

Phulkari Embroidery: Tradition and Features

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OPEN ACCESS

Keywords

Phulkari, Punjab, Embroidery, Tradition

How to cite this article:

Sharma, M., Arya, N., Annu., Divya. and Somlata. 2025. Phulkari Embroidery: Tradition and Features. *Vigyan Varta* 6 (10): 135-138.

ABSTRACT

Phulkari, meaning "floral work," is a traditional Punjabi embroidery characterized by colourful silken threads worked in a darning stitch on the reverse side of coarse cotton or fine fabrics like silk and mulmul. Derived from *phul* (flower) and *akari* (shape), Phulkari symbolizes life, virtue, and familial blessings, often created by women to celebrate a girl's birth. Its origins trace back to at least the 7th century CE, with references in historical texts and folk literature. Traditional Phulkari styles include Bagh, Chope, Subhar, Darshan Dwar, Sainchi, Tilpatra, Neelak, and Chhamaas, each distinguished by motifs, stitch patterns, or cultural significance. Bagh covers the entire surface, while Chope and Subhar are bridal pieces and Sainchi depicts village life. The craft's evolution reflects regional variations across Punjab and influences on other embroidery traditions, with designs incorporating floral, geometrical, and sometimes metallic elements. Phulkari remains a vibrant symbol of Punjabi culture, artistry and heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Phulkari, meaning "floral work," features designs that go beyond flowers to include various motifs and geometric patterns. The main characteristics of phulkari embroidery are the use of darn stitch on the

wrong side of coarse cotton cloth with coloured silken thread.

The traditional varieties of phulkaris are large items of cloth and include chope, tilpatra,

neelak and bagh. The craft of phulkari has changed over the centuries. The traditional method of embroidering a phulkari and its widespread use in Punjab, India. Traditionally, women would embroider phulkaris without using stencils. Phulkari and bagh embroidery have influenced the embroidery of Gujarat, known as heer bharat in its use of geometrical motifs and stitchery (Maskiell, 1999).

Phulkari is derived from two words: phul meaning "flower" and akari meaning "shape." Phulkari meant the shape/direction of flowers, which symbolized life. In Punjab, it was popularly believed that the birth of a girl child in the family was auspicious. The mother and grandmothers would start embroidering Phulkari dupattas upon her birth because they thought that she would be the creator for future generations. Phulkari was done with real flowers. Silk and mulmul fabrics were used because of their purity and longevity. It was thought that a woman's virtue and character were reflected in the creation of Phulkari.

Origin

Several theories exist regarding the origin of Phulkari. One such belief is that this embroidery was prevalent in different parts of the country as far back as the 7th century CE, but survived only in Punjab. There is a reference to phulkari in ancient texts, folk legends and literature of Punjab. In Harishcharitra, the biography of the Emperor Harshavardhana (590-647 CE), the last ruler of the great ancient Indian Vardhana empire, the seventh-century chronicler Bana wrote, "Some people were embroidering flowers and leaves on the cloth from the reverse side," which is a technical description of Phulkari embroidery (Maskiell, 1999).

Features:

Bagh: Bagh, meaning "large garden," is a style characterised by a whole surface covered with embroidery. By working with the darning

stitch, numerous designs are created using horizontal, vertical and diagonal stitches. Some differentiate by stating that Phulkari refers to lightly embroidered floral designs, while large and elaborate floral embroidery is called Bagh.



Figure: Phulkari and Bagh

Ghunghat bagh: Originating in Rawalpindi, the ghunghat bagh is heavily embroidered around the centre on the edge to be worn over the head. The embroidered centre is then pulled over the face to form an embroidered veil (Bukhari, 2019).



Figure: Ghunghat Bagh

Chope and Subhar: Brides traditionally wear the two styles known as chope and subhar. The chope is distinguished by embroidery done on both sides of the fabric. Chope is traditionally embroidered in red with yellow. Two fabric panels are joined that have similar patterns embroidered on both ends. The only motifs embroidered on both selvages are a series of triangles with the base towards the selvedge and pointing inwards. The design is worked with small squares in a step-ladder fashion. The subhar features one central motif along with four additional motifs placed at the corners (Steel, 1888).



Figure: Chope Phulkari

Darshan dwar: A type of Phulkari which was made as an offering or bhet (presentation). It has a panelled architectural design. The pillars and the top of the gate are filled with latticed geometrical patterns. Sometimes human beings are also shown standing at the gate.



Figure: Darshan dwar

Sainchi: This is the only style where the outlines of the figures are drawn using black ink. It is then filled with embroidery in a darning stitch. In other styles, there are no patterns drawn and the work was done only by counting the threads from the back. Sainchi was popular in Bathinda and Faridkot districts. Sainchi Phulkari was likewise well-known in Ferozepur and its surrounding areas.

Sainchi embroidery draws inspiration from village life and depicts various scenes of everyday village life such as a man ploughing, lying on a charpai (jute cot), playing chaupar (a cross and circle board game), smoking hookah or guests drinking sharbat (sweet cordial) (Steel, 1888).



Figure: Sainchi phulkari

Tilpatra: The term Tilpatra means ‘the spreading of seeds’. The tilpatra has decorative embroidery that is spread out as if spreading sesame seeds.



Figure: Tilpatra phulkari

Neelak: Neelak embroidery is made of a black or red background with yellow or bright red embroidery. The colours of Phulkari are often combined with metallic elements (Bukhari, 2019).



Figure: Neelak phulkari

Chhamaas: The chhamaas phulkari hails from Rohtak, Gurgaon, Hisar and Delhi. The Chhamaas Phulkari incorporates mirrors which are sewn into the cloth with yellow, grey or blue thread.



Figure: Chhamaas Phulkari

Phulkari of the South and Southwestern Punjab region: The phulkari of the South and Southwestern Punjab in India and Pakistan has wide edges upon which designs of animals and birds are embroidered. As is the case with the chope, the edges are embroidered on both sides of the cloth (Gundev and Karolia, 2018).

CONCLUSION:

Phulkari is not just a decorative craft but a powerful expression of Punjabi life woven with values, celebrations and continuity. It bridges past and present through stitch, colour and form, preserving cultural identity and

familial heritage. Though its materials, contexts, and modes of use have evolved, Phulkari remains a living art: vibrant, meaningful and deeply rooted in virtue, memory and community.

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