Chikan Handicraft Industry in Lucknow: Historical Evolution and Industry Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Chikan is the world famous hand embroidery from the Lucknow region of Uttar Pradesh. Despite the changing times the craft has held its name globally since the time of Mughals, when it was first introduced in India. This paper elaborates the history and the development of Chikan handwork in India. Secondary data has been used for the study. The paper tells that the art was mainly a full time job done by men but over the period of time it became a part time work done by the female folk for extra income. The process used in making a product is elaborated, starting from the raw material stage to the finished product ready to go to the market. Some details about the cluster have been given. The industry analysis has been done using the porter’s five force model and a SWOT analysis of the chikan handicraft industry has also been done to find out the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats which will help identifying the current and future potential of the industry, giving a better understanding of the industry.

1. Introduction

India is a country with a large pool of artisans. Indian textiles have been well known in Europe since the ancient times. From 1600 to 1800, India had been the largest exporter among all the Textile Exporting Countries (Arya and Sadhna, 2002). In India, the cloth is decorated in various ways like printing, embroidery, dyeing, brocading and painting. But of all the ways the art of embroidery has been used the maximum.

Lucknow, the capital of the state of Uttar Pradesh is one of the poorest and most populous states of India. According to the 2011 census, its population is 4.58 million and in the last decade the population experienced an increase of 25.79%. According to the 1991 census, 40% of the population of Lucknow lived in slums. Like in India, there is a majority Hindu population in Lucknow but there is a significant Muslim population residing in Lucknow that is about 23% of the residents of the city. Lucknow is primarily an administrative and service center in which there is relatively less industrial activity as shown by the commercial structure of urban poor in the city. The economy is mostly informal with a significant number of people dependent on conventional skills like embroidery, pottery, chik (blinds) making, earning low incomes in transportation, vending and daily wages work which offers livelihood opportunities.

2. History and Tradition of Chikan

The art of chikan came to India almost 400 years ago. It is believed to be a Persian craft. It was Noor Jahan, the Mughal Emperor Jahangir’s Queen who introduced the art to India, was practicing it. The embroidery developed in the protection of the rulers of Awadh. The knowledge of the craft came to Lucknow along with the change of capital of Awadh from Faizabad to Lucknow. Mughals having prior knowledge of hand block printing made it easy to practice chikan craft because perfectly tracing of the first design on cloth was the most difficult task then. This easy tracing of this design paved way to teach their servants the art of this great embroidery. The first learners would have taught the art to their family members and close ones and so, the art gradually spread among the people. It became a source of income among people of rural areas (Arya and Sadhna, 2002).

Writing about the United States business owners William Hoey in 1880 says, Chikan was always a favorite job of women in the domestic sector. Hoe has described two types of workers. One, the male professional chikan workers were making the best work and were being paid the highest wages. Second, the women and children were working for less money and for long periods, this included the low-quality work to be done on Indian-style clothes, handkerchiefs and separate articles (Hoey 1880). It means that even more than a hundred years ago, the division of labor based on sex existed in the chikan handwork. In which men's work was widely and well paid and women's work was given low pay. As an export industry, the chikan goods were produced for the population outside Lucknow, along with those produced for the local elites. It made the source for the wages of poor women and children though only small wages (Oldenburg 1984).

Members of the Hindu Commercial Castes who had shifted from other activities to lending money and manufacturing provided the finance and organization for the Chikankari Industry. Among them, Rastogi, Sunni and Hindu Khatri businessmen started establishing centers to fulfill the taste of the new elite (Oldenburg 1984). The craft of chikan is very special and has become synonymous with the name Lucknow. Chikankari embellished the garments of silk and muslin for the ruling elite who set the trends in fashion and costumes (Swarup, 2012). The love for the craft of the artisans made beautiful designs on clothes that showed the sheer grace of the art. They captured the beauty of the complex pattern of marble mesh and the infusion of the Mughal architecture and developed this indigenous form embroidery named Chikankari. The tradition and art of embroidery has trickled down from the
families who had once served the ruling elite. With all dedication the craftsmen worked for their masters and created designs that were different from others. With the decline in patronage from the rulers and financial restrictions forced men to seek more lucrative employment opportunities and the craft became a source of side earnings for the women family members of the craft community. Gradually, this became the main source of earnings for the women (Arya and Sadhana, 2002; Ahmad and Anees, 2016).

Until 1950, women in the industry were in the majority. In the 1960s, chikan product range included saris, kurta, scarf, women's salwar suits, etc. English goods like tablecloth and table linen were continued for export or for consumption by upper class Indians only. Coincidentally, it has also been the period in which the embroidery phase was fully feminized. With the decline in demand for better work, men found their productive skills unrestricted and either created a tendency toward agent roles or left the industry altogether. Women are now the best and most expensive, as well as making the most fat and cheap chikan products. They are both the cheap labor of the industry and its master craftsman and are making an increase if still small as the ratio of agents that work (Wilkinson-Weber 1999). Initially, the Mughals and Persians settling in Oudh, practiced and preserved the craft, but later its elegance continued in Dhaka and Bengal. Mainly in Calcutta where Wajid Ali Shah the last Nawab of Lucknow was deposed by the British rulers. The chikan work in Bengal was done mainly for the European market but it is not found today neither in Calcutta nor in Dhaka (Arya and Sadhana, 2002). The artisans involved in Chikan embroidery may be classified as Thappagars (Block makers), Chhappagaris (Printers), Rangrej (Dyers), The Darzis (Tailors), Chikandoz (Embroiderers) and Dhobis (Washermen).

Critics and the sub-contractors of the industry see a clear connection in the uniformity of the development of a special women's workforce and poor quality work - a connection that is based on false assumptions of women's skills. In a classic example of how gender can affect the notion of conservative skills, chikan is now defined as the work of women and with the respect given to men's work (Wilkinson-Weber 1999). Despite the decline, the production of cheap, coarse chikan work serves the economic interests of the Mahajan (traders / subcontractors). Competition among the Mahajans is now intense and in the embroidery phase the values are extracted more intensively, which means that women with very low wages are being given the job of making bluffs at very low wages. In Lucknow, the embroiderers used to work in the protection of local courts. When they collapsed in the middle of the nineteenth century, the handwork of chikankari was replaced by a professional activity, pursued by men into an activity for women. Today, it is mostly done by Muslim women and is an important industry in Lucknow (Arya and Sadhana, 2002).


It is not common to have the same embroidery in two different parts of the world because of the different styles of stitching done in any hand embroidery. It is these stitches that make each type of hand embroidery unique. Most of the skilled chikan embroiderers say that there are a maximum of seventy-five stitches and minimum of twelve stitches (Wilkinson-Weber 1999). There is no consensus as to how is the name of the stitches give. Even knowing how to make more stitches does not necessarily translate into better embroidery skills. (Arya and Sadhana, 2002) Chikan embroiderers say there are about thirty-two types of stitches that are given catchy names. Some stitches in the local language are bijli, lambi murri, kapkapi, bakhia, dhania patti, karan phool, ghaspatti, sidhual, makra, mandarzi, bulbulchashm, Tajmahal, rozan, meharki, kaj, chameli, chane ki patti, balda, phooljal, phanda, dhoom, gol murri, zanjeer, keel, kangan, tapchim kauri, zora, pachni, hathkati & daraz of various types. Many of these names are different combinations of the same basic stitches.

Defining chikan in the context of its stitches is complex and does not tell how the embroiderers themselves think about their work. Wilkinson-Weber has a 'complete' list that is imaginary in any case, since there is no one to subscribe for such a list (Wilkinson-Weber, 1999). Typically, flat and embossed stitches are discriminated, among them the stitches named tepchi, katao and bakhia are said to be flat and most types of murri. According to indigenous discrimination, the 'jali' is always considered as a different kind of work. While the separation of jali is well established, there is no evidence that the embroiderers differentiate between embossed and flat stitches. Bakhia, Katao and Tepchi are always classified as 'flat' stitches according to the Watt's (1904) classification. As per Dhamija (1964), Bakhia, Katao and Tepchi triad is discussed before going to jali, there is a discussion of murri and phanda in between. Embroidery is an art that transforms the plain cloth magnificently.

The following flowchart (Figure 1) shows the process through which the final chikan product is obtained.
4. The Artisan Cluster

A cluster is defined as the concentration of horizontal and vertical linked firms in a local area. These firms specialize in the same type of business. He has also stated many advantages associated with a cluster as combating the effect of global competition, achieving economies of scale, reduced transportation costs, locally availability of specialized labour, public sector investments, attracting financial markets to fulfill industry demands, easy to attain competitive advantage (Mohring, 2005). The development of a cluster helps in improving both the local economy and the socio-cultural identity of the area.

Chikan embroidery in Lucknow is India’s largest artisan based cluster. About 250,000 artisans of hand embroidery associated with it. Apart from embroidery artisans in other areas such as cutting, stitching, hand block textile printing, block making and washermen are also part of this cluster. Thus, the total number of artisans related to the cluster is about 5000 in addition to the embroiderers, (Arya and Sadhana, 2002).

In the stretch of about 125 K.m., the craftsmen of chikan embroidery are scattered i.e. in and around Lucknow. The covered area are Unnao, Barabanki, Lakhimpur kheri, Karoki, Hardoi, etc. Some other villages where artisans of Chikankari stay are in Rae Bareli, Sultanpur and Faizabad (Arya and Sadhana, 2002; Singh, 2008). Women are mostly homemakers and in most cases their work is the only source of their personal income.

Chikan handicraft industry not only employs approximately 250,000 artisans of different crafts but non-craftsmen also earn their livelihood by attaching themselves to the craft. The number of non-artisans earning bread and butter from this craft is approximately one million. They can be employees, contractors, manufacturers, retailers, raw material providers or wholesalers.
In Figure 2, supply chain structure of the chikan handicraft industry.

5. Milestones covered by the Chikan Embroidery Cluster

By 1860, this artistic embroidery was the craftwork of the ladies of the Royal Mughal families. Only members of the royal family used the products (Manfredi, 2017). From 1860 to 1947, the main buyers were Muslims and the main market was in Dhaka (now Bangladesh) and some areas that are now in Pakistan, Hyderabad and Lucknow. In these decades the trade was good and a handful of manufacturers were able to cater to the demands of the entire market. After partition the main market of Chikan Embroidery was not easily accessible because they became foreign markets for the Indians. In turn the manufacturers had to shift to completely new products such as gents kurta and sarees. Some manufacturers started making ladies suits with or without dupattas and even luncheon sets. This duration is also considered as the worst period of chikan embroidery. Due to the production of low-value products consumers started using the products in the form of night wear. The period from 1990 to 1999 can be called the golden age of this cluster. New products such as suit lengths developed and manufacturers started to produce high-value products. New entrepreneurs with high ambition entered the industry and started building good quality products. Some reputed fashion designers included chikan embroidery in their samples and catalogs, which highlighted embroidery at national and international levels. Especially through the media, embroidered products got good publicity in T. V. Serials and films. Also during 1990-91, for marketing of finished products of the chikan industry UPEC, Lucknow established 12 centres at Lucknow, Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Allahabad, Bombay, Bhopal, Nagpur, Calcutta, Agra, Kanpur (Dixit, 2000).

Source: https://www.slideshare.net/arghufran/final-chikankari
The turnover of manufacturers of the cluster has been shown in the figure above. It says that there are five manufacturers in the cluster having their turnover more than rupees 22 crore, there are ten manufacturers who have a cumulative turnover of rupees 25 crore, 300 manufacturers who have a turnover of 225 crores, 750 manufacturers together make a turnover of 250 crores, 2000 manufacturers making a turnover of 300 crores and 2000 small manufacturers exist who are able to touch a turnover of rupees 80 crore only. This shows the number of small manufacturers that exist in the industry owing to the sector being an unorganized one.

6. Industry Analysis

The industry analysis has been conducted to find the competitiveness of the industry. This was done using the five forces model given by Michael E. Porter in 1979. It is useful for finding suitable strategies for the competitive business environment and hence improve the potential profit.

**Competitive Rivalry - Moderate**

- The level of competition among the various players of the industry is high
- Exit barriers are less
- Industry is highly fragmented and the sector is highly unorganized.
- Products are not differentiated and can be easily substituted
- Competitors are of equal size
- Low customer loyalty

**Threat of new Entrants - High**

- Low amount of capital is required to enter a market
- Existing firms do not possess patents, trademarks or do not have established brand reputation
- 100 percent FDI is allowed in the Indian textile sector
- There is no government regulation
- Products are nearly identical
- A few large suppliers are focusing on forward and backward integration

**Threat of Substitute Products - High**

- Other hand made embroideries prevalent in India
- Low cost substitute products from China specifically machine made Chikan work
- Attractive price or a better quality

**Bargaining Power of Suppliers - Low**

- Significant presence of small suppliers has reduced the bargaining power
- The material is easily accessible
- Suppliers do not pose any threat of forward integration

**Bargaining Power of Buyers - Low**

- Customers do not have much bargaining power, as the product differentiation is low and number of players is high and fragmented.
- Switching costs to other supplier are low
- There are many substitutes
- Buyers are price sensitive

Based on the analysis of Porters model it can be found that the achievement of economies of scale in tough job in the chikan handicraft industry. So focus should be on the cost leadership strategy. Product development strategy should be implemented as the current market growth is slow and the market is flooded with similar products having very less product differentiation.

7. SWOT Analysis of Chikan Handicraft Industry

**Strengths**

- It's a traditional handicraft
- It has a large artisan base
- The embroidery can be done on different types of clothing
- Skilled craftsmen are available for each work involved in the process
- There is high competition between the manufacturers
- Low cost handmade garments are also available
- The embroidery work is available in all price categories
- Customized products can be made as per the need
- GI tag awarded to the work
- A brand name in embroidery
- Raw materials is easily available
- Availability of transport facilities

**Weaknesses**

- No technical updates have been done over decades
- Lengthy production time
- No designer input
- Production of low quality products
- Introduction of GST to the industry
- Manufacturers do not have any technical qualifications
- The quantity of exports is less
- There is no connection between manufacturers
- There is no fixed time, each stage takes its time especially embroidery
- The artisan cluster is highly unorganized
- Limited fund flow from financial institutions
- Almost no advertisements done in the foreign markets
- Very little use of modern facilities like computers, CADs, Internet and e-mail, etc.
- The products are mainly considered as seasonal summer clothing in India
- Undercutting practiced among manufacturers

**Opportunities**

- The art has a big scope in the domestic market
- The art has a big scope in foreign market
- There is high scope for the development of new products
- There is scope to sell low-priced goods in Latin America (such as wearing beach in Brazil, Chile)
- Various schemes from the center and state government for the benefit of the industry, especially artisans

**Threats**

- Competition with the printed and machine
embroidered items.

- Pakistani embroidery
- Chinese machine made chikan work
- Globalization
- Changes in government policies such as tax rates

Source: Arya and Sadhna, 2002 (modified)

8. Conclusion

The industry is mainly dependent on the skill of the artisans. As time changed the shift of skill from men to skilled women and now with the changing times the degradation in the quality of skill because of focus on a few stitches which are easy to make and sell for less cost in the domestic market. Having left only a few experts embroidering for the export market that has a large potential yet to be exploited. With a few improvements as trainings for the workers, more money input from the government and increased marketing and branding for the industry can take the industry to new heights in this world of globalization.

References

11. https://www.slideshare.net/arghufran/final-chikankari retrieved on June 18, 2019