

# Traditional and modern expressions of *Phulkari*

■ MANDEEP KAUR, SANDEEP BAINS, SUMEET KANG GREWAL AND NEELAM GREWAL

Received: 01.05.2014; Revised: 01.10.2014; Accepted: 15.10.2014

See end of the paper for authors' affiliations

## MANDEEP KAUR

Department of Apparel and  
Textile Science, College of Home  
Science, Punjab Agricultural  
University, LUDHIANA (PUNJAB)  
INDIA  
Email: mandeepfd@gmail.com

■ **ABSTRACT** : Handicrafts offer reflections to the artistic creativity rendered by the people of a region producing a traditional masterpiece even though moulded with the winds of time. These crafts serve as the roots of the ethnic fashions that shape the trends and innovations of the coming future. *Phulkari* craft is from the land of five rivers - Punjab which has experienced such transformation emerging out of the changing times and trends. The artefact being an important element of the cultural heritage of Punjab needs to be revitalized. The various traditional aspects of the craft need to be compared with its modern form to review all transformations. Documentation of both traditional and contemporary articles worked with *Phulkari* embroidery was undertaken to study the historical aspects and the modifications. The work was an attempt to preserve the essence of the craft serving the interest of the future generations.

■ **KEY WORDS**: *Phulkari*, Hand embroidery, Motifs, Traditional craft

■ **HOW TO CITE THIS PAPER** : Kaur, Mandeep, Bains, Sandeep, Grewal, Sumeet Kang and Grewal, Neelam (2014). Traditional and modern expressions of *Phulkari*. *Asian J. Home Sci.*, 9 (2) : 460-464.

The unity in diversity of India mirrors itself by the styles of needlecraft from its various states. The surroundings of the Indian folks inspired them to mould such artefacts to form the traditional crafts of the country. *Phulkari* is one of these Indian masterpieces from the state of Punjab, a land of ethnic and religious diversity. *Phulkari* is a rural tradition of hand embroidery by the Punjabi women using flowers along with other motifs from the surroundings in geometrical form. The craft was traditionally practiced on homespun, handwoven cotton fabric, khaddar from the wrong side of the fabric with colourful untwisted silken floss (*pat*). The creativity of the rural women from Punjab was clearly reflected through the beautiful traditional embroidered shawls that evolved by counting the threads of the fabric from the reverse side producing masterpieces. The embroidered when covered the whole surface of the khaddar took the form of a *Bagh*.

The domestic craft was passed on to the younger generations through the word of mouth and possessed many regional variations in the state itself. However, the shape of this traditional craft faced distortion as an outcome of number of factors. This has been due to non-documentation of the

traditional craft embroidered in the olden times, use of foreign patterns, lack of women interest who no longer wish to take time and pain in practicing the traditional hand embroidery and modification of the technique of embroidery to overcome the time constraint. All this compiled with changing materials (*pat* and base fabric) for embroidery, commercialization of the traditional craft and production of automated replications of *Phulkari* in embroidered or printed form leaving, only a few artisans keeping the traditional handiwork alive.

A considerable change in the trend of the traditional handicraft observed compared to the historical database would serve a clear insight into the loopholes for this valuable inherited tradition. This evoked the need to study the recent practice of *Phulkari* craft as compared to the traditional style of embroidery. The study will assist the future researchers and designers to understand the traditional craft of *Phulkari* in its purest form and explore it in more depth.

## Objectives :

The study was undertaken with the major objective to document the motifs, fabrics, stitches and colours used in *Phulkari* traditionally and in the last five years (2009-2013).

■ RESEARCH METHODS

Primary and secondary sources were used to document the motifs, fabrics, stitches and colours used in *Phulkari*.

■ RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In view to provide a clear presentation of the details, the discussion has been provided under various heads. While documentation, it was observed that 40 consumers possessed 50 *Phulkari* products whereas, 20 retailers offered 66 *Phulkari* products for documentation. The articles embroidered with *Phulkari* observed while documentation included dress materials, kurtas, sarees, dupattas, purses, potli bags, mobile covers, key rings, wallhangings, upholstery, file covers and bookmarks.

**Motifs used in the articles :**

The motifs of the *Phulkari* craft were an outcome of creative imagination, originality and excellent knowledge of colour blending. The documentation of motifs used in *Phulkari* in the olden times revealed that, since *Phulkari* was connected to the rural Punjab, the motifs were inspired from village life and nature. The use of different types of flower motifs were found in abundance, as the traditional craft derived its name from *phul* meaning flower (Fig. 1a).

Traditionally, the motifs of birds, animals, vegetables, rivers, sun, moon, fields along with other motifs from everyday life were used. Thus, the patterns were classified accordingly; like *dhaniya* (coriander), *motia* (jasmine), *leheria bagh* (garden of waves), *surajmukhi* (sunflower), *mor* (peacock), *kukad* (cock) etc. Even motifs of ornaments such as *hansali*, *tika*, *kada*, *singhar-patti* and *guluband* were used. In most of the *Phulkaris*, geometric motifs were used involving the basic geometric shapes like triangles, squares, vertical and horizontal lines. These basic shapes employed either colour variation or by variation of the direction of the darn stitch. Some skilfull women embroidered complicated patterns like lozenges, pentagons and wavy lines. These geometrical shapes were also used to produce highly stylized motifs such as a rolling pin (Fig. 1e), a parrot (Fig. 1f) or the lotus flower through use of colour variation (Grewal and Grewal, 1988).

The documentation of *Phulkari* motifs, used in *Phulkari* products from the year 2009 – 2013 as observed from consumers and retailers have been given in Table 1. Data collected indicated that in 64 per cent of the consumer products and 78.79 per cent of the retail products, flower motifs were mainly used. The geometric motifs like lines (vertical, horizontal and zigzag), triangles, squares, rhombus, etc.were the next popular class of motifs followed by leaf motifs. No motifs of bird/animal, human figure and houses were observed in the consumer products. In retail products, 7.57 per cent of the motifs were of birds/animals. Peacock was the only animal motif used in the retail products. The motifs of human figure



**Fig. 1 :** Different types of *Phulkari* motifs (a) Different flower motifs, (b) Depicts both variation of colour and direction of the darn stitch, (c) Pattern of wavy lines, (d) Jewellery motifs at one side surrounded by flower motifs, (e) Rolling pins and (f) Parrots

Motifs	Frequency	
	Consumer's articles (n=50)	Retailer's articles (n=66)
Flower	32(64.00)	52(78.79)
Leaf	8(16.00)	10(15.15)
Bird/ Animal	–	5(7.57)
Geometric shape	24(48.00)	43(65.15)
Human figure	–	1(1.51)
House	–	1(1.51)

Multiple responses, Figures in parentheses represent percentage and house were used only in 1.51 per cent (each) of the retail products.

**Fabrics used in the articles :**

*Phulkari* was done traditionally on coarse homespun, hand-woven cotton fabric, a coarse khadi that was used as a

shawl to be presented by a mother to her daughter on marriage. The fabric was used because of its durability and ease in counting threads while embroidering, as the patterns were not traced and developed by counting the thread.

The base fabrics used by the consumers and retailers during the last five years have been enlisted in Table 2. Chinon chiffon was the most popular base fabric used for *Phulkari* articles documented from consumers (24 %) followed by chiffon (16 %), voile and khaddar contributed to 12 per cent each. Silk fabrics like raw silk and tussar silk were least used in only 4 per cent of the consumer products. Among the retail products, cambric was used in 36.63 per cent of the products while, base fabrics like voile and chiffon accounted for 27.27 and 7.57 per cent, respectively in the retail products. Silk fabrics were used in only 4.54 per cent of the retail products.

Fabric	Frequency	
	Consumer's articles (n=50)	Retailer's articles (n=66)
Silk	2(4.00)	3(4.54)
Chiffon	8(16.00)	5(7.57)
Chinon chiffon	12(24.00)	-
Khaddar	6(12.00)	10(15.15)
Cambric	9(18.00)	24(36.63)
Voile	6(12.00)	18(27.27)
Tericot	7(14.00)	6(9.09)

Figures in parentheses represent percentage

**Stitches used in the articles :**

The imaginative skillfull women of Punjab created excellent *Phulkaris* and *Baghs* by working out the patterns using darn stitch from the wrong side of the coarse fabric by counting the fabric threads. These women skilfully manipulated the length and direction of the darn stitch which was the main stitch used in the embroidery to produce various designs. The normal length of this *Phulkari* stitch ranged from 1/2 to 1/4 of an inch. The boundaries of the design, specially the *Baghs*, were marked by running stitch with a green thread to avoid mistakes while embroidering. The outlining of the borders and marking of the areas was done with stem stitch, chain stitch and herring bone stitch. At times, double running stitch and satin stitch too were employed. Rare use of cross stitch for edging and finishing was made with the button hole stitch. In Table 3, the data concerning the stitches used for *Phulkari* in the documented articles from the last five years have been tabulated. Observation of consumer products (78 %) and retail products (93.94 %) also indicated maximum use of darn stitch. Other stitches comprised of button hole stitch, stem stitch, herring bone stitch, double running stitch ad cross stitch. These stitches were used in borders and to fill spaces, which accounted for 58 per cent of consumer products and 42.42 per cent of retail products. The running stitch was used

in 56 per cent of consumer products and 36.36 per cent of retail products. The satin stitch was least used in both consumer articles (4 %) and retail products (12.12 %). As per the observations, it was observed that the running stitch which was earlier used for marking now, aided in filling the motifs for shear fabrics like chiffon in place of the darn stitch.

Stitches	Frequency	
	Consumer's articles (n=50)	Retailer's articles (n=66)
Darn stitch	39(78.00)	62(93.94)
Running stitch	28(56.00)	24(36.36)
Satin stitch	2(4.00)	8(12.12)
Other	29(58.00)	28(42.42)

Multiple responses, Figures in parentheses represent percentage

**Colours used in the articles :**

With the development in science and technology, the synthetic dyes were introduced along with wider colour range for both the base fabrics and the *pat* thread. Traditionally, the colours of the base fabric, khaddi, were red, brown, off-white, black or blue. While, the documentation of the *Phulkari* products possessed by the consumers and offered by retailers in the last five years suggest that varied hues of primary, secondary and neutral colours and their tints and shades were used in the articles. The details of these have been furnished in Table 4. Red was the most preferred colour for the base fabric of the articles possessed by consumers and retailers contributing to 48 and 40.29 per cent, respectively. Brown contributed to 20 and 13.63 per cent of the consumer and retail products, respectively followed the red colour. Yellow and green were the minimum colours used as base colour in consumer products (2 % each). For retail products, yellow, green and purple were the least observed base colours that accounted for 1.51 per cent each. Purple colour was not observed on the products possessed by the consumers.

Colour of the base fabric	Frequency	
	Consumer's articles (n=50)	Retailer's articles (n=66)
White	2(4.00)	13(19.69)
Black	5(10.00)	5(7.57)
Brown	10(20.00)	9(13.63)
Red	24(48.00)	27(40.29)
Orange	2(4.00)	3(4.54)
Yellow	1(2.00)	1(1.51)
Green	1(2.00)	1(1.51)
Blue	5(10.00)	6(9.09)
Purple	-	1(1.51)

Figures in parentheses represent percentage

The traditional colours used for the *pat* thread were golden yellow, red, crimson, orange, blue, white, violet, green and dark brown. While, black or dark blue colours were used only in minimal proportions for *nazar butis* symbolising protection against evil eye. The same colours continued to be used in the documented articles from the past five years, along with their tints and shades. The results in Table 5 indicate, the colours of the *pat* thread used in the documented articles from the last five years. From the colours used for embroidery *pat* thread, red was used in the majority (66 %) of the consumer products. Green and blue coloured embroidery threads were found in 52 per cent each of the consumer products, while white and orange being used in the minimum (12 % each) amount. Majority (60.6 %) of the retail products were embroidered using red colour. This was followed by green coloured thread contributing to 40.91 per cent of the products offered by retailers. Brown was used only in 7.57 per cent of the retail products.

**Table 5 : Colour of the *pat* used in documented articles**

Colours of the <i>pat</i>	Frequency	
	Consumer's articles (n=50)	Retailer's articles (n=66)
White	6(12.00)	15(22.73)
Brown	7(14.00)	5(7.57)
Red	33(66.00)	40(60.60)
Orange	6(12.00)	14(21.21)
Yellow	21(42.00)	23(34.85)
Green	26(52.00)	27(40.91)
Blue	26(52.00)	25(37.88)
Purple	15(30.00)	15(22.73)

Multiple responses, Figures in parentheses represent percentage

In the traditional *Phulkaris* and *Baghs*, the use of the colour combination of *pat* thread varied from one colour to five to seven colours. Table 6 gives details regarding the colour combinations of the *pat* thread for embroidery used in the documented articles from the last five years. Use of four colours was the maximum preferred colour combination used to embroider consumer products that contributed to 30 per cent followed by use of one colour (26 %). Two and three colours of *pat* thread were used on 20 per cent each of consumer products. Only 4 per cent of the consumer products were embroidered using more than four colours. Maximum (40.91 %) numbers of retail products were embroidered using two-colour combination followed by the use of four colours (21.21 %). The retail products using more than four colours accounted for only 1.51 per cent.

### Conclusion :

Findings elaborate on the fact that the original form of *Phulkari* embroidery is no more into practice as patterns are

**Table 6 : Colour combination of embroidery used in documented articles**

Details	Frequency	
	Consumer's articles (n=50)	Retailer's articles (n=66)
Colour combination for embroidery		
– One colour	13(26.00)	11(16.67)
– Two colours	10(20.00)	27(40.91)
– Three colours	10(20.00)	13(19.69)
– Four colours	15(30.00)	14(21.21)
– More than four	2(4.00)	1(1.51)

Figures in parentheses represent percentage

now first traced onto the fabric using wooden blocks for mass production. The articles like dupatta, sarees, dress materials, accessories, upholstery, etc. embroidered with *Phulkari* work are increasing but, the quality of work is decreasing. Most of the traditional motifs from nature including birds, animals, jewellery, and domestic articles failed to find place in the *Phulkaris* of the modern times replaced with flower, leaf and geometric motifs. The running stitch is being increasingly used to fill the motifs incase of shear fabrics which was earlier done with darn stitch only. The quality of the stitch, in terms of density and neatness, is shrinking as an outcome of commercialisation. Only a few of the customised *Phulkaris* have been able to sustain the quality but remains far behind their traditional counterparts. The fabrics and colours for the base fabrics have expanded from the traditional range. The colours and colour combinations of the *pat* thread has not changed considerably. The traditional aspects of the craft have experienced many types of changes in terms of technique, motifs used, base fabrics, distribution in terms of employment of stitches and colours. The study would serve to provide knowledge about the textile craft and its use in the past 5 years.

### Acknowledgement :

The authors acknowledge the co-operation of the respondents for providing support in documentation of *Phulkari* items. Efforts of Punjab Agricultural University museum authorities and other sources providing traditional information on *Phulkari* are specially acknowledged for collecting, preserving and disseminating information on such traditional crafts.

### Authors' affiliations:

**SANDEEP BAINS, SUMEET KANG GREWAL AND NEELAM GREWAL**, Department of Apparel and Textile Science, College of Home Science, Punjab Agricultural University, LUDHIANA (PUNJAB) INDIA  
Email: sandeepct@pau.edu

## ■ REFERENCES

**Grewal, N. (1986).** Phulkari, the folk embroidery from Punjab. *Indian Tex.*, **96**(10) : 78-83.

**Grewal, N. and Grewal, A. (1988).** The needle lore: Traditional embroideries of Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, 36-55 pp. Ajanta Publications, INDIA.

**Hitkari, S.S. (1980).** *Phulkari: Folk art of Punjab*. Phulkāri

Publications, NEW DELHI (INDIA).

## ■ WEBLIOGRAPHY

**Beste, M. (2000).** Hopes and dreams - Phulkari and Bagh from the Punjab. <http://www.m-beste.de/Beste/T-online/Text%20englisch.pdf> [accessed 15/05/2012].

**Rond, F. (2010).** Phulkari – ancient textile of Punjab. <http://www.indianheritage.biz> [accessed 15/11/2013].

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ 9<sup>th</sup> Year of Excellence ★ ★ ★ ★ ★