

A photograph of a wooden table with a green and blue patterned cloth and a blue patterned cloth. The green cloth is folded and placed on top of the blue cloth. The blue cloth has a white pattern. The green cloth has a white pattern. The background is blurred, showing some colorful objects.

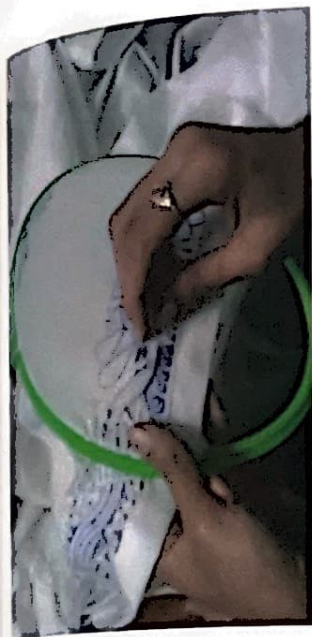
Carrying home wherever I go

by Varisha Tariq

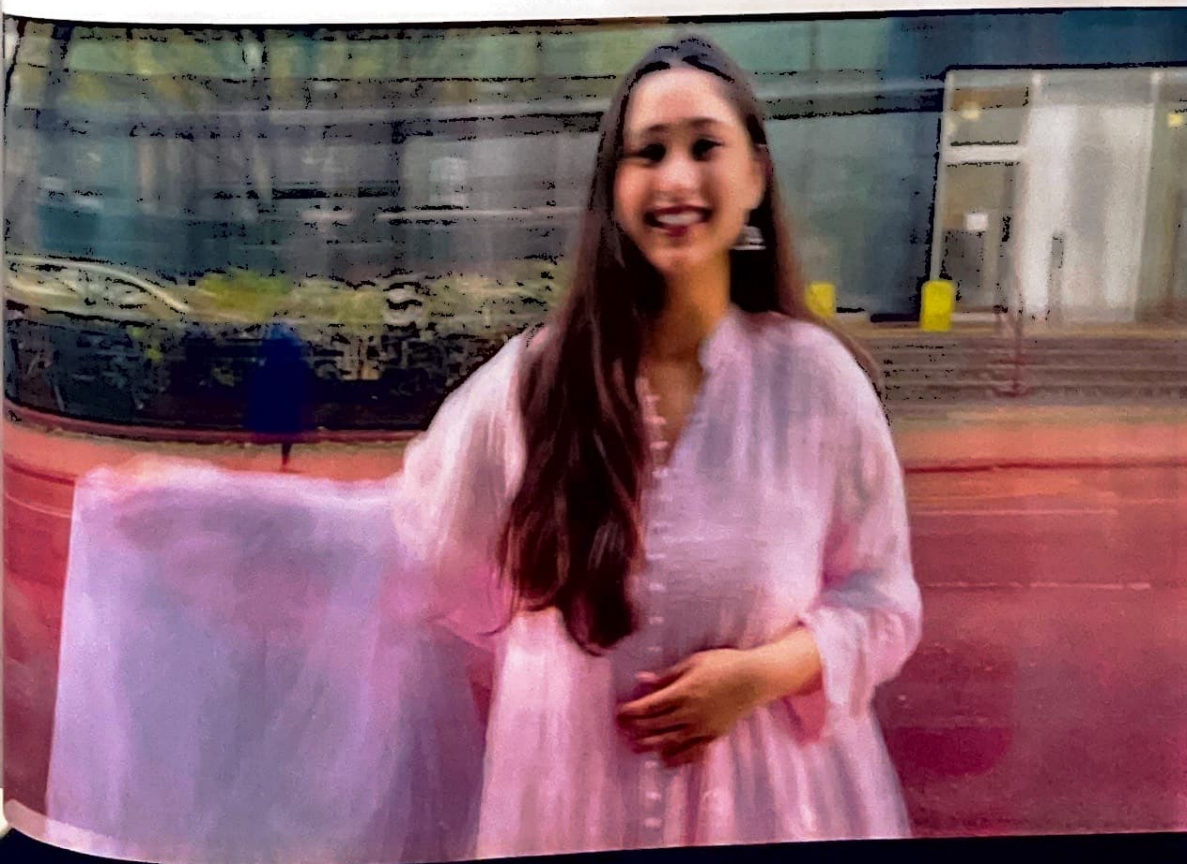
Wearing Chikankari in London seemed bizarre, so out of place. I felt like I was wearing an art piece. Or putting my culture on display as if I was inhabiting a global museum. Back home, in Lucknow, I wore these to go to the office or on brunch dates with my friends. And it wasn't just me, it was everyone I knew. Wearing Chikankari pieces was an ordinary part of my life.

From the city of Nawabs, comes the handwork of Chikankari, almost 200 years old and the heritage of Mughal India. Today around 5000 families in and around Lucknow are dedicated to carrying forward this traditional work, with Chikankari slowly transforming into a global phenomenon. Chikankari is an elegant form of hand embroidery on different kinds of clothing. There have been several mentions of this in Indian Literature but the most recent understanding is that it was part of East Bengal and during the reign of Mughal Emperors in the 18th century, it came to my city, Lucknow. The craft faced its own set of ups and downs. From the hands of the elite, it was transferred to the hands of the poor for commercial purposes in the 20th century, after the reign of landowners and rulers ended during British Rule. Now women and children were the ones making it. In the late twentieth century, a study sponsored by UNICEF highlighted the impact of labour on children and finally, the craft mostly shifted to the hands of women who wanted to be independent. To this date, the Chikan work in Lucknow comes from factories where it is primarily women craftsmen. In Lucknow, Chikankari stores are in almost every area, where you have a job done on Sari, Kurtas, Tops, Stoles, and my favourite, long gowns. The materials range from cotton to chiffon, depending on what you want to wear.

When you look closely, the embroidery is so delicate and gentle. From flowers to patterns, you can understand how the work is not only influenced by the rich diversity of India but also by the intricate patterns that can be found in Central Asia. As a city, Lucknow is popular for its tehzeeb or this idea of noble behaviour from the people in Lucknow. Not only is it reflective of the royal influence on the city but a unique identifier attached to the whole city, of people being gentle in their behaviour. Nawabi culture, as it is popularly known. The Chikan work is as delicate as the culture of the city.



"Chikankari is an elegant form of hand embroidery on different kinds of clothing."





Images: jointly curated by Varisha and her mother Ghazala Tariq
Photos of Varisha were taken by Arushi Mishra

Article

When I was first immigrating to the UK, I knew that the change in clothing would be a deeply emotional shift for me. What you wear in your own house is not a representation of culture for you, but your most comfortable clothing, the one you are used to wearing. Yes, of course, even places in other parts of India view chikankari work as a cultural phenomenon but one does not stand out wearing those. I wore this piece in London very recently, without any cultural reason, and just because I missed home and I wanted to. Although I enjoyed the compliments I received from strangers when I was dressed in this, I knew it was because I was wearing something vastly different, maybe something that I can only wear at festivals or very specific gatherings of Indians.

When I moved here, thanks to globalisation, it did not take long to blend in with the crowd where the wardrobe consists, very narrowly, of Zara, H&M, M&S, Primark or Uniqlo. The fashion of London bleeds into almost having a uniform look. Given the season, that does make sense. However, you lose a little bit of your identity in trying to fit in. I desperately miss the loud colours from back home. The shades of pastel, the blazing red or the screaming shades of pink. You would never stand out if you were wearing the entire colour palette. It would be so ordinary to be expressive with your clothing. As an immigrant, I am constantly aware of the colours and types of clothing I am wearing. And it is not just me, I look at people from other South Asian communities feeling the same. Home, I have come to realise, can be found hidden in so many places. I would find hints of blue in their eye shadow or a popping statement earring from a street market in India, or a peek of traditional long shirts with elephants and peacocks hidden beneath their very long brown overcoat.

Fabrics, much like music and perfume, have a way of connecting you to your past. When I was wearing this, I was back in my home, on an eid get-together, laughing with my family and friends or I was back in the arms of my best friend on her birthday. Wearing this piece, in the heart of London, kept me connected to my home and my people. If you were to take my word for it, it felt a little bit like magic, as if it had transported me back to them.

Despite feeling like I am a piece of art, walking down Kings Cross square, I felt so proud to be able to wear my pink Chikan piece. Thousands of women have, through working at Chikan Kari factories, found empowerment. This is not a piece that is coming from the factories of Bangladesh or Sri Lanka where women are underpaid and exploited but instead it is coming from my home where this work has freed so many women from economic oppression. It serves as a reminder that I have uprooted my entire life and moved away from home in pursuit of a better future but I'll always have hints of it in my heart (and my wardrobe). A line of clothing with such a rich cultural heritage is an important piece that an immigrant like me can hold onto. I'll be wearing my share of the brands, but every so often you'll find a piece of home, peeking from beneath my cardigan.



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