iJRASET
International Journal For Research in Applied Science and Engineering Technology

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Volume: 14 **Issue:** VI **Month of publication:** June 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2026.83727

www.ijraset.com

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International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology (IJRASET)
ISSN: 2321-9653; IC Value: 45.98; SJ Impact Factor: 7.538
Volume 14 Issue VI June 2026- Available at www.ijraset.com

Mukaish Embroidery: A Critical Study of Its Evolution, Cultural Significance, and Contemporary Revival

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Abstract: ***Mukaish embroidery, also known as Badla work or Kamdani, constitutes one of the most refined traditions of metallic thread embroidery in the Indian subcontinent, historically centred in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. Characterised by the painstaking insertion of flattened metallic strips into fine fabric to produce a subtle, luminous surface effect, Mukaish occupies a distinctive position within the broader constellation of Indian textile arts—neither as dominant as Zardozi nor as widely recognised as Chikankari, yet possessing its own aesthetic logic, technical repertoire, and cultural genealogy. This paper traces the evolution of Mukaish embroidery from its contested origins in the Mughal courts through its Nawabi golden age, its decline during colonial and post-industrial periods, and its contemporary revival within global fashion and heritage economies. Drawing upon qualitative research encompassing historical analysis, review of published scholarship, examination of fashion and design literature, and interviews with practitioners, the study examines the transformations in materials, techniques, designs, and market demand that have characterised the craft's trajectory. The analysis reveals that while Mukaish has demonstrated significant adaptive resilience—migrating from royal court attire to contemporary bridal wear, fusion fashion, and international couture—its survival remains imperilled by structural challenges including artisan impoverishment, skill attrition, competition from mechanised substitutes, and inadequate institutional support. The paper argues that Mukaish embroidery's long-term viability depends upon coordinated interventions in artisan empowerment, design innovation, digital documentation, market diversification, and policy reform, and contributes to the growing literature on craft sustainability and intangible cultural heritage preservation in the context of globalisation.***

Keywords: Mukaish embroidery; Badla work; Kamdani; Lucknow textiles; traditional Indian embroidery; craft revival; intangible cultural heritage; sustainable fashion; metallic thread work; Awadhi culture

I. INTRODUCTION

The textile traditions of India constitute one of the world's richest and most diverse repositories of material culture, encompassing an extraordinary range of weaving, dyeing, printing, and embroidery practices that encode centuries of aesthetic sensibility, technical knowledge, social organisation, and cultural identity (Gillow & Sentance, 2008). Within this vast landscape, the embroidery traditions of Lucknow occupy a particularly significant position, shaped by the confluence of Mughal court culture, Nawabi patronage, and the distinctive tehzeeb (refined etiquette) of Awadh (Oldenburg, 1984). While Chikankari has received considerable scholarly and popular attention as Lucknow's signature embroidery form, Mukaish—also referred to as Badla work or Kamdani—has remained comparatively marginal in both academic discourse and public consciousness, despite its historical importance and distinctive aesthetic contribution to Indian textile heritage.

Mukaish embroidery is characterised by the insertion of flattened metallic strips—traditionally of silver or gold-plated copper—into fine fabric to create a delicate, shimmering surface effect that is qualitatively distinct from the heavier, more ostentatious appearance of Zardozi. The technique produces what might be described as an aesthetic of understated luminescence: a subtle play of light across the textile surface that reflects the Awadhi courtly preference for nafasat (refinement) over display (Kumar, 1999). This aesthetic sensibility, deeply rooted in the cultural milieu of Lucknow's Nawabi era, distinguishes Mukaish from other metallic embroidery traditions in India and positions it as a uniquely nuanced expression of Indian luxury craft.

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Despite its historical significance, Mukaish embroidery has experienced a prolonged trajectory of decline. The withdrawal of royal patronage during the colonial period, the disruptive impact of industrialised textile production, changing fashion preferences, and the migration of artisans to more remunerative occupations have collectively eroded the craft's material and human infrastructure (Dhamija, 2004). In recent years, however, a revival of interest in traditional crafts, the growing influence of sustainability discourse in fashion, and the deliberate efforts of designers, government agencies, and cultural organisations have created new possibilities for the craft's reinvigoration. Yet this revival raises its own critical questions: to what extent can a courtly luxury craft adapt to the conditions of contemporary mass and luxury markets without compromising its technical integrity and cultural identity? What are the structural conditions necessary for sustainable craft revival? And how should Mukaish be positioned within the broader discourse on intangible cultural heritage preservation?

This study addresses these questions through a comprehensive examination of Mukaish embroidery's historical development, technical characteristics, cultural significance, decline, and contemporary revival. The research is guided by three objectives: (1) to trace the historical evolution of Mukaish embroidery from its origins to the present, identifying the key social, economic, and cultural forces that have shaped its trajectory; (2) to document and analyse the materials, techniques, and aesthetic principles that define the craft; and (3) to evaluate the contemporary challenges and prospects for Mukaish embroidery's survival, with particular attention to artisan livelihoods, design innovation, market dynamics, and heritage preservation frameworks.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The scholarly literature on Mukaish embroidery is characterised by a notable asymmetry: while the craft is frequently mentioned in broader studies of Indian textiles and Lucknow's embroidery traditions, it has rarely been the primary focus of sustained academic investigation. This section reviews the existing literature, identifies key themes and gaps, and positions the present study within the field.

Early scholarly engagement with Indian embroidery traditions, exemplified by Kumar's (1999) Costumes and Textiles of Royal India and Dhamija's (2004) Asian Embroidery, establishes the historical and cultural context for Mukaish within the wider landscape of Mughal-era textile production. Kumar provides an authoritative account of the development of embroidery crafts under Mughal patronage, situating Mukaish as a metallic thread technique associated with luxury and nobility. Dhamija extends this analysis by examining the role of handmade embroideries in Indian cultural life more broadly, discussing Mukaish alongside Chikankari as significant elements of Lucknow's textile heritage. Both works, however, treat Mukaish as a secondary subject within a broader narrative, providing historical context without detailed technical or ethnographic documentation of the craft itself.

Subsequent literature has addressed the socio-economic conditions of artisans engaged in traditional embroidery. Reports by UNESCO (2003) and the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) under India's Ministry of Textiles have documented the challenges facing traditional craft practitioners, including inadequate remuneration, limited market access, declining intergenerational skill transmission, and competition from machine-produced imitations. These institutional reports provide valuable empirical data on the structural conditions affecting craft sustainability but tend to treat Mukaish as one among many endangered crafts rather than examining its specific challenges and dynamics.

More recent scholarship has attended to the revival and contemporary adaptation of traditional crafts within the global fashion system. The work of designers such as Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla, who have incorporated Mukaish into high-fashion garments, has been documented in fashion media and design literature, illustrating the craft's potential for reinvention within luxury markets (Jani & Khosla, 2016). Studies on sustainable fashion have positioned Mukaish and similar handcraft traditions as environmentally preferable alternatives to industrial textile production, linking craft preservation to broader sustainability agendas (Clark, 2008; Fletcher, 2008). However, this literature often romanticises craft production without adequately addressing the material conditions of artisans' lives or the structural inequalities that characterise the craft sector (Scrase, 2003).

A significant gap in the existing literature concerns the systematic documentation and analysis of Mukaish embroidery as a distinct technical and aesthetic tradition. The specific patterns (motifs), tools, and methods employed in Mukaish have not been comprehensively catalogued or analysed. The relationship between Mukaish and other Lucknow embroidery traditions—particularly Chikankari, with which it is frequently combined—has not been theoretically elaborated. Furthermore, the potential of Mukaish within global sustainable fashion markets has not been adequately examined through rigorous empirical research. The present study addresses these gaps through a focused, in-depth investigation of Mukaish embroidery's history, techniques, cultural significance, and contemporary prospects.

III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A. *Ancient and Early Origins*

The precise origins of Mukaish embroidery remain a matter of scholarly debate, complicated by the fragmentary nature of early textual and material evidence. While the craft is most firmly associated with the Mughal period, some scholars have traced its antecedents to much earlier periods of Indian textile history. Archaeological excavations at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro have yielded needles dating to the Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 3300–1300 BCE), suggesting that ornamental stitching was practised in the Indian subcontinent from antiquity (Gillow & Sentance, 2008). Vedic texts, including the Taittiriya Samhita and the Rig Veda, contain references to needles used for stitching, which some scholars have interpreted as evidence of early embroidery practices, though the specific connection to metallic thread work remains speculative.

It is important to note that these early references establish only the general antiquity of needlework in the Indian subcontinent, not the specific genealogy of Mukaish as a metallic thread embroidery technique. The earliest reliable evidence for the practice of inserting metallic threads into fabric in India dates to the medieval period, when Islamic court culture introduced sophisticated metalwork traditions from Persia and Central Asia (Kumar, 1999). The confluence of these imported metalwork techniques with indigenous Indian textile traditions created the conditions for the emergence of Mukaish as a distinct craft, though the precise chronology of this development remains to be established through further archival and material research.

B. *Mughal and Nawabi Patronage (Sixteenth–Eighteenth Centuries)*

The Mughal period represents the most significant epoch in the development of Mukaish embroidery, as it was under Mughal patronage that the craft attained the level of technical refinement and aesthetic sophistication for which it is known. The Mughal courts, which placed a premium on luxury, refinement, and the synthesis of Persian and Indian artistic traditions, provided both the material resources and the cultural milieu necessary for the flourishing of metallic thread embroidery (Kumar, 1999). The Ain-i-Akbari, the sixteenth-century administrative document compiled by Abu'l-Fazl ibn Mubarak during the reign of Emperor Akbar, contains a reference to Muqayyash, which scholars have identified as an early term for Mukaish, suggesting that the craft was sufficiently established by the late sixteenth century to warrant official documentation (Abu'l-Fazl, 1590/1927).

Popular tradition attributes the introduction and promotion of Mukaish (alongside Chikankari) to the influence of the Mughal Empress Nur Jahan (1577–1645), whose reputed skill in textile design and whose patronage of luxury crafts have entered the cultural mythology of Lucknow (Dhamija, 2004). While the historical accuracy of this attribution is difficult to verify, the association of Mukaish with Nur Jahan reflects the craft's deep embedding in the culture of Mughal femininity and courtly elegance.

Under Mughal patronage, Mukaish was primarily used to embellish Chikankari work on white fabric, creating a luminous effect that complemented the white-on-white aesthetic of the base embroidery with subtle metallic accents. The craft was employed in the creation of garments for royal occasions, where the shimmering effect of metallic thread against fine muslin signalled status and refinement.

The relocation of Mughal cultural patronage to Lucknow following the decline of Delhi in the eighteenth century proved decisive for Mukaish's development. Under the Nawabs of Awadh, who cultivated a distinctive courtly culture characterised by lavish expenditure on the arts, Mukaish embroidery reached new heights of technical and aesthetic achievement (Oldenburg, 1984). The Nawabi courts of Lucknow provided sustained patronage to embroidery artisans, supporting a thriving craft ecosystem in which Mukaish was practiced alongside Chikankari, Zardozi, and other decorative textile arts. This period established Lucknow as the pre-eminent centre of Mukaish production, a position it retains to the present day, albeit in diminished form.

IV. MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

A. *Materials*

The material constitution of Mukaish embroidery is defined by the interaction between metallic thread and fine fabric, a relationship that produces the craft's characteristic aesthetic of subtle luminosity. The primary material is the badla (also called mukaish strip)—a thin, flat metallic strip traditionally made from silver (rupa ka badla) or gold-plated silver (zari ka badla). In contemporary practice, copper strips with gold or silver finishes have become the standard, reflecting both the prohibitive cost of precious metals and the changing demands of the market (Mittal, 2024). The quality of the metallic strip is critical: it must be sufficiently flexible and pliable to be folded and pressed into fabric without tearing, yet durable enough to maintain its form and lustre over time. The production of badla involves a specialised process in which metal ingots are drawn through perforated steel sheets to create thin wire, which is then flattened through hammering to produce the characteristic flat strip.

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The fabric substrate for Mukaish embroidery must be sufficiently fine and loosely woven to permit the insertion and manipulation of metallic strips without damage. Traditional fabrics include muslin (malmal), which was historically the preferred base for Mughal-era Mukaish; georgette and chiffon, which are commonly used in contemporary bridal and formal wear; organza, which provides a crisp surface that accentuates the metallic shimmer; and fine cotton, which serves as the base for more everyday applications. The choice of fabric significantly influences the visual effect of the finished embroidery: finer fabrics produce a more integrated, floating effect, while heavier fabrics create a more pronounced textural contrast between the metallic insertions and the textile surface.

The needle used in Mukaish work is a specialised fine needle (kanta) designed to pierce the fabric without creating visible holes, enabling the artisan to insert the metallic strip with precision. Unlike Zardozi, which employs a hook (ari) to pull thread through fabric, Mukaish requires a pushing technique in which the needle creates a passage for the flat strip, a distinction that contributes to the craft's characteristic subtlety of effect.

B. Core Techniques

The technical process of Mukaish embroidery follows a sequence of carefully calibrated stages that demand both precision and patience. The process begins with fabric preparation: the fabric is washed and lightly starched to provide sufficient body and stiffness to withstand the manipulation of metallic strips without tearing or distortion. The metallic strips are then prepared through the drawing and flattening process described above.

The core embroidery technique involves three principal actions: piercing, inserting, and twisting. The artisan uses the fine needle to pierce a minute hole in the fabric, inserts the metallic strip through the opening, and then twists the strip back upon itself on the reverse side of the fabric, pressing it flat to secure it in place. Critically, Mukaish work does not employ knots: the metallic strip is secured entirely through the friction of the twist and press, which holds the insertion in place without creating bulk on the reverse side. This knotless technique distinguishes Mukaish from many other embroidery traditions and contributes to the clean, reversible quality of the finished textile. After the insertion is secured, any excess metallic strip is trimmed away with scissors, leaving a neat, flat dot or motif on the fabric surface.

The process is repeated hundreds or thousands of times to build up the desired pattern, a labour-intensive procedure that requires sustained concentration and dexterity. An experienced Mukaish artisan can produce approximately 200–300 insertions per hour, meaning that a complex design covering a full garment may require several days of continuous work (Development Commissioner [Handicrafts], n.d.). This labour intensity is a defining characteristic of the craft and a significant factor in both its economic vulnerability and its cultural value.

C. Common Mukaish Styles

Three principal styles or categories of Mukaish work are recognised within the craft tradition, each distinguished by the scale, density, and complexity of the metallic insertions. Fardi ka kaam (literally, "dot work") is the most common and characteristic form, consisting of minute, equally spaced metallic dots called budiya that are scattered across the fabric surface to create a constellation-like shimmer effect. This style is the most time-intensive, as each dot requires an individual insertion, and the visual impact depends upon the regularity and precision of the spacing.

Kamdani represents a more elaborate form of Mukaish in which the metallic insertions are arranged to form intricate motifs, clusters, and jaal (net-like patterns) that cover larger areas of the fabric. Kamdani requires a higher degree of design skill and planning than fardi ka kaam, as the artisan must work from a mental or traced pattern to produce the desired figurative or geometric design. The term Kamdani is sometimes used interchangeably with Mukaish in popular discourse, but within the craft community it refers specifically to this more elaborate patterned form.

Tikki work involves the creation of small, flat, button-like metallic spots that are slightly larger and more pronounced than the dots of fardi ka kaam. Tikki insertions create a more visible textural effect and are often used in combination with fardi ka kaam to produce contrast in scale and density within a single design. Together, these three styles constitute the technical vocabulary of Mukaish embroidery, enabling a range of aesthetic effects from the subtlest shimmer to more elaborate decorative patterns.

V. CULTURAL AND AESTHETIC SIGNIFICANCE

Mukaish embroidery embodies a distinctive aesthetic philosophy that is deeply rooted in the cultural milieu of Awadh. Unlike the bold, ostentatious visual register associated with Zardozi—which communicates wealth and status through the accumulation of heavy metallic thread, sequins, and precious stones—Mukaish operates within an aesthetic of restraint and refinement.

The craft produces a soft, diffused shimmer rather than a glittering surface effect, an aesthetic choice that reflects the Awadhi cultural values of nafasat (delicacy) and tehzeeb (refined conduct) that permeated Lucknow's courtly society (Oldenburg, 1984). In this sense, Mukaish can be read as a material expression of a particular social worldview: one in which luxury is signalled not through excess but through subtlety, and in which the finest craftsmanship is that which appears effortless.

The cultural significance of Mukaish extends beyond its aesthetic properties to encompass issues of identity, heritage, and social memory. As a craft tradition historically practiced in and around Lucknow, Mukaish is deeply embedded in the cultural geography of Awadh, serving as a tangible link to a pre-colonial past characterised by sophisticated artistic patronage and cosmopolitan cultural exchange. The craft also embodies the syncretic cultural dynamics of the Mughal and Nawabi periods, in which Persian design sensibilities merged with Indian textile traditions to produce hybrid aesthetic forms that defied simple categorisation as either "Islamic" or "Hindu" art (Bayly, 1986). This syncretic heritage positions Mukaish as a significant example of India's pluralistic cultural history, a dimension that has particular resonance in the contemporary political context.

Furthermore, Mukaish embroidery serves as a vehicle for the intergenerational transmission of embodied knowledge. The craft is traditionally learned through ustad-shagird (master-apprentice) relationships within family-based workshops, a mode of knowledge transmission that emphasises tacit, embodied learning over codified instruction (Singh, 2010). This pedagogical model, while effective in maintaining technical standards within the craft community, also contributes to the craft's vulnerability: when the chain of master-apprentice transmission is broken—as it has been in many families due to economic pressures—the accumulated knowledge of generations may be irretrievably lost.

VI. DECLINE OF MUKAISH EMBROIDERY

The decline of Mukaish embroidery is attributable to a confluence of socio-economic, technological, and cultural factors that have systematically eroded the craft's material and human infrastructure since the mid-nineteenth century. The most consequential factor was the withdrawal of royal patronage following the annexation of Awadh by the British East India Company in 1856 and the subsequent dismantling of the Nawabi court, which had served as the primary source of demand and financial support for Mukaish artisans (Oldenburg, 1984). The colonial economy reoriented Indian craft production toward export markets and industrial commodities, privileging machine-manufactured textiles over handcrafted luxury goods and undermining the economic viability of craft traditions that had been sustained by courtly patronage.

The industrialisation of textile production compounded the effects of lost patronage. Machine-made imitations of Mukaish and other metallic embroidery techniques—produced using automated stitching and synthetic metallic threads—offered consumers a superficially similar aesthetic at a fraction of the cost and production time of handcrafted Mukaish. While these imitations lack the technical refinement, material quality, and cultural authenticity of handmade Mukaish, they have proven sufficient for mass-market consumers who prioritise visual appearance over craft provenance (Scrase, 2003). This substitution effect has depressed both the demand for and the perceived value of authentic Mukaish work, creating a downward pressure on artisan incomes that has driven many practitioners to abandon the craft.

The economic marginalisation of Mukaish artisans has had cascading effects on the craft's human capital. The low and often irregular remuneration available from Mukaish work—which reflects the structure of the informal craft economy rather than the skill and time invested—has made the craft economically unviable for many practitioners, particularly younger artisans who can earn higher wages in other sectors (Development Commissioner [Handicrafts], n.d.). Intergenerational skill transmission has consequently declined, as families that have practiced Mukaish for generations are increasingly unwilling or unable to transmit their knowledge to children who see no economic future in the craft. This attrition of skilled practitioners represents perhaps the most serious threat to Mukaish's long-term survival, as the craft's embodied knowledge cannot be recovered once the chain of transmission is broken.

Additional challenges include difficulties in exporting Mukaish products due to concerns about material authenticity and quality certification, limited market access for artisans operating within the informal economy, and the absence of robust geographical indication (GI) protection that would distinguish authentic Lucknow Mukaish from machine-made imitations (Mohapatra, 2016). The combined effect of these factors has been a significant contraction in the scale and vitality of the Mukaish craft sector, with the number of active practitioners declining substantially over the past several decades.

VII. CONTEMPORARY REVIVAL AND ADAPTATION

Despite the structural challenges documented in the preceding section, Mukaish embroidery has experienced a notable revival in recent years, driven by the convergence of several cultural and economic trends.

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The growing influence of sustainability discourse within the global fashion industry has created new demand for handcrafted textiles as environmentally and socially responsible alternatives to industrial production (Fletcher, 2008; Clark, 2008). Mukaish, as a labour-intensive handcraft tradition with a low environmental footprint, is well positioned to benefit from this trend, though the extent to which sustainability rhetoric translates into tangible economic benefit for artisans remains questionable.

Fashion designers have played a pivotal role in Mukaish's contemporary revival. Designers such as Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla, Sabyasachi Mukherjee, and Manish Malhotra have incorporated Mukaish into their collections, combining it with Chikankari to create layered textile effects that appeal to both domestic and international luxury consumers (Jani & Khosla, 2016). These designer interventions have served a dual function: they have repositioned Mukaish from a fading heritage craft to a desirable fashion element, and they have introduced technical and aesthetic innovations—including the use of coloured metallic threads, larger-scale motifs, and novel fabric combinations—that expand the craft's expressive range. However, the relationship between designer-mediated revival and artisan welfare is complex: while designer patronage generates employment, it also tends to concentrate creative control and economic returns in the hands of designers rather than artisans, raising questions about equity within craft value chains (Lyons, 2010).

The contemporary application of Mukaish has diversified significantly beyond its traditional domain of royal and ceremonial attire. The craft now appears in bridal and couture garments, fusion wear combining Indian and Western silhouettes, accessories such as clutches and shoes, home textiles including cushion covers and table linens, and international fashion collections. This diversification reflects both the adaptability of the craft and the changing structure of the luxury market, which increasingly values handcrafted provenance and heritage narratives as markers of distinction (Banim, 2016). The substitution of synthetic metallic threads for traditional precious metal strips—while compromising the material authenticity of the craft—has also reduced production costs and expanded the craft's accessibility to mid-market consumers, though this adaptation raises its own questions about the boundaries of craft authenticity.

Government and non-governmental organisations have contributed to Mukaish's revival through various interventions, including training programmes, craft clusters, marketing support, and heritage recognition initiatives. The Indian government's Ministry of Textiles, through the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), has implemented schemes for artisan skill development, market access, and financial assistance. Non-governmental organisations such as the Crafts Council of India and Dastkar have facilitated direct market linkages between artisans and consumers, bypassing exploitative intermediary structures. UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) provides an international framework within which Mukaish's cultural significance can be formally recognised and protected, though the practical impact of such recognition on artisan livelihoods remains limited without corresponding economic interventions.

VIII. SUSTAINABILITY AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

The long-term sustainability of Mukaish embroidery depends upon the coordinated implementation of interventions across multiple domains: artisan empowerment, design innovation, digital documentation, market development, and policy reform. This section examines each of these domains in turn, drawing upon the analysis presented in preceding sections to identify the most promising strategies for the craft's preservation and development.

Artisan empowerment must be the foundational priority of any sustainable revival strategy. The low and irregular remuneration available to Mukaish practitioners is the single most significant barrier to the craft's survival, as it drives skill attrition and intergenerational disengagement. Addressing this requires both upward pressure on wages—through market positioning that communicates the value of handcraft and eliminates exploitative intermediary structures—and the provision of social security measures including health insurance, pension schemes, and educational support for artisans' families (Scrase, 2003). Fair-trade certification and artisan cooperatives offer institutional mechanisms through which these objectives can be pursued, though their effectiveness in the Indian craft sector has been uneven.

Design innovation is essential for maintaining Mukaish's relevance within contemporary fashion markets, but it must be pursued in a manner that respects the craft's technical integrity and cultural identity. Collaborative design processes that position artisans as creative partners rather than passive executors of designers' visions can generate innovation that emerges from within the craft tradition rather than being imposed from outside (Lyons, 2010). The development of new product categories—including home textiles, accessories, and sustainable fashion products—can expand the craft's market reach without requiring a departure from its core technical principles. The integration of Mukaish with complementary craft traditions, particularly Chikankari, offers opportunities for creating composite textile products that leverage the distinctive aesthetic qualities of both crafts.

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Digital documentation represents a critical preservation strategy for a craft whose knowledge is primarily transmitted through embodied practice rather than codified instruction. Systematic digital archiving of Mukaish motifs, techniques, and design vocabularies—using photography, video, and three-dimensional scanning—can create a permanent record of the craft's technical knowledge that is accessible to future generations of practitioners, designers, and researchers (Kalman, 2014). Such documentation must be undertaken with sensitivity to the intellectual property rights of the artisan communities whose knowledge is being recorded, ensuring that digital archives serve to empower rather than appropriate.

Market development requires a multi-pronged approach that addresses both domestic and international demand. Within India, the growing luxury market and the increasing consumer preference for heritage products create opportunities for positioning Mukaish as a premium craft with verifiable provenance. Geographical indication (GI) registration would provide legal protection against machine-made imitations and establish a framework for quality certification that can underpin premium pricing (Mohapatra, 2016). Internationally, the sustainability and heritage narratives surrounding Mukaish can be leveraged to access ethical fashion markets, though this requires investment in branding, marketing, and distribution infrastructure that extends beyond the capacity of individual artisans.

Policy reform at both state and national levels is necessary to create an enabling environment for Mukaish's sustainable development. Key policy priorities include: the integration of craft education into formal schooling and vocational training curricula; the extension of credit and insurance facilities to artisans in the informal sector; the enforcement of intellectual property protections for traditional designs and techniques; and the development of public procurement policies that favour handcrafted products. The recognition of Mukaish as an element of India's intangible cultural heritage under UNESCO's 2003 Convention—and the implementation of corresponding domestic safeguarding measures—would provide both symbolic and practical support for the craft's preservation.

IX. CONCLUSION

This study has traced the evolution of Mukaish embroidery from its contested ancient origins through its Mughal and Nawabi golden age, its decline during the colonial and post-industrial periods, and its contemporary revival within global fashion and heritage economies. The analysis reveals a craft tradition of remarkable aesthetic refinement and cultural depth, whose distinctive technical repertoire—characterised by the knotless insertion of flattened metallic strips into fine fabric—produces an effect of understated luminescence that embodies the Awadhi courtly values of nafasat and tehzeeb. Mukaish's history is, in microcosm, the history of Indian craft under conditions of colonisation, industrialisation, and globalisation: a narrative of creative achievement, structural marginalisation, and resilient adaptation.

The study's findings indicate that while Mukaish has demonstrated significant adaptive capacity—migrating from royal court attire to contemporary bridal wear, fusion fashion, and international couture—its survival remains structurally precarious. The craft's contemporary revival, driven by designer patronage, sustainability discourse, and heritage consciousness, has generated new market opportunities, but these have not yet translated into sustainable livelihoods for the majority of Mukaish artisans. The persistence of low wages, skill attrition, competition from mechanised substitutes, and inadequate institutional support suggests that the craft's revival remains fragile and contingent upon continued external intervention rather than being self-sustaining.

The paper argues that Mukaish embroidery's long-term viability requires coordinated action across five domains: artisan empowerment through fair remuneration and social protection; design innovation that respects craft integrity while expanding market relevance; digital documentation that preserves embodied knowledge for future generations; market development that leverages both domestic and international demand through quality certification and GI protection; and policy reform that creates an enabling institutional environment. These interventions must be pursued not in isolation but as components of an integrated strategy that addresses the structural conditions of craft production rather than merely its symptoms.

More broadly, the case of Mukaish embroidery illuminates the challenges facing traditional craft traditions across India and the global South as they navigate the tensions between heritage preservation and market adaptation, between cultural authenticity and design innovation, and between the symbolic value of craft as heritage and the material conditions of artisans' lives. The preservation of Mukaish is not merely a matter of conserving a decorative technique; it is a matter of sustaining a form of embodied knowledge, a mode of cultural expression, and a source of livelihood for some of India's most skilled yet marginalised artisans. The urgency of this task demands not sentiment but strategy: informed, coordinated, and sustained action that addresses the structural conditions within which Mukaish embroidery—and the artisans who practice it—must survive and flourish.

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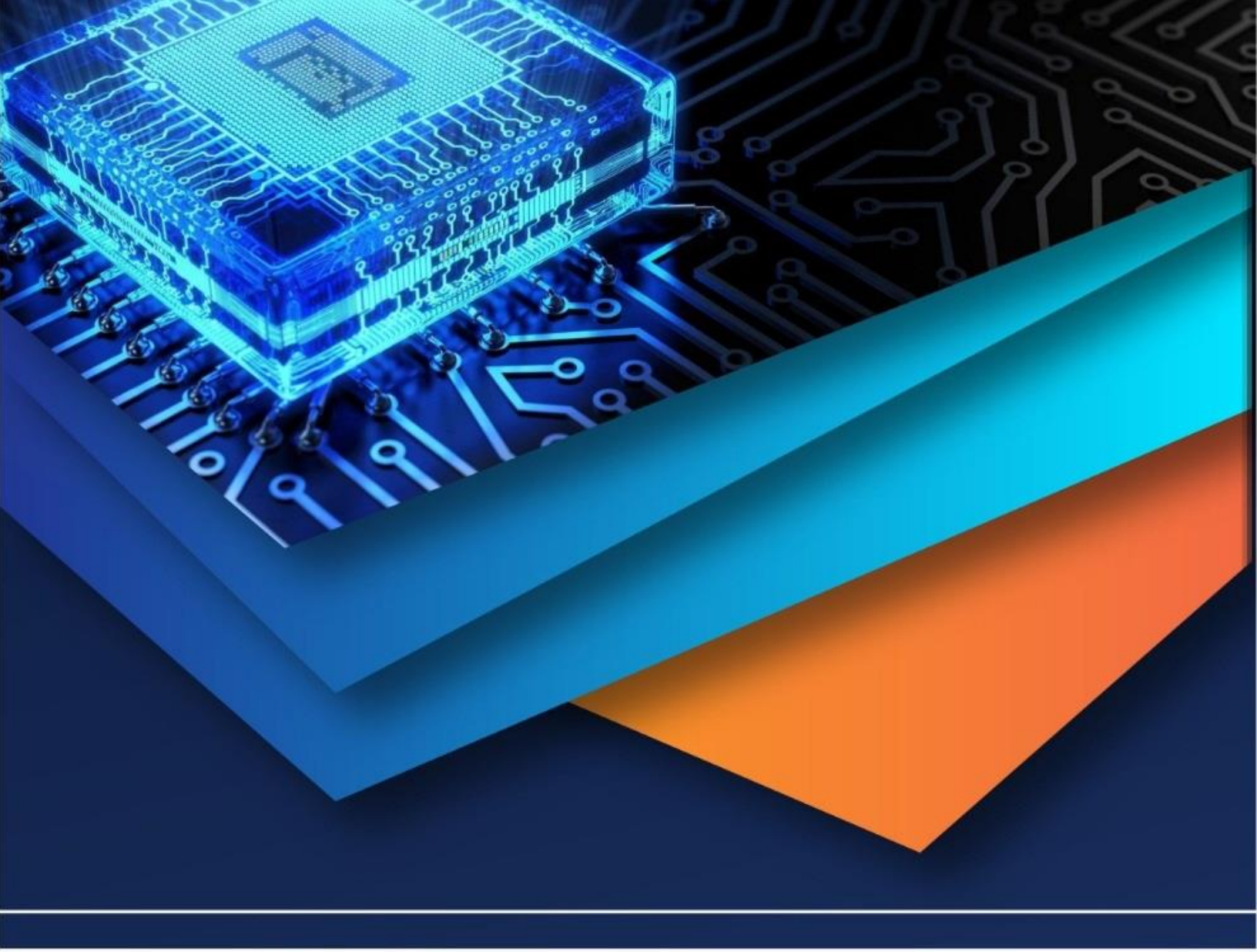

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