

Phulkari & Bagh: Folk Art from Punjab

Phulkari, is a traditional simple and sparsely embroidered fabric from Punjab, India, *Phul* means flower and *kari* means work i.e. 'flower work'. It is a age old traditional folk art of Punjab which is done on coarse khadi fabric –a homespun cloth embroidered with silk threads called pat with bright colours like golden, green, blue, crimson, yellow and pink on beige and red colour.



Some scholars feel that the art of Phulkari came from Iran where it is known as "Gulkari". Some feel it came from Central Asia along with Jat tribes who migrated to India and settled in Punjab, Haryana and Gujarat. There is reference of Phulkari in Vedas, Mahabharat, Guru Granth Sahib and folk songs of Punjab. In its present form, phulkari embroidery has been popular since the 15th century.



Bagh litreally means garden and is one of the kind of Phulkari. A fabric/ garment that cover the entire body with embroidery patterns made for special and ceremonial occasions. In phulkari the cloth is ornamented by embroidery technique and in Bagh the fabric is embroidered fully so that the base fabric is not visible. The basic stitch is darning on the reverse side of the fabric with silk threads. The smaller the stitch, finer is the quality of the embroidery. Conventionally the designs were mainly floral or geometrical with balanced designs in vertical horizontal and diagonal.

- *Baghs* considered symbols of '*Suhag*', formed an important part of a bride's trousseau
- *Phulkari* was placed on the bier of a woman who had led her full life and whose husband was alive
- *Phulkari* and *Baghs* were presented in the temples and Gurudwaras to drape the diety or the holy Granth Saheb
- In the villages, they were worn as wraps or shawls for protection against the cold weather
- On the occasion of 'Akhand Path' of the holy Granth sahib, phulkaris and baghs were hung on the walls to decorate the house

Motifs

Besides floral motifs, birds, animals, human figures, vegetables, pots, buildings, rivers, the sun and the moon, scenes of village life, Wheat and barley stalk with ears are a common motif and other imagery motifs are in use. Creative ability of Punjabi women has produced innumerable and intricate geometrical patterns.



Some motifs spring from the kitchen, which give the *Phulkaris* their names such as, *Dhania* (coriander) *Bagh*, *Mirchi* (chilli) *Bagh*, *Gobhi* (cabbage) *Bagh* and *Karela Bagh* (bitter gourd)!

Names are also derived from the number of colours used. A *Pancharanga* is a five coloured Phulkari, while *Satranga* is a seven-coloured one. However, most motifs were taken from everyday life.

There are a variety of Phulkari styles used for different occasions and purposes.

Chope

The *Chope*, is red colored cloth with embroidered borders usually presented to the bride by her grandmother during a ceremony before the wedding.

Vari-da-bagh

Vari-da-bagh (bagh of the trousseau) is also on a red cloth with golden yellow embroidery symbolizing happiness and fertility. The entire cloth is covered patterns smaller ones within the border and intricately worked in different colors.

Ghunghat bagh

Ghunghat bagh or *sari-pallau* (covering for the head) has a small border on all four sides. In the center of each side, which covers the head, a large triangular motif is worked.

Bawan bagh

Bawan bagh (fifty-two in Punjabi) has as many geometrical patterns. *Bawan* Phulkari, *Bawan* meaning 52, the cloth was divided in 52 squares, each of which was filled in with a different motif.

Darshan dwar

Darshan dwar (the gate offering a view of the deity) is usually for presentation in temples or to adorn the walls of the home when the *Granth Sahib* (holy book of the Sikhs) is brought to a house. The theme is a decorative gate.

Suber

Suber is a phulkari worn by a bride during marriage rites. It comprises five motifs, one in the center and one each in the four corners.

Chamba

Chamba is a hybrid phulkari having a series of wavy creepers, stylized leaves and flowers.

Nilak

Nilak is worked on black or navy blue Khaddar with yellow and crimson red pat

The Evolution

Though it originated from Punjab, Haryana has also become an important centre to produce Phulkari and Bagh. Till early 19th century, the Phulkaris were produced for domestic consumption (within the family) only. It was only in later part of the 19th Century, in times of famines and hardships that the Phulkaries were put to sale, securing foreign markets. Attempts at commercialization, led to impressive time saving patterns adopted in cheaper material that destroyed the genuine spirit of Phulkari. By the turn of the 20th Century, Phulkari was virtually reduced to a lost art and the fatal blow came with the partitions of India. Fresh attempts have been made to revive the lost art of Phulkari.



Phulkari embroidery now thrives as a cottage industry. It is worked on curtains, bedspreads, cushion covers, wall hangings, chiffon saris, kurtas or shirts and dupattas or shawls. But many beautiful old Phulkaris and baghs continue to be passed down from one generation to another. Their beautiful and dense patterning conveys the love, care and sheer effort that went into crafting them, and take us back into another time.