

# Phulkari, The Journey of a Craft Revival

Sunaina Suneja

"Crafts make us feel rooted, give us a sense of belonging and connect us with our history." This quotation by American actor Phyllis George captures the sentiments of women of the Indian state of Punjab *vis-a-vis* their personal *Phulkari chaadars* (also referred to as shawl or *dupatta*). These *chaadars* also evoke memories of activities and conversations shared by women of the family. Even today *phulkari* continues to be used in music and poetry, as a metaphor for life and living, love and yearning, and also wistful nostalgia for young married women of maternal homes left behind.

*Phulkari* translates as flower-work, and it is the generic term for the folk embroidery form of Punjab both in India and Pakistan. Its embroidery follows the warp and weft of its canvas, *khaddar* fabric; its yarn is handspun on spinning wheels and then handwoven. Before the Industrial Revolution the fabric was usually dyed in shades of brown, rust or red, the last two considered auspicious in Punjab. Rare pieces were also made on indigo-dyed blue or even dark green. Following the innovation of textile machinery during the Industrial Revolution and, with it, the import of cloth into India, new fabrics and colors were introduced into the gamut of *phulkari chaadars*.

An often quoted and well documented article written in 1888 by F.A. Steele, a British woman resident in India, celebrates *phulkari* as an art form but also laments its decline due to commercialisation. She situates the areas where the embroidery was most popularly done and also conjectures on its origins. A keen and empathetic observer of life and customs in rural India, she also observes that *phulkari* work was not just produced within families but outsourced as well. She writes: "While in Rohtak [now in the state of Haryana] at the present day the Jat woman works for herself, in Hazara and the neighboring district the fine work is all done to rich orders, and most big houses keep dependants constantly embroidering." She continues her observation: "Here it is a work of leisure—the work of women, who, after doing yeoman's service with father or husband in

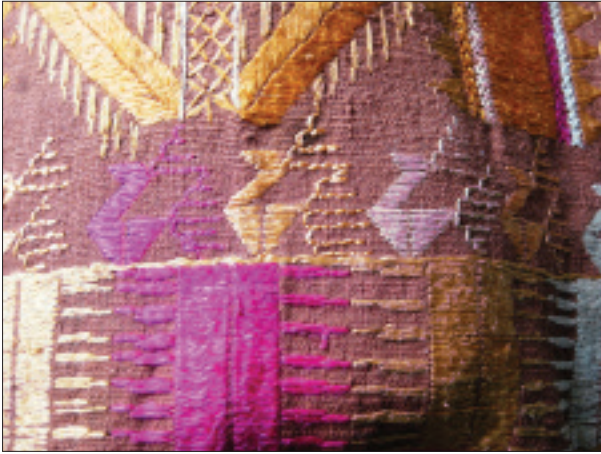
the fields, sit on the heaps of golden grain, darn away with patient, clumsy fingers at the roll of ruddy cloth upon their lap."

Let's reflect on the word leisure. A woman of a village of Punjab today rises early and her morning chores include washing, feeding and milking the cattle; cooking three meals, laundry, cleaning the house, and she then sits down—her leisure time—to embroider before her evening chores begin.

Unfortunately, very little is known about the provenance of *phulkari* embroidery. For every story one hears, there is an opposite one told as well. Did *phulkari* come to Punjab as a "transfer of technology" through invasions and settlers, or through travel and trade over the centuries? Or was it an indigenous textile art? Perhaps it evolved from the weaving craft. *Phulkari* embroidery follows the warp and weft of the fabric, and its geometric medallion motifs are similar to those found in the carpets/kilims of Central Asia. People from this region are known to have travelled extensively overland,



1 Kite (*patang*) (The small portion embroidered in Indian pink: is it a *nazar buti* or did the embroiderer run out of yellow thread?)



2 Peacocks (*Mor phulkari*).



3 Gold and silver (*sohna chandi*).



6 *Chope*.

crossing through northern India and, of course, through invasions, and settled here.

The embroiderer would sometimes embroider a "*nazar buti*," a motif or color different from the rest, into the *chaadar* to ward off evil. Or was it a metaphor: perfection lies only in the hands of the Almighty. People who are familiar with carpet/kilim weaving note that the "*nazar buti*" device continues to be used in Central Asia.

Other so-called imperfections were most certainly need-based, linked to financial circumstances or miscalculation of thread required for the size of cloth on hand. Since the untwisted silk threads are said to have been purchased from traders who visited at regular intervals, new lots of hand dyed colors would have certainly varied from the original one. The embroiderer was possibly then compelled to use whatever color was available to complete the *chaadar* she was working on.

We appreciate these imperfections in old folkloric pieces; they recall to our minds the imprint of the human hand, but today we demand perfection in the newly made. Each motif has to be of a specific size and equal one to another; spacing between motifs must be regular; the fabric must not have weaving defects, and thread colors must be uniform.

*Phulkari* is celebrated even today in poetry and song. It is often used to mark rites of passage, a metaphor for the cycle of life. Associated with inner courtyard activities, the *trinjan* was exclusive to the women of the household, who gathered together to talk and laugh, share their stories and experiences as they spun on spinning wheels, churned butter, prepared meals, took care of children and embroidered.

The *phulkari* repertoire includes the *bagh* (figure 4), *sainchi* (figure 7) and *chope* (figure 6) as well. The four are easily differentiated one from the other. The *phulkari* is not as densely embroidered as the *bagh* and its thread colors are usually orange, magenta, green silk threads and white cotton. The embroidery is done using the darn stitch, its length varying according to the embroiderer's skill. The base fabric is visible on a *phulkari* but not at all or barely on a *bagh*.

Other names given to the *phulkari* are motif-centric (for example, *ghenda phulkari* for marigolds, *patang phulkari* for kites (figure 1), *mor phulkari* for peacocks (figure 2)).

The *bagh* (garden) is usually embroidered in two colors of silk thread, usually yellow and white to replicate gold and silver (*sohna chandi*) (figure 3), but it has variants which take their names from the number of colors used so *pachrang*i (five colors) (figures 4 and 5), *satrang*i (seven colors), *naurang*i (9 colors). The *vari da bagh*, so called as it is offered in a wedding ritual to the bride by the groom's family, and may include a differently embroidered triangular portion which covers the bride's head (*ghunghat bagh*) (front cover image).

So fine and rich is its workmanship the *bagh* may have been a visual symbol of prestige and indicative of the family's affluence. Heavily embroidered, the fabric of





**Above: 4** Five colored *bagh* (*pachranga*). **Below: 5** Reverse of the five colored *bagh*.



a *bagh* is barely visible.

The embroidery stitch of the *chope* (figure 6) is different from the darn stitch but is included within the ambit of *phulkari*. *Chope* was also used traditionally by the bride as a part of wedding rituals; its two ends are usually not bordered with embroidery, thus signifying the blessing of longevity.

In *sainchi*, the pictorial *chaadar* (figure 7), the same motifs recur very often from one *chaadar* to another. For example, the train with its passengers included, a woman spinning on a spinning wheel or churning butter, wrestlers, well known characters from Hindu mythology and even The Foreigner, identified by his or her dress, appear on some. These are fascinating insights into the world view of the embroiderers and are not symbolic as is sometimes suggested. Instead they are representative of day to day life. The *sainchi* itself seems to be based on the *sanjhi* that women make on the walls of their homes during the *Navratra* period, the nine days and nights dedicated to the Mother Goddess.

The medallion-motifs of the *phulkari/bagh* appear to be the most basic to this style of embroidery and others may have been added later.

The embroiderer plays with this basic motif to cre-

ate new ones: The medallion can be divided into four parts, and when they are used separately or combined, a new motif emerges (figures 8, 9, 10 and 11).

We are told that at the birth of a girl child her grandmother and mother would joyously start working either individually or jointly on a *phulkari* to be offered to her on her wedding day. Each stitch would bear the hopes, dreams and blessings of the embroiderer for the child.

This narrative is similar to other handworked textiles where decorative pieces were made for ceremonies marking the rites of passage and special usage. Handwork has always been invested with social and cultural significance. The skill may have gone unremarked, women's work after all, but the finished product itself was highly cherished.

Traditionally *phulkari* embroidery was done without tracing or printing on the fabric. Nor were frames used to avoid the fabric from puckering. Probably these tools, used commonly today, did not then exist. Also, using the darn stitch, picking up one thread at a time, the motifs were embroidered from the reverse side of the fabric.

In conversations with Punjabi women a picture seems to be emerging. Upper middle class Hindu



7 *Sainchi*.





8 The full medallion motif.

women as young girls were taught embroidery but these were European embroidery stitches, probably considered to be more sophisticated at the time as a result of colonial rule.

And so these upper middle class Hindu women outsourced *phulkari* work, perhaps to Muslim women who were usually more skilled in fine workmanship. For example, an older generation remembers Muslim women coming home to pick up fabric and threads for *phulkari* embroidery.

On the other hand, more Sikh women tend to narrate stories about their *chaadars* having been embroidered by grandmothers, mothers and aunts. In their families, *baghs* and/or *phulkaris* have been passed down the generations. They are venerated as a good omen, and they find a sacred space in religious ceremonies and may also be used to drape over the Holy Book (*Guru Granth Sahib*). In marriage ceremonies, a *phulkari* canopy may be held over the bride by her brothers as she walks towards the ceremonial area; traditionally, she receives one from her parents and another one welcomes her into her new family. A *phulkari* may also be used as a cover on a divan to welcome an honoured guest and, of course, as a wrap around a woman's shoulder as the *chaadar* is usually worn.



9 One-fourth of the motif, repeated all over—*bagh*.

A *phulkari* is still highly prized and symbolic of Punjab. To cater to the demand, commercially produced *phulkari* are available aplenty in market places of Punjab. Mass produced on cotton and synthetic fabrics, the stitches are usually too long and designs are traced on to the fabric. The more affluent Punjabi women have a marked preference for chiffon and elaborate embroideries on this fabric are also produced.

Its popularity paved the way for an income generating and skilling project for women in villages of Nabha, Punjab (India). Unskilled in embroidery, older and young women joined the project. In an instant recall with



the *trinjan* of earlier times, the women would gather together in a public space, either a temple complex or a community center, and attempt to learn the embroidery over shared conversations. However, it took almost three years of perseverance to reach a level of skill comparable to the fine work done in the past.

During one of these training sessions an elderly lady joined us and claimed to have done a lot of *phulkari* work in her younger days. She demonstrated her skill to us, embroidering a small motif on the reverse side of the fabric without using a frame—an exciting moment, a link to the past substantiating what we had heard or read about it being done from the reverse side.

This demonstration may have been the turning point because thereafter there was a qualitative difference in the workmanship. The women obviously had grasped the technique. And from then onwards it became easier to train other women. Along with skilling the women in the embroidery it was also important to train their eyes to recognize and appreciate fine work: were the embroidery stitches of the same length, was the space even between the stitches and the lines? The aesthetics of space were new concepts for them, but it was important for them to understand to improve their newly acquired skill.

Now skilled and earning an income from their embroidery work, the embroiderers share the change it has made to their lives. Married or single, they are able to make a significant contribution to the family budget.

They are definitely more confident and more aspirational too. If this model were to be replicated in other parts of Punjab, not only would it benefit the women embroiderers to generate an income and be empowered to make a difference in their lives and those of their children but also significantly benefit and sustain the craft itself.

Photographs by Sunaina Suneja.

*Sunaina Suneja has been working with the textile crafts of India for over 30 years. Her first passion is khadi, India's handspun handwoven fabric. She designs with the fabric and researches its history which she presents through talks and spinning demonstrations. In October 2016 she was invited to participate in the "Festival of India" in Australia with a solo fashion show. Over a period of seven years in villages of Punjab she worked on reviving phulkari embroidery as it was done in the past. Her Exhibition, "Phulkari; Song of Flowers," was held in Delhi in 2015.*



10 Half motif with stem and leaves—*phulkari*.



11 Jewelry motif. Three-fourths of the motif constitute the earrings on either side of the "*maang tikka*," worn in the center of the forehead. The necklace is also embroidered—*phulkari*.