



Exploring The Socio-Political Dialogue In Contemporary Embroidery Art Practice In India

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Abstract: With an emphasis on its usage as a cultural dialogue and historical reflection, this research paper examines the changing function of needlework in modern Indian art. The research looks at how needlework, which was one thought of as a domestic craft, has been reclaimed as a means of resistance and storytelling through the works of Dr. Paula Sengupta and Lavanya Mani. While Mani's textile-based works question the politics of fabric, trade and postcolonial identity, Sengupta's approach, uses Nakshi Kantha embroidery to explore issues of displacement, Partition, and colonial legacies. These artists question historical narratives and reinterpret embroidery as an active medium of socio-political participation by fusing traditional embroidery techniques with modern conceptual frameworks. This paper highlights how embroidery continues to be a dynamic and critical medium fostering dialogue between past and present in India's cultural landscape.

Index Terms: Contemporary embroidery, Paula Sengupta, Lavanya Mani, needlework, art, craft, socio-political, identity, history, culture, gender, post-colonial, textile, fabric.

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of embroidery in Indian art dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization, which also marked the start of a long and thriving tradition that has endured for centuries. An essential component of India's artistic legacy, embroidery is woven into cultural customs and acts as a medium for local identities. The historical background of the art form, which reflects the varied traditions, folktales, and societal ideals of India's numerous regions, is fundamental to its significance. Embroidery, which serves as a storytelling medium and a mark of regional pride, has been essential in maintaining and passing down the cultural history of these areas, from the colourful Phulkari of the north to the delicate Kantha of the east.

Historically, embroidery served as a means of preserving local history, passing down family traditions, and expressing the distinctiveness of each community's cultural ethos in addition to being a decorative skill. Every stitch and design had a symbolic value, whether it was a representation of socioeconomic class, religious themes, or folklore. The custom was handed down through the centuries, allowing for both individual expression within the parameters of tradition and legacy preservation.

Nonetheless, embroidery has experienced substantial changes as India has entered the modern age. This old art form has developed into a distinctive and beautiful medium that simultaneously challenges and preserves its cultural legacy in the present era. By experimenting with new materials, and various conceptual frameworks, contemporary Indian needlework artists have begun to push the limits of tradition and bring modernity to the ancient craft. The function of embroidery in modern art has been reimagined as a result of this blending of the old and the new, where it not only maintains its cultural relevance but also develops into

a potent medium for political and social commentary, and individual expression. Embroidery is no longer limited to traditional clothing or ornamentation in this modern environment; rather, it has become an art form that can participate in wider cultural discussions. These days, needlework is being used by the artists to investigate various subjects like gender, identity, memory and the meeting point of regional and international influences. This evolution of needlework from a traditional craft to a modern creative endeavour shows how adaptable and culturally relevant it is, making it a potent tool for cross-cultural communication in cultural India.

The purpose of this research study is to examine the cultural discourse that takes place within Indian modern embroidery techniques. It explores how artists combine classic methods with contemporary interpretations to produce works that speak to cultural history and the issues and goals of the modern world. The study looks into the ways that modern embroiderers are using their art to examine issues of politics, gender, identity, and ancestry. It also looks at how these artists push the limits of what needlework can stand for in the twenty-first century by balancing the need to preserve cultural uniqueness with the acceptance of global influences.

2. PAULA SENGUPTA

Born in 1967, Dr. Paula Sengupta is a renowned artist, scholar, curator, researcher, and author whose work extensively explores the cultural significance of textile traditions and needlework. Her artistic approach encompasses a variety of media, including applique, woodblock printing, Nakshi kantha, chintz, muslin, and found materials. A key component of her visual language is hand stitching. By using these methods, she brings historic textile crafts back to life and reimagines them, incorporating them with modern stories that deal with issues of history, identity, and displacement.

The exploration of domestic spaces and women's lived experiences – particularly those limited by patriarchy and strict gender roles – is at the heart of Dr. Sengupta's embroidery practice. Her work blurs the lines between art, craft, and social commentary by utilizing traditionally feminine craft techniques like applique and Nakshi Kantha, which are historically linked to women's creative expression and storytelling. By employing fabric and thread for more than just decoration, she reclaims needlework as a potent tool for resistance and conversation, preserving individual and societal histories. By frequently contrasting Oriental and Occidental elements, her needlework work also challenges the lingering effects of colonial control and questions historical power structures and cultural assimilation. Her work's complex stitches weave together stories of migration, exile, and desire, acting as a metaphor and a tangible representation of broken memories. This is especially clear in her autobiographical investigations, where she combines words and pictures to investigate the effects of the 1947 partition and her family's ancestral home in Bangladesh. She turns cloth into a storehouse of history and individual identity by using embroidery to document the psychological and emotional terrain of relocation.



Figure 1 Paula Sengupta, 'Rivers of Blood - Caste: Baidya, Village: Kalia', 2010. Medium: Wood & fibre glass almirah; found objects; corn-fibre paper lining; hand-block printed wallpaper lining; hand-embroidered bed linen; painted, hand-embroidered, & hand-block printed dress; wooden hanger; & vinyl stickers. Picture Courtesy: Gallery Espace. Source: <https://virtual-kolkata-partition-museum.org/paula-sengupta/>

Dr. Sengupta transforms needlework from a household activity into an important cultural discourse tool by fusing traditional stitching methods with modern conceptual frameworks. In addition to preserving India's rich textile legacy, her work reimagines it as a medium for feminist resistance, historical documentation, and storytelling. By doing this, she highlights the embroidery's continued significance in modern Indian art, establishing it as a political and artistic practice that continues to influence cultural narratives.

'River of Blood', a graphic representation of Dr. Paula Sengupta's journey journal through Bangladesh, is both a historical reflection and a moving remark on the lingering effects of partition. It is intensely personal but widely relatable. The piece highlights how the weight of history continues to influence modern identities by capturing the stories of innumerable families uprooted by the subcontinent's horrific divide. By combining narrative and stitching, Rivers of Blood reclaims embroidery as a political and personal act while transforming textile into an important storytelling medium. The appropriation of Nakshi Kantha, a traditional quilting technique from Bangladesh that has traditionally served as a platform for women's voices, social commentary, and personal histories, is at the core of this piece. Nakshi kanthas, which are traditionally made from found fabrics, have historically served as political and cultural symbols, providing an alternate mode of documentation during turbulent times. Dr. Sengupta first experimented with this medium by etching and drawing, but she eventually started hand embroidering on textiles from the colonial era. By doing this, she allowed the medium to represent the rich history and cultural tensions of a divided region by contrasting colonial embroidery techniques with the native Nakshi Kantha thread.

The sewing needle serves as a sketching tool in Rivers of Blood, piercing through relics of colonial legacy to produce a narrative field with several layers. A recurrent theme in her work, clothing emerges as a representation of memory, identity, and displacement – acting as conduits for the histories and ambitions that are transported over national boundaries. The continuous conflict between colonial legacy and indigenous customs is graphically represented by the delicate lace, elaborate chintz, backdrops, and colonial embroidered stitches – stem, chain, and cross – that are compelled to live with the native Kantha run stitch. Seventy-five years after India and Pakistan became independent, this tension is a metaphor for the complicated weight of history that still shapes the post-partition mindset.

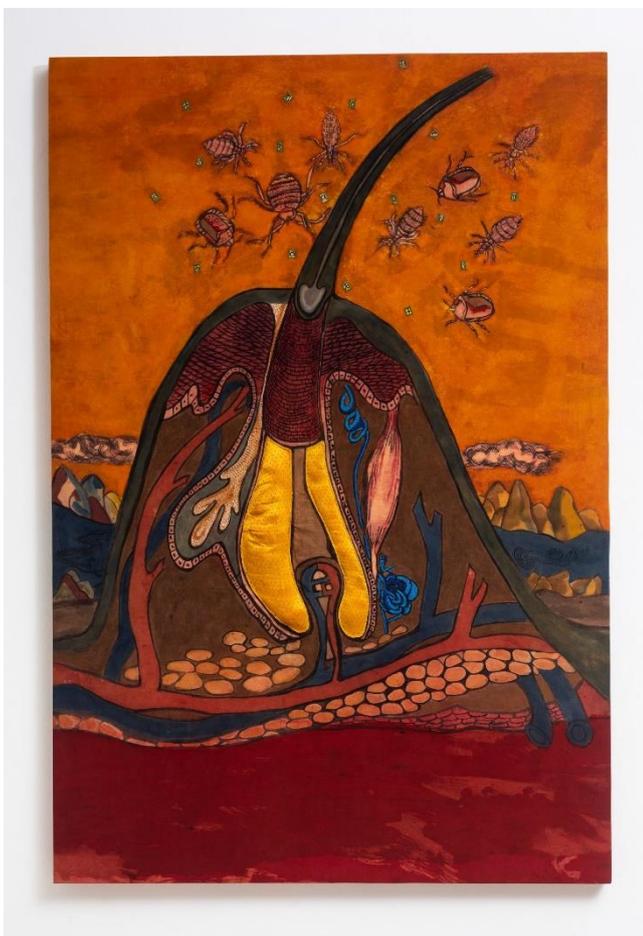


Figure 2 Lavanya Mani. 'Parasite,' 2018-2019, Natural Dyes, Applique and Hand Embroidery on Cotton Fabric, 72 x 48 inches | Lavanya Mani / Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai. Source : <https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/art-lavanya-manis-signs-taken-wonders-mumbais-chemould-prescott/>

Dr. Sengupta transforms embroidery into a vehicle for political and cultural discourse in *Rivers of Blood*, going beyond its traditional aesthetic use. She reclaims stitching as an act of resistance and commemoration by incorporating personal history into found colonial materials, proving its continued significance in Indian art today. The piece is proof of embroidery's ability to preserve communal memory, challenge historical accounts, and give voice to the unsaid but enduring effects of displacement.

3. LAVANYA MANI

Lavanya Mani is a contemporary Indian artist known for her intricate textile-based works that incorporate embroidery, painting and traditional dyeing techniques. Her practice is deeply rooted in historical textile traditions, particularly Indian craft forms like Kalamkari, block printing, and embroidery. Through her work, she explores themes of colonial history, cultural identity, ecological concerns, and the intersection of myth and reality.

Mani's needlework is a potent storytelling tool in addition to being purely ornamental. She employs stitched patterns, applique, and painted elements to create layered narratives on fabric, which she uses as a conceptual space. She embroiders her compositions with themes that reflect colonial trade, nature, and cross-cultural interchange, and they frequently mimic antique textile maps, botanical images, or geographical representations.

By combining needlework with dyeing and printing methods, Mani produces aesthetically striking surfaces that harken back to India's textile manufacturing past. In her artwork, she has used needlework to draw attention to specifics, creating a tactile depth, and draw attention to symbolic motifs. Her complex, handcrafted creations are further enhanced by the delicate and accurate embroidered stitches she frequently uses.

India's colonial past is heavily reflected in Mani's investigation of fabric and thread as a location of power relations. Mahatma Gandhi led the Swadeshi movement, which put handwoven fabrics at the heart of India's struggle for freedom. The movement turned fabric into a political instrument of resistance against colonial rule by supporting handspun khadi and calling for a boycott of British mill-made fabric. In her artwork, Mani makes reference to this past, highlighting the ways in which textiles have historically been intertwined with concerns of national identity, self-sufficiency, and exploitation.

Mani's use of collage, both conceptually and in form, results in compositions that tell untold tales about the fabrics we wear. She represents the various forces that have influenced Indian textiles throughout the years by piecing together historical allusions, botanical themes, colonial trade maps, and shards of individual or collective memory. In this layering, embroidery is essential because threads turn into acts of reclamation that give voice to marginalized histories and restore obliterated narratives. She challenges how power systems still affect textile production today by fusing several textile traditions, such as Kalamkari, block-printing, and embroidered motifs, and contrasting the handcrafted with the industrial, the native with the alien. Through the deeper socio-political meanings weaved into the very threads of their garments, her work challenges viewers to reevaluate their connection with fabric.

Mani's interest in mythology, science, and environmental issues is another important component of her work. Imaginary landscapes where the natural and artificial worlds live in strange harmony are frequently featured in her embroidered textiles. She blends historical and fictitious elements, borrowing inspiration from early European botanical drawings, Mughal miniature paintings, and cartography. In her work, embroidery serves

as a bridge between two disparate systems: Indian mythical storytelling and western scientific classifications. She questions colonial impositions on indigenous knowledge by reconstructing alternative histories using stitching and patterns.

Because it reclaims needlework and textile art as a medium for critical debate, Lavanya Mani's work is important in the current art scenario. By transforming needlework from a decorative technique to a philosophical and political medium, she confronts the historical marginalization of textile-based crafts in fine art settings. Her work is especially pertinent to conversations about postcolonial identity and the resurgence of traditional craft in modern art because of her involvement with themes of colonization, ecology, and mythology. Mani challenges prevailing historical narratives and celebrates the tenacity of Indian textile traditions via needlework, fostering a conversation between the past and present. Her creations redefine embroidery's place in modern art and demonstrate the craft's ongoing significance as an artistic and intellectual endeavour. Through embroidery and collage, she transforms fabric into a space of storytelling, questioning, and reimagining the narratives that shape India's cultural and artistic landscape.

4. CONCLUSION

In India, modern needlework has developed into a tool for historical contemplation, political criticism and cross-cultural communication. Using stitching, artists such as Paula Sengupta and Lavanya Mani reinterpret stories of resistance, colonial history and identity. In Sengupta's work, especially in Rivers of Blood, Nakshi Kantha is used as a means of recording partition and relocation, while Mani's collages question the politics of fabric and colonial trade history. Through their activities, needlework is repositioned as an active medium of storytelling and socio-political participation, challenging its historical reputation as a domestic craft. Their work highlights embroidery's continuing significance as an artistic and critical discourse in India's cultural landscape by linking the past and present.

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