



International Conference on Indian Knowledge Systems
(ICIKS 2026)



Commercialisation of Traditional Chikankari Craft

Shubhangi Yadav

Research Scholar

Department of Indian Languages and Literary Studies

University of Delhi

Abstract

The study will explore the commercialisation of Chikankari embroidery through the age tracing the transformation from a heritage hand embroidery to market driven industry and it shaped the global market. It originated in Lucknow and has a long association with the craftsmanship, cultural identity and skilled labour specially women. However, the pressure of mass production changed the consumer preferences and expansion of fast fashion has changed the production process and value system.

The study will also examine the how commercialisation has led to opportunities and challenges. It will examine the paradox of how on one hand it has increased the visibility and generated livelihoods on the other hand it has diluted the very authenticity and exploitation through low wages. With the rise of digital platform how it has gone through transformation in its public perception. Through the research it will highlight the tension between preservation, profit and changing perception. Ultimately, the paper argues for a more ethical and sustainable model of commercialisation which has authenticity, visibility and safeguard the intangible heritage embedded within Chikankari craftsmanship.

Keywords: Chikankari, Commercialisation, Sustainability, Cultural Identity, Authenticity, Craftmanship.

Introduction

Chikankari is an age-old tradition originated in Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh. It is known for its refined intricate work and use of white thread on a fabric. It is long associated with elegance, grace and skilled craftsmanship. Traditionally practiced by artisans most of them were women working within their homes. The craft embodies not only aesthetic beauty but also deeply rooted cultural heritage passed down through generations. The motifs were inspired by flower, vine and paisley, which also shows the relationship between art and nature, while the techniques show a high level of precision and labour-intensive effort. Historically, Chikankari flourished under royal patronage, particularly during Mughal Era where it was celebrated as a symbol of sophisticated and luxury and later it bloomed under Nawabs of Awadh. With time the craft came to local markets becoming the source of livelihood for artisans. In the contemporary time,

Chikankari has gone through significant change in reshaping in production, distribution and perceptions. The commercialisation brought both expansion and tension. It got the due recognition in the global market that led to the high demand and created many economic opportunities for artisans who completely rely on this art for survival. But it also brought many challenges with it like the increasing demand for affordability and rise in machine made Chikankari, it dilutes the authenticity. Artisans are underpaid, exploited and lack of recognition are also the problem. Also, the shift towards mass production and slow handmade work has reduced. Understanding these dynamics is very essential in the increasingly commercialised world.

History of Chikankari Embroidery

India is a very diverse country that has its own unique history of embroideries that has shaped the cultural history of the country. From Kashmir to Kanyakumari India has different kind of embroidery that are rooted in rich culture of that region from Phulkari of Punjab to Chamba Rumals from Himachal to Chikankari from Lucknow. Chikankari embroidery is one such that has a rich and unique history. It is a century old work that has historical cultural importance. It is a style from Lucknow (City of Nawabs) city of Uttar Pradesh.

“Chikankari” comes from the Persian word “Chakin,” which means cloth decorated with needlework. The history of Chikankari embroidery can be traced back to Mughal era around 400 years back and later embroidery also flourished under the patronage of Nawabs of Awadh. This artform has been passed down from one generation to other. It shows the vibrant synthesis of Indian, Persian and Mughal culture. Requires lots of patience and intricate work of threads. The motives were inspired heavily by Mughal designs like Paisleys and flowers. Even sometimes a single piece can take months to complete. It also has a deep rooted relation with myths and folklore stories of that region.

Chikankari was very popular but it got worldwide recognition when it got a GI Tag. From local artisans to big designers everyone has contributed significantly to that so that this reaches global level and receive its due respect. Today, Chikankari is not just worn by the royals but it is consumed by the commoners also.

Origin of Chikankari

Chikankari is believed to be as old as 3rd Century B.C. The early example is Ajanta Paintings that has similar patterns as that of Chikankari embroidery. In that same era Megasthenes, a Greek ambassador came to India and wrote about White flowered muslin worn by the courtiers during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya.

Indian fabrics were highly admired in ancient Greece and Rome. The cloth was so fine and delicate that the Romans called it “woven wind.” It is also believed that Chikankari was used in the court of Harshvardhan, where white cloth was a symbol of royalty and elegance.

Many people believe that Chikankari was introduced to the Mughal courts by Noor Jahan around 1600 A.D. From there, it spread to Bengal and later to the Nawabs of Awadh in the 17th century, where it became a royal craft. Today, it is one of the most famous traditional embroideries of Lucknow. Chikankari was usually done on very fine white cotton fabric called muslin or mulmul. This light and soft fabric was widely produced in Bengal and exported to many countries. Chikankari art form was developed and refined under the patronage of Mughals who appreciated the elaborate craftsmanship. Noor Jahan was the wife of Mughal emperor Jahangir was thought to have popularised and polished the Chikankari craft. After the Mughal Empire fell, Chikankari grew under the support and patronage of Nawabs of Awadh. The Nawabs encouraged this delicate and intricate work which led to the refinement of Chikankari even more.

Over the period of time, this became an important part of Lucknow’s art and cultural identity. The artisans involved in Chikankari are spread across Lucknow and nearby areas within a radi-

us of about hundred plus kilometers. The main districts where these artisans live and work include Unnao, Barabanki, Lakhimpur Kheri, and Hardoi. Smaller groups of Chikankari artisans can also be found in Raebareli, Sultanpur, and Faizabad. In total, around 2.5 lakh people are connected to the Chikankari industry, including embroiderers, washermen, block printers, and other workers involved in different stages of production.

Colonial Influence

In 17th century, the colonial rule began in India with establishment of English East India company. There has been a significant impact on India's culture and tradition under the colonial rule. Britishers have been inclined towards the Indian textile, art and culture. They paid close attention to Indian artist and their intricate work and techniques. They also had a huge impact on textiles. They introduced mechanised looms and new textiles like muslin. Indian cotton became famous in European cloth market. They also helped Indian art and culture reached to the west. Since then, Indian fashion was colonised during the British dominion. The British colonial era introduced cotton and organza as common basis for Chikankari replacing the traditional fine Muslin and that's who Chikankari work got more diverse.

Institutionalisation and Branding of Chikankari

In this topic, researcher will see from a critical lens, how the traditional Chikankari embroidery has been formally set up in the commercial space, branding happens and commodification of this age-old embroidery started in the contemporary era. The artisans were organised formally in a structural way to make this intricate embroidery with their age-old skills.

A significant milestone in this process was the granting of the Geographical Indication (GI) tag in 2008 by the Geographical Indications Registry under the GI Act, 1999. This has helped Chikankari gain legal recognition and it has increased its symbolic and cultural value and also protected it from mass production and cheap imitations in national and international market. Although Chikankari received the GI tag but in reality, large-scale machine-made and mass-produced imitations continue to dominate the market. Machine made Chikankari motifs are sold under the same name but at a cheaper price. There has been a flood duplicate Chikankari, very hard for consumers to differentiate between authentic handmade embroidery and machine-made cheap quality work.

Commercialisation and Market Dynamics

Commercialisation is the process through which a new idea gradually becomes a widely used product in the market. This process often takes many years or even decades because technology needs time to improve, production needs to scale up, and people need to become familiar with the product. Commercialisation of Chikankari embroidery as seen on kurtis, sarees, dupattas and other garments can be understood as the gradual process through which a traditional craft becomes a widely sold product in national and international markets. In the beginning, Chikankari was a local handicraft practiced mainly by artisans in the city of Lucknow. The embroidery was done by only by hands and the end product was for royal consumption and local markets only. Because it took time to made, the production was very slow and it all depend on the skilled artisans so the supply was also very limited and this made the product very exclusive. Over time, people from different region began to notice and appreciate this work and its uniqueness and slowly the demand increase. All the business people started buying th product and started selling it in large markets. As the demand grew, more and more artisans stared joining this craft and slowly the production network developed between the designers, traders and local artisans. This demand and supply shaped the industry. When more customers wanted Chikankari garments like kurta, saree suit this encouraged retailers to produce more pieces and organize artisans more systematically, later this was replaced by the machines and that led to the mass production of this unique and age-old embroidery and it overall expanded the market

in India. Designers and big fashion brands started making fusion designers by combining traditional embroidery with modern twist and used it in a luxury clothes. This gave it more social and economic value. This has pushed Chikankari to international market. Another important change that happened was the shift from traditional muslin clothe to coloured fabric.

Today, Chikankari is done different fabrics like silk, georgette, chiffon, cotton and in different colour and this makes it more attractive for modern consumers, it also allows designers to create new and versatile designs by using this age-old embroidery. And these things influence the market forces like production and pricing. Today the demand comes from everyday wear to high end fashion brand market. Consumers buy Chikankari garments because they have a value for this traditional craftsmanship, comfort and cultural identity. Thus, the commercialisation of Chikankari embroidery shows how a traditional craft can gradually expand into a large market through a growing demand, changing fashion trends, wider distribution and competition among producers.

So now what happens when there is surplus in the market producers often try to differentiate their products to create new demand. For example, designers might introduce new styles, use different fabrics, combine Chikankari with modern fashion trend, or target new markets such as online buyers or international customers. Some sellers may also shift their focus towards high-quality or premium handmade embroidery to attract customers who are willing to pay more for authenticity. The meaning of Chikankari has changed from a symbol of age-old craftsmanship and cultural identity to a product that is commercialised in the fashion industry. That's how the embroidery has a "social life," as its value and meaning keeps on changing depending on the social and economic context in which it is used. With the commercialisation and the growth of fast fashion markets, Chikankari has become a popular product sold in boutiques and global fashion markets. Even though it has become a product, it still shapes people's identity and relationships. For artisans, making Chikankari is part of their family tradition and connects them to their community and livelihood. For consumers, wearing it shows their cultural pride, fashion trend, or a connection to traditional Indian clothing. It also created intricate relation between artisans, traders, designers, and buyers in the market. And that's how Chikankari is not just a cloth or a embroidery but something that carries cultural meaning and connects different people from social and economic networks.

Women Artisans and their Exploitation

Chikankari is a huge industry where 90% of artisans are women. Since it is a homebased and an unorganized industry, and can be done side by side while doing the house chores and the intricate needle work is done by female artisans mostly and this work gives job and income to many people especially women in and around Lucknow. Today, it is an important source of livelihood for women who can work from home. However, even though Chikankari provides income, it does not always give women real power over their work or better control in the market. In many marginalised communities, embroidery is considered women's works as it's an indoor job and can be done alongside the household chores, even if it costs extra labour to the women. Families, under the strong influence of patriarchy, expects only women to practice soft-skill like embroidery and pass the skills down to females through generations on the name of tradition and family values instead of survival. Because of this, women form the main workforce for Chikankari.

Chikankari may have become the source of income to millions of the women but it doesn't provide true empowerment, due to the lack of control over raw material, production and distribution. Selling the goods in the market is considered men's job that leads to loss of control over fair cost and bargain of women handwork that further leads to uneven money distribution among the artisans and sellers. In these dynamics, often women are paid lesser than men even

though they are the bone and soul of the embroidery. Women living in neighbourhood or in small town around of Lucknow, are the primary producers of the Chikankari. The craft often allows women to earn some livelihood even if they don't have a formal job. Nonetheless, women have little contribution in the price, production decision or how their work is reaching the markets as the middlemen and traders decide the price and supply. In contemporary era people who make this and their work reaches the global level are often marginalized and unrecognised. Chikankari originated in Lucknow and was historically a handmade embroidery linked to cultural heritage and skilled craftsmanship during the Mughal Empire. Over the period of time, the craft has evolved because of commercialization, globalization, and the growth of the fashion industry.

However, even though there is a lot of demand for this but still a lot of artisans face economic and social difficulties. Chikankari embroidery has been a very old and close part of these families and communities in Lucknow and nearby areas for centuries. Women artisans carefully do the detailed hand embroidery and create the designs that make Chikankari special. They show great skill and creativity while making these beautiful patterns. However, working for long hours with needles can make their fingers rough, stiff, and tired and they are not compensated for the same.

These women play an important role in producing this craft. By doing Chikankari work, they can earn money and become financially independent. Their income helps support their families and manage household expenses. This work also gives them more confidence and the ability to take part in family decisions. In this way, Chikankari helps women become economically stronger and slowly challenge traditional gender roles in society.

Most workers are women who work from their homes in and around Lucknow and nearby areas. Although the embroidery requires great skill and time, they are often paid very low wages. The production process involves a lot of middlemen who take most of the profit. Because of this system, the artisans who actually make the embroidery do not receive equal benefits. This situation shows an important contradiction in the commercialization of traditional crafts. While Chikankari has become famous and widely sold in national and global markets, the artisans who keep the tradition alive often remain economically vulnerable. Thus, it is very important to see and recognise both the growing success of Chikankari and the challenges faced by the artisans. Supporting fair wages, better working conditions, and greater recognition for artisans can help ensure that the popularity of Chikankari also improves the lives of the people who create it.

Chikankari and Environment

Fast fashion has contributed actively in environment pollution but Chikankari initially was eco-friendly as it is made on natural and breathable fabric like cotton, mulmul, silk that are biodegradable and have lower carbon footprint. But with the growth of fast fashion industry and rising global demand this has disrupted the ecology and the use of chemicals, synthetic fabrics all these are not eco-friendly and not biodegradable. Also, excessive use of fresh water and so much fabric waste happening which is affecting our environment. Fast fashion had brought new environmental challenges as well and as a consumer one should be mindful efforts should be made for sustainable development without harming the environment.

Influence of Celebrity Culture and Social Media

Now a days, Chikankari has gained much more visibility in fashion markets. Designers and fashion brands use this embroidery in many types of clothing such as sarees, lehengas, kurtas, dresses, and fusion wear. The growth of tourism, online shopping, celebrity tracking culture and export markets has also increased the global demand for Chikankari products. Many boutiques, fashion houses, and online platforms sell these embroidered garments as luxury or herit-

age items. The rise of social media and celebrity tracking culture and popular “airport looks” and paparazzi style has shaped the consumers interest on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest. These platforms have shifted the attention from runway to wearable styles by public figures and consumers try to copy it, that’s how it gets popularised but has also made fast fashion a trend and helped increase the popularity and visibility of the craft. It has also created more opportunities for the craft to reach national and international markets.

Conclusion

In conclusion the commercialisation, social media celebrity tracking culture has reshaped the consumption of Chikankari industry in the contemporary era. What was once tradition region specific is now a everyday fashion. Digital narratives has made it aspirational for younger trend conscious audience. But growing trend brings the tension between values and visibility. While increased demand has the potential to economically benefit the artisans also risks the craft to be reduced to fast moving trend. Therefore, it is important to engage with this transformation critically. Preserving Chikankari in this age of digitalisation requires a very balanced approach, preserving craftsmanship and ensure fair recognition and artists should be compensated well and it should ensure uniform consumption. Only then can the craft continue to thrive without losing the cultural significance.

References

- ♦ Appadurai, Arjun, editor. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- ♦ Bourdieu, Pierre. “The Forms of Capital”. *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John G. Richardson, Greenwood Press, 1986.

Articles

- ♦ Bose, Arijit. “The Unhurried Reign: How Lucknow’s Chikankari and Zardozi Mastered Global Luxury.” *The Lucknow Tribune*, <https://thelucknowtribune.org/the-unhurried-reign-how-lucknows-Chikankari-and-zardozi-mastered-global-luxury/>. Accessed 26th Feb. 2026.
- ♦ Government of India. *The Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999*. Act No. 48 of 1999, Ministry of Law and Justice, 30 Dec. 1999. <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/1981/5/A1999-48.pdf>. Accessed 25th Feb. 2026.
- ♦ Pandey, Shraddha, and Komal Khandelwal. “A Study of Sustainable Chikankari Craft and Through Chikankari Waste.” *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, vol. 11, no. 3, Mar. 2023, p. 137-150. IJCRT, <https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2303232.pdf>. Accessed 26th Feb. 2026.
- ♦ Pandey, Reena. “Chikankari: The Craft of Nawabi Shaan.” *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*, vol. 5, no. 8, Aug. 2018, pp. 42. JETIR, www.jetir.org. Accessed 27th Feb. 2026.
- ♦ Singh, Richa, and Purnima Shah. “Socio-Economic Status of Female Workers Engaged in Traditional Chikankari under Sitapur District.” *Asian Journal of Basic Science & Research*, vol. 4, 2022, pp. 27–33. AJBSR, <https://doi.org/10.38177/AJBSR.2022.4404> Accessed 1st March, 2026.
- ♦ Verma, Pooja. “Chikankari Sector of Lucknow: Challenges Faced by Woman Artisans.” *IJIRT (International Journal of Innovative Research and Technology)*, vol. 9, no. 12, May 2023, ISSN 2349-6002. <https://ijirt.org/article?manuscript=159895>. Accessed 1st March, 2026