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Behind the scenes: Hidden stories of Craftswomen of Punjab, India

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Phulkari is an embroidered textile of Punjab, India crafted by women for adorning veils, wraps and many other lifestyle products (Plate 1). The outcome is incredibly rich that Phulkari wraps were saved especially for trousseau and hence referred as bridal textiles. The production of this textile was closely associated with women. At every step of making these textiles, precision was required: spinning yarn, fabric production, dyeing with natural resources, and finally designing and embroidery. The situation has changed in recent years; historically, it was only manufactured for personal or family use, but now it is primarily created for the market and often for personal use. Commoditization of Phulkari have altogether revolutionised the complete production and marketing process.

Plate 1: Punjabi woman displaying personal Phulkari

Phulkari is now created on variety of fabrics keeping in view the taste and liking of the customer. This calls for sourcing of different base fabrics for embroidery. In order to offer a new product, several designers, boutique owners play with the foundation fabric. A National award-winning craftswoman in her interview revealed that her participation in various craft fairs across country provided her with a chance to explore new fabrics exhibited by craft persons from different states. Hence, she has been experimenting Phulkari embroidery on different fabrics. Other stakeholders of the trade/craft also try to develop new products by varying the fabric as well as placement of motifs (Plate 2).

Phulkari making has undergone lot of changes vis a vis the traditional or the original form. In traditional form, women used to pick up or count yarns making geometrical forms from the reverse side of the fabric where as women now embroider the contemporary pieces with motifs which are sketched or printed on the base material by a professional printer using

blocks (Plate 3). Yarns are procured as per the design and desired colour combination. For coordination between craftswomen, retailers or vendors, there exists a network of middle women (agents). These agents are women from different villages who take order from the shopkeepers and further distribute work to the craftswomen. They work on commission basis.

Plate 2: Different types of Phulkari textiles for the market (displayed by a middle agent in her house)

This material-printed fabric along with yarns are provided to the agent with the instructions about the colour combination and colour placement. She further visits craftswomen homes from village to village as per her network and supply them with the material and instructions and collect the same after completion. This whole workflow forms a part of unorganised sector where craftswoman is placed at the bottom of the supply chain. These Phulkari craftswomen are part of an informal workforce because there are no legal or work agreement between the vendor, agent and crafts women.

Plate 3: Craftswomen preparing veil and saree printed with motifs of Phulkari embroidery

Working and Embroidering in Informal Spaces

Phulkari craftswomen are an important part of the informal economy as they work from their home. They get the embroidery job at their door and don't have to go to a formal office setup. A variety of other jobs or profession like stitching, weaving, developing handicraft products, processing and preparing food items, services like of beautician are also pursued as a part of informal economy. Worker whose location of work is own dwelling, a structure attached to the dwelling, or a detached structure/open area adjacent to the dwelling within the homestead land is referred as home-based worker.¹ Home work is very much prevalent in textile and garment, leather, carpet, electronics industry. It is an important source of employment in different parts of the Globe as six sub-Saharan African countries, Egypt, Argentina, Germany, Hong Kong, Italy, and Japan.² Even in countries like US there is an increase in home based work.³

Phulkari craftswomen primarily belong to the rural area-villages of Punjab. They pursue this home based work of embroidery while sitting at home. They feel comfortable while working from their domestic spaces. This kind of work arrangement makes it easier for them to carry out other household duties with convenience that they consider as their primary responsibility. As per Punjabi social norms, it is important for a women to be skilled in household work and her worth depends upon the way she manages her home. She believes it is her job to finish her daily household tasks-cooking, washing, taking care of family, animals etc. She tries to complete the order undertaken for embroidery work in between her regular routine.

¹ Govindan Raveendran, "Home-based workers in India: A statistical profile" WEIGO, Statistical Brief No 23, June 2020: 2, accessed December 20, 2020, https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/file/WIEGO_Statistical_Brief_N23_India%20for%20web_0.pdf

² Marilyn Carr, Martha Alter Chen, and Jane Tate, "Globalization and home-based workers," *Feminist Economics* 6, no.3(2000): 127-128, accessed December 5, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/135457000750020164>.

³ Anna Kurowska, "Gendered effects of home-based work on parents' capability to balance work with non-work: Two countries with different models of division of labour compared," *Social Indicator Research* 151 (2020): 406, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-018-2034-9>.

Workplace flexibility gives women workers a flexible schedule, while also taking care of their family and other domestic duties.⁴ That is why when craftswomen are asked to engage in events outside their homes such as exhibiting their work in crafts fair, they generally refuse because no one is prepared to shoulder their obligations and support the cause if they move out of their residence. So, combining work with the daily activities facilitates craftswoman to perform her role as a traditional housewife, mother etc. along with income-producing activities and also give her a status of hardworking woman who can shoulder dual responsibilities. More over, women are not allowed to go out of their home and work. A research by Kazi, Raza and Aziz also showed that women were restricted by their families to take up outside employment. Income earning activities undertaken at home were far more acceptable as they did not go against social sanctions.⁵

Women and girls in the village or in Punjabi society don't roam around and are not allowed to work outside home. We have to sit at home and work.

-Craftswoman from Samana Mandi

Another craftswoman elaborated how she was denied to work outside the boundaries of her domestic space:

“My marriage was fixed up after I finished a course of nursing. I was happy that after marriage I would be able to move out of my home, earn and live happily with my new family. But to my surprise, I was denied for stepping out of home for work. My mother in law as well as my husband told me that you can work from home but not outside; it is a prestige issue for us and a shame if woman of the family go out to earn; men can very well support the family. Hearing this I was very disappointed. I learnt this craft and started working on it. Now I am pursuing this as I have no choice.”

The above narrative supports a report from Bangladesh.⁶ According to this research, a wife's labour is often viewed as a threat to male dominance and authority. Similarly many other crafts women from numerous villages of Punjab voiced that they have no other choice and have to follow decisions taken by men of the house.

Driving force – Small but Important Earnings

Majority of phulkari embroidering women work to earn money so that they can spend it on their children or relatives, and sometimes on themselves. Many of them revealed that they spend these marginal earnings on their children's education or to buy them clothes and toys. Some craftswomen reported that their husbands do not provide them with enough money to cover household expenses. They have to rely on their family for support to meet basic needs

⁴ Abigail Powell, and Lyn Craig, “Gender differences in working at home and time use patterns: Evidence from Australia,” *Work, Employment and Society* 29, no.4 (2015): 571-587, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017014568140>.

⁵ Shahnaz Kazi, Bilquees Raza, and Naheed, Aziz, “Women in the informal sector: Home-based workers in Karachi,” *The Pakistan Development Review* 28, no. 4 part II(Winter 1989): 784, accessed December 20, 2020, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/41259387>.

⁶ Nicola Banks, “Female employment in Dhaka, Bangladesh: participation, perceptions and pressures,” *Environment and Urbanization* 25, no.1(2013): 95.

on a daily basis. Women are repeatedly reminded that they are worth less and unable to contribute to the household income.

My husband does not give me money. For how long I have to beg for money?
-Craftswoman from village Nalaas

One of the middle agents from village *Nalas*, near Rajpura town commented on the vulnerabilities of craftswomen.

“Craftswomen working for me are married to men who are usually daily wagers and are working at a very low level and can barely earn Rs. 5000-6000 in a month. How can one run a house in this amount when one wants her/his children to get good education? Madam, it is very difficult to meet our needs with the income of a single member. As there is no regular source of a fixed income, so these women have no choice but to embroider and earn. At least by doing this craft, women are able to earn something so that they can support their husband or fulfil small demands of their children and many a times their own desires as hardly any man give his salary or earning in woman’s hand.”

Low level of education of these craftswomen add to their helplessness as they consider themselves as of no use to anyone. They often mentioned that this is the only work they can do. Many of them were of the view that if they had enough money then, they would not embroider.

I do it because I do not have any other option. I am not educated enough that I can go out of my village to work. Moreover, there is no work in this village too.
-Craftswoman from Mubarikpur

Various government and NGOs prompt these craftswomen to join self-help groups, where 10-20 women of the place join together and form a group. They contribute some amount Rs 50-100/- or more every month. This group opens a bank account to deposit this money. Whenever any group member is in need of money, she can take a loan from the group itself (inter loan) on some minimum interest rate and can return it later. This also reduces their dependency on big money lenders. The SHG is also eligible for additional loans from banks and government institutions under various schemes promoting women's economic empowerment and independence, hence they try to establish themselves.

Many marketing options for the crafts sector have been funded by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), one of which is the establishment of Rural Marts, retail outlets in potential locations to support women, such as *Jhansla* (village), *Bassi Pathana* (town) etc. This scheme of NABARD provides for support towards operational expenditure for setting of Rural Marts. This outlet is a marketing initiative at the doorstep of various self-help groups' craftswomen, where they can prepare and showcase their products (phulkari, pickles, embroidered sheets or veils, knitted sweaters etc.). These Rural Marts not only provide a market, but they also assist in the promotion of entrepreneurship among the producer communities of various SHGs, encouraging more women to engage in craft work and become self-sufficient.

Plate: A self help group

While the earnings or financial independence obtained by craftswomen through embroidery are minimal, it is considered good because it can help her improve her quality of life. Working from home can be a good way for supplementing income.⁷ And it is a common survivalist economic practice, especially in areas of unemployment,⁸ and thus aids in poverty alleviation.⁹

Challenges within and outside the boundaries

There are many challenges crafts women juggle with on everyday basis. Though many craftswomen reported that they have no restrictions from the family on embroidering for the market, but they do it when men of the family are not around or they move out to work. But some of the women reported that they do not tell their husbands that they earn. Both these cases infer that husbands don't like wives to concentrate on activities that make them earn and feel independent. This can also imply that they want dependency of women on them. One of the craftswomen mentioned that her husband has burnt many of her beautiful work/creations. He does not want her wife to work for money. On one side he refuses to allow his wife to earn and on the other side does not give her money to spend. Craftswomen

⁷ Darshini Mahadevia, Aseem Mishra and Suchita Vyas, *Informal economy monitoring study: Home-based workers in Ahmedabad, India* (UK: WEIGO, 2014), 1, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/IEMS-Ahmedabad-Home-Based-Workers-City-Report.pdf>

⁸ Kalpana Hiralal, "The 'invisible' workers of the informal economy- a case study of home based workers in Kwazulu/Natal, South Africa," *Journal of Social Science* 23, no.1(2010): 29, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09718923.2010.11892808>.

⁹ Tipple Graham, "The Place of home-based enterprises in the informal sector: evidence from Cochabamba, New Delhi, Surabaya and Pretoria," *Urban Studies* 42, no.4 (2005): 611,623, accessed December 2, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43197278>.

face subjugation at home when they do not have a direct cash in their hands. Many a times their hard work is snatched by males and they do not get due respect. They are looked upon by everyone.

On top of it, underpayments for the hard work at various levels was reported by many of the craftswomen. Average wages or income earned in informal sector as compared to formal sector have been reported by many scholars to be lower especially for women.¹⁰ The demands of seclusion and restricted mobility of these women leave them vulnerable to exploitation by middlemen as a source of cheap labour.¹¹ The exploitative nature of home-based work perpetuates the subordinated and oppressed status of women and girls.¹² Middle agents try to maximise the commission and major chunk goes to the designers, boutique owners, vendors, retailers etc. For a phulkari wrap which is sold at exorbitant price in the market, a crafts woman is barely able to earn Rs 500 to Rs 1000 on an average on monthly basis. This again depends upon the amount of time she spends working on embroidery. The payment for a wrap or a product is done in two ways-either a consolidated amount and in many cases according to number of motifs embroidered. More work, more earnings. However, her other household duties restrict the amount of time she may devote to embroidery. Though there were cases where she is able to earn up to Rs 3000/- a month but majority of them earn little. As mentioned earlier too that even though they earn less, it still contributes to poverty alleviation and enhancing the family's quality of life. This was supported by narratives of many craftswomen.

A study on working conditions in India's home-based garment sector highlighted that 95.5% of workers are female and most workers received between 50% and 90% less than the state-stipulated minimum wages.¹³ Similarly a study on socio-economic status of women workers in the Informal sector in Chennai, India also reflect that they are subjected to multiple forms of exploitation as low wages, delayed and irregular payments and sporadic work. Further they do not have any social security protection, including no paid holidays and no insurance schemes.¹⁴

Not only less payment but untimely payments are another issue for Phulkari workers. This goes well for the middle agents as well as for craftswomen. They are always paid in instalments, and agencies - vendor/designer/NGOs - always retain a portion of the payment to ensure that these women stay faithful to them. Their payments are kept as a means of security, preventing them from leaving the shopkeeper or middle woman. Many shopkeepers would even demand security in cash for giving work to the artisan directly with a view to ensure the cost of the fabric. Even a slight error in embroidery (whether in stitch or colour combination) by the craftswoman can lead to complete repayment of the product from her

¹⁰ Marilyn Carr, Martha Alter Chen, and Jane Tate, "Globalization and home-based workers," 127.

¹¹ Shahnaz Kazi, Bilquees Raza, and Naheed, Aziz, "Women in the informal sector: Home-based workers in Karachi," 784.

¹² Siddharth, Kara, "Tainted Garments: The exploitation of women and girls in India's home-based garment sector," Blum Center for Developing Economies University of California, Berkeley January 2019: 5, Accessed December 10, 2020,

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ixp7QunDHOkOwJstndfaeBpQHBh_-Bmq/view

¹³ Ibid, 7.

¹⁴ Sivasubramanian K., Pushpa A., Raju V., and Madhu Dhruva Kumar, "Women and informal employment: An analysis of socio-economic and health conditions of women home-based workers in Chennai, India," *Journal of International Women's studies* 21, no.5(2020): 97-98, accessed January 20, 2021, <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol21/iss5/10>.

and there were instances narrated by several workers that many a time they are not even paid for the entire product even if they rectify the mistake. Because of their reliance on middle agents for design, raw materials, and work, these craftswomen are unable to negotiate the product's price.¹⁵ They believe that they are at least getting something and it is better to work with lower wages than not working and earning nothing.

Almost every craftswoman said that their requests for increase in wages is always postponed by the vendor or designers/NGOs. Moreover, these vendors are always look out for artisans who are ready to do high quality embroidery for them at low wages. So many a times they visit villages which are in interiors where women are ready to work even at low wages. Craftswomen who live in close proximity to towns are more aware of prevailing prices for embroidering specific motifs. Some of them do negotiate prices and get better deal for their work than others. Many craftswomen work for NGOs where they are underpaid. Even if they wanted to leave this NGO and work independently, they could not do that because directors/ management/ owners of these NGOs often help them to get loan from banks.

An incident witnessed by the researcher - a middle agent conversing with a shopkeeper to give her earlier dues. She was requesting him to clear all her pending payments and mentioned that she needs money but this was postponed by the vendor that he does not have sufficient money to pay her dues, it will be cleared next time. Later on, when the shopkeeper was asked for the act or his behaviour, he replied that this is the place of crafts women. He replied that if he will clear all the dues she will run to another vendor and these women have to be treated as they are at a lower level. This is not just one incident, there were many which reflect the patriarchal values rooted deep in the Punjabis and unveils the exploitation through which these women undergo.

The shopkeepers are really bad – they don't let us go anywhere. They keep us and kick us.

-Craftswomen from different villages

Many of these women complained that they neither get payment nor respect. The only thing the craftswomen desired was that shopkeepers or vendors to treat them with dignity and pay them on time. Not only on wages but craftswoman also have no control over the design. Any of her intervention even in terms of colour combination, taste of craftswomen is not accepted and they are bound to make what is dictated by vendors/ boutique owners etc. Presence of craftswomen in many exhibitions are encashed by designers, vendors, organisations regarding the authenticity of the products displayed. Irony of the situation is that the status of the craftswomen remains same.

Occupational Health Hazards- Compromising health for work

Craftswomen work hard to complete orders and meet deadlines as asked by vendors or designers. Many of them sit in odd postures for hours and embroider. This impacts their eyes, back, limbs and has several adverse effects on their body physique. Various health

¹⁵ Jeemol Unni, and Uma Rani, "Home based Work in India: A Disappearing Continuum of Dependence?" Paper presented at the EGDI and UNU-WIDER Conference on Unlocking Human Potential: Linking the Informal and Formal Sectors, September 17-18, 2004, Helsinki. (2005),4, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/Unni-Rani-Home-based-work-India.pdf>

issues of different types of work can be related to higher incidence of work intensity¹⁶ as well as nature of work¹⁷ and working conditions. It is common for garment workers to have backache and eye strain.¹⁸ Complete loss of vision, chronic back pain, muscle pain and atrophy, headaches, pulmonary issues, cuts and infections are some of the other occupational health issues faced by many home-based garment workers as studied by Kara.¹⁹

Phulkari craftswomen just work without bothering about their health. Many of them replied that they can't afford to visit specialists so sometimes they try to avail health facilities in the village. Though they work for many organisations and vendors but they responded that they have not been provided any counselling for sitting in the right posture and level of distance that they must maintain to sustain good eyesight. They are aware of their health issues but they neglect their medical check-ups, regular exercise and precautionary measures.²⁰ This reveals a requirement of sensitisation of craftswomen with regards to maintenance of their health.

The other side of coin:

Craft- Boosting confidence and inspiring many

Though there are many difficulties and hurdles faced by the craftswomen as highlighted above but this craft is used by many craftswomen, middle agents, entrepreneurs to establish themselves in their community and the craft sector. The name and fame achieved by them gives them economic freedom, confidence to take decisions. This is in contrast to their situation when they were not earning and were not involved in any household matters. Now they do not always look up to others for permission to work but they maintain healthy relations in the family and have created some space for themselves. The financial independence and the status earned through pursuing this craft can empower women and they become visible in their household too. Though this number is not big but many in this sector try to climb up the ladder of success and status. This gives them a feeling of satisfaction and contentment of their struggle. Such work also gives an occupational identity to many as they devote their time, energy and resources to pursue this craft.²¹

It is very difficult to get established and involves a lot of hard work. There were so many problems that I faced initially, but I kept on working without bothering about these hurdles. Now I have confidence to talk to strangers and even men, I can move out of my village too. Now I take many women from the village to participate in crafts fair.

-Entrepreneur of Phulkari from Village Jhansala

¹⁶ Maria S. Floro, and Anant Pichetpongsa, "Gender, work intensity, and well-being of Thai home-based workers," *Feminist Economics* 16, no.3 (2010):5, accessed January 20, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2010.499657>.

¹⁷ K. Sivasubramanian, Pushpa A., Raju V., and Madhu Dhruva Kumar, "Women and informal employment: An analysis of socio-economic and health conditions of women home-based workers in Chennai, India," 104.

¹⁸ Darshini Mahadevia, Aseem Mishra and Suchita Vyas, *Informal economy monitoring study: Home-based workers in Ahmedabad, India*, 2.

¹⁹ Siddharth, Kara, "Tainted garments: The exploitation of women and girls in India's home-based garment sector," 17.

²⁰ Anu H. Gupta and Harpreet Kaur, "Occupational health problems of Phulkari artisans," *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences* 9, no.7 (2019): 697.

²¹ Anita M. Unruh, "Reflections on: 'so what do you do?' Occupation and the construction of identity," *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy* 71, no.5(2004): 293.

There were many cases where women have climbed up many levels-from a craftswoman to middle agent or to a successful business woman. They are able to get the products crafted for fairs and exhibitions and even negotiations are done by them. Many craftswomen feel satisfied when they are able to purchase fabric, embroider the same and stitch their garments because of many training programmes related to phulkari embroidery and stitching organised in their villages.

Bringing cohesiveness

One of the important social aspect or contribution of this craft is Community bonding. Sitting together in groups and embroidering serves many purposes. Women can relax while talking to their friends or group mates, share their problems and get solutions. They can laugh with each other developing and nurturing a strong bond. Embroidering together is a form of recreation and socialising event for them.

Unless we embroider one or even two flowers, we do not feel that our day is complete. Some of us started embroidery because everyone around us was doing the same and gradually it became a part of our daily routine.

-Craftswoman from village Mandiyana

Not only this, even exchange of this textile during marriage ceremonies brings love and cohesiveness between members of family and community.

Conclusion

Phulkari embroidery is carried out by women also majorly in the Malwa region of Punjab. They work on this embroidery while sitting at home. Pre and post activities required for product development is carried at the end of vendor/designer but embroidery work remains with the Phulkari craftswomen. She is provided with the raw material to work on at her door step. Women workers pursue this craft compromising on low wages/ meagre rates per piece or per motif. These craftswomen experience exploitation at home when they are denied money and respect and even outside home by the vendors. Though they earn less but they continue this work to achieve some amount of economic independence. But in this process they usually ignore their health and this can lead to many of the occupational health issues. Many of them strive to move further and achieve a respectable status and name in the field of craft. Whatever are the difficulties the craftswomen enjoy their friends company while embroidering. This research has also highlighted some issues of concern that can be addressed for the benefit of the craft and the craftswomen.

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