

Hopes & Dreams

PHULKARI AND BAGH FROM THE PUNJAB
MICHAEL BESTE

This article is an introduction to the embroidered covers and hangings of the Punjab known as phulkari and bagh, which are worked with mainly geometric designs in floss silk on hand-woven cotton. It has been extracted from a more comprehensive German language monograph circulated privately during the mid-1990s. The author collects and deals in tribal textiles, and his collection contains more than a hundred prime examples of these colourful folk embroideries.

The folk embroidery tradition runs deep in the Punjab. At the end of the 15th century, the founder of the Sikh religion, Guru Nanak, wrote: "Thou art not a worthwhile woman until thou hast embroidered thy own blouse". Village women still practice the craft, also stitching bed and cushion covers and a variety of other cloths, but the art probably reached its zenith in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Phulkari in Punjabi literally means "flower work" and was originally used to describe all types of embroidery. In time, however, the term came to be used only for an embroidered head cloth or shawl, some 1,40x 2,30m in size, also known as an odhini. Together with a narrow blouse (choli) and long skirt (gaghra) this formed the traditional dress of Punjabi women. Such embroidered cloths were also used as wall hangings and covers, in particular east Punjabi pieces with figural representations of scenes from daily life. Today, densely embroidered cloths for special occasions and ceremonies are called bagh (Hindi/Farsi:

garden), while more sparsely embroidered cloths for everyday use are called phulkari.

The major distinguishing feature between baghs and phulkaris relates to the amount of embroidery. In phulkaris, the motifs are more or less regularly divided over the whole cloth, and large areas of ground fabric are visible. As a rule, the ends have quite different patterns from the centre and are often much more richly worked. The motifs on a bagh, on the other hand, are embroidered so close to each other that the ground cloth shows as just a thin line around each motif. Also the ends of the bagh almost always pick up the motif of the main field.

Little is known about the true source of this textile art. Tools such as bronze needles, as well as sculpted and painted representations of textiles, enable us to trace back the Indian embroidery tradition at least to Mohenjo-Daro and the Indus Civilisation. Some of the fabrics depicted in the early medieval paintings in the Ajanta Caves are very similar in design to phulkari embroideries (see John Irwin & Margaret Hall, *Indian Embroideries*, Ahmedabad 1973, p.1). However, apart from a small square chamba style rumal reputed to have been embroidered around 1500 by Guru Nanak's sister Debe Nanaki, and an embroidered shawl (shamla) dated to 1580, we know of no extant Punjabi embroideries that can be attributed to the 16th century or earlier. Both these textiles are preserved in Sikh holy places in the Punjab, at Gurdaspur and Jalandhu respectively.

Embroidery was probably introduced to the fertile plains of the Punjab by virtue of the region's character as a gateway to the Indian Subcontinent, and a place of settlement for migrants from Iran and Central Asia. It is thought that either cattle-breeding nomads from the northwest, or Scythian-descended Jars, brought the tradition with them. Phulkaris and baghs are associated with the areas of Peshawar, Hazara, Rawalpindi, Sialkot, Multan and Jhelum in west Punjab (now Pakistan), and Amritsar, Jullundur, Ludhiana, Ferozpur and Patiala in east

Punjab (now India), as well as neighbouring parts of Haryana such as Ambala, Rohtak and Hissar. While the best pieces are sometimes thought to come from Hazara and Chakwal in northwest Punjab, the present settlement area of the Jats, in the Haryana districts of Hissar, Sirsa and Rohtak, is often considered to be the real heartland of the phulkari tradition. In 1913 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy wrote "The original art stemmed from the rural Hindus (Jats) from Rohtak, Gurgaon and Delhi, while in Hazara a more artistic and developed form is found." In this he partially echoes Mrs Flora Steel, who, in the Journal of Indian Art in 1888 noted that "The art in its most original form is found today among the small farmers of Rohtak, Hissar and Gurgaon."

Before partition in 1948, the Punjab was populated by Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims, but phulkari and bagh embroideries are predominantly the work of the first two communities. Originally the women made them solely for personal and domestic use - young girls produced their dowries, mothers and grandmothers worked for daughters and granddaughters. Commercial work only began in 1882, when Maharaja Ranjit Singh agreed the first export contract for phulkaris.

Demand grew towards the end of the 19th century, around the time of the Punjab Exhibition of 1881 in London. During the same period, a severe drought in the Punjab forced many families to sell their old embroideries. Thereafter, an even greater market was found in the West for baghs and phulkaris and objects decorated in this style, among them purses, curtains, and assorted covers. New patterns and colour combinations were developed, including the so-called 'Manchester' and 'Jubilee' baghs. To obtain faster and cheaper production a coarser and looser style of embroidery was employed. This, along with other advances saw an abrupt decline in the handiwork tradition - in 1888 Flora Steel also complained about the decline in handwork, the use of aniline dyes and the poor quality of the silk, as well as the use of foreign patterns.

The dating of these embroideries poses a difficult question. It cannot be said when the first phulkari was made; indeed no example is known today which can be positively dated to earlier than about the 1820s. Even one hundred year old phulkaris are very rare. Though the textiles themselves might not have survived - due to natural wear and tear and the effects of the Indian climate - it should be possible to find other records of their existence. The 18th century Heer-Ranjha and Sohni-Mahiwal ballads, for instance, include very accurate commentary on Punjabi women's jewellery, adornment and clothing, yet the sole mention of Phulkari, according to Neelam Grewal in *The Needle Lore*, appears in the Heer-Ranjha in the context of the heroine's dowry. Nor do any early 19th century inventories of marriage gifts mention phulkaris. That said, the approximate age of a piece can usually be determined from the condition of the main fibres and the colours (dyes) used; with older pieces, for instance, it was quite common to use cotton threads instead of silk, particularly for white, green and rose. The best such embroideries available today were probably made between 1870 and 1920. Museums in Ahmedabad, Delhi, Lahore and London hold many baghs and phulkaris in their stores for which acquisition dates are known, thereby facilitating the dating of other, comparable pieces.

The embroidery is done for the most part upon coarse cotton cloth (khaddar) locally woven from loosely homespun yarns of irregular thickness, generally with between 10-12 warp threads/cm. Neelam Grewal expresses the relationship between women and embroidery rather poetically, explaining that the coarse ground material represents the demanding life of the Punjabi woman and the rich embroidery of fine coloured silk her hopes and dreams.

For baghs, ground fabrics of better quality are woven, called chaunsa khaddar (ca.15-18 threads/cm); here warp and weft have the same thickness and the material is more supple than standard khaddar. A still finer texture was also used

- halwan (ca. 22-25 threads/cm) - produced only in Amritsar and Lahore. Weaving these cloths was much more time consuming, so women used it only for more costly pieces. Halwan is found more often in pieces from west Punjab, mainly Hazara and Rawalpindi.

Khaddar was woven in narrow strips some 45-60cm wide; thus two to three and a half strips were sewn together for the required width. The ground was often red, considered lucky by Hindus and Sikhs alike. One also finds brown, various blue tones, black and white. Green is very rare. Hindu women from northern Pakistan mostly used a white ground with dark red silk for the embroidery.

Untwisted coarse silk yarn, produced from the outer threads of the silk cocoon, was used for the embroidery. Known as pat, the supple white yarn required careful handling. When a section of embroidery was completed, the fabric was rolled in a clean white cloth to keep it from soiling while work continued on an unembroidered part. The silk came in skeins from Kashmir, Afghanistan, Bengal and the best quality from China. It was dyed mainly in Amritsar, Jammu or Dera Ghazi Khan. The village women then bought the skeins from itinerant merchants. They also used cotton yarns (bandi) for white, black and yellow in certain pieces. Wool yarns were very rarely used, except in certain specific types.

The principal stitch used for this work was the darning stitch. Indeed, the almost exclusive use of the long and short darning stitch over counted threads distinguishes phulkari and bagh from all other known Indian textiles with embroidered decoration. Normally the darning stitch moves in straight lines; in a skilled example, however, the stitch work can be more dynamic. The pattern is controlled mainly by counting threads; in west Punjab the pattern on the cloth is planned out with green yarn in parallel lines or squares worked in double running stitch. A woman's ability was measured by the number of patterns she could master. Since the material was, during the work, only visible from behind,

a single numerical error was enough to destroy the entire symmetry. Other stitches used include chain stitch, which was used to outline figures. To fill in the motif either satin stitch or a variation known as stop stitch was preferred. Stem stitch was also used at times, as were herringbone stitch, running stitch and, for borders, buttonhole stitch.

There were no pattern books or catalogues from which designs could be copied. Rather, these were passed from generation to generation by word of mouth and example. Thus each family had its own characteristic style and, with practice and experience, each woman was able to develop her own repertoire. At this point, the textile ceased to be a mere piece of handiwork and became instead, through the stitches, colours and motifs, an expression of the embroiderer's feelings, hopes and dreams.

The limitations of stop stitch, which allows only straight lines, meant that motifs had to be very stylised. In baghs, often only geometric patterns were used (triangles, squares, diamonds). Other common motifs are taken from daily life, and accordingly the pieces were given very literal names such as gobhi (cauliflower) bagh and mirchi (spinach) bagh. Shalimar and chaurasia baghs recall famous Mughal gardens in their layout, while the ikka bagh is inspired by playing cards (diamond). Other designs include dhoop chhaon (sunlight and shade), laharya (wave, patang (kite), saru (Cypress), suraj rnukkhi (sunflower), panchranga (five colours) and satranga (seven colours).

The danga (river) bagh aptly depicts a row of blue wavy stripes on a white ground, while the chand bagh recalls the play of moonlight with small white or beige lozenges on a dark red field, and the sheeshedar (mirror) phulkari is decorated with small circular mirrors on a white ground. On many phulkaris, the form of a bird is embroidered over the whole field, and the phulkaris are named accordingly, the most common being the peacock (mor) and parrot (tota).

Some very special types of phulkaris and baghs were made for more formal occasions. In west Punjab, following the birth of a boy, it was customary, on a day chosen by the local astrologer, to begin a vari da bagh. In an atmosphere of singing, dancing and gambling, sweetmeats and red yarn would be distributed and the newborn's grandmother would place the first stitch on the embroidery. This bagh would later be handed to the boy's bride on their wedding day. Worked in yellow/gold yarn on a red ground, the colours symbolise luck and fertility. The whole surface is covered with diamonds, each enclosing a smaller diamond. In especially good pieces three sizes of concentric diamond are found, the smallest again divided into quarters. The sides and ends usually show various patterns worked in several colours. To produce such a bagh could take over a year. These pieces are today regarded as family heirlooms and worn for a short time as an act of remembrance.

The bawan bagh is very rare as only a few women were able to fashion this type. Bawan means the number 52; in these pieces we usually find 52 different patterns. The field is subdivided into 42 or 48 rectangles, each containing a different multicoloured motif. The remaining four or ten motifs are placed in the side or end borders.

Another more typical bagh is the darshan dwar bagh, meaning "the Gate from which one sees the God". From the eastern Punjab, this type always has a red ground; a series of large peaked gates are drawn, from four to seven on either side depending on their size and the dimensions of the cloth. The gates adjoin and open inwards; between them are images of people, animals, flowers and plants, or even a railway. The roofs of the gates are worked in multicoloured patterns of triangles and diamonds. Often smaller gates are embroidered in the triangular space between the selvedge and the gate roofs. but without figures. The gate motif was probably derived from the covered veranda which

surrounded the temple. These particular baghs were dedicated to the temple after fulfilment of a wish.

A bagh given to bride by her grandmother was known as a chope. These were worked in double running stitch so that the pattern would be visible on both front and back. Worn by the bride as a chador (cloak) at her wedding ceremony and bigger than all other types, the chope is begun by the grandmother after the birth of a girl and can thus be compared with the vari da bagh. The borders of the chope are not embroidered so that a red stripe passes through the textile - a symbol of endless good fortune for the bride. Less often we find the figure of a small peacock or a cow, invoking protection, good luck and well-being.

A rarer type of phulkari is the thirma, the name signifying a white ground. Exclusively made by Hindus, they formed an important part of the dowry of a woman from north-western Punjab. The floral patterns were embroidered in red, violet and green - often so thickly that they give a velvety surface. The ends have characteristic diagonal rows in red satin stitch. The patterns of this type differ markedly from all other baghs and phulkaris. It is interesting to note their similarity to embroideries from Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Produced in east and southeast Punjab, sainchi phulkaris depict scenes of everyday life in the Punjab at the turn of the century and today are perhaps the most valuable and sought-after of all. The motifs were often marked on the cloth with ink and the sketch then filled with darning stitch. Wool or cotton threads are often used instead of silk.

Sainchis can be divided into two groups. The first have coloured representations on a red ground of human figures, beasts, village scenes and so on, without symmetry and end borders. The second group, with black, dark brown or, very rarely, blue grounds, are symmetrically drawn. Here we often see a pattern of

five lotus flowers - a large, vibrant blossom in the centre, the other four in the corners. Their arrangement corresponds to those in the suber phulkari, which is carried by the Punjabi bride when she has walked round the holy fire (pherey) seven times. Various traditional ornaments show that sainchi phulkari played a part in the wedding ceremony. Abstract peacocks often appear in the end borders, contributing to the symmetry, while in between are yet more animals and objects, randomly completing the design.

Scenes of everyday life on sainchi include personal effects, such as jewellery and combs, domestic animals, ox-carts and household objects. We also see men playing dice games, spinning wheels, cooking or other routine activities. Railway imagery is also used - a locomotive spewing thick smoke, passengers looking out of carriage windows. Circus images with animals and acrobats are common. Especially graphic are scenes featuring figures such as a begging yogi, a man beating his wife, or a British official visiting a village.

Sar pallu from east Punjab have wide borders which are usually very bold and colourful. Assembled from lozenges and triangles, the design sometimes evokes wild and abstract fantasy landscapes with the central field decorated with small flowers, birds and other animals.

There are, too, features which differentiate west Punjabi pieces from those of east Punjab. Normally cloth and embroidery from west Punjab was finer and a better quality of silk was used. Also in western Punjab examples, black or blue was seldom seen as the ground colour, while in east Punjab white was not used. The central fields in the western group were for the most part embroidered with only one or two colours, while the number of colour combinations in eastern types was much greater. Moreover, the women in east Punjab had a larger repertoire of stitches, and used cotton and very often wool was used as the embroidery thread.

In contrast to the much more varied patterns in the eastern repertoire, with its depictions of human figures, animals and birds, in west Punjabi embroideries the motifs and patterns in abstract representations were rather limited. This may be associated with the influence of Islam in the eastern Punjab, and the consequent prohibition of figural representations in their art. Finally, in west Punjab the strips of material were first embroidered, then sewn together, whereas in the east Punjab these two steps were reversed. In phulkaris from Haryana, the southeast of the old Punjab, the main field is often divided into regular squares in which the motif may be repeated. The monotony of this design is sometimes relieved by the introduction of other motifs or ornaments. Naturally, there are exceptions to all these "rules", but they serve as a useful guide.

Punjabi villagers are considered to be superstitious and god-fearing people. In order to ward off the evil eye, a newborn would have a black fleck painted on their cheek; a bride would have a black tassel tied onto her red and ivory arm rings and a black pot would be hung in front of a new house. For the same reason, even the most perfectionist of embroiderers allowed themselves small flaws in their work, suddenly using another colour or leaving a small area unembroidered. Many women simply leave a couple of centimetres of loose hanging thread to show that the work is unfinished. Since the Sikhs were "enlightened" and in general less superstitious, these symbols occur mostly on Hindu-produced pieces. Such deliberate irregularities are known as nazar butti.

One often finds in a corner of the embroidery, or in another concealed place, a name cartouche, usually in Gurmukhi script. This is the name either of the embroiderer or of the owner. Sometimes the embroidered syllable Om or Ek-Onkar is visible. These holy mantras of the Hindus or the Sikhs are meant to invoke God's blessing on the success of the work or to bring divine favour to its wearer.

The original purpose of embroidery was to adorn the rough simple surface of odhinis. Gradually people began to connect some of the motifs and patterns with certain events and ceremonies, and so the textiles acquired a religious and magical significance. In a tradition minded Punjabi family, for instance, no important ceremony was held without the offering of a specific type of phulkari by the senior woman of the family.

Many, if not most, pieces have a particular relation to parts of the marriage ceremony and married life. This fact, coupled with the rich, mainly floral motifs of the phulkari, points to an associative connection with the family's fecundity and well-being. For example, yet another phulkari type was used for the ceremonial bath before the wedding (nahai dhoi), the filling of the clay pots (gharoli bhorna) and the mounting of the horse by the groom (ghoricharana).

The bride's family presented the groom's relations with baghs and phulkaris, which formed a part of the dowry. When a new mother left her room for the first time on the eleventh day after the birth of a child, she wore a phulkari. At the same time, a very large embroidered cloth - the less richly worked til patra (scattered sesame) - would be distributed to the men and women servants of the house.

The year of an Indian family is rich in festive days, for which sometimes Punjabi women wore phulkaris. Honoured guests of a house found a phulkari laid out specially as bedding, or a tablecloth. In temples and gurudwaras, walls, figures or holy writings were decorated with phulkaris or baghs. In colonial times, sometimes a bagh was presented to a British official at Christmas, together with fruit and sweetmeats. And if a woman died before her husband, a phulkari sash would be used to wrap her body.

With the exception of some outlying villages in which baghs and phulkaris are still made, this kind of craftsmanship and handiwork is almost entirely a thing of the past. Recent attempts by the Indian and Pakistani governments to restore the tradition have had little effect. When one realises that a trained embroiderer required about five hundred hours to complete a bagh (three to four months at four to five hours daily), it is not hard to see why. Life has become complicated for Punjabis, not least because of the partition of their homeland and the vast movements of population that accompanied it. Instead of occupying themselves in the afternoons with conversation and handiwork, the women now go to schools and colleges. Cinema, radio, television, artificial fibres, industrial dyes and the influence of western styles of dress have all caused interest in embroidery to lapse.

S.S. Hitkari, author of *Phulkari - Folk Art of Punjab* (Delhi 1980) closes his book with an optimistic look into the future:

"All that has been born must pass; it is not worth shedding tears over it. The sensitivity and creativity inbred in the Punjab women will certainly find new forms of expression. Folk art never stagnates, but always finds itself developing. So let us hope that in the course of time something as unique and as fascinating as the Phulkari will exist. Until then it remains for us to save what is left over from destruction and keep it for the new world."