Chapter 4

BACKGROUND OF CHIKAN INDUSTRY IN INDIA
Lucknow, the capital city of Uttar Pradesh is an important cultural and manufacturing center (Gould 1974). Its population was recorded in the 2001 census as 3,681,416. The larger part of the city forms a semi-circle on the south bank of the Gomti river (Hjortshoj 1979). The north bank is punctuated with mohullas (traditional neighbourhoods) where craft manufacture – including chikan embroidery – industries are located. Some of these areas, for example, around Daliganj and Hasanganj are extremely old, dating back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Hjortshoj 1979). Today, Lucknow is expanding much further to the north in new commercial and residential areas. The main city is made up of three distinct sections (Mukherjee and Singh 1967). The oldest section to the west is centered on the Chowk wholesale market, the newest organized around the Hazratganj retail market in the east, and the third associated with the Aminabad retail market. Since 1900, dense retail markets and residential areas have clustered around nineteenth century roads built to connect Hazratganj to the south and the east. While the consumers of chikan come from all areas of Lucknow, embroidery production is almost entirely contained within its oldest sections. Most of the city’s chikan embroiderers live in the old city and chikan businesses are concentrated in the Chowk market. Though, lately, due to increase in demand of chikan, the business has expanded to almost all the retail markets of the city.

The Meaning of Chikan

Chikankari is the name given to the “delicate art of hand embroidery traditionally practiced in the city of Lucknow and its environs”. Its Lucknow origin is the strongest and the simplest element in the definition. Scholars have been defining and classifying chikan for almost a
century. Their efforts span several changes in the kind of embroidery being produced and the conditions in which it has been made. Several writers have tried to probe the word itself for clues as to the essential nature of chikan. But there is no certainty, and certainly no consensus as to what "chikan" means. Some have described chikan as a Bengali word meaning 'very nice thing'. Some have translated it as 'fine' (Lucknow City Magazine 1988), while still others have termed it as a Persian word meaning 'to put in bold relief' (Lucknow City Magazine 1988). Paine (1989) gives a range of Persian possibilities, from the 1651 Burton's classical dictionary definition of "a kind of embroidery with gold thread, quilting" to "embroidery in various kinds of silk on garments and other items" in later dictionaries. She also writes of Richardson's 1806 Persian/English dictionary terms chikan/ chikin "a kind of cloth worked with the needle in flowers." Finally, she notes that chikan has possible linguistic connection to the physical barriers of purdah through the Persian word for "a blind" (chik/ chiq). Other definitions of chikan include "a form of embroidery done on some whitewashing material such as muslin, calico, linen or silk" (Watt 1903), and "embroidery done by white cotton threads on colourless muslin" (Pande 1968).

The very range of embroidered textiles to which the word 'chikan' has been applied in the literature no doubt contributes to the difficulty in settling upon its meaning (Watt 1903). The category 'chikan' is essentially the product of British classification of the last century and it is unclear at what point the analytic categories of British critics diverged from names and descriptions given by makers and consumers of embroidery. British and other subsequent writers' own prior ideas about how embroidery was to be understood and their familiarity with European styles of needlework
were highly influential in shaping their classifications (e.g. use of terms such as ‘satin-stitch’, ‘buttonholing’ and so on). In most lexigraphical definitions, chikan appears as a class of objects, neither connected specifically with Lucknow nor entailing an entirely distinctive form of embroidery. Watt’s (1903) classification gives chikan the status of a ‘division’ of embroidery with subdivisions of chikan-work proper, satin-stitch on white-washing material, and kamdani or gold and silver embroidery on white cotton cloth and muslin. Watt therefore, writes about chikan in such far-flung places as Peshawar, Madras and Calcutta as well as Lucknow, although the work differed in each location. Naqvi’s 1971 definition is almost the same as Watt’s with the addition of information about the thread that is used—“white threads of bleached raw silks like Muga or Tasar”.

The Stitches

Defining chikan in terms of its stitches usually produces a complex categorization rather than illuminating how embroiderers themselves think about their work. Occasionally traders and embroiderers are cited as local authorities or sources of information. There are various categorizations of the stitches and each individual or informant can provide a different categorization. A ‘complete’ list, as Wilkinson-Weber puts it, is in any case hypothetical, since there is no one who subscribes to such a list (Wilkinson-Weber 1999). Most commonly, discrimination is made between the flat and embossed stitches. In which the stitches of bakhiya, katao, and tepchi are termed flat, and most forms of murri embossed. Jali is always treated separately as a kind of ‘network’, in accordance with indigenous discriminations. While the segregation of jali is well established, there is no evidence that embroiderers make a distinction between so called embossed
and flat stitches. Short descriptions tend to pinpoint a few details of chikan that make it distinct. *Bakhiya, katao, and tepchi* are invariably mentioned, grouped together as ‘flat’ stitches according to Watt’s (1903) categorization. Dhamija (1964) also traces the *bakhiya, tepchi* and *katao* triad, but inserts a discussion of *murri* and *phanda* before going on to *jali*.

The most highly skilled embroiderers possess a broad repertoire of twelve to seventy-five stitches (Wilkinson-Weber 1999). Although there are major areas of overlap, there is no consensus among the most highly skilled over how stitches are named, nor does knowing more stitches necessarily translate into greater skill. Describing chikan on the basis of its stitches is therefore, a somewhat fruitless task. However, a critical distinction between the most accomplished embroiderers and the mass of workers lies in the fact that while for the former there are only a range of stitches, for the latter, there are only different forms of work. Most embroiderers know only one form of work that employs, typically, no more than five stitches.

The main forms of work are *bakhiya* work, *murri* work, *phanda* work, *tepchi* work and *jali* work. Women tend to specialize in one form of work or another, and this in turn reflects their skill level and position in the industry’s structure.

*Bakhiya* work uses only one stitch. Ideally, tiny, closely packed stitches should yield, on the obverse opaque petals and leaves rimmed by contiguous stitches. In the simplified work prevalent in the market, the stitches are so loosely applied that no opaque areas show up at all on the right side and stitches rarely touch one another. *Bakhiya* work is regarded by skilled embroiderers as coarse and crude. It is made almost entirely by
low-skilled workers in the nearby villages of Lucknow, who are said to be making *mota kaam* (coarse work).

*Bakhiya* work is conventionally opposed to another form of work, *murri* work. *Murri* is considered higher in status than *bakhiya* work, and typically includes between four and six stitches (e.g. *gol murri*, *lambi murri*, *phanda*, and possibly, *jora*, *kauri* and *keel*). The very finest pieces in which stitches are counted distinctly are also known as *murri* work. According to some artisans, even run-of-the-mill *murri* work requires a higher degree of skill than *bakhiya* work and thus takes longer to master.

*Phanda* work uses only one knot-like stitch. *Tepchi* work is characterized by a large quantity of stitches distributed all over the garment, often a *saree*. The *tepchi* stitch, which is the only one found in *tepchi* work, is made with a thin thread and is almost like a running stitch.

*Jali* always appears alongside *bakhiya* or *murri* work, but like them is done by a separate set of workers. *Jali* involves opening up spaces in the base cloth and holding them apart with taut stitches, creating the effect of a net. In theory, *jali* demands a skilled technique (although some *jali* is extremely crude) and uses a different kind of needle and thread from *bakhiya* and *murri*. Except for an increasing number that feature *bakhiya* work alone, most articles of chikan embroidery are made in two separate production circles: first the embroiderers (mostly rural) make *bakhiya* work, then the urban embroiderers finish the garment by making the *jali* work.

Most government accounts (National Small Industries Corporation, District Industries Centre) mention that the chikan embroiderers claim a repertoire of about thirty-two stitches. The names
provided by them are Sidhaul, Makra, Mandarzi, Bulbulchashm, Tajmahal, Phooljali, Phanda, Dhoom, Gol murri, Janjeera, Keel, Kangan, Bakhiya, Dhania patti, Lambi murri, Kapkapi, Karanphool, Bijli, Ghaspatti, Rozan, Meharki, Kaaj, Chameli, Chane ki patti, Balda, Jora, Pechni, Tepchi, Kauri, Hathkati, Daraj etc. On further analysis, one realizes that many of these stitches are different forms of one master stitch, from which they vary only in a slight manner. For example, as mentioned above, gol murri, lambi murri, phanda, and possibly, jora, kauri are all various forms of murri work.

Origins and History of Chikan

Very little can be said about the origins of chikankari with any certainty. There are various theories based on historical references made at different stages in history ranging from the seventh century B.C. to the early nineteenth century. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya traces chikan to the seventh century B.C., to the court of King Harsha, ruler of much of North India. King Harsha is said to "have had a liking for muslin garments embroidered with patterns, but no colour or ornamentation" (Chattopadhyaya 1963). There is another reference in literature dating back to the third century B.C., in which Magesthenes has mentioned the use of flowered muslins by the Indians in the court of Chandragupta Maurya (Pande 1968). Bana, a contemporary of Harsha, has referred to garments of muslin with fine silk embroidery, but there is no historical authenticity to the fact that some sort of chikankari was prevalent in those days. Curiously, these claims assert a Hindu identity for a craft that, throughout its existence, has been most associated with Muslim makers. The majority of origin stories recited by embroiderers, traders and scholars go back only a few hundred years, and no single story predominates. Nobody denies that
chikan reached its most elaborate and distinctive form in Lucknow. However, there is disagreement over whether chikan began in Lucknow, or came here from some other location. This is not an attempt to speculate upon the possible accuracy of the origin of chikan. But, origin stories are so much a part of the embroiderers’ accounts of their crafts that they merit special attention.

The most probable explanation, which has historical backing, reveals that chikan craft originated in West Bengal, where the word ‘chikan’ means ‘fine’. It is thought to have been practiced in Dacca and Calcutta. The jamdani weaving of Dacca was very influential. The visual effect of the jamdani weaves is of a series of flowers or geometric designs set against a semi-translucent mesh background. Bengali chikan work produced the same kind of effect through embroidery – a method both simpler and cheaper than the more skilled weaving process. Some surmised that chikan evolved from jamdani either as a conscious imitation or as a means to repair flaws in the woven cloth (Paine 1989), although Watt makes a strong argument for the autonomy of embroidery working its own unique influence on loom fabrics (Watt 1903). A majority of written accounts (government publications and scholarly books on handicrafts and embroidery) trace chikan back to Bengal and to male artisans who came to Lucknow from there to take advantage of courtly patronage (Irwin and Hall 1973, Chattopadhyaya 1963, Dhamija 1964, Coomaraswamy 1964, Mukharji 1974, Naqvi 1971). Most writers are unsure about when the migration occurred, referring broadly to the period of the Nawabs (rulers of the territory of Awadh from 1720 to 1856). It is worth noting in this respect that while Jamdani weaving was previously confined to Dacca, from 1850 onwards very fine white on white jamdani was produced in Tanda,
Background of Chikan Industry in India

near Faizabad to the east of Lucknow, to which period Irwin and Hall (1973) ascribe the beginnings of the Lucknow Chikankari Industry. On the whole, most subscribe to a later florescence in Lucknow rather than a sooner one. Watt (1903) puts its arrival in Lucknow during the second half of the period mentioned above, referring specifically to the patronage of the Shahs (kings) who replaced the Nawabs in the early nineteenth century. William Hoey, writing of the chikan embroidery of Lucknow in 1880, describes it as having flourished there for about twenty years. He says that it was then well established as a prosperous trade within Central, Northern and Western India, and extended also to Calcutta. In addition to the skilled professional embroiderers, he noted that chikankari was worked by women to augment the family income.

"When one wanders through the mobullas of the city where reduced Mohammedan families reside and where there poor Hindu families who need to add to the scant subsistence afforded by a small shop or by service, one sees women and even small children busy with needle and muslin. Thus, the labour at the manufacturers command is cheap and abundant. He is able to undersell those who go to the market from other places. This is one reason why the chikan business has taken deep roots in Lucknow."

Sharar (1975) also portrays chikan as a late arrival in the court culture. After describing the invention by Shah Nasir-ud-din Haider (1827-37) of a cap made for the members of the Shia sect of Islam Sharar writes,

"A little later, a very attractive embroidered cap of the same type was created for the winter. The five panels were covered in thin muslin upon which gold and silver crescents and designs were stitched in different colours. In winter one saw no other covering
on the head of men of fashion. Later, when chikan (embroidery on muslin) became popular, it was used for this purpose.”

Hence, there are three major grounds for believing in the Bengal origin of chikankari. First, the richness of indigenous textile traditions in Bengal compared to what was found at a comparable time period in Lucknow – asserting in essence that a tradition of embroidery like this could not have arisen spontaneously in the city. Second, a possible relationship between chikan and jamdani (Mukharji 1974, Watt 1903). Third, forms of embroidery called chikan appear in accounts of Bengali textiles in the nineteenth century (Taylor 1851; Mukharji 1888). Bengali products with this name were intended either for export or for use by Europeans living in India. The Nawabs of Awadh, great lovers of grace, style and beauty were greatly attracted to this craft and it must have been gradually imported. Many craftsmen and women were patronized by the Nawabs, Sultans, Rajas and the Zamindars in and around the state of Awadh. Chikankari, therefore, received much impetus and was at its peak during the central part of the nineteenth century (Rai and Ranjan 1992). The thread was worked in a variety of stitches on sheer white or pastel coloured muslins, voile, organza and sometimes silk. Originally, the embroidery was restricted to the use of white tanzeb or muslin brought from Dacca, variations being brought in through the rich variety of design and the subtly different stitches.

Lucknow chikan was used in the past for the production of European-style clothing and table linens (Coomaraswamy 1964) but chikan embroideries have always included indigenous forms of clothing and nowadays almost all production is dedicated to Indian apparel. How a kind
of embroidery so adapted to European usage, as Bengali chikan might have been adapted to the decoration of indigenous clothing in Lucknow is unclear. Paine (1989) suggests that chikan's unique form might have been influenced both by Bengali flowered muslins and by European embroidery. Without in-depth knowledge of historic textile collections, it is difficult to judge the validity of some of these propositions. But it is important to note that like other origin stories, the story of Bengali origin is not just a hypothesis, but is instead an ideological construct that tells us as much about gender as it does about actual 'facts' (Wilkinson-Weber 1999). The Bengal thesis stresses the male artisanal nature of chikan, eliminating the work of women from consideration. It also downplays the significance of Lucknow as a place of origin in its own right. No contemporary embroiderer endorses the Bengal story, preferring instead an exclusively Lucknow history, or tracing chikan to a courtly genesis in Persia.

Most embroiderers insist upon a Lucknow origin for chikan, at some vaguely distant time anywhere from one hundred to three hundred years ago. A story that includes elements of both a Lucknow and a Bengal origin that occasionally encountered in written accounts, describes one of the Nawab's wives or concubines who was from the cultured Bengali town of Murshidabad, then famous for chikan work. She was a skilled seamstress. To escape the boredom of the court zanana or harem, she embroidered a chikan cap for amusement and presented it to the Nawab. Other women in the zanana followed her example and the competition that arose among them helped elevate chikan into a unique art form (Hasan 1983, Dhamija 1964). Courtly patronage is paramount in accounts of Lucknow origin. The original passion and interest for chikan grew among the kings and the nobility of the city. In another version, it was the
whimsical conceit of a court servant (again, male) to embroider a flower upon the Nawab's topi or cap that had just been washed. Once the Nawab had given his approval, this proto-embroiderer made increasingly elaborate designs until chikan came into being (Wilkinson-Weber 1999). In contrast to the previous story, this one reasserts a male origin to chikan. However, unlike the Bengal stories of origin, there is no 'industry' evident. In casting full aesthetic responsibility for chikan upon the embroiderer, this story is more like the bored Murshidabad lady. Another feature here is that the proto-embroiderer was located by the informants in Daliganj, a locality considered as one of the earliest centers of chikan production in the city.

A major alternative to local stories of origin among embroiderers shifts the emphasis away from the male originators to female ones. This story attributes the invention of chikan to Empress Noorjahan, consort of Mughal emperor Jahangir. In Persia, Noorjahan was said to have seen decorative motifs on the walls of a monument that she found particularly beautiful. She attempted to have these motifs replicated on her clothing and she got an embroiderer to make them for her. She gathered together blockmakers and printers, as well as embroiderers to recreate the design. Here we see a distinct 'industry' being established – a solitary feature this story shares with tales of Bengal origin. The empress's own interest in the craft set a trend that spread to the rest of the Mughal court. In another version cited in the Lucknow City Magazine (1988), Begum Bismillah, a maidservant of empress Noorjahan brought this art to Awadh.
Lucknow and Chikankari: A Historical Reconstruction

Lucknow has ancient associations; Different legends associate its name with Lakshmana, brother of the King Rama of Ayodhya. It is said that Rama gave this region as reward to Lakshmana after conquering Sri Lanka and completing his term of exile. Another view is that in the sixteenth century a small fort named Machchi Bhavan was built here by Shaikh Abdur Rahim, a nobleman in the reign of Emperor Akbar. The architect who designed this fort was named Lakhna. Some say that because of his name the town was called Lucknow (Sharar 1974). By the sixteenth century, Lucknow was a thriving commercial town (Oldenburg 1984). Chowk was one of its oldest streets, around which there were clustered mohallas and markets, some of which were built at the behest of Mughal emperors Akbar and Jahangir (Oldenburg 1984). As the Mughal state slid into decline at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Lucknow became a prominent city, seat of the Nawabs of Awadh who came to power in the Mughal rulers’ wake (Cole 1989). They had some impact on the form the city took during this period. Above all, Lucknow became home to thousands of artisans who supplied the sophisticated demands of the Nawab and his retinue.

By the mid 1700s, European visitors, while remarking upon the splendor of the palaces and vibrant commercial life, also noticed its congestion and filth, and the wretchedness of the poor (Llewellyn-Jones 1985, Oldenburg 1984). In the later half of the eighteenth century, the British East India Company supplanted the Nawabi lineage as the preeminent regional power. The Nawabs continued to rule in name and the nobility remained. The most famous of the Nawabs, Asaf-ud-Daulah moved
his court to Lucknow from Faizabad and helped raise the settlement to artistic and architectural prominence. From now on, the court became more famous than the city. At the death of Asaf-ud-Daulah, the British moved swiftly to become the new super regional power taking a greater role in Nawabi affairs and seizing more land (Metcalf 1964, Barnett 1980). The Nawabs had little more to do than indulge consumption habits that were paid for with revenue they were still allowed to extract and keep for themselves (Barnett 1980, Fisher 1987). Under the first Shah, Saadat Ali Khan, Lucknow's 'consumer aristocracy' was boosted again (Bayly 1983). It is quite possible that this was when chikan embroidery was first introduced in the city (Wilkinson-Weber 1999). At last Awadh succumbed to British annexation, which was swiftly followed by the anti-British uprising of 1856-57. Ranged against the British was a diverse group including disgruntled landowners upset at British reallocation of land rights (Metcalf 1964, Fisher 1987), religious figures (particularly Shias) who lost financial support and judicial standing with the annexation of Awadh (Cole 1989), and people with interests in commerce and handicrafts, both of which had suffered a decline with the annexation (Bayly 1983). The sociopolitical, economic and even psychological effects of the uprising have been amply documented (Metcalf 1964, Spear 1984, Brown 1985). In Lucknow, the construction of a new city for Europeans to live in marked the shift of political power from the old city (Oldenburg 1984). William Hoey, writing in 1880 of the 'trade manufacturers' of the United Provinces states that chikan was always a “favourite employment of women of some castes” in the domestic sphere. Hoey describes two tiers of workers. On one hand there were male 'professional chikan workers' doing the best work and getting paid the highest piece wages. On the other hand there were women and children
working long hours for very small amounts of money, or lesser quality work including Indian style garments, handkerchiefs, and pieces for inserting into separately prepared articles (Hoey 1880). This strongly implies the existence of a sexual division of labour in chikan work more than one hundred years ago, in which men’s work was elaborate and well paid and women’s work, while detailed, was low-paid. Chikan as an export industry grew producing goods for populations outside Lucknow, instead of only for the local elite, with the labour of impoverished women and children desperate even for small wages (Oldenburg 1984). In order to support a few vestiges of their previous lifestyle, they sold their personal property to pawnbrokers, who themselves had withdrawn from banking in the face of competition from British financial institutions.

Providing the organization and finance for the chikan industry were members of the Hindu commercial casts who had transferred their activities from banking to moneylending and manufacturing. Among them were Rastogis, and Sunni and Hindu Khatri businessmen, who began to set up karkhanas (workshops) to cater to the tastes of the ‘new elite’ (Oldenburg 1984).

Numerically dominant among the classes in decline were Muslims, moreover the same Shia Muslims who had been in the ascendancy less than two decades before. On the other hand Sunnis who had been unable to grasp power during the Nawabi period but could now claim privileges under the British as the larger minority, fared better in the changed conditions. The precipitous decline in the elite Shia fortunes relative to Sunnis, helped consolidate emergent communal identities and resentments in the city (Cole 1989). In 1877, the Northwest provinces and Awadh were
amalgamated into a new territory called the United Provinces, with its capital in Allahabad. Lucknow's population had fallen after the uprising and the city faded into obscurity that lasted for nearly forty years (Hjortshoj 1979). In the 1920s, the capital of United Provinces was finally shifted back to Lucknow. By this time Lucknow had become known as the only place where chikan was made. According to some embroiderers, three or four male run karkhanas filling orders directly for patrons were the primary sources of chikan work in the first decade of the twentieth century. Daliganj, with two karkhanas, was an important production center, notwithstanding that it was dehat (village) surrounded by jungle. Other embroiderers put the figure of the karkhanas at ten to fifteen, referring to locations in Husainabad, Muftiganj, Musaibganj, as well as Daliganj. Karkhanas were still important when women began to replace men as practitioners at the highest level in the industry. By the 1930s, men had stopped taking up the craft and the karkhanas closed down. Ayub Khan, son of one of the most famous embroiderers of the twentieth century, Fayaz Khan, described his father's earnings from chikan in the 1930s and 1940s as "low.... only twenty rupees per month." The 1930s was the time when women entered the workforce in high numbers and shopkeepers flourished. When the karkhana system came to an end, the better skilled men started acting as agents (Ghosal 1923). Though men continued to have a stake in the fine work that they still made, they had an increasing stake in the work that they gave to the female embroiderers.

Lucknow retained its position of the regional capital with Indian Independence and the creation of the new stat of Uttar Pradesh in 1947. The population of Lucknow which had been depressed for many decades following the uprising began to increase again after independence and the
partition of India (Hjortshoj 1979). Many Muslims left the state for Pakistan, but substantially more immigrants came from Punjab and other northwestern states. Those who left came largely from the middle and upper classes, stripping the city of a layer of 'elite consumers'. Perhaps this was when nearby villages began to give way to the city itself as the only location for 'real chikan'. By the 1950s, women were in majority in the industry. In the 1960s, the chikan product range widened including sarees, kurtas, dupattas, women's salwar-qamiz and away from topis. English goods like tablecloths and table linen continued to be produced either for export or for consumption by upper class Indians. Not coincidentally, this has also been the period in which the embroidery stage has been totally feminised. With the fall in demand for superior murri work, men found their productive skills unrewarding and either gravitated towards agent roles or left the industry altogether. Women now make the best and the most expensive as well as the coarsest and the cheapest chikan products. They are both, the industry's cheap labour and its master craftspersons, and make up an increasing, if still small, proportion of agents who subcontract work (Wilkinson-Weber 1999).

Till about less than a decade ago, chikan was going through a phase of decline. There was no variety in the stitches and mostly coarse work used to sell. All those involved in the trade keep on blaming each other for bringing about this downfall to the craft. The local mahajans (traders) are blamed by embroiderers (and officials in the government hierarchy) for the decline of chikan, accused of giving work to whoever will take their paltry wages regardless of the quality of the results. Most skilled embroiderers try to make a handful of items that they hope to sell direct to customers or to bigger dealers in the major cities bypassing the local
mahajans altogether. For their part, local mahajans accuse metropolitan "outsiders" of knowing nothing about chikan and blame them for spurring an export boom in the 1960s and 1970s that jeopardized the livelihoods of other mahajans when it deflated. As for the taste of the consumers, mahajans from the older businesses say that there are customers interested in fine work, but there are no embroiderers capable of it. Yet the most skilled embroiderers own existence and continuing productivity attests to the inaccuracy of statements that good chikan work is truly dead, although the circumstances in which such work can be made are indeed constrained.

Critics and mahajans alike see a clear connection in the development of an exclusively female workforce and the prevalence of poor quality work—a connection that is based on false perceptions of female skill. In a classic restatement of how gender stereotypes can influence perceptions of skills, chikan is now defined as women's work and as such can never be regarded with the respect that is given to men's work (Wilkinson-Weber 1999). Explanations of decline notwithstanding, at base the production of cheap, coarse chikan serves the mahajans economic interests. Competition among mahajans is now intense and value is more intensively extracted in the embroidery phase, meaning that more and more low-skilled women are being employed to make *bakhya* work for very low wages.

After independence, the Directorate of Industries, Uttar Pradesh attempted to revive the craft by setting up the Government Chikan Embroidery Scheme in 1947. Chikan centers were set up during 1952-1964 and attempts were made to widen the market. The schemes attempted also to improve the standard of workmanship and to provide regular
employment to craftspersons on fair wages. By the end of the second five year plan, a little over one thousand craftspersons were enrolled in the scheme, and their output worth rupees two lakhs, amounted to 15 per cent of the total production (Lucknow Chikan: A Report. U.P. Export Corporation). Several innovations were introduced by this time, for instance, the use of fabrics like brightly coloured cambrics and rubias, and the use of coloured thread apart from white. But, gradually, deterioration in the quality of embroidery had set in. For various reasons including financial constraints, the centers were closed in 1964. In 1971, the Uttar Pradesh Export Corporation (UPEC) was set up with similar goals and took up operations on a wider scale. Another organized intervention was made in the industry by UPEC in 1976. Above two thousand workers were attached to this scheme of the UPEC. The corporations operations were carried out in its main office situated in Moti Mahal in Lucknow. The planning, designing, and co-ordination of the production process was done at this office. The raw material was acquired directly from the traders. The designing, cutting, tailoring and printing were done at the office. The distribution of work for embroidery and payment was done at its six production centers situated at Malihabad, Kakori, Bijnour, Koneshwar (Chowk), Adam Nagar, and City Station in Lucknow district (UPEC 1995). This scheme ran till 1999, and then, was suspended due to paucity of funds. Apart from these organizations, several other interventions have been made from time to time by government agencies like the District Industries Centre; the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), Ministry of Textiles, Government of India and the Uttar Pradesh Mahila Kalyan Nigam, Lucknow.
Among the non-government organizations, the names of Self Employed Womens’ Association (SEWA) and Craft Council of Uttar Pradesh (CCUP) are noteworthy. In spite of the concerted efforts by the Government Agencies, Non-Government Organisations and social workers, the progress in the industry remains far from satisfactory. The majority of workers, including those living in the rural areas are not much affected by the schemes. The middlemen or agents and traders manage the business and dole out work on a piece-wage basis. There is much room for exploitation, and consequently there is flow of goods that are poorly made.

The latest in the series of organized interventions by the Government is the Baba Saheb Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojana (AHVY) initiated in the year 2001-2002. This scheme, floated by the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, aims at promoting Indian handicrafts by developing artisans’ clusters into professionally managed and self-reliant community enterprises on the principles of effective member participation and mutual cooperation. The thrust of the scheme is on a need-based integrated project approach for sustainable development of handicraft through participation of craftspersons leading to their empowerment. At the district level, the implementation of the interventions is coordinated by ‘Local Agencies’ (voluntary agencies, trusts, NGOs, cooperative societies and institutions working in promotion and development of handicrafts and rural sector) and the ‘Mother Agencies’ (agencies coordinating the work of various implementing or local agencies. Based on these guidelines, there are at present six ‘local agencies’ that have formed self-help groups of chikan workers in Lucknow. The benefits reach the workers through these agencies.
The Production Process

A chikan garment goes through several stages of production before it is finished. Most chikan goods, with the exception of sarees and table linen, are specially tailored clothes. Therefore, first the cloth must be cut into various pieces that make up a garment. Mastercutters usually work in-house for the mahajans. The pieces are then taken away to tailors (darzi or silai karnewale) for stitching. Tailors are usually men who work in their houses in the older settlements in the city. It was found that sewing can also be taken up by persons without a heredity or background in stitching. The researcher came across various women who had taken up sewing of garments for chikan embroidery as a means to alleviate their poverty. The sewn garments, after being returned to the mahajan are taken to the printer for blockprinting the design to be embroidered. The clothes come back to the mahajan once again and are dispatched to the embroiderers. When the embroiderers have completed their work, the garments come back to the shop, and are then to be washed and ironed. Only after the completion of the laundry do the chikan clothes return to the shop for the final stages of production. Buttonholes are stitched, flaws are repaired, extra threads are clipped, and the articles are folded up stacked ready for sale.

The Production Specialists

For every stage of production in the chikan industry, there are specialists. Here, we discuss the various productive specialists in the industry, barring the chikan embroiderers, who will be discussed in detail in the following chapters.
Print blockmakers (known as thappakars) are not integrated into the process of chikan production, as they have no relationship with the mahajans. They deal only with the printers and possibly with the embroiderers who come to them to purchase blocks. The blockmaker is thus an independent craftsman in the world of chikan who does not work for the capitalist. His work is an end in itself and not a stage of the production process. It is difficult to gauge how many blockmakers are still working in Lucknow. Blocks are made out of sal wood (also known as sisam, botanical name Dalbergia sisso). The blockmaker cuts the block to size, and paints it with emulsion before carving it with a hammer and chisel (Paine 1989). While blockmakers insist that they make their own designs dimagh se (from the mind), a few skilled chikan embroiderers were of the view that the blockmaker was no more than a workman who made blocks according to their design and specifications. At least one blockmaker admitted that a few people came to him with their own designs, but that this was rare. He professed not to know any embroiderers but dealt exclusively with printers who came to order and buy his blocks.

As the chikan market has shifted heavily towards bakhiya production, so the nature of blocks used in printing has changed. Old blocks, besides being dustier and deeply dyed, have wholly different contours than those made recently. The raised edges to which ink adheres are more densely arranged on the block, in patterns that embroiderers immediately identify as specific to muri stitches. New blocks have large leaf motifs and are distributed more openly over the block surface. Large blocks with animal motifs and elaborate patterns also seem to belong to the
older set. Ahmad Ali, a blockmaker, confirmed that block designs had fundamentally changed in his lifetime. Old blocks were *maheen* (fine) but demand in the present day was primarily for *mota* (thick) blocks featuring designs that lent themselves to *bakhiya*, rather than *maheen tanka* (fine stitches).

The connection of blocks to chikan is well understood. Meanwhile, a small, emergent, market in blocks as aesthetised objects further separates blockmaking, as an independent artisanal activity, from the process of chikan production.

*Printers*

Chikan printers operate in small shopfronts or workrooms clustered around the Chowk Bazaar. Printing is the quickest stage of production, owing to the speed at which it is accomplished and the fact that no preparatory or finishing techniques need be done on the cloth to complete the work. Echoing the blockmaker, the printers said that the designs came from their minds in the process of printing. Some print designs are set by convention. For example, on a *kurta* (the most common item), a narrow block about three to four inches long, is used to make two stamps forming a tapered point at the bottom of the placket, then two vertical stamps are made on either side. A *kurta* can be finished in a matter of seconds. *Sarees* and table linen require more ingenuity and a good grasp of spatial organisation. They take more time to do and the wage rate per piece is higher. Older established printers could earn up to 25 paise for a *kurta*, Rs. 1.50 for a *salwaar qameez*, or from Rs. 4 to Rs. 10 for *sarees*. Higher rate was reserved for *sarees* with *pallu* (portion of *saree* worn over the
shoulder) design. A younger, inexperienced printer, though, may be paid lesser in comparison. Besides the mahajans, government development schemes and embroiderers also used the printers’ services. If an embroiderer approaches the printer to do a design specifically for her, the cost is higher than the rate per piece paid by the mahajans. The mahajan has greater leverage over the printer and can give mass orders. An embroiderer may also be expected to pay more for a printer to take the time to make a complex customized print. Printers work alone on one garment at a time. Printing is done with one or several wooden blocks. A block is pressed onto a dye-soaked cloth wad in a tin of dye, and then rolled swiftly on the cloth. There are two kinds of dye, one blue (neel), and one pink (gulabi). The pink dye is much harder to remove from the cloth than the blue dye. Pink is conventionally used on cottons, from which it can only be removed by protracted boiling. Blue is used on synthetics that cannot undergo the rigorous bleaching and boiling to which cotton is subjected. Skilled embroiderers prefer to work on cotton and choose pink dye because it stands up better to the repeated handling that complex handling entails. Blue dye is kamzor (weak). It dissolves readily in water and fades rapidly on elaborately printed cotton. Printers said they chose the blocks and created the subsequent design. They conceded that the mahajan sometimes told them what he wanted, indicating, for example, whether he wanted a bakhiya design or a murri design, or even choosing the blocks he wanted. But, printers never admitted to having the design minutely directed.

**Merchant/ Shopkeepers**

The Merchants/shopkeepers or the mahajans have very little to do with the actual process of chikan production and their control over the
workers involved in different stages of production is rather limited. While Chowk and its adjacent streets are the centres of production as well as wholesale and retail activities, chikan retail shops can be found in almost all major markets of the city. Some mahajans families have been involved in the chikan industry since the beginning of the century, and in some cases, over a hundred years. On the other hand, some businesses have been functioning for only about five to ten years. Chikan manufacture is a family business with entire joint families involved in it. The majority of mahajans are from the Rastogi subcaste, whose traditional occupation is moneylending.

The shop is the centre both of productive organisations and of sales. But, many businesses are started of homes and continue to operate out of them. Merchants may then supply chikan directly to traders outside the city. A careful distinction needs to be drawn between export meaning ‘outside Lucknow’, and export meaning out of the country. Where mahajans are involved in overseas export, it is usually as suppliers of goods to Delhi and Mumbai merchants, who dispatch them out of the country. Wholesalers also mail goods to secondary outlets throughout North and South India or via visiting retailers who buy in bulk. A small number of shopkeepers/merchants are Muslim, although chikan production is regarded by the artisans, and also by these same Muslim traders, as principally Hindu domain within the chikan industry. Mahajans do not directly supervise the production process. Only a few procedures are carried out in the shops, including cutting and finishing. In general, specialists are left to do the work unsupervised. Also, mahajans do not take the initiative in finding either agents or embroiderers. Agent connections are acquired informally, through the introduction of a potential agent by
another. The number of agents a mahajans works with varies according to the size of his enterprise and the range of goods he gets made. Mahajans often term embroidery as a household task that is subordinated to domestic work — a kind of 'free-time' activity that is "neither a priority for the women nor a real occupation". Not interfering in the production process and maintaining the agent system is advantageous to the mahajans. He incurs no long-term obligation to his employees and he can leave much of the responsibility for managing the labour to his agent.

**Agents**

The overwhelming majority of chikan embroiderers do not deal directly with manufacturers and probably do not know for whom they are working. Instead they collect their work and their wages from the agents. In order to access the rural embroiderers, mahajans must rely on the agents (also referred to as bichauliye or beech wale). Otherwise, agents are known simply known by their names and not given any collective term. Sometimes male agents are heads and members of embroiderers' households. Occupying a central position means that the agent is an important channel of communication between businessman and worker and can stand to benefit financially from each relationship. The agents' activity is known to release the mahajans from the need to bring labour formally under the control of capital (Kooiman 1983). While in the past agents used to distribute work to embroiderers in Lucknow and its immediate surroundings, the 'new' agents are heavily involved in rural areas and are diversifying away from agricultural work. Some men who were essentially subcontractors for their families were often themselves artisans and they handed down their experience in such activities to daughters and
wives who have now stepped into their agent shoes (Wilkinson-Weber 1999).

The agent is supposed to communicate the mahajan’s requirement to the embroiderers and to distribute wages and embroidery material. He imposes a rudimentary discipline upon them by adjusting the flow of work according to the relative productivity of each woman, and adjusting wages as a means of penalizing deficient workers. Agents have been known to occasionally have other jobs along with the subcontracting that serves as a secondary income generating activity. The agents usually receive payment in parts. Since goods are often returned piecemeal, and because they fear that some pieces may ‘disappear’ altogether, mahajans often hold back a portion of what the agent is owed until all the material is returned completed.

*Washermen*

From any of the major bridges in Lucknow, it is possible to see washermen at their work on several washing locations along the river Gomti. Laundering is a traditional caste-based job, and unlike many producers in other stages of production, Dhobis (washermen) have been washing clothes as their hereditary occupation for many generations. Some embroiderers said that any washerman could wash chikan, while others insisted that only specialists could.

Washing chikan is a multistaged process. The working day starts at about 6:00 a.m. and ends at 3:00-4:00 in the afternoon. In the summer months, when the workload is particularly heavy, washermen may have to wash as many as a hundred items every day. On an average, items stay for
four to five days with the *dhobi*. The monsoons bring a lull in the industry; it becomes difficult to wash clothes as the river swells and the water becomes dirty and muddy. During this season, washermen may use water tanks to wash clothes, but find them an unsatisfactory alternative to the river. Access to tanks is limited and there is charge to use them.

A large proportion of chikan clothes today are easy-to-wash, blue printed synthetics that can be easily cleaned by commercially available washing products. But, pink printed cottons are still the livelihood of the *dhobis'* washing activity, and the complex and lengthy treatment to which these clothes are subjected is the most widely reported of *dhobis'* activities (Paine 1989). Cottons are soaked in what the *dhobis* call a 'masala' (mixture) of washing powder and water, to which additional soap from soap cakes may be added if the pieces are particularly dirty. They are then boiled or steamed vigorously in a clay pot or 'matka' placed over a fire in a *bhatti* (oven). The high heat required can be produced only by burning wood, not dung cakes. The rest of the process is finished at the riverside, where the entire washing process is done. Clothes are soaked in big plastic basins or plastic-lined holes in the ground. Large ridged stones set into the edge of the riverbank are used as washboards on which the clothes are beaten and scrubbed. Besides soap, a whitening agent is applied to remove discolour from the threads, and hydrochloric acid is applied at particular parts to remove stains and rust spots. *Neel* (literally, blue) is used to treat white items. Continuous use of such chemicals along with long hours working in water creates several health problems for the washermen. Their hands and feet develop cracks, their limbs look bleached and pinkish in colour, and their skin swollen and completely smooth (Gulati 1999). The final stages of laundering are performed by washerwomen at their homes. The clothes are
pressed either with hot coal-filled or electric irons. The use of large hefty irons in clothes pressing is a familiar sight.

**Finishers**

*Mahajans* employ between two to five women to correct and finish the embroidery in-house. These are usually urban embroiderers with at least a moderate level of skill, who are able to disentangle, redo, or modify areas of embroidery that have been poorly executed. Needing to correct work is the lack of formal means to ensure consistent quality. The importance of checkers in other informal industries has been documented (Swallow 1982). Mies (1982) writes that women checkers for trade in the lace industry of Narsapur are usually individuals who occupy a position of trust.

The contemporary chikan industry thrives on an informal organisation of labour, in which artisans work for piece-wages from the *mahajans* without formal wage contractor assurances of employment from day to day. Mechanisation has not been introduced because the flexibility, abundance and effectiveness of hand-powered labour is more beneficial for the chikan traders. The weak bargaining power of these workers, and potential workers, means that low wages persist.
References


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