

## RESTORING THE TRADITIONAL TECHNIQUE OF *RUMAL* EMBROIDERY FROM HILL STATES OF PUNJAB

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### Abstract

Since olden times, before 1948, Hill states of Punjab have been famous for its textile industry. The tradition of *rumal* (coverlet) embroidery was prevalent throughout this region. The most popular article made was embroidered coverlets and hangings known as *dhkanu* (square coverlets) or *chhabu* (circular coverlets) used for covering the ceremonial gifts as well as offerings made both for gods and rulers(1). In the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the embroidery activities declined in this region on withdrawal of patronage and radical political changes in the region. However, the tradition of embroidery was still continuing in Chamba but it lost its artistic element and reduced to mere embroidery (2). One of the significant factors declining the quality of embroidered products was deviation from traditional technique and decorative features seen in earlier artifacts. In present paper attempt was made to identify important characteristics of craft with respect to *rumal* and other articles made in embroidery. The significant findings were studied from photographs of museum pieces and personal collections. Technique was classified and studied with respect to stitch direction, filling stitches and outline stitches. Furthermore, ornamental features were also studied which were integral part of embroidery.

**Keywords:** *Rumal, Dhaknu, Chhabu*, Technique, Ornamental features

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## **Introduction**

The *rumal* embroidery was distinguished pictorial handicraft practiced in the region of Hill states of Punjab from very ancient times and flourished from 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The earliest extant specimen of embroidery is a *rumal* dating back to 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is believed to be embroidered by Bebe Nanki, sister of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh religion<sup>3</sup>. This piece is now kept in the Chola Sahib Gurudwara, Gurdaspur. The stitch used for embroidery was double sided satin stitch which was known as *dorukha tanka*. The embroidery was worked using untwisted silk yarns on unbleached *muslin* or *khaddar* fabric. Embroidery was worked in two different styles i.e. folk style and miniature style. These different styles sometimes shared common themes, but nevertheless, were identifiable as two distinct entities (3). Embroidery was based on distinctive themes such as religious, local traditions, scenes from daily life, literature and floral patterns. The most popular articles of embroidery were Chamba *rumals* and wall hangings. Chamba *rumals* were used for covering ceremonial gifts and offerings in temples, whereas wall hangings were used for decoration and gifting purpose. However, other articles were also made for domestic use such as *cholies*, caps, pillow covers, hand fans, dice boards etc.

However in Chamba, the production of rumals was plentiful that the geographical denomination 'Chamba *rumal*' (4) became almost synonym for the embroidery of the entire Panjab hills. This was the most popular and well known article which was embroidered in large numbers in Chamba till late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The province of Chamba was a stable, powerful area as there were lesser invasions from outside. These conditions were more favorable for the development of art and crafts including embroidery. Hence, various artistic achievements were credited to the province of Chamba (5). In the second quarter of the nineteenth century the weaving industry as a whole suffered a setback throughout India and generally the process of finishing of the silk yarn also deteriorated. There was, then the advent of chemical dyes which were easy to use and also available at cheaper rates. These conditions had appeared late in Punjab, the source of the supplies to the Punjab hills and good work continued to be done in nineteenth century(6). Though, Chamba state during nineteenth

century continued to be ruled by the old feudal dynasty in traditional pattern, but the winds of change did not permit this comparatively much secluded geographical and political entity to remain unaffected by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century(7).

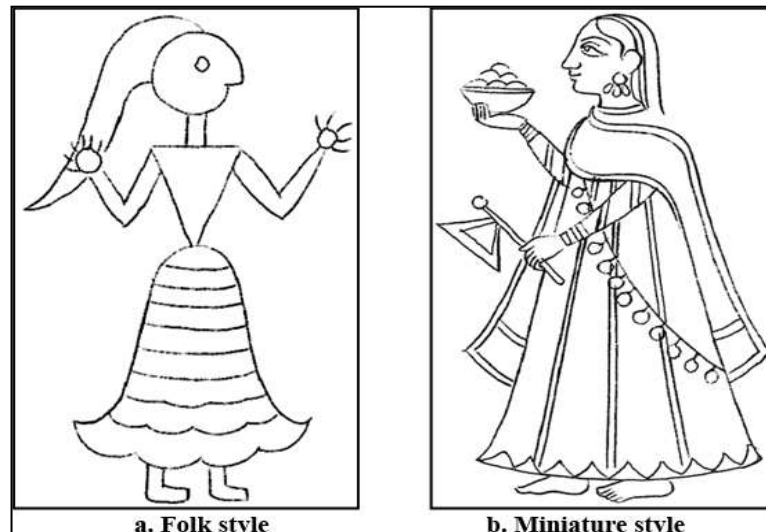
Since the craft of rumal embroidery is based on the art of miniature painting, this faced serious decline in the hills due to lack of patronage. The court painters, thus, were compelled to change their traditional profession. During this declined phase of the *Pahari* painting, an apparent decadence in Chamba *rumal* was noticed. With the onset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the captivating craft culture of Chamba witnessed a slow and gradual decline. The fall in standards started around 1920 with the decline of court patronage and embroidery was not executed in its traditional form (2). The present research paper thus focuses on documentation of traditional technique and ornamental features used in embroidery.

### **Different styles of rumal embroidery**

In Chamba the handicraft of embroidery was dependent almost entirely on one of the social customs of the people. The development of the craft came to a fine state of perfection, and was preserved in a very beautiful form (4). These *rumals* were produced by people belonging to all classes in Chamba. While the leisured classes were responsible for more beautiful and elaborate designs, poor people produced simple designs with geometrical patterns (8). The grandeur of craft was such that it was practiced by women of royalty and nobility (9). Some Kangra paintings depicted scenes of pastime activities of the women folk of the Hindu aristocratic society in which female figures were shown engaged in embroidery work (10).

Embroidered *rumals* represent exquisite examples of the use of elaborate narrative designs and motifs of its kind. The variety of themes, designs and motifs added to the richness of the embroidery. Each motif and object was intended to be a symbolic echo of the situation and does not merely provide a naturalistic background (4). On the basis of the line drawing, embroidery stitches and subjects two distinct styles are evident (3). Folk designs were made by the embroiderers themselves based on their beliefs and customs. It was based on their sacred ideology, unstructured composition and stitches; free hand line drawing, and spontaneous colours schemes (figure 1a). On the other hand miniature style designs were

commissioned pieces made by professional miniature artists. They show rich subject matter, structured composition and stitches, more detailed line work, balanced colour schemes, and intricacy in embroidery stitches (figure 1b).



**Figure 1: Styles of Embroidery; Courtesy: Drawings by  
Prixit Sharma**

Variety of products were made apart from these *rumals* which include wall hanging, women's blouses (figure 2a) (*cholies*), pillow coverlets, caps, hand fans (figure 2b), dice (figure 2c) (*chaupad*), beadscover (*gaumukhi*), waistband (*patka*), book wrapper etc (Pathak, 2010). Usually, the articles were worked differently unlike *rumals* with respect to raw material, stitches, designs and motifs.



**Figure 2: Traditional Articles**

The embroidery on rumals was widespread in vast region; various variations were seen and categorized as *rumals* in miniature style and folk style. Under each category technique with respect to filling stitches, stitch direction and outline stitches; decorative characteristics such as colours, finishing stitches and edgings are discussed:

### Technical Characteristics of Embroidered *Rumals*

Technique included different types of filling stitches, direction of stitches and outline stitch.

#### Identification of filling stitches

Variation of darning and satin stitch were observed in old specimen from museums namely long and short darning stitch, brick stitch and encroaching satin stitch.

**Long and short darning stitch:** This stitch was most commonly practiced by artisans even to present day. The double sided stitches were worked from bottom to top in area to be filled. On analysis of museum specimen textures in miniature style *rumals* was achieved by filling background in shape of motifs leaving them unembroidered or filled using different colours. This technique was used to create patterns in costumes of female forms and horse riders and animals skin (figure 3).



**Figure 3: Textures in Miniature Style *Rumals*; Courtesy: After Aryan, 2010**

Textures were also created by technique called voiding where narrow gap was created between rows of stitches (Figure 4). Voiding technique was used to bring out fine details and



separating areas without outlining like leaves of banana tree, patterning in costume of male figure (8) and female figure (9) (Figure 3) .

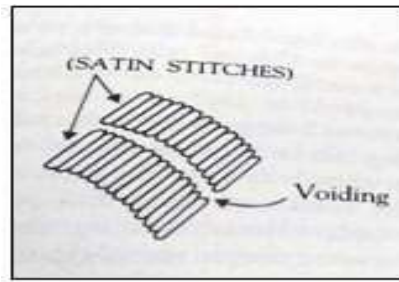


Figure 4: Voiding Technique

**Brick stitch:** It was another variation of double long and short darning stitch where there is more structured arrangement of stitches (Table1). The stitches are laid in perfect brick arrangement. This stitch was no longer being practiced by the artisans.

**Encroaching satin stitch:** This is variation of satin stitch where individual rows of stitches are made (11). This stitch was generally observed in folk style *rumals* using multiple directions and colours (figure 5). Different fascinating patterns were created in costumes and animals which explores hidden creativity of folk of Chamba.



Figure 5: Textures in FolkStyle *Rumals*; Courtesy: After Aryan, 2010

### Analysis of direction of stitches



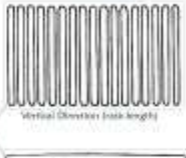

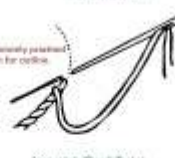














The direction of stitches while embroidering is very significant in bringing out the desired effect. According to an author, very interesting effects can be created using restricted color palette only having tints and shades of single hues. The embroiderer creatively chooses the

best direction of stitches to give impression of several shades used in embroidery(10). Three types of directions were discerned in earlier specimen namely vertical, horizontal, and diagonal. The stitches were named by the different arrangements of threads in different directions (Table1). It is interesting to observe that in folk style embroidery the space is divided in smaller portions which was then filled in multiple directions. It created an optical illusion of shades of single colour which adds visual appeal to simple looking motif. This kind of work was no longer being practiced by the artisans at present.

### Types of outline stitches

In earlier specimen it was observed that running stitch was used for highlighting, separating and defining designs and motifs used in embroidery (Table1). It was evident that the colors used for outline were many times in contrast to the colors used for filling or subdued for harmonious blending with filling colors. However, at present stem stitch is used in black color.

**Table 1: Technical Characteristics of Embroidered *Rumals***

FILLING STITCHES		STITCH DIRECTION		OUTLINE STITCHES	
Line drawing	Old specimen	Line drawing	Old specimen	Line drawing	Old specimen
 <p>This stitch is generally used by artisans.</p> <p>Long and short stitch</p>	 <p>Detail from: Lokesh Museum, Ahmedabad</p>	 <p>Vertical Direction (side length)</p>		 <p>Commonly practiced stitch for outline.</p> <p>Stem stitch (Sachu Tanka)</p>	 <p>Detail from: Personal Collection</p>
 <p>These stitches are mostly used by artisans.</p> <p>Crosshatching stitch</p>	 <p>Detail from: National Museum, New Delhi</p>	 <p>Horizontal Direction (side width)</p>		 <p>This stitch is used in majority of earlier museum pieces.</p> <p>Running stitch (Sachu Tanka)</p>	 <p>Detail from: Arun Arora, 2010</p>
 <p>Silk stitch</p>	 <p>Detail from: Lokesh Museum, Ahmedabad</p>	 <p>Same Direction</p>		 <p>Multiple Direction</p>	 <p>Detail from: Arun Arora, 2010</p>
				 <p>Colors used for outline</p>	

These were extensively used in old articles to enhance visual appeal and aesthetics in embroidery like colours, ornamentation and textures, finishing stitches and edgings.

## Colours

It was evident from the earliest piece of embroidery (figure 6a), believed to be made by Bebei Nanki in sixteenth century and other earlier pieces of eighteenth century (figure 6b) showed limited range of colour palette including pink, red, blue, off white, light and dark shades of green and yellow. Probably, after invention of synthetic dyes in nineteenth century more colours were introduced. The colour palette used for the embroidery could be identified from the border of the composition. Since border was always worked in last after completing central and field design and it showed all colours used.



**Figure 6: Limited range of colours used in earlier pieces of embroidery, Courtesy: a. Bedi family, Chola Sahib Gurudwara, Gurdaspur, b. National Museum, New Delhi**

## Stitches used for finishing near edges

Stitches were used to enclose the embroidery as well as used for finishing edges. The stitches used were buttonhole stitch, cross stitch, herring bone and double satin stitch. It was noticed that most of the times embroidery was finished leaving few inches from the outer edge. The outer edge was then folded neatly on the wrong side of the fabric with hemming (*ulari*). They are as follows (Table 2):



## Edgings

After completion of embroidery, external edgings were used for decoration for instance fabric frills, tassels, coloured piping and laces (Table-2). Colourful yarns is the traditional method used for decoration of edges with colourful yarns fraying out from the outer edge of the fabric in alternating single or single colours. The colours used for yarns were similar to those used for embroidery. This kind of edging was used for both circular and square format of coverlets. Fabric frills are used as edgings for coverlets in varying width, size and colour. In some samples fabric tassels or threads tassels were placed on sides. In a variation, fabric tassels were placed at corners, along with the piping on the edge, or equally spaced on four sides. Also, beading was seen leaving some distance from the edge and on the corners tassels were attached. In some *rumals* piping in contrasting colours to that of embroidery colours was used as edging. The width of piping was varying ranging from 0.5 inches to 1 inch. Another way of adorning the edge of *rumal* was the use of lace on the four sides. Metallic laces were frequently used in varying sizes. However, in few samples fabric laces were also used.

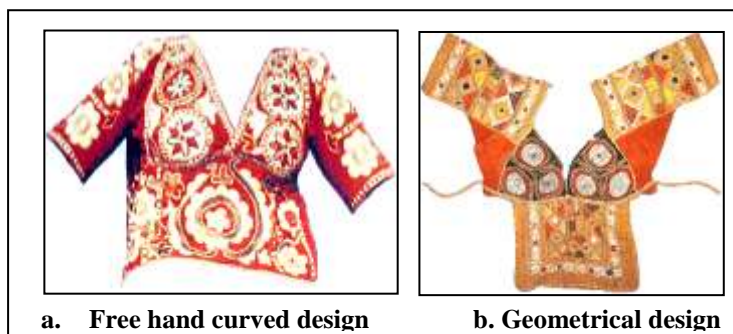
**Table 2: Decorative Characteristics of Embroidered *Rumals***



## Utility articles

Apart from these famous miniature and folk embroidered coverlets, another broad range of articles were also created in embroidery. These articles were equally appealing and categorically fall in differently due to their subject matter and stitches. The layout of the

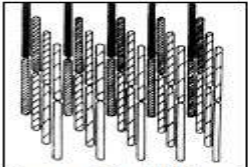
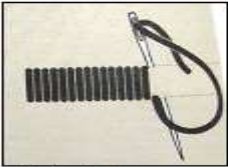

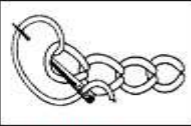
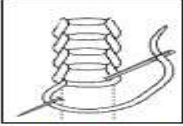
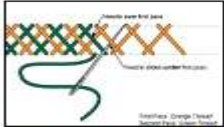

articles depended on the shape, size and utility. Varied designs and motifs were imaginatively created in articles comprising of floral, bird animal which can be free hand curved designs and geometrical patterns. Both variations were given different treatment resulting in characteristic features.



**Figure7: Styles of designs in articles, After Aryan 2010**

Mostly articles were worked in single sided stitches excluding coverlets and hand fans. The stitches most frequently used were single sided darning stitch in long and short stitches, satin stitch, stem stitch, chain stitch, double cross stitch and herring bone stitch. The base cloth used was khaddar dyed in shades of red and dark navy blue. For embroidery untwisted silk yarns were used predominantly in off white, red, orange, light and dark shades of yellow and green.

**Table 3: Stitches used in articles**

Stitches	Line drawing
<b>Filling stitches: Single sided</b> <b>Long and short stitch:</b> Long and short darning stitches were taken in vertical rows from bottom to top. Stitches were taken in such a manner that distinct layers were not formed. In front small rips of fabric were taken between stitches as a result very small stitches were visible on back side of fabric. This kind of stitch was seen in free hand designs. <b>Satin stitch:</b> Same length stitches were taken across and distinct layers were formed. The gap between layers was notable. This stitch was invariably used with geometrical patterns. <b>Note:</b> Double sided long and short stitch was also used in floral coverlets.	 <b>Long and short stitch</b>  <b>Satin stitch</b>
<b>Outline stitches:</b> Most frequently seen stitches were stem stitch, chain stitch and square chain stitch. Stem stitch falls in category of straight back stitches while other two were looped stitches. Stem stitch and chain was used for curved areas while square chain stitch provides broad outline.	 <b>Stem stitch</b>  <b>Chain stitch</b>  <b>Square chain stitch</b>
<b>Narrow borders:</b> These borders were used to enclose embroidered areas. They were made using double herringbone stitch and cross stitch in two colors. These were used in <i>choli</i> waist bands, dice etc.	 <b>Double herringbone stitch</b>  <b>Cross stitch</b>
<b>Edging:</b> Fabric tassels and trims were used for decorating edges of the articles. Tassels were triangular fold of fabric or sometimes slashes were given on lower edges. They were generally seen in off-white color attached to <i>choli</i> , dice etc. Colored broad trims were attached on the edges of hand fan.	

Presently, articles made by residents in (1980 onwards) of Chamba were meant for decoration. It was worthy to note that folk element was retained in the craft as some of the sample made by embroiderers from remote village in Chamba was based on their imagination and religious beliefs though simpler in their representations. Drawings were made mostly by embroiderers themselves tracing from calendars at home or traced designs provided by dealers. They were either selling their samples to dealers in Dalhousie or working for master craftsperson in Chamba. It's interesting to note that most of these articles were double sided like embroidered *rumals* unlike traditional articles made using single sided stitch. Probably that stitch was not taught in training centers and people were not aware of that aspect of the craft. Most commonly made articles included embroidered samples in wooden frame (Figure 8a), wall hanging (Figure 8b), handkerchief (Figure 8c), cushion covers (Figure 8d ) pillow coverlets, bedcovers with wedding scene in machine embroidery, sofa covers (*bathku*), dressing table cloth, table cloth, stoles, *dupattas* and shawls (Figure 8e), cover for mantle piece (*bukhari*) (Figure 8f)etc.

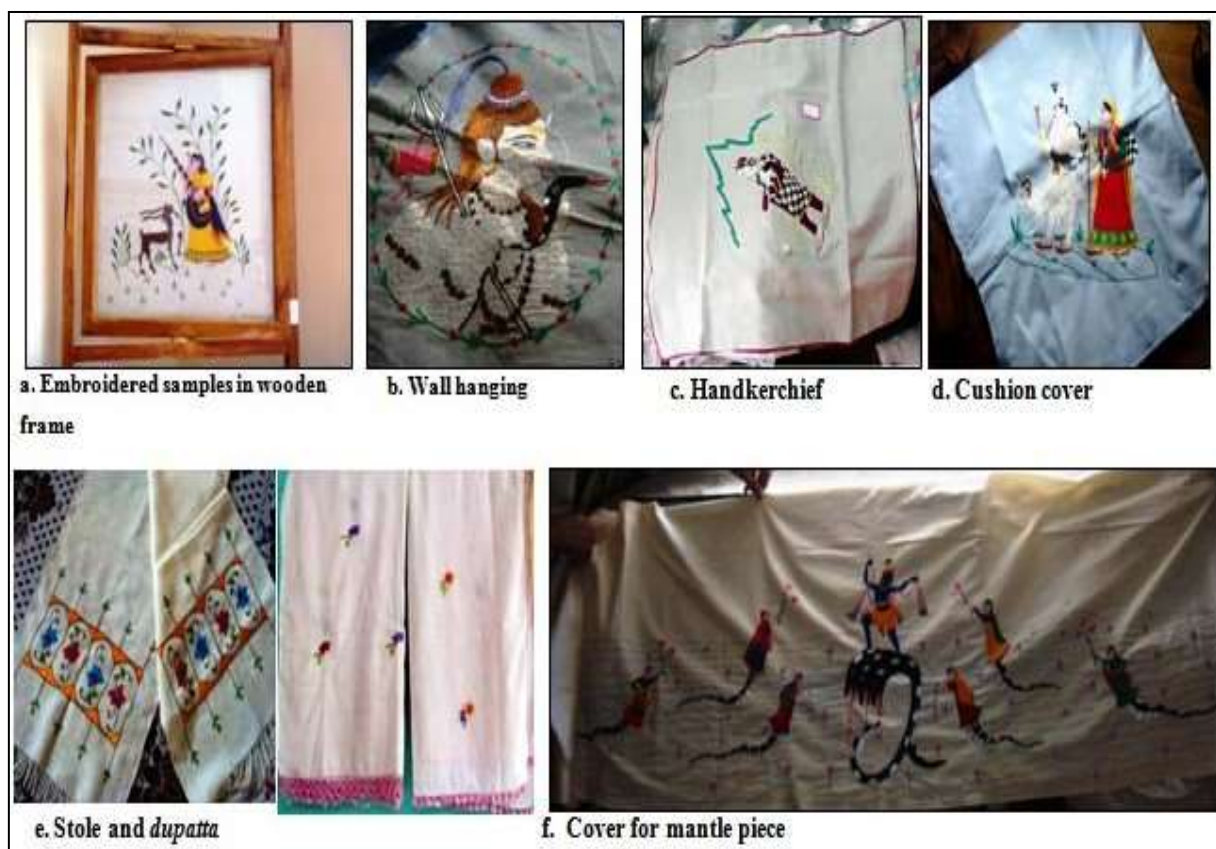


Figure8: Embroidered Articles, Courtesy: Author

## **Discussion**

It is quite evident that wide variety of stitches was used in rumal embroidery. In miniature style rumals more structured arrangement of stitches in consistent length were seen. In folk style rumals the stitches were loosely spaced and randomly arranged making them more spontaneous in their expression. Both the style of rumal embroidery was skillfully adorned using finishing stitches and edgings apt to their end use.

Apart from embroidered coverlets wide variety of articles were being made using varied stitches for filling in patterns, outline and borders. However, these stitches were single sided unlike embroidered coverlets. In free hand curved designs the stitch used for filling was single sided darning stitch in long and short stitches. The long and short stitches were taken in vertical rows from bottom to top. They were taken in such a manner that individual layers of stitches were not formed. Small nips of fabric were taken as a result very small stitches were visible on back side of fabric. The outline of motifs was worked in basic chain stitch, square chain stitch or stem stitch. The stitch used for geometrical designs in articles was single sided satin stitch or darning stitch. In satin stitch stitches were taken across while in darning, stitches were worked from bottom to top. This kind of stitch has marked affinities with Phulkari of Punjab. Narrow border of herring bone stitch in double colours was used to enclose embroidery. Articles worked in embroidery were versatile as broad spectrum of variations were seen which lend each its unique characteristics.

## **Conclusion**

*Rumal* embroidery was unique and crafted meticulously using striking variety of stitches in technique and decorative features. The blending of darning and satin stitches was adapted beautifully by artisans to give unmatched qualities to the craft. It was evident that these features were integral part embroidery and important to document to bring back craft to its proclaimed status.

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