



Chikankari Embroidery In The Era Of Economic Liberalization: Survival And Transformation Of A Traditional Handicraft In Lucknow, India

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the Chikankari embroidery industry in Lucknow, India, and its journey through economic reforms that began in 1991. Chikankari is a traditional hand embroidery craft with over 400 years of history. The paper looks at how this ancient craft has survived and changed in modern times. The study explores the challenges faced by artisans, the role of middlemen, government support programs, and market changes. Using data from government reports, NGO studies, and academic research, this paper shows both the problems and opportunities for traditional crafts in today's economy. The findings reveal that while economic reforms brought new export opportunities, they also created challenges for small artisans. The paper suggests policy recommendations to protect traditional crafts while helping them grow in the global market.

Keywords: Chikankari, traditional handicrafts, economic liberalization, artisan welfare, Lucknow, embroidery industry, craft preservation

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

India has a rich tradition of handicrafts that dates back thousands of years. These crafts are not just products but represent the cultural identity and heritage of different regions. Among these traditional crafts, Chikankari embroidery from Lucknow holds a special place. This delicate white-on-white embroidery work has been practiced for over four centuries and is closely connected to the city's cultural history.¹

The year 1991 marked a turning point in India's economic history. The government introduced economic reforms that opened up the Indian market to global trade. These reforms, also called economic liberalization, changed how businesses operated in India. While these changes helped many sectors grow, they also brought new challenges for traditional industries like handicrafts.²

The Chikankari industry provides employment to thousands of artisans, mostly women working from their homes. According to government estimates, more than 200,000 artisans are directly involved in Chikankari work in Lucknow and nearby areas.³ Understanding how this industry has adapted to economic changes is important for developing policies that can help other traditional crafts survive and grow.

1.2 Research Objectives

This research aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the historical development of Chikankari embroidery in Lucknow.
2. To analyze the impact of economic reforms on the Chikankari industry.
3. To study the working conditions and income levels of Chikankari artisans.
4. To evaluate government policies and programs supporting the handicraft sector.
5. To suggest recommendations for sustainable development of traditional handicrafts.

1.3 Research Methodology

This study uses secondary data collected from various reliable sources. The main sources of information include published books on Indian handicrafts, academic journal articles, government reports from the Ministry of Textiles and Office of Development Commissioner for Handlooms, reports from NGOs working with artisans such as SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) and Dastkar, and statistical data from the National Sample Survey Office.⁴ The research focuses on the period from 1991 to 2025, covering three decades of economic reforms.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CHIKANKARI

2.1 Origins and Evolution

The word 'Chikan' comes from the Persian word 'Chikeen', meaning embroidered fabric. Historical records suggest that Chikankari came to India during the Mughal period. Some historians believe that Nur Jahan, the wife of Emperor Jahangir, brought skilled craftsmen from Persia who introduced this delicate art to India.⁵ Over time, local artisans in Lucknow developed their own unique styles and techniques, making Chikankari distinctly Indian.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, Chikankari flourished under the patronage of the Nawabs of Awadh. The royal courts of Lucknow became centers of art and culture, and Chikankari work was highly valued. Artisans created beautiful garments for the nobility using fine muslin cloth and white cotton thread.⁶ The traditional craft involved 32 different types of stitches, each with its own name and purpose.

2.2 Traditional Production Process

The traditional Chikankari production process involves several skilled workers. First, a designer creates the pattern on paper. Then, a block printer transfers this design onto fabric using wooden blocks and washable ink. The fabric is given to embroiderers who work on the stitches by hand. After embroidery, the piece goes through washing and finishing processes.⁷

The most common stitches include Taipchi (a running stitch), Bakhiya (shadow work), and Phanda (a knotted stitch creating raised dots). Each stitch requires different skills and time. A single garment can take anywhere from a few days to several weeks to complete, depending on the complexity of the design.⁸

2.3 Social Organization of Production

Traditionally, Chikankari work has been organized through a putting-out system. In this system, merchants or contractors provide raw materials to artisans who work from their homes. The artisans return the finished product and receive payment based on piece rates. This system has existed for generations and continues even today.⁹

Most Chikankari artisans are women from lower-income families. They learned the craft from their mothers or other female relatives. Working from home allows them to combine craft work with household responsibilities. However, this arrangement also means they have less bargaining power and often face exploitation by middlemen.¹⁰

3. ECONOMIC REFORMS AND THE HANDICRAFT SECTOR

3.1 Overview of 1991 Economic Reforms

In 1991, India faced a severe economic crisis. The government had to introduce major economic reforms to stabilize the economy. These reforms included reducing import duties, removing industrial licensing requirements, allowing foreign investment, and privatizing public sector companies. The main goal was to move from a controlled economy to a market-based economy.¹¹

These reforms brought significant changes to various sectors. Large industries grew rapidly with access to foreign technology and capital. The service sector expanded dramatically. However, small-scale industries and traditional sectors faced both opportunities and challenges. The handicraft sector, which employed millions of workers, was particularly affected by these changes.¹²

3.2 Impact on Traditional Handicrafts

The handicraft sector faced mixed outcomes after economic liberalization. On the positive side, export opportunities increased significantly. According to the Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts, exports of handicrafts grew from Rs. 2,300 crores in 1991-92 to over Rs. 26,000 crores by 2018-19.¹³ International buyers became more interested in Indian handicrafts, seeing them as authentic, handmade products in a world of mass production.

However, the sector also faced serious challenges. Competition increased both from machine-made products and cheaper imports from countries like China. Many artisans found it difficult to adapt to changing market demands. Quality requirements for export markets were often higher than what traditional production methods could easily achieve.¹⁴

The domestic market also changed dramatically. Rising incomes created demand for new products, but consumer preferences shifted toward branded products and fashion trends. Traditional handicraft items faced competition from modern designs and synthetic materials. Many young people moved away from craft work to seek education and jobs in growing urban sectors.¹⁵

3.3 Government Response and Policies

The Government of India recognized the importance of protecting traditional handicrafts while helping them grow. Several policy measures were introduced. The Handicrafts Development Programme was restructured to focus on skill development, design innovation, and market access. The government established numerous training centers and provided financial assistance to artisan cooperatives.¹⁶

In 2003, the government introduced the Geographical Indication (GI) tag system in India. Chikankari of Lucknow received GI registration in 2008, which meant that only products made in Lucknow using traditional methods could be sold as authentic Chikankari.¹⁷ This protection helped prevent cheap imitations and preserved the craft's authenticity.

4. THE CHIKANKARI INDUSTRY AFTER 1991

4.1 Market Expansion and Export Growth

The post-reform period saw significant growth in Chikankari exports. The craft gained popularity in international markets, particularly in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. Foreign buyers appreciated the hand-embroidered quality and traditional designs. Large export houses in Lucknow established direct connections with international retailers and fashion brands.¹⁸

The domestic market also expanded. Rising middle-class incomes created demand for designer ethnic wear. Chikankari garments became fashion statements, not just traditional wear. Major clothing brands started

including Chikankari items in their collections. Online shopping platforms further increased market reach, allowing artisans and small businesses to sell directly to customers across India.¹⁹

According to industry estimates, the Chikankari industry was worth approximately Rs. 1,200 crores in 2018, up from around Rs. 50 crores in the early 1990s. The number of people employed in the industry also grew substantially, though exact figures are difficult to determine due to the informal nature of much of the work.²⁰

4.2 Changes in Production and Technology

The industry witnessed several technological changes. While the core embroidery work remained hand-based, other processes became mechanized. Screen printing replaced block printing for transferring designs. Power looms produced base fabrics more cheaply than handlooms. Some manufacturers introduced embroidery machines for simpler, repetitive patterns, though hand embroidery remained essential for complex designs.²¹

The range of products expanded significantly. Traditional items like kurtas and sarees remained popular, but manufacturers also produced Western garments, home furnishings, and fashion accessories with Chikankari work. The color palette changed too. While white-on-white remained classic, colored threads on pastel fabrics became common to meet fashion trends.²²

These changes created tension between tradition and innovation. Some purists worried that the craft was losing its authentic character. Others argued that adaptation was necessary for survival. Most large manufacturers found a balance, producing both traditional items and contemporary designs to serve different market segments.²³

4.3 Value Chain and Middlemen

The Chikankari value chain involves multiple intermediaries between artisans and final consumers. At the bottom are individual embroiderers who work at home. Above them are local contractors (called 'dalals') who collect work from multiple artisans. These contractors supply to larger manufacturers or export houses. Finally, retailers sell finished products to customers.²⁴

Research by NGOs shows that artisans receive only a small fraction of the final selling price. A study by Dastkar found that for a garment selling at Rs. 2,000 in retail, the embroiderer might receive only Rs. 150-200 for their work.²⁵ The majority of value is captured by middlemen, manufacturers, and retailers. This unequal distribution of profits remains a major issue in the industry.

The situation improved somewhat with the growth of artisan cooperatives and self-help groups. Organizations like SEWA helped artisans organize themselves, access credit, and sell directly to buyers. Government e-commerce initiatives also allowed some artisans to bypass middlemen. However, the majority of artisans still work through traditional contractor systems.²⁶

5. WORKING CONDITIONS AND LIVELIHOODS OF ARTISANS

5.1 Income and Earnings

Income levels of Chikankari artisans remain low despite industry growth. According to a survey by the National Sample Survey Office, the average monthly income of handicraft workers in Uttar Pradesh was around Rs. 3,500 in 2011-12.²⁷ Even accounting for inflation and some wage increases, most artisans earn below the minimum wage. Many work part-time or irregularly, making their annual incomes even lower.

Earnings vary based on skill level, type of work, and market demand. Beginners learning basic stitches earn very little. Experienced artisans skilled in complex patterns earn more but still face irregular work. Payment is usually piece-rate, meaning artisans must work long hours to earn adequate income. There is no guaranteed minimum wage or regular employment.²⁸

Most artisans depend on Chikankari work as supplementary income rather than primary livelihood. Their households typically have multiple sources of income. Women do embroidery work between household chores, while male family members work in other occupations. This pattern means craft work helps families but rarely provides financial security by itself.²⁹

5.2 Working Conditions and Health Issues

Chikankari artisans typically work from their homes, sitting on floors or low stools for long hours. Poor lighting conditions are common, especially in low-income households. The repetitive hand movements required for embroidery can cause physical problems. Studies document health issues including eye strain, back pain, neck pain, and repetitive stress injuries in fingers and wrists.³⁰

Working from home has both advantages and disadvantages. Women can combine craft work with domestic responsibilities and childcare. They avoid commuting costs and maintain purdah (seclusion) norms if culturally required. However, home-based work also means isolation from other workers, lack of workplace protections, and difficulty organizing for better conditions.³¹

Few artisans have access to social security benefits. Since most work informally without written contracts, they do not receive health insurance, retirement benefits, or maternity leave. In times of illness or old age, they have no financial safety net. Government welfare schemes exist but reaching informal workers remains challenging.³²

5.3 Gender Dimensions

The vast majority of Chikankari embroiderers are women. This reflects traditional gender roles where embroidery is considered women's work. It also connects to broader patterns of women's employment in India, where home-based work allows women to earn income while conforming to social expectations about domestic responsibilities.³³

However, women's contribution often goes unrecognized. Their work is seen as supplementary or casual rather than serious employment. Payment goes through male contractors or family members, reducing women's direct control over their earnings. Despite doing most of the actual embroidery work, women have little voice in industry decisions or policy-making.³⁴

Some positive changes have occurred through women's organizations. SEWA and similar groups have organized women artisans into self-help groups and cooperatives. This gives women better bargaining power, access to credit, and skills training. Women's cooperatives have also helped members access government benefits and legal support.³⁵

5.4 Skill Transmission and Younger Generation

Traditionally, Chikankari skills passed from mothers to daughters through informal apprenticeship. Girls learned embroidery from childhood, gradually mastering different stitches and patterns. This transmission system ensured continuity of craft knowledge across generations.³⁶

However, younger people increasingly prefer other occupations. Education levels have risen, creating opportunities in formal sector jobs. Young people see craft work as low-paid and lacking social status. Many families encourage children to pursue education and urban employment rather than continue in traditional crafts.³⁷

This trend raises concerns about skill loss and craft continuity. Government training programs try to address this by offering formal skill certification and training. Design schools have introduced courses on traditional crafts. Some young entrepreneurs combine traditional skills with modern business methods, creating new models for craft-based enterprises.³⁸

6. GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND SUPPORT PROGRAMS

6.1 Institutional Framework

The Government of India supports handicrafts through multiple agencies. The Office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) under the Ministry of Textiles is the nodal agency for policy formulation and program implementation. At the state level, the Uttar Pradesh Handicrafts Development Board works specifically on promoting local crafts including Chikankari.³⁹

Several autonomous bodies also play important roles. The Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts focuses on export development. The All India Handicrafts Board advises on policy matters. National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) and National Institute of Design (NID) contribute through design development and research.⁴⁰

6.2 Major Support Schemes

The government operates various schemes to support artisans. The Handicrafts Mega Cluster Development Scheme aims to develop infrastructure in areas with high concentration of artisans. For Chikankari, this includes setting up common facility centers in Lucknow for dyeing, washing, and finishing operations.⁴¹

The Design and Technology Upgradation Scheme provides funds for modernizing production techniques while preserving traditional skills. It supports purchasing improved tools, installing better lighting in workplaces, and training in quality control. The scheme also funds collaboration between artisans and professional designers to create contemporary products.⁴²

Financial assistance is available through various channels. The National Scheduled Castes Finance and Development Corporation and similar bodies provide loans to artisan enterprises at concessional rates. The Credit Guarantee Scheme helps artisans access bank loans without collateral. However, awareness about these schemes remains low among grassroots artisans.⁴³

6.3 Marketing Support

The government helps artisans access markets through several initiatives. Regular handicraft exhibitions and trade fairs are organized at national and international levels. Artisans receive subsidized participation to showcase their products and meet buyers directly. These events provide valuable market exposure and networking opportunities.⁴⁴

E-commerce platforms dedicated to handicrafts have been developed. The GeM (Government e-Marketplace) portal allows government departments to purchase directly from artisans. Private e-commerce sites receive support to create dedicated craft sections. Training programs help artisans learn online selling skills, digital payment systems, and social media marketing.⁴⁵

The GI tag system protects authentic products from imitation. For Chikankari, the GI tag ensures that only products made in designated areas using traditional methods can be marketed as genuine Chikankari. This protection helps maintain quality standards and prevents market flooding with cheap, machine-made copies.⁴⁶

6.4 Challenges in Implementation

Despite numerous schemes, implementation faces several problems. Information about schemes does not reach many grassroots artisans due to low literacy and limited media access. Application procedures are often complex, requiring documents and paperwork that informal workers find difficult to provide. Corruption and favoritism in benefit distribution have been reported in some areas.⁴⁷

Coordination between different agencies is sometimes poor. Multiple departments have overlapping programs, causing confusion and duplication. State and central programs may work at cross purposes. Moreover, budget

allocations are often insufficient compared to the sector's needs. Fund utilization is incomplete in many cases due to administrative delays.⁴⁸

Monitoring and evaluation systems are weak. Success is often measured by funds disbursed or programs conducted rather than actual impact on artisan livelihoods. Long-term outcomes like income increases, improved working conditions, or skill preservation are rarely tracked systematically. This makes it difficult to assess which interventions work best.⁴⁹

7. CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

7.1 Major Challenges

The Chikankari industry faces multiple interconnected challenges. First, competition from machine-made imitations continues to grow. Advanced embroidery machines can now produce designs that look similar to hand embroidery at a fraction of the cost. Consumers cannot always distinguish between genuine handwork and machine copies, especially online.⁵⁰

Second, price competition pressures profit margins. Large retailers demand lower prices to remain competitive. Export buyers expect international quality standards but are unwilling to pay premium prices that would allow fair wages. Artisans and small manufacturers get squeezed between these demands, often forced to cut corners or reduce wages.⁵¹

Third, the industry struggles with quality consistency. Since production is dispersed across thousands of home-based workers, maintaining uniform standards is difficult. Training levels vary widely. Some artisans produce excellent work while others struggle with basic skills. This inconsistency affects export orders where buyers expect standardized quality.⁵²

Fourth, skill transmission to younger generations remains problematic. As mentioned earlier, young people increasingly reject craft work in favor of other opportunities. Unless the craft becomes more financially attractive and socially valued, this trend will continue, potentially leading to skill loss.⁵³

Fifth, environmental concerns are emerging. Traditional Chikankari used natural fabrics and threads. Modern production often involves synthetic materials and chemical dyes. Washing and finishing processes can cause water pollution. As environmental awareness grows, the industry needs to adopt sustainable practices.⁵⁴

7.2 Emerging Opportunities

Despite challenges, several opportunities exist for the industry's growth. Global consumer trends favor handmade, authentic products. There is growing appreciation for slow fashion and sustainable clothing. Chikankari fits perfectly into this market segment as genuinely handcrafted, traditional workmanship.⁵⁵

Digital technology opens new market channels. Social media platforms allow artisans and small businesses to showcase their work globally. E-commerce eliminates geographical barriers, letting customers anywhere purchase directly. Online customization tools enable made-to-order products, reducing inventory costs and increasing customer satisfaction.⁵⁶

Design innovation presents another opportunity. Collaboration between traditional artisans and contemporary designers can create products that respect tradition while appealing to modern tastes. Fusion designs combining Chikankari with other craft techniques or contemporary styles can attract new customer segments.⁵⁷

Tourism provides another avenue for growth. Lucknow attracts domestic and international tourists interested in cultural heritage. Craft tourism, where visitors observe artisans at work, purchase products, or even learn basic skills, creates additional income opportunities. Workshop tourism and experiential learning programs can add value to traditional craft work.⁵⁸

Social enterprise models offer promise for combining commercial success with social impact. Organizations working directly with artisan communities can ensure fair wages, better working conditions, and skill development while producing quality products for conscious consumers willing to pay premium prices for ethically made goods.⁵⁹

8. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Improving Artisan Welfare

First priority must be improving wages and working conditions. Minimum wage enforcement should extend to home-based workers. Payment should be prompt and through transparent systems that artisans can track. Written contracts, even simple ones, would provide basic employment security. Social security coverage needs expansion. A simplified registration system could bring home-based artisans into existing welfare schemes. Subsidized health insurance specifically designed for craft workers would address common occupational health problems. Retirement benefits through voluntary contribution schemes could provide old-age security.

8.2 Market Development

Marketing support needs to be more sophisticated. Simple participation in exhibitions is not enough. Artisans need help with branding, packaging, pricing, and customer service. Government could fund marketing professionals to work with artisan groups, helping them develop strong market positioning. E-commerce training should be comprehensive and ongoing. Many artisans need help with product photography, online shop management, and social media marketing. Government could establish digital resource centers in craft clusters providing these services and training.

8.3 Institutional Reforms

Better coordination between different government programs is essential. A single nodal agency for each craft cluster could coordinate various schemes and reduce duplication. Regular meetings between central, state, and local authorities would improve policy coherence. Implementation processes need simplification. Application forms should be available in local languages with pictorial instructions for low-literacy populations. Mobile service centers could visit craft villages regularly to help with paperwork.

8.4 Financial Access

Credit access remains difficult for most artisans. Banks need special credit products designed for craft workers, considering their irregular income patterns and lack of conventional collateral. Microfinance institutions could fill gaps but need appropriate regulation to prevent excessive interest rates. Self-help groups and cooperatives should receive enhanced support for credit intermediation.

8.5 Education and Awareness

Public education about craft heritage is crucial. School curricula should include content about local crafts, their history, and cultural significance. Field trips to craft clusters could give students direct exposure. This early education builds appreciation that might influence later consumer choices and career paths. Consumer awareness about authentic handwork versus imitations needs improvement. Simple guidelines helping buyers identify genuine Chikankari would support premium pricing.

9. CONCLUSION

The journey of Chikankari embroidery through three decades of economic reforms reveals the complex challenges facing traditional handicrafts in modern India. This ancient craft has shown remarkable resilience, adapting to market changes while maintaining its essential character. The industry has grown significantly in monetary terms, with exports increasing many times over and domestic markets expanding.

However, this growth has not equally benefited all participants. Artisans, particularly home-based women embroiderers, continue to face low wages, poor working conditions, and economic insecurity. The value chain remains exploitative, with middlemen capturing disproportionate shares of profits. Government programs, while well-intentioned, often fail to reach grassroots workers due to implementation problems.

The future of Chikankari depends on balancing multiple objectives. The craft must remain economically viable to attract new practitioners. It must preserve traditional techniques and knowledge to maintain authenticity. It must provide decent livelihoods to current artisans. And it must adapt to contemporary markets and consumer preferences. These objectives sometimes conflict, requiring careful policy design.

Several key lessons emerge from this study. First, economic liberalization creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities for traditional sectors. Market expansion benefits those with resources to take advantage, but

can marginalize small producers. Second, craft preservation requires active policy support, not just market forces. Without intervention, competitive pressures tend to erode quality and exploit workers. Third, empowering artisans themselves through organization, education, and direct market access is crucial for sustainable development.

The Chikankari case has broader implications for cultural heritage preservation in developing economies. It demonstrates that traditional crafts can survive globalization but need supportive ecosystems. This includes quality standards, fair trade practices, skill transmission mechanisms, and social recognition. It also requires moving beyond romantic notions of craft authenticity to practical approaches that allow evolution while preserving core values.

Looking forward, the industry has real potential for sustainable growth. Global trends favor handmade, sustainable products. Digital technologies create new market channels. Design innovation can attract contemporary consumers. Tourism and experiential economy create additional revenue streams. However, realizing this potential requires coordinated action by government, industry, civil society organizations, and consumers.

Government must strengthen its support through better implementation, simpler procedures, adequate funding, and evidence-based policy making. Industry needs to move toward ethical practices, fair wages, and quality focus rather than just cost competition. NGOs should continue organizing artisans and advocating for their rights. Consumers can support craft preservation through informed purchasing decisions and willingness to pay fair prices.

Most importantly, artisans themselves must have voice and agency in shaping the industry's future. Their knowledge, skills, and perspectives are invaluable. Policies work best when designed with their participation, not just for their benefit. Empowering artisan organizations and ensuring their representation in decision-making bodies should be a priority.

The story of Chikankari is ultimately a story about people adapting to change while trying to preserve what they value. It reflects broader tensions in development between tradition and modernity, local and global, handwork and machinery, cultural preservation and economic necessity. There are no perfect solutions, only ongoing negotiations and adjustments. What remains clear is that traditional crafts like Chikankari deserve protection and support not just as economic activities but as living cultural heritage belonging to all humanity.

This research has examined Chikankari's transformation over three decades of economic reform. While the craft has survived and in many ways prospered, significant challenges remain. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policy reforms, industry cooperation, and broader social commitment to valuing traditional knowledge and artisan livelihoods. Only through such multi-faceted effort can India's rich craft

heritage thrive in the modern global economy while continuing to provide meaningful livelihoods to millions of skilled artisans.

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