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INDIGENOUS STITCH-ARTS OF INDIA: TRADITION AND REVIVAL IN A GLOBAL AGE

Punam Madhok

Abstract: Stitch art allows for the creative expression and economic support of countless women throughout India. This article examines four notable styles: chikankari, flora and fauna stitched in white thread on fine white cotton, rabari, the stitching of mirrors into colorful cloth, phulkari, resplendent flowery motifs sewn into shawls in Punjab, and kantha, Bengali patch work yielding quilts and seating mats. In addition to describing each technique, this article discusses how women have been economically empowered through this art by such organizations as Self-Help Enterprise (SHE) in Kolkata and Adithi, a women’s cooperative, in Bihar.

Keywords: chikankari, rabari, phulkari, kantha, Self-Help Enterprise, Adithi

Introduction

With a well-stocked repertoire of motifs at their fingertips, needleworkers adorned the cloth and documented their observations. Organizations are striving today to revive the engaging and narrative potential of needle-painting as well as to convert it into an income generating enterprise. Marginalized women who are now the main practitioners of stitch-arts in India depend on their artistic production to earn a living and thereby overcome barriers. The profession of sewing colored threads onto cloth using an array of stitches to create patterns and pictures is empowering these embroiderers to avoid exploitation and instigate change. This applies in varying degrees to four notable stitch-arts of India known as chikankari, rabari, phulkari, and kantha. Shaped by environmental factors, regional customs, and individual circumstances, each of these stitch-arts has developed a specific style and practitioners are adapting their methodologies to meet the requirements of global trade.

Chikankari

Flora and fauna stitched with white thread on very fine white cotton or muslin cloth is called chikankari. Although known as white-

1 The primary Muslin-weaving centers in India were East Bengal (now Bangladesh), as well as Lucknow and Banaras in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh (formerly called Oudh or Awadh). Also known as mulmul, muslin was one of the first materials of India to be acclaimed in the West. See Dehejia, V. (2021), India, a story through 100 Objects (p. 56), New Delhi: Roli Books; Gillow, J. (2010), Textiles of the Islamic World (p. 237), London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.; Manfredi, P. (2007), “In Search of Perfection: Chikankari of Lucknow,” in L. Tyabji (Ed.),
on-white embroidery, many pieces of chikan work used ‘muga’ or yellow-golden silk thread to accentuate the pattern. Chikan work is one of the most delicate and subtle stitch-arts of India and is produced today mainly in Lucknow and its vicinity in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

Expert chikankaras claim to know as many as seventy-five stitches. Not all stitches are systematically named. Some of them are shared with other stitch-arts while others are characteristic of chikan work. Many kinds of needles are used for embroidering, for example, a wide, blunt one is utilized for making holes in the fabric. Multiple techniques help to create the pleasing textural contrasts in monochrome chikankari. Its stitches can be categorized as flat, embossed, and trellis-making. The latter, known as jaali or meshwork, is the most challenging. Here the warp and weft threads of the material are carefully separated with a needle and held apart by minute stitches to produce a net-like appearance.

Another of chikankari’s distinct features is shadow work, created by embroidering the motif with herringbone stitch on the textile’s back side. A shadow of the threads as well as an outline of the motif with tiny stitches resembling back stitch is seen on the textile’s front side. Sometimes the motif, cut out of the same material as the base cloth, is stitched on the fabric’s reverse side to create an opaque effect on its flip side. The edges of the cut motif are turned in so meticulously that they are barely visible from the front surface of the fabric. According to Paine, no other stitch-art of the world can match the rigor

Threads & Voices, Behind the Indian Textile Tradition (pp. 18-29: 23), Mumbai: Marg Publications; Some of the birds and animals included in Chikan work (kari) include parrots, pigeons, doves, peacocks, fish, reindeer, horses, tigers, and camels. See Walia, A. (2010), “Moonlight on White: Imperial Embroidery,” in K. Vatsyayan (Ed.), Embroidery in Asia: Sui Dhaga, Crossing Boundaries through Needle and Thread (pp. 4-7: 6), New Delhi: Wisdom Tree [hereafter referred to as Embroidery in Asia: Sui Dhaga].


4 See Morrell, A. (1994), The Techniques of Indian Embroidery (p. 69), London: B. T. Batsford Ltd.


7 See Kumar (1999, p. 318); Morrell (1994, p. 73); Brijbhushan (1990, p. 43); Chattopadhyay, K. (1977), Indian Embroidery (pp. 39-41), New Delhi: Wiley Eastern Limited.
required for *chikan* work of India. It is worth noting that such embroidery work demands an extensive amount of time and remarkable skill. Consequently, the resulting products are both highly valued and sought after, mainly due to their intricate craftsmanship. Additionally, the labor-intensive nature of this art form contributes to its relative value.

How this stitch-art came to be named *chikankari* is unclear. It could have originated from the Iranian word, ‘*chikin*,’ that alludes to a cloth embroidered with flower motifs using gold thread. However, unlike the *chikan* stitch-art of India where threads are teased apart and motifs are flowing, *chikin* work of Iran is based on drawn threads and stiff motifs. Hence, a link between them cannot be definitively ascertained. *Chikankari* has also been associated with bamboo grids called ‘*chiks*’ that provided privacy to Mughal women, and *chikankari* may be further connected with the Turkish word, *chikh*, meaning latticework. Alternatively, the term could have stemmed from the Bengali word, *chikon*, meaning “very fine thing.”

The extent of its history is also undetermined. It may have begun as early as the third-century BCE because Megasthenes (c. 350 to c. 290 BCE), the Greek ambassador to the Maurya court, wrote about a “White flowered muslin worn by courtiers in the reign of Chandragupta Maurya (c. 321 to c. 297 BCE), which was subtle and rich in texture though colorless.” Romans referred to *chikan* textiles in the sixth century CE as ‘woven winds,’ because of their diaphanous quality. Remnants of *chikan* clothing have been seen in the Ajanta cave paintings of India (around second century BCE to fifth-century CE) and King Harsha, who ruled in northern India during the seventh-

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8 See Paine (1989, p. 8).
9 See Walia (2010, p. 7); Chakravarty (2010, pp. 32-33, 35); Brijbhushan (1990, p. 43).
13 See Walia (2010, p. 5); Manfredi (2004, p. 264).
14 See Walia (2010, p. 5).
17 See Chakravarty (2010, p. 31).
18 See Chakravarty (2010, p. 31); Paine (1989, p. 5).
19 See Walia (2010, p. 5).
century CE, is known to have had “a great fondness for white embroidered muslin garments…” that may be *chikankari*.

It has been proposed that *chikankari* stemmed from *jamdani* weaving that was practiced in Bengal, a state in east India. Repairers of *jamdani* pieces invented a kind of stitch-art called *chikan*, which is a simpler, less expensive version of *jamdani* woven decorations. The influx of English cotton that began flooding the Bengal bazaar around the early nineteenth-century CE terminated this weaving industry as well as the export of muslin products. Bengal weavers then relocated to Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh seeking new court patronage.

It has also been suggested that *chikankari* originated from the white-on-white embroidery of Shiraz, a city in south-central Iran, and that Iranian nobles brought it to the Mughal court of India. A story goes that Nur Jahan (1577-1645), the accomplished queen of Jahangir, once intricately embroidered a fine white muslin cap to present to her husband for the Eid festival. Enamored by its beauty Jahangir had workshops set up where *chikan* embroidery was perfected by craftsmen. Instructions from royal Mughal ladies were conveyed to these craftsmen by eunuchs.

Many *chikan* motifs that are stamped on the muslin cloth with wooden blocks today are of floral designs borrowed from Mughal art and architecture. Flowers, alluding to the Garden of Paradise, frequently appear in Islamic art. During Mughal rule, stylized flower patterns of Iranian origin absorbed the curvilinear qualities of Indian designs and became less rigid (Fig.1). Courtiers dressed in translucent white robes embroidered with flowery motifs are seen in Mughal miniature paintings. With the demise of this dynasty the *chikankars* relocated from Delhi to other cities of India, namely, Lucknow, Bhopal, and Madras (now Chennai), as well as to Dhaka.

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26 See Walia (2010, p. 6); Chakravarty (2010, p. 30).
(now in Bangladesh), and to Quetta and Peshawar (now in Pakistan), where they thrived for a short time.\(^{30}\)

It was primarily rulers of Iranian origin in Oudh or Uttar Pradesh that kept *chikankari* from dying out.\(^{31}\) The *chikankars* that moved to this northern Indian state settled in the royal courts of Burhan ul Mulk’s successors. Mulk, an Iranian nobleman, was appointed Governor of Oudh by Bahadur Shah II (r. 1837-58), the last Emperor to rule the Mughal dynasty. In Oudh, *chikankari* began to flourish from the late 18\(^{th}\) century CE onward and was purchased by refined, wealthy clients. After the British took control of Oudh and ousted the royal court, the local gentry sponsored *chikankari*.

Fine muslin embroidered with *chikan* motifs were marketed overseas by the British.\(^{32}\) Kolkata (capital of West Bengal in India) and Dhaka (capital of Bangladesh), both Bengali-speaking cities, were the main exporters of *chikan* fabrics to Europe in the nineteenth century.\(^{33}\) A robe with *chikan* embroidery dating to late in that century exists in the Royal Scottish Museum of Edinburgh.\(^{34}\) With the decline of the Oudh courts as well as the export market, the demand for this stitch-art diminished. Eventually, the *chikankars* were compelled to abandon their expertise and adopt other occupations.\(^{35}\)

Left in the hands of inexperienced needle workers, the quality of *chikankari* plummeted. It is now practiced mainly by sidelined women who embroider articles for a broad populace.\(^{36}\) Many of them live in villages near Lucknow. Due to insufficient coaching and pay, they lack skills and motivation. Organizations such as SEWA-Lucknow are attempting to elevate this stitch-art to its former level of excellence by providing adequate facilities to these rural artisans.\(^{37}\) SEWA (“service”) stands for Self Employed Women’s Association. Established in 1984, SEWA ensures that embroidered items by the disadvantaged reach national and international markets.\(^{38}\) Another such organization dedicated to restoring *chikankari* and unshackling vulnerable women is the Mijwan Welfare Society (MWS). Founded in 1993, it is named after a village in Uttar Pradesh.\(^{39}\)

\(^{30}\) See Chakravarty (2010, pp. 29-30); Morrell (1994, p. 68).


\(^{33}\) See Kumar (1999, p. 318).

\(^{34}\) See Manfredi (2004, p. 270).

\(^{35}\) See Chakravarty (2010, pp. 33-34); Manfredi (2007, p. 27).


Embroidering the chikan garment is left primarily to women today. Roughly half a million women, Hindus and Muslims, work in unison to meet the ongoing demand for chikankari. Men are mainly in charge of processes such as designing and carving the wood block for printing as well as styling and stitching the fabric. Most chikan pieces are embroidered collaboratively, each participant excelling at a different stitch. As Laila Tyabji aptly pointed out, “‘I’ as heroine or single protagonist is not a concept rural Indian women understand…Their dreams and aspirations were also collective ones.”

Chikankari has been likened to eighteenth-century European whitework of Dresden in Germany and Ayrshire in Scotland. Paine mentions that English women who settled in India, primarily at Kolkata, in the late eighteenth-century would hire local Indian tailors to make copies of the whitework that they brought with them. Indian tailors most likely incorporated features of European whitework in chikan embroidery. Manfredi points out that feather light muslin cloth as well as white muslin embroidered with white flowers from India were being exported to Europe since the seventeenth century and in the eighteenth-century whitework embroidery was being produced on muslin cloth in many parts of Europe, including France and Italy. Due to scanty evidence, it is not possible to determine the degree to which one culture borrowed from the other. While handstitched white-on-white embroidery has become nearly obsolete in Europe today, chikankari is still assiduously embroidered by hand in India.

41 See Walia (2010, p. 7).
42 See Paine (1989, pp. 45-47); Chakravarty (2010, p. 35).
46 To learn more about the comparison between Chikankari and eighteenth-century European whitework embroideries, like those from Dresden in Germany and Ayrshire in Scotland, see Paine (1989, pp. 9-11, 22-23). Also see Gillow (2010, p. 240).
47 See Crill (1999, p. 11).
49 The embroidery machine, invented by Josué Heilmann of Mulhouse in 1828, gradually put an end to the hand embroidered whitework of Europe. See Paine (1989, p. 9).
Rabari

Rabari refers to nomadic pastoralists who live in the western states of Gujarat and Rajasthan in India. Initially they were camel herders but now breed other animals as well, such as cows, buffalos, goats, and sheep. There are many subgroups of rabaris. Their clothing is embellished with colorful motifs and mirror pieces. Dazzling objects like mirrors, together with bright colors and asymmetrical patterns, are believed to vanquish harmful spirits. The use of glass mirror in western Indian stitch-art most likely originated from the mica prevalent in deserts of this region. Now glass mirror is produced especially for rabari stitch-art and has become its distinguishing attribute. Large globes of blown glass are silvered on the inside, broken into small pieces, and then cut into geometrical shapes of various sizes. The placement of mirror pieces is significant; for example, rabari women adorn their blouses (cholis) with mirror pieces and motifs to accentuate their breasts and to shield them. With the commercialization of this stitch-art, the use of mirror pieces has become mainly decorative.

In the best pieces of rabari stitch-art, chain stitch completely covers the silk, cotton, polyester, or acrylic cloth. As Laila Tyabji remarked, “‘Less is more’ is not part of the mental makeup of Indian craftspeople!” The rabari adopted the chain stitch used by the mochi or cobblers and leather workers of Kutch and neighboring Saurashtra, both regions in Gujarat. The latter had developed this stitch with an ari, a fine awl-like tool, while embroidering leather products like shoes,
bags, and belts around the nineteenth and mid-twentieth century CE. Soon they began to embroider garments for the royal courts. When the courts declined, mochi embroidery lost its patronage.

It is at midday that rabari women sit together to stitch. 59 Mothers begin teaching their daughters from the age of about fifteen to outline patterns with even-sized chain stitches. 60 Next they are taught to attach mirror pieces to the cloth with a grid of interlocking threads and buttonhole stitches. 61 These threads and stitches must not be too tight or lax for mirror pieces to adhere securely to the base material. Motifs are silhouetted in yellow and white chain stitch. 62 The area in between is filled with stitches of multi-colored threads. Young girls gradually progress from elementary stitches to complex ones. 63

Patterns are stitched spontaneously, without first being drawn on the cloth, with cotton or silk threads of contrasting shades. 64 They include motifs based on stylized creepers, vines, peacocks, parrots, sheep horns, scorpions, trees, and flowers, symbolic of communal beliefs. 65 “Our embroidery and designs are over 1,000 years old, imprinted in our heads and hands by our ancestors,” said a needlewoman. 66 The abstractions of nature seen in rabari motifs reflect their close contact with Muslim herders in Kutch and the impact of non-representational motifs in stitch-arts of Sindh (now in Pakistan). 67 It was from Sindh that the rabaris migrated to Kutch in the fourteenth-century. 68 With the passage of time, some of the rabari motifs have become merely ornamental. 69

Rabari women take pride in stitching their trousseaux, daily attire, and utility items. Since they embroider for personal satisfaction, they consider their pieces works of art. 70 After marriage, rabari brides display the pieces they have embroidered for their dowries in their husbands’ villages and in their parents’ villages to be critiqued by other

59 See Frater (2010, p. 89).
60 See Frater (2010, p. 86).
61 There are various methods by which cut mirror pieces can be hooked to the base fabric. See Morrell (1994, pp. 78-79); Frater (2010, p. 86); Raja, L. and Soma, P. in conversation with Frater (2007, p. 6).
63 See Frater (2010, p. 87); Raja, L. and Soma, P. in conversation with Frater (2007, p. 7).
64 See Frater (2010, p. 86); See Raja, L. and Soma, P. in conversation with Frater (2007, p. 8).
65 To learn more about Rabari motifs, see Kwon, C. and Raste, M. (2003), Through the Eye of a Needle, Stories from an Indian Desert (pp. 47-50), Vancouver: Maiwa Handprints Ltd.; Frater (1999, pp. 41-46).
women. Eager to surpass other brides, they diligently embroider these items. In 1995 the elder men known as Nath, who decree how this group of people function, banned labor-intensive, time-consuming embroidered dowry articles because they delayed a newlywed bride from joining her husband and his family until she was in her thirties.

With elaborately embroidered trousseau no longer permitted, and a deteriorating economy necessitating sale of rabari stitch-art, needlewomen have had to make mandatory adjustments to their customary practices. Now they attach mirror pieces and add finishing touches by hand to their garments, home decorations, and bags that are machine embroidered by paid artisans or by themselves. Instead of inventing their own meaningful motifs, they use stencils provided by profit-oriented designers. Complicated stitches are either simplified or eliminated. For example, the chain stitch is replaced by a jig-jag machine-made stitch. Hurriedly embroidering pieces to market them has led to work of low quality.

This is lamentable. Nonetheless, the younger generation are discovering innovative ways of designing motifs with sewing machines and computers. By learning to intelligently use the machine, rabari women are making economic use of time without sacrificing the charm of their stitch-art. Balancing quality and quantity of embroidered products for sale is a constant challenge. A not-for-profit organization called Kala Raksha (‘Preservation of Traditional Arts’) has endeavored to safe-guard age-old conventions of rabari stitch-art by giving embroiderers control over designs and cost of their products. The Kala Raksha project began in Kutch in 1991 and became a registered society and trust in 1993. Today it works with almost one thousand needlenwomen.

71 See Frater (2010, p. 89).
73 See Frater (2010, pp. 89-90); Raja, L. and Soma, P. in conversation with Frater (2007, pp. 10-11, 16-17).
74 See Frater (2010, p. 90); Raja, L. and Soma, P. in conversation with Frater (2007, p. 11); Frater (2004, pp. 149, 156).
75 See Frater (2010, p. 90); Tyabji (2007, p. 124); Frater (1999, p. 31).
76 See Kwon and Raste (2003, p. 26).
80 See Frater (2010, pp. 91-92); Raja, L. and Soma, P. in conversation with Frater (2007, p. 5); Frater (2004, p. 149).
81 See Frater (2010, p. 92); Raja, L. and Soma, P. in conversation with Frater (2007, pp. 8, 10, 12); Frater (2004, p. 150).
Kala Raksha does not print its patterns. Its members are encouraged to embroider motifs directly on the cloth, as they have done for generations, and to add a narrative dimension to their stitch-art. Although storytelling is not a traditional practice in Kutch stitch-art, since 2001 Kala Raksha embroiderers have been exploring the potential of self-expression. In 1997 the Kala Raksha Textile Museum was established in Kutch, where its well-documented collections could be digitally catalogued and archived. Kala Raksha also founded an institution of design called Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya (KRV) in Kutch in 2005 to provide its members the means to upgrade their skills. Faculty from the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, and the Rhode Island School of Design in the US helped develop the basic curriculum for KRV. Kala Raksha has established links with leading design institutions in India, including the National Institution of Design (NID), the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology, and the Indian Institute of Crafts & Design (IICD). It markets the products of Kutch stitch-art worldwide.

Another not-for-profit organization in India since 1969, dedicated to promoting Kutch stitch-arts through sales and exhibitions in India and abroad, is called Shrujan (‘Creativity’). It employs over three-thousand, five-hundred needlewomen who are provided stitching materials, free of cost, at their doorsteps. Their embroidered drape is converted into upscale items and sold at high prices. In 2016 Shrujan opened a Living and Learning Design Centre (LLDC), a crafts museum and resource center, to train its members. This has equipped them to participate in international workshops. Shrujan has also produced books and films to highlight the diverse stitch-arts of Kutch.

A co-operative called Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS) that has been working since 1989 in India to improve the prospects of Kutch embroiderers, arranged the first far-reaching exhibition in July 2002, titled, ‘Through the Eye of a Needle: Stories from an Indian Desert,’ at the Vancouver Museum in Canada. It brought Kutch stitch-arts global acknowledgment. KMVS was assisted by Maiwa Handprints, a store founded in 1986 and run by Charlotte Kwon at Vancouver, Canada, that markets handcrafted, fair-trade clothing and is one of the largest importers of Kutch stitch-arts. Enraptured by the stitch-arts of Kutch needlewomen working with KMVS that she saw during one of her visits to India in 1999, Charlotte Kwon remarked, “These are collector or museum quality.” The Maiwa staff make sure that their

84 See Kwon and Raste (2003), Through the Eye of a Needle, Stories from an Indian Desert.
85 See Kwon and Raste (2003, p. 8).
customers are aware of the initiatives taken by KMVS to conserve the Kutch stitch-arts.

Besides rabari, stitch-arts by other tribes in Kutch, namely, Mutwa, Jat, Meghwar, and Sodha were also included in the exhibition at Vancouver Museum.86 Mutwas are a Muslim clan that migrated from Sindh in Pakistan to Kutch in India.87 Their women are known for stitching assiduously with tiny mirrors. To quote a Mutwa woman: “Our embroidery is in our eyes and in our hands – that is our skill.”88 Joining KMVS brought adequate wages and eased restrictions on movement outside their isolated villages. Jats are Muslims from the Halab region of present-day Baluchistan (in southwestern Pakistan), who settled in Kutch. Jat women started marketing their captivating stitch-art to survive droughts.89 Joining KMVS helped them prosper. Meghwars are weavers and leatherworkers who relocated from Marwar in Rajasthan to Kutch.90 They are disrespected by orthodox Hindus because they process leather and eat meat. Therefore, they prefer to mingle with their Muslim neighbors. This has resulted in an amalgamation of embroidery skills among them. Meghwar women are expert needle workers. An elder of the Meghwar tribe stated: “Just as you learn to write each letter before making a word, we learn each stitch to make the pattern. We follow our mothers, and we learn our designs slowly…slowly.”91

Before becoming members of KMVS, they were misused. KMVS helped them maintain the high caliber of their work and earn a decent income.

Sodhas are a subgroup of the larger Hindu Rajput community who migrated to Kutch from the Sindh district of Pakistan, following the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971.92 Sodha women brought with them from Sindh a fresh vocabulary of stitch-art that impacted other Kutch embroiderers, most of all the Meghwars. Since their livelihood is dependent on needlework, enrolling in KMVS was a boon. It led to a wider clientele and provided them the scope to internationally exhibit their exquisite work.

In their own words: “We like that our embroidery is going to a place far away and that people there will know who a Sodha Rajput is…The large pieces that take us four to six months to complete bring us an income normally earned over one year. Doing them is like having a savings account. Every stitch we do is a deposit and when we finish,

86 Affected by the separation of India and Pakistan in 1947 and the war between these two countries in 1971, many Hindus from Sindh, the southernmost province of Pakistan, along with several Muslim inhabitants from Pakistan relocated to western India. The Mutwas, Jats, Meghwars, Sodhas, and Rabari are their descendants. See Kwon and Raste (2003, p. 13).
87 See Kwon and Raste (2003, pp. 65-69).
88 See Kwon and Raste (2003, p. 69).
89 See Kwon and Raste (2003, pp. 70-72)
90 See Kwon and Raste (2003, p. 73).
91 See Kwon and Raste (2003, p. 62).
92 See Kwon and Raste (2003, p. 78).
we get such a large amount of money that we can do something important. When this piece is finished for the museum, I will be paid enough to send my child to a good school.”

Likewise, KMVS opened exciting avenues for the rabari needlewomen who commented: “We feel good that our work is valued by the outside world – everyone should know who the rabari are.” Embroidering pieces for exhibitions overseas allowed the rabari to experiment with colors and patterns in unusual ways, different from their traditional apparel. From 1996 onward KMVS felt the need to collaborate with an independent organization called Qasab (“craft skill”), rather than rely on government corporation for commissions that was proving inadequate. Run by the leading craftswomen of Kutch, Qasab encourages innovative approaches and guarantees a steady income.

**Phulkari**

*Phulkari* was the achievement of pre-partition Punjab, a region that extends across India and Pakistan today. It means ‘flowery motifs embroidered on cloth’ and refers loosely to stitch-arts from Punjab. Accurately, a shawl or wrap with a few motifs is called *phulkari* while a profusely embroidered wrap is known as *bagh* or ‘garden.’ Wraps

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93 See Kwon and Raste (2003, p. 77).
94 See Kwon and Raste (2003, pp. 81-82).
99 No section of the cloth is left unembroidered in *baghs*. See Sethi (2017), “The Many Meanings of Punjabi Phulkaris,” (pp. 16, 20-21); Singh (2010, pp. 11, 17); Graham, J. (2004), “Phulkari and Bagh: The Embroidery Shawls of the Punjab,” in J. Dhamija (Ed.), *Asian Embroidery* (pp. 113-124: 121); Brijbhusan (1990, pp. 31-
were at first embroidered with a small number of motifs because silk thread was costly and not easily available in rural Punjab. Peddlers from Afghanistan brought silk thread to this region. It was also obtained from Kashmir and Bengal in India or imported from China.

Besides silk, cotton thread or wool yarn was occasionally used. As wraps came to be cherished by the wealthy, they developed into baghs that are tightly packed with motifs and take months or years to complete. Commonly used for covering the head and shoulders, these wraps were variously sized, some around four to five feet in width and eight to ten feet in length. They were stitched on the reverse side of a sturdy, homespun fabric called khaddar (or khadi). Its loosely woven texture enabled needlework dependent on counting of threads. Although phulkari is based on the counting of threads, like cross-stitch, it is much more difficult and takes years to master. Untwisted silk floss of different hues were used to embroider these wraps with darning stitches placed in horizontal, vertical, and diagonal directions. This resulted in a gradation of colors and a velvet like sheen.

Phulkari and bagh were largely anonymous creations, stitched joyfully during free time between farming and household duties, by Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh women. Members of these different faiths


109 Besides the most frequently used darning stitch, other stitches, namely stem, chain, cross, herringbone, satin, buttonhole, and more, are also used in Phulkari embroidery. See Sethi (2017), “Faith and Identity in Silk, Cotton, and Wool: Textiles from the Kapany Collection,” (p. 262, n. 3); Lal (2013, p. 11); Gupta (2010, p. 51); Singh (2010, pp. 11-12); Dhamija (2007, pp. 45, 47); Kumar (1999, p. 319); Morrell (1994, p. 55); Das, S. (1992), Fabric Art, Heritage of India (pp. 100-102), New Delhi: Abhinav Publications; Irwin, J. & Hall, M. (1973), Indian Embroideries (p. 161), Ahmedabad: Calico Museum of Textiles; Dongerkery (1951, p. 27).
worked together in late nineteenth-century Punjab. Infrequently, the embroiderer’s name or recipient’s name, or female family members’ names were stitched on a few of these wraps. The date when they were completed or the village where the embroiderer stitched them were not recorded. On those that were embroidered jointly, two names were sometimes stitched. They were embroidered for formal and informal occasions, such as marriage, daily wear, home and temple décor, gifts, and other rituals. Striking as well as spiritually protective, this handicraft was passed down by the female folk. Some of these wraps were embroidered by a group of women. They gossiped, shared ideas, and strove to outdo one another while depicting their reactions to life around.

Motifs, stylized and naturalistic, were derived from flowers like the pure lotus often stitched in the center or corners of a wrap, fields of grain, vegetables, animals, birds, usually peacocks, pigeons, and parrots, native people engaged in their daily routine, accessories like jewelry, combs, and hand-held fans, kitchen gadgets like rolling-pins, spinning wheels, and yogurt churners, means of transportation such as trains, motor cars, and chariots, entertainers, for example, jugglers and dancing girls, children’s toys, and the like. Scenes of violence, such as people quarrelling or a man beating his wife, moralizing themes, like snakes biting disloyal partners, foreign subjects, namely, the British in their European attire along with their pets, tragic stories of lovers kept apart, for example, Sassi-Punnu, Heer-Ranjha, Sohni-Mahiwal, and Mirza Sahiban, and scenes of filial piety, as Shrawan Kumar carrying his blind, aged parents—the whole gamut of village-life experiences and tales surfaced in these wraps.

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116 See Singh (2010, pp. 12, 16); Gupta (2010, pp. 53-54); Morrell (1994, p. 57); Irwin & Hall (1973, p. 165).
They also had an otherworldly dimension to them, often presented to a temple or *gurudwara* and used to cover sacred books. Geometric patterns based on squares, triangles, diamonds, and circles that possibly had magical power were embroidered. It took years to learn their formulas. A single slip or false stitch could ruin the symmetry. At times an intentional error was made to deflect foul spirits because perfectly stitched wraps were susceptible to envy. A disruption in the color scheme or pattern deflected the evil eye or marked an important event like birth, marriage, or reunion with a relative or friend. Sometimes, a black dot (‘*nazar buti*’) or a symbol of the Absolute (‘*Om*’) was stitched in one corner to counteract the envious gaze. Women prayed or distributed sweets blessed by the divine before stitching a *phulkari* or *bagh*, and sang folk songs while they embroidered, indicating that this group activity was regarded as a ceremonial engagement. These folk songs inspired the lively folk dances of Punjab, like the *bhangra*.

Surviving *phulkaris* date mostly to the early nineteenth century but oral history, folk songs, and literary sources indicate that this stitch-art was practiced centuries ago. Banabhatta (a Sanskrit writer and court poet of the seventh century CE), in his biography of King Harsha (*Harshacharita*), described a bridal costume with floral designs embroidered from the back side of the cloth that could be *phulkari*. How and when this stitch-art originated is not certain. Was it was introduced by nomads from Central Asia, or did it stem from the Iranian stitch-art *gulkari* (“*gul*,” Persian for flower, “*kari*,” working style)?

121 See Dongerkery (1951, p. 27).
125 The evil eye is known as ‘drishti’ in Sanskrit and ‘nazar’ in Urdu. See Singh (2010, pp. 12-13); Das (1992, p. 97); Hitkari (1980, p. 35).
There is no consensus.\footnote{See Hitkari (1980, pp. 15-16).} Similarities have also been noted between patterns of \textit{phulkari} and textiles from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Indo China on the one hand, and stitch-arts of India, such as \textit{kasuti} of Karnataka, \textit{kashida} of Bihar, \textit{hir} of Saurashtra, tribal embroidery from the Jabera area of Madhya Pradesh, and a few Rajasthani textiles on the other.\footnote{See Das (1992, pp. 94-95); Dhamija (1964, p. 15); Dongerkery (1951, pp. 25, 35-41).} Due to insufficient data, it cannot be proven if or how patterns were exchanged between Punjab and other regions within and beyond India.

With changing lifestyles in the twentieth century, \textit{phulkari} wraps began to lose their customary usage.\footnote{See Mason, D. (2017), “Identity and Transformation: The Politics of Embroidery in South Asia,” in \textit{Phulkari, The Embroidered Textiles of Punjab from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection} (pp. 77-93: 80-85), New Haven and London: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press; Sethi (2017), “The Many Meanings of Punjabi Phulkaris,” (p. 32); Kaur and Gupta (2015, p. 175); Graham (2004, p. 124); Das (1992, pp. 104-105); Brijbhusan (1990, p. 33); Hitkari (1980, p. 10); Irwin & Hall (1973, p. 162).} Organizations are now striving to revive \textit{phulkari} through training programs, museums are acquiring samples of it, and markets are converting hand or machine-embroidered \textit{phulkari}, on \textit{khadi} and other fabrics like cotton, silk, georgette, and chiffon, into consumer products, such as covers for files, cell phones, cushions, tables, lamps, upholstery, as well as curtains and wall hangings.\footnote{See Mason (2017, p. 87); Sethi (2017), “The Many Meanings of Punjabi Phulkaris,” (p. 32); Kaur and Gupta (2015, pp. 177-185); Lal (2013, p. 11); Irwin & Hall (1973, p. 162).} \textit{Phulkari} items today often deviate from the former application of this stitch-art.\footnote{See Dongerkery (1951, pp. 27-28).} Motifs, copied from pattern books, are stamped on the base material with a wooden block and needle work is done with the aid of a wooden frame on the front side of the cloth in a much shorter span of time.\footnote{See Kaur and Gupta (2015, p. 178); Gupta (2010, p. 53); Morrell (1994, p. 57); Dhamija (1964, pp. 16, 19).} Hand embroidery is being replaced by computer-based stitch-art.\footnote{See Mason (2017, p. 87).} However, Manish Malhotra (born 1966), one of India’s leading fabric designers, has enhanced his high-fashion apparel with this native stitch-art of Punjab bringing it world-wide prominence.\footnote{Manish Malhotra was invited by the Philadelphia Museum of Art on April 28, 2017, to speak on \textit{phulkari} embroidery. According to him, \textit{phulkari} can be readily adapted to the wardrobe of today. He aspires to bring global recognition to \textit{phulkari} of India through his creations. See “Manish Malhotra to speak on phulkari embroidery technique” – Google Search, accessed June 13, 2022. Also see Mason (2017, p. 88).} Malhotra’s original take on \textit{phulkari} was noticed by
curators of the Philadelphia Museum of Art who included his ensembles in a 2017 exhibition of this stitch-art.\textsuperscript{139}

\textbf{Kantha}

\textit{Kantha}, meaning ‘rags or patched cloth,’ was invented by frugal Bengali women who layered soft, worn-out cotton fabrics, fastened them together with minute running stitches, and converted them into items for everyday use.\textsuperscript{140} This stitch-art has become synonymous with the simple running stitch employed in ingenious ways.\textsuperscript{141} Over the years, other stitches, some of them nameless, impromptu inventions, were also made use of.\textsuperscript{142} One branch of \textit{kantha} developed into elaborately embroidered quilts, sometimes called \textit{sujani}, and seating mats, known as \textit{ashan}.\textsuperscript{143} Quilts were around six to seven feet by four to five feet in

\textsuperscript{139} Malhotra’s creations were displayed at the Joan Spain Gallery, Philadelphia Museum of Art, in an exhibition, titled “Phulkari: The Embroidered Textiles of Punjab from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection” (March 12, 2017, to July 9, 2017). See “Threading A Narrative, Manish Malhotra on being part of a phulkari exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art” – Google Search, accessed June 14, 2022.


\textsuperscript{141} See Padmaja (2010, p. 77); Mason (2009, p. 2); Ghuznavi (2004, pp. 133-134).

\textsuperscript{142} See Zaman (2009, p. 116).

\textsuperscript{143} See Zaman (2009, pp. 119-120, 134, n. 11). \textit{Sujani} also refers to stitch-art from Bihar; it resembles Bengal’s kantha. \textit{Sujani} and \textit{kantha} are sometimes used interchangeably. See Gupta, C. S. (2010), “Sujani, the Fine Needlework of Bihar,” in \textit{Embroidery in Asia: Sui Dhaga} (pp. 38-41: 39). According to Das, the word, \textit{Sujani} stems from \textit{Sujan} that means a gentle or good person. See Das (1992, p. 114). The purpose for which \textit{kantha} mats and quilts were embroidered is not always clear. See Padmaja (2010, p. 77); Mason, D. (2009), “Background Textures: Lives and Landscapes of Bengal’s Embroidered Quilts,’ in D. Mason (Ed.), \textit{Kantha: The
size and served as winter wraps and bedspreads; mats were square-shaped, each side around thirty to thirty-five inches, and seated guests during ceremonial or religious occasions. They were embroidered without hoops mostly on layers of handspun, hand-woven cotton cloth. Besides old cloth, new, mill-made cloth was also utilized. Colored threads drawn from old sari borders were formerly used to embroider them; later, purchased threads were put to use as well. Their imagery indicates that they were embroidered by cultured women. Kantha quilts could take six months to three generations to embroider. At times a quilt was stitched by a mother, her daughter, and granddaughter. A majority of kantha quilts and mats are by unknown needle women. Some of them record the embroiderer’s name; others, the recipient’s name, and kinship to the maker. Sometimes the date of completion and the embroiderer’s village appears on them. Often given as gifts to cherished ones, they were preserved and handed down from one age group to the next. Although surviving kantha mats and quilts date only to the first half of the nineteenth

Embroidered Quilts of Bengal (pp. 1-29: 23); Zaman (2009, p. 123); Ghuznavi (2004, p. 138).

144 Kantha quilts and mats were used for various purposes. See Mason (2009, 1-2); Zaman (2009, p. 127).
145 See Mason (2009, p. 2).
148 Kantha was stitched by women of different social status. Those from well-to-do households would use better materials to embroider quilts for special occasions; those from poor homes would layer rags to make simple wraps. See Zaman (2009, pp. 117, 123, 127); Das (1992, p. 113).
151 The dates when they were begun and completed are stitched on a few of them. They are records of family relationships and events. See Zaman (2010, pp. 21-22); Zaman (2009, pp. 117-118, 120-121, 126); Mason (2009, pp. 21-23); Ghosh (2009, “From Rags to Riches,” pp. 33, 37, 40, 46-47); Ghosh, P. (2009), “Embroidering Bengal Kantha Imagery and Regional Identity,” in D. Mason (Ed.), Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal (pp. 81-113: 86); Zaman (2009, pp. 117-119, 120, 122); Ghuznavi (2004, p. 138).
152 See Das (1992, p. 117).
century, it is believed that they existed since ancient times in India.\textsuperscript{154} Many of them were stitched between mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth century.

*Kantha* mats and quilts share an affinity with ritual floor patterns (called ‘*alpana*’ in West Bengal), drawn with the finger using rice-paste in liminal places to overcome perils.\textsuperscript{155} As in the *alpana*, patterns stemming from the sacred lotus flower (a symbol of purity because of its incorruptible nature)\textsuperscript{156} form the core of many *kantha* mats and quilts. *Kantha* makers began by stitching the lotus medallion in the center, then the corner motifs, and finally wide-ranging imagery in the remaining areas. These motifs were sketched with the needle or stitched instinctively on the fabric. Akin to drawing the *alpana*, embroidering *kantha* mats and quilts was oftentimes regarded as a meditative act.\textsuperscript{157} Their textile surface, treated as consecrated space, can be equated to the inner cell of a Hindu temple, with the lotus in the center like the deity and trees in the corners like guardians.\textsuperscript{158} It can also be compared to a Muslim tomb or shrine with a dome-canopy and corner-pillars.\textsuperscript{159}

For *kantha* makers, religion was part of daily life.\textsuperscript{160} Hence motifs like the peacock and fish appear repeatedly on their mats and quilts.\textsuperscript{161} A peacock is associated with several Hindu deities, such as *Krishna*, whose crown is adorned with its plume, and *Kartikeya*, who is mounted on this bird. In Islamic belief, peacocks grace the entrance to paradise and Prophet Muhammad’s flying steed *Buraq* has a peacock

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\textsuperscript{154} See Padmaja (2010, pp. 77-78); Mason (2009, p. 2); Mittal (2004, p. 41); Das (1992, pp. 109-110).


\textsuperscript{157} See Ghosh (2020, pp. 45, 49).

\textsuperscript{158} Some trees are stylized; others are realistically portrayed like the Kadamba tree, considered sacred because the Hindu god Krishna danced under it with his beloved Radha. Stylized leaves or fruits of hallowed plants, known as *kalka* or paisley, are sometimes placed in the corners, around the central lotus, or along the edges of the *Kantha* quilt. See Zaman (2010, pp. 25-26); Padmaja (2010, p. 75); Mason (2009, pp. 8-9); Zaman (2009, pp. 127, 131-132).

\textsuperscript{159} See Mason (2009, p. 9).

\textsuperscript{160} See Mason (2009, p. 11).

\textsuperscript{161} For examples of a *Kantha* mat (31 x 31 in.) with peacocks and a *Kantha* quilt (65½ x 44 in.) with fish, see D. Mason (Ed.), *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (p. 214, pl. 32; p. 277, pl. 77).
Representative of fertility, intelligence, and auspices, fish is consumed regularly by Bengalis. One *kantha* mat depicts *Rama*, an incarnation of the Hindu god *Vishnu*, shooting arrows at the ten-headed demon *Ravana*. On this mat is stitched in Arabic script the words, “*Ya Allah*,” summoning *Allah*, God of the Muslims. Next to it is embroidered a crescent moon that represents the Muslim faith as well as the Hindu god *Shiva*. This makes it difficult to discern the Kantha maker’s religious inclination. The co-existence of Hindu and Muslim symbols on *kantha* mats and quilts indicates an accord between these two communities in pre-partition Bengal.

Aspects of the changing lifestyle appear on *kantha* quilts as well. Besides old means of transportation like palanquins, new inventions like trains are included. They point to the rail network introduced by the British. Criticism of the hypocritical society of British-Calcutta (as Kolkata was formerly known) surface on *kantha* quilts through images like women birching sheepish men and a docile man, under the sway of his wife or mistress, ill-treating his old mother. Appalled by the immoral behavior of anglicized Bengali men, these needle women humiliated them in scenes of domestic disorder. Such images of social criticism on *kantha* quilts were influenced by Kalighat paintings (c. 1800-1930 CE) that flourished around the Hindu temple of Goddess *Kali* in South Calcutta (when the British moved to Bengal, they anglicized the name Kalighat to Calcutta). From 1870 onward, Kalighat painters began to record their impressions of the increasing moral hypocrisy of British society.

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164 This mat (33 ½ x 33 ½ in.) is represented in D. Mason (Ed.), *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (p. 187, pl. 3).


166 See Mason (2009, p. 10).

167 See Mason (2009, p. 17); Zaman (2009, p. 129). For examples of Kantha quilts with trains (68 x 42 in. and 64 ¼ x 41 ¾ in.), see D. Mason (Ed.), *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (p. 262, pl. 62; p. 284, pl. 84).

168 The first railway of India, established by the British in Bengal, dates to 1854. See Mason (2009, p. 4).

corruption in British-Calcutta. Their shop-studios became pictorial-news-centers. Wood-cut prints that followed also represented similar satirical images.

The turbulence following Bengal’s breakup in 1947 disrupted *kantha*’s improvisational and story-telling attributes. Since then, organizations such as Karma Kutir and Self-Help Enterprise (SHE) in Kolkata have tried to rejuvenate this classic stitch-art by transforming it to meet current needs. During my study tours in the summers of 2014-2018, I visited both Karma Kutir and Self-Help Enterprise (SHE) as well as several other such organizations (for example, Artisana, Crafts Council, Aims, Kadam Haat, and Silence) in Kolkata and its environs to research the empowerment of destitute women through the revival of indigenous handicrafts of India (Figs. 2-4).

Karma Kutir (meaning, ‘a place of work’) was set up in 1961 under the guidance of Dr. Phulrenu Guha (1911-2006), a freedom fighter and social reformer. Its goal is to capacitate underprivileged women through skill-building in such fields as *kantha* stitch-art. Groups of fifteen to twenty women meet at training centers in and nearby Kolkata to stitch *kantha* items which are then marketed by Karma Kutir. These needlewomen are given leeway to choose their own motifs, colors, and stitches so that they are not confined to provided directions. In this way, Karma Kutir is not only securing the lives of impoverished women but also bringing back *kantha*’s lost impromptu and expressive quality.

SHE (or Self-Help Enterprise) was established around 1998-99 in Kolkata by Shamlu Kripalani Dudeja (b. 1938) to support *kantha* embroiderers and to increase appreciation of this stitch-art domestically and internationally (Fig. 5). It was at a local fair in Kolkata that Dudeja came across village girls from the Santiniketan area selling layered *kantha* mats. She urged this small group of eighteen-year-olds to embroider sarees and other single-layer-fabric items, such as scarves and jackets, and started marketing their *kantha* products. Soon more and more needlewomen from rural Bengal began enrolling in SHE; they number over one thousand today (Figs. 6-8). Strict quality control of *kantha* clothing by SHE’s embroiderers guaranteed their uniqueness and the first exhibition in Kolkata was a great success. This was followed by exhibitions in other cities of India and overseas in London, Paris, Tokyo, Yokohama, Melbourne, Washington, and Santa Fe.

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171 See Padmaja (2010, pp. 80-81).
172 Ruby Ghuznavi adequately discusses the challenges and compromises involved in the evolution of *kantha* embroidery. See Ghuznavi (2004, pp. 140-142). Also see Zaman (2009, pp. 115-17, 132-133); Padmaja (2010, pp. 80-83); Mason (2017, p. 88); Mason (2009, p. 19); Das (1992, pp. 115-116).
173 See *Through the Eye of a Needle – A Tribute to SHE*. For images of *kantha* garments stitched by members of SHE, see (https://www.facebook.com/shekantha); (www.Instagram.com/shekantha); (http://www.shekantha.com); and (https://mkcbengal.com/).
Shamlu Dudeja’s daughter Malika Dudeja Varma joined her mother’s endeavor of *kantha* revival and promoted SHE’s online growth (Fig. 9). Malika has given this timeless stitch-art of Bengal a contemporary spin by designing *kantha* embroidered sarees, stoles, shrugs, and capes to make them appealing to the younger generation, “which believes in fuss-free chic dressing”\(^\text{174}\) (Figs. 10-13). Impressed with *kantha* stitch-art, Iryna Vikyrchak (Ukrainian poetess, writer, translator, and culture manager) displayed several of Malika’s trendy *kantha* outfits by wearing them one afternoon at ITC Royal Bengal, a luxury hotel in Kolkata\(^\text{175}\) (Fig. 14). Malika’s *Kantha* Collection includes garments that can be worn year-round by all ages. Eager to market eye-catching, versatile *kantha* items at affordable prices, locally, nationally, and internationally, Farah Khan opened The *Kantha* Store on Loudon Street in Kolkata.\(^\text{176}\) *Kantha* has also drawn the attention of curators and scholars.\(^\text{177}\)

The *kantha* quilts embroidered by members of Adithi (a women’s non-government organization established in 1988 in Patna, capital city of Bihar, a state in eastern India, near West Bengal, and Bhusara, a village near Patna) have become an outlet for socio-political comment.\(^\text{178}\) Known as *sujani* in Bihar, these quilts combine running stitches with appliqué work (*khatwa*) to raise awareness of issues such as illiteracy, poor health care, sexually transmitted diseases, abortion of female fetuses, widows not permitted to remarry or wear colorful garments, dowry and ill-treatment of brides.\(^\text{179}\) What these women once

\(^{174}\) See Chakraborty, S. (2022), “Fashion, t2 Explores a Contemporary Kantha Mood Board in Multipurpose Styles” (pp. 16-17: 16), in *The Telegraph, t2* (Wednesday, August 3).

\(^{175}\) See Chakraborty (2022, pp. 16-17).

\(^{176}\) See Roy, P. A. (2022), “t2 Checks Out the Kantha Store by Farah Khan, A New One-Stop Shop for All Your Kantha Picks” (p. 12), in *The Telegraph, t2* (Friday, August 5).


hesitated to discuss with their male relatives, they are now disclosing to the world through this stitch-art, like the Mithila painters of Bihar many of whom also depict themes of social injustice. The main storyteller draws the outlines on the sujani quilt; others in the group join her in stitching the images, adding observations of their own. Stitched collaboratively by needlewomen of different faiths, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian, sujani quilts celebrate communal harmony. Exhibitions of these quilts held in 1998 at the Asia Society in New York city, in 1999/2000 at the Textile Museum of Canada in Toronto, Ontario, and in 2002 at the October Gallery in London were well received and brought these embroiderers much needed economic upliftment and acknowledgment. Sujani quilts by Adithi members have inspired textile artists abroad to add a narrative dimension to their stitch-arts.

Kantha quilts share certain features such as compositional layout with sixteenth-seventeenth century Indo-Portuguese quilts (known as colchas) of Satgaon (a port on River Hoogly, around twenty-three miles north of current-day Kolkata). In 1536, a few Portuguese from Goa (a sea post in south-western India) migrated to Satgaon, Bengal’s old trading capital. Soon Indo-Portuguese quilts (about two and a half by two meters in size) from Satgaon, embroidered on cotton or jute, and sometimes on silk, mainly with chain, back, and running stitches, were exported to Europe, and attained international fame. The imagery on colcha quilts mostly portrayed classical mythology, biblical stories, allegorical figures, hunting and marine scenes, daily episodes, and ornate designs. Like kantha quilts, colchas were square or rectangular in shape with a central and corner motifs and the space in between densely covered with varying subjects. When the Mughals


seized Hoogly in 1682, the Portuguese sponsorship of these quilts ceased. Their quality deteriorated and by the end of the seventeenth or mid-eighteenth century they became extinct.

Outside of India, _kantha_ has evoked comparison with _Sashiko_, the Japanese quilting stitch-art that uses white cotton running stitches to create patterns on the background fabric that is often of patched recycled pieces.\(^{185}\) _Kantha_ has also been equated with the Japanese _Boro_ textiles, sewn from rags and pieces of indigo-dyed cotton. Furthermore, _Kantha_ quilts resemble African American quilts made from remnant textiles, and Asian _Hmong_ story cloths stitched by women to depict folk tales and life-affecting episodes.\(^{186}\) Like them, _kantha_ appreciates the improvised and unwasteful approach.

**Conclusion**

Stitch-Arts of India can no longer be practiced in the manner of their historical antecedents.\(^ {187}\) Reconfiguration is imperative to align them with modern usage and the world marketplace. Supervisors cognizant of the historic roots of India’s stitch-arts are mandatory to channel the growing, semiskilled workforce.\(^ {188}\) Tradition and innovation can and should coordinate.\(^ {189}\)

Present-day artists are expanding the scope of India’s stitch-arts by applying distinctive renditions of them to their artwork. The 2020 pandemic brought to light several artists in India who approached stitch-arts not as mere diversion but as art works with a descriptive capacity.\(^ {190}\) Raised in Doordooma, Assam, Jahnavee Baruah began recording her impressions of tea plantations and paddy fields with needle and thread. Stitch-Art to Jahnavee feels like a language that her hands speak. She likes the slow process of embroidering that helps her unveil the truths contained in myths and day-to-day life.

The remodeling of old materials and effectiveness of the simple running stitch in _kantha_ inspired two Bangalore-based artists, Anuradha

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\(^{187}\) See Padmaja (2010, pp. 81-83); Das (1992, p. 109).

\(^{188}\) About 500,000 of India’s populace today earns its livelihood through hand-embroidered textiles. See Friesen, H. L. (2014), *India* (p. 15), New York: AV2, Weigl.

\(^{189}\) Scholars have stressed the need for current day needle workers in India to be knowledgeable about traditional stitch-arts of India. Only then can they be adequately appropriated to meet the needs of today. See Padmaja (2010, pp. 81-83); Sethi (2010, p. xx); Manfredi (2007, p. 29). Judy Frater points out that traditions are not static. See Frater (2004, p. 144).

Bhaumick and Renuka Rajiv, to adopt embroidery as their means of expression. In her piece, “Cherry Pickers” (2020), Anuradha painted with a needle four women in textured sarees sitting beside two baskets of cherries with trees and lush greenery behind them. Renuka prefers to use a thread rather than a pen to draw her figurative imagery on T-shirts and quilts. She began by playing with the running stitch, and gradually incorporated applique and chain stitch in her pieces.

The Santiniketan-based artist Gunjan Thapar found solace during lockdown by sketching with needle and thread miniature portraits of famous artists such as Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) and Amrita Shergil (1913-1941). Not only did Gunjan’s embroidered portraits sell when she posted them online, she began receiving requests for more. Soon the custom orders became overwhelming, forcing Gunjan to turn them down to reserve time for her personal work.

In her exhibition, Mobile Palace, organized by Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto (March 12 to August 1, 2022), Swapnaa Tamhane challenged the boundaries between art, craft, and design (Fig. 15). In her own words, “Every single panel included in "Mobile Palace" has been appliquéd or beaded. After the panels were sent to me - after having been printed and dyed by Saleemamad Khatri - I appliquéd each one so that each panel is totally unique in its print and dye combination, and in its appliqué, thereby challenging the idea of repetition and making each one a unique artwork.” Swapnaa’s naturally dyed, woodblock-printed, and embroidered fabric compositions draw inspiration from the mirrorwork of Qasab-Kutch Craftswomen, Phulkari motifs of Punjab, Mughal and Ottoman tents, the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier’s designs for the Ahmedabad Textile Mill Owners’ Association building (or ATMA House), and the fertile history of India’s textiles.

To continue discovering novel possibilities, stitch-arts should be included in the curriculum of art schools. Artists can breathe

192 Quoted from an email I received from Swapnaa Tamhane on May 2, 2023.
193 Vatsyayan points out that embroidery has for years been considered a craft rather than an art; hence it has not been included in the curriculum of art schools. See Vatsyayan, K. (2010), “Introduction” in Embroidery in Asia: Sui Dhaga (pp. ix-xiii: xiii). I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Purnima Bhatt and Sharon Anderson for their helpful suggestions upon reading my manuscript, to Dr. Bindu Madhok for accompanying me to the organizations in Kolkata, engaged in the revival of kantha stitch-art, and to Shamli Dudeja, Malika Dudeja Varma, and Swapnaa Tamhane for permitting me to include photographs of their work in my article.
fresh life into outworn formulas by repurposing their forms to address current trends and concerns. A kaleidoscope of stitches, patterns, colors, and images, stitch-arts require as much know-how as other branches of the visual arts. With sewing needles as their tools of creativity, artists can preserve India’s handmade treasures as well as revitalize markets driven by industry. Rediscovery of India’s regional stitch-arts is one of the keys to sustainability and empowerment.

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Google Search


SHE kantha garments – (https://www.facebook.com/shekantha); (www.Instagram.com/shekantha); (http://www.shekantha.com); and (https://mkcbengal.com/).


Fig. 1 – Author’s drawings after chikankari motifs (Photo credit: author)

Fig. 2 – Author interacting with kantha embroiderers working for ‘Artisana’ in Kolkata, India (Photo credit: author’s relative, Dr. Bindu Madhok)
Fig. 3 - *Kantha* embroiderer working for ‘Artisana’ in Kolkata, India
(Photo credit: author)

Fig. 4 - *Kantha* embroiderer working for ‘Artisana’ in Kolkata, India
(Photo credit: author)
Fig. 5 - Kantha embroiderer working for ‘SHE’ (‘Self-Help Enterprise, also known as ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’) in Kolkata, India (Photo credit: ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’)

Fig. 6 - Kantha embroiderers working for ‘SHE’ (‘Self-Help Enterprise, also known as ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’) in Kolkata, India (Photo credit: ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’)
Fig. 7 - Kantha embroiderers working for ‘SHE’ (‘Self-Help Enterprise, also known as ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’) in Kolkata, India (Photo credit: ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’)

Fig. 8 - Kantha embroiderer working for ‘SHE’ (‘Self-Help Enterprise, also known as ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’) in Kolkata, India (Photo credit: ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’)

Fig. 9 - Shamlu Dudeja and her daughter Malika Dudeja Varma, who founded ‘SHE’ (‘Self Help Enterprise, also known as ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’) in Kolkata, India (Photo credit: ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’)

Fig. 10 - SAREE by Kantha embroiderers working for ‘SHE’ (‘Self Help Enterprise, also known as ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’) in Kolkata, India (Photo credit: ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’).
Fig. 11 - SAREE by Kantha embroiderers working for ‘SHE’ (‘Self-Help Enterprise, also known as ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’) in Kolkata, India (Photo credit: ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’)

Fig. 12 - STOLE by Kantha embroiderers working for ‘SHE’ (‘Self-Help Enterprise, also known as ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’) in Kolkata, India (Photo credit: ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’)
Fig. 13 - STOLE by Kantha embroiderers working for ‘SHE’ (‘Self-Help Enterprise, also known as ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’) in Kolkata, India (Photo credit: ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’)

Fig. 14 - Iryna Vikyrchak modeling in a trendy kantha outfit by Kantha embroiderers working for ‘SHE’ (‘Self-Help Enterprise, also known as ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’) in Kolkata, India (Photo credit: ‘Malika’s Kantha Collection’)

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Fig. 15 - Swapnaa Tamhane, Mobile Palace, 2019-2021, Natural dyes, appliqué, and beading on mill-made cotton, made with Salemamad Khatri, and Mukesh, Pragnesh, Avdhesh Prajapati, and Bhavesh Rajnikant. Installation views “Swapnaa Tamhane: Mobile Palace”, ROM, March-August 2022, curated by Dr. Deepali Dewan, Photograph by Paul Eekhoff/ROM.