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## Evolution and Cultural Significance of Appliqué Craft in India

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### Abstract

This paper reviews the historical evolution, cultural significance, and contemporary relevance of appliqué work embroidery in India. It explores the influence of the Mughal era, which brought Persian-inspired designs and intricate floral patterns into the appliqué collection. Additionally, it attempts to showcase the diverse regional styles and techniques that have developed across the country, such as Pipili appliqué from Odisha, Phool Patti Ka Kaam from Uttar Pradesh, and Katwa work from Gujarat. By tracing the craft's origins from utilitarian purposes to a sophisticated decorative art form, the paper highlights its integral role in religious ceremonies, cultural traditions, and social identity. The paper also examines contemporary applications of appliqué in fashion, interior design, and artistic collaborations, emphasizing how NGOs and modern designers have contributed to preserving and revitalizing this craft. By addressing the challenges faced by artisans and the craft's adaptation to current trends, this review highlights the continuing relevance of appliqué as both a cultural heritage and a sustainable livelihood for artisans.

**Keywords:** Arts and Craft, Appliqué, Mughal, Women, Contemporary.

### 1.1 Traditional Arts & Crafts of India

India's traditional textiles and crafts are deeply woven into its cultural and historical fabric, showcasing a rich tapestry of regional diversity and artistic expression. Each region of India contributes unique techniques, styles, and motifs that highlight its heritage and cultural ethos. For instance, the luxurious Banarasi silk saris from Varanasi are celebrated for their intricate brocade work, often featuring motifs inspired by nature and Mughal architecture. These saris are emblematic of Indian weddings and special occasions, symbolizing opulence and tradition (Jain, 2019). Similarly, Rajasthan's Bandhani textiles, created using a traditional tie-and-dye method, produce vibrant patterns and are iconic of the region's craft heritage. The Ikat textiles of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, crafted using a complex resist-dye technique on yarn before weaving, are equally notable for their vivid and intricate patterns, showcasing the artisans' mastery and precision.



**Fig 1. Tradition art and crafts of India (Source: <https://necessitystore.in/history-and-legacy-of-indian-handicrafts/>)**

In addition to textiles, India boasts a variety of handcrafted pottery traditions that blend functionality with artistry. Jaipur's Blue Pottery, with its distinctive blue glaze and intricate designs, reflects a unique confluence of Persian and Indian aesthetics. Meanwhile, West Bengal's terracotta pottery stands out for its rich earthy tones

and motifs inspired by mythology and nature, serving both decorative and utilitarian purposes (Kumar, 2020).

India's artistic legacy extends to its painting traditions as well. Madhubani painting from Bihar, renowned for its vibrant storytelling and intricate detailing, often depicts themes from mythology and nature. Similarly, Pattachitra, a traditional painting style from Odisha, is characterized by its detailed narrative artwork, typically illustrating mythological tales on cloth or dried palm leaves (Bhatia, 2013).



Fig.2 Indian Folk paintings (Source:

<https://travelogueofkuntala.com/7-traditional-paintings-of-india-a-heritage/>)

These traditional crafts and textiles not only preserve India's cultural heritage but also provide sustainable livelihoods to artisans, reinforcing the connection between craft practices and socio-economic well-being. They serve as a reminder of India's artistic ingenuity and its enduring legacy, which continues to inspire both within the country and beyond.

### 1.2 Appliqué craft in India

Appliqué craft in India is a vibrant textile tradition that combines functionality and artistic expression. Derived from the French word *Appliquer*, meaning "to apply," appliqué involves stitching shaped fabric pieces onto a base material, often using colorful and contrasting fabrics. This craft has been practiced across India for centuries, with each region contributing its distinct style. For instance, the Pipili appliqué work of Odisha, known as Chandua, features intricate motifs and vibrant patterns, traditionally used in religious festivals, including the Rath Yatra of Lord Jagannath (Saha, 2014). In Gujarat, Kathwa appliqué often incorporates mirror work and bold geometric designs, reflecting the region's cultural vibrancy (Bhatia, 2013). Uttar Pradesh is known for its delicate *Phool Patti ka Kaam*, where floral motifs are meticulously stitched onto fine muslin fabric, a tradition rooted in Mughal aesthetics. Originally developed as a practical solution to repair or repurpose old textiles, appliqué has evolved into a decorative art form that continues to thrive today, blending traditional aesthetics with modern applications. It also plays a significant role in supporting artisan communities, particularly women, by providing sustainable livelihoods and preserving cultural heritage (Gillow & Sentance, 2001).



Fig 3. Appliqués of India

(Source: <https://varnikadesigns.wordpress.com/2022/08/28/the-art-of-Applique-in-india-%EF%BF%BC/>)

### 1.3 Evolution of Indian Appliqué craft

Appliqué work in India has a rich history, deeply embedded in its cultural and artistic traditions. Its origins can be traced back to ancient times when it served a utilitarian purpose of repairing worn-out fabrics, eventually evolving into an art form. The craft was closely tied to religious practices, with brightly coloured fabric pieces being stitched to create ceremonial items like banners and canopies for temple rituals, as seen in the 12th-century appliqué work of the Jagannath Temple in Puri, Odisha. (Singh, 2020) During the medieval period, regional styles flourished under royal patronage, reflecting diverse cultural influences. Pipili in Odisha became a hub for vibrant appliqué artisans who crafted items featuring motifs like animals and mythical figures for religious festivals (Tripathy, 2019). In northern India, the Mughal era saw the rise of intricate *Phool Patti ka Kaam*, where floral patterns were created on fine muslin fabrics for royal garments (Kumar, 2021). The Mughal era (16th to 18th century) marked a transformative period in Indian textile craftsmanship, including the art of appliqué and embroidery. The Mughal emperors, brought Persian influences on floral motifs, arabesques, and geometric patterns inspired by Persian and Central Asian art. In Gujarat's Kutch region, the craft thrived among nomadic communities, who used it to create colourful geometric designs on canopies and quilts. However, the colonial period brought challenges as industrial fabrics and machine-made textiles threatened traditional techniques (Rao, 2020).



Fig 4. Mughal and Persian influence on Appliqué Craft

(Source: <https://www.behance.net/gallery/54571141/Mughal-Persian>)

Post-independence, the revival of traditional crafts became a significant focus for the Indian government as part of preserving the nation's cultural heritage. Appliqué work, which had faced challenges during the colonial period due to the influx of industrial fabrics and machine-made products, was one such craft that needed deliberate efforts to restore its prominence. The decline in demand for traditional products, coupled with socio-economic changes, led to a decrease in the number of artisans practicing this craft. Additionally, the lack of organized markets and competition from cheaper, mass-produced textiles further marginalized this art form, necessitating immediate intervention (Sharma, 2016).

Recognizing the importance of preserving appliqué as both a cultural symbol and a livelihood for artisans, the government introduced several initiatives. Institutions like the All-India Handicrafts Board were established to promote and support traditional crafts, including appliqué. Special efforts were made to provide artisans with access to training, raw materials, and platforms to market their products. The introduction of the Geographical Indication (GI) tag for Pipili appliqué work from Odisha and Tharu appliqué from Uttar Pradesh played a crucial role in reviving these crafts. The GI tag not only recognized the uniqueness of these regional art forms but also helped secure intellectual property rights, ensuring that the craft remained associated with its place of origin (Ministry of Textiles, 2011).

The GI tag for Pipili, granted in 2008, bolstered the craft's visibility and marketability. Pipili appliqué, also known as *Chandua*, gained recognition for its vibrant motifs and association with the Jagannath Temple, leading to an increased demand for the craft in both domestic and international markets. Similarly, efforts to revive Tharu appliqué, practiced by the Tharu tribal community in Uttar Pradesh, focused on integrating contemporary designs with traditional techniques to appeal to modern consumers. Collaborative projects between NGOs, designers, and artisans helped adapt the craft to changing market trends while preserving its essence (Kumar & Roy, 2022).

The revival efforts also emphasized the socio-economic importance of appliqué, particularly in empowering women artisans who form a significant portion of the workforce in this sector. By creating opportunities for sustainable livelihoods and adopting pride in their cultural heritage, these initiatives have played a vital role in not only preserving the craft but also uplifting artisan communities. Despite these efforts, the appliqué industry continues to face challenges, including competition from machine-made products and the need for further design innovation, highlighting the ongoing need for strategic support and promotion (Rao, 2019).

#### 1.4 Regional Variations and Cultural Significance of Appliqué Craft in India

Appliqué work in India is a vibrant and diverse craft, with each region infusing its unique cultural motifs and techniques into the art form. The significance of these motifs often reflects the local traditions, beliefs, and natural surroundings, making appliqué a

rich tapestry of India's cultural heritage. In Rajasthan, notable for Gota and Kinari work, appliqué combines vibrant colours, intricate embroidery, and mirror work, often seen on garments, quilts, and home décor. Gujarat's Katab appliqué emphasizes patchwork with animal and floral motifs, bold colours, and cultural symbolism, used in religious and marriage ceremonies. Bihar features Khatwa appliqué with geometric and natural motifs, often applied to household items and marital gifts. Orissa's Pipli appliqué is rooted in temple traditions, using stylized motifs like peacocks and sun designs on vibrant fabrics for canopies and decorations. In Uttar Pradesh, pattiwork appliqué, with its refined floral motifs on cottons and organzas, is prominent in garments and home furnishings. These crafts blend traditional artistry with contemporary adaptations, preserving cultural heritage while meeting modern demands. The detailed characteristics of each Appliqué craft are outlined below:

- **Gujarat:** Gujarat's Katab appliqué is celebrated for its vivid colours, bold patterns, and the use of mirror work, adding a distinctive vibrancy to quilts, garments, and torans (Shah, 2016). In Gujarat, particularly in regions like Saurashtra, Banaskantha, Patan, and Kutch, appliqué work is known as 'katab'. This technique involves cutting coloured or patterned fabric into various forms and sizes, which are then stitched onto a plain background. The motifs often include geometric patterns, floral designs, and representations of local wildlife, reflecting the region's rich biodiversity and cultural symbolism. The colour palette varies from warm to cool tones, with artists employing both bright and neutral shades to create visually striking compositions.



**Fig 5. Katab Appliqué of Gujarat (Source: <https://www.dsourc.in/resource/Appiqué-and-patchwork-kutch-gujarat/introduction>)**

- **Odisha:** In Odisha, the Pipli appliqué is one of the most prominent styles, widely recognized for its vibrant and intricate designs used in temple decorations and religious ceremonies, such as the Rath Yatra of Lord Jagannath (Mohanty, 2018). In Odisha, particularly in the town of Pipli, appliqué work is traditionally known as 'Chandua'. This craft involves sewing fabric shapes over a base layer, with motifs inspired by natural elements such as peacocks, elephants, and flowers like jasmine and lotus.

The designs are often used to adorn temple chariots during the annual Rath Yatra festival, highlighting the spiritual significance of the craft. The vibrant colours and intricate patterns of Pipili appliqué are not only decorative but also serve as offerings to deities, embodying the region's deep-rooted religious traditions.



Fig 6. Pipili Appliqué work of Odisha (Source:

<https://www.dsourc.in/resource/traditional-pipli-Appliqué-work-pipli-orissa/products>)

- Rajasthan:** Rajasthan integrates appliqué into its textile traditions, often blending it with bandhani and leheriya techniques to create richly decorated fabrics. In Rajasthan, particularly in the Barmer district, appliqué work features fabric patches in different shapes and patterns, often incorporating mirror work. The motifs are inspired by the desert landscape, with designs depicting camels, elephants, and traditional Rajasthani architecture. The use of mirrors (shisha) in the appliqué work adds a reflective quality, symbolizing the desert's shimmering sands and the region's vibrant culture. In Chhattisgarh, tribal communities incorporate appliqué into their textiles using earthy tones and motifs inspired by nature, showcasing a harmonious relationship with their environment (Sharma, 2020).

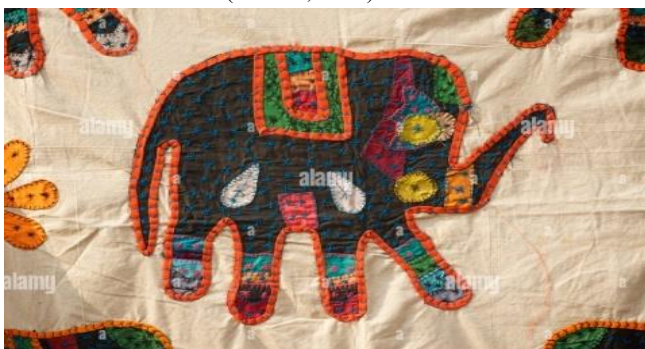


Fig 7. Appliqué of Rajasthan (Source:

<https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-Appliqué-rajasthani-textile-with-an-elephant-motif-jaisalmer-rajasthan-84041878.html>)

- Uttar Pradesh:** In Uttar Pradesh, appliqué work holds a special place, with its roots deeply tied to traditional art

forms such as Phool Patti Ka Kaam and the decorative embellishments of Rampur. Phool Patti Ka Kaam, originating from the Rampur and Aligarh regions, is a distinctive appliqué technique where delicate floral motifs are cut from fine muslin or organdy fabric and stitched onto a base fabric, often in white-on-white designs or subtle pastel tones. This craft is renowned for its elegance and precision, with designs inspired by Mughal floral motifs, reflecting the region's historical and cultural ties to the Mughal Empire (Chisti, 2007). The intricate patterns are often used to decorate garments such as saris, dupattas, and kurtas, adding a touch of sophistication and heritage to contemporary wear. In addition to Phool Patti Ka Kaam, the Tharu tribal community of Uttar Pradesh practices their own form of appliqué. Their work is characterized by bold geometric patterns and vibrant colours, often used to create decorative quilts, wall hangings, and garments. This craft reflects the community's connection to their natural surroundings and their cultural narratives, making it a vital element of their artistic expression (Srivastava, 2015).



Fig 8. Phool Patti ka Kaam of Aligarh and Tharu (Source:

<https://in.pinterest.com/pin/1020135753071706181/>,  
[https://www.vastrashilpakosh.in/search/recordPreview/nift\\_del-388-cfp?t=Tharu%20Appliqué](https://www.vastrashilpakosh.in/search/recordPreview/nift_del-388-cfp?t=Tharu%20Appliqué) )

These regional variations in appliqué work not only showcase the artistic skills of Indian artisans but also offer a window into the diverse cultural landscapes of the country. The motifs and techniques are deeply intertwined with local traditions, beliefs, and natural surroundings, making each piece a unique representation of its region's heritage. These regional styles of appliqué have not only aesthetic but also socio-cultural significance. They are deeply rooted in the traditions, beliefs, and rituals of their communities. Many motifs carry symbolic meanings, such as prosperity, fertility, and protection, which make them integral to festivals and ceremonies (Mukherjee, 2019). Moreover, these crafts provide a sustainable livelihood for artisans, particularly women, empowering them and preserving the cultural heritage of their communities in the face of modernization (Chaudhuri, 2017).

## 1.5 Role of Women in the History of Appliqué Craft in India

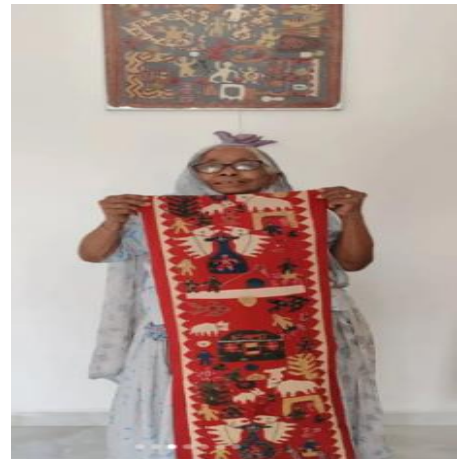
Women have played a pivotal role in the evolution and preservation of appliqué and embroidery traditions in India,

serving as both creators and custodians of these crafts. Historically, the transmission of these skills has been a maternal lineage, with mothers imparting techniques and designs to their daughters, thereby embedding these art forms deeply into the fabric of women's daily lives. This generational knowledge transfer has not only sustained the craft but also reinforced its association with femininity.

Beyond domestic spheres, women have been instrumental in the economic aspects of appliqué work. By producing decorative items for personal use and for trade, they have contributed significantly to household economies. In some instances, this involvement has led to financial independence, as women have engaged in the commercial aspects of the craft, selling their creations in local markets or through cooperatives. For example, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Gujarat has empowered rural women by facilitating the commercialization of traditional crafts, including embroidery, thereby enhancing their economic self-reliance.

A compelling case is the story of senior artisan Rani Ben and her family's dedication to appliqué and patchwork. Migrating from Pakistan to India during the partition, they brought with them the ancient craft taught by their forefathers. Settling in Kutch, Gujarat, they continued this tradition despite socio-economic hardships. Their work garnered attention from Kala Raksha, an NGO founded in 1993, which supports artisans by preserving traditional arts and making them economically viable. Additionally, Kala Raksha has not only provided a platform for over 800 artisans, including embroidery specialists, but has also introduced educational programs to align their work with contemporary styles. Under this initiative, Rani Ben and her family combined appliqué and patchwork techniques to create intricate handmade designs that garnered widespread recognition. Through exhibitions across India and even internationally, they demonstrated their artistry, challenging perceptions that such precision could only be achieved by machines.

Women like Rani Ben exemplify how traditional craft forms are sustained through their skills, adaptability, and commitment. Their efforts not only preserve cultural heritage but also inspire younger generations and showcase the potential of women artisans to thrive in global platforms.



**Fig 9. Raniben Ratilal Bhanani, a master artisan of Kalaraksha**  
 (Source:

[https://www.instagram.com/kalaraksha/p/Cgl6P4ioxdq/?img\\_index=7](https://www.instagram.com/kalaraksha/p/Cgl6P4ioxdq/?img_index=7) )

### 1.6. Giving a Modern Twist to a Traditional Art: How Appliqué is Being Used in Contemporary Art and Fashion

The timeless art of appliqué, which involves sewing fabric cutouts onto a base fabric, has found new life in contemporary art and fashion. This traditional craft, once rooted primarily in functional and decorative applications within households and cultural ceremonies, has evolved into a versatile medium for artistic and fashionable innovation. Designers and artists today are pushing the boundaries of appliqué, combining its traditional essence with modern aesthetics to create unique and eye-catching creations.

One of the most notable trends in modern appliqué design is the use of geometric patterns, vibrant colours, and abstract motifs. These elements give appliqué creations a sleek and contemporary feel, appealing to modern sensibilities while retaining their cultural roots. Designers are employing these patterns on garments, turning everyday apparel into bold statements of art and style. For example, contemporary sarees, kurtis, and dresses feature intricate appliqué work that combines traditional motifs with modern design principles, resulting in a perfect blend of heritage and innovation.



**Fig 10. Modern Appliqué Denim Dress** (Source: <https://www.silaistudio.com/products/blue-tropical-Appliqué-dress>)

Another fascinating development is the incorporation of 3D effects, layering, and pleating in appliqué designs. These techniques add depth, texture, and a sense of movement to the creations, transforming simple fabric cutouts into dynamic, multidimensional artworks. This experimentation has opened up possibilities for appliqué in haute couture and avant-garde fashion, where designers use the technique to craft show-stopping pieces that celebrate individuality and creativity.



**Fig 11. Appliqué with 3D effect and layering technique** (Source: <https://www.etsv.com/listing/1543155123/seafoam-green-3d-Appliqué-beaded-flower>)

Appliqué is extending its influence beyond fashion and making a significant impact in the field of interior decor. Artists and designers are creating exquisite wall hangings, cushions, and bedspreads that use appliqué to bring charm and vibrancy to modern living spaces. These pieces often incorporate sustainable practices, using leftover or recycled fabrics, which not only adds to their appeal but also aligns with the growing demand for eco-friendly design.



**Fig 12. Pipili Appliqué home furnishing products** (Source: <https://itokri.com/collections/pipli-Appliqué>)

Collaborations between traditional artisans and contemporary designers have played a pivotal role in this transformation. Initiatives by organizations and NGOs have facilitated the revival and modernization of appliqué while ensuring the craft remains economically viable for artisans. By blending traditional techniques with cutting-edge design, these collaborations ensure that appliqué continues to thrive in the modern world.



**Fig 13. The Essential Guide to Designer-artisan-manufacturer Collaboration** (Source: <https://ruralhandmade.com/blog/the-essential-guide-to-designer-artisan-manufacturer>)

In essence, the evolution of appliqué in contemporary art and fashion exemplifies how a traditional craft can be reimagined to suit current trends while preserving its cultural heritage. Through the innovative efforts of designers and artists, appliqué has excelled its original purpose, finding new expression in a variety of modern contexts and attempting to captivate audiences worldwide.

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