

Chikankari of lucknow



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Chikan is one of the prides of the city of Nawabs that is Luknow. Although chikankari is an ancient form of white floral embroidery it has become synonym of nazakat and nafasat of the tehzeeb of Lucknow . For centuries this fine white tracery on transparent white fabric has delighted the hearts of the kings and commoners alike. The profession has always been respected that it is one vocation that affluent families have taken up without any perceived loss of societal acceptance. It is a complex and elegant craft that has come down to us, evolving over the years into an aesthetic form of great beauty .

Chikankary has been practiced in Lucknow for more than two hundred years but it did not originate here. It flourished in the Mughal courts in the seventeenth centuries. When the Mughal courts disintegrated the artisans scattered across the country. Some of them came and settled in Avadh. They brought their craft with them and paved the way for the artisans of Luknow. Some historians opinion that chikan is a Persian word `Chikin' or `Chikeen' kind of embroidered fabric. It is believed that the craft was brought to the Mughal court of Jahangir by his talented consort Nurjahan.

There are however other opinions on the origin of Chikankari. According to one historian , there is evidence of embroidered muslin apparel depicted in the famous paintings of Ajanta caves dating back to the fifth century A. D. This could be early trace of the presence of chikan. As per another version chikan can be dated back to king Harsh who is said to have a great fondness for white embroidered muslin garments without any embellish it. Bana a contemporary of king Harsh refers to this skillfully embroidered white muslin.

Megasthenes also mentions the use of flowered muslin by Indians. The history of chikankary is richly anecdotal. It is said that one of the wives of a Nawab belonged to Murshidabad in Bengal where chikankary was established and popular at that time. She once embroidered a cap for the Nawab with chikankary. The other begums also picked up this craft to please the Nawab. Thus this became a trend setter among the ladies . Another interesting story says that a once a traveler was passing through a village in Lucknow.

He stopped and requested a poor peasant for water. Delighted at this hospitality of the peasant, the traveler taught him the art of Chikankari. The slight cultural variation has distinct impact upon chikankary. Thus there is a difference between the chikankari of Bengal and that of Lucknow. It is said that exceptionally good Lucknow chikankari could get in those days a worker enough money to feed his family for a year. The chikan workers of Bengal used muslin or mulmul for embroidery, very much liked in Greece and Rome .

These delicate fabrics known as gossamer were so prized that the Romans romantically called it “ textilli venti” or woven winds . Lucknow has also earned name and fame for producing some very fine muslin . Rosy Llewellyn Jones in her book, A Fatal Friendship has written, “ During the seventeenth century the East India Company decided to send two employees to live in Lucknow and buy bales of ‘ dereabauds’ a kind of muslin which was made in Hassanganj area of Lucknow on the northern bank of the Gomti. ” Later this muslin became the base material for good chikankary.

Addhi, Tanzeeb and Girant were the traditional chikan fabrics. Several Europeans prominent among whom being Madec and Gentil settled in the court of Nawab Shuja-ud-daulah in the middle of the 18th century and it seems possible that French white embroidery had some influence on chikan of Lucknow. Apart from the muslin, another kind of white cotton fabric was produced in lucknow & Faizabad in those days. This fabric was called Jamdani. It bore a unique blend of regular and irregular floral motifs. The only difference being that Jamdani is woven & chikan is pure embroidery.

Chikankari was used primarily to embellish garments. Long flowing angarkhas, , achkans, kurtas were for men. For ladies chikankari was used to adorn lehengas, odhnis, kurtas, veils etc. Chikan craft was not confined to dress alone and it soon became a part of domestic life. The Lucknowasis use chikan to grace their homes in the form of bedsheets, palanquin curtains and drapes. It's also used in table covers, mats, napkins, tea-cozy covers. The chikan industry received a setback after the dissolution of the royal courts of Avadh. It lost its greatest patron with the deposition of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah.

Soon it became a commercial activity & reduced to a domestic economic activity practiced largely by Muslim women. With the passage of time there has been a qualitative degeneration in chikan craft of lucknow in the fabric as well as stitches partly because of dearness and partly because of commercialization. Nevertheless it is a way of life for its people and is very much woven into their culture which is distinctly called ' Lucknowi'. Chikankari has a global presence. It is a great tribute to the skill and technique of the

craftpersons of Lucknow. Sonakshi srivastava La Martiniere Girls College
Lucknow