CHAPTER 1

Chikan in Historical Context

THE FIELD SETTING

Lucknow today is a less important cultural center than Banaras and a secondary manufacturing center compared to Kanpur (Gould 1974). It is still, however, the capital of the state of Uttar Pradesh, and houses the State Parliament and many state government departments. It is also home to a large number of educational and research institutions, including several colleges of art and design, the Uttar Pradesh State Museum, Lucknow University, the Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeobotany, the Central Drug Research Institute, and the National Botanical Research Institute.

Lucknow's population was recorded in the 1991 census as 1,669,136. In population terms, Lucknow is second only in the state to Kanpur, with a population of just over two million (Census of India 1991). The larger part of the city forms a semicircle on the south bank of the Gomti River (Hjortshoj 1979:27). The north bank is punctuated with poor neighborhoods where crafts manufacture—including chikan embroidery—and industries are located. Some areas, for example, around Daliganj and Hasanganj, are extremely old, dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Hjortshoj 1979:85, 117). Currently, Lucknow is expanding much further to the north in new commercial and residential areas such as Indira Nagar and Aliganj, which cluster around the major north-south thoroughfares.

The main city is made up of three distinct sections (Mukherjee and Singh 1961; Hjortshoj 1979:28). The oldest section to the west is centered on the Chowk wholesale market, the newest organized around the Hazratganj retail market in the east, and the third associated with the Aminabad retail market. The last section is impossible to define as neatly and accurately as the Chowk and Hazratganj sections. Since 1900, dense retail markets (of which Aminabad, in the narrow sense, is just one) and residential areas have clustered around nineteenth-century roads built to connect Hazratganj to the south and east. Today, the Aminabad section extends as far south as the railway station at Charbagh. Many of the twentieth-century immigrants to Lucknow have

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settled in this area and the population of the section is heavily Hindu (Hjortshoj 1979:29).

Aminabad aside, Lucknow conforms to King's (1976) model of a colonial city. New Lucknow confronts Old Lucknow, the two areas of the city organized according to different ideological principles of space, order, and morality. In almost all parts of the old city, buildings and neighborhoods abide by ideological rules that demand separation (of men from women, and of different ethnic, religious, or family groups from each other) and enclosure (containment of internal diversity while presenting external anonymity) (Hjortshoj 1979:36). In this respect Old Lucknow is like most other "Islamic" cities throughout North India, South Central Asia, and the Middle East (see Gilsenan 1983, Kostoff 1991). The population of the city's older sections has been relatively stable over time, with families living in the same place for several generations. Even in *hawelīs* (traditionally constructed mansions) that have been subdivided into accommodations for many families, people still try to maintain a lifestyle in tune with the principles of separation and enclosure. The immigrants who swell the *bastīs* (slums) and squatter settlements in Aminabad and New Lucknow, cannot (Hjortshoj 1979:65–66). The newest arrivals even live their lives openly on the streets (ibid.).

While the consumers of chikan come from all areas of Lucknow, embroidery production is almost entirely contained within its oldest sections. I never heard of any of the new immigrants into the city doing embroidery. Most of the city's chikan embroiderers live in the old city and chikan businesses are concentrated in the Chowk market. However, the two areas with which I became most familiar were both north of the river. Madeganj is a community in an area known as Khaddra. Madeganj is built around a *pakkā* (constructed, paved) but badly deteriorated street that runs directly off the main road, about half a mile north of Hardinge Bridge. Like other lanes in the *moḥallas* (traditional neighborhoods) the street is bounded by open drains covered with stone slabs. North of Madeganj is a largely open, rubbish strewn area dotted with ruins. Most homes in Madeganj are partly *pakka* (made of baked brick), although some are entirely *kaććā* (made of sun-dried brick). One Madeganj house with which I became familiar was entered through a broken wooden door, opening onto a small courtyard. To the right of the door was a latrine and washing area. To the rear of the courtyard was a kitchen area partially roofed with thatch and canvas, and inside was a mudbrick oven for cooking. Two rooms led from the courtyard, the farthermost with a curtained doorway. A single light bulb hung in the covered kitchen area and water had to be drawn from a pump outside the house. The house, in size and upkeep, was moderate for the neighbor-

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hood. In Khaddra, houses ranged from small *kacca* dwellings to two-storeyed, spacious, *pakka* ones, situated closer to the main road. Ayub Khan, the foremost male embroiderer and agent in Khaddra, lived in a larger *pakka* house a few *galīs* (narrow lane) over from the house just described. I did not see the house in its entirety, but what I did see included a large room set up for *zardozī* (gold and silver embroidery) work, a back room for receiving guests, a large sunny courtyard, and family rooms. In contrast, the poorest houses were single-roomed, *kacca* dwellings, covered with a rotten thatch and a few sackcloths.

Daliganj is a large area made up of several *mohallas*. It is very close to Khaddra and lies on the main road leading from Iron Bridge. I spent most of my time in Bandho Mohalla, which was reached either by a tortuous rickshaw ride or on foot through small *kacca* streets that led off the main road. The journey took one past small general stores, sewing workshops, vegetable stands, all interspersing old, and mostly *pakka*, residences. At one point, the way led beneath the railway line, where the rickshaw had to negotiate a path to the side of a vast, stinking garbage dump. Approaching closer to Bandho Mohalla, a large open area lay to the right of the road, site of the Idgah (festival grounds for celebrating Id-ul-fitr, the Muslim festival that marks the end of the month of fasting known as Ramadan).

The last part had to be done on foot, through narrow, uneven, and sometimes muddy *galis*. Several possible routes existed to the house of my teacher, with whom I spent most of my time. The routes took one past the two prominent institutional features of the *mohalla*, the school, and the mosque. The *galis* were busy places, where people visited and shopped at the permanent food stands or mobile vegetable carts. Goats and dogs were also familiar inhabitants of the *galis*. At dusk, a herd of water buffaloes wended their way through the neighborhood after being watered at the river.

Homes in Bandho Mohalla were better made than homes in Madeganj. The kinds of embroiderers who inhabited these two neighborhoods were also different from a social standpoint, and did different kinds of work. My teacher's house was completely *pakka*. There was a front room with two curtained doorways to a backroom, where the family spent most of its time. The backroom contained personal items, mementos, chests of finished chikan work collected over the years, and bundles of chikan to be embroidered. To the rear of the backroom was a courtyard and adjoining it three small rooms, a kitchen with a kerosene stove, a latrine, and a washing area. There were at least two electric light bulbs in the house, and an electric ceiling fan that because of power brownouts could never be used at the time it was most needed. A water tap, which carried only an intermittent water supply, was in the courtyard.

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WHAT IS CHIKAN?

The most satisfactory definition of chikan today perhaps would be "any cotton embroidered article that comes from Lucknow." Its Lucknow origin is the strongest and simplest element in the definition, since chikan includes garments—both Indian and western in style—and table linens, a range of stitches, articles entirely white and some using color, as well as handwork and machine work. Scholars have been defining and classifying chikan for over one hundred years. Their efforts span several changes in the kind of embroidery being produced and the conditions in which it has been made.

Several writers have tried to probe the word itself for clues as to the essential nature of chikan. But there is no certainty, and certainly no consensus as to what "chikan" means. I have heard chikan described as a "Bengali" word meaning "very nice thing." Some have translated it as "fine" (Lucknow Magazine 1988:16), while still others have termed it a Persian word meaning "to put in bold relief" (Lucknow City Magazine 1988:21). Paine (1989:16) gives a range of Persian possibilities, from the 1651 Burton's classical dictionary definition of "kind of embroidery with gold thread, quilting," to "embroidery in various kinds of silk on garments and other items," in later dictionaries. She also writes of Richardson's 1806 Persian/English dictionary terms *chikan/chikin* "a kind of cloth worked with the needle in flowers." Finally, she notes that chikan has a possible linguistic connection to the physical barriers of purdah through the Persian word for "a blind" (*chick/chiq*) (ibid.).

The very range of embroidered textiles to which the word "chikan" has been applied in the literature no doubt contributes to the difficulty in settling upon its meaning (see especially Watt 1903:398–406). The category "chikan" is essentially the product of British classification of the last century and it is unclear at what point the analytic categories of British critics diverged from names and descriptions given by makers and consumers of embroidery. British (and other subsequent) writers' own prior ideas about how embroidery was to be understood and their familiarity with European styles of needlework, were highly influential in shaping their classifications (e.g., use of terms such as "satin-stitch," "buttonholing," and so on). In most lexigraphical definitions, chikan appears as a class of objects, neither connected specifically with Lucknow nor entailing an entirely distinctive form of embroidery.[1] Watt's (1903:398) classification gives chikan the status of a "division" of embroidery, with subdivisions of chikan-work proper, satin-stitch on white-washing material, and *kāmdānī* or gold and silver embroidery on white cotton cloth and muslin. Watt therefore writes about chikan in such far-flung places as Peshawar, Madras, and Calcutta as well as Luc-

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know, although the work differed in each location. One must conclude from that the word "chikan" is loosely associated with needlework of various kinds, a collective noun with either no specific referent, or shifting referents. What relationships there may have between chikan in different locations, whether chikan's appearance was an accidental product of similar politicocultural conditions in other locations, or whether the apparent ubiquity of chikan is simply an artifact of classification, cannot be dealt with adequately here.

STITCHES AND "WORK"

Defining chikan in terms of its stitches usually produces exercises in abstruse categorization rather than illuminations of how embroiderers themselves think about their work. Occasionally, traders—and less commonly, embroiderers—are cited as local authorities or sources of information. Aesthetic and technical analysis is cumulative, drawing heavily upon previously published work. Sources are not always cited, but George Watt's volume on the Delhi Art Exhibition of 1903 is clearly a starting point for many descriptions (Watt 1903: 399–406). Categorizations are many and each is invariably presented as definitive. On the contrary, they are inevitably partial, drawn as they are from only a few informants or from previous analyses. A "complete" list is in any case hypothetical, since there is no one who subscribes to such a list.

A recurrent discrimination is made between flat and embossed stitches, in which the chikan stitches *bakhyā*, *kaṭā'o*,[2] and *tepčī* are termed flat, and most forms of *murrī* embossed. Sharima (1959:47) describes *bakhya* as a smaller version of *murri*, but this seems to be an aberration. *Jālī* is always treated separately as a kind of "network," in accordance with indigenous discriminations. Again, Sharima (1959:47) is alone in his description of *jali* as *katao*. While the segregation of *jali* is well established, I found no evidence that embroiderers make a distinction between so-called embossed and flat stitches.

All stitch forms are described with reference to named western-style stitches when possible, for example, "stem" or "chain" stitch. For many reasons, certain chikan stitches are *not* stem stitches or satin stitches—not even the technique is commensurate. In appearance, there are similarities, but appearances are no guide to the forms of design, construction, and naming employed by embroiderers. Naqvi (1971) eschews broad western classificatory categories and simply presents the stitches as a list. He recognizes the names given to stitches by embroiderers but is still inclined to describe them in terms of western technique. The descriptions he gives are, in turn, heavily dependent upon an earlier article by Pande (1968).

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Short descriptions tend to pinpoint a few details of chikan that make it distinct. *Bakhya*, *katao*, and *tepci* are invariably mentioned, grouped together as "flat" stitches according to Watt's categorization. Chattopadyaya (1964:9) also refers to *kalai*, which I cannot identify. Dhamija (1964:25–26) also traces the *bakhya*, *tepci*, and *katao* triad, but inserts a discussion of *murri* and *phandā* before going on to *jali*. Saraf (1982) is clearly unaware of the basic difference between "shadow-work" (broadly used as a synonym for *bakhya*), which is worked on the reverse, and stitches that are worked on the obverse. He does, however, utterly distinguish *katao* and *bakhya*. Paine (1987:7–9) gives one of the most extensive and satisfactory accounts of chikan but again tends to couch it in definitive terms. She writes that there are six basic stitches, five derivatives, and seven stitches "that in themselves form an embossed shape," and that this fixed repertoire is the basis of discipline and constrained creativity in the craft. However, this cannot be an exhaustive list since none of the embroiderers I met subscribed to such a narrow and precise classification of stitches.

The most highly skilled embroiderers possess a broad repertoire of between twelve and seventy-five stitches. Although there are major areas of overlap, there is no consensus among the most highly skilled over how stitches are named, nor does knowing more stitches *necessarily* translate into greater skill. Describing chikan on the basis of its stitches is therefore a somewhat fruitless task. However, a critical distinction between the most accomplished embroiderers and the mass of workers lies in the fact that while for the former there are only a range of stitches, for the latter, there are only different forms of work. I believe that this discrimination is critical for developing a truly useful definition of chikan. Forms of work are named for the stitches that are used in them; for example *bakhya* work and *phanda* work contain *bakhya* and *phanda* stitches, respectively. Most embroiderers know only one form of work that employs, typically, no more than five stitches, and commonly only one, often sketchily executed. The main forms of work are *bakhya* work, *murri* work, *jali* work, *phanda* work, and *tepci* work. Women tend to specialize in one form of work or another, and this in turn reflects their skill level and position in the industry's structure. All forms of work are regarded by highly skilled embroiderers (and traders) as debased derivatives of "authentic" work based on knowledge of many stitches.

Bakhya work is the most ubiquitous form of work and uses only one stitch. In appearance, *bakhya* most closely resembles the western herringbone stitch, done on the reverse of the cloth. Ideally, tiny, closely packed stitches should yield, on the obverse, opaque petals and leaves rimmed by contiguous stitches. In the simplified work prevalent in the

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market, the stitches are so loosely applied that no opaque areas show up at all on the right side and stitches rarely touch one another (figure 1.1). The rudiments of *bakhya* can be mastered very quickly and an acceptable standard of work for the market achieved in comparable time.

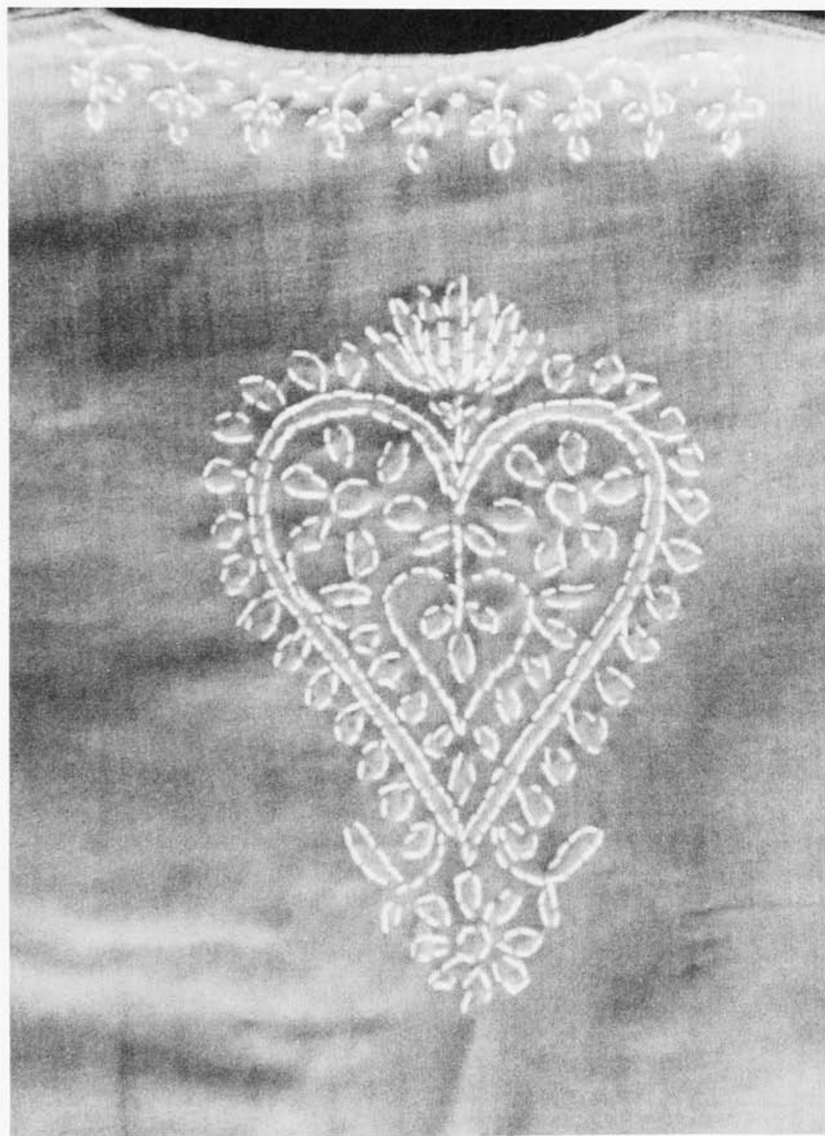

FIG. 1.1. Detail of *bakhya* work.

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However, the difference between *bakhya* as a stitch in the repertoire of the highly skilled, and as a form of work done by women with few or no skills at all, is so great that it is difficult to view them as being at all alike. *Bakhya* work is regarded by skilled embroiderers as coarse and crude. "It is poor man's fare next to real chikan," said one. It is made almost entirely by low-skilled villagers, although neater and less sketchy forms of *bakhya* work are made in the city.

Bakhya work is conventionally opposed to another form of work, *murri* work. *Murri* is considered higher in status than *bakhya* work and typically includes between four and six stitches (e.g., *gol murri*, *lambī murri*, *phanda*, and possibly *joṛā*, *kauṛī*, and *kīl*). The very finest pieces, in which stitches are counted distinctly, are also known as *murri* work (figure 1.2). But the most accomplished embroiderers insist their kind of *murri* can readily be set apart from the *murri* work of ordinary embroiderers. Even run-of-the-mill *murri* work requires a higher degree of skill than *bakhya* work and thus takes longer to master. It is almost exclusively a city specialty.

Phanda work is made almost entirely in villages and uses only one, knotlike stitch. *Tepci* work is made by villagers and city-dwellers, and

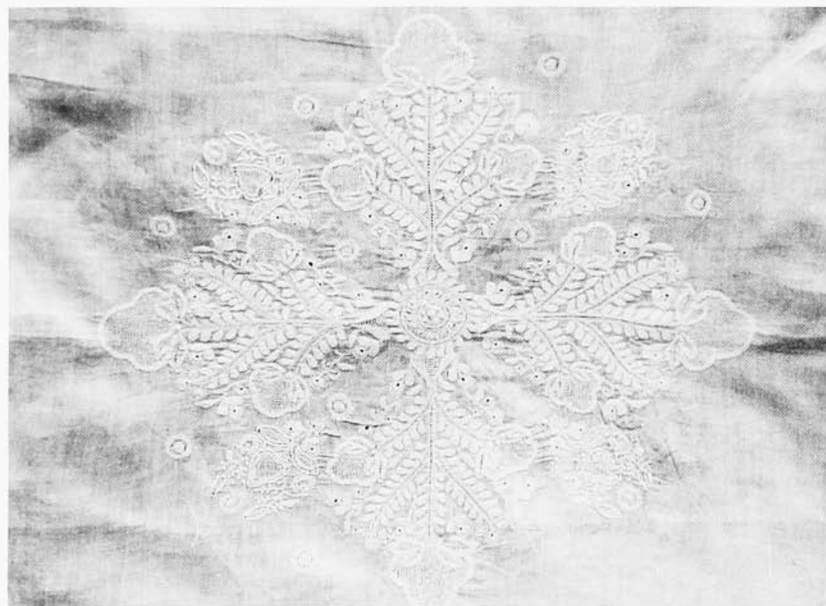

FIG. 1.2. An example of fine work. This kind of work is collectively known as *murri* although it is finer quality than commercial *murri* work.

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is characterized by a large quantity of stitches distributed all over the garment, often a *sari.* The *tepci* stitch, which is the only one found in *tepci* work, is made with a thin thread and is most like a running stitch.

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

ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF CHIKAN

Scholars generally admit that little can be said about the origins of chikan with any certainty. This has not stopped some from indulging in speculation. The most ambitious trace chikan to references by Megasthenes to "flowered muslins" in the third century B.C.E. (Pande 1968:43), or to dress in the seventh century C.E. court of Harsha, ruler of much of North India (Saraf 1974:213; Chattopadhyaya 1963:8). Curiously, these claims assert a Hindu identity for a craft that throughout its existence has been most associated with Muslim makers and, until recently, a group of elite consumers heavily influenced by Muslim tastes.

The majority of origin stories recited by embroiderers, traders, and scholars go back only a few hundred years. No single origin story predominates and each is delivered with the same finality by their various proponents. Nobody denies that chikan reached its most elaborate and distinctive form in Lucknow, applied with spectacular results to Indian garments such as *ṭopīs* (caps), *saris, ćogās* (a kind of scarf), and so on (Hoey 1880:88; Paine 1989:13–15). Watt (1903:399) specifically terms Lucknow chikan "the most artistic and most delicate form of what may be called the purely indigenous needlework of India." However, there is disagreement over whether chikan began in Lucknow, or came from some other location. I do not intend here to speculate upon the possible accuracy of any origin stories. This kind of historical study was outside the scope of my research. However, origin stories are encountered so often in literature and in embroiderers' accounts of their craft that they merit special consideration.

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Bengal

The majority of written accounts (government publications and scholarly books on handicrafts and embroidery) trace chikan back to Bengal and to male artisans who came to Lucknow from there to take advantage of courtly patronage (Irwin and Hall 1973; Chattopadhyaya 1963:43–44; Dhamija 1964:25; Coomaraswamy 1964:206; Mukharji 1888:371; Naqvi 1971).[3] Most writers are vague about when this migration occurred, referring broadly to the period of the *nawābs* (rulers of the territory called Awadh [roughly coterminous with present-day Uttar Pradesh] from 1720 to 1856). On the whole, most subscribe to a later florescence in Lucknow rather than a sooner one (e.g., Mukharji 1888:180). Watt (1987:399) puts its arrival in Lucknow during the second half of this period, referring specifically to the patronage of *shāhs* (kings), the name that replaced *nawab* in the early nineteenth century. In a vague and tantalizing reference, Sharar (1975:172) also portrays chikan as a late arrival in court culture. After describing the invention by Shah Nasir ud-Din Haidar (1827–37) of a cap made expressly for members of the Shia sect of Islam, Sharar writes,

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

Paine (1989:26) remarks candidly that no clear-cut evidence exists for the Bengal origin thesis. However, she and others subscribe to it on three major grounds. First, the richness of indigenous textile traditions in Bengal compared to what was found at a comparable time period in Lucknow—asserting in essence that a tradition of embroidery like this could not have arisen spontaneously in the city. Second, a possible relationship between chikan and *jāmdānī* (muslin with an interwoven design that was particularly associated with the Bengali city of Dacca) (Mukharji 1888; Watt 1903:283). Some surmise that chikan evolved from *jamdani* either as a conscious imitation or as a means to repair flaws in the woven cloth (Paine 1989:19), although Watt makes a strong argument for the autonomy of embroidery working its own unique influence on loom fabrics (Watt 1903:371). Third, forms of embroidery called chikan appear in accounts of Bengali textiles in the nineteenth century (Taylor 1851; Mukharji 1888). Bengali products with this name were intended either for export or for use by Europeans living in India. Lucknow chikan was used in the past for the production of European-style clothing and table linens (Coomaraswamy 1964:206) but chikan

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embroideries have always included indigenous forms of clothing and nowadays almost all production is dedicated to Indian apparel. How a kind of embroidery so adapted to European usage as Bengali chikan might have been adapted to the decoration of indigenous clothing in Lucknow is unclear. Paine (1989:24–25) suggests that chikan's unique form might have been influenced both by Bengali flowered muslins and by European embroidery.

Without in-depth knowledge of historic textile collections, it is difficult to judge the validity of some of these propositions. But it is important to note that like other origin stories, the story of Bengali origin is not just a hypothesis but is instead an ideological construct that tells us as much about gender as it does about actual "facts." The Bengal thesis stresses the male, artisanal nature of chikan, eliminating the work of the women from consideration. It also downplays the significance of Lucknow as a place of origin in its own right. No contemporary embroiderer endorses the Bengal story, preferring instead an exclusively Lucknow history, or tracing chikan to a courtly genesis in Persia.

Lucknow

Most embroiderers insist upon a Lucknow origin for chikan, at some vaguely distant time anywhere from one hundred to three hundred years ago. A story that includes elements of both a Lucknow and a Bengali origin that is occasionally encountered in written accounts, describes how a woman from the cultured Bengali town of Murshidabad became bored with life in the court *zanānā* (separate and secluded women's quarters) at Lucknow, and embroidered a cap for amusement that she presented to the *nawab*. Other women in the *zanana* followed her example, and the competition that arose among them helped elevate chikan into a unique artform (Hasan 1983; Dhamija 1964:25). Indeed, Hasan attributes the employment of so many impoverished but high-status women in the later industry to the courtly beginnings of the craft, when so many women learned to make it. Dhamija attributes the story to shopkeepers in the city. I did not hear any embroiderers relate it, however.

Courtly patronage is paramount in accounts of Lucknow origin (Sharima 1959). The original *shauq* (passionate interest, love) for chikan grew among kings and nobility, in short, the *ra'īs log* (rich, important people) of the city. Saliha Khatun, in her version of the origin of chikan, said that it was the whimsical conceit of a court servant (again, male) to embroider a flower upon a nawab's *topi* that had just been washed. Once the *nawab* had given his approval, this proto-embroiderer made increasingly elaborate designs until chikan came into being. In contrast

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to the previous story, this one reasserts a "male" origin to chikan. However, unlike the Bengal stories of origin, there is no "industry" evident. Indeed, the story denies a role for any of the other artisans involved in chikan production today. In casting full aesthetic responsibility for chikan upon the embroiderer, this story is more like the tale of the bored Murshidabad lady. Another feature of this second story is that Saliha located the proto-embroiderer firmly in Daliganj. Embroiderers all over the city tend to agree that Daliganj was one of the earliest centers of chikan production in the city.

When relating their family histories, some embroiderers claimed a diverse craft background, most often in *zardozi* and *kamdani* (light embroidery with gold and silver wire—contrasted with the heavier *zardozi* form). Others spoke of chikan being the first craft activity acquired in the family. In a story that uniquely unites family history and chikan origins, Ayub Khan, son of one of the most famous embroiderers of this century, Fyaz Khan, retold his father's version of how their ancestor, Mohamad Shair Khan, became an embroiderer (for Fyaz Khan's version, see Dhamija 1964:25). According to Ayub Khan, his ancestor was resting outside his house when he was approached by two men. "What are you doing here?" they asked. "Do you know any craft?" He replied that he knew none, and they answered that they would teach him one. The next day they returned with needle and thread and taught him chikan. He in turn instructed his family and his neighbors, and thus chikan was born. The men who gave him his initial training were never known, and family lore refers to them as angels. Although I did not hear any other embroiderer repeat this story, or any variation of it, Dhamija (1964:25) found embroiderers respectfully visiting a tomb of Mohamad Shair Khan at the time of her research.

Persia

A major alternative to local stories of origin among embroiderers shifts the emphasis away from male originators to female ones. This story attributes the invention of chikan to Empress Nur Jahan (transformed into Empress Mumtaz Mahal in one version), consort of Jahangir, an emperor in the Mughal dynasty that dominated North India from the early sixteenth century to around the early eighteenth century. It is unsupported in scholarly literature, but has a few adherents in the lower levels of the government hierarchy who have received the story directly from embroiderers, specifically the family of another famous embroiderer of the mid-century, Hasan Mirza. In Persia, Nur Jahan was said to have seen stone tracery[4] on a monument that she found particularly beautiful. She wanted the same designs to be replicated on her clothing

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and she got an embroiderer to make them for her. In a version told to me by Rehana Begum (daughter of Hasan Mirza), Nur Jahan gathered together blockmakers and printers, as well as embroiderers, to recreate the design. Here we see a distinct "industry" being established—a solitary feature this story shares with tales of Bengal origin. The empress's own interest in the craft then set a trend that spread to the rest of the Mughal court. According to Akhtar Jahan, Rehana's sister, the man who did the first embroidery for Nur Jahan was the *ustād* (master, teacher) of the first embroiderer in her own family. In another version cited in *Lucknow City Magazine* (1988), it was a female handservant of Nur Jahan who brought the craft to Awadh. Others who quote the Nur Jahan story make no mention of how the craft became established in Lucknow. They do, however, emphatically deny that chikan came from Bengal. With a female originator, organizer, and transmitter of skills, and the use of chikan on female garments, this story contrasts starkly with tales of male embroiderers completely immersed in a public, market-oriented system of production.

There are also intermediate forms of the Bengal/Persia stories. Some Bengal stories of origin credit the Mughal emperors with having encouraged the development of chikan on Indian soil either through their own patronage, or indirectly through their courtiers. In general, like the Persian thesis, these theories tend to dilute the Indianness of chikan by referring to an external source, but return the emphasis to royalty, women, and personal patronage over and above commercialism and trade.

Historical Reconstruction

So much for legends. But what can reasonably be inferred about the history of chikan in Lucknow? A major problem in historical reconstruction is that chikan embroiderers simply do not feature prominently in histories of the city or of its region. Identifying the sociopolitical events that helped produce the conditions in which early industry flourished is not too difficult, and there has been plenty written about the kinds of people who have worn and enjoyed chikan over the years. Unfortunately, we know much less about the people whose production made accumulation and elite consumption possible.

Lucknow has ancient associations but is not usually thought of as a city of antiquity. Different legends associate it with Lakshman, brother of the divine hero Ram, for whom the Lakshman Tila area in the old city is said to be named (Hjortshoj 1979:17), or Lakhna, the builder of the Macchi Bhavan palace complex on this same site (Sharar 1974:37). By the sixteenth century, Lucknow was a thriving commercial town (Old-

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enburg 1984:6). Chowk was one of its oldest streets, its southern end (and the southern extent of the city) bounded by the Akbari Darwaza (Llewellyn-Jones 1985:18). A number of routes connected Lucknow with important transregional centers and it was a stopping place on the imperial highways to the East. Around the Chowk clustered *mohallas* and markets, some of which were built at the behest of Mughal emperors Akbar and Jahangir (Oldenburg 1984:7).

As the Mughal state slid into decline at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Lucknow became a prominent city, seat of the *nawabs* of Awadh who came to power in the Mughal rulers' wake (Cole 1989:42). Although not all the *nawabs* of Awadh resided in the city, all had some impact on the form the city took in this period (see Hjortshoj 1979; Llewellyn-Jones 1985). Above all, Lucknow became home to thousands of artisans who supplied the sophisticated demands of the *nawab* and his retinue.

The old city, with its *mohallas*, markets, and religious monuments, has always retained a level of independence vis-à-vis the palace complexes that began to dot the city from the mid-eighteenth century onward. It was the home of craftspeople, bankers, courtesans, and merchants. By the mid-1700s, Europeans visitors never failed to remark upon the splendor of the palaces and the vibrant commercial life of the city. They also noticed its congestion and filth, and the wretchedness of the poor (Llewellyn-Jones 1985:11–12; Oldenburg 1984:11).

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the British East India Company supplanted the *nawābī* lineage as the preeminent regional power. The *nawabs* continued to rule in name and the nobility remained, but the achievement and perpetuation of status took new forms. Some grew wealthy as revenue contractors and bankers, and streamed their income more and more into patronage of the arts and crafts (Cole 1989:93–95). The most famous of the *nawabs*, Asaf ud-Dawlah, moved his court to Lucknow from Faizabad and helped raise the settlement to artistic and architectural prominence. Hjortshoj (1979:20) dates Lucknow's status as a true city from the succession of Asaf, citing the feverish building activity that took place in his reign, and the growth in Lucknow's population.

From now on, the court became more famous than the rest of the city, leading to the impression that the city *was* the court. Asaf was a lavish patron, supporting scholars, architects, and artisans on a scale unmatched by his predecessors, and generally without regard to sectarian or communal differences (Oldenburg 1984:4; Fisher 1987:75; Cole 1989:94–95). Asaf's courtiers emulated his example in other areas of the city, with the result that mosques, *imāmbārās* (religious buildings of Shias, especially associated with the observance of the Islamic festival of

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Mohurram), and mansions began cropping up in affluent *mohallas* all over the city (Hjortshoj 1979:49; Oldenburg 1984:14). Asaf's building projects included a major refashioning of the Macchi Bhavan site and the construction of the Daulat Khana complex. Major landmarks of what later became "the old city" were built at this time, including the Rumi Darwaza and the Asafi (or Great) Imambara, the latter conceived as a kind of "work for welfare" project during the famine of 1784 (Sharar 1975:47). Recent estimates put the population between 350,000 (Llewellyn-Jones 1985:12) and 400,000 (Oldenburg 1984:19) by 1856, with between 50,000 and 100,000 people migrating into the city during the court's heyday.

A few of the monuments built in Asaf's reign stand today, including the Great Imambara, the Rumi Darwaza, the Baoli of the defunct Macchi Bhavan complex, and a few buildings of his huge palace compound, the Daulat Khana. None of these stands in the context of its original construction, and only the Great Imambara and Rumi Darwaza are prominent stops on the tourist trail. But nostalgia for the "golden age" of Asaf ud-Dawlah (famines notwithstanding) is as strong as ever, so much so that it is not at all surprising to find a contemporary advertisement for a chikan store headed by the famous couplet that reads, "*Jis ko na de Maulah, use [tis ko] de Asafu'd-Dawlah*" (Who from the heavens naught receiveth, to him Asaf ud-Dawlah giveth).[5] In fact, chikan is casually assumed by many Lakhnawis both inside and outside the industry to have been one of the many craft specialties that blossomed under the *nawabs*. Some sources even make deliberate reference to Asaf ud-Dawlah himself as an early patron.

At the death of Asaf ud-Dawlah, the British moved swiftly to become the new superregional power, taking a greater role in *nawabi* affairs and seizing more land (Metcalf 1964; Barnett 1980:236). The *nawabs* had little more to do than indulge consumption habits that were paid for with revenue they were still allowed to extract and keep for themselves (Barnett 1980; Fisher 1987:7). Under the first *shah*, Saadat Ali Khan, Lucknow's "consumer aristocracy" was boosted again (Bayly 1983:205). Accounts written by British visitors, attendants, and residents described life at court as indolent, indulgent, and extravagant, utterly distinct from the world outside its walls (Knighton 1855, 1865; Sleeman 1858).

It is quite possible that this was when chikan embroidering was first introduced in Lucknow. Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, a European woman writing in 1832 about her twelve-year stay in the city, writes of poor Sayyid (high-status Muslim) women making "jaullie (netting) for courtie's [*sic*] (a part of the female dress), which, after six days' close application, at the utmost could not realize three shillings each" (Meer

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Hassan Ali 1973[1832]:9). She makes no elaboration upon this remark, either in a discussion of productive activity or of fashion. However, it is possible there was an early specialist role for female *jali* makers, and that there was production for exchange of one of the present-day forms of work.

At last, Awadh succumbed to British annexation (Metcalf 1964), an event swiftly followed by the anti-British uprising (also known as the mutiny, or first war of independence) of 1856–57. The uprising's causes are complex and beyond the scope of this book (see Metcalf 1964; Brown 1985:83–89). Ranged against the British was a diverse group including disgruntled landowners upset at British reallocation of land rights (Metcalf 1964; Fisher 1987:238), religious figures (particularly Shias) who lost financial support and judicial standing with the annexation of Awadh (Cole 1989:271–72), and people with interests in commerce and handicrafts, both of which had suffered a decline with annexation (Bayly 1983). Lucknow was literally in the middle of the uprising; there was a harrowing succession of sieges and reliefs of the city and considerable portions were devastated in the course of the conflict. The sociopolitical, economic, and even psychological effects of the uprising have been amply documented (e.g., Metcalf 1964; Spear 1984; Brown 1985). In Lucknow, construction of a "new" city for Europeans to live in marked the shift of political power from the old city (Oldenburg 1984).

"Loyal" citizens were rewarded. *Ta'alluqadārs* (large landowners), deemed the ultimate "natural" authority and appropriate beneficiaries of a new land settlement, were brought by British patronage into the milieu of urban life from which they had previously been isolated, helping to buoy existing patterns of elite consumption in Lucknow, particularly at the occasional *darbār* (ceremonial celebrations of authority and deference, see Cohn 1983) held in Lucknow between 1867 and 1876 (Oldenburg 1984). The privileged supporters of the *nawab* that they replaced included Shia nobles, pensioners, and retainers, as well as the courtesans and royal wives. Many courtiers left Lucknow altogether after 1858 (Freitag 1990:261). Some with pensions and vested rights eked out a living and perpetuated, in genteel poverty, some last remnants of *nawabi* culture.

William Hoey, writing in 1880 of the "trade and manufactures" of the United Provinces, states that chikan was "always a favourite employment of women of some castes" in the domestic sphere, but refers to chikan explicitly as a Lucknow *industry* of the post-uprising period, being "almost unknown in the Nawabi" (Hoey 1880:28). Hoey describes two tiers of workers. On one hand, there were male "professional chikan workers" doing the best work and getting paid the high-

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est piece wages (Hoey 1880:89). In another reference to chikan in the nineteenth century, Abdul Halim Sharar (1989 [1975]:172) writes that a delicate chikan cap took up to a year to make, "and even the most ordinary ones cost anything from ten to twelve rupees." On the other hand, there were women and children (whose numbers clearly impressed Hoey), working long hours for very small amounts of money, on lesser-quality work, including Indian-style garments, handkerchiefs, and pieces for inserting into separately prepared articles (Hoey 1880:88). Hoey does not elaborate upon the particular type of work each "tier" was doing, but his reference to women and children embroidering *būṭās* (round floral motifs) and *bels* (lit., creeper, a decorative embroidered flower stem) implies that it was neither *jali* work nor *bakhya* work. Watt (1903:399, 402) refers to both *phanda* and *tepci* "work" in his description of Lucknow chikan. He describes *phanda* as high-status work along the lines of what "*murri*" refers to today, while tepci was dismissed as the simple, cheap work of women.[6] Perhaps it was *tepci* work Hoey observed women making.

Taken together with the earlier observations of Meer Hassan Ali, this strongly implies the existence of a sexual division of labor in chikan work some one hundred years ago, in which men's work was elaborate and well-paid and women's work, while detailed, was low-paid. Chikan was a prodigious industry that flourished in the disturbed social conditions of the postuprising period. In this "fertile ground," chikan as an export industry grew, producing goods for populations outside Lucknow, instead of only for the local elite, with the labor of impoverished women and children desperate even for small wages (Hoey 1880:88; Oldenburg 1984:165; Mukharji 1888:180). In order to support a few vestiges of their previous lifestyle, they sold their personal property to pawnbrokers who themselves had withdrawn from banking in the face of competition from British financial institutions.

Providing the organization and finance for the chikan industry were members of the Hindu commercial castes who had transferred their activities from banking to moneylending and manufacturing. Among them were Rastogis, and Sunni and Hindu Khatri businessmen, who began to set up *karkhānās* (workshops, companies) to cater to the awakening tastes of the new elite (Oldenburg 1984:211–14). A present-day Muslim shopkeeper flatly suggested that the same families who pawned their belongings to Rastogi moneylenders were later compelled to make chikan for them (see also Oldenburg 1984:169)

Numerically dominant among the classes in decline were Muslims, moreover the same Shia Muslims who had been in the ascendancy less than two decades before. On the other hand, Sunnis, who had been unable to grasp power under the *nawabi* but could now claim privileges

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under the British as the larger minority, fared better in the changed conditions. The precipitous decline in elite Shia fortunes relative to Sunnis, coming as it did on the heels of the establishment of Sunni separateness and superiority, helped consolidate emergent communal identities and resentments in the city (Cole 1989).

In 1877, the Northwest Provinces and Awadh were amalgamated into a new territory called the United Provinces, with its capital in Allahabad. Lucknow's population had fallen after the uprising and the city faded into a political obscurity that lasted for nearly forty years (Hjortshoj 1979:26). In the 1920s, the capital of the United Provinces was finally shifted back to Lucknow. By this time, Lucknow had become known as the only place where "chikan" was made. According to the embroiderers Ayub Khan and Saliha Khatun, three or four male-run *karkhanas* filling orders directly for patrons were the primary source of chikan work in the first decades of the twentieth century and the places in which chikan in its finest form was developed (see also Chattopadhyaya 1963:44–45). While rooted in the household, *karkhanas* were open to a wider circle of young boys to learn the craft. Both Ayub and Saliha emphasized Daliganj, with two *karkhanas,* as an important production center, notwithstanding that it was, in their words, *dehāt* (country) surrounded by "jungle." Other embroiderers put the figure of *karkhanas* at ten to fifteen, referring to locations in Husainabad, Muftiganj, Musaibganj (near Takkurganj), as well as Daliganj. The number of men employed in the *karkhanas* was not given, although Ayub Khan said that five men had held positions in his grandfather's *karkhana* at the beginning of the century.

Karkhanas were still important when women began to replace men as practitioners at the highest level. Although I did not systematically collect oral histories from embroiderers, it was apparent that many present-day female embroiderers, especially those with high skills, were at least second- and more often third-generation artisans, whose grandmothers and great-grandmothers had been the earliest family members to take up chikan. Among the highly skilled, it was also common for embroidery skills to have originated with male ancestors, then shifted to female ones. Skilled embroiderer Anwar Jahan had a *nānī* (mother's mother) who had learnt from her own husband, the first embroiderer in that family. Hasan Mirza instructed all his daughters in chikan, and their mother had learnt from her own father Ali Nawab. Asiya Khatun, daughter of Saliha Khatun, had learnt from her father, but this is unusual today. The prevalent pattern was that once a female ancestress had learnt the craft, the skill had been passed on thereafter in the female line from mother or *k͟hālā* (mother's sister) to child.

What exactly provoked this shift is still unknown and can only be

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discovered through further research. That it coincided with a period of global depression certainly seems suggestive. By the 1930s, boys had stopped taking up the craft in any numbers and the *karkhanas* closed. Ayub Khan described his father's earnings from chikan in the 1930s and 1940s as "low . . . only twenty rupees per month." Ayub's account was seconded by a *mahājan* (lit., "big man," businessman, in this context, chikan manufacturer and shopkeeper) who said that the 1930s was when women entered the workforce in high numbers and shopkeepers flourished. In fact, as early as 1923 there were reports the *karkhana* system had come to an end and that male and female members of a household now formed the core productive unit, the better skilled men acting as agents (Ghosal 1923:22). Men continued to have a stake in the fine work that they still made but had an increasing stake in the work that they gave to female embroiderers.

Lucknow retained its position as a regional capital with Indian independence and the creation of the new state of Uttar Pradesh in 1947. The population of Lucknow, which had been depressed for many decades after the uprising, began to increase again after Independence and the partition of India and Pakistan (Hjortshoj 1979:27). Many Muslims left the city for Pakistan, but substantially more immigrants came from the Punjab and other northwestern states (Mukherjee and Singh 1961). Those who left came largely from the middle and upper classes, stripping the city of a layer of elite consumers whose absence may in part explain Lakhnawis' sense that the city has gone into a decline. Perhaps this was when nearby villages began to give way to the city itself as the only location for "real chikan."

Women were already important producers in the industry before Independence, and by the 1950s they were in the majority. According to chikan embroiderers, *mahajans* and Lakhnawi laymen alike, the history of chikan, particularly since the mid-century, is essentially a story of inexorable decline. No embroiderer that I met denied that the quality of embroidery had declined over the years. Embroiderers, even those who can do exquisite work, all swear that the work is *moṭā* (thick, i.e., crude) today, and that fine work is *k͟hatam* (finished). When I asked about changes in chikan clothes at one shop, the proprietor presented me with a stark contrast. "Look at this," he said, casting down on his left a contemporary lemon yellow *sari*, covered with thick *bakhya* work, and on his right, a muslin *kurtā* (an Indian shirt), embroidered carefully and delicately in *murri*, its stitches strikingly clear and precise, slightly worn in a few places. "This," he said pointing to the *kurta* on his right, "was made only twenty years ago. It was commonplace work then. But now, you can't get it at any price."

Old examples of fine work may be fetched from the shopkeeper's

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private collection upon request, but they are shown only as items beyond price and without contemporary equal. Without exception, these pieces are delicate, detailed, and are remarkable for a profusion of intricate *jali* work. They may include *saris*, *kurtas*, and *dupaṭṭās* (shawls) ranging from twenty to fifty years old. But the majority are unfinished *topis* that were used as samples for individual clients to choose the designs they wanted on commissioned work. They are not always as elaborate as the scores of outstanding examples of richly embroidered *topis* that have already found their way into private and museum collections. But the standard of work on these *topis*, even if no more than twenty years old, is far superior to what is considered good quality (if not the very best) *murri* work made today. One prominent *mahajan* said there was no present-day market for these kinds of caps, and a sizeable consignment of old caps that the shops could not sell had been packed up and dispatched for sale in Pakistan in the late 1970s.

In the 1960s, the chikan product range shifted toward *kurtas* and *salwar-qamiz* (women's pants and tunic) and away from *topis* and more elaborately tailored apparel. English goods like table cloths and table linens continue to maintain a foothold in the market, produced either for export or for consumption by upper-class Indians. In the same time, *bakhya* work came to prominence, part of the growing commercialization and cheapening of chikan, and the move away from what *mahajans* refer to as an "artistic industry." Newer *mahajans* came into the business with no background in, or knowledge of, chikan. In the 1960s and 1970s, the numbers of shops began to increase dramatically. Sharma (1959) recorded around twelve dealers in the old city. Today, there are dozens of independent shops all over Lucknow.

Not coincidentally, this has also been a period in which the embroidery stage has been totally feminized. No male embroiderer has ever been associated with producing *bakhya* work. With a fall in the demand for superior *murri* work, men have found their productive skills unrewarding, and have either gravitated toward agent roles, or left the industry altogether. Women now make the best and most expensive, as well as the coarsest and cheapest chikan products. They are both the industry's cheap labor and its master craftspeople, and make up an increasing, if still small, proportion of the agents who subcontract work.

The differences between otherwise coincident stories of decline lie in where the blame is laid. Art critics and connoisseurs of fine chikan have denounced the debased tastes of an India-wide consumer class that craves *bakhya* work. Traders and embroiderers agree that there has been a decline in the discernment (and thus the distinction)[7] of chikan consumers. "There aren't as many people who respect chikan and who know it the way the *nawabs* did," said Rehana Begum. Chikan has

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