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MASTERS' UNION × SEWA LUCKNOW

Pre-Read

Chikankari Craft & Community Enterprise Immersion

PGP Bharat C2 Immersions | SEWA Lucknow, Chikankari Cluster

1. About SEWA Lucknow

SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association), Lucknow, was registered in February 1984 under the Societies Registration Act as an autonomous association of chikan workers. It grew directly out of a 1979 study by UNICEF and Literacy House, Lucknow, which found that women and children in the chikan industry were being more cruelly exploited than in any other craft in the unorganised sector of Uttar Pradesh. SEWA was formed specifically to eliminate the middlemen extracting margin from that exploitation and to connect artisans directly to markets.

Its stated objectives are worth reading closely before the visit, because they are the practical version of the "organisation vs. exploitation" argument at the heart of SEWA's work:

- Ensure fair wages by removing middleman exploitation
- Identify and develop new markets for chikan products
- Organise workers to build confidence, leadership, and security
- Train members in purchase, production, management, marketing, and accounting
- Upgrade artisan skills and revive/revitalise the traditional craft
- Give artisans collective bargaining power
- Provide social benefits - education, health, and rights-based support for members and their children

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Vision: *"an egalitarian and gender-just Society within a framework of Women's Rights and Sustainable Human Development."*

Mission: *Empowering marginalised women through capacity-building and improved quality of life.*

Operating model, per the organisation's own site: SEWA Lucknow provides regular design, technical, and marketing support to roughly 2,240 individual entrepreneurs. Production is entirely home-based - artisans embroider at home after finishing their domestic work, so chikankari functions as supplementary rather than sole household income, but it materially increases artisans' say in family decisions and social standing. Finished products are tagged with price, size, a photo of the artisan who made them, and a short organisational story - a transparency practice that makes the artisan behind each piece visible to the buyer.

2. SEWA's Business Model - Community-Led Enterprise

Artisans are structured as individual entrepreneurs, not employees or formal cooperative shareholders - the organisation describes 2,240 individual entrepreneurs who sell finished products to SEWA Lucknow, with pricing "worked out between them and the core artisan team of SEWA Lucknow." This is a negotiated buyer-seller relationship rather than a published wage scale or profit-sharing structure.

Artisans build capacity through this relationship. Many become confident enough to negotiate prices, hold regular meetings, and maintain their own books of accounts, and some eventually graduate to selling independently to their own buyers while still producing for SEWA as needed.

Legally, SEWA Lucknow itself is a registered society (not a trust or producer company), and it does not use terms like "self-help group" or "cooperative" for its own structure - worth flagging to students as a useful thing to ask about directly during the visit: how artisan groups are actually organised day-to-day, and whether "community-led" is the right description or whether it is closer to a supported-entrepreneur network.

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3. Ms Runa Banerjee - Founder, SEWA Lucknow



Ms Runa Banerjee is the co-founder of SEWA Lucknow and, at the organisation, holds the roles of General Secretary and Chief Executive Officer - the person most directly responsible for turning the "organisation vs. exploitation" argument into an actual institution. Students meeting her, or hearing about her, should know the full arc of how SEWA came to exist.

She was born in 1950 in the Model House area of Lucknow and holds a Master of Arts in History from the University of Lucknow. She was active in social work from early in her life, focused on educating women and children in her locality, and in 1979 organised a health camp for the poor with participation from locally known physicians.

That same year, 1979, is the hinge point: a UNICEF report on chikankari artisans redirected her focus specifically to the craft - the same report referenced above, which found artisans being exploited by middlemen and living in poverty. Ms Banerjee, together with her friend Sehba Hussain, responded first not with a trade intervention but an education one: they started a primary school for artisans' children, charging a nominal fee of one rupee. It began as a single-teacher school and eventually grew into what is now the SEWA Montessori School.

In 1984, she launched a mission called "Earn While You Learn," starting with just 31 members. That effort was formally registered the same year as the Lucknow chapter of the Self Employed Women's Association. The model gave chikankari artisans a way to learn the craft while working,

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rather than requiring existing skill as a precondition for earning. Under her leadership, membership grew past 7,500, and the organisation is credited with training around 8,000 women and reviving a craft that was, by the late 1970s, in serious decline.

She also took the work international: under SEWA, exhibitions were staged at the Islamic Centre in New Delhi (the first), then the Silk Road Campaign in Washington, the Macef International Home Show in Milan (2003), the Brides of the Orient Show in Melbourne, and further shows in London and Barcelona - the market-access side of the argument that organisation gives artisans real bargaining power. SEWA Lucknow is also listed as an implementing agency under the Ambedkar Hastashilp Vikas Yojana, a Ministry of Textiles government scheme.

Her work extended beyond chikankari specifically: following the 2002 Gujarat riots, she and Sehba Hussain toured Gujarat and helped affected women take up chikankari as a livelihood, training them in the craft as a form of economic rehabilitation. That relief work contributed to her being one of "1000 PeaceWomen Across the Globe" collectively nominated for the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize (the prize that year went to Mohamed ElBaradei). In 2007, the Government of India awarded her the Padma Shri, the country's fourth-highest civilian honour.

4. About Chikankari

Chikankari is a traditional whitework embroidery style from Lucknow, India. Lucknow and its adjoining districts remain the centre of production, with Chowk, Lucknow as the traditional retail hub. In December 2008, chikankari was granted Geographical Indication (GI) status, formally recognising Lucknow as its exclusive origin.

Its origins are genuinely disputed rather than settled fact. Some trace a precursor to Megasthenes' 3rd-century-BC account of "flowered muslins" in Chandragupta Maurya's court, though historians note this lacked chikan's actual defining features. Textile historian Laila Tyabji connects it to white-on-white embroidery from Shiraz, Persia, arriving via Mughal-court nobles. The most popular, but unverified, origin story credits Empress Noor Jahan, wife of Emperor Jahangir, with introducing it to India. Academic sources are explicit that none of these has clear historical evidence behind it. Better documented is the shift from male master craftsmen in the Nawabi-patronage era to an

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almost entirely female, low-paid workforce once that patronage collapsed - the exploitation-by-middlemen dynamic SEWA was built to correct.

The production process runs in five stages: design, engraving (of printing blocks), block printing (the motif is stamped onto fabric), embroidery (hand-stitched over the printed guide), and washing/finishing (which removes all trace of the printed pattern, leaving only the stitched motif). Traditionally the work is done in white thread on fine, pastel-coloured muslin or cotton - the fabric has to be sheer enough for a needle to pass through easily and, for shadow-work stitches, sheer enough that the reverse-side stitching is visible through the front. Contemporary chikankari also appears on chanderi, georgette, viscose, silk, organza, net, crepe, and chiffon.

5. Glossary

Tepchi	A long running/darning stitch, usually the first stitch applied, forming the outline that later stitches build on.
Bakhiya (shadow work)	The signature chikankari stitch. Worked from the wrong side of the fabric so only a "shadow" of the thread shows through on the right side - the source of chikankari's translucent, layered look.
Murri	Small, rice-grain-shaped knots, typically filling flower centres. Considered the oldest and most prized chikankari stitch, and increasingly rare as fewer artisans are trained in it.
Phanda	A knot stitch, thread wrapped around the needle before insertion; larger and less delicate than murri, used for flower centres and decorative dots.
Jaali (net/trellis work)	An openwork, lace-like effect created by separating the fabric's own warp and weft threads (never cutting them) and securing the gaps with small buttonhole stitches. The back looks as finished as the front - a good example of "invisible" skill.

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Hool	A fine detached eyelet stitch: a small hole is punched, the threads teased apart, and the edges secured with tiny stitches, often forming a flower centre.
Zanzeera	Chain stitch, used for bold outlines and borders.
Rahet	Stem stitch, used for stems and curved lines.
Banarasi	Twisted-thread work, used for decorative borders.
Mulmul / Malmal	Fine muslin, the traditional base fabric for chikankari.
Block Printing	Stamping the design onto fabric before embroidery, using carved wooden blocks.
GI Status	Geographical Indication - the legal recognition tying chikankari specifically to Lucknow.

6. Sources

- [SEWA Lucknow - Home](#)
- [SEWA Lucknow - About](#)
- [SEWA Lucknow - Products](#)
- [Runa Banerjee - Wikipedia](#)
- [Chikankari - Wikipedia](#)
- [The Complete Chikankari Stitch Dictionary - Awadhkari](#)