

An Exploratory Study on the Indian Apparel Industry, with Special Emphasis on Traditional Embroidery Segment with Respect to Women Employment and Income Generation

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ABSTRACT

The Indian apparel industry has witnessed a significant shift from traditional hand-embroidered garments to machine-made products, threatening the survival of this intricate and culturally rich craft. This research explores the critical need to preserve and promote traditional hand embroidery in India, highlighting its potential to empower women artisans. The study emphasizes how supporting this craft can enhance the socioeconomic status of women and their families, fostering economic independence and community development. Furthermore, it examines the broader macroeconomic benefits of revitalizing traditional embroidery, including increased employment opportunities and sustainable economic growth.

Key words: Artisans, Embroidery style, Employment, Indian textile industry, Wages, Women empowerment

Research Question: The apparel industry in India is a major source of employment for both men and women. How far has this industry fared in recent times? What is the nature of employment of this industry especially with respect to traditional embroidery? Has this sector helped in preserving the ancient arts of India? How far has it helped the traditional artisans in terms of income generation? Has it been sufficient to encourage them to pass on their skill to the younger generation? This paper seeks to address these and related questions.

1. Introduction

The term "textile" originates from the Latin word *textilis* and the French word *Texere* meaning "to weave". Throughout time, textile structures have evolved from ancient handicrafts to modern scientific innovations. India, a key player in this evolution, began using cotton as early as 3000 BCE, with evidence of printed textiles dating back to the 4th century BCE. During the Mughal

era (16th to 18th century), it became renowned for producing fine muslins, which were intricately printed or painted. This rich legacy of textile craftsmanship has significantly shaped India's cultural and economic landscape, laying the foundation for modern textile and embroidery industries.



Handmade embroidered items serve as a manifestation of luxury. In India, every state right from Kashmir in the north to Kanyakumari in the South, has its own distinct style of embroidery, shaped by several factors. For instance, a state's climatic conditions, culture and availability of required threads and artisans play a significant role in shaping the style of embroidery. Aesthetic sensibilities such as the vibrancy of the colour and intricacy of patterns also depend upon which state of India the embroidery originates from. While some regions focus on geometric patterns, other states predominantly emphasise nature through tailored depictions of animals, birds, flora and fauna. Moreover, states with strong religious inclinations often integrate

spiritual narratives into their embroidery designs, further emphasizing the interplay between culture and artistic expression.

Over time, the demand for such intricate and fine embroidery has been diminishing as a result of a few influencing factors. One pertinent factor for the decline of embroidered items is the rise of fast fashion that prioritises speed and low cost production over craftsmanship and sustainability. The low wages and increasing costs have also driven traditional workers to seek more stable forms of employment. These two fundamental factors have caused a significant reduction in the demand for such items of traditional embroidery.

The Indian textile and apparel industry is highly diversified with a wide range of segments ranging from products of traditional handloom, handicrafts, wool and silk products. Although there is a significant reduction in the demand for traditionally embroidered goods, the apparel industry's market share is expected to reach US dollars 190 billion by 2025 and 2026. India's textile and apparel industry is the only industry in the country after the agricultural sector that has generated large scale employment for both skilled and unskilled labour. This is because Indian textiles and apparels have a history of fine craftsmanship and global appeal. Therefore, this sector is still a significant contributor to the Indian economy in terms of its domestic share, exports and employment generation.

Handlooms dominate the Indian apparel industry employing millions of people, roughly around 4.5 million workers (2024). However, in the recent years, the decentralised power looms form a larger portion of this sector. This unorganised industry focuses primarily on providing informal employment with no incentive to adopt superior technology. This is because they prefer to remain at a "cottage-industry" level in order to receive subsidies by the government. This interplay between economic considerations and societal roles similarly impacts the traditional embroidery sector.

In the Indian textile market, particularly in the traditional embroidery sector, the workforce composition reflects deeply rooted societal norms. Men, traditionally seen as the primary breadwinners, have increasingly moved away from embroidery to pursue secure, stable jobs that ensure a steady income for their households. This shift stems from the inability of the arts to provide consistent financial support, compelling them to abandon these crafts for more reliable employment opportunities.

On the other hand, women, who dominate this sector, often view embroidery as a means of earning secondary income. Since they are not the main earners, the income generated from their work is considered supplementary and not essential for their families' survival. As a result, the

art form is often devalued, leading many women artisans to discontinue their practice, further contributing to the decline of this traditional craft in India.

2. History of India's embroidery styles

Figure 1 : Embroidery Map of India



Source: <https://www.memeraki.com/blogs/posts/embroidery-map-of-india>

India is home to a rich diversity of traditional embroidery styles, with each state offering a distinct style that reflects the region's cultural heritage. In Gujarat and Rajasthan, *mirror work* (Shisha) and *Kutchi* embroidery are popular, featuring bold designs with mirrors and bright threads, often adorning vibrant traditional attire. In West Bengal, *Kantha* embroidery is a folk art where running stitches are used to create beautiful motifs, often telling stories of everyday life. In Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, the famous embroidery style *Chikankari* originates and is believed to have been introduced in India during the Mughal ruling (16th-18th century). The art form flourished under the patronage of the Mughal rulers and their noble families, renowned for its delicate floral and paisley patterns on fine fabrics. However, it faced a steady decline during the

British colonial era when the local textile industry suffered due to the import of machine made fabrics. The revival of the *Chikankari* embroidery style started in the early 20th century when various organisations and individuals recognised its culture and artistic value.

Women artisans were one such group that played a significant role in preserving and promoting arts such as Chikan work and mirror embroidery. Another key factor in the revival of this art was the emergence of organizations like SEWA. SEWA was born as a trade union of poor self-employed women in 1972 in the city of Ahmedabad, Gujrat. It grew out of the women's wing of the textile labour association, India's oldest and largest union of textile workers which was founded by Anasuya Sarabhai and Mahatma Gandhi in 1920. The organisation was also registered as the single largest central trade union on 12th April, 1972 with a membership of over 2.9 million poor, self-employed women workers from the informal economy across 18 states in India.

Figure 2: Women SEWA Association



Source:https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self_Employed_Women%27s_Associat

3. Relevance of this sector to the Indian economy

The textile industry of India is vast, encompassing a wide range of processes such as fibre production, spinning, weaving, dyeing, and finishing, and employing both skilled and unskilled labour. Valued at \$165 billion as of 2022, the industry plays a significant role in generating large-scale employment, particularly in rural areas. India stands as one of the largest producers of

cotton and jute, holding a key position in the global textile market. Contributing approximately 1% to India's GDP, the sector demonstrates both its economic relevance and the immense involvement of its workforce.

A notable segment of this broader textile industry is the Indian apparel market, which includes garment manufacturing, such as ready-made garments and customized traditional wear. Catering to both domestic and international markets, the industry is driven by diverse fibres like cotton, wool, silk, and synthetic materials, each contributing to the variety and scope of its offerings.

Within this expansive sector, the market for Indian embroidery has seen notable growth. Studies estimate that the embroidery market alone is valued at approximately Rs 800-900 crore annually (2024), with an impressive annual growth rate of 20%. This highlights the sector's potential and the significant opportunities available. However, to fully tap into this expanding market, dedicated efforts and strategies are needed.

3. 1 Machine-made vs. Traditional Embroidery:

The demand for machine-made embroidery has been steadily rising in recent years due to its efficiency and cost-effectiveness. According to industry reports, the machine-made embroidery market is growing at a rate of 15-20% per year, driven by the increasing need for mass-produced garments and ready-to-wear fashion. In contrast, the demand for traditional hand-embroidered textiles has seen a decline of around 5-7% annually, as artisans face challenges in competing with machine-driven production in terms of speed and cost.

Machine-made embroidery's ability to produce large quantities with consistent designs has made it a dominant force in the commercial market. On the other hand, traditional hand-embroidery, while culturally significant and valued for its craftsmanship, is now seen as a luxury and niche market.

4. Analysis

4.1 Phulkari

Phulkari, a traditional embroidery style from Punjab, has been primarily crafted by women. The phulkari embroidery style derived its name from the Hindi word *Phul* meaning flower and *Akari* meaning shape. The history of phulkari began in Punjab where the birth of a girl child was considered auspicious. From the moment a girlchild was born, her mother, grandmother, and aunts start embroidering Phulkari pieces to give her on her wedding day to use as dowry (a payment of money, goods, or property made by the bride's family to the groom's family as part of the marriage).

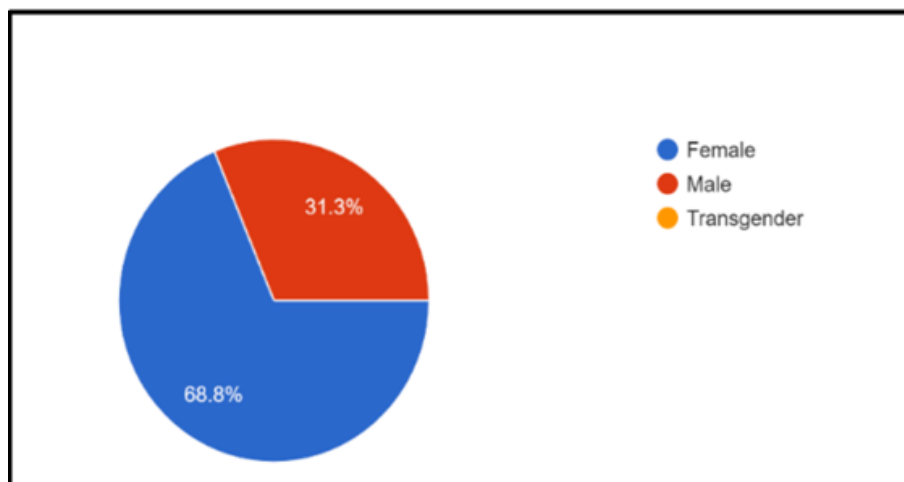
Figure 3: Image of Phulkari Bagh



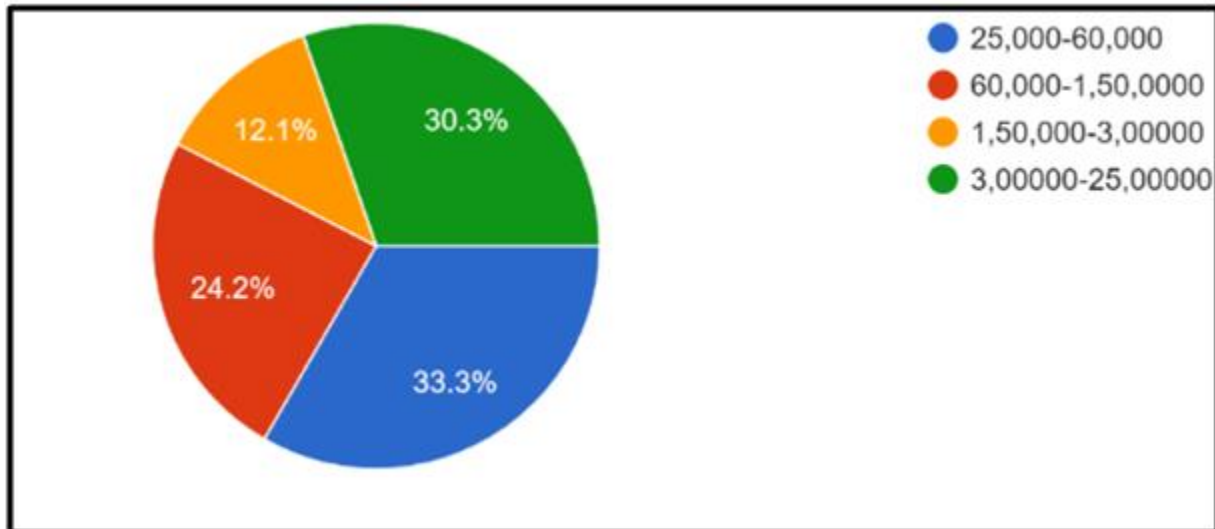
Source: [Do You Know Why Were Initially Phulkaris Embroidered By Punjabi Women? | Lifestyle - PTC Punjabi](#)

Research has indicated that the work force of Indian artisans embroidering phulkari constitute more women than men. Approximately 68.8% of the Phulkari embroidery are women, compared to only 31.3% that are men.

Figure 4: Pie Chart indicating the % of women & men working on phulkari embroidery



Source: <https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR2312097.pdf>

Figure 5: Pie chart indicating wage difference in Phulkari

Source: <https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR2312097.pdf>

Historically, traditional embroidery of Phulkari in India was entirely handmade. However, the current embroidery process is a blend of both hand and machine techniques, making it more cost-effective. This shift explains the significant price differences between traditional hand-embroidered Phulkari pieces and machine-made ones.

Traditional hand embroidery is a time-consuming process, often taking 6 to 8 weeks to complete a single Phulkari garment piece. In contrast, a machine can produce 20 to 30 Phulkari pieces per day, depending on its size and capacity, allowing for much higher production output. While machine-made pieces are faster and cheaper, traditional handwork remains valued for its intricate designs and craftsmanship.

In terms of materials, *Phulkari* embroidery has evolved over time. Traditionally, it was done on heavy fabrics like khaddar, a thick cotton fabric, which provided a sturdy base for the intricate designs. However, today, *Phulkari* is often created on lighter materials such as chiffon and lightweight cotton, making it more versatile and suitable for modern fashion trends.

4.2 Chikankari

Chikankari embroidery traces its origins to the Mughal era in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. This intricate hand-embroidery style is said to have been introduced by Empress Noor Jahan, wife of Emperor Jahangir. Traditionally performed on fine muslin cloth, the craft was a hallmark of

Mughal sophistication and aesthetic. Over centuries, Chikankari adapted to changing trends, materials, and demands, becoming a cultural symbol of Lucknow.

Figure 6: Image of Chikankari embroidery



Source: Types of Chikan Embroidery | The Indian Couture Blog

Chikankari was traditionally performed on fine muslin, known as *mulmul*, a lightweight and breathable fabric ideal for India's hot climate. However, over time, the use of muslin declined due to its rarity and cost. Today, cotton and chiffon are the primary fabrics, offering durability and affordability while retaining elegance. The transition to these materials has made Chikankari more acceptable to global consumers.

The motifs embroidered were inspired by elements from nature such as flowers, leaves and birds. Over time, Persian and Turkish designs were also incorporated. The main patronage was from the Nawabs of Awadh, who were rulers of the region and encouraged skilled artisans to create exquisite garments.

This art faced a decline in the British colonial era due to the import of machine made fabrics. Today it has been revived and has gained international recognition in both ordinary as well as exquisite fashion statement pieces.

As the market was flooded with machine made garments, to safeguard the traditional art the government of India in 2008, gave a GI (Geographical Indication) that safeguards traditional art from imitation.

Initially, it was a male-dominated craft, with male artisans (called *karigars*) specializing in its delicate patterns. However, as societal dynamics shifted, women began taking over the craft,

making it a primary livelihood for many rural women in Uttar Pradesh. Today, women dominate the Chikankari industry, with estimates suggesting that over 85% (<https://www.theheritagelab.in/chikankari-embroidery/>) of artisans are female. This shift is tied to changing gender roles, accessibility, and the decentralization of the craft to rural households.

Despite women now constituting the majority of Chikankari artisans, significant wage disparities persist. Male artisans, often perceived as more skilled due to their historical association with the craft, tend to earn higher wages. For instance, men might receive Rs. 300-400 per piece, whereas women often earn only Rs. 100-200 for similar work. This disparity is exacerbated by women's limited access to markets and dependence on middlemen, who often exploit their labour by paying below market rates.

Figure 7: Women artisans embroidering Chikankari work



Source: [The Chikankari Legacy: A Thread that Weaves Through History – Rangсутра](#)

4.3 Kutch embroidery

Kutch embroidery, originating from the Kutch region of Gujarat, is one of India's most vibrant and intricate hand embroidery traditions. With roots tracing back over 500 years, it reflects the cultural heritage of various tribal communities, including the Rabari, Ahir, Jat, Sindhi, Memon and Mutwa. This art form is known for its bold designs, mirror work (*abhla bhara*), and the use of vibrant colours like red, yellow, green, and blue.

Traditionally, Kutch embroidery was done on handwoven cotton using silk or wool threads. Over time, the materials have evolved, with artisans now incorporating synthetic fabrics like polyester or acrylic for cost-efficiency and mass production. The popular motifs were the three petal butti,

panj kanio (five sections), phudi (flower) motif, kagda na pag (crows legs) etc. Along with this mirrors were used to ornament the embroidered pieces.

Historically, women practiced Kutch embroidery as a way of preserving stories, traditions, and identity through their textiles. These pieces were often used in dowries, as decorative household items, or to express tribal and regional affiliations. Till date, Kutch embroidery has remained predominantly a women's craft, with approximately 90% of the artisans being female. Although men are involved in ancillary roles, such as managing sales or sourcing materials, women are the primary creators of the embroidery itself.

As Kutch is a drought prone region, embroideries have always aided as a supplementary income for the family along with its significant social and cultural aspects. It was only in the 80's that the exquisite embroidery from this unique and isolated region of the country caught the attention of the market. These were sold at government outlets in cities, generating great interest leading to government personnel working among different communities to create embroidered articles for urban clientele.

Now, women have become equal contributors to household income, earning respect within their families, especially during times of drought when they have become the sole income generators for their households. This silent revolution has led to women enhancing their status in society. In the early years, it was the government that encouraged the development of hand skills. Later, various NGOs and organizations emerged, working to empower women and help them increase their earnings through their craftsmanship.

Figure 8: Women karigars for Kutch embroidery



Source: The embroiders of Kutch - Frontline

5. Path of the traditional hand embroidery segment in women's apparel

The art of embroidery is exemplified by couture designers and high-fashion brands, where embroidery is extensively featured on their garments and accessories. Highly embellished garments are often exorbitantly priced, yet these high prices do not benefit the workers, who earn poor wages. They are often required to work overtime with poor wages, leading many to discontinue their craft out of frustration. This, in turn, discourages them from passing on their skills to their children and other close relatives, who, hoping for better-paying jobs, are less inclined to follow family traditions.

Compared to developed economies, the prices of embroidery are the cheapest in developing countries like India. With the advent of embroidery machines, Indian embroidery, like that of other Asian countries, has suffered a marked decline in both quality and quantity.

The market for artisans has diminished for several reasons:

- The market for couture is contracting.
- The number of craft workers is continuously decreasing.
- Younger generations are unwilling to carry on the family tradition of embroidery.
- Cheaper labour is available overseas.
- There is increasing competition from sophisticated embroidery machines.
- The demand for ready-to-wear garments is rising.
- There is a decreasing demand for expensive hand-embroidered garments.
- The prevalence of cheaper alternatives and copies of original hand-embroidered luxurious couture pieces.

All the above reasons have contributed to a decline in the demand for original hand embroidered luxurious couture pieces. India being the most hand-skilled country in the world, employs a large number of artisans who are predominantly rural. However, they are subject to a ruthless economic order that promotes mechanization and mass production, prioritizing mass-produced goods over hand skills and ingenuity. Embroidery export houses in India have built their business based on handcrafted rural artisans that supply to European fashion houses. However, with an increase in export houses there has been a subsequent increase in the number of choices for foreign buyers, more often than not replacing quality with large quantities at cheaper prices.

This has resulted in replacing the hand embroidered garments with cheaper machine-made products reducing the demand for artisans.

5.1 Greater role of women artisans in the embroidery segment

Traditionally, the art of embroidery was primarily in the hands of men, except in cases like Kutch embroidery and Phulkari, where it was female-dominated. Despite some embroidery traditions being female-dominated, the earnings from their craft were so minuscule compared to the male earnings in the family that their work was often undervalued and overlooked. This disparity highlights the broader socio-economic challenges faced by women in India, particularly in terms of access to education and adequate nutrition.

With the fading art of Indian embroidery, it becomes essential to educate women and empower them to preserve and promote this dying tradition. Organizing and encouraging workshops can inspire artisans and the younger generation to embrace their unique talent. It is crucial to help them realize the immense value of their craft—a skill as precious as gold and diamonds—that holds the potential to revive and sustain this cultural heritage. It is crucial to empower women and challenge the perception of them as subordinates to their male counterparts. Embroidery should not be relegated to part-time work pursued only after completing daily chores. Instead, women artisans must be recognized as key stakeholders in every handmade garment they create for the couture industry, ensuring they receive the respect and rewards they rightfully deserve. To achieve this a number of non-profit organisations need to work together to help them increase sales and profits. Collaboration and cooperation from enterprises with these talented women will help in increasing their incomes and sustain the fading art of embroidery.

6. Way forward

The traditional embroidery sector in India has a huge impact in women empowerment, particularly for women employment generation and increase in the family income. For the Indian economy to achieve its macroeconomic goals, like reduction in unemployment and poverty it is vital to bring into the mainstream, jobs and employment for women.

Craftswomen and women artisans feel that they are empowered socially and economically through their skill. The economic independence through the income generated strengthens their social position in society, as was seen in the drought area of Kutch. Moreover, increased income to women artisans becomes a catalyst in terms of motivation, inspiration and encouragement for the other women in society.

Given the gender bias against women regarding education and family status, learning an embroidery craft offers rural and urban women an avenue to achieve greater independence in

society. To make this a reality, it is crucial for all stakeholders—including the central and state governments, district authorities, panchayats, and self-help groups in both rural and urban areas—to work collectively toward achieving financial independence for women. This can be facilitated by initiatives such as geotagging hand-embroidered products to highlight their origin, encouraging digital payments to streamline transactions, and providing modern marketing facilities. These efforts would ensure transparency, traceability, and quality assurance for products in both domestic and international markets, thereby empowering women and preserving the craft.

Finally, empowerment should be seen as a continuous process rather than a final product. It is an evolving journey that demands sustained effort and serves as an essential pathway toward achieving broader societal goals. Empowerment equips the powerless with the tools to gain control over their social and economic positions in life. For instance, female entrepreneurs—women who contribute to employment creation and economic growth through their active participation—play a crucial role in enhancing diversity and equality in entrepreneurship. These women should be supported and encouraged, not only to amplify their own success but also to inspire and uplift other women, fostering a ripple effect of empowerment across communities.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of traditional Indian embroidery reflects the changing socio-economic landscape of the country. From its peak during the Mughal period to its decline in the 20th century, the craft has experienced a slight revival through concerted efforts by designers, government agencies, and NGOs. There has been a transition in the craft of embroidery from male artisans to female artisans, primarily driven by the insufficient income earned by male *karigars* to sustain entire households. Most rural and urban women in India traditionally engage in embroidery as a part-time activity, after fulfilling their primary household responsibilities such as daily chores and caregiving. This shift has resulted in women becoming the primary custodians of this craft. Given the significance of women's empowerment and their socio-economic status in society, it is vital to promote and support this traditional craft. Empowering women to become independent wage earners not only fosters their self-reliance but also ensures the preservation and continuation of this fading art form. Special emphasis is needed from all stakeholders, as this craft faces immense competition from machine embroidery, both within India and from international markets, particularly firms in China replicating these designs. A concerted effort by the government—whether at the central, state, or district level—is essential to address the challenges women face in the production and marketing of their art, ensuring its survival and sustainability.

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