

## PREVAILING STATUS OF PHULKARI: A BROAD PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

Handicrafts of a country showcase the rich cultural and artistic history of that nation. Phulkari is a rural traditional art of crafting embroidered head drape used by women in Punjab. Phulkari literally means flower work, linked integrally with the events considered to be milestones in a woman's life. The self trained embroiderers none other than the women of every household used a number of techniques combined with fine and vibrant designs to make most intriguing patterns and motifs. Till early 19th century Phulkari was only made for the domestic consumption within the family and never for trade. It was only in the later part of the 19th century in the times of famines and hardships followed by the partition in early 20th century that the Phulkaris were put to sale and commercialization.

This commercialization led to striking time saving patterns. It also adopted cheaper materials, lack of fineness in craftsmanship which in-turn destroyed the genuine spirit of Phulkari. Phulkari was virtually reduced to a lost art and was under severe threat of extinction. Thereafter in the following many years the quality of products have deteriorated and this once beautiful craft form have become a caricature of itself. Lack of proficiency amongst the embroiderers and the exploitation of the craftspersons by the middlemen are the major identified problem areas for the downfall of this craft. The main aim of this paper is to throw light upon people's awareness about the craft. The data has been

collected by survey method during an exhibition on Phulkari.

Keywords: Traditional Textile, Embroidered craft, Sustainability, Handicraft.

### INTRODUCTION

India is a country which has a rich cultural heritage in its art and crafts. Indian textile crafts showcase an outstanding craftsmanship throughout the world. Each state has its own personality with regards to its textile legacy. Over the period of time the scenario of the Indian culture and tradition has been changing. Technological developments instead of windfall are proving carnage. One such embroidered textile craft 'phulkari' coming from the land of five rivers; the Punjab, is facing akin. A rural traditional art of crafting embroidered head drape used by women in Punjab has faced immense torment since early 20th century. With the changing time the craft have undergone many changes. Phulkari was a domestic craft and was made to offer as a gift to the daughter at the time of her marriage. The self trained embroiderers none other than the women of every household used a number of techniques combined with fine and vibrant designs to make most intriguing patterns and motifs. The love and blessings of a mother were profoundly embroidered by one stitch at a time creating an exquisite piece of excellence. Each piece with unmatched craftsmanship was a status symbol of those times.



Plate 1: A part of map of India indicating areas practicing phulkari embroidery  
Source: <http://www.giss.org/land.html>

Partition had affected this craft incalculably; it had forced the craft to die an atrocious death. People lost everything in partition. They were looking for the food to satisfy their hunger why would they sit and embroider phulkari anymore. Left with nothing they then started trading this craft as a commodity for the monetary gains. This commercialization led to striking time saving patterns. It also adopted cheaper materials, lack of fineness in craftsmanship which in-turn destroyed the genuine spirit of Phulkari. There after today what we see in the market is even the deteriorated version of this craft. The choices of fabrics used today are no-where closer to what was then. To meet the demands of the market and to keep up with the changing times people have adapted to the finer fabrics like chiffons, silk, fine cotton and even georgette to be used as a base fabric for this craft. The colour palette can be customized in any colour, shade required. The designs and the patterns can also be customized. In the time which is so advanced than the past the technologies the expertise is somehow not being wisely used. The wholesalers and the retailers have made enough dents by experimenting every possibility to exploit the craft. The exploration with fabrics and the colours is still enduring, but negligence to the motifs which is the key aspect of this craft is a solemn concern. The craft has been commercialized by

adapting machine printing, machine embroidery and painting by a just few geometric motifs which have flooded the markets. The fineness of the craftsmanship in a few handmade phulkaris found today is very diminutive. There are a few ngo's and government organizations who are working on the revival of the craft but the efforts taken are not even ten percent matching the required rank. Hence the main aim of this paper is to unleash the consciousness about the craft amongst the people of Delhi.



Plate 2: A detailed view of Bagh  
Source: National Handicrafts and Handloom Museum, Delhi.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study was conducted at an exhibition, 'Mela Phulkari V' held at India Habitat Centre, New Delhi. The exhibition was curated by Dr. Alka Pande and organized by '1469 Workshop' owner Mr. Harinder Singh and his wife Mrs. Kirandeep Kaur. The exhibition was based on various five aspects connected with the Punjab like, the five loved ones, five rivers, five 'K's', five love stories, five poets, five sports, five forts etc. It also had products on sale like pouches, clutches, key-chains, backpacks, sling bags, hand bags, dupattas, stoles, sarees and fabrics for turbans, dress materials in silk, viscose and cotton with blends available in hand embroidered and digital prints.

Accessories like, scarves, hair-bands, book on the stories from Punjab, art wall pieces inspired from Punjab. The exhibition was accessible from February 10th-19th, 2018. People from all age groups and cultural backgrounds visited the exhibition. The researcher interviewed each visitor willing to give their responses with the help of a semi structured interview schedule which was used as a tool and recorded the responses. The interview schedule had both open as well as close ended questions. The questions were based on the general awareness of the respondents with regards to the craft. The questions were framed to comprehend the inclination of people towards Indian traditional crafts, their perceptiveness towards phulkari and also to understand the market acceptability of the hand crafted products. The total number of visitors at the exhibition throughout was around seven to eight hundred; the total number of respondents who agreed to respond for the schedule was seventy four, hence it became the sample size.

## **RESULTS**

The responses received for the semi structured interview scheduled was computed and graphically represented for a comparative understanding. The problem was addressed to the respondents with the help of broad questions based on the exhibition as well as the craft. The idea of posing questions on exhibition was to get a reflection of the concern of the respondents towards the craft and its existence. The majority of the respondents had known about the exhibition by word of mouth from the organizers and the curator. Out of the total respondents only 23% of them had witnessed the earlier series of mela phulkari. This shows the inclination of the people towards a craft, and their loyal curiosity to witness what innovative

dimensions have been taken up. 98% of the respondents said that they have inclination towards Indian traditional crafts. But most of the respondents on interviewing revealed that they were not able to identify the traditional or contemporary form of any traditional craft, which is also a challenge. The respondents were asked whether they are aware of the embroidered craft of the Punjab to which 96% respondents reported that they were well aware and the left 4% were not. These 4% were students, professionals from diverse fields, and home-makers. The biggest challenge identified here is to create awareness of the craft universally.

The responses on how phulkari can be identified from any other craft, maximum respondents with a huge percentage of 54.06% reported that the bright colour of the craft was a distinguished identification for the craft whereas 26% reported as the silk floss thread and the plain reverse side of the fabric helps to identify the reverse side of the fabric and the following 20% said that it is the geometric floral pattern, which helps them to differentiate between phulkari from any other craft. Punjab has many other crafts like which are like phulkari exclusively made only in Punjab, but 99% of the respondents were not aware of these crafts like, punja durrie weaving, nala braiding, metal crafts, wood inlay work and jutti making. The respondents preferred Dupattas, stoles (25%) and digitally printed mulmul turbans (13.51%) over other products. The price range of the hand embroidered products was also towards higher side depending upon craftsmanship involved. The products which were digitally printed on cotton as stoles or pieces for kurtis, and the hair-bands were also appreciated by the visitors in terms of the quality and the price. The silk stores, scarves and dress materials were also digitally printed and

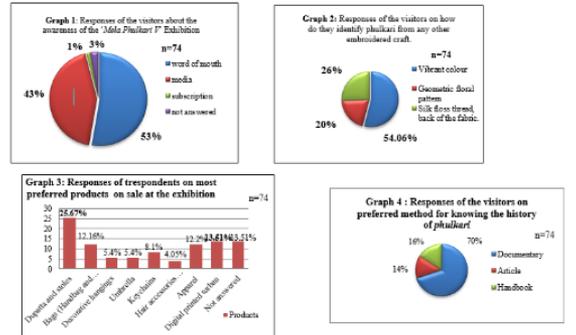
priced the same as hand embroidered products. As the majority of the visitors were young age people and wanted to buy the products could not due to the heavy prices.

The respondents were also enquired about their inclination toward traditional textiles this was done mainly to understand the market acceptability of products if the researcher introduces a line. It was also enquired that what inspires them to wear traditional clothing to comprehend what the main influences are playing major role in molding their dressing habits. Majority of the respondents reported that they are inspired by their family practices and influenced by bollywood. The respondents reported that they would love to wear a phulkari for festival celebrations or a wedding, as the bright colours make it lively for any festivity. Understanding the inclination of the respondents to this craft the researcher also enquired about whether they are familiar with the fact of how this craft is made. The respondents' reports gave a data of 70% of them who were not aware about how a phulkari was made traditionally and the story of this craft. The best way to educate the people about any craft is to educate them about the process, the technique and the method followed to make this craft, through handouts, videos and books and articles. The maximum number of the respondent's i.e 70% reported that they preferred documentary over article of a handbook to know about the history of phulkari as, documentary gives you an access to larger amount of detailed information than a book or an article. The moving visuals supported with the audio note also hold the interest and transmission detailed information to the audience is achieved efficiently.

## CONCLUSION

## The very well known embroidered craft

### Results



where people know it but are not able to discern it. The main purpose of conducting the study was to understand the prevailing status of phulkari craft in a broader perspective. The perspective includes the thoughts and ideas, perceptions about this craft from all the sectors and groups of the society. The exhibition was chosen to be a suitable place for the above survey supported with a semi structured questionnaire interview schedule as the visitors to any exhibition are people with common interest or inadvertent hence, giving a balanced platform to collect the unbiased data. The exhibition had five exquisite pieces of authentic traditional bags and phulkaris on display but only 5.40% out of the total population were able to truly admire by identifying the time-honored pieces. The audience who visited the exhibition was a mixed crowd of people like the retired personnel to college students, home makers to professionals, engineers to fashion designers. The people who knew about the craft more than the other visitors were the academicians from fashion and textile field. It was concluded that the awareness must be created by sensitizing each group towards this craft in some or the other. The commercialization has led to the striking time saving patterns. The markets are flooded with these few geometric patterns which are printed or painted,

hand or machine embroidered. The technique also is lost with time to support the faster production of the crafted products. The true essence which includes the fineness of work is replaced with time saving scattered stitches done with acrylic threads, the beautiful range motifs is now only restricted to the stylized flower motif which is sometimes accompanied with stylized peacock motif and geometric flower motif which is repeated by rearranging the same motif in various combinations of different placements. The quintessence of craft is vanished and hence can be said to it as a languishing craft. The products available currently in the market are either block-printed for the outline of the patterns and then embroidered sparsely with viscose or polyester threads. What we see in the market is a mere caricature of this craft. The respondents or any other person is unaware of the core of the craft may be because the craft is not portrayed in the market responsibly. The people who have taken this craft in mainstream commercialization could have followed ethical ways to portray the craft rather than immorally tainting it. A need to revive this craft is strongly felt by the researcher assuming the future of the craft will be even more besmirched. Currently at this situation, where the people's unawareness cannot be blamed as they just follow what market has to offer and market has what designers has to offer. The question arises is who is responsible for the diluted face of craft, who is accountable if the craft is not conscientiously exemplified. It is concluded from the above study that this is a serious issue of craft exploitation by just reproducing it to the levels that it gets exhausted. As a responsible designer and consumer one must act diligent enough towards sustainability of the craft.



Plate 3: An example of *phulkari* then and now  
Source: (Left) Display piece at National Handicraft and Handloom Museum Delhi (Right) chiffon saree machine embroidered with multi colour viscose rayon threads, photographed at researcher's close relative.

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