

# SundayHerald art & culture

## FLORAL CRAFT



**ARRESTING DESIGNS**  
Bagh embroidery.  
PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

## Patterns of Punjab

Phulkari designs remain as colourful fashion picks. What has changed is the attitude towards their creation. **GOPIKA NATH** visits Punjab for a reality check

**T**he other day, I decided to wear a Phulkari stole bought in Patiala's Adalat Bazaar (Punjab). A red poly-cotton fabric embroidered with bright orange, ultramarine blue and turquoise green, paired with brown knit trousers and a black T-shirt, offsetting the neutral tones with its colourfulness, it looked quite stunning.

Phulkari and Bagh are colourful, embroidered shawls worn by the women of Punjab that were enormously popular from 1850-1950 AD. It is thought that the tradition came to India with the migration of the Jats from Central Asia. The word Phulkari (literally meaning flower-work), first appeared in Punjabi literature in the 18th century, and Waris Shah's *Heer Ranjha* describes Heer's trousseau enlisting items of Phulkari. But there are no surviving pieces from before the 1850s.

Traditionally, Phulkari was done on thick, almost coarse, cotton fabric known as *khaddar* where each colour had its own significance. The embroidered shawls that are fully covered, where you barely see the fabric beneath, are known as Bagh. Embroidered with silk threads, this was essentially a domestic activity done by the women of the household and the *odhanis* or *chaddars* were made for personal use.

Today, especially in Patiala's Adalat Bazaar, there is no dearth of colourful Phulkaris, embroidered on georgette, crepe and poly-cotton fabrics. Fluorescent yellows juxtaposed with turquoise blue and emerald green, or electric blue rubbing threads with vermillion, nudging lime-green into purple, the exotic Phulkaris of the new millennium are rich in colour.

Most of the women who do this work today no longer do it for the love of the art, but out of *maajboori*. I once met one who said that if she had the money, she wouldn't do Phulkari work, but would spend her money buying Phulkaris, as she had seen wealthy, urban women do. I found it odd that someone who had the gold in her hands would prefer to relinquish this, and buy it from the market.

But I realised that the idea of this work as underpaid and undervalued made her feel she would be better off if she could afford to buy it, rather than be the one to make it.

Driving through Punjab, there were

miles and miles of green on either side of the road. The crop was mostly wheat that had been flattened by the rains. Sitting inside the car, in the pelting rain, contemplating the mowed down, destroyed ears of wheat, I recollect a 19th century *Thirma* from the north-west region of Punjab, which I had seen at an exhibition in Lado Sarai, Delhi.

### Intricacy

The entire surface of this *odhani* had been embroidered, with a lozenge structure on finely woven, off-white cloth. The silk threads created a glistening crimson-pink field. At the centre of each lozenge, two motifs depicting the ear of the wheat plant were embroidered with green thread. Traditionally, these wheat ears represented blessings for fecundity and wealth. The *Thirma*, made exclusively by Hindus and Sikhs, was an essential part of a Punjabi girl's wedding trousseau.

It was wet and cold as we walked into the Balran centre in Sangrur district. I found about a dozen young women bundled up in woollens, their heads bowed in concentration over needle and thread, singing in plaintive voice. It was a song they had heard their mothers and grandmothers sing, daydreaming about the groom to whom they would soon be married, as they stitched colours of this dream onto the fabric they would carry with them into their new homes, possibly in another village, far from their own family home.

This plaintive verse had been handed down through generations, but not the art of Phulkari. I asked why they continued to sing this particular song, since they were not making *odhanis* for their trousseau, but comparatively minuscule keychains for 1469, a chain of stores that sold all things Punjabi. I was told that they associated the song with Phulkari work.

The original Phulkari were made by counting the threads of the woven structure of the cloth. Typically, stitches were made at right angles so that the embroidered patterns reflected light, according to the direction of the stitches. The basic stitch is a darning stitch. The other stitches are employed for outlining motifs and edging the piece. It is said that there were 52 stitches that made up the Phulkari repertoire, of which but a few survive. Untwisted skeins called *pat* were used to embroider

**“THE SAINCHI PHULKARI IS ANOTHER KIND CLOSELY LINKED TO THE MOTHER GODDESS, LOCALLY KNOWN AS SANJHI, ASSOCIATED WITH AGRICULTURE...**

from the back of the fabric, with the pattern unfolding on the other side, unseen.

The girls at the Balran Centre were using mill-made, rayon threads and not working from the back of the fabric. The designs were imprinted by pressing a mixture of *neel* and kerosene oil through perforated paper onto fabric, thus transferring the design. With the imprinted design, there is no need to count the threads, and the auspicious sacred grid is ignored.

The Chandra Bagh, which is one of Phulkari's most exquisite designs, is a fine example of the use of the sacred grid where the warp and weft is the basis of the grid, upon which multiple squares, within squares, create a rich and powerful pattern. The varying, directional movements of the stitches create a lustrous effect, bringing to mind the luminous glow of a full moon. This sacred grid is the base upon which places of worship and traditional townships were created. In the midst of the large expanse of a glowing white, a solitary, dark motif is often inserted. It is for *nazar* — protection from the evil eye.

### Worshipped weaves

The Sainchi Phulkari is another kind closely linked to the mother goddess, locally known as Sanjhi, associated with agricultural worship and worshipped during the *Navratri*. The Sainchis depict daily village life with its trials, tribulations, joys and aspirations. Unlike the other embroidered *chaddars* from Punjab that are geometric and abstract in their imagery, the Sainchi is figurative in its expression.

The geometrical designs seen in the Baghs are primarily associated with Muslim communities, which reflect the Islamic restraint on figurative work. Hindu and Sikh Phulkaris (like Sainchi) incorporate human figures, animals, flowers and birds, presenting a rich repertoire of designs. They depict scenes of everyday life. These are interspersed with stories of epics, myths, personal aspirations and desires.

For many who do this work today, it is not about embroidering their garden of dreams, but the means for earning a meagre livelihood. It is important for craft traditions to be kept alive. But can they thrive if there is no personal investment or a sense of creativity and joy in the doing? Well, that's a million dollar question.

## Satire in the arsenal

A Saudi comedian had made a satirical TV series called 'Selfie', which sneers at the macabre culture of the extremist group, ISIS. While some have deemed it brave, others have given it flak.

## PERCUSSION ARTISTE

# Conquering clay pots

**I**t was neither a rebellion nor an attempt to draw attention. It was just answering that inner call, the prompting that pointed out to her the path to what was to be her calling in life. "I was always attracted to rhythm, even as a child, tapping on the nearest hard surface. Naturally, I gravitated towards percussion instruments," says the renowned *ghatam* artiste Sukanya Ramgopal.

Talking to this extraordinary musician with an ordinary, no-airs countenance, the first thing that strikes the mind is the sheer grit that has seen her surmounting many hurdles to get to where she is today in the realm of Carnatic music, particularly in playing on the humble clay pot — the *ghatam*. "I have learnt vocals and the violin. But percussion fascinated me. I decided to learn the *mridangam*, notwithstanding my parents' misgivings. I enrolled myself in Harihara Sharma's school in Chennai, well-known for its tutelage in all percussion instruments," she says.

Harihara Sharma was the father of the maestro T H Vinayakaram. She learnt *mridangam* for a year, at the same time watching Sri Sharma teaching other students. The *ghatam* held a special attraction for her and it was not long before she summoned courage to approach Sri Sharma to ask him to coach her in this instrument. As if a girl from a conservative family venturing into a male-only field of percussion was not enough, but here she was, wanting to learn the *ghatam*! Sri Sharma had his reservations, but her persistence paid off when he spoke to his son Sri Vinayakaram, who memorably said, "Why not? Music does not know any barriers of gender." And the rest, as the cliché goes, is history.

### Path to acceptance

Reminiscing about her more-than-four-decade journey in the field of Carnatic music percussion, Sukanya expresses happiness at having achieved her goal of learning and performing on this instrument. But, at the same time, it has been fraught with obstacles, most prominent of which has been discrimination based on gender. "It is inexplicable. Many musicians, both the main and *mridangam* players, are not ready to accept a woman *upapakkavadyam* artiste on the stage. Even more hurtling is the same kind of mindset that some lady vocalists exhibit. I really am unable to guess why. Maybe they feel that I would eclipse them in elicit-

iting audience appreciation," rues Sukanya.

On the other hand, there are many musicians who have no issues whatsoever with having her as part of their group. But, as she philosophically adds, the charm lies in countering opposition with poise, patience, dignity and erudition, which she has done with aplomb. Maintaining rhythm is one thing, but coaxing melody out of this seemingly intractable instrument is no mean task.

Vigorous palm beats on the main body of the pot, the alternating soft and hard thumb flourishes on the thin neck, the discretionary opening and closure of the mouth with the palms to produce the resonations and yet, to maintain the complex time cycles that characterise Carnatic music — all require immense practice and concentration.

Calloused palms are not uncommon among *ghatam* artistes. Perhaps, Harihara Sharma had these things in mind when he first encountered Sukanya's request. But after Vinayakaram came back from a year abroad, he was amazed with the way in which Sukanya had learnt the nuances of this instrument from his father. Taking her further did not prove difficult for him.

### On her own

In this highly mathematical art of percussion where it is not possible to teach every pattern and combination of beats, the *korvais* and *koraippus* as they are called, how did she develop her skills? "I listen to all music (especially the percussion turns), incorporate the finer points, and create my own pieces," she explains. This point is to be seen in her solo turns, where she not only faithfully adheres to the path of the lead *mridangam* player, but also shows flashes of her creativity unobtrusively.

Three Taal Tarang, an all-woman percussion ensemble of *mridangam*, *ghatam*, *Kanjari*, *morsing* and *ghata tarang*, where she singlehandedly plays on five *ghatams* tuned to different pitches, is one of her notable forays. Training a select band of students at her school named after her mentor, Sukanya Ramgopal has been conferred with many awards and honours. Today, she holds her head high as a much-sought-after woman *ghatam* practitioner, moving ahead with fortitude.

**MIRLE KARTHIK**



**DEFYING STEREOTYPES** 'Ghatam' player Sukanya Ramgopal.

## BRAND DIARY

# Ahoy! Destination on sale...

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cultures, wonders, festivals and celebrations," says Y BHG Dato Haji Azizan Noordin, Deputy Director General (Promotion), Tourism Malaysia. "We will continue to use the 'Malaysia, Truly Asia' branding. And whenever we travel overseas and tell people we come from Malaysia, they sing back to us the sign-off lyrics of the signature tune of 'Malaysia, Truly Asia' TV commercials," adds Noordin.

"France's pro-active slogan, 'Be There! Do That!' is a unique invitation to embark on a totally different French adventure for an offbeat, out-of-the-box French holiday. Keeping in mind the dynamic spirit of the campaign, the creative featuring striking visual assets accompanied by a short yet descriptive text aims to capture the essence of 'Be There! Do That!', explained Kesh-



**CASE IN POINT** Thailand's viral video sensation, 'I Hate Thailand', has proved to be more impactful than a conventional tourism branding commercial. PHOTO BY AUTHOR

war Bhagat, Promotions Manager, Atout France. Each visual essay a wealth of experiences possible in France, such as hot air ballooning over French vineyards, rafting at the foot of the Alps, cooking with French chefs in Provence, vinotherapy sessions in resplendent vineyards or encounters with lions and bears at a driving distance from Paris.

What makes the #MeetSouthAfrica campaign incredibly powerful is the message that travellers make heartfelt connections with South Africans, rather than just enjoying the scenic beauty of the place. "To resonate with Indian travellers, we have customised the outdoor campaign to make it more local by highlighting South Africa's unique experiences in local languages in a contextual manner," explained Hanneli Slabber, Country Manager, South African Tourism. The campaign includes

media mix, comprising large-format hoardings, bus shelters and ambient media such as malls in strategic locations to further enhance consumer reach.

Slabber further said, "Jonty Rhodes, former South African cricketer, is the absolute personification of South Africa. His huge fan-following in India, credibility, stellar cricketing career, continued association with India, and his love for travel, adventure and South Africa, made him the perfect ambassador to promote South Africa's varied tourism experiences to Indian travellers. He wears his love for both South Africa and India on his sleeve and seamlessly translates the wonders of South Africa to our Indian audiences."

Singapore Tourism Board (STB) reworks their catchphrase every few years, hoping a sparkly new slogan will reignite

travellers' interest. Chang Chee Pey, Executive Director, South Asia, Middle East and Africa, STB, said, "We have adopted a customised visitor-centric marketing approach to address the needs of the target audience in key markets. As Indian travellers display a strong preference for families to travel and bond together through shared learning experiences, the fourth phase of STB's 'The Holiday You Take Home With You' marketing campaign with the tagline 'Leave as Mum & Dad, and return as superheroes' in India invites parents to discover their inner 'superhero' and re-live their family 'Super Moments in Singapore'."

But a catchy tagline can only perform the duty of arousing interest in an audience as it is a marketing tool. Eventually, the destination should be worth the slogan to woo visitors.