Vol. 6, Issue 06, PP. 17-23, June 2019

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Evolution of Mirror Embroidery in Two Villages of Sanghar Sindh

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Abstract— The tradition of mirror embroidery is one of the major features of regional embroideries of Sindh. Several studies on embroideries of Sindh have been conducted but seldom research work has been done, particularly on mirror embroidery. It is in the backdrop of this and owing to the immense richness of embroidery of Sindh this study has been conducted. This study focuses on identifying the lost characters and changes within mirror embroidery, since the past three decades. Having rich traditions in embroidery in lower Sindh, Sanghar District has been chosen as an area of study for this paper. In order to have a closer qualitative study, two villages; Moulvi Khair Muhammad (Bakhoro) and Haji Abdul Karim Laghari (Patti), were mainly surveyed along with some other areas. In this phenomenological investigation, data were collected through interviews, open-ended questionnaire and visual reference. After analysing both textual and visual data, the changes within the following major aspects were evaluated:

1) Materials 2) Techniques 3) Colours 4) Designs 5) Products

Keywords— Mirror Embroidery, Stitch, Sanghar, Sindh, Shisha

Introduction

The craft of embroidery is one of the most primitive methods of surface decoration of the textiles. Different kinds of techniques were used for embroidery since the ancient cultures. Shrikant [1] indicated that in some cultures, different materials like precious stones and metals were used in embroidery and were later replaced by the cheaper materials. Therefore the present day practice of mirror embroidery has also a great link with this evolutional process.

Rivers [2] has discussed that most of the mirror embroidery is being practised in the desert regions of India, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Similarly, Gillow and Sentence [3] declared that the regions of Gujarat and Rajasthan from Indian and Sindh from Pakistan are the most important centres of mirror embroidery in the world. In the light of both evidence, the two countries; India and Pakistan can be considered as the hub of the mirror embroidery.

In Pakistan, the embroidery of Sindh provides diverse examples of mirror work. Almost every community practices its own unique style of embroidery. Thus the styles of mirror embroidery also vary from one community to another. The style, colour, shape and even some times stitchery of mirror embroidery are also different from one region to another and from one community to another. Much of these aspects have

evolved through modifications and enhancements from time to time. Foreign invasions and migrations of people from other regions have further enriched the work by intermixing of different cultures in this region [4].

Researchers from different parts of the world have worked on the indigenous embroideries of Sindh. Several authors [4] [5] described the mirror embroideries of different regions of Sindh, which includes: Ghotki, Shikarpur, Jacobabad, Khairpur, Sukkur, Mirpur Mathelo, Thano Bula Khan, Thatta, Badin, Hyderabad, Hala, Nawabshah, Mirpurkhas, Sanghar, Kashmore and multiple regions of Thaparkar particularly Umarkot, Chachro, , Diplo, Nagarparkar and Mithi. Much of this literature provides sufficient detail about different embroidery forms but has very briefly discussed the mirror work in particular. Also, in most literature, the mirror work, specifically that of the Tharparkar is being emphasized [4] [5] [6]. Furthermore, Shrikant [1] provides details of basic stitches without mentioning any change in it. However, Paine [6] has pointed out that some basic changes within human behaviour and technology have caused the decline of regional embroideries. It is also an important fact that currently, the craft is undergoing certain changes, and these changes have vet not recorded in most of the literature, thus there was a need to understand the present form of mirror work in its historical context. Therefore the basic purpose of this study is to explore the changes within mirror embroidery along with lost characters, particularly since the past three decades. Sanghar, being one of the most important centres of mirror embroidery, has been chosen as the area of study [5]. Particularly, the two villages specializing the craft; Moulvi Khair Muhammad and Haji Abdul Karim Laghari, are mainly investigated.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The embroidery of the sub-continent is very famous for its unique stitchery and indigenous motifs throughout the world. Tantalizing mirror work is one of its most prominent features. The evidence of embroidery craft in Vedic literature affirms the fact that embroidery in sub-continent was an established craft, since the very early time [1] [5]. Furthermore, in Sindh, the embroidery is considered as old as the Indus Valley Civilization as the archaeological findings like Bronze needles (resembling those used for embroidery) from Mohen-jo-Daro, which support the evidence of embroidery in that era [5]. Also, the raised trefoil motifs over the shawl of the king-priest, suggests that design is embroidered.

The origin of the mirror embroidery in sub-continent is still in conflict. Rivers [2] suggests that the origin of mirror embroidery cannot be accurately established. However, on another hand, it is also suggested that the mirror embroidery might have originated in the Indian Sub-continent [3]. However, in contradiction, some other authors argued that the tradition of the mirror embroidery in sub-continent has been brought by foreign travellers. Askari and Crill [4] have mentioned that the Baluchi mountain dwellers brought the traditions of fine geometric embroidery incorporating mirrors in Sindh. Thus the accurate time and the place of origin of mirror embroidery are yet to be established. However, one thing is still clear that the craft was originated in Asia.

There is no doubt that the art of using mirrors in embroidery is a result of the long evolutional process. This process might have initiated since the advent of ancient civilizations when the sun was being worshipped. The people see the gigantic sun as a sign of divine, hope or deity in itself. Therefore in earlier cultures, the mirrors were associated with deities, sun, water and the life hereafter. In ancient time, different types of mirrors were used by people of different cultures like Haitians, Peruvians, Mexicans, Tahitians, Egyptians and Greeks. [2]

Shrikant [1] is of the opinion that, in an earlier time, the embroidery work on the attire of kings of different periods. was used to denote their aristocracy and power. Therefore different expensive materials like gold, precious stones and pearls were used for the decoration of their wardrobe. With the span of time, these materials have been substituted with other elegant but less expensive materials like glass beads, mirrors and different metallic fibres. Rivers [2] declares that in old ages, the different shimmering objects like coins, beetles elytra, tin and silver were used at the place of mirrors in embroidery. Then the mica; shiny mineral, resembling the mirror glass in appearance, was used in embroidery [2] [3] [5]. Many researchers [1] [2] [7] have indicated that in past, the silver glass was used in embroidery, which was produced by blowing mirror glass into spheres. Then it was broken into pieces of required sizes. It was slightly convex in appearance. Thus such a mirror was assumed to frighten the evil spirits away, by terrifying them, by their own reflections. Paine [7] describes that, in India, the mirror glass is termed as shisha by the Hindus and as abhla by the Muslims.

Askari and Crill [4] surveyed different regions of Sindh, which produce mirror embroidery and also have catalogued the communities which produce mirror embroidery such as *Mahar* community near Shikarpur and Ghotki, *Jat* community in Badin, farming groups of Hyderabad, Hala and Nawabshah, Lohana and Pallari groups from Thano Bula Khan and a number of communities of Tharparkar region. Yacopino [5] identified the Umarkot, Hyderabad, Sanghar and Kashmore, as some of the most important centres of mirror embroidery in Sindh. Furthermore, Duarte [8] has merely indicated the use of mirrors in the embroidery of Sindh without providing further details. Apart from this, Paine [6] has discussed several mirror

embroidered products of Sindh but have neither discussed lost products nor the new emerging trends. Thus, lost products as well as the latest uses of mirror embroidery are also uncovered in this study. However, Memon [9] has explored amazing facts about mirror embroidery in his discussion about three phases of Sindhi cap. He described that in the first phase of Sindhi cap the mirrors and sequins were used, however in the second phase, stibnite/antimonite was used at the place of mirrors. These caps were often made of black cloth over which the small pieces of stibnite were attached, which give a unique effect under the sunlight. While in his discussion of the third and present phase of Sindhi caps, he pointed out the use of Zari (metallic) thread in the embroidery but at the same time has not discussed the different types of mirrors used. Therefore different types of mirrors used in the embroidery of the present age are also discussed in this study. Also, Shrikant [1] has clearly demonstrated the traditional method of stitching mirrors used in India and in Sindh but she has not identified any changes in it. Therefore in this study, the changes within these traditional methods are focused, instead of demonstrating the basic stitching method. As in most of the literature, the traditional form of mirror embroidery is discussed without mentioning any changes in it. Therefore the basic purpose of this study is to describe the changes within mirror embroidery for the past three decades. Particularly the changes within basic mirrors (appearance, physical properties, size, shape), threads (material and colour), Technique (stitching methods, appearance), Designs (layouts/plans), Products (old and new types of mirror embroidery products) are mainly surveyed.

METHODOLOGY

A pilot study was conducted to identify the villages and people working on mirror embroidery in Sanghar. Thus two villages; Moulvi Khair Muhammad and Haji Abdul Karim Laghari, practising the expertise of craft were shortlisted for this study along with some other areas of Sanghar. The craft of mirror work is only practised by the women in these regions, therefore all the respondents were female embroiderers. Responses of 13 respondents from Moulvi Khair Muhammad and 10 respondents from Haji Abdul Karim Laghari while 15 respondents from other areas which mainly include Yousif-Ji-Mian (Mian), Padri-jo-Goth, Waheed colony, Shahmeer colony, Zahid Town and Khaskheli Paro (of Sanghar city) were also recorded for primary data collection. Majority of the respondents have minimum 10 years experience in embroidery. Empirical evidence was also collected by interviewing two elder respondents (one from Moulvi Khair Muhammad and another from Haji Abdul Karim Laghari) having more than 50 years experience in embroidery. They shared much deeper information, particularly, about the time period of initiation of new techniques and older traditions of the craft. For the qualitative data collection, the phenomenological approach was used. The data were primarily collected through open-ended questionnaires, interviews and visual reference (photography). Initially, the basic aspects, which have undergone certain changes, were

investigated through open-ended questionnaires, which were designed in the local (Sindhi) language. The embroiderers were capable of reading and writing Sindhi who filled these questionnaires. After identifying the basic aspects there was a need to explore that, what kind of changes these aspects have experienced? For example, it was explored that the mirrors have undergone certain changes but it was unclear how they have been changed, in texture, shapes, sizes or what? Thus these more explanatory facts were then investigated through interviews. Additionally, the collected data require further analysis, by comparing it with the visual examples as most of the facts were associated with visual properties like colours, texture and designs. Therefore the older and newer embroidery samples, authenticated by elder respondents, were recorded through photography. Also, the newer stitching technique was recorded from an embroidered product, which was in progress, from Haji Abdul Karim Laghari village. Initially, the collected data were analyzed through discourse After identification of the basic aspects, the analysis. responses were given specific codes. Additionally, the textual collected data were compared with the visual reference, in order to authenticate the results. Finally, the coded answers were assessed through the percentage method in order to evaluate the most common and least common responses for making final results.

RESULTS

In Sanghar the mirror embroidery is produced in extensive amount particularly in two villages; *Moulvi Khair Muhammad* and *Haji Abdul Karim Laghari*. The way the mirrors are stitched on cloth has gone through slow and gradual improvements /changes from time to time. During the survey many respondents indicated a number of aspects which have undergone certain changes, the statistics of those changing aspects according to the survey are given in the table below.

S#	Research Question	Names of areas with the number of respondents			Statistics	
	The difference in mirror work of past & present age	Moulvi Khair Muhammad	Haji Abdul Karim	Other Areas	Total	Percentage
	Responses	13	10	15	38	
A	Yes	6	5	6	17	44.7
	1. In Stitch or technique	1	1	0	2	5.26
	2. In availability in different shapes at present	2	0	0	2	5.26
	3. In colours	0	1	1	2	5.26
	4. In Shapes	3	3	1	7	18.4
	5. In Designs	0	1	5	6	15.8
	6. In Usage	2	0	0	2	5.26
В	Not	7	5	9	21	55.3

It was indicated that the shapes of mirrors and also the patterns of mirror embroidery have been greatly changed. However, some embroiderers notified that other aspects particularly technique of mirror stitch, availability of different forms of mirrors in market, colours and usage of mirror embroidery have also undergone certain changes. Some of the new techniques of mirror embroidery were recorded during the survey. Furthermore, some modifications within the traditional methods which result in changes in the appearance of mirror work were also noted. Unfortunately, some of the aspects of mirror embroidery have now been disappeared with the passage of time. But the introduction of new aspects has replaced and balanced the absence of the lost ones.

A. Evolution of Materials of Mirror Embroidery

The basic materials used for mirror embroidery are primarily mirrors and threads. In the present time, when the machinery and technology are asphyxiating, the traditional methods of manufacturing, the materials employed for traditional crafts are also getting changed, slowly and gradually.

Mirrors in Early Age: A number of embroiderers mentioned that in old age before the introduction of machine cut mirrors, the mirrors of only circle shape were used in embroidery. Some respondents indicated that, earlier, the mirror glass was purchased from the market in the form of large sheets. These large sheets were then cut with the help of scissors into small circle pieces, of the required size. These were metal backed mirrors and were termed as 'Sado'. This type of mirror has an uneven surface which also bears bubbles but it has a permanent shine see Fig.1.

Latest Types of Mirrors: At present, the machine-cut polished mirrors termed as 'Special' are produced which are available in different shapes and sizes. Such mirrors have more sparkling shine, compared to that of Sado. But it was also mentioned by most respondents that its polish is temporary which gets deteriorated, after washing. Much of embroiderers shared that the availability of different shapes of mirrors in the market has brought changes in their craft as such mirrors are available in square, triangle, diamond, drop, eye and even heart-shape. Particularly the embroiderers of Mian village Sanghar mentioned the use of heart-shaped



Figure 1. Bubbled surface of 'Sado' type of mirrors, Moulvi Khair Muhammad village Sanghar, source author.

mirrors in $Sagi^{\ l}$. Many times a variety of shapes are incorporated in single product see Fig. 2. Despite all these innovations, the circle shaped mirrors are still most widely used, due to their strong link with the past.

Different types of mirrors are also produced for commercial use. One of them is mirror encased in metal ring see Fig 3. This type of mirrors is used, particularly by the embroiderers of the *Mian* village. They use chiefly these mirrors, for making commercial products just like *Sagi*. Such mirrors are stitched only with four simple stitches at the four sides of the ring just like a button. This type of mirror work is less intricate and gaudier in look. While interviewing, an embroiderer mentioned that what is being preferred and liked by customers is more important for them, as they produce commercial products. Therefore this type of mirrors are mostly preferred for commercial products but not for a domestic one.

Threads in the Earlier and Present Age: An elder respondent indicated that a specific type of thread Kashmiro² was used in the mirror embroidery which was later replaced by artificial threads. Recently the artificial wool (acrylic) threads are widely used for stitching the mirrors. These are locally termed as Irani Dhago/Pasham/Una, by the villagers. An elder respondent shared that, use of this type of thread was started about 15 years ago. A type of artificial silk thread CTC³ is also used for mirror embroidery primarily that of formal wear.

Colours in Earlier Time: Traditionally, the colours of threads used in mirror embroidery were mainly limited to basic primary and one secondary colour, along with black and white. The traditional colours indicated by most embroiderers were: black, white, red, blue, yellow and green. However, the use of pink, purple and brown was also indicated by some of the embroiderers see Fig. 4.

Colours in Present Era: By the introduction of a new type of fibres/threads for embroidery, new colours range have also emerged. In visual reference, it was observed that a very unique palette of colours, is also employed for some products. Particularly the colour range of artificial silk; CTC, is very vast. Tints of different hues, pastel colours and even neon colours are also used.

Evolution in the Basic Stitching Techniques

Hair accessory, resembling the long braided hair, often decorated with mirrors, beads, tessels and pompoms at the end. It is often added within hair braid to increase the length.

The mirrors are stitched by using two layers of stitches; $Katcho^4$ and $Pakko^5$. The fact was affirmed by a number of embroiderers, at Sanghar.

Katcho Stitch (Traditional Approach): Initial layer;



Figure 2. The embroidered neck of girl's frock embroidered with square, drop and circle shaped mirrors, *Haji Abdul Karim Laghari* village Sanghar, source author.



Figure 3. Mirrors encased with metal rings, *Mian* village Sanghar, source author.





Figure 4. Gaj^{1} of 1980s, simple design made with few basic colours,

² Fine thin and lustrous thread made of natural fibres ³ Artificial silk thread, made of very smooth fibers combined with low twist

⁴ Sindhi term which literary means weak or immature.

⁵ Sindhi term which literary means firm or solid.

Katcho is a kind of cross stitch and is used to hold the mirror on its place, before making the final stitch. It also serves as a framework, for the second layer of the stitch. It was also indicated by embroiderers that, in early age the style of this stitch, closely resembles the octagram see the Fig. 5.

Pakko Stitch (Traditional Approach): The Pakko stitch is the final layer of stitch, employed to encircle the mirror. The most common type of stitch used for making Pakko is informally termed as $Reso^6$ by most of the embroiderers. It can be considered as a combination of buttonhole and chain stitch see Fig. 6.

Katcho Stitch (Contemporary Style): With the span of time, the style of *katcho* stitch has a little bit changed. At present, the cross stitches for *katcho* are made in the form of hexagram instead of octagram see Fig. 7.

Pakko Stitch (Contemporary Style): Traditionally the Reso was embroidered to encapsulate mirror, forming a circular band. But later, some enhancements were made, which changed its appearance much extent. One of these enhancements was exposed by one embroiderer at Moulvi Khair Muhammad village Sanghar. This technique involves the application of Reso, in the form of other shapes (other than a circle). In this method, the technique remains almost the same, except that the outline of stitches forms another shape. In simple words, in this style, the outline of stitches is extended outward to form another shape. In the result, the finished mirror has circle from inside and square (or any other shape) from outside see Fig. 8.

Other Techniques: A new technique of stitching mirrors is also being practised, at present. This is locally termed as *Tare-Waro-Shisho* in Sindhi, which literary means 'star-shaped mirror'. The embroiderers of *Mian* village term this technique as '*Deesh*' see Fig. 9.

Evolution of Designs and Patterns of Mirror Embroidery

In early age before 1990s, the mirrors were stitched in very simple designs and patterns of embroidery. The basic plan of most of these designs was geometrical. Much of these designs were made in the border, stripe and set layouts. In the visual survey, it was observed that the mirrors were mostly embroidered, to form chains and several stripes were repeated, to fill the desired area. However, other times, the mirrors were placed in alternation with a motif, to fill the entire space, with the set layout, see Fig. 10. With the span of time, the nature of designs starts getting change slowly and gradually due to changes in techniques, used for the application of designs.

Many embroiderers in their response, shared that with the span of time, the great changes within patterns and designs of mirror embroidery, have occurred. Particularly, the designs on the Gaj^7 and bodice front/ neckline, hem and sleeves of shirts



Figure 5. Illustration of the katcho style of the early age.



Figure 6. Traditional style of Pakko stitch, *Moulvi Khair Muhammad village* Sanghar, source author.





Figure 7. The contemporary style of *katcho* stitch with illustration, *Haji Abdul Karim Laghari* village Sanghar, source author





Figure 8. Circle mirrors stitched in diamond form with illustration of basic layout, *Moulvi Khair Muhammad* village Sanghar, source author.



Figure 9. Tare-Waro-Shisho/Deesh, Haji Abdul Karim Laghari village Sanghar, source author.

variety of stitches and colours. Sometimes, it is made on separate piece of cloth and then attached to the garment.

⁶ Literally Sindhi term used for chain stitch but is also used informally for the stitch used in mirror embroidery.

⁷ Solid embroidery over the woman's shirt it usually cover the area starting from neck up to the stomach. It incorporates

have experienced great changes. An elder respondent shared that an early age when she was young, embroiderers used to apply the designs, by making a free-hand drawing on to the cloth. Later the technique of block printing was used, for the application of patterns. Also, a new method, which uses butter paper, was introduced after it. In this method, the linear design was produced by making a dotted line through pinned holes. often with a needle. As this method, was also possible to be done at home, thus embroiderers started to create their personally composed patterns, through this method at home. Also, the method facilitated the replication of design, from any other resource like printed textile. This way, there was no longer a need to create the patterns from imagination. In the late 1990s, the style of designs was changed and geometrical designs incorporating flower in scattered and box layouts were also used, see Fig. 11. This change also occurred due to some enhancements in the traditional stitching method of mirrors.

Nowadays, different types of designs, both floral and geometrical designs, are used in mirror embroidery and even an embroiderer mentioned that mirrors are also incorporated in paisley motif, see Fig. 12. In general, different types of designs are being used in embroidery however the border design is still widely used.

Uses and Products of Mirror Embroidery in Earlier and Present Time

Earlier, the mirror embroidery was mainly used for making *Gaj*. Some embroiderers also shared that earlier, the mirror embroidery was limited to the adornment of women's attire. But some of the men's products like Sindhi Cap (*Topi*), *Agath* ⁸ and *Ganji/Banyan* ⁹ were also adorned with mirror embroidery.

With the span of time, the uses of mirror embroidery also get diverse and later mirror embroidery was also adopted for home furnishing. A number of embroiderers mentioned that the trend of using mirror work in pillow covers has recently been emerged see Fig. 13. Furthermore, it was also mentioned that, now, many other products like TV covers, bed sheets, mobile covers, purse and shoes are also adorned with mirror work.

Lost Characters

The pleasure of a woman, which she feels, while wearing a dress, densely covered with traditional mirror embroidery, is now getting less day by day. The basic reason behind it is the availability of commercial articles especially glass beads, metallic fibres, stylized sequins, iridescent plastic buttons and fake glass stones, are overcoming the innocent charm of tantalizing mirrors. Use of such commercial items, within women's wardrobe has substituted the use of mirrors. Also, at present, such materials are used along with mirrors in embroidery, thus the uniqueness of mirrors in embroidery has greatly been influenced see Fig. 14.

⁸ Sprang or draw string used in men's trouser.

⁹ Upper under garment for men.

It was also mentioned by some of the embroiderers that, the trend of wearing mirrors, is really getting less, among the young generation. Many embroiderers shared that, in past mirror, men's upper undergarment; *Ganji/Banyan* was embellished with the mirror embroidery but this tradition has no longer existed.

CONCLUSION

A long expedition, which the mirror embroidery has taken, has enriched it and brought evolutionary developments and changes in style. On one hand, a void has been created due to the use of other shiny materials in embroidery, whereas, on another hand, the increasing scope of mirror embroidery and variations of its forms, are efficiently filling the former space.



Figure 10. Above, *Gaj* of 1980s made with simple design in set layout, below *Gaj* of 1990s in stripe layout, (Close-up detail of each in right), *Moulvi Khair Muhammad* village Sanghar, source author.



Figure 11. Two *Gaj* with unique design plan made in the late 1990s, *Moulvi Kahir Muhammad* village Sanghar, source author.





Figure 12. *Gaj* with mirrors stitched in paisley motif design, 2018, (Right close-up detail of paisley), *Haji Abdul Karim Laghari* village Sanghar, source author.





Figure 13. Pillow cover with *Hoormitch*; Sindhi stitch and mirror work in the border, 2018, (Right close-up detail), *Haji Abdul Karim Laghari* village Sanghar, source author.





Figure 14. Contemporary style of mirror embroidery with sequins, pompoms and metallic threads embroidered together, 2018, (Right close-up detail), *Haji Abdul Karim Laghari* village Sanghar.

Thus it can be said that, despite the latest technology and introduction of new materials and techniques of embroidery, the traditional charm of mirror embroidery has not only survived but has been enhanced. Only, its form has been slightly changed, however, its essence is still the same. There is a need to understand its real beauty, by exploring its glorious historical past, which has been explored in this work. This study illustrates those evolutionary aspects of mirror embroidery, which have not been described in most of the previous literature. These include changes within basic types of mirrors, their characteristics, shapes, types of threads and their colours, technical and visual changes within basic stitching methods, changes within designs, patterns and

layouts and also techniques of application of designs and finally the old and new mirror embroidery products. By describing most of these aspects through textual and visual results, the sufficient details about different aspects of mirror embroidery, which are undergoing certain changes are provided in this research.

FUTURE WORK

A number of aspects associated with mirror embroidery of Sindh, have yet to be explored. The past events, which influence the traditional mirror embroidery still need to be explored. Particularly the basic reasons, behind the changing aspects of mirror work are still uncovered. The very earlier forms of mirror embroidery are still unknown. Many villages/areas practising the mirror embroidery are still uncovered, thus there is a need to explore the expertise of mirror embroidery, of smaller communities of Sindh. Different techniques employed for the mirror embroidery, still need a detailed study to spot the various styles of mirror embroidery in Sindh. Characteristics of mirror embroidery in products like Sindhi *topi* of Jacobabad, wedding shift from Thano Bula Khan and many other products, still need to be highlighted.

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