NOTES ON THE USE OF THE HOOK IN INDIAN EMBROIDERY

By

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and

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INDIA has long been famous for its chain-stitch embroideries, especially those worked in multi-coloured silks on a cotton or satin ground. They were produced professionally both for court use and for the commodity market, and also at amateur level as part of folk or tribal tradition. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries many fine Indian chain-stitch embroideries reached Europe in the form of bedspreads, hangings and piecegoods imported by the Dutch and English East India companies.

It is well known that chain-stitching can be done either with a needle or with a special kind of hooked implement whence it is known as hook-embroidery. With the former, it is inevitably a slower operation; but with the hook the skilled user can work very much faster, thus enjoying professional advantage. The question arises: to what extent and how early was the hook used in India for chain-stitching?

Much careful analysis of the actual embroideries will have to be done before this question can be answered with any finality. But as a first step, we think it would be useful to place on record what is known about the use of the embroidery hook in India.

The evidence we have to offer is based on enquiries conducted independently by us in western India in 1957 and 1967 respectively, and until recently unknown to one another. We now welcome this opportunity to pool our findings in the form of a joint article for the Needle and Bobbin Bulletin.

Although chain-stitching has been practised in many parts of northern India, the area chiefly famous for it is the west – especially the region covered

by present-day Gujarat and the Pakistani province of Sind. Until 1948, when the Sind-Gujarat border was suddenly transformed into an international frontier, there was considerable movement between the two provinces and correspondingly strong cultural links. This was especially true of embroidery, for which the whole area had been renowned at least since medieval times. One medieval witness is Marco Polo who visited Gujarat on his way back from China at the end of the thirteenth century, and described Gujarat embroidery as the best in the world.[1] He was referring in particular to embroidered leather mats which the local Mohammedans were said to have put on the floor to sleep on. These, he says, were *de corio rubeo sculptis in eo auibus & bestijs cum filio aureo & argenteo sutis multum subtiliter* (literally, "of red leather depicting birds and beasts in gold and silver thread, sewn very subtly"). He adds that they also made couches and cushions in the same manner. The association of the embroidery with leatherwork is interesting, since, as we shall see, the word for the embroidery hook used in this part of India is *ārī* – a word synonymous in the Gujerati language with cobbler's awl. It is relevant, moreover, that embroidered leatherwork remained a well-known local commodity until recent times. The exhibition of contemporary crafts organized at Delhi in 1902-3 (known as the Delhi exhibition) included a number of such embroideries from Sind. They are described in the catalogue as "leather sheets" and as having "central medallions, borders and corner pieces done in appliqué with black, red or green leather, elaborately embroidered over the surface in chain-stitch and with silver and gold wire judiciously intermixed".[2] A few nineteenth-century specimens of this type of work are preserved in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The better known silk-on-cotton chain-stitch embroideries of Gujarat are first mentioned in European records in the sixteenth century. The Portugese merchant, Barbosa, was probably referring to work of this kind, when in 1518, he described among the products of Cambay (then chief port of Gujarat) "very beautiful quilts and testers of beds finely worked".[3] He adds the interesting information that they were worked by "Moorish washerwomen", presumably as a supplementary means of earning their living. In 1585 the description was elaborated by the Dutchman, Linschoten, who referred to them as *ghestickt van syde, ende cock can Cattoen, van all coloeren ende stickel,*[4] which, allowing for the bad grammar of the sentence, seems to be saying that they were bedspreads worked in many-coloured silks on a cotton ground – a description corresponding to surviving specimens. Records of the English East India Company show that from the time of the opening of their trade in India, they were keen to acquire these already-renowned embroideries for export to England. Specific instructions were given to the merchants to

buy "quilts made about Cambay",[5] and from 1614 onwards they feature in the Company's London auction sales.

The export of chain-stitch embroideries to Europe declined in the eighteenth century, but a vigorous local tradition of professional embroidery persisted until the present century at Bhuj, the capital of the Kutch, under the patronage of the local court and nobility. These embroiderers were all members of the Mochi or leatherworking caste, and according to verbal tradition their forefathers had originally emigrated to Kutch from Sind, bringing their embroidery skill with them. It was to Bhuj that we both went in search of evidence.

Notes by John Irwin, compiled after a two-day visit to Bhuj, capital of Kutch, in February, 1957:

". . . In the evening Mr. Shelat, curator of Bhuj Museum and a local art school teacher, took me to the embroidery shop of Messrs. Ramji Jethabhai and Sons in Schroff Bazar. The Jethabhai family belonged to the Mochi caste, which was traditionally a leatherworking caste, and they claimed to have been wholly engaged in professional embroidery for at least three generations (this is the usual limit of family memory among Indian artisans). They nowadays make and sell only machine embroidery, and I saw three employees engaged in this work. Formerly they had made and sold hand embroidery. Mr. Ramji Jethabhai told me that traditional Mochi embroidery (Plate I) had always been a male occupation. According to legend, the Mochis of Bhuj were immigrants from Sind, from whence they had brought their embroidery art.[6] I asked what kind of implement was used for the chain-stitching and whether he could show me a specimen. He disappeared into a neighboring house and half an hour later returned with a type of hook, which I was delighted to be able to study and photograph (Plate II). The name by which the hook is known locally is *ãrī*, which is also the Gujerati word for cobbler's awl. Mr. Ramji Jethabhai demonstrated the working as follows (Plate III):

(a) He sat with the cloth lying loosely on his raised knee (no frame being used). The pattern was right-side up.

(b) He held the hook in his right hand, the wooden handle being embedded in the palm; his forefinger was extended so that the tip of the nail pressed at right-angles against the steel arm of the hook (see fig. 1). He showed me a metal nail-guard used by those whose nails were soft and easily damaged by constant work (the nail-guard is clearly visible in Plate II).

Plate I. Woman's petticoat; satin, worked with coloured silks in chain-stitch. Made by embroiderers of the Mochi caste at Bhuj, capital of Kutch, Gujarat, late 19th century.

Victoria and Albert Museum, I.M.27-1912.

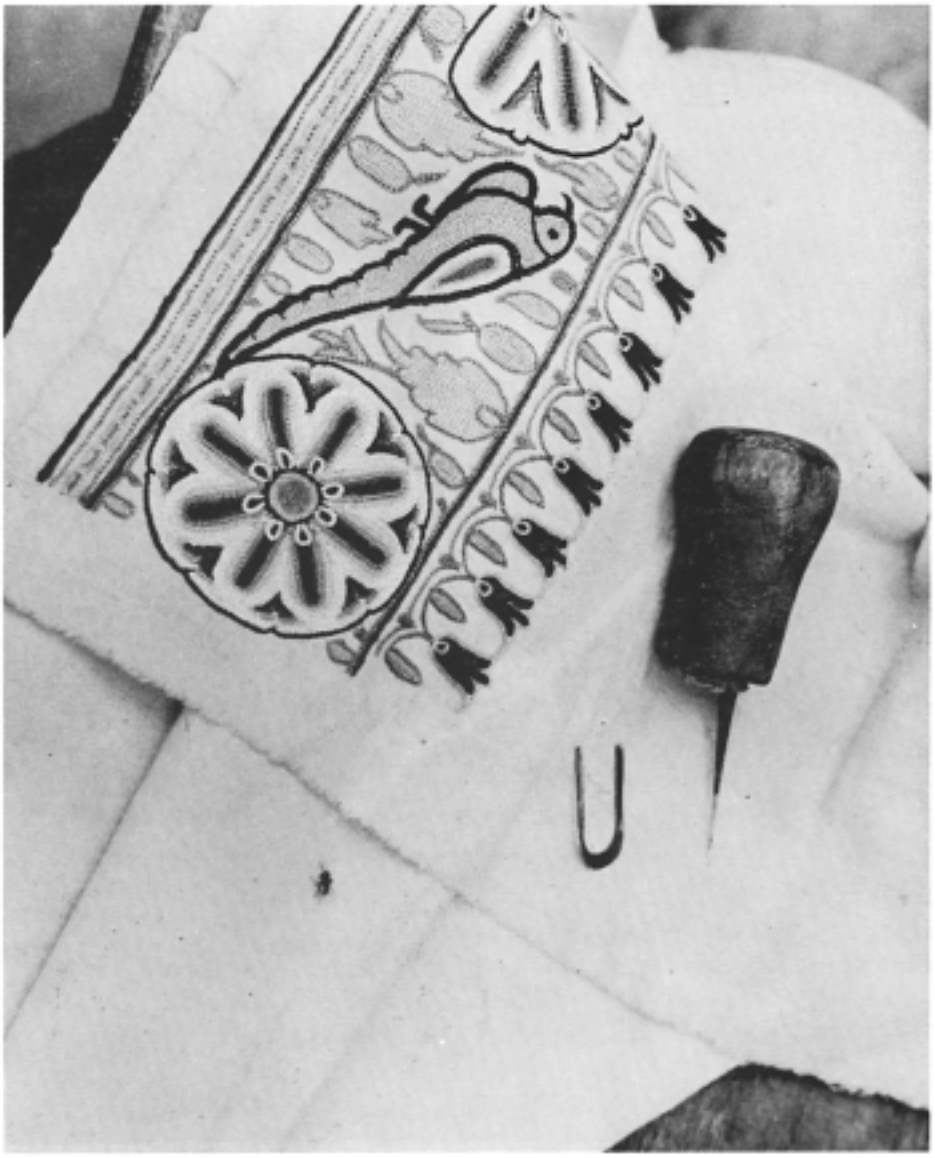

Plate II. Hook (*ãrī*) used by Mochi embroiderers. Photographed by J. Irwin at Bhuj in February, 1957.

Plate III. The hook (*ãrī*) being used by a Mochi embroiderer. Photographed by J. Irwin at Bhuj in February, 1957.

(c) The hook was inserted downwards into the cloth and a small loop of silk engaged.

(d) The hook was then pulled through and re-inserted, and so on. In this way the chain-stitches were worked very rapidly and evenly.

Notes by Babette Hanish following research at Bhuj in December, 1967, subsequently continued in the States:

By the time I began research on Indian textiles in the mid-1960's, references to the *ãrī* had come to my notice in published works. It was therefore with foreknowledge and a desire to see the implement and the kinds of embroidery worked with it that I visited Bhuj in 1967. In particular, I wanted to learn in detail how the groups of fabrics represented at Plate I were made.

During my four day stay in Bhuj I visited a number of villages as well as the city itself. Within Bhuj I was taken by the District Industries Officer, Mr. Rathod, and his associates of the Co-operative Societies, Government of Gujarat, to Schroff Bazar and the shop of Ramji Jethabhai & Sons, professional Mochi embroiderers.[7] There I was shown the voluminous pattern book which the family has handed down from one member to another over the years. I was also privileged to see a sketch book prepared by Ramji Jethabhai containing primarily religious subjects from which embroidery designs could be derived. In addition several embroideries were brought out for me to view, among them one or two award-winning works and a group of traditional pieces.

When I asked to see the *ãrī* (the tool the Mochis use) I was taken to the *Kutchi Bharat Center* which is run by the Co-operative Societies of the Government of Gujarat, where a group of young women trainees were being taught the use of the *ãrī* by one of the two Jethabhai brothers (sons of Ramji). I joined the class as they sat on the floor, legs crossed, each member with a piece of fabric draped over the right knee. After observing at close hand the manner of working the *ãrī* I attempted with the assistance of Mr. Jethabhai to learn a bit of the technique. A great deal of time has to be devoted to mastering the skill, but even a short exposure was sufficient to provide at least a degree of insight into the craft.

The *ãrī* has an awl-like handle and a needle-sharp metal shaft with an almost invisible hooked tip (see fig. 2). The tool is held in the right hand at an angle of approximately forty-five degrees to the fabric (see Plate III). The hook, pointed away from the embroiderer, penetrates the cloth to pick up the

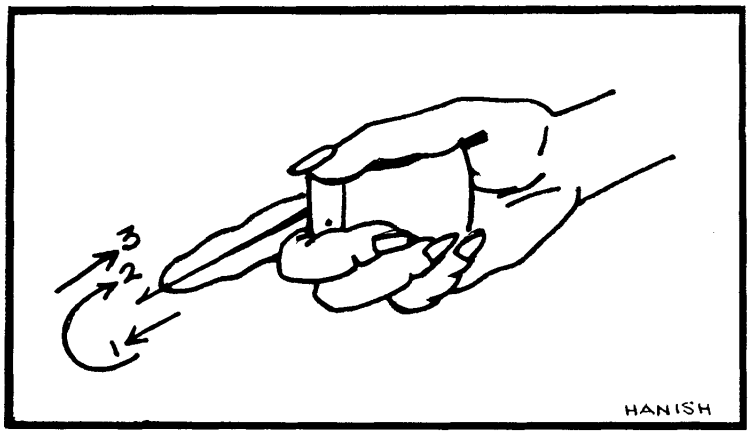

fig.1

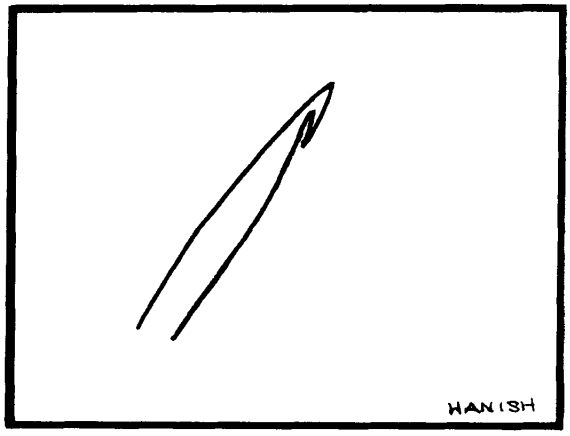

fig.2

thread fed by the left hand from beneath the fabric. The loop is then brought to the surface by withdrawing and quarter-turning the *ãrĩ* away from the embroiderer. No knot is made when the work is begun or ended. Each successive loop is created by the same means except that after the first loop is made the *ãrĩ* passes through its center to pick up the next one, thereby creating a chain not unlike that obtained in tambour embroidery[8] or crocheting. The *ãrĩ* is limited by the fact that it can produce only loops, but this limitation is, in another way, its virtue since it permits a person competent in the use of this awl-like implement to work much more quickly than would be possible with a needle. The pattern is worked on the upper surface of the cloth with the chain-stitch used both for filling in, and outlining, the motif – only a colour change distinguishes between the two. Each stitch requires only one puncture of the cloth by the *ãrĩ* to create a loop, as compared with a needle which requires a double action to make a loop and usually results in two piercings per stitch. The single puncture for each *ãrĩ* stitch means that the continuous thread runs from hole to hole with no skips between. Unlike the needle which can, and often does, pick up only the surface of the fabric leaving bare spots beneath, the *ãrĩ* must penetrate the cloth completely to pick up the thread from below, producing a stitch on the reverse side for each one occurring above.

The silk thread used by the Mochis (and this is especially true of the traditional work) is of the floss variety which requires much deftness of handling to keep it from splitting. This differs from tambour work where the tightly spun thread is less fragile. I make the comparison here between tambour and Mochi embroidery because there are similarities especially in the finished product. However, there is a point of considerable difference between them with regard to the use of a frame – tambour embroidery derives its name from the frame used to facilitate stitching, while the Mochi work is done without any frame.[9]

It is worth reiterating that Mochi embroidery (known locally as *kutchi bharat*) is professional, not folk. The evidence suggests that these people used the hook almost exclusively in preference to the needle. On the other hand, I could find no evidence that the hook was used by Kutch folk embroiderers, and it is perhaps significant that their chain-stitching is of more than one type and is usually combined with other kinds of stitches which are only workable with the needle. [0]

To distinguish hookwork from needlework is not always easy or obvious, but there are a few guides to recognition. For instance the single puncture of the cloth by hook to create the loop (already described) is one clue. Another is the fact that the hook seems to set up a tension such that the previous stitch

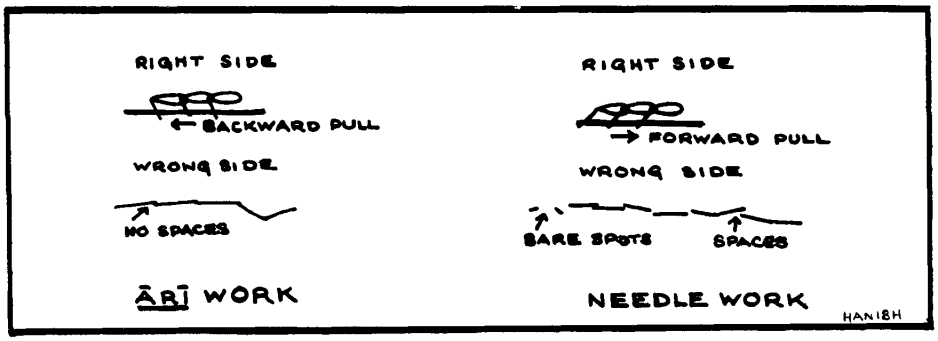

fig. 3

pulls the next loop towards it – whereas in needlework the next stitch acts in a holding or tacking capacity so that each stitch is not pulled back, but rather forward. (See fig. 3)

There is no evidence beyond legend regarding the antiquity of the embroidery hook in India, nor do we know over what geographical area its use spread.[11] We do know, however, both from surviving specimens of Mochi work and from documentary reference, that it was used by the Mochis of Kutch at least a hundred and fifty years ago.

The earliest presently known published reference appears in a book by Marianne Postens Young entitled *Cutch, or Random Sketches taken During a Residence in One of the Northern Provinces of Western India,* London, 1839. In a chapter entitled "Skills of the Cutchees" she writes:

> "The embroiderers display much taste in their native designs; but the most remarkable characteristic of their talent is the surprising correctness they display in the art of imitation. They work with a long steel needle, crooked at the point, and, placing the silk below the material to be worked, hook it through, by means of this little implement. They never draw any pattern to guide their stitches, but imitate any embroidery placed before them, by the eye, without even measuring the distance of the pattern. The embroidery is flat, somewhat resembling old English tambour-work. For working on satins, coloured silks are used; and for velvets, gold thread, spangles and beads".

The Mochi embroidery of Kutch has very much declined in quality over the last seventy years. The craft is now reduced to the point where only the two sons of Ramji Jethabhai remain capable of carrying on the technique

with any measure of professional skill. Undaunted by this situation, the Jethabhai brothers are now training a group of women in what has hitherto been an exclusively male occupation. However, the years of apprenticeship necessary to produce work of the former standard, and the high costs which such training and materials involve under modern conditions, do not encourage optimism. The fact is that the Mochi embroidery was part of a way of life that has all but vanished and is not likely to be revived in light of the social and economic pressures shaping the India of today.

Postscript

It is perhaps relevant in this context to publish the only other evidence at present known to us of the embroidery hook being used in India. At Plate IV we reproduce a painting of hook-embroiderers at work in Kashmir in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The painting appears in 'Oriental Volume No. 71 at the India Office Library, London, the handwritten title of which reads as follows: "Book containing illustrations of the various trades in Kashmir with their respective implements and the corresponding accounts of processes of manufacture". The handwriting is identical with that of William Moorcroft, the well-known East India Company veterinary surgeon and adventurer, whose detailed notes on the crafts of Kashmir, made between 1820 and 1823, are also preserved in the Library. The volume contains 86 paintings by a native artist with descriptions in a corrupt style of Persian. At the top is written: "Likeness of Khãliq-embroiderer and the tools of Khãliq-embroidery are described". The hook seems to have a projecting barb and is therefore somewhat different to the Mochi hook of Kutch. Nevertheless the name is the same. Beneath the drawing of the hook in the centre of the picture are the words: *ãrī kunj kih az an yarma kãrī mīkunad,* best translated as "hooked awl with which he does *yarma*-work".[12]

Plate IV. Khãliq-embroiderers at work with hooks. Painted in Kashmir by a local artist about 1820.

India Office Library, London, Oriental Volume 71.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Some caution is needed in quoting Marco Polo. The great traveller, although conversant with four Asian languages, was practically illiterate in his native tongue and his famous travel story might never have been committed to paper had he not found himself in a Genoese prison with time on his hands. There he told his story to a fellow prisoner who recorded it in Italianized French. The original is now lost, and there are many inconsistencies and interpolations in subsequent Italian and Latin translations. The text here quoted is the Toledo ms. of about 1400, written in Latin. This is published by A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot under the title *Marco Polo: The Description of the World,* 2 vols., London, 1938, together with an English translation which is unsatisfactory, and which we have ignored in this context as inaccurate.
2. George Watt, *Indian art at Delhi, being the catalogue of the Delhi Exhibition, 1902-3,* Calcutta, 1903, p. 201 and Plate 43 B.
3. Duarte Barbosa, *Livro de D.B.,* translated by Hakluyt Society, London, 1918, vol. I, p. 142.
4. J. H. van Linschoten, *Itinerario,* Amsterdam, 1596.
5. India Office Archives, London. Factory Records Miscellaneous, vol. 25, p. 19.
6. The dynasty of Kutch was itself of Sind origin, having been conquered in the fourteenth century by the Sind tribe of Samma Rajputs.
7. J. M. Nanavati, M. P. Vora, M. A. Dhaky, *The Embroidery and Bead Work of Kutch and Saurashtra,* Department of Archaeology, Gujarat State, 1966, pp. 11-13, provides the most comprehensive information presently available on the Mochi and other schools of Gujarat embroidery.
8. Thérèse de Dillmont, *Encyclopedia of Needlework,* D.M.C. Library, Mulhouse, Alsace, [n.d.], pp. 152-156.
9. Kamala S. Dongerkery, *The Romance of Indian Embroidery,* Thacker & Co. Ltd., Bombay, 1951, p. 32, and Jamila Brig Bhushan, *The Costumes and Textiles of India,* Taraporevala, Bombay, 1958, p. 52, speak of the use of a frame in Mochi embroidery; however, Messrs. Nanavati, Vora and Dhaky, p. 12, indicate that the lap, not a frame, is used. This latter point of view corresponds with our own findings (see Plate III).
10. Jasleen Dhamija in her article, "The Textiles and Embroideries of India", published in *Marg,* Bombay, 1965, p. 48, states that the *ãrĩ* is used by the Mochis and the Ahirs of Kutch. See also Dongerkery, p. 32, and Bhushan, p. 52, who speak of the 'Cutch Embroiderers' using a hook. Nanavati and his colleagues indicate that the *ãrĩ* is used only by the Mochis. The phrase 'Cutch embroiderers' is misleadingly vague. We have no positive evidence that the *ãrĩ* is used by any contemporary group beside the Mochis.
11. Bhushan, *op.cit.,* p. 52, probably based on Dongerkery, *op.cit.,* p. 32, cites a legend that the *ãrĩ* technique was introduced about 300 years ago from Sind and that it was originally used for embroidering leather. This, in light of the evidence mentioned at the beginning, seems entirely plausible.
12. We are grateful to Mr. Robert Skelton of the Victoria and Albert Museum for translation and his interpretation of the corrupt literal sense of the wording.