



Review On The Hindsight And Traditional Motifs Of Indian Embroidery

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Abstract

Indian embroidery, with its rich history and intricate motifs, reflects the diverse cultural, religious, and social traditions of the Indian subcontinent. This article traces its roots through various dynasties, regions, and communities. The study examines the distinct styles such as Phulkari from Punjab, Chikankari from Lucknow, Toda from Tamil Nadu, Zardozi from Lucknow, and Kantha embroidery from Bengal, highlighting their unique techniques, materials, and symbolic meanings. It also delves into the motifs used in these embroideries, which often draw inspiration from nature, mythology, and everyday life, serving as a visual narrative of India's heritage. Through this exploration, the article underscores the importance of preserving these traditional art forms in the face of modernization, ensuring that they continue to thrive and inspire future generations.

Keywords: Indian embroidery, Phulkari, Chikankari, Toda, Zardozi, Kantha, History, Motifs.

Introduction

India's vibrant cultural heritage is vividly expressed through its intricate embroidery, showcasing the remarkable craftsmanship and diverse traditions of its artisans. From regal silks to humble cotton, embroidered fabrics have long been integral to India's textile heritage, adorning royalty, nobility, and everyday people.

Employing embroidery as a means of embellishing garments has existed since the advent of clothing, with its origins traceable to the Iron Age. This development commenced when early humans realized that they could utilize thread to stitch together various materials, thereby creating wearable items [1].

Yeon-Hee Han's 2011 study on Mirror Work examines the diverse regional adaptations, distinctive techniques, and materials associated with this craft, as well as its current relevance in the realm of fashion and wearable art. In a complementary analysis, Yi Rang Kim and Mi Jeong Kwon's 2021 research, which is informed by Bourdieu's cultural theory, delineates four unique regional embroidery styles: the vibrant, Hinduism-influenced patterns of Eastern India; the Persian-inspired gold thread embroidery of Western India; the straightforward, Dravidian culture-based cross-stitch of Southern India; and the varied, floral designs characteristic of Northern India. Collectively, these investigations highlight the cultural importance of Indian embroidery and its capacity for contemporary artistic innovation [2]. This article sets out to uncover the complex history of embroidery in India, delving into its development, regional variations, and the talented craftspeople dedicated to preserving this ancient art form.

Indian Embroidery

Indian embroidery serves as a vivid representation of the cultural heritage of its people. This traditional craft is an intricate art form, meticulously crafted by artisans who possess specialized knowledge and skills. These artisans exhibit an unwavering sensitivity to color and design, which is essential to their craft. The art of Indian embroidery is extensive, characterized by a harmonious and graceful aesthetic that consistently captivates and elevates the art form to remarkable heights of creativity. Much of the traditional embroidery still practiced in India is hand-stitched, primarily by rural women who work from their homes, thereby contributing to their family's income. The designs often draw inspiration from the natural world, featuring motifs of animals and birds such as elephants, horses, and peacocks, as well as floral and leaf shapes like lotus, lily, cypress, and chinar. Additionally, artisans creatively interpret fruits like mangoes into artistic forms [3].

Kantha of Bengal

Kantha may derive its name from the Sanskrit term "kontha," which translates to rags. The earliest reference to kantha appears in the Chaitanya Charitamrita, a 500-year-old text authored by the Bengali poet Krishnadasa Kaviraja. In this study, the mother of the 15th-century saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu dispatches a handcrafted Kantha to her son via a contingent of itinerant pilgrims.

A Kantha is traditionally composed of multiple layers of worn sarees or dhotis stitched together to create a blanket, primarily utilized by the impoverished for warmth. Subsequently, the decorative variant known as 'nakshi' emerged within the homes of undivided Bengal, symbolizing women's aspirations and dreams. This art form served as a visual narrative of their unspoken stories, which were bequeathed as a cherished legacy [4]. Additionally, this craft served as a medium for women to showcase their artistic abilities, with nearly every woman in a village engaging in this practice for her household. The designs often reflected the maker's affection for her loved ones and were believed to offer protection against malevolent forces. Kantha represents one of the oldest forms of Indian embroidery, with its origins traceable to the first and second centuries A.D. This folk art arises from the interplay of material conditions and everyday necessities. The quilting tradition in Bengal is particularly distinctive, as the indigenous Kantha embodies a confluence of various elements that contribute to the cultural identity of the region. Beyond its practical function, Kantha serves as a significant example of folk art, especially as it pertains to women's creativity. Historical accounts suggest that Lord Buddha and his followers utilized old rugs featuring diverse patchwork designs for warmth, which laid the groundwork for the development of Kantha embroidery. Daily life provided the primary inspiration for this craft, particularly during the relatively mild winters when there was a demand for coverings. The Kantha evolved primarily from this necessity, while the extended rainy seasons afforded the women of Bengal the opportunity to stitch together multiple layers of fabric.

The materials employed in Kantha typically consisted of old saris, lungis, or dhotis that had been worn to the point of fragility. For many years, Kantha embroidery has served as a vital source of income for rural women in West Bengal, thus acting as a medium through which their voices have resonated across generations.

Additionally, the broader historical context, including events such as the partition of Bengal, the transition through East Pakistan, and the emergence of Bangladesh, is reflected in the narratives woven into this women's art [5].

Initially, Kantha artisans did not sketch the design onto the fabric; rather, they embroidered the outline using needle and thread. Once they were content with the outline, they proceeded to fill the interior with vibrant stitches. Typically, a design was first outlined, and the stitching began from the outer edges, progressively converging towards the center. This method ensures that the texture remains uniform and prevents any bunching or folding within the outline [6].

Motifs: The running stitch represents the predominant technique employed in Kantha embroidery. Frequently utilized motifs include traditional folk designs, floral patterns, representations of animals and birds, geometric figures, chariots, as well as intricate floral scrolls and creeping vines. Additionally, motifs reflecting daily life, such as combs, mirrors, and umbrellas, are prevalent in this form of embroidery. Themes derived from everyday activities also serve as common subjects for the artwork. The entirety of the fabric is adorned with running stitches, resulting in a visually appealing composition [1].



Figure 1: Kantha embroidery

Chikankari of Lucknow

The term "Chikan" is derived from the Persian words 'Chikan', 'Chikin', and 'Chikeen', which refer to the art of creating delicate patterns on fabric. Chikankari represents a sophisticated and detailed form of shadow-work embroidery, characterized by the use of white thread on colorless muslin fabrics known as "tanzeb"—where "tan" signifies body and "zeb" denotes decoration [1].

The origins of chikankari in Lucknow remain largely speculative, with various narratives emerging that reflect differing perspectives. Some accounts, which are more romanticized and widely accepted in Lucknow, suggest a lineage rooted in Persian and aristocratic traditions, often implying royal patronage. Conversely, other theories propose a Bengali origin for this intricate craft. Despite their apparent differences, these narratives share common elements and are not necessarily contradictory.

One prominent tale involves Nur Jahan, who, captivated by the intricate jali work and floral motifs adorning the structures of Isfahan, commissioned the replication of these designs onto wooden blocks for printing on fabric and embroidering on fine muslin.

An alternative version of this narrative features Mughal empress Mumtaz Mahal, Nur Jahan's niece and the cherished wife of Shah Jahan, who commissioned the construction of the Taj Mahal in her honor.

A new narrative surrounding the origins of chikan has emerged, attributed to the artistic talents of a princess from Murshidabad, Bengal, who was married to the Nawab of Oudh. This princess, renowned for her exceptional sewing skills, sought to alleviate the monotony of life in the harem by creating an embroidered cap for the Nawab. Employing intricate stitches and diverse patterns, she crafted a white cap, richly adorned with white thread on muslin fabric. She requested permission to present the cap to the Nawab in person upon completion. This request was granted, and during the private audience, the Nawab was captivated by both the gift and its creator, leading him to bestow greater attention upon her. The other women in the harem, envious of the princess's newfound favor, began to engage in their own embroidery projects, striving to surpass one another in the intricacy of their stitches and the elegance of their designs. They guarded their creations closely, ensuring that their efforts remained secret. Thus, a remarkable art form was born from the tedium of harem life and the aspiration to gain the Nawab's affection.

In a contrasting account passed down through a prominent family of artisans, the inception of this craft is attributed to a weary and enigmatic traveler who received aid from one of their forebears, a humble peasant. Grateful for the hospitality extended to him, the traveler vowed to impart a skill that would ensure the peasant would never face hunger. He subsequently taught Ustad Muhammad Shahir Khan the art of chikankari, a practice that the chikankars believe was divinely inspired [7].

Motifs: The motifs predominantly draw inspiration from the natural world, encompassing elements such as flora—specifically flowers and creepers that resemble lace patterns, jaals, and butis—as well as fruits like mangoes and almonds, which are integral to the paisley motif. Additionally, avian representations, particularly of parrots and peacocks, contribute to a harmonious blend of diversity. The traditional patterns reflect the artisans' adeptness in emulating architectural designs, with influences derived from notable structures such as the Taj Mahal, Fatehpur Sikri, and the Imam Bara Mosque, which served as a foundation for motif development. Initially characterized by white-on-white embroidery, this craft has gradually incorporated a spectrum of colors, marking a contemporary innovation in Chikan embroidery. Historically, the palette was limited to whites and pastels; however, it has since expanded to include a broader range of hues. Chikan work is utilized in various decorative items, including blouses, sari borders, caps, cuffs, cushions, curtains, mats, and table runners.

It is also present in men's garments such as kurtas, bandis, and chogas, typically worn during summer [8].



Figure 2 (a) (b): Chikankari embroidery

Phulkari of Punjab

Phulkari, which translates to "flower craft," is derived from the words "phul," meaning flower, and "kari," meaning work, thus referring to floral artistry. This traditional embroidered shawl was historically worn by women in Punjab and serves as a representation of the region's cultural heritage. In Patiala, the phulkari craft sector is notably disorganized, resulting in the exploitation of impoverished rural women. This art form is on the verge of disappearing due to intense competition from phulkari products created by computerized machines. These machines can produce phulkari items rapidly, making them more cost-effective for traders; however, the essence of phulkari lies in its handcrafted nature. There is an urgent necessity to revitalize this traditional craft and provide support to disadvantaged rural women. Additionally, there is a need to enhance the quality of base materials, color combinations, designs, and decorative elements to increase its appeal among the younger generation, ensuring that the spirit of traditional craftsmanship endures for future generations [9].

Phulkari embroidery's rich history is veiled by scarcity of documentation, leaving its origins open to interpretation. Nevertheless, literary references, archaeological findings, and expert insights provide valuable

clues. The tradition of Phulkari is deeply rooted in Indian culture, with mentions in ancient texts such as the Vedas, Mahabharata, and Guru Granth Sahib, indicating its presence since the 15th century AD.

Literary works like Waris Shah's classic poem "Heer Ranjha" (1725-1790) vividly describe Heer's attire, featuring Phulkari embroidery. Earlier, Bana Bhatt's "Harishcharitra" (7th century AD) details embroidery techniques remarkably similar to Phulkari and Bagh, suggesting a long-standing tradition. These literary foundations underscore Phulkari's significance in Indian artisanship.

Scholars have proposed two potential origins: Iranian influence, where a similar technique called "Gulkari" (flower work) exists, and Central Asian migration, where Phulkari accompanied Jat tribes migrating to Punjab, Haryana, and Gujarat. However, experts consider these theories inconclusive due to lack of concrete evidence.

Historical artifacts preserved in Punjab's Sikh sites attest to Phulkari's heritage. Notably, Bebe Nanaki's 15th-century Phulkari shawls and handkerchiefs, Guru Nanak Dev ji's sister, demonstrate the art form's antiquity. Significant sites like Gurudwara Dera Baba Nanak (Gurudaspur district) and Gurudwara Mao Sahib (Jalandhar district) house these treasures, including a shawl used by Guru Arjun Dev ji during his marriage.

Experts like Jasleen Dhamija note similarities in 7th-century Indian embroidery techniques, hinting at a broader regional influence. Phulkari designs have appeared in Bihar and Rajasthan, reinforcing this theory. These findings collectively weave a narrative of Phulkari's evolution, underscoring its significance in Indian artisanship. As this traditional craft evolves, its rich history and cultural significance remain essential to understanding its beauty and value [10].

Motifs: Numerous phulkari patterns were consistently derived from natural elements or everyday objects. A vast array of designs also established a nuanced vocabulary for their classification. For instance, phulkari featuring a blue background was referred to as nilak, while thirma denoted a style where the fabric remained un-dyed, creating a white canvas that was then adorned with colored threads, such as red. Women from both Eastern and Western Punjab crafted phulkaris incorporating both geometric and figurative motifs, which included shapes like lozenges, squares, and triangles, as well as representations of animals, plants, jewelry, and human figures. They meticulously counted the yarns or outlined intricate designs with black ink before filling them in with darning stitches. The embroidered motifs ranged from stylized representations of karela (bitter gourd), mustard flowers, and golden marigolds to jasmine buds, lotus flowers, and flowering trees. Additionally, stylized depictions of men and women, along with various other themes, were common. Curiosity also led to the inclusion of modern elements such as railway trains, motor cars, lorries, and even chariots. Furthermore, phulkaris often featured birds and both domestic and wild animals, depicted in various sizes and orientations [11].



Figure 3: Phulkari embroidery

Zardozi of Lucknow

Zardozi embroidery, revered as ShahiKaam, is a sumptuous and intricate craft that weaves together 24-karat gold and silver threads with precious gemstones to create breathtaking masterpieces. With its origins tracing back to the illustrious Mughal Period, this ancient art form continues to embellish luxurious fabrics such as silk, satin, and velvet with elaborate motifs. The opulent materials used in Zardozi embroidery include gold-plated threads like Kalabattu and Kasab, twisted steel threads like Salma and Tikora, sequins known as Tilli, and round pieces called Sitara.

The craftsmanship of Zardozi is further enhanced by the incorporation of zari threads, including Kora and Chikna, which add depth and luster to the designs. Expert artisans meticulously outline the intricate patterns using Gijai, a round, thin, and stiff thread. The result is a dazzling display of gold, silver, and gems harmoniously blended to create awe-inspiring designs that reflect the rich cultural heritage of India [12].

A large amount of literature documents the long-standing custom of using metal wire for needlework to adorn textiles. Zardozi, a unique embroidery style that uses gold and silver wires, is typically connected to a talented group of people called the "Zardozi." Based in Delhi, this group links this craft's beginnings to a well-known story; the earliest records date to the Vedic era. The legend states that a mosquito that got into the king's ear caused him to have a terrible headache. Various cures were tried, but none worked. In the end, the head hakim disclosed that he had dreamed that a saint advised striking the king's hurting place with a shoe as the only way to heal him. In accordance with these instructions, a unique shoe embellished with threads of pure gold and silver was made especially for this use. The insect was destroyed and the king's pain was lessened when the shoe struck him. The emperor praised the shoe's elaborate design and declared his intention to help the artists who created it. Other emperors and nobility thereafter adopted this idea.

The statement "His Majesty pays significant attention to numerous goods; consequently, there is a multiplicity of Iranian (Persian), European, and Mongolian clothes" has been used to describe the wardrobe of Akbar, a well-known Mughal emperor. Many tourists that visit places like Fatehpur, Gujrat, Agra, Ahmedabad, and Lahore are drawn in by the elaborate patterns and motifs created by artisans throughout the Mughal and imperial times. The imperial workshop at the court of Aurangzeb was seen by the French explorer Francois Bernier in 1663. He wrote of the facility's "several vast halls which are the karkhanas, meaning the areas where craftsmen operate." Even though Aurangzeb was known for leading a modest life, he wore elaborate clothing to public events, festivals, and social meetings. But as talented artisans looked for greater financial prospects in different parts of India, they blended their techniques with regional customs and created a distinctive fusion of embroidered culture, which contributed to the downfall of the imperial workshops [13].

Motifs: The essence of all motifs has consistently been derived from nature. Elements such as flowers, leaves, trees, and various animals and birds reflect the rich ecological heritage of India, which is intricately woven into every piece of Zardozi embroidery.



Figure 4: Zardozi embroidery

Toda of Tamil Nadu

The Toda tribes are widely recognized for their exquisite embroidered shawls, which play a significant role throughout various aspects of their lives. These shawls are deeply embedded in their traditions, culture, rituals, and daily activities. The women of the Toda community engage in a sophisticated and aesthetically pleasing form of embroidery, which is culturally distinctive to them. This unique style of embroidery is locally known as “Pugur” or “Pukhoor.”

The process of embroidery is meticulous and time-consuming, requiring considerable effort to create a visually captivating piece. Historically, this craft was practiced by the women of the tribe as a communal activity, where they gathered in shared spaces to converse and work on their shawls. The embroidery technique produces a rich, embossed texture on the fabric. The women possess remarkable skill, executing the embroidery without the aid of traced patterns or reference materials. Traditionally, this embroidery is performed on thick, off-white or cream-colored cloth, utilizing red and black woolen threads. The stitches are applied in a lengthwise manner, creating a geometric design on the fabric, and the embroidery is also executed on the reverse side without any drawn patterns, distinguishing it from other embroidery styles. The ‘poothukuli’ shawl holds significant importance during various occasions, including weddings and funerals. Newly embroidered shawls are particularly favored for weddings, with designs symbolizing prosperity, fertility, and security. In funerals, the newly embroidered shawl is used as a shroud, referred to as “Pekhadaar Poothkuli.” Guests also wear ‘poothukuli’ embroidered fabrics during wedding celebrations. The expertise of Toda tribal women in this craft is well-documented and celebrated [14].

Motifs: The traditional lifestyle of the Todas is intricately linked to their natural surroundings, which serves as a significant source of inspiration for their motifs and patterns. The majestic Nilgiri mountains have influenced the design known as ‘twehhdr’, while the stripes of the squirrel have

contributed to the ‘peshk’. The delicate chequered pattern of the butterfly is reflected in the ‘kopaan’, and the structure of a beehive has inspired the ‘Kwudrkorr’.

Additionally, the yellow marsh flowers have shaped the design known as ‘modhery’. The natural world provides a wealth of inspiration, including elements such as peacock feathers, buffalo horns, rabbit ears, wildflowers, as well as celestial bodies like the sun, moon, and stars. The patterns created are a testament to the ingenuity of Toda women, who envision designs in their minds and skillfully transfer them onto fabric. Through dedicated practice, they have perfected this craft, producing intricate designs without the need for tracing or reference materials. This practice accounts for the subtle variations that may occur in designs derived from the same natural inspiration. Like all art forms, Toda embroidery is dynamic and continues to evolve. As a result, numerous new

patterns have emerged since its inception, featuring a range of motifs that either modify traditional designs or introduce new interpretations of earlier patterns [15].



Figure 5 (a) (b): Toda embroidery

Conclusion

In summary, the evolution and themes of Indian embroidery encapsulate the nation's extensive cultural legacy, regional variety, and artistic ingenuity. Over the centuries, Indian embroidery has undergone significant transformation, shaped by numerous dynasties, trade interactions, and cultural exchanges, while still preserving its unique character. Traditional methods such as Zardozi, Kantha, Phulkari, Chikankari and Toda exemplify the exceptional craftsmanship that has been inherited through generations.

The designs featured in Indian embroidery are rich in symbolism, frequently reflecting elements of nature, mythology, spirituality, and societal practices. Common motifs include floral arrangements, animal figures, geometric patterns, and abstract forms, each imbued with its own cultural meaning. Many of these designs draw inspiration from local aesthetics and traditions, further emphasizing the diversity inherent in Indian embroidery. Although modernization and the decline of traditional crafts have affected certain regions, Indian embroidery continues to be a significant and revered art form, both within India and on the international stage. With ongoing revival initiatives and an increasing appreciation for artisanal textiles, this craft persists in flourishing, effectively connecting historical practices with modern fashion.

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