styles rely on borders, framed on either side with edges, to define and emphasize the shapes of main areas. All of these are basically mirrors alternating with embroidered motifs.

Suf

Suf embroidery is based on the triangle, called a *Suf*. Like *Khaarek*, *Suf* is counted. But its motifs of surface satin stitch are worked from the back of the fabric.

Suf patterns are arranged in square blocks, or triangular pyramids. As with other Sindhi styles, borders are an important element of composition. Colour was invariably green on a red background, or red on an off-white background. Gold or yellow, purple or indigo, white and deep magenta were used as accent colours.

An essential part of the **Suf** style is detailing. An artisan displays virtuosity in “decorating” her motifs; a piece is considered incomplete without this. Symmetrical patterns are filled with tiny triangles, and accent stitches. Virtuosity was also displayed in variation. For example, a **rumaal** might have four peacocks symmetrically placed, but each would be decorated in a unique way.

Originally concentrated in Dhat, eastern Sindh, **Suf** as well as the counted **Khaarek** were brought to Garada in small quantities in the dowries of Sindhi Rajput brides. These were rarely seen as they were felt out of style in the region. The counted styles were brought to Kutch more significantly with Sindhi refugees in 1972. The refugees also brought **Paako** work, and the persistence of regional tradition is illustrated in the similarity between their work and that of immigrants of 400 years ago.

Trace Elements: Muko, Haramji or Bavaliyo, Nen and Khambiri

Muko, metallic embroidery associated with Rajputs and Muslims, and **Haramji**, an interlaced style, were both brought from central Sindh. Originally styles in their own right, both **muko** and **haramji** have been diffused into accents in more predominant styles. In Garada, Bhanusalis used **haramji** butt is to cover skirts or **odhanis**. Called **bavaliyo/** acacia in Gujarati speaking regions, blocks of **haramji** alternating with mirrors are used as borders throughout Kutch.

Nen and **Khambiri**, both practised in Sindh, are particular to Banni-Pachham and associated with **Khaarek** embroidery. **Nen**, literally eyebrows, is

units of buttonhole stitch in curved shapes, usually used in conjunction with **khaarek**. **Khambiri**, double running stitch in an all-over pattern of concentric forms, is used particularly for quilts. The technique relates to the **alekh** of **khaarek**.

Ethnic Styles: Pastoral Nomadic Rabaris, Mutavas and Jats

Ethnic styles express lifestyle. In Garada and Banni, three ethnic embroidery styles are practised by pastoralists whose heritage is rooted in community rather than land. These peoples have remained relatively isolated, retaining unique customs as well as embroidery traditions.

Rabaris

Rabaris are traditionally nomadic camel herders who migrated centuries ago via Sindh.⁷ In Kutch there are three Rabari subgroups: Kachhis in Garada, Dhebarias in central Kutch, and Vagadias in Vagad. Each sub-group practises a distinguishable embroidery, all of which can be recognized as distinctly Rabari. Essential to Rabari embroidery is the use of mirrors, particularly in a variety of shapes. Rabaris outline patterns in yellow and white chain stitch, then decorate them with a regular sequence of mirrors and accent stitches, in a regular sequence of colours. Rabaris also use decorative back stitching, called **bakhiya**, to decorate the seams of women’s blouses and men’s **kediyajackets**.

Whereas regional styles remained largely consistent over time, Rabari work, like Rabaris, adapted.⁸ Contemporary work shows the influence of sub-regional styles. Kachhi work, like **Paako**, relies on dense square chain, and in the late 20th century became finer, reminiscent of Mutava work.

Mutavas

The Mutavas are a small group of Muslim herders who inhabit eleven villages in western Banni.

They are recognized as culturally distinct from neighboring Muslim *Maldharis*, and claim origin in "Arabistan." The exclusive Mutava style comprises minute renditions of local styles: *Paako*, *Khaarek*, *Haramji* and Jat work, though these are known by different names. *Haramji*, for example, is called 'tun', which means darning, or *harna*. Specific patterns of each style, such as elongated hooked forms and fine white back stitch outlining in *Paako*, and an all-over grid in *Haramji*, are also unique to Mutava work. Though technique varies, Mutava style is uniformly fine and geometric, and orange stitching predominates. This suggests the adopting of local styles to an existing aesthetic. The striking similarity of fine square chain stitching in orange with white accents practised in Saudi Arabia lends credence to Mutava claims of their origins.

Jats

Jats are pastoral nomads who originated outside the Subcontinent.⁹ In Kutch there are three Jat communities: Garasias, who inhabit twenty-eight villages throughout Kutch, Danetas, who live in western Banni, and Fakiranis, who inhabit four or five villages in Garada.

Today, Garasias are distinguished by the fact that they are settled (hence their name, meaning 'landholders'). But differences in embroidery styles strongly suggest different origins. Garasia embroidery completely covers the background cloth in tiny cross stitch patterns studded with minute mirrors. This style, displaying comprehension of the structure of fabric, is unique in Kutch and Sindh.

Daneta and Fakirani Jats were originally one community. Danetas began herding buffalo, while Fakiranis remained orthodox, herding the original camels. Both groups still share an embroidery tradition, characterized by tiny bars of kharkiyala tight padded satin stitch¹⁰ and radiating circles of a couched stitch.

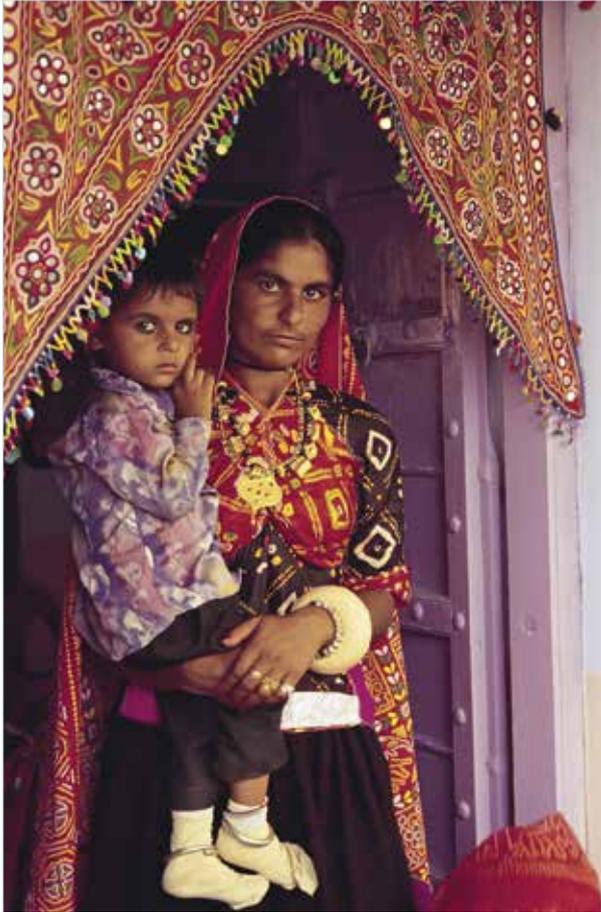
The Jat colour palette resembles that of *Paako*, and Jats may combine *Paako* with their work, suggesting an old association with Samroti.

The Heart of Kutch: Central and South

The heart of Kutch generated the regional style of Kutch. Two professional styles, *zardozi* and *aari* embroidery, patronized by the royalty and wealthy merchants in urban centres of central Kutch, established an aesthetic that deeply influenced folk styles of the region. In both cases, influence flowed from high status groups to lower status groups, but with revitalizing mutual exchange.

For the Jadeja rulers of Kutch, as for royalty all over India, silver and gold thread *zardozi* was high art, the decoration for important occasions. This ancient Persian craft was patronized in India by Mughals, then provincial courts. In Kutch, reflecting the history of Islamic origin and royal patronage, *zardozi* was produced for the tombs of *pirs*/ Muslim saints, and for the *aabha*/ tunics of urban Muslim communities, as well as for the courts. *Zardozi* was professional work, stitched by Muslim artisans, who couched various textured wires and added sequins. Occasionally *aari* embroiderers also used metallic thread. The *zardozi* artisans left Kutch about seventy-five years ago.¹¹ But the aesthetic was continued in the professional fine mirrored embroidery patronized by urban Muslim traders, and in the *muko* of the north and west.

Aari work, minute chain stitch embroidery executed with a delicate version of the cobbler's tool, was unique to Mochis, originally cobblers, who became professional embroiderers in Western India. In the 19th century Jadeja rulers hired Mochis, commissioning the finest embroideries stitched in silk on *gaji*/ satin silk imported from China through Mandvi.¹² But these *aari* garments, so closely associated with Kutch royalty, were considered 'second class art', made for little occasions or daily use. Most were worn only a few times, then passed down to village-born servants.¹³



Ahir woman at a wedding in Sumrasar Sheikh, c. 1994

For villagers, the style was not only beautiful, it was also associated with the elite. The blocks that Mochis used for patterns were available to them, so they adopted the style, using their own coarse hand woven cotton cloth, cotton thread, and hand stitching with a straight needle. Rural populations of central Kutch, Kanbi and Ahir agriculturists, and Gujara Meghvals who emulate Ahirs, copied Mochi work. Dhebaria Rabaris adapted the motifs and colours. Village artisans vitalized Mochi style with accent stitches and mirrors. In turn, Mochi artisans adopted peacock, parrot and damsel motifs derived from folk traditions. The embroidery became a regional style, the materials: the exigencies of economic and social status, most significantly differentiating rural renditions from urban traditions.

Vagad: The Eastern Region

As with Banni-Pachham, Vagad is a region isolated on three sides by the Rann. Narrow land passages connect this semi-island to Banaskantha and Saurashtra, and Vagad is culturally and linguistically connected with these regions.

Embroidery illustrates this connection. Vagad is inhabited by subgroups of the Kanbi and Ahir agriculturists, Rajput landholders, and Rabari pastoralists who inhabit central Kutch. But all of these share a regional aesthetic that differentiates them from their Kutchi relatives. The Vagad embroidery style, shaped by available materials common to Banaskantha and Saurashtra: rough khadi cloth, thick *hir*/floss silk and loosely plied cotton thread, is further characterized by large scale chain and herringbone stitches, and large, bold, hand-drawn motifs.

These have a historical basis. Kanbis and Ahirs migrated to Vagad from Saurashtra. Kanbis came from Halar, the region around Jamnagar about four hundred years ago. Ahirs, who had intermarried with Kathi landholders in Saurashtra¹⁴ came earlier via Machhukantha, the region around Morbi.¹⁵ Kanbis and Ahirs brought their respective regional embroidery styles, both based on bold chain and herringbone stitches, with them. The Jadeja Rajputs who ruled small estates of Vagad tended to bring brides from Saurashtra. Thus their dowries maintained an influx of currently popular Saurashtrian embroidery styles.

Although Vagad was culturally separate, access to Kutch was open. Vagadia peoples adapted elements of the Mochi style popular in adjacent central Kutch to local materials and techniques. The delicate yellow outlining of Mochi-influenced work, for example, in large scale resulted in the dominance of yellow, which characterizes Vagad embroidery.

For every regional style there are community variations. In Vagad, the variations recall



Toran embroidered by the Rajput community, Vagad.

community history. The Kanbi rendition of Vagad style adds animals that were popular in Saurashtrian embroideries of the mid-20th century. Ahir embroidery combines geometric patterns, herringbone and interlaced stitches of the Kathi work of their ancestors with local motifs. Rajput work employs blocks of interlacing and profuse mirrors, recalling their Sindhi origins.

Kutch Embroidery Today

In the last few decades, rapid commercialization coupled with the sudden opening of communication have had a dramatic impact on the embroideries of Kutch. The harsh realities of economics drove women to seek income to supplement the meager earnings of traditional village livelihoods. They began to sell old embroidery no longer useful to them. In addition, they began to embroider for wages.

Commercialization of craft traditions began in Kutch in the 1960s. For Kutchi embroiderers, it was a viable option. In many traditional societies, social constraints prohibit women from going out to earn through manual labor such as construction, agricultural, or drought relief work. Lack of education precluded other livelihoods. Embroidery could be integrated with essential household work. Merchants and a range of development organizations responded to this opportunity. They provided coloured threads and cloth stamped with patterns that often had tenuous reference to traditions. Eager to earn, artisans willingly devoted their embroidery time to executing these homogenized pieces.

Professional craftwork has always existed. The chikankari of Lucknow, and the aari work done by Mochis of Kutch, for example, were designed professionally and produced by 'workers' whose focus was simply skill, the size and quality of the stitch.

The folk embroidery made by village women of Kutch, however, was always a personal, hand made art. Design and execution were two inseparable sides of a coin and the concept of rote repetition was completely alien. The profound change in the transformation of an art into a commodity cannot be underestimated.

Traditional work endured, however, so embroidery morphed into two distinct entities: embroidery for earning a living, and the artisans' own traditions. This phenomenon inevitably prompts the question, how does commercial work affect the tradition?

The impact, initially, was in terms of time. Regardless of how they earned, women had less time to embroider for themselves. Commercial production work addresses time. The method of embroidering patterns printed onto cloth evolves from an industrial model, striving for speed, as well as consistency and minimal cost. Facing time limitation, artisans too calculated their efforts. But they did not choose the production solution; they found different strategies.

Kachhi Rabaris innovated with new technology: they outlined traditional patterns in machine zigzag-emulating their dense square chain stitching, and added hand stitched mirrors and details. At first, the machine embroidery was done professionally by the few community members who had sewing machines. Soon many women could purchase their own machines.

For Dhebaria Rabaris, dramatic transformation of embroidery was compelled by the community. In 1995, the Nath, a group of Dhebaria elder men who make community rules, banned the making and using of traditional hand embroidery as they deemed it 'too expensive'.¹⁶

Ironically, in banning hand embroidery, the Nath opened a Pandora's box. Keeping within the rules, Dhebaria women began to use sewing machines to apply ribbons and trims for embellishment. They rejoiced in this speedy rendition, and worked

with great abandon and enthusiasm, in the spirit of their elaborate traditional work. Thus *Harijari*, the new Dhebaria art, was born.

Suf and kharek embroiderers had yet another way to economize time. They concentrated intense creativity into fewer pieces. The precious, delicate work was relegated to home decoration that could be framed or reserved for a few days of celebration.

Pako and Ahir artisans used a combination of these strategies, limiting their repertoires and combining hand and ribbon trim work.

The second impact on embroidery traditions was fashion. Indirectly, commercial embroidery enabled the advent of local fashion. By the 1990s, organizations and traders were providing work to hundreds of artisans. While women had less time for their own handwork, they now had the power to purchase the synthetics and ready-made trims that were becoming available. Earning activities also exposed artisans to a wider range of inspirations. Traditions have always evolved over time, in response to the evolution of societies. But fashion was distinctly different from traditional innovation in its rate and extent of change, duration of trend, sphere of influence, and sense of volition. Today, with technological innovations, and with young women through working becoming independent and enjoying exposure, the entire concept of embroidery has changed. Most traditional pieces are no longer compulsory, and higher than ever value is bestowed on innovation.

"Design has to do with technology," Pabiben explains. "Technology saves time. Now, we even use a motorized machine. We want everything fast. But technology also changes your taste, your liking. Now, no one even likes hand work. Dhebaria women themselves eliminated the little hand work that was initially allowed: hand *bakhiya* (back stitching) and hand *jig* (rope stitch) for their blouses. Now they do those patterns with a sewing machine too."

Purists lament the introduction of machines and ready-made trims. But to artisans, who are concerned with spirit as well as technique, the critical factor is who is determining the pattern. Second is the calculation of time spent on inspiration vs. time spent purely on labour.

"If someone has the courage to make something new, and others follow," Lachhuben notes, "it becomes a fashion trend. There is still a relationship between artisan and art," she continues. "It is the same, but it has changed. Machine work has enabled girls to be more creative. Now, when the art is not so much on hand work but machine, girls who are artists want to be behind the wheel!"

"Even with machine work," Pabiben adds, "there is a difference between doing your own machine work and getting it done professionally. The art speaks. If it is done well, everyone knows it is the artisan's own work, not purchased. And, if it is what I decide to do, I enjoy the work more." For artisans, in the world of their own embroidery creativity, more than money, is empowerment.

For us, what is striking is the persistence of expression in style. Despite changes in technology and the burgeoning of fashion, visual expression of group affiliation remains clear. Embroidery style continues to express cultural identity.

Assessing an array of Rabari embroidery, Harkhuben organizes them chronologically. Satisfied with the result, she counts, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine styles."

"And each one is Rabari!" chorus her cohorts.

When I ask if the new work, now almost entirely sequins and trim, will be recognized as Rabari, still in unison they respond, "YES! It is contemporary Rabari!"

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- ² For an overview, see Nanavati, J.M.(ed.), *The Embroidery and Beadwork of Kutch and Saurashtra*. Ahmedabad: Dept. of Archaeology, Gujarat State (India), 1961, and Elson, Vickie C. *Dowries from Kutch: A Woman's Folk Art Tradition in India*. Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1979.
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- ⁵ In this article, I use local terminology, and spellings generally accepted in transliterations of South Asian languages. The "aa" is as the "a" of father; the "a" sounds like the "u" of but. These spellings distinguish two different characters in South Asian languages.
- ⁶ for illustrations of stitches, see Thomas, Mary, *Dictionary of Embroidery Stitches*. New York: Gramercy Publishing Co., 1935.
- ⁹ for comprehensive documentation of *paako*, *khaarek*, *suf* and Rabari embroidery styles, see Frater, Judy, *Traditional Embroideries of Sindh and Kutch in the Collections of Kala Raksha Trust*, Vol. 1-4, Unpublished manuscripts in Kala Raksha Resource Centre, Sumrasar Sheikh, Kutch.
- ⁷ see Frater, Judy, *Threads of Identity: Embroidery and Adornment of the Nomadic Rabaris*. Ahmedabad: Mapin, 1995.
- ⁸ see Frater, Judy, "When Parrots Transform to Bikes: Social Change Reflected in Rabari Embroidery Motifs", *Nomadic Peoples* Institut fur Volkerkunde, Universitatzu Koln, forthcoming.
- ⁹ Westphal-Hellbusch, S. and H.W. Westphal, *The Jat of Pakistan*. Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1964p. 13-51 .
- ¹⁰ for a diagram, see Elson, Vickie, op. cit., p.51.
- ¹¹ H.H. The Rajmata of Kutch, personal communication
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- ¹⁴ Jain, Jyotindra, *Folk Art and Culture of Gujarat*. Ahmedabad: ShreyasPrakashan, 1980, p.72.
- ¹⁵ Parmar, Khodidas B., personal communication.
- ¹⁶ Young women were engaged in robust peer competition, making more and more imaginative, elaborate, and exquisitely executed pieces for their dowries. It was taking them so long to complete the embroideries that they were not going to their in-laws' homes until they were in their 30s. Wedding was becoming purely a woman's realm, and the Nath decided to take some control in the matter. ●●●

Kasuti: Karnataka Kashida

Sunita Shahaney

“Old Rocks—some of the oldest in the world—known by geologists as rocks of the Deccan by the name Dharwars, after the Karnataka town said to belong to the Archaean age, and are a thousand million years old. This is Karnataka—home to India’s oldest form of embroidery—Kasuti.”

After the fall of the Gupta Empire (6th-10th century A.D.) there was a tremendous revival of the arts and culture which was known as the Golden Age. This region was ruled by the Satavahanas of Paithan, Chalukyas of Badami, Rashtrakutas of Malkhed, and the Pallavas and Cholas.

Then again in the 13th century, in the original State of Mysore, the women of the courts were well-versed in 64 arts and one of them was Kasuti—said more recently to have been practiced by the Lambani tribe who migrated to Gujarat from Rajasthan and then down to the South in Karnataka. They are a gentle people, reclusive in nature who lead a semi-nomadic life in the harsh terrains of Bijapur. The Lambanis believe that clothing worn without Kasuti is a bad omen.

The word Kasuti can be broken up to mean Kai—hand, Suti—cotton—hand work done in cotton. It can also be a variation of the word *kashida*—which means embroidery in North India.

Kasuti was done on Ilkal Saris woven in Northern Karnataka in a town called Ilkal on pit looms. These are woven in cotton and silk. The dark background of the Ilkal sari provides a good base for the colours used in Kasuti embroidery.



The word Kasuti can be broken up to mean Kai—hand, Suti—cotton—hand work done in cotton.



An elaborate border in Kasuti.

These saris had a distinct style—a 4" of border, which was generally in deep shades of red—and this enveloped a well woven sari with a red *pallav* carrying white panels called *tope* and *tenni*. Kasuti embroidery is done above this *pallav* in a border called *bugadi*, which forms the base of the embroidery to follow. This continuous border is worked in *gavanti* stitch which has been known to mean knot stitch or rural stitch. After this the larger patterns on the sari emerge. The chariot *Ratha*, or a tree with peacocks or flowers—and this distribution of motifs grows sparse as it travels away from the *pallav*—becoming small flowers and dots—which are worked into the pleats of the sari.

Originally, this embroidery was done by women with silk threads, which were taken directly from the weavers of the Ilkal saris. Later weavers sold these saris with 10" of extra silk thread in the

warp which hung from the *pallav* area. This was the colours used in embroidery blended well and the combinations were never garish. The most readily available medium they could use was their daily clothing—which were saris and *cholis*, *kunchis* (bonnets) and *lahngas* or skirts.

Kasuti embroidery is very rich in symbolic motifs—as the finest examples of this embroidery are found where the Vijayanagara and Chalukya court influence was strongest, the present Bijapur/Dharwar areas. Hence the inspiration for these womenfolk were symbols and designs which came from temples, caves, shrines, beautifully sculptured edifices with exquisite patterns, the flora and fauna of the region, and anything that their eyes could relate to.

The Lingayats, followers of Lingayatism, a Hindu reformist movement of the 12th century, believed



Kasuti, a way of life in the family.

to be converts from Jainism and devout followers of Shiva, were known to be the experts of this craft. Vithabai, an 82 years old Lingayat lady had learnt this art of embroidery from a neighbour when she was 6 years old. She has embroidered the most intricate designs and patterns depicting folk culture and traditional motifs. Her first work after mastering the stitches on samplers was on her son's cap. Now the embroidery she

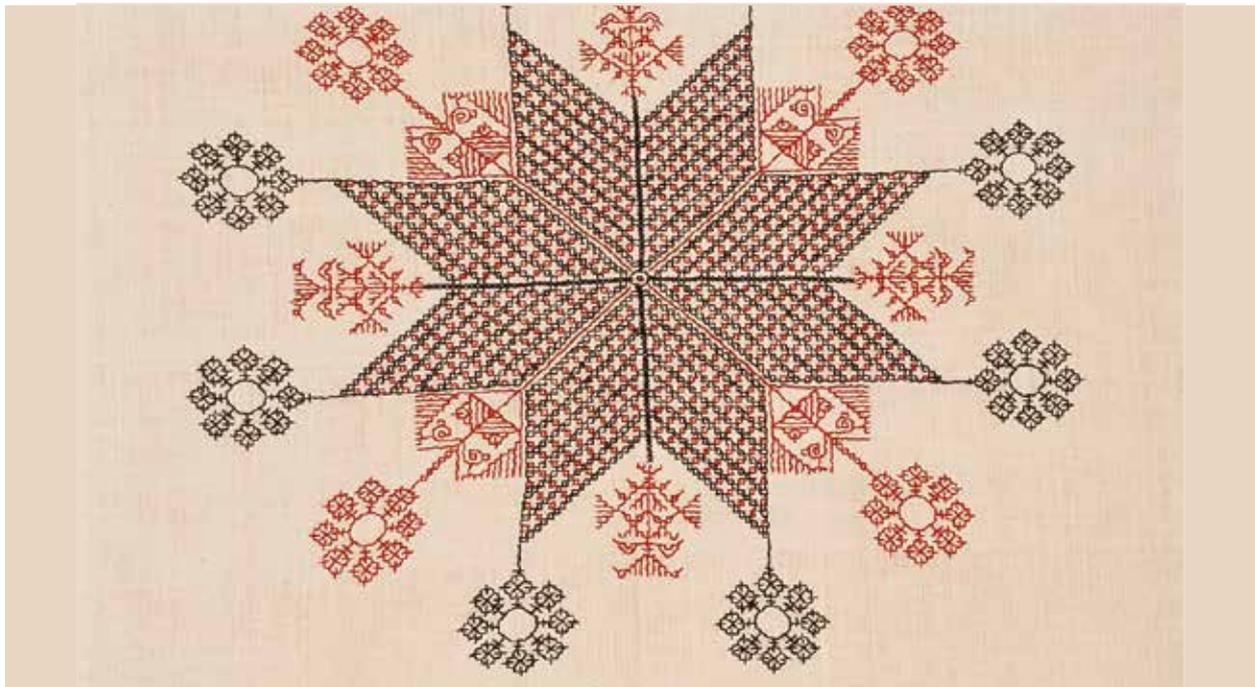
does on saris are simply exquisite. One of the saris she has embroidered was given to Queen Elizabeth of England as a gift from the Government of Karnataka. Vithabai says it has become a way of life for her family. There is no formal training in this art, but she has passed this art down to her daughter-in-law and to her granddaughter, who are now just as deft with their fingers as Vithabai, at the age of 82.

Nowadays there are many other communities, especially a large Christian community which practises this art. According to the Imperial Gazetteer of India, Bombay Presidency Vol. 1, during the decade ended 1901, the Christian population increased by 30%, mainly due to the conversions among the lower classes. There were nearly 5000 Christian converts at the turn of the century in this area.

During a recent visit to Northern Karnataka, I visited a Christian village where almost all the ladies, approximately 150, were Kasuti embroiderers. Kamalakshi, a 62-year old lady, said she started embroidery when she was 13 years old. Her



An unique decorated border.



A typical Kasuti Motif.

maternal aunt, Sundaramma, now 74, was her teacher. Sundaramma, in turn, learnt from a German Christian convent at Gadag Betgeri, where the German missionaries had put up a hospital and school. Embroidery, drawing and painting were taught along with the school curriculum. Kamalakshi made samplers for practising her stitches and later went on to embroidering saris and *khuns*, blouse pieces.

The ladies in this village talked of an interesting piece of information regarding 'Kasuti' and that it dated back to biblical times. A Kannada Bible was produced and mention of 'Kasuti' in the Book of Exodus was shown to me. On referring to the English version, the Book of Exodus, chapter 26 mentions Embroidery and it is possible that during the translation process, embroidery has been translated as 'Kasuti' in the Kannada Bible. It translates as follows: "Since ladies are not permitted to go outdoors, they are not to get fat and idle by indulging in cooking and eating, do Kasuti and spinning and be independent."

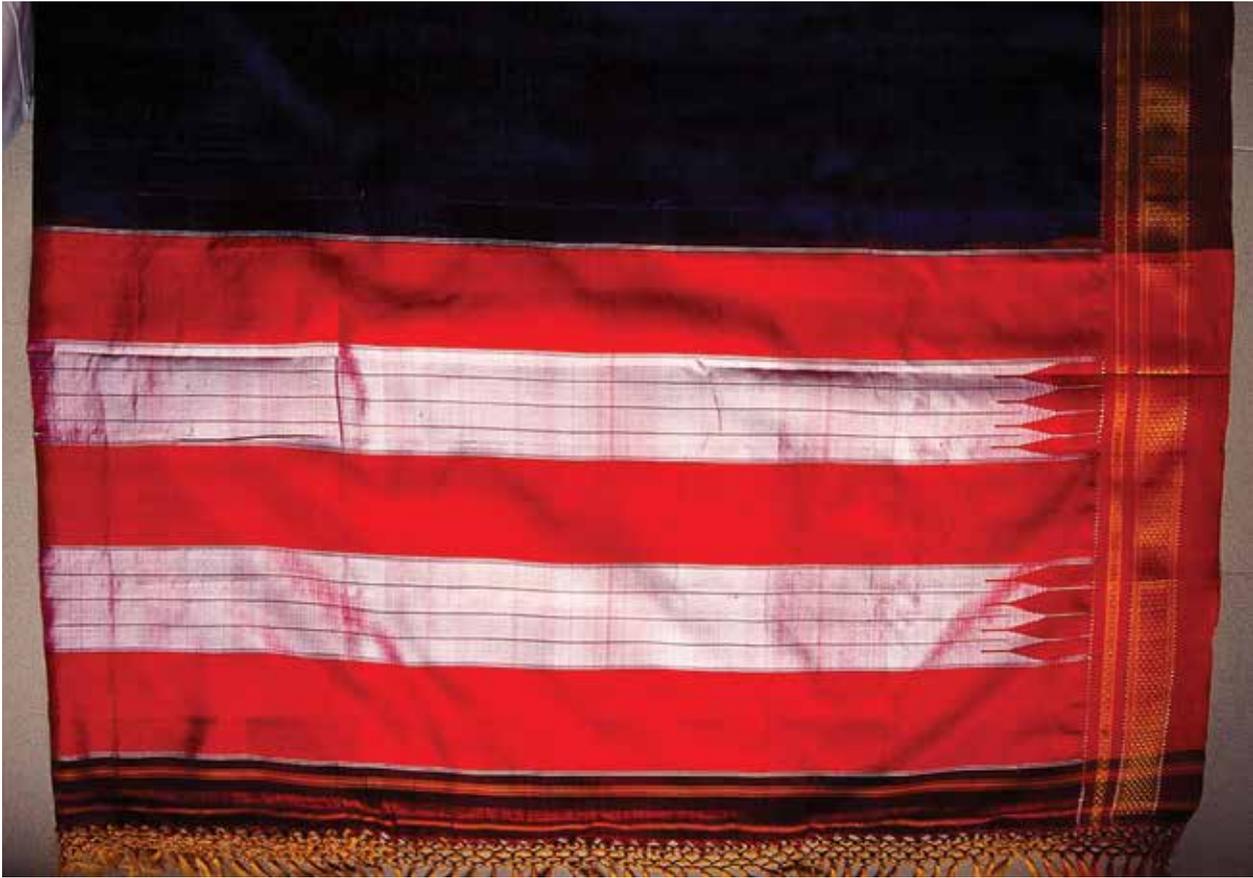
According to Kamalakshi's colleagues, the Bible was translated on to palm leaves from the Greek version and much later on to paper. We could not determine when that particular edition of the Bible was printed—as its first few pages were missing.

Until recently, it was customary for brides to be presented with blue-black Ilkal saris with Kasuti embroidery on it. In earlier days, girls themselves embroidered this sari known as the Chandrakali sari, which is a blue-black nine yards Ilkal sari to be readied for her marriage. A Chandrakali sari taken by the bride as she goes to her husband's house was traditionally woven with an indigo dyed warp and a black weft. In fact the use of indigo as a warp was mandatory in the Ilkal sarees and thus the different colours woven would have a light and shade effect. The Chandrakala was considered *Shubha Shagun*—a good omen.

Among the Lingayats a hand embroidered *khun* or choli piece was considered a most appropriate



Design depicting a camel, generally used on borders.



A border embellished with Kasuti work.



Kasuti is dominated by geometric designs.



A delicate motif design in Kasuti.

gift for an expectant mother. The dreams and desires of these young girls find expression in these embroidered pieces. Along the border, one may find a horse, which is ridden by a horseman, maybe a palanquin, which might take her to her husband's home to two love birds right in the middle of nowhere.

Mrs. Pushpa Bakre has mentioned in her book that a family heirloom, an embroidered Chandrakali sari which was done in 1902, took 18 months to complete after working 4-5 hours each day. Besides the intricate embroidery of the Goupras, fine mirror work, the Aryas of Moropant (couplets of Moropant, a famous Marathi poet of the 19th century) are unique features of this sari. This particular sari is an absolute masterpiece of Kasuti embroidery and it now hangs in the Raja Dinkar Kelkar Museum in Pune.

Technique

Kasuti can be described as a delicate embroidery with geometric design which when worked very closely can make dramatic patterns.

A combination of four main stitches, all based originally on the counted thread method (equi-distance running stitches—by counting the same number of threads), allows many people to work on the same pattern and a change in the working hands does not affect the final design. Now the designs are regrettably being traced on paper or loosely woven gauze, which is then pulled off after completing the work. Kasuti Embroidery is done with four main stitches:

- *Govanti* or *Gaunti* meaning knot, is a double running stitch and is used in straight, horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines.



A woman's blouse mid-18th century.

- *Muragi* is a zigzag running stitch and looks like a ladder when it is used. Small motifs like squares, hexagons, octagons and ladders are created with this stitch. The *muragi* stitch looks identical on both sides of the cloth.
- *Neygi* or *Negi*—the name of the stitch is derived from the Kannada word *neyi* to weave. This is a darning stitch in which long and short lines are used which gives the effect of weaving.
- *Menthe*—a Kannada word which means fenugreek seed or a forked stitch, cross stitch. This stitch is mainly used to fill in the motifs.

The most remarkable feature about Kasuti is that there is no right or wrong side. Both sides look identical when the design is embroidered skillfully. However complicated the pattern, the end of the design coincides with the beginning. There is no knot used either at the beginning or the end of the thread. A small straight stitch is

put in at the start of the embroidery and another one is put in at the end.

Most stitches used in embroidery are common to the embroidery done in different parts of the world. Variations on the basic stitches allow distinctive regional characteristics to develop. The stitches used in India link the work done here with other countries.

The Kasuti of Karnataka bears a close resemblance to the embroidery of Austria and Hungary and some of the Celtic stitches of Scotland—in particular of the Holbein stitch used in Elizabethan black work.

The Holbein stitch, double running stitch, line stitch, and in the 17th century a Spanish teacher called it “Spanische stitche”—this apparently was seen in a pattern book printed in Germany in 1527—a seamstress in the Court of Elizabeth-I called it “True Stitche”—there was no wrong side or right side: why, so many names—for one



Govanti or *Gaunti* meaning knot, is a double running stitch and is used in straight, horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines.



Motif showing the use of all Kasuti stitches

stitch? The answer to this lies probably in the fragments of printed and embroidery fabrics which have been found in the ruins of Fustat, the capital of Egypt during the 14th century. Studies on these fragments which have reached several museums around the world, have revealed that these textiles were indeed made in the western parts of India, and on studying the pictures, the similarities between Kasuti and that particular embroidery which seems to have been done during the rule of the Mamluks (1250-1517), is nothing short of striking.

There seems to be many obvious reasons why this fine art of Kasuti is practically extinct.

The technique is a difficult one to learn as the patterns are made by counting warp and weft threads, which when done on dark backgrounds can cause a great deal of eye strain. It is a laborious process and takes years to master. Even a minor error during the embroidery process means undoing that motif and re-doing it completely as the error would be spotted from afar. This form of embroidery also requires physical and mental alertness and a great deal of patience.

Years of British rule in this country taught the womenfolk of this region other hand skills like crochet, tatting and other forms of hand embroidery which were taught in the schools. There were no formal training schools for the traditional crafts; no books were printed on Kasuti and its multiple designs. The only instructions received in embroidery were in the home, with samplers prepared by the older women in the family, as their only texts. Lastly the earning through this craft was very poor; hence there was never enough money to get the required materials.

Revival of Kasuti

There are many people and organizations who have been responsible for encouraging and reviving this art of Kasuti Embroidery. The Janata Shikshana Samiti founded by Hukkeri Rama Rao—in Dharwar, has done a great deal to revive this form of embroidery. Mr. Rama Rao located many old women who were masters in this craft, brought them from their villages to the Dharwar College to teach the girls, and it was made part of the academic curriculum.

In 1960, Kamal Devi Chattopadhyay was invited to visit the Samiti and greatly encouraged their work on the revival of Kasuti. She placed orders and the All India Handicrafts Board organized and exhibition of Kasuti in Delhi and produced a brochure. It was the first time that Kasuti came out of Karnataka and found a place in the national market.

Many other individuals like Laila Tyabji, founder of Dastkaar, Asha Savla, and Subala, an NGO in Bijapur, to name a few, have put in a great deal of research, resource and time to promote the embroidery and expose it once again to the world.

Sadly, all this is only a drop in the ocean. Much more needs to be done in the way of documenting and promoting this art. Funds are needed for any type of revival work—and this is always in short supply. With help from those who are genuinely interested in Kasuti, and in fostering our ancient tradition, this art can be protected and can flourish once more. ●●●

Chikankari from Lucknow: Origins of a Legend

Paola Manfredi

Chikankari tradition developed to legendary levels of graceful elegance, expressed in a distinctive aesthetic, in 19th century Lucknow. Minute white embroidery, on white sheer muslin, a monochromatic sobriety of chikan, balanced

with a rich texture from various stitches combined in different ways, all perfectly designed to complement and enhance the patterns of clothes it ornamented with details creating harmonious and an often mesmerizing wholeness. The origins



A chickankari motif with stitches



Chickankari: a rich texture various stitches



Detail of work around the neck

of Lucknawi chikankari's reputation and legendary elegance lays in those antique creations whose fame has carried the tradition until today, even if there is little similarity between the chikankari of then and now.

Chikan: a glimpse on the historical context

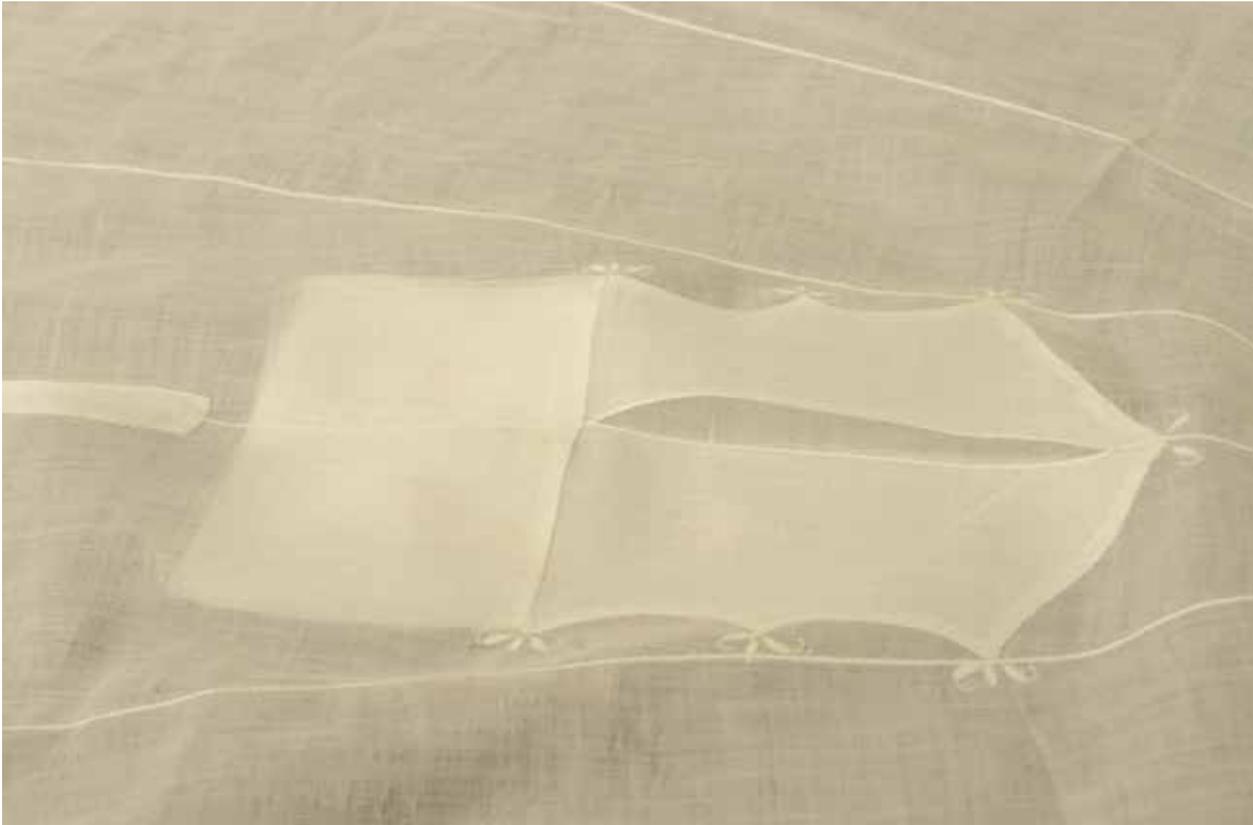
The 19th century chikan embroidery, according to contemporary trade records and exhibitions' catalogues, was produced in different places, from Calcutta and Dacca, to Lucknow, Bhopal, Madras, Peshawar, and Quetta. *"In Madras, silk is the material most generally employed and the form of needlework there practised is almost exclusively satin-stitch [...] the exceedingly beautiful but imperfectly known white embroidery of Baluchistan has never been assigned its true place, namely, along with the chikan work of Eastern Bengal and Lucknow. [...] the Bhopal white work is a form of silk embroidery in satin stitch, a quilting embroidery in which very frequently a padding of some coloured material is employed which shows faintly through the sewing thus producing a most*



Close-up of a motif

graceful and highly artistic effect. A similar form of padded or quilted embroidery is met with in Quetta." [1]

However *"Lucknow chikan work is perhaps the most remarkable of these crafts as it is the most artistic and most delicate form."*[2]



The gossamer look of chikan



Sleeve seam with a chikan border

Only a few antique pieces of ascertained origin have survived, mainly from Dacca and Lucknow, while the forms and styles of chikan works made in other places remains more elusive.

The word “chikan” is Persian, although in that language it referred to embroidery with gold thread and quilting, or was used as a metaphor

for the needle and did not apply specifically to any white on white, or floral, embroidery. Considering Persian was the international lingua franca and the official court language in South Asia before British colonisation, it is not unusual to find Persian terms from ancient trade records entering the common use vocabulary; therefore “chikan” seems to have been used as a generic term for white embroidery on white cloth.

The passion for sheer cloths ornamented with patterns has a long history in India. We find mention of “*flowered garments made of the finest muslin*” at the court of Chandragupta Maurya in the 3rd century BC; there are ancient terracotta images of the same period from Chandraketurgarh in Bengal, depicting the finest muslins embossed with tiny rosettes draping the body of goddesses or princesses. In the 7th century AD, “*King Harsha is said to have had a liking for white muslin*”

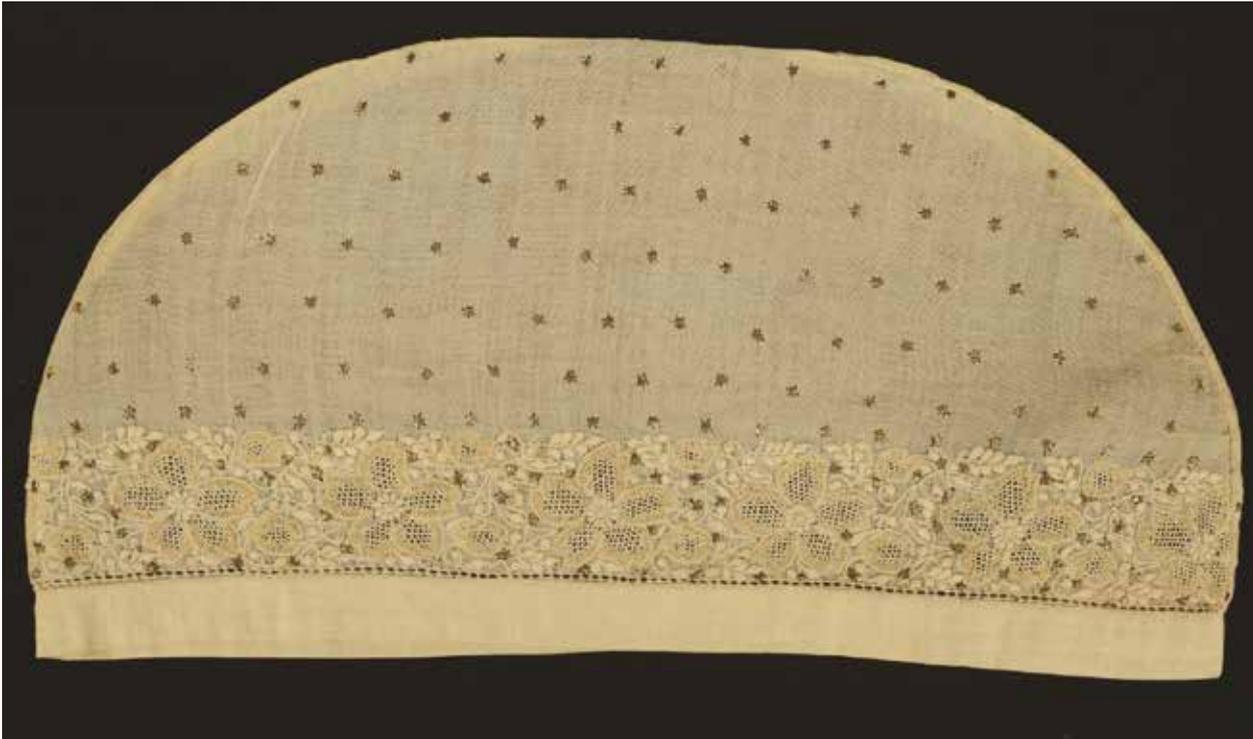


Details of a kurta with chikan work.

garments embroidered with patterns but no colour, no ornamentation, nothing spectacular to embellish it.”[3]

Muslins from India were renowned internationally. They were a coveted luxury possession from as far back as the Roman empire. Arab trade with Bengal flourished since early times, and the fine textiles produced in the Dacca region were among the products of choice.

During the Mughal empire, special workshops in Dacca produced the royal muslin or *mulmul kas* especially for the court. Nur Jahan, Jahangir’s beloved and much influential queen, of Persian origins herself, was a cultured aesthete and passionate about “*rich textiles, tapestries and fine embroideries*”[4]. She lived in Dacca for a few years at the time of her first marriage to Sher Afgan, and it is quite possible of an acquaintance with the finest muslins produced there, perhaps also embroidered ones destined



A heavily ornamented cap in chikan work.



Design in chikan work 'Shul ka daraz'.

for export. The queen is credited to have “*greatly encouraged the manufactures of the country and under her patronage the Dacca muslins acquired great celebrity. They became at this time, the fashionable dress of the Omrah[5] at the Imperial and Vice-regal courts of Hindostan, while the finer fabrics, so exquisitely delicate [...] were exclusively appropriated to adorn the inmates of the seraglios.*”[6] Nur Jahan’s well-known designs included *dudami* or flowered muslins, in which many would like to see the origin of chikankari. “*The costumes designed by her remained famous for many centuries. Writing a century later, Khafi Khan remarks that the fashions introduced by Nur Jahan still governed society.*”[7]

In a remarkable portrait dated 1620 by Bichitr, the renowned Mughal court painter, Emperor Jahangir is seen wearing a sheer muslin jama with floral seams looking very similar to the *phul ka daraz* or seam of flowers found with chikan embroideries. Similar costumes are also worn by his son the Emperor Shah Jahan in other miniature paintings by Balachand (c.1627-29) and other artists.

The Awadh Dynasty and Lucknow

With the decline of the Mughal empire regional courts gradually asserted their own autonomous rule. Saadat Khan Burhan-ul Mulk was appointed governor of the vast and rich province of Awadh in 1722, starting a dynasty of Nawabs who ruled until 1856. The luxurious lifestyle and arts patronage of their court surpassed the weakened Mughal court of Delhi. Lucknow gradually attracted artists and artisans, cooks and literary figures in quest of royal favour. This influx contributed to a glowing reputation for beautiful Urdu poetry and literature, for classical music and dance. As its fame grew, foreign artists and adventurers arrived in ever greater numbers to find lucrative opportunities with the Nawabs. Lucknow evolved

a distinctive lifestyle which came to define class, taste, manners and culture.

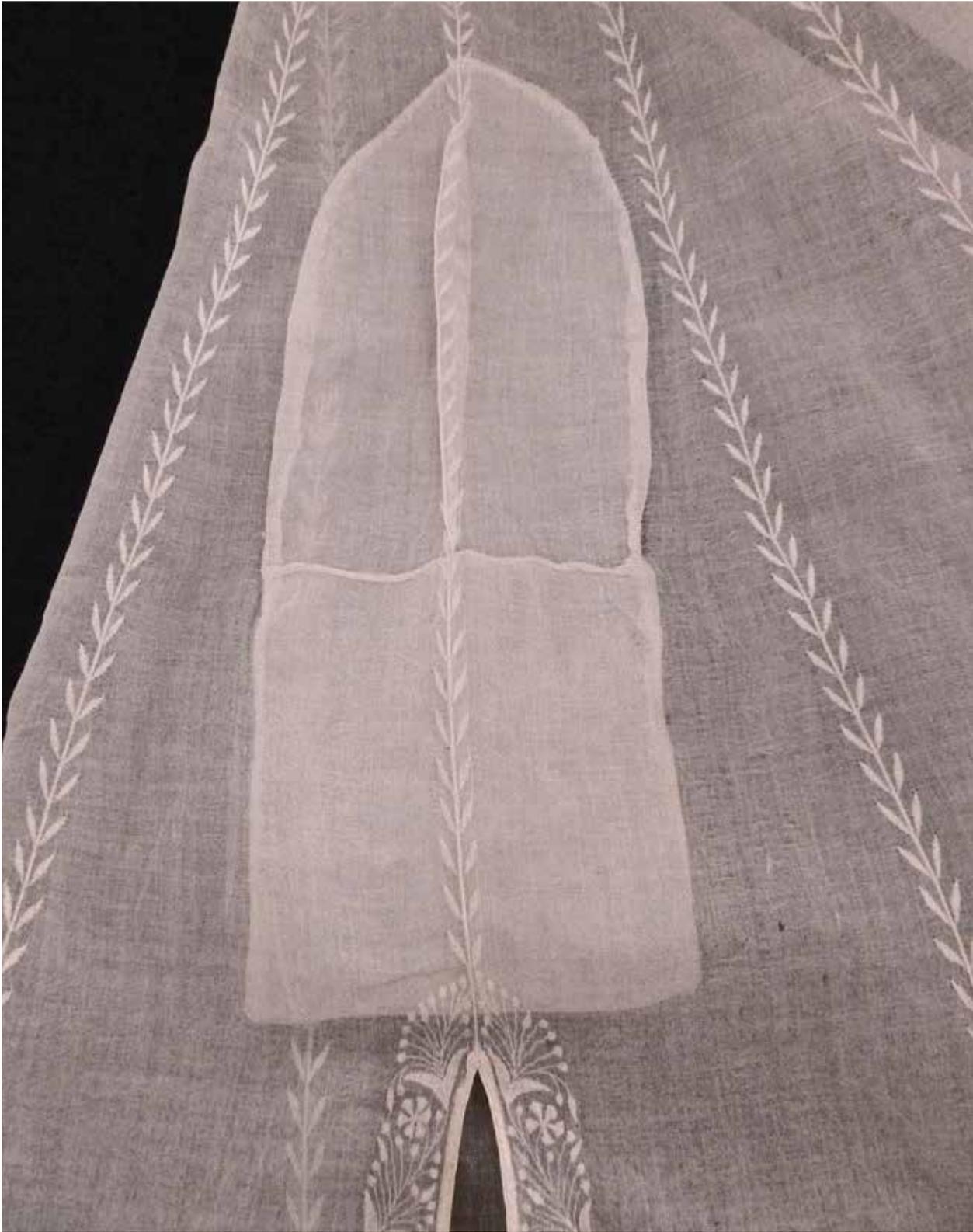
In this atmosphere of wealth and sophistication, a variety of arts and crafts flourished in the province. In particular luxury textiles, including fine silks from Banaras or Varanasi, and exquisite jamdani muslins in Tanda and Jais. The *karkhanas*, or royal workshops, produced precious zardosi and kamdani embroideries on silks and velvets or on fine muslins with silver or gold threads which were famous for their superb works. Chikan embroidery, although apparently developed only towards the end of the nawabi era, is often taken as the epitome of Lucknow’s refined taste and culture. Yet how and when chikan embroidery originated in Lucknow remains quite mysterious.

Origin of chikan in Lucknow

The origin of chikankari in Lucknow is largely a conjecture. There are different narratives, some more romanticised and popular in Lucknow, favouring Persian and noble origins, in any case, a royal patronage, while others point towards a Bengali origin. These different narratives, as distant as they might appear, have converging features and are not mutually exclusive.

One story is of Nur Jahan, enchanted with jali works, the delicate flowery designs and exquisite ornamentations on the buildings of the Persian capital Isfahan, ordered these designs be replicated on wooden blocks, printed on cloth and embroidered on fine muslins. A variation of the same narrative sees the Mughal empress Mumtaz Mahal as the protagonist, Nur Jahan’s niece and beloved wife of Shah Jahan, for whom he built the Taj Mahal.

Yet another tale has chikan developed thanks to the artistic dexterity of a princess from Murshidabad, in Bengal, married to the Nawab of Oudh. “*The princess was a skilled seamstress and to escape from the boredom of the harem took*



Chikankari a throwback to the 'Jah' work of Isfahan.

to embroidering a cap for the Nawab. With tiny stitches and variegated patterns she successfully embroidered a white cap working it richly with white thread on muslin cloth. Finally when it was ready, she sought permission to present it to the Nawab personally. The permission was granted and so was the private audience. The Nawab was so charmed by the gift and the giver that he started to single her out for his attentions. The other inmates of the harem jealously watched the favoured princess at work. Slowly they too started to work at different items trying to out-do each other in the fineness of their stitches and the delicacy of the patterns. Jealously guarding their work so that no one should know what they were preparing. Thus a great art was born out of the boredom of the harem and the desire to win the favours of the Nawab.”[8]

According to a different story handed down within a well-known family of craftspeople, the origin should be ascribed to a mysterious and exhausted traveller who was assisted by one of their ancestors, a simple peasant. *“The traveller was so pleased with his hospitality that he promised to teach him an art which will never allow him to go hungry. The traveller then trained Ustad Muhammad Shahir Khan in the art of chikankari. Chikankars believe that he was sent by God himself.”[9]*

Trade records, colonial literature and scholars instead suggest that chikan embroidery originated in Bengal. It has been attested that forms of white floral embroidery on white muslin were produced in Bengal mainly for export at least as early as the 17th century. As happened elsewhere for other Indian textiles, whether printed or woven made for foreign markets, intense and enriching exchanges of sample books and designs between buyers and producers took place since the early trading relationships, seeking to cater to the tastes and fashions of overseas markets. Indian craftsmen were reputed to be dexterous and meticulous, painstakingly making by hand *“with a greater perfection and beauty”[10]* exquisite products highly coveted in the West. Chikan

needlework probably developed in Bengal as a less expensive, but equally charming, substitute of the jamdani textiles which are muslins patterned on the loom.

Without getting into the complex, albeit fascinating, history of the competition of the West to outdo the Indian textiles industry, it suffices to be said that from the early 19th century the manufacture of fine muslins in Bengal declined rapidly as the British textiles industry succeeded in manufacturing competitive textiles mechanically. Exports of muslins from India stopped with consequent crisis for artisans in the textile sector and a huge decrease of almost 70% of the population of Dacca was recorded. From the second half of the 18th century, the court of Awadh had attracted accomplished craftsmen specialized in different arts to cater to the lavish and luxurious lifestyle of the ruling elite in Lucknow.

Scholars suggest chikan embroidery in Lucknow came from the muslin, jamdani and chikan craftsmanship developed in Bengal during centuries of royal patronage and of international trade relationships, having perfected these skills and absorbed them into a characteristic idiom of exotic styles and taste. In the latter part of 19th century chikan embroidered items of various genre and quality were also made for export to Western markets.

George Watt, in his major reference work on Indian Art at the Delhi exhibition in 1903 defined chikan from Lucknow as “purely indigenous needlework of India”[11] but later on chikan embroidery has been described as ‘Indo-European’ white-work[12] combining elements from the vocabulary of Indian textiles floral patterns with European white-works embroideries, which became particularly fashionable in the Western world towards the end of the 18th century. However, this concise and slightly dismissive definition misses out on dimensions that have contributed to make chikankari distinctive



A traditional 'jama' embellished with chikankari.

and unique, with its own aesthetic codes and technical prowess strongly rooted in the ethos of Lucknow's cultural and social identity.

Chikankari designs also reflected the trends of other decorative arts and architectural eclectic styles of Lucknow, particularly the adornment of stucco works characterized by lush floral imagery, quite different from earlier Mughal aesthetic. [13] Convoluted foliage, vines and floral elements typical of chikan embroidery are common features on friezes and arches on Lucknawi old mansions, monuments and Imambaras dating from the 18th to the early 20th centuries. *"The vibrant, flowing floral imagery of Lucknow transmuted the orchestrated severity of Mughal flowering plants to produce a vitality of form and spirit far removed from the sombre products of the Mughal ateliers."*[14]

Chikan embroidery's main characteristics have remained consistent throughout its long history. The motifs are predominantly floral, with scrolls, trailing stems and creepers filling compositions, with the paan leaf and the keiri or paisley motifs being among the favourite themes. The flowers however are rarely depicted with naturalistic styles, as they are generally outlined with a central portion filled with jali or open work stitchery of various kinds. The form and quality of chikan needlework on old pieces, and on contemporary productions as well, may span dramatically from minute and flawless execution for an affluent and fastidious Indian clientele, worked with tiny and complex stitches, to commercial works that no matter how attractive they may be, yet they lack the amazing finesse of the former.

Chikankari fashion

The enduring fame and legendary aesthetic of Lucknawi chikan originates from antique and delicate samples of which only a few survive across the world today. The quintessence of chikankari from Lucknow lay in its various complementing elements: exquisite designs

worked in minute embroidery and how they perfectly merge with the cuts and sewing craftsmanship of the costumes. Chikankari was not just an added ornamentation, but a complex syntax of dressmaking, superbly mastered by specialized craftsmen, embroiderers and tailors, karegars and darzis, which developed in the stylish atmosphere of the city.

A.H. Sharar, in his chronicle of Lucknawi culture and lifestyle written during the nawabi era, captures the fastidious attention that was paid to one's own apparel and image: *"In Lucknow [...] when a gentleman went out, he then dressed in chau goshia, a four cornered cap, fresh from the mould, an immaculately clean angarkha, which looked as though it had just come from the laundry and the hems and sleeves of which had just been crimped, wide linen or muslin pyjamas, a triangular scarf over the shoulders, a handkerchief and cane in hands, and Lucknow—made khurd nau, light, short-toed velvet shoes, on the feet. Many people took such care when going out that their clothes always looked freshly laundered, although they may not actually have been washed for months. The practice was to go out in the evening and stroll through the fashionable area of the Chauk market, taking great care not to let anything touch the clothes, even shying at one's own shadow. At night, on returning home the first thing that was done was to put the chau goshia on its mould and cover it with a cloth, then the angarkha, pyjamas and handkerchief were carefully folded with the scarf wrapped round them and put away...in this way expensive clothes, especially those made of shawl material, lasted four or five generations."*[15]

The costumes might not have been different from what was worn at the courts elsewhere in India, but the fashion-conscious Lucknow introduced changes in the cut and therefore in their look. *"A new introduction was the kurta which was a modified version of the old nima or nimcha; but made of fine material and with a great deal of embroidery work in white on white, it acquired a presence of its own. Likewise the topi, dupalli as it*



Convoluted vines and floral elements are typical of chikankari.

was called, simply made but elegantly finished and sometime rakishly worn, was made of very light material.”[16]

The surviving old pieces are mainly costumes and apparel for men, comparatively fewer old pieces for ladies are known, and there are some amazing *rumals* or square handkerchiefs densely ornamented with the finest craftsmanship, possibly for ceremonial use.

Chikankari ornamentations on dopalli consisted mainly of a fine embroidered border all around, but sometimes the embroidery covered the entirety of the background fabric, as it is often the case on the panch gaushia (five-panelled) cap designed in the 1830s by Nawab Nasir ud Din Haidar, which became very fashionable at that time. In the panch goshia style *“the long conical sections were joined together and attractive crescent-shape patterns were sewn on at the rim. These crescents were made of cotton and were stitched on the inside of the fine muslin panels. They showed through the panels and gave the head-dress an elegant but simple appearance. This cap was so popular in Lucknow that it could be seen on the heads of all and most people gave up wearing pagris,”*[17] and when chikan became popular *“it was used for this purpose... A delicate chikan cap took up to a year to make and even the most ordinary ones cost anything from ten to twelve rupees.”*[18]

Elegant costumes like angarkhas, chogas, chapkan, kurtas, shalukas, to mention only a few, are among the fragile antique pieces that have survived the inclemency of weather and wear. The diaphanous fabric, the style, the tailoring, the sewing, the design of the ornamentation and the fine needlework, while suggesting refined lifestyles of the patrons, also testify to the superb craftsmanship of the artisans who made them.

On a few remarkable and rare pieces, the seams at the shoulders and at the sides, including the gusset, are executed with such sophisticated

and subtle tailoring techniques that the seam becomes pure ornamentation.

Unfortunately there is a dearth of in-depth documentation of these skills, perfected over time by master tailors producing for a fashionable, discerning and demanding clientele. The rare samples occasionally to emerge from private collections, or are stored in museums displays, with unmatched delicate stitchery testifying to the refinement and inconspicuous luxury for which Lucknow had become famous.

The Artisans, the Craft

Tailors, designers and embroiderers worked together to achieve a perfectly balanced ornamentation, with varieties of textural effects. While the range of applied embroidery stitches was rather limited at that time, their multiple combinations and flawless execution fashioned the characteristic understated elegance and fostered the legendary charm of chikankari.

In the past, textiles and artistic crafts of exclusive quality were generally produced in palace workshops or karkhanas, where the organization of work facilitated the integration of different production steps.

François Bernier, the 17th century traveller who spent time at the Mughal court, thus captured their industrious atmosphere: *“Large halls are seen in many places, called kar-khanays or workshops for the artisans. In one hall embroiderers are busily employed, superintended by a master. In another you see the goldsmiths; in a third, painters; in a fourth, varnishers in lacquer-work; in a fifth, joiners, turners, tailors, and shoemakers; in a sixth, manufacturers of silk, brocade, and those fine muslins of which are made turbans, girdles with golden flowers, and drawers worn by females, so delicately fine as frequently to wear out in one night. This article of dress, which lasts only a few hours, may cost ten or twelve crowns, and even more, when beautifully embroidered with*



A minutely worked 'jama' for an affleunt client.

needlework. The artisans repair every morning to their respective kar-khanays, where they remain employed the whole day; and in the evening return to their homes."[19]

Descendants of lineages of master craftsmen reveal how in the early 20th century there were still a few *karkhanas*, or palace workshops in Lucknow producing very fine chikankari for an elite, but by the '30s these had completely disappeared. Characteristic of the workshop system was that the artisans and embroiderers were male, although contemporary texts do mention ladies doing also fine work at their homes.

William Hoey, who was posted to Lucknow as a Licence Tax Commissioner in the 1880s to survey the existing industries, wrote: "*There is one industry that has grown to great proportions in the last 20 years. It was almost unknown in the nawabi. It is chikan-dozi. The class of embroidery denominated chikan is in great demand and the export of it to Calcutta, Patna, Bombay, Hyderabad and other cities is an important trade. It is not easy to see why this industry has taken so fast an hold on Lucknow. But I might venture an explanation. When one wanders through the mohullas of the City where reduced Muhammadan family reside and where there are poor Hindu families who need to add to the scant subsistence afforded by a small shop or service, one sees women and even small children busy with needle and muslin. Thus the labor at the manufacturer's command is cheap and abundant. He is able to undersell those who go into the market from other places. This is one reason why the chikan business has taken a deep root in Lucknow. ... As a domestic pursuit chikan was always a favorite employment of the women of some casts.*"

Thus the *karkhana* system was progressively replaced over the course of the 19th century and completely in the 20th century with a fragmented organization of commercial productions which is still common today. Each task of the production

chain is completed in a different place by different specialized artisans, including, in the past, the weavers of fine muslins, master tailors and tailors, designers of embroidery, block makers and printers, artisans, mainly ladies, working at home and doing different kinds of embroidery work, washermen and their wives ironing the finished pieces. Many authors agree that the deterioration of the fine tradition is largely due to the fragmentation and to the exploitative commercial productions, which have on the one hand greatly simplified the craftsmanship involved, and yet on the other have privileged bold, thick and fast needlework, contrary to original legendary finesse of this craft.

The chief stitches used by the Lucknow embroiderers as described by G. Watt in 1903 were not as many as in today's high quality works, yet although with a limited repertoire the textural combinations were almost limitless. Among these *khatao* was "a form of applique', minute pieces of the same material as the fabric are sewn to the surface, these are so minute that it requires very careful observation to detect that the design is mainly in applique', not embroidery". This form of craftsmanship, which nowadays is not practised any longer in the same meticulous and tiny designs, attained unparalleled artistic finesse. *Murri* with a rice-shaped elongated form, and *Phanda* with a very minute spherical shape were considered to be the indication of superior quality. "This is one of the most graceful developments of Lucknow embroidery and the one that may be described as most characteristic of this great centre of needlework." A typical feature, today disappeared, was the golden *tasar* silk used in the filling of petals or leaves. "This peculiarity instantly distinguishes the chikan work of Lucknow from that of the rest of India." [20] Last but not least, the *jali* or open work in various forms and patterns was and still is an essential trait of chikankari.

Some of the sophisticated craftsmanship of the past is not practised any longer. However, after

a long period of decline, towards the end of the 20th century chikankari through the combined passion of master craftswomen, craftsmen and designers, is again rediscovering high levels of artistry. Its distinctive floral ornamentation has found new forms of expression, reflecting new aesthetics and yet making them to appear very traditional. Admittedly the antique chikan craft was associated to refined understatements, minimalist expressions, while today's chikankari for an affluent patronage generally reflects a textural richness more in tune with a lavish lifestyle. Perhaps these are but fresh fragments of a new search for an emergent aesthetic as India seeks to retrieve its heritage into the present.

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Photo Essays: Embroidery for the Home

Sreoshi Chatterjee

The verandah in the erstwhile Indian bungalow was an ideal multipurpose meeting ground. It was the spot where the gardener and the memsahib interacted so that she could get an update about the plantings of the garden, the fresh vegetables that were plucked and the sundry details of the work layout for the rest of the day. While such exchanges were a daily schedule, there were also additional activities that took place, particularly during the summer vacations and occasional term breaks, when this spot in the house became the centre of needlework activities for the daughters of the house and their friends, who would bond together with their companions, supervised by their mother, as they embroidered tray cloths, runners, napkins and tablecloths and sundry household linen that were used year-round in their houses.

These activities were the result of their tutoring by the missionaries where schools for girls, generally categorised as 'convent schools', followed the principle of an all-round education and academia was invariably linked with a training in the finer arts, such as music, painting, reading and needlework. Being of European origin the nuns in these schools instructed their wards in the rudiments of needlework comprising of a set of stitches that was commonly used to adorn vintage linen in their home countries. Thus with painstaking exactitude these tutors taught their wards to make the rear side of their needlework articles as well finished as the floral designs on the front side. To begin a pattern by tying a knot

was nothing short of blasphemy and called for the severest reprimand, which sometimes included a rap on the knuckles with the metal crucifix that hung from the rosary attached to their habits.

Unlike the concept of making craft a way of adornment, the convent variety of needlework was strictly made for household use and were largely floral in their makeover. Great emphasis was placed on neatly trimmed edges of tray cloths and napkins and for this purpose, a variety of lace making techniques were taught alongside designs with the needle and thread. Also, the idea was to make the needlework an eye catching adornment on the plain surface of the cloth and thus a napkin or tray cloth was never smothered in close stitchery but accented as a well finished corner motif. The edges of the needlework were given equal attention being finished with a border of open hem stitching instead of an untidy edge of frayed ends of cloth.

The needlework item that was made at school was strictly a school-based activity and was seldom carried home before its completion. Thus errant needle workers and clever shirkers had little opportunity to escape the hawk-like attention of their needlework 'sister' who entertained no truck with carelessly finished work and mercilessly ripped apart any slovenly attempt to complete a needlework 'any old how.' For amateur makers of these domestic items it took an entire school year to complete a single tray cloth, but the end result was a lifelong

learning opportunity and the acquisition of a skill that came in very handy when these former wards of the nuns began to run their own homes and where the need for tray cloths and napkins was de rigeur, for tea could not be served on a naked tray and it was sacrilegious to even think of placing the daily lunch menu on bare boards.

As a corollary to this lifestyle, the convents became hubs for the purchase of fancy and well finished needlework items made by the nuns, for the home. The Annual Day of the school which was marked by a fete, had designated stalls of needlework items produced by the convent which were eagerly bought up by the parents and guests and have remained much cherished heirlooms that are sported in homes across the country for special dos. Other outlets for acquiring such work were from missionary institutions in south India which remain reputed outlets for such prized possessions today.

As the missionaries came from different countries in Europe to set up institutions in India,

they brought with them the unique styles of needlework prevalent in their particular region. Thus a convent with a majority of Belgian sisters began to specialize in making bobbin lace items, while a convent with a majority of Irish sisters would invariably concentrate on floral patterns, embellishing their cloths with primroses, violets, daisies and forget-me-nots, among others.

Their legacy of needlework continues till date as sales of their handiwork are organized countrywide, not as a rigorous commercial activity but as an elitist specialty available at mission outlets, the foyers of five star hotels in the country and at convent fetes. Like in the past, the quantity of such work remains contained and coveted for the demand far outweighs supplies. But what lingers on, across the country, in countless homes, is a dedicated band of needlewomen, who continue to produce such work as heirlooms and gifts that they pride in handing down to their future generations and which are used and admired for their stamp of nostalgia by their makers and their exclusive quality of content by their users. •••



Luncheon place mat and napkin in cross-stitch.



Place mat and napkin in hardanger work.



A placing for lunch



Bobbin lace tea cosy.



Runner in bobbin lace.



Floral embroidery in long and short stitch.



Runner with beading inset



Floral design with beading



Crochet work on mat



Floral spray using satin stitch



Tea towels in cross stitch



Bath towel edged with crochet work



Sari border in Romanian stitch

Kantha

Shabnam

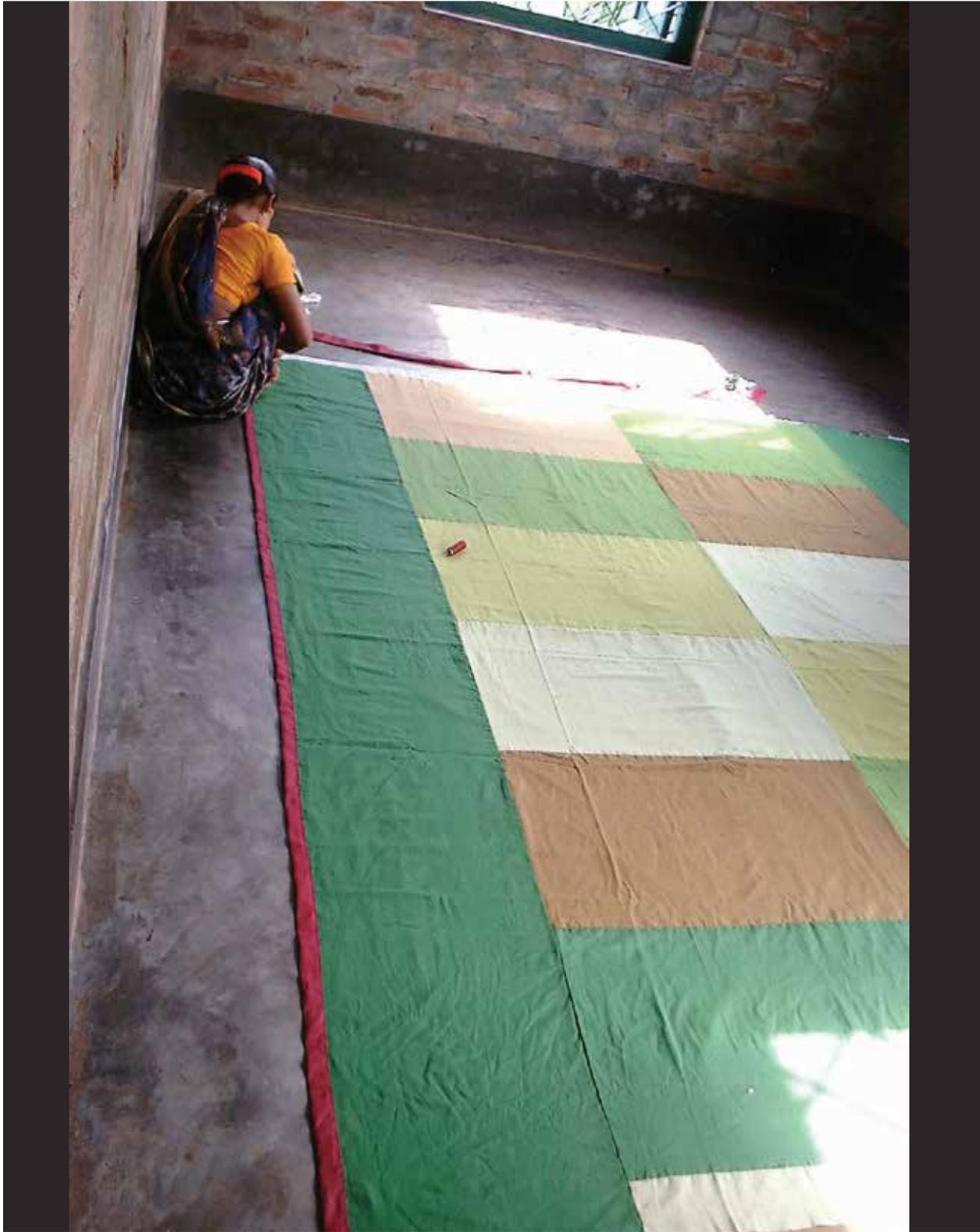
I am a rare bird in India. I am a Muslim with a Brahman name. I am a city girl with village roots. I am an educated middle class woman with an extended family of largely uneducated villagers, rickshaw drivers and farmers. Anywhere in the world these are large divides. In India,

generations after Independence, they are chasms that are usually all but unbridgeable.

And they are chasms I have spent my life trying to bridge. I was living with my city-born husband in Delhi when fifteen years ago, we realized that



The base of the cotton with Kantha embroidery.



Preparing the base cloth for Kantha.

if you want to build bridges you have to start with solid foundations. And you need a starting point on ground level. So we moved back to the village of my father's family in Murshidabad in West Bengal.

Bengal is famous for its brasswork and for its kantha—a simple running stitch that can be used to create complex geometric patterns or 'coloured-in' designs of flowers, birds or trees on textiles. For generations Bengali women have sat around their verandahs or on their cool mud earth courtyards during the heat of the midday or in the evening after the day's work has been done and chatted together with their laps covered in fabric, stitching quilts for trousseaus for themselves their daughters'. This story is about kantha, about how it came from these kitchens

and verandahs to become a globally recognized craft that can be seen in international fashion outlets and exhibitions. And I want to talk about my small role in this emergence, but first I would like to tell you my story—it is a story about dreams, about women's empowerment, about education. It is a story about a school which I love more than anything or anyone in this world and this school's inextricable bond with kantha.

My father was the first in his village to get an education. The brilliant son of a prematurely widowed mother who sold land to send him to school, he earned scholarships to see him through a medical degree and carved himself a successful career as an army doctor. He helped his brothers through their education and he changed my birthright. Instead of being married



A group sitting together with Kantha work.



The courtyard or verandah is an ideal space for laying out the cloth to be embroidered.



A group working with Kantha embroidery.

off in my teens to an illiterate farmer like most of the village daughters I was educated in a private girls' school and I entered the privileged world of the English-speaking middle class. During school holidays I visited my grandmother in the village, and some of my happiest childhood memories are being with her, eating her *mishti dhoi*, and running amok in the mud and paddy fields. I loved climbing the tamarind trees with my cousins and village friends, swimming in the local ponds and playing *khabbadi*. But as we grew up, our worlds started diverging. By the time I was in my mid teens, most of the girls I knew were married and mothers. I spoke a different language; I ate with cutlery; I knew about music and the movies and I loved to read. They were mainly busy with household chores.

Most of my adult life in Delhi had been spent in trying to bring education to the most disadvantaged communities. I met my husband Jugnu Ramaswamy – a journalist who abandoned his flourishing career to help me build a small school in the heart of a New Delhi slum. Together we poured ten years of our lives into that tiny concrete school which we called Jagriti, trying to use education to move street kids away from a future path of prostitution and crime. But at the end of that decade, we lost the land to building contractors. The slum, the school and the homes of 10,000 families were all cleared to make way for a new hotel. We watched a wrecking ball demolish ten years of work and hope, and we promised ourselves that we would build a school no one would ever be able to claim or destroy.

We had to start anew and realized that it couldn't be in New Delhi, where education and its vague promises of a better future are no match for the instant gratifications of earnings in the city for street kids. And that's how we ended up where my father had started out, in the village of Katna.

When we moved there fifteen years ago Katna was still trapped in the 17th century. Five hours by local bus from Kolkata, the village could only be reached by foot or bullock cart along a muddy 2 km track. Water came from wells and pumps and in the monsoon it brought typhoid and dysentery. Farmers ploughed their rice fields by buffalo. There was no electricity, few fixed structures and most people's houses were made of mud and straw. The area was barely in the cash economy. Traders rode rickety bicycles into the village and bartered their plastic buckets and cheap shirts for bushels of rice or vegetables.

When Jugnu and I moved there, we immediately started building a school. This new Jagriti Public School would have three incarnations. The first structure was two dark rooms in a cowshed. Later we built another building that was both school and our living space. But Jugnu always wanted a beautiful school—like his own St. Stephens' School in Delhi. "Why should the poor always have bad schools?" he said. His dream was to build something big, something that would outlive us, and that was too firmly established to end its life in a wrecking ball.

The fulfillment of a dream is not a punchline. It is not something that happens as it does in the movies, cut effortlessly from one scene to the next with the subtitle: "Ten Years Later." In real time, that subtitle is a commitment of years of work and graft; a commitment of a lifetime even. In our case it was a commitment of two lifetimes and one life.

Jugnu built the school he'd promised he would. He applied for grants and begged friends for donations. He learned the basics of architecture,

he tested soil samples, and studied local brick making techniques; he drew up the plans and advertised for teachers. With a megaphone strapped to his chest, he went from village to village to convince locals, long used to false promises from outsiders, that this plan, this dream, was for real. Brick by brick he built that school of his dreams. He did it all. He put his life into it. Two weeks before the school inauguration he had a sudden cardiac arrest. He died in our car as we were driving to the hospital hours away. I believe he literally killed himself building this school. I believe that he gave his whole great heart to his dream of Jagriti Public School.

I have spent the decade since his death honouring his vision and his dream. Jagriti now has kids who will sit the national board exams that will make them eligible for tertiary education. We have more than 600 students and a long waiting list. A third of our students come from the most impoverished families in the region and their education is fully subsidized. The school has won prizes and accolades and for many of the region's most disadvantaged children, the education we offer is the only possible way out of their closed and limited circumstances.

But a school is not just a building with classrooms. A school such as Jagriti, no matter how high the intentions, can only succeed if it pulls up its surrounding community with it. Jugnu and I realized that years ago. Education and a real opening of the mind can only work if children aren't hungry, if their mothers aren't being treated as mindless servants at home, financially dependent on their menfolk and with no option to leave even if violence and abuse is the norm. Katna and its surrounds has precious little to offer in the way of work. Those with land call the shots; those without it must work as sharecroppers or leave for the city. And as for the women—the only work they can expect is unpaid, uncredited and at home.



A typical Kantha workplace.

We all know by now that communities can only improve if women are financially independent and have an equal say in the household. Jugnu and I understood from the beginning that the only way we could really carry out our job as educators would be to find a way for the women of Katna—the mothers, grandmothers and sisters of our students—to become financially independent.

The inspiration we had been looking for came from an unusual source. I had gone to visit the home of a former playmate of mine from the village who had recently died. Her shrouded body lay on the verandah and next to it sat her weeping daughter. The young woman clutched an old Kantha—a bedspread that had been

stitched together by her mother from her old sarees. The girl rocked back and forth and wailed into the cloth. “Amma your smell”, she sobbed. Her mother’s scent still lingered on the cloth and it had triggered the memories of a mother who would never be by her side again.

The scene brought to mind all the children of India who bury their heads in their mother’s sarees, who snuggle on saree-covered laps for a nap, or have their tears wiped by her saree *paloo*. There can be no more evocative memory of childhood love and security than this scent of mother or grandmother.

And there was my epiphany. In a flash it was clear. Sentiment, cloth, a skill that was so natural

to people here that they would no more think of it as a skill than breathing. In a moment of breathtaking clarity, I realized that this was something we could harness. And I think I knew even then that what this young girl was clutching in her hands was our future.

Kantha is the way that the people of Bengal have found to create something beautiful from old fabric that would, in a richer part of the world, be thrown away. The poor cannot afford to throw anything away. So they collect torn sarees and old cloth and sew them together in a running stitch to make Kanthas – bedspreads that will go into the trousseau of the next marriageable daughter.

As a child I had seen my grandmother and my aunts all sewing together in the evening using up the last precious hours of daylight and still continuing to be productive. From their constantly working fingers, emerged Kantha quilts of unique beauty. Durable, exquisitely worked and on fabric that always had that sentiment of having belonged to an older beloved family member; old sarees, lungis, dhotis were all recycled before the word took on the hip currency of the West's Green movement. Cloth that had belonged to one generation was transformed into something lovely, useful, and with a whole new value for future generations. Kanthas are treasured as family heirlooms and there is not a little competition between women vying with each other to make ever more beautiful examples.

The irony is that our country, which has a deserved reputation for being one of the world's most important centres for textiles, and which for centuries, has been famed for its artisanal skills and handicrafts, is also the place where such skills are uniquely undervalued. India has 23 million craftsmen and women, some of them practising skills that have been handed down through the generations for centuries. Yet every day, sees more artisans leaving their crafts and

their villages to find jobs as construction workers in the cities, for Rs 200 a day.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Indian textile handicrafts took Europe by storm when they were introduced by the French and English colonials. Eventually they were replaced by the mills of northern England during the Industrial Revolution. There was another peak during the Flower Power years of the 1960's and 70's when the US and Britain went through a craze for kaftans and kurtas. But those years also gave Indian handicrafts a bad rap, and frankly our artisans are still suffering from the fact that the words "Indian handicrafts" have become synonymous for cheap and badly made kitsch.

Thankfully we are seeing a resurgence of dedication to quality and artistry in the incredible range of crafts India has to offer, A new generation of designers and artisans have been making their mark in the global market and the best Italian, Danish and French designers still come to India to source their fabrics and craftsmen. This global market however is dwarfed by the vast emerging Indian middle class.

Indians have always treasured textiles and fabrics. Shawls, sarees and fabrics are handed down from mother to daughter along with the gold jewelry. Any middle class housewife can spot a real pashmina from a fake one, and blindfolded, she could still distinguish a hand-embroidered piece from one with machine stitching. Hand work is valued here which is why Katna's Kantha has made such a name for itself in a relatively short period of time.

When my husband and I cashed in the final insurance policy that we had been saving for our old age, to buy raw materials for a women's collective that would be known as Katna's Kantha, we had hoped for success. We didn't dare to dream that within a few years a group that started with 10 women would grow to a 1400-strong collective of skilled, organized



The women behind the Murshidabad Kantha.



The Katna Kantha has put power into women's hands.

women who would earn their own salaries, contribute to the co-funding of the school and create a micro-credit fund for any member to borrow from, in times of emergencies.

The earning power of women has had a tangible effect on this region. One important change we have witnessed is that as women's earnings have gone up, the statistics on domestic abuse and crimes against women have gone down. Households where men ruled with the right of their sole earning power has suddenly seen a gender balance shift in how the working women are treated.

A few years after I came to Katna, the District Commissioner asked me to start a Social Justice

Project—a kind of informal court that would settle disputes and hear and rule on cases mainly against women. The project, Stree Shakti has become firmly established in the area now and people come from 50 kms away to file cases of dowry abuse, rape, marital disputes and sometimes murder.

As the presiding judge, jury and lawyer for both sides, I have seen a marked rise in women emboldened with new earnings to come of their own accord to file for divorces or make instances of male violence against them or their daughters public.

The Kantha collective has put power into the hands of the women who run it. They have their

own bank accounts, their own pension funds. I am not their leader. The collective itself leads. It is divided into units of ten women who govern their unit for themselves.

To join the collective, women must commit to putting a part of their earnings aside for the education of their children; each new member has to sign a contract stating that if she marries off a daughter under the age of 18, she will be expelled from the collective. The contract is enforced. Each woman is assessed on her skills level and her experience and she earns accordingly. As her skills go up, so does her earning capacity.

Designers have come from around India to work with the women. But they don't impose their designs. They offer ideas on colour and shapes and lay orders for piecework. Katna's Kantha works on the symbiosis of old ideas and new. We use traditional patterns and motifs, but we twitch them slightly for a more sophisticated market. And as our kantha workers see more of the new pieces, their own tastes and ideas evolve.

Our more experienced kantha workers are divided into those whose strengths are design, others who are better cutters and others who are the best in intricate stitching. The women take the work home and do it around their household

chores, and they are paid piecework. The kantha collective has given not only employment opportunities to women in this region for the first time in its history; it has also opened up a window to the world for people who had very few chances to look outside their environs. We have Indians visiting us from all over the country as well as visitors from around the world. They bring with them new languages, new ideas, new food—yes we pass around the Swiss chocolates, the Dutch cheese and Iranian pistachios that we get from our visitors.

Over the years, the skills pool that is the foundation of Katna's Kantha has attracted some of India's top designers and retail outlets. The label has exhibited in Indian Arts fairs in Russia, Islamabad and Milan. It has connections with designers and retailers from Iran, Switzerland, the US and The Netherlands.

It swells my heart with pride to think of the pieces of fabric that come from the mud homes and cement verandah floors of Katna travelling the world and earning praise from a real global community. Katna is no longer stuck in the 17th century. We are part of this century now, part of the future and at the same time proud of our past heritage. ●●●

Bagh, Phulkari and Sainchi: The Punjabi Women's Creativity

Jasleen Dhamija

The creativity of Punjab has no boundaries; it is free flowing as the Sapt Sindhu, the seven rivers, which are mentioned in the Rig-Veda. Known later as Punjab, the land of five rivers, its borders over millenniums have extended beyond Afghanistan and into Central Asia.

Greater Punjab was open to many influences and the Harappan civilizations extended from the foot hills of the high mountainous region to the Arabian Sea, extending over nearly 2000 kilometers, exceeding the stretch of Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilization. Heroditus mentions that Punjab was the 20th Satrapy, province of the Achaemenian Empire around 700 BC and was the most populous and the richest. It is these rich traditions, which shaped the living cultural traditions of Punjab.

The rich valleys attracted the nomadic cattle breeders from Central Asia it attracted adventurers, traders and armies. These cultures were absorbed by the settled population enriching their way of life.

The people of Punjab created myriads of objects to enrich their lives. The vibrant women of the Jat community created one of the richest forms of embroidery the Bagh and Phulkari. The women spun the locally grown cotton, wove their patterned durries, painted their

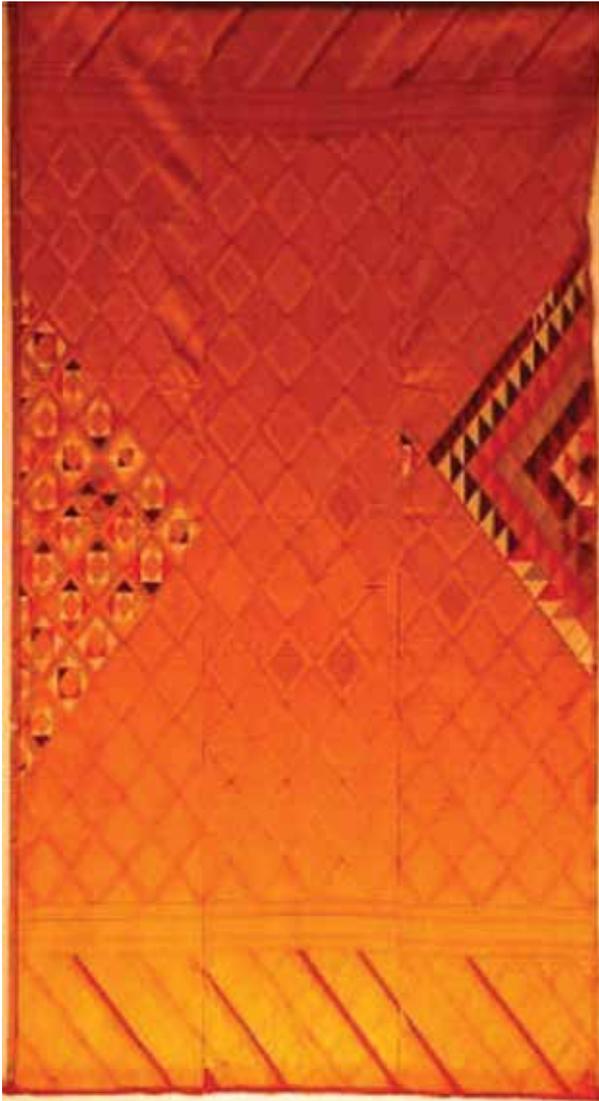
homes and embroidered their handspun, hand-woven *chaddars*. These embroidered Baghs and Phulkari were interwoven into their lives and were very much part of their rites of passage. The most powerful pattern was the Bagh, which was built up of a golden grid. The multiple squares is the sacred grid created by parallel lines running parallel to the earth and running upwards to the sky. This grid is the base of the woven cloth on which the Bagh is created. The sacred grid is also the basis of creating the places of worship, creating the townships, and the very basis of creating astrological charts, which show the movement of the planets, the nakshatras, which govern our lives.

Each occasion had a special Bagh or Phulkari associated with it from birth to the last journey when the woman was wrapped in a phulkari often embroidered by her.

The new born child was wrapped in it at birth.

*Jamdara lal gudar beleteah
Kuchar lita in dayia tai mayia
Nata tai dhota lal pat beleteah
Kuchar lita mapeo jayiah*

The young girl had her puberty rites celebrated, and after her first bath of purification, the girl



Wari da Bagh with Ghungat : The richest embroidered bagh, made by the paternal grandmother for the bride, is a rich glowing yellow and represents the sun.

would be wrapped in a phulkari of red background, *Suha subera*, signifying that she had come of age.

The wedding ceremony itself was also closely linked with the Bagh and Phulkari. The day of the ritual bath, when the girl emerged from her seclusion, she was bathed and wrapped in the red Chope, worked in yellow with exquisite stylized motifs of the dancing peacocks.

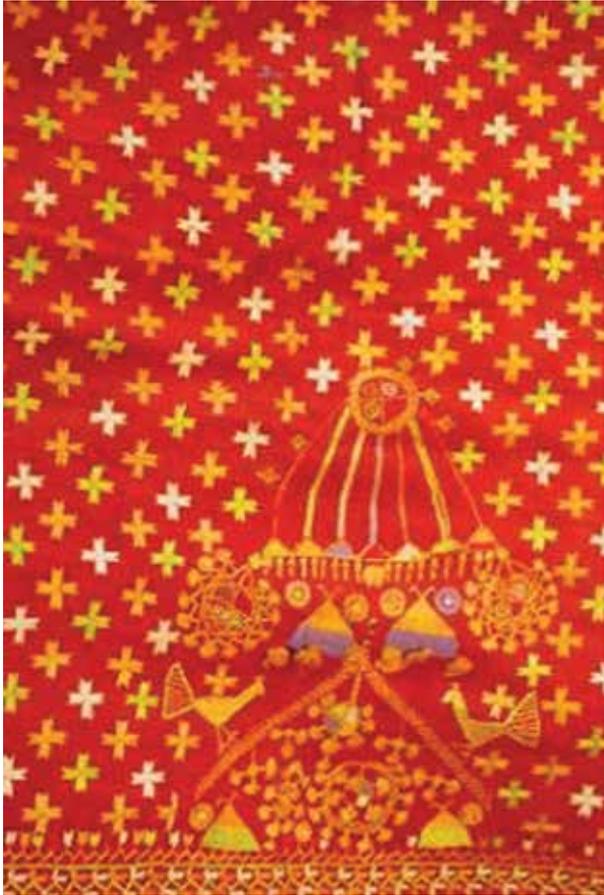
On the boy's side, the groom was brought by married women shaded by a phulkari and seated on a red pirdha (stool) and given the ritual bath.

Early research and *collection* was carried out in mid 19th century by F.A. Steele supported the theory that, this style of embroidery may have been brought into Punjab by the Jat community, who migrated from the Altai Mountains. Later research pointed out that, a group also migrated towards Iraq and Turkey. It is likely that the original name was given by the Turkish embroiders and is derived from *gulkari*. However, Harshcharita by Banabhatta dated to 7th century AD mentions embroidery done on the wrong-side, which indicates that it does have early origin. In the Sikh history one of the Phulkari preserved in a Gurudwara in Punjab is said to have been embroidered by the Bebe Nanaki for her brother, Guru Nakak Devji, which would be dated to the 16th century. There is also mention of Phulkari in Heer Ranjah by Warish Shah (1720–1790). During the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, it is said that Phulkari and Bagh was widely used.

A very rare piece carries the name of the embroiderer Guru Dev and an inscription saying "*Head-master Inder Singh di larki Bibi Gurudev Kaur ne choti behn Harbhajan Kaur de liye kadai Haiji.*"

The richest embroidery was the Vari-da-Bagh, an all over embroidery embroidered in golden yellow silk thread. It was made by the paternal grandmother for the bride of her grandson, which reflected the family history. The rich embroidery done with diagonal darn stitches reflects light and signifies the richness of the wheat harvest. The fast of *karvachauth* for the long life of the husband is celebrated by the *puja*, which all Hindu married women perform dressed in their bridal clothes and wrapped in the *vari-da-bagh*.

There is a range of patterns embroidered on the Bagh and Phulkari. There is the exquisite *Chandarma Bagh*, moon garden, with round



Ghungat Wali Phulkari

white moons embroidered on a deep indigo blue background. The *sheeshe-wala-bagh*, mirrored garden of a glowing golden yellow.

Young girls learnt to embroider simple flowers on pieces of cloth and slowly graduated to making shawls embroidered for everyday use. The straight and diagonal darn stitch is worked from the wrong side on handspun hand-woven *khaddar*, making it easy for them to create the patterns by counting threads. Besides the darn stitch, only two other stitches are used. The stem stitch works out the outline of the pattern, and to create the flowing pattern of flowers. There is the holbein stitch, which is used for making the *chope* and that has a rich pattern of stylized dancing peacocks. It is also used in creating sections of motifs such as stylized birds, the scorpion pattern or the *karela*, bitter-gourd pattern.

The Bagh & Phulkari, which was known to scholars and art historians from the 19th century was the richly embroidered geometrical patterns, which covered the entire surface creating the effect of a woven silken brocade. Former West Punjab, now Pakistan created the most richly embroidered Bagh, as well as Phulkari. The difference between the two was that the entire surface of the Bagh was completely covered and the patterns were created by the directional movement of the stitches, which also created the textured effect and even light and shade effect.

The Phulkari was created with sparse embroidery, which could be sprigs of flowers or a grid pattern or curving border patterns. The Bagh however was completely covered and was mostly used for ritual purpose, while the Phulkari would be a



Thirma



Bhulbhuliya Bagh

wrapper for a chilly day or to add a celebratory colour to simple everyday use.

*"Kadni kajale di dhara
Mutear pani bharan chali.
Leh rangdar Phulkari reshami
Chana milnai nu chali"*

The finest embroidery was reputed to be on a finely woven cloth, known as *halwan*. However, recent research points that embroidery on *halwan* was very rare, as it was difficult to count the threads. The more common cloth was *chaunsa khaddar*. This was a specialty of Zila Hazara from North Western Frontier Province, which was my homeland. My mother did have a *sishewala bagh*, which was done in *halwan*.

The Bagh and Phulkari of East Punjab was however quite distinctive. There were the pieces similar to the Bagh & Phulkari of West Punjab, but not as refined. What was however most distinctive were

the pictorial style of the Sainchi, which is also linked with the mother goddess Sanji worshipped in Eastern Punjab and Haryana.

In Eastern Punjab, the Sainchi has a pictorial form. This affects the woman's world. Her dreams, her longings, her everyday life and her aspirations. Often it carries a dominant central medallion of a flowering lotus. A rich border encloses the area and alongside is a train crossing the horizon. It is an expression of her longing for the far horizons where her beloved lives. Women churning the butter, spinning, carrying water pitchers and also playing the *chopat* are also embroidered along with the view of the outside world. Wrestlers are seen jousting their vigorous bodies attracting the women, horse carriages brought visitors, while the palanquin carries the bride. Rich scenes create their everyday world, as well as express their dreams. They embroider the jewellery that they have longed for and never possessed. The

women are knowledgeable of the epics and legends, as well as the stories of Janamsakhis and they embroider the episodes from them. A popular motif is of Srawan Kumar, who carried his blind parents on pilgrimage.

Another very special embroidery of the area is the darshan dwar. These are embroideries, which carry large doorways of shrine like mirror images embroidered on both sides. These are made for offering to the Dargahs of Sufi saints temples or the gurudwaras for wish-fulfillment. The *darshan dwar* represents the doorway to the shrine where the women make a vow to offer their creative work.

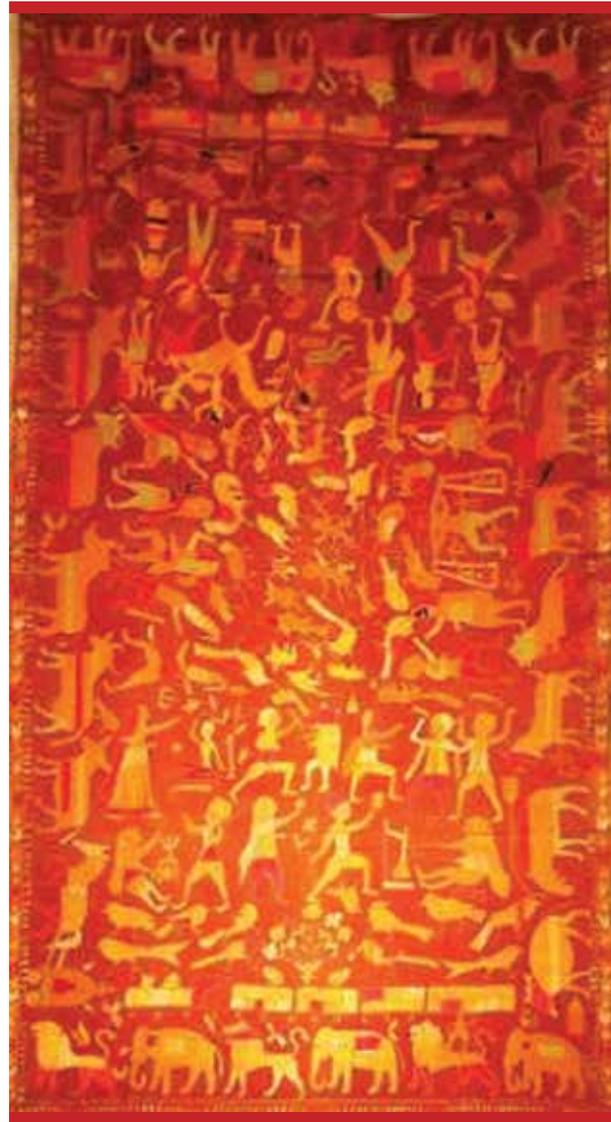
The phulkari also gets mentioned in the poignant songs of longing sung, by the young women:

*Dhola je tur chalou.
Rang lani han sawa
Meri aihl jawani
Jewai bhakda hi awa.*

Oh beloved! You are leaving and I am embroidering with green thread. This is my early youth when I burn with longing like a burning kiln.

Haryana and Shekhawati, who have a large Jat population, have a similar style of embroidery for their *ordhunis*, as well as their *ghagras*, the *daman*. The *ghagras* were generally dyed indigo and embroidered with a pattern of yellow stylized cypress trees, with a few scenes that enlivened the all over pattern. These were near the border and the belt. The opening of a rare piece of embroidery on a *ghagra*, had a scorpion at the opening, representing the pain of unrequited passion.

The older women would recite their prayers or sing their songs of love, of longing, of *virag* and also the sufi chants of Heer Ranjah of Waris Shah, Bulah Shah and Sultan Bahu well-known mystic poets of Punjab, as they embroidered. This would



Sainchi

attract the younger women to come and join them with their embroidery.

The women would sing verses of Sufi poetry with reference to their embroidery. Sultan Bahu wrote:

*Dam Dam de Viche tera nam levan.
Hik wich lawan teri kadi HU.....
Le tane te bane
Tera nam japan
Kad kad teri kudrat hu....*



Darshan Dwar

*With every breath he called your name
To his breast he held your embroidery
The warp and weft was his litany
As you embroidered your creation.*

Another beautiful verse of Bula Shah's was sung all over Punjab, as it spoke the language of the people.

*Hey hu da jama pa ghar aiya
Ism kamavan tera nam hu
Likh Likh teri zikar veh Ranjha
Ag di lat uh kaddi hu*

*He wore your jama and came home.
After enriching himself with your name.
Ranjah wrote again and again on your name.
Till the flame burst forth. HU!*

Last of all, there is my favourite,

*Paiya hai ji paiya hai
Satguru ne allakh lagai hai
Is phul ateh pai hai
Kad kad tera nam Buleha
Allakh Niranjan paihai
Paiya hai kuj paiya hai*

"Celebrating the finding of your presence, Oh Lord!" sings the woman as she embroiders the Vari da Bagh for her grandson's wife. Singing her prayers, embroidering the events of the family, which she symbolically noted by a change in the rhythm of the embroidery pattern or the colour palette. For when the bride is brought to her new home it is this shawl of love, of family history, which will welcome her and enclose her in the enriched warp and weft of life. ●●●

Chamba Rumal: Embroidered Paintings

Purnima Rai, President, Delhi Crafts Council

Amongst the rich repertoire of embroideries known and practised in India, the Chamba Rumal, a narrative style of embroidery, stands apart as being unusual and striking both visually as well as in the beauty of its concept. It takes its name from the historic city of Chamba, in Himachal Pradesh, where



A typical Raas with elaborate borders and corners (recreated from the original in Kumar Gallery, New Delhi)



Chaupad (Dice) (recreated from the original in the Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba)

it is still commonly practised. Chamba is a small picturesque town perched on a hilly ridge rising above the gushing waters of the river Ravi (Irawati). Embroidery was practised in these regions from early times. Women were known to embroider their *cholis* (blouses) and embroidered scarves, which were also called rumals, were worn around the neck of the men folk. This practice was widely spread in this entire region which included the neighbouring towns of Guler, Nurpur and Basohli. It is interesting to note that these towns also became associated with their special ateliers of miniature painting. However, it was the Rajas (rulers) of Chamba who in the 18th and 19th centuries fostered and encouraged this particular style of embroidery which then came to be known as the Chamba Rumal.

Rumal means a kerchief, in this case a square piece of embroidered cloth. It was used as wrappings for auspicious gifts and as coverings for ceremonial dishes. Even today, during marriages in Chamba, rumals are exchanged between families of the bride and groom as a token of goodwill. Pahari miniature paintings of this period are replete with imagery which show the embroidered rumal being used in this manner. It was an important social custom of the region which continues to the present day. In some of the paintings the rumals are shown as being used as part of the costumes in the form of a *patka* or sash.

Dating back to the 16th century, the oldest known rumal is attributed to Bebe Nanki, the sister of Guru Nanak, and is preserved in the Sikh shrine in Hoshiarpur district of Punjab.

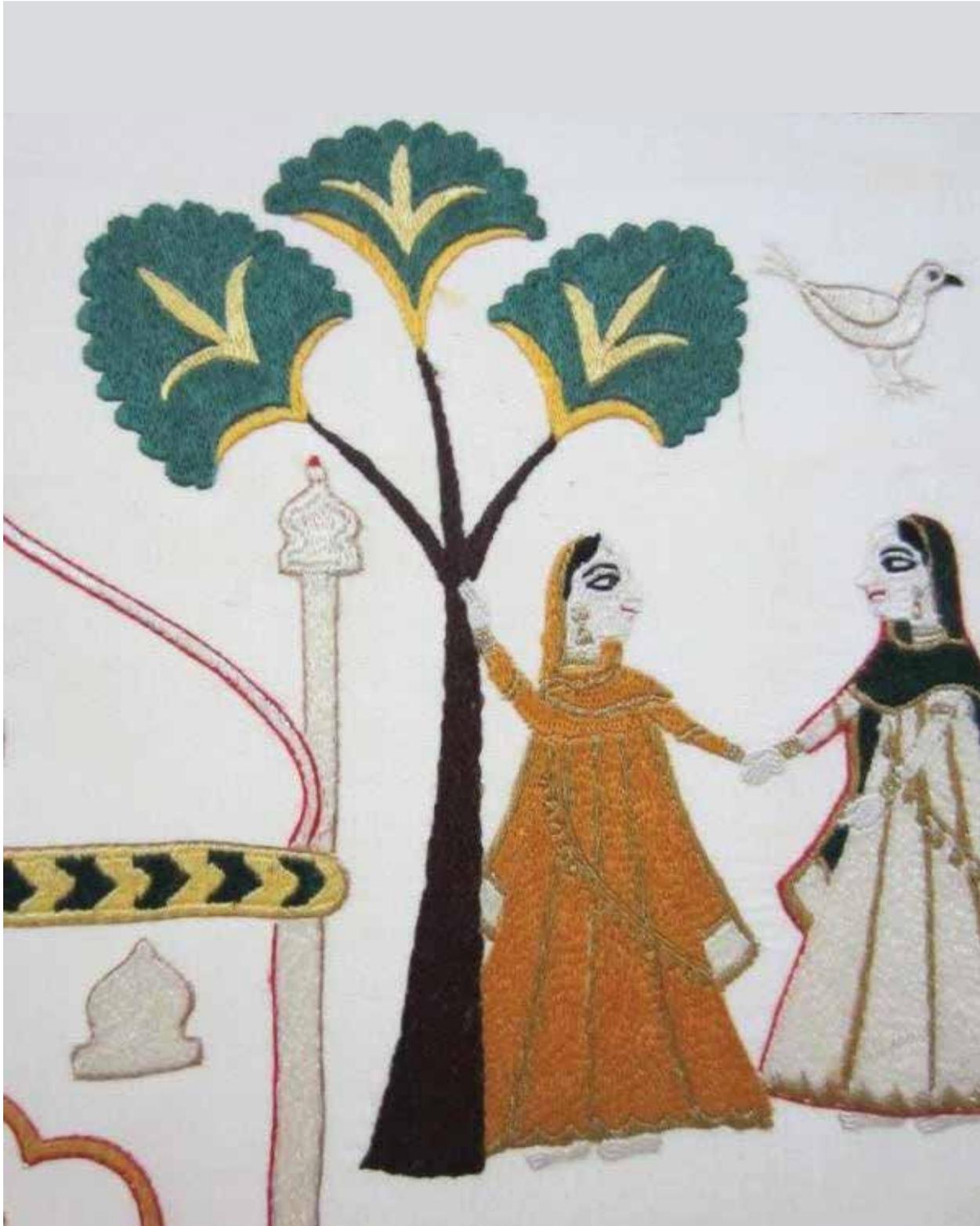
The full flowering of this art however owes much to the enlightened and artistically inclined Rajas (rulers) of Chamba in the 18th and 19th centuries. At this time miniature artists fleeing from the disintegrating courts of the Moghul Empire were given sanctuary and patronage by the rulers in Chamba. The Pahari style of miniature painting that emerged combined with the local tradition of embroidery gave birth to the rumal. For

a century and a half, exquisite rumals were being produced in Chamba, most of these can now be found in museum collections. For example, in the 18th century it is recorded that Raja Gopal Singh presented a rumal with the unusual theme of the battle of *Kurukshetra* to the British authorities. This rumal is now preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Raja Bhuri Singh (1904-1919) is also reputed to have been a great patron of this art. He is said to have presented several Chamba rumals to important personages during the Delhi Durbars of 1907 and 1911 where they seem to have been much admired. He was greatly influenced by the Dutch scholar Dr. J. Ph. Vogel who not only encouraged him in supporting this art but also helped him make an important collection of rumals. In 1909, Raja Bhuri Singh opened the Chamba Museum in Chamba and the collection was displayed to the public for the first time. The museum has now been renamed the Bhuri Singh Museum and presently has one of the most extensive collections of Chamba rumals in the world. Fine specimens of Chamba rumals can also be found in other museums like the National Museum, New Delhi, the Calico Museum, Ahmedabad, The Indian Museum, Kolkata, the Crafts Museum, New Delhi as well as well known museums abroad.

Rich in detail, the distinctive appeal of the Chamba rumal lies in the fact that it is an artistic intertwining of two highly developed arts, that of miniature painting and embroidery. 'The two can in so many ways be seen as *sahodara*, born of the same womb' says the art historian Dr. B.N. Goswamy.

Both these skills were and are well developed in this region. The remarkable idea of combining them to produce the rumal can be attributed to the high calibre of artistic and creative imagination which seems to have prevailed during the 18th and 19th centuries in Chamba under the discerning eye of the Rajas.



Detail showing figures.

It is usually a miniature artist from the Pahari School of painting who makes a free hand drawing in ink on the fabric for the embroidery. Although the themes for the rumals are both secular and religious in character, the most favourite theme is the life and legends of Lord Krishna specially the Raas Leela. Perhaps the circular format of the raas lends itself conveniently to the square format of the rumal and thus continued to be one the most popular themes. Other legends of Lord Krishna which are depicted included the beautiful *Godhuli*, *Daan Leela*, *Parijat Haran*, *Rukmini Haran*, *Ashtanayika* and *Geet Govind*. Stories from religious texts featuring fables from the life of Lord Shiva and Ganesh were also embroidered in great profusion. The secular themes included games and pastimes of the nobility like the *Chaupad* (dice) and *Shikar* (hunting).

Besides miniature painting, the inspiration for the style of drawings found in the rumals is also attributed by some historians to a series of mural paintings done on the walls of the *Rang Mahal* (ladies chambers) in the main palace at

Chamba. The palace was built during the reign of Raja Umaid Singh in the mid 18th century. There were over a hundred and thirty paintings in various sizes including smaller ones set into recesses and surrounded by heavy floral borders. These murals, now on permanent display at the National Museum in New Delhi, could also have had a strong influence on the drawings done for the rumals.

After the drawing is completed, the rumal is embroidered by the local women of this region. Traditionally the skill of doing this embroidery with its special repertoire of stitches is passed on from mother to daughter. At one time, women of the royal family also practised this art extensively.

The earlier rumals were typically embroidered on unbleached hand-spun muslin fabric using untwisted silk floss dyed in natural colours. The main stitch used is a double satin stitch known as *do-rukha*, this ensured the exact duplication of the embroidery on the reverse of the cloth. Although laborious, this stitch can also be used to cover large areas of the fabric in different colours



Embroidering the Chamba Rumal



Detail of embroidery being done.

which appear flat and textured when viewed. The outlines and other details are worked in a double running stitch; silver wires or threads are used very sparingly but effectively to high light details such as crowns, jewellery and weapons.

A simpler style of rumals can also be found in which the drawing is done by the women embroiderers themselves and which has simpler motifs and themes. These drawings depict everyday events and the idyllic natural beauty of the region. Some experts call these the 'folk style' of rumals.

In the more 'classical' style of rumals, the elaborate floral borders, ornamentation, and the sophisticated portrayal of figures and animals as found in miniature paintings are some of the notable and distinctive features. The tiny details of

the facial features of the figures and their clothing as drawn by the artist are picked out with unusual skill by the embroiderers and are another exquisite feature of this embroidery. Infused with the beauty of miniature paintings, Chamba rumals have been aptly called 'paintings in embroidery' by art historians and scholars like Dr. Stella Kramrisch.

Exquisite specimens of Chamba rumals were being made up till the early part of the twentieth century, however, towards the later part, the patronage extended by the rulers of Chamba slowly dwindled and ceased because of the political turmoil which preceded the struggle for independence. Without discerning patrons and an appreciative audience there was inevitably a notable decline in the quality of this famed art form.



Corner detail of a Rumal

After independence, Kamaldevi Chattopadhyay took a very keen interest in reviving the Chamba rumal. Under her direction a training centre was set up by the government. Unfortunately it could not be sustained for long due to the usual problems of official apathy and disinterest.

In 1992, Delhi Crafts Council (DCC), under the guidance of Usha Bhagat, took up the revival of the Chamba rumal as one of its projects. For more than two decades, DCC has continually striven through numerous exhibitions and workshops to spread and enhance the level of awareness about

this art amongst a wider audience all over the country. Since 2003, a centre has been established in Chamba to guide and train the embroiderers in improving the quality of their embroidery as well as in the use of appropriate colours. Marketing the rumals is an aspect to which DCC has paid special attention. Attractive packaging and information about each individual rumal that is sold has been specially designed by the Council. It is heartening that other individuals and organizations, perhaps due to increased visibility on the social media, have also recently contributed to an increased level of awareness about this rare art form.



Krishna with Gopis (Recreated from original in the Calico Museum, Ahmedabad)



Radha Krishna with gopies in a Garden—Original image from Folk Embroidery of Western Himalayas' by Subhashini Aryan



Radha Krishna in a Pavilion (recreated from the original in the National Museum, New Delhi)

As in most traditional arts, the social milieu in which they were created is changing at an unprecedented pace. It is therefore, imperative to raise issues about their relevance and continuity. This is specially so in a revival project such as this one. Thus, reviving the rumal in the technical aspects, though challenging, is only the beginning of the journey. At DCC we have realized that what is also critical is how to keep a fresh impetus flowing into the designs, both in drawing and embroidery. Keeping this in mind new experiments have been carefully undertaken by the Council in the last couple of years. The debate and discourse we have engaged in this aspect of the project must and hopefully will continue. What is clear is that there

can be no single or easy answer about the direction this special heritage art form will take in the future.

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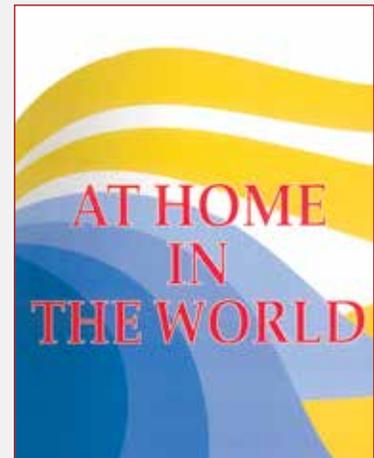
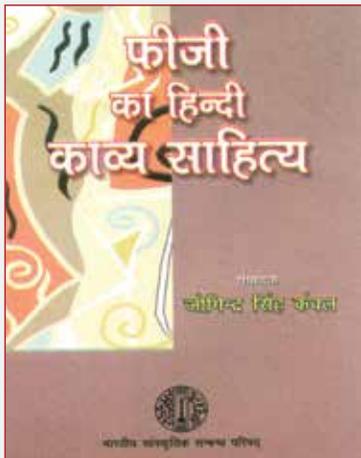
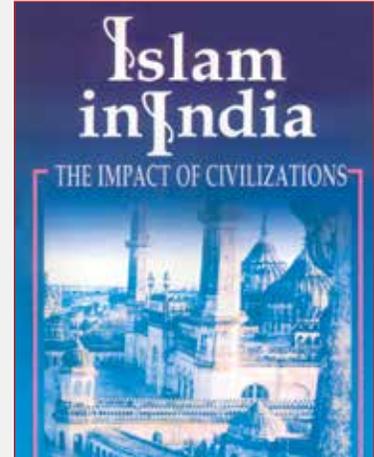
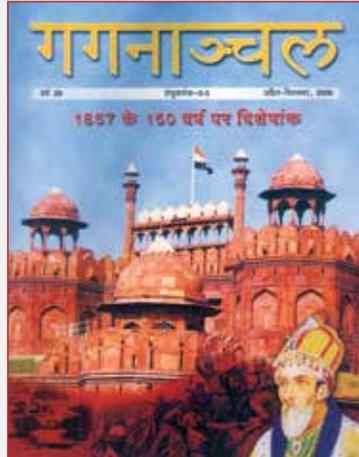
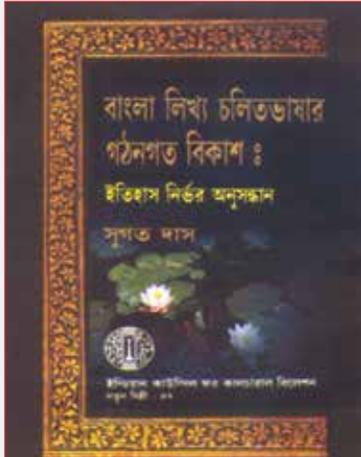
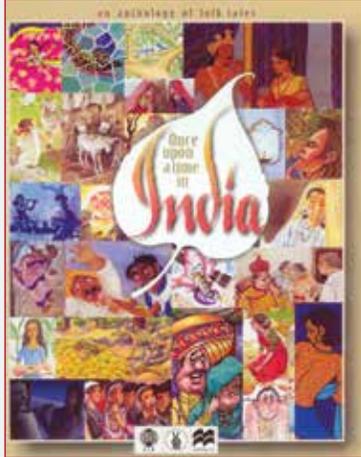
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