

## A Song on Their Lips and Needle to Thread



Phulkari, literally meaning flower-work, was once the celebrated art of rural Punjab. It is a derivative of the lush Bagh embroideries which cover almost the entire fabric with a surface darning stitch. A lot of the excellence in traditional crafts have been lost in time and to the many socio-economic shifts encountered, in the changes from a rural economy to an industrial and digitally-driven one; but perhaps none as much as the embroideries of Punjab.

About three years ago, at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts in New Delhi, I met Prito Aunty aka Pritam Kaur along with other women who were doing this embroidery. They had travelled from Tripri, near Patiala, to demonstrate their art. All of them said that they had learned to do this embroidery out of choice, to fulfil an aspiration but today, they worked out of '*majboori*' to earn and keep a roof over their heads. Each had stories to tell about the hardships they had borne. Bakshi Rana and Parvati Maasi had come to India from Pakistan at the time of Partition and though they were very young then, they recollected many facets of this experience. The embroidery done during the demonstration mostly used the Holbein stitch employed in Chope rather than the fuller darning stitch of the rich Bagh embroideries. The fabric they used was also not the coarse cotton Khaddar that the earlier Baghs were embroidered upon. Instead, lighter fabrics such as georgette and chiffon were used, which altered the nature of the embroidery. These fabrics are too light to take the weight of the silken threads that would be added in the dense stitch-work of a Bagh. The base colour of the fabric, earlier hardly seen, now also became the highlight of a dupatta, scarf or stole.

Traditionally, Phulkari and Bagh are colourful, embroidered shawls that were worn by the women of Punjab which were enormously popular from 1850-1950 AD. Their origin is lost in time but it is

thought that the tradition came into India with the migration of the Jat peoples from Central Asia, and could also have drawn inspiration from Gulkari embroidery of Iran, which also means floral-work.

A year ago, on a visit to the Sangrur district in Punjab, I met seventy-five year old Karnael Kaur who recounted doing Phulkari as a young girl, along with her cousins and sisters, while seated in the village court yard - "*Pind ke gate ke peeche*", singing and sewing. Even today younger girls undergoing training, by an NGO in Balran in Sangrur, were singing when I walked into the workshop situated within the compounds of the local Gurudwara. Heads lowered; concentrating on the insertion of their colourfully threaded needles into the fabric, in unison they sang:

*Nikhri sui pat da dhaga  
Mein kashida kar rahee-aa  
Aunde jaunde rahi puchde  
Tu kyun biba ro rae-ae  
Babul mere kaaj rachaye  
Mein pardesan ho rahee-ae*

With shining needle and silken thread  
I embroider (my garden of dreams)  
Passersby, ask of me  
why, fair maiden do you weep  
Family elders my marriage have arranged  
Now, but a foreigner will I be

With a song on their lips the women of Punjab have embroidered throughout history and there are many songs related to the making of a Bagh or Phulkari embroidery. The repetitive rhythm of sewing by hand somehow does bring a song to ones lips. I to like to sing as I embroider and delight in knowing that its part of an age-old tradition. This also creates a sense of nostalgia and romance for the simpler pleasures of everyday life, including the art of hand-embroidery that is no longer a preferred past-time in our world today.

**Gopika Nath**