

Exploring the Needlework Heritage of South Punjab: Tracing the Tradition of Chikankari Embroidery in Bahawalpur

Rabia Shaukat¹, Ahmad Bilal², Asna Mubashra³

¹Lecturer, Textile Design Department, Lahore College for Woman University, Lahore, Pakistan.

²Director, Post Graduate Research Center for Creative Arts, College of Art & Design, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

³Incharge/Assistant Professor, Department of Textile Design, College of Art & Design, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

Correspondence: asna.cad@pu.edu.pk³

ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: Chikankari is an historical hand embroidery technique that is associated with the South Punjab region. Chikankari was majorly patronized by the Nawabs and elites of Bahawalpur. This research is exploratory research where the original Chikankari work images from the local artisans are taken from the south Punjab, Bahawalpur.

Methodology: The data gathered to compile this research has been taken from the local artisans of Bahawalpur. This research is based on qualitative analysis where different embroidery samples are comprehensively viewed for the Chikankari techniques executed. The research paper provides detailing of the array of stitches utilized in creation of this craft. It also involves the analysis of the stitch techniques, motifs, and color scheme which create a link between the historical and contemporary practice of Chikankari.

Findings: The findings showcase that the Shadow work (Herringbone Stitch), Bour Tanka (French Knot), and Bharwa Tanka (Satin Stitch) are commonly used stitches in the Chikankari work. The motifs that are commonly used in the Chikankari work are the Paisley and floral motifs. The use of traditional stitches and historical motifs is a continuation of legacy in the modern world.

Conclusion: Chikankari is an intricate embroidery process that has been patronized by the Nawabs for centuries and has not lost its popularity. This research includes a comprehensive analysis of the techniques, stitches, artistry, history, and culture that distinguishes this embroidery technique from others. Chikankari originated from Lucknow but it is especially known as the crafts of the Nawabs. The cities of Bahawalpur and Lucknow are the cities of Nawabs, and this art has flourished in this area.

Keywords: Chikankari, Stitches of Chikankari, Hand Embroidery, Craft of South Punjab.

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Introduction

Chikankari, is a famous and renowned embroidery technique that is the most intricate and traditional kind of embroidery which is the cultural and traditional embroidery of South Asia. Chikankari is an ancient hand embroidery that requires precision and detailed intricate handwork which converts fabric into a canvas of beauty. The Origins of the Chikankari are rooted in the heart of Lucknow and Bahawalpur, the city of Nawabs.

This unique embroidery is known for its intricate and fine needlework. The use of materials usually involves the white thread on lightweight fabrics such as muslin, chiffon, and organza. The Chikankari embroidery motifs involve the use of elegant motifs of floral, geometric, and paisleys. A fine artisan skill is required to create his craft. The word Chikankari derives from the Persian word “Chikan” which means fabric, that implies the main focus on the fabric in the cultural tradition.

Looking back in history, it is found that Chikankari was established in Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow which is the northern territory in India. This art is said to have flourished in the 18th century in the Mughal era, by the Nawabs of Awadh. This art is particularly known as the crafts of Nawabs. The Nawabs were not only in Lucknow, but were spread all over the Punjab in the Subcontinent. Chikankari is famous in the heart of Bahawalpur as well and the city is well-known for its embroidery of Chikankari (*Baral, B., William, J. A., & Kumar, A. (n.d.)*).

The Chikankari embroidery gained popularity in Lucknow as the artisans adapted the skills of this craft and it became an important part of the wardrobe of Royals, Mughals, and Nawabs. This craft also evolved with time with the influence of other cultures like Persian, Central Asian, and Indian traditions as well.

The embroidery process of Chikankari involves the use of fine and delicate needlework which requires long intensive working hours and a detailed stitching process. The motifs that are very commonly used in this embroidery are flowers, motifs like paisleys, and some others that are influenced by the Mughal appreciation for gardens. The embroidery is implied on lightweight fabric, which made it very comfortable to wear in the summers and was ideally suitable for the warmer regions. During the Mughal era, trade was at its highest peak and this expansion led to cultural exchange Chikankari embroidery flourished in other regions creating an acknowledgment of this craft in other regions. It was also appreciated by the local and other elite class members and also created opportunities for the artisans as well. Today this art is a symbol of elegance that has found its way into the contemporary world as well as linking the South of Nawabs rich heritage and paying a tribute to the legacy of Chikankari traditional craft.

Literature Review

More than 400 years ago Mughal Emperor Nur Jahan brought Chikankari from Central Asia to India. It took firm routes from the surrounding area to Lucknow and came to be known as Lucknow Chikankari. Chikankari joined the patronage of Nawab of Awadh, while there came a time when Chikankari started to diminish and there were no wages for the artisans and the market had a downfall as well. Almost the century later the struggle for revival and recognition began. The art of Chikankari known as the art of Nawabs has been practiced in the South of the Punjab, Bahawalpur as well. Chikankari embroidery was done on mulmul fabric, but pure mulmul fabric has diminished from the market so nowadays, embroidery is practiced on cotton, organza, chiffon, silk, etc.

Most of Chikankari work is done by women workers and is mostly practiced by the Muslim community. The most famous areas for Chikankari embroidery are Bahawalpur, Lucknow, Delhi, and Mumbai as well. And it is known that there are a lot of families of artisans in Bahawalpur that create this embroidery work.

History

The word “Chikan” from Chikankari is a Persian word meaning perforation. It is used to be done on mulmul and was worn in summer and was very airy and had a cooling effect with jaali embroidery work on the fabric. The breezy fabric of mulmul made it a classic for the women to wear it around the seasons and look equally elegant and formal. Chikankari is a symbol of Lucknow and Bahawalpur culture and the elegant dress code in the courts of the nawab. It is one of the finest and oldest embroiderers. The word chikan is used as a metaphor for the needle. The word chikan was given to embroidery which was produced in different parts of South Asia so scholars think that it was probably a kind of trade term.

Mughal Emperess Nur Jahan brought Chikankari from Central Asia to India about 400 years ago. It took firm routes from the surrounding area to Lucknow and came to be known as Lucknow Chikankari. Chikankari joined the patronage of Nawab of Awadh, while the history can be traced back to Persia. This art was practiced by Nur Jahan and other wives of the Mughal Emperor and this is how it spread from the courts of the Mughals to nawabs. Chikankari gained popularity during the reign of the Nawab of Awadh. In 1722 the Chikankari was practiced in Faizabad but the capital changed to Lucknow which shifted the craft to Lucknow.

During the Mughal era, a new method came of block printing which made Chikankari work easier for the artisans to practice. The art was then taught to the servants because block printing made it easier for them to work on it and was passed to their families resulting in a part-time source of income for the workers. Because of this, the art was not only limited to the courts of Nawab. This art started to spread in various regions of India and South Punjab (*Baral, B., William, J. A., & Kumar, A. (n.d.)*).

Chikankari stitches were named differently in different cultures, for example, some use Machli tanka, Mali Kanth, shadow work, or herringbone stitch.

As we know the Chikankari was bought by Nur Jahan in India, and with this, her patterns were distinct too like her designs were inspired by the Rajasthan and Kashmir. The design inspiration can also be seen in the architecture as well. The artisan also came with her from the district of Koh Mehr, Persia. Through this craftsmanship, this art was transferred to the Nawab families of the Awadh. The use of fabric at that time for embroidery was cotton and Dhaka muslin which no longer exists today and was imported from the East. The embroidery was done by the women who observed coverings and preferred staying at home. They used to do craftsmanship of embroidery for running their homes while staying at home. The book of Guzishta Lucknow which means part of the city of Lucknow written by Abdul Halim Sharar quotes that the art of Chikankari started to diminish after the death of Nur Jehan. In 1830, the second King of Awadh Nasir ud din Haider revived this art. This art then became a popular attire of the Mughal Courts and was used as an exchange of gifts between Britain. The application of the art of Chikankari spread from shawls to Lehngas, Kurta, and caps of men as well.

Different tales have been brought down with different narrating stories, some say that the Nawab of Awadh married a princess who was a professional embroiderer and made a head cover for her husband out of love. It was a Muslin cap with fine detail thread work and because of her beautiful work other women got jealous and these women started to create their own Chikankari work, through which this art started to spread. The traditional use of the thread was of cotton and only white color thread was used. The base of the fabric was tightened on the round frame which made it easier for the artisan to do embroidery. The royal families preferred the use of Chikankari for their clothes embellishment. The techniques of Chikankari were passed down through the generations. The art of Chikankari was also sped up with the use of wooden blocks. For the pattern tracing methods the blocks were carved with designs and then stamped with temporary ink and then this pattern was transferred onto the fabric which made the design process faster. After the design process, the most common thread that was used was a white thread in the beginning (Kaur, 2018 et al).

Research Methodology

In this study Chikankari of the South of Punjab in the region of Bahawalpur is explored in detail.

This is a qualitative study. This research was compiled by obtaining the samples of the Chikankari being made by the local artisans of Bahawalpur. The data has also been gathered from the interviews of the local artisans of the Bahawalpur.

Data Collection and Analysis

Raw materials:

1. **Colors of block print Design Transfer:** There are two types of colors used for pattern tracing.
 - A black grainy powder is mixed in warm water. Add 10 Tola powder in 2 liters of warm water to create a traceable ink for printing.
 - Secondly, a black polish or black powder is used which is mixed with kerosene oil.

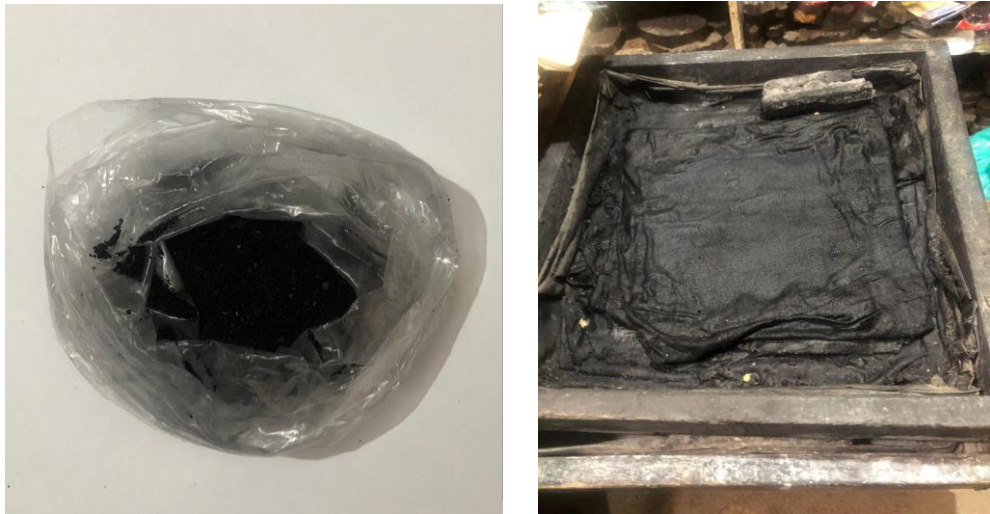


Figure 1 Printing with Black Powder (Picture by author)



Figure 2 Printing with Black Polish (Picture by author)

2. Threads

- **Staple thread:** A staple thread with a low twist is used for the embroidery.
- **Anchor Thread:** An anchor thread is of high twist and has 6 strands which is used for the embroidery.



Figure 3 Staple thread (Picture by author)



Figure 4 Anchor Thread (Picture by author)

- Fabric:** The fabrics usually used for embroidery are lightweight fabrics such as mulmul, cotton, lawn, organza, and chiffon.
- Printing:** For printing design on the fabric, a block printing box with 7 to 8 layers of fabric topped with a mulmul layer at the top is soaked with the ink which is used as a stamping pad for blocks to transfer the design onto the fabric. For the tracing paper method, butter paper with a design undergoes the pinning process where tiny holes are punched over the design on the butter paper so that the kerosene mixture polish can then penetrate through these holes to the fabric.



Figure 5 Block printing for pattern tracing (picture by author)

- Needles:** Various needle sizes are used for the different types of stitches. The sizes that vary are from 5 to 11 size. For Jali embroidery needle sizes from 5 to 9 are used and for other types of stitches 10-11 needle sizes are used.



Figure 6 Embroidery Needle (picture by author)

6. **Embroidery Frame:** A wood or fabric embroidery frame holds the fabric firmly in the frame.
7. **Scissor:** A sharp scissor is used to cut the fabric and the remaining thread.



Figure 7 Embroidery frame and scissor (picture by author)

8. **Thread Box:** A box should be kept to organize the threads used in embroidery, making it easy to work.



Figure 8 Thread Box (picture by author)

9. Embroidery process:

- **Fabric Selection:** The first step is the fabric selection process for the embroidery.
- **Design Making:** The first step is to make a design for Chikankari embroidery onto the fabric using block printing methods or tracing paper methods.
- **Embroidery Frame:** After the design making the fabric is tightened on the embroidery frame.
- **Embroidery:** Chikankari embroidery is done on the fabric using various stitches of Chikankari.

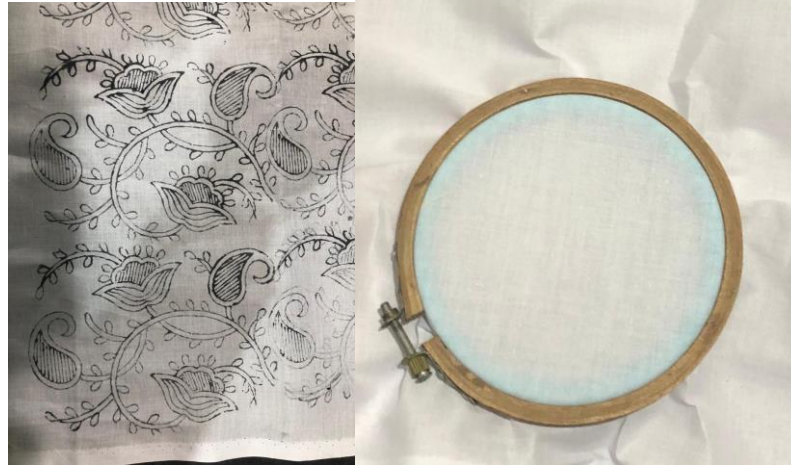


Figure 9 Pattern Making and securing the fabric in an embroidery frame (picture by author)

10. Embellishment: It is optional to add embellishment to the fabric Badla, Patli Applique, Mukesh, Sheesha Work, and Tarkasi. Sometimes Badla or Mukesh is incorporated with the Chikankari work.



Figure 10 Block printing for pattern tracing (picture by author)

Category of Stitches

The Chikankari stitch can be divided into three types of stitches:

1. Flat stitches
2. Embossed stitches
3. Jaali

A flat stitch is a stitch that lies flat to the fabric and the stitches that are under this category are Shadow work stitch, stem stitch, and back stitch which are used to create outlines of the motifs.

An Embossed stitch rises above the surface and has a grainy texture. For Example, Satin Stitch and French Knots.

Jaali stitch is a type of stitch that has net-like features where the stitches are tightened which causes the breakage of the warp and weft yarns creating a window in the fabric.

Types of Stitches

There are nine stitches of Chikankari stitches that are practiced in Bahawalpur South Punjab, Pakistan.

1. Shadow Work (Machli tanka or Herringbone stitch)

This is also known as Machli tanka stitch in South Punjab, Pakistan. It involves embroidery in a way that creates an effect of shadow on the fabric from underneath the surface of the fabric.

2. Bakhiya Stitch (Back Stitch or Sewing Stitch)

A Bakhiya Stitch uses one stitch backward on the front and two stitches forward on the back.

3. Dandi Tanka (Stem stitch)

A stem stitch forms a twisted line of stitches with stitches overlapping each other on the same side.

4. Pakka or Bharwa Tanka (Filling stitch or Satin stitch)

A filling stitch is a straight stitch used as a cover stitch in floral and big-size motifs. It is also known as Bharwa tanka or Poli tanka in south Punjab.

5. Pakka or Bharwa Tanka (Fishbone Stitch-Variation of Satin Stitch)

A fishbone stitch is a variation of a satin stitch in which a design is divided into two parts and filled with a satin stitch creating an effect of plaited effect.

6. Bour (French Knot)

Bour is a small circular stitch called a French Knot. The thread is winded on the needle and drawn back from the same hole from where the stitch was taken.

7. Pipal girah (Long French knot or Pistil stitch)

This is a variation of the French knot stitch where the winded needle is drawn back into the fabric just a few centimeters away from the first stitch.

8. Mori tanka (Hole stitch or Eyelet stitch)

It is a hole stitch with the edges stitched finely.

9. Jaali

Jaali is like lace work, which has cutwork and mesh-like features. There are two types of Jaali work, one with a Jali-like pattern on the surface and the second where the bread is tightened in a way that holes are created in the fabric.

Motifs

The most common type of motifs used in Chikankari are

1. Florals
2. Paisley
3. Geometric Pattern
4. Buti

Preservation of Chikankari Art

The cottage industry is still there where Chikankari is still practiced and needs attention so that this art can survive. All the arts are from villages rather than the cities because they have more time and natural light and the government needs to focus on that and make them strong and help the artisans and provide them with wages, education, and medical facilities as well so that this art can survive in the village.

Analysis and Findings

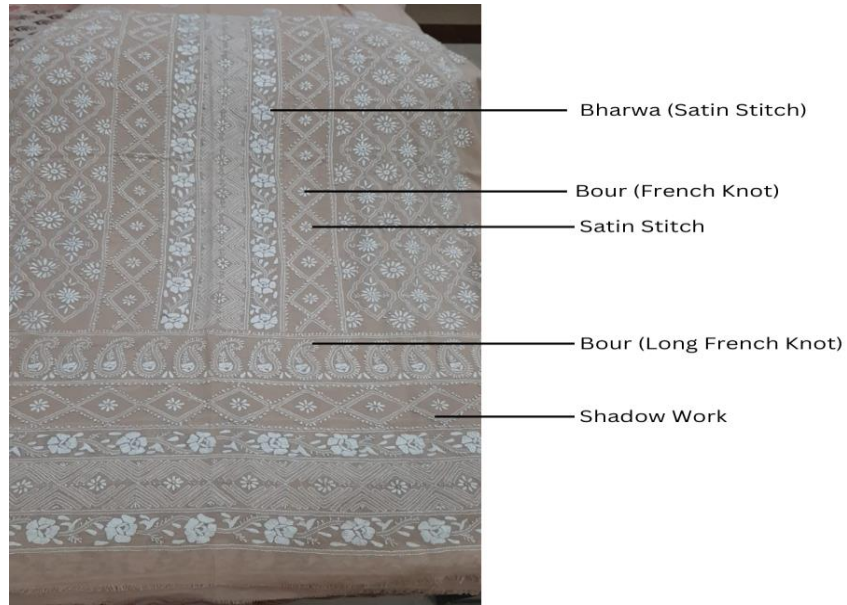


Figure 11 Chikankari Shirt (Picture by author)

This image shows a Chikankari Shirt which is a fully embroidered fabric. The types of stitches used are Shadow Work which is used in the lines, bails, paisley, triangular motifs, and the outlines of motifs. The stitches that are used in the small floral motifs are the Bharwa (Satin Stitches). In the center of the flower, the stitch used is called a Bour (French knot). The stitches used in the large flower are simple satin stitches. This piece showcases a beautiful color scheme of the beige base of the fabric and white thread used for the embroidery. There are different repeats used in the design with symmetrical variations like the brick repeat pattern used for the border and a composition of brick and half drop repeat is used all over the design process. The fabric used in this is Cotton fabric.



Figure 12 Chikankari neckline (Picture by author)

This image shows a Chikankari neckline which is a fully embroidered shirt. The type of stitch used is Shadow Work which is used in the borderline of the neckline and some outlines of motifs. The stitches that are used in other motifs and florals are shadow work Stitches. The embroidered fabric is of organza and the thread that is used for embroidery is anchor thread. The color scheme used in this piece is of the pink base of the fabric and white threads are used for the embroidery. The repeat used in the neckline design is a symmetrical brick repeat pattern.



Figure 13 Chikankari (Picture by author)

This image shows a Chikankari fully embroidered fabric. The types of stitches used are Shadow Work which is used in the lines of borders. In leaf shapes, two types of stitches are used which are Patli Applique and Bakhiya Tanka (Back Stitch) is used in the outline of the leaf shape. The Bharwa Tanka (Satin Stitch) is used around the paisleys. The stitches that are used at the border are Dandi Tanka (Stem Stitch). This piece showcases a beautiful monochromatic color scheme of the light orange base of the fabric and dark color thread used for the embroidery. There are different repeats used in the design with symmetrical variations in this design a horizontal and vertical brick repeat pattern is used. The embroidered fabric is of cotton and the thread that is used for embroidery is anchor thread.



Figure 14 Chikankari neckline (Picture by author)

This image shows a very detailed and intricate Chikankari embroidery. Various types of stitches are used in this arctic but the eye runs immediately to the bails in which a variation of Shadow Work stitches is used. The stitches that are used in the flower petals are Bharwa Tanka (Satin Stitch). In the leaves, the Ulti Shadow stitch is used. There is Takashi work also used with the Chikankari. The fabric used in this image is cotton fabric with anchor thread work. This piece showcases a beautiful color scheme of the peach base of the fabric and the peach and white color thread used for the embroidery. There are different repeats used in the design with symmetry.

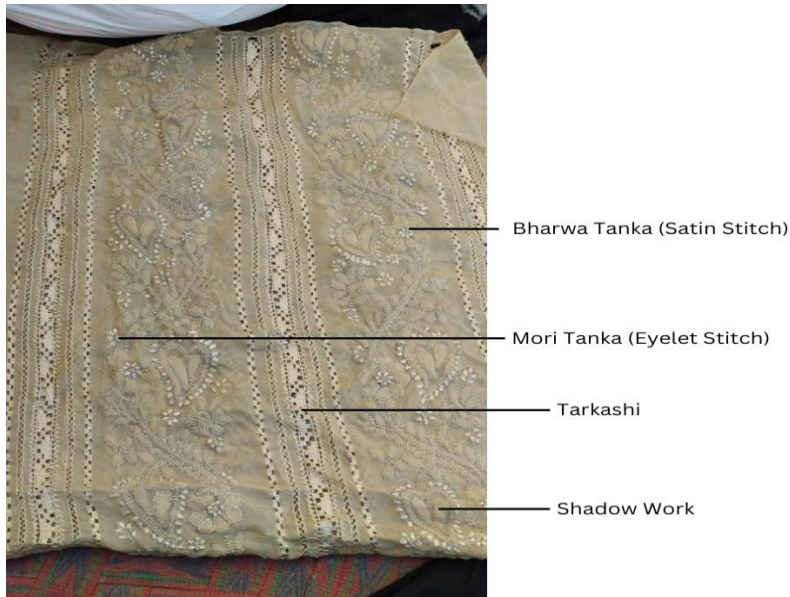


Figure 15 Chikankari (Picture by author)

This image shows a very detailed and intricate Chikankari shadow work embroidery. The stitches that are used in the main motif design are the shadow stitches and, in the flower, Bharwa Tanka (Satin Stitch) is used. In the center of the flower, a Morri Tanka (Eyelet Stitch) is used. There is Takashi's work also used with the Chikankari. The base is of Chiffon and Silk threadwork is used for embroidery. This piece showcases a beautiful color scheme of the light green base of the fabric and the white color thread used for the embroidery. There are different repeats used in the design with symmetry.

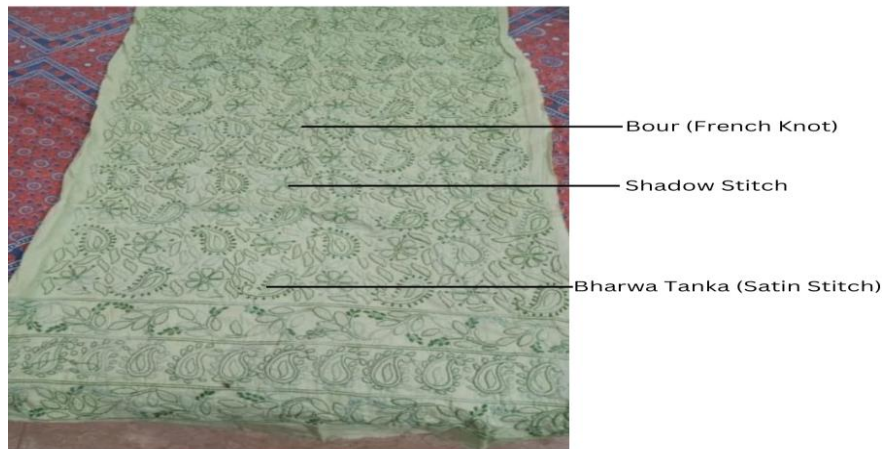


Figure 16 Chikankari (Picture by author)

This image shows a full embroidered shadow work fabric. The stitches used in the paisley and outlines of the motifs are shadow work stitches. Around Paisley Bharwa Tanka (Satin Stitch) is used. In Flower motifs, Bour (French Knot) is used. The fabric used in the image is cotton fabric. This piece showcases a beautiful color scheme of the monochrome with the light green base of the fabric and the dark green color thread used for the embroidery. The repeat used in the main pattern is brick repeat and the same repeat has been horizontally in the border.



Figure 17 Chikankari (Picture by Author)

This image shows Chikankari embroidery with the use of embellishment. The mirror is used as an embellishment with the blanket and chain stitch. The stitches that are used in the petals of the flowers are Bharwa Tanka (Fishbone- Variation of Satin Stitch). The stitches that are used in the large flowers and leaves are shadow work stitches. The Bour (French knot stitch) is also used in the curved arch. The color scheme used in this embroidered fabric is a pearl white base of the fabric and the multi-dyed yellow to green color thread is used for the embroidery. In this sample piece, the brick repeat pattern is used in horizontal and vertical symmetrical patterns.

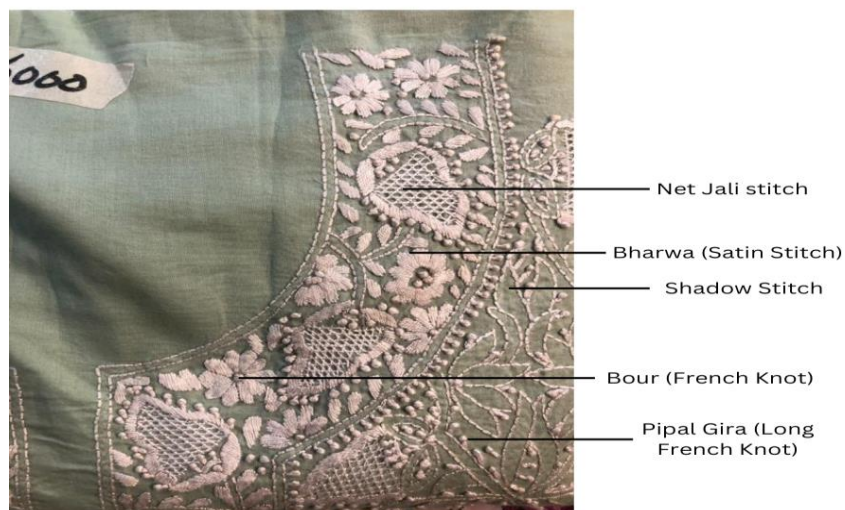


Figure 18 Chikankari neckline (Picture by author)

This image shows the detail of the Chikankari embroidery neckline with the Shadow work stitch in the neckline outline and leaves. The Net Jali stitch is used in the motifs inside. A Pipal Gira which is a Long French Knot is also used. The stitch used in big flowers is Bharwa (Satin Stitch) The Bour (French knot stitch) is used in the center of the flower motifs. The leaves motifs also have a satin stitch. The color scheme used in this embroidered fabric is a sage base of the fabric and the white color thread is used for the embroidery.

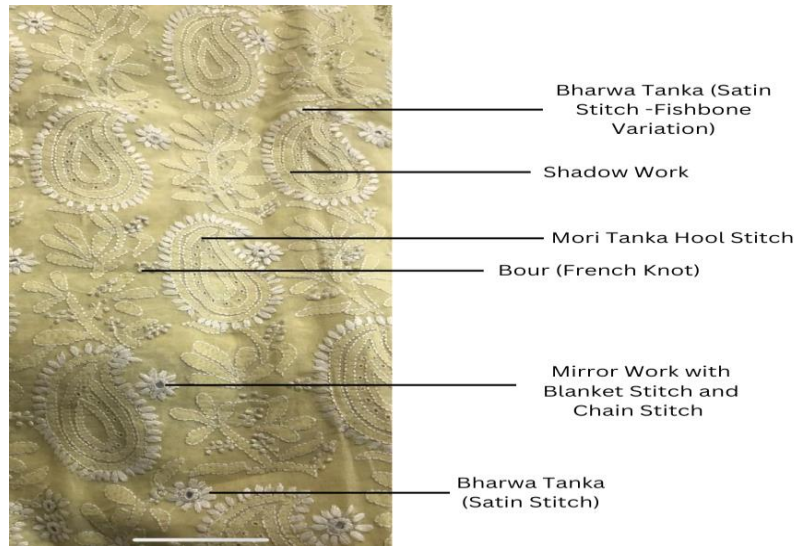


Figure 19 Chikankari (Picture by author)

This image shows the detail of the Chikankari embroidery paisley motif. The stitch used in the outline of the paisley is Bharwa Tanka (Fishbone- Variation of Satin Stitch). After the satin stitch, the outline of the paisley consists of a shadow work stitch. In the Paisley, a Mori Tanka (Hool Stitch) is used to align with the shape of the paisley. The Bour (French knot stitch) is also used creating the shape of a small bail with French knot flowers. Mirror embellishment is also used with the Blanket and Chain stitch in the center of the flower. The fabric used in this article is Chiffon fabric. The color scheme used in this embroidered fabric is a yellow base of the fabric and the white color thread is used for the embroidery. The repeat used in this is a half-drop repeat.



Figure 20 Chikankari (Picture by author)

This image shows the use of a Shadow work stitch in the outline of the motifs. In the Paisley center motif, a Jaali stitch is used. Outside Paisley and in the center of the flower motif a Bour (French knot stitch) is used. The color scheme used in this embroidered fabric is a blue base of the fabric and the white color thread is used for the embroidery. The fabric used in this embroidery is cotton lawn fabric.

Conclusion

Chikankari is an intricate embroidery process, that has been patronized by the Nawabs for centuries and has not lost its popularity. This research includes a comprehensive analysis of the techniques, stitches, artistry, history, and culture that distinguishes this embroidery technique from others. Chikankari originated from Lucknow but it is especially known as the crafts of the Nawabs. The cities of Bahawalpur and Lucknow are the cities of Nawabs, and this art has flourished in this area. This craft is not limited to the cities of Nawabs but has transcended over time through various borders into contemporary art. Chikankari is known for its delicate needlework on the lightweight fabric which makes it a very comfortable attire to wear in the summer. The fabric that was used for the embroidery purpose was muslin cloth known as muzlin, but with time this fabric became extinct from the market so a transition was made to other lightweight fabrics like cotton, chiffon, and organza. Various tools and material used in this process shape the craft of Chikankari. Each element contributes to the elegance of the embroidery which showcases the culture and tradition of this embroidery. This intricate embroidery goes through an extensive selection process to the last stage of final embellishment which requires precision and long working hours. The artisans use the block printing tracing method, afterwards with the embroidery hoops are used creating a stable canvas for artisans. These stitches of Chikankari can be categorized into three types of stitches which are, flat, embossed, and Jaali stitches which contribute to the texture and visual appearance. Various types of stitches have characterized the craft but there are only nine basic stitches used in the Chikankari process in the Bahawalpur. These stitches are Shadow Work (Herringbone stitch), Bakhiya Stitch (Back stitch) Dandi Tanka (Stem stitch), Pakka or Bharwa Tanka (Filling stitch or Satin stitch), Pakka or Bharwa Tanka (Fishbone Stitch-Variation of Satin Stitch), Bour (French knot), Pipal girah (Long French knot or Pistil stitch), Mori tanka (Hool stitch or Eyelet stitch) and Jaali Stitch. The motifs used in the embroidery range from florals to paisley designs. Each motif has a cultural significance, that transforms the fabric into a beautiful piece of attire which also showcases the artisan's creativity. The motifs that are commonly used in the Chikankari work are the Paisley and floral motifs which have found their way into the contemporary world as well, using traditional stitches and motifs which are a continuation of traditions in the modern world. In conclusion, Chikankari is a remarkable art that has been passed down from generation to generation and is a legacy of the Nawab traditions. The stitches and motifs of Chikankari connect the rich cultural heritage of past to the present. Chikankari is not just some ordinary embroidery but a living legacy of generations.

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Conflict of Interest


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ORCID iDs

Rabia Shaukat ¹ <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6362-9377>

Ahmad Bilal ² <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0057-4835>

Asna Mubashra ³ <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0743-6846>

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