

# The Fabric of the Aftermath

Caught between skill and survival, memory and markets, *phulkari* resists simple preservation or 'revival', instead calls for adaptation and continuity through belonging

By CHAHAK MITTAL

**O**n the morning they left undivided Punjab, Delhi gallerist Bhavna Kakar's grandmother did not reach for gold. She reached for cloth. *Phulkaris* were lifted from cupboards, folded into neat squares, wrapped in muslin, neem leaves slipped between their creases. Children were hoisted, doors shut, and the trunk latched. Years later, Bhavna would hear the family joke retold—how, in the rush of leaving, they carried “only clothes.” As a child, Bhavna recalls teasing her grandmother for this choice. “My cousin and I used to tease *naani* for doing so. Back then, we were too juvenile to understand the sentimental and ritualistic value it held.”

“*Jis sui reshmi phul kadhe, us sui di koi rees nahi,*” goes the Punjabi couplet—the needle that embroiders silken flowers can match no other. What it gestures toward is not craft alone, but authorship. For generations, *phulkaris* were stitched alongside cooking, farming, child-rearing, and rituals of passage. They were not diversions from life; they were life rendered in thread. Bhavna's mother, Shyama Basin-Kakar, moved homes every three to four years—14 cities in all. From Gujranwala to Mandi Bahaudin in undivided Punjab, from

Ambala's Baldev Nagar Refugee Camp to Ambala city, where the family eventually settled, the *phulkaris* travelled with her. Inherited from her great-grandmother and mother, they crossed borders and decades. At her own wedding, Bhavna walked beneath her great-grandmother's *vari-da-bagh*—an inheritance worn overhead, transforming ritual into lineage.

Why was fabric more “survivable” than bullion? Textile artist Rubina Singh, founder of Rafunaama, describes *phulkari* as always being “future-oriented”—stitched while imagining good lives for daughters and granddaughters. Dr Vandana Bhandari, author and textile educator, says, “What families carried with them was



(Clockwise from left) *Phulkari* in Bhavna Kakar's home; *vari-da-bagh* in her wedding; designs in *phulkari*; Women weavers



shaped as much by circumstance as by attachment. Some of these textiles were made on what became the Indian side of the border, while others travelled later from regions that were left behind.” She adds that what people chose depended greatly on what they could manage physically. “Perhaps, a shawl was easier to wrap a child in than a gold block was to hide!”

Rooted in the cultural memory of Punjab, *phulkari*—literally “flower work”—has long been more than embroidery; it is a language of identity, celebration, and generational storytelling stitched into cloth. For the past 18 years, The Nabha Foundation, inspired by the vision of Maharajkumari Jeet Nabha Khemka and the philanthropic legacy of the Khemka family of Nabha, has worked to revive this heritage craft in its original technique and spirit. What began in 2007 as a craft revival initiative has evolved into a women-led livelihood movement that today supports over 400 artisans from marginalised rural families across Punjab. At its recent exhibition in Delhi, the craft steps into the spotlight with its true custodians—the artisans themselves.

Some *phulkaris* bear visible fracture. A veteran collector speaks of a single *sainchi phulkari* stitched across two emotional registers. One half, completed before Partition, is densely populated with animals, snakes, and scenes of livelihood. The other, finished after migration, collapses into repetitive circular motifs. “I could never go back to embroidery the same way,” she says. The *sainchi* was a woman's gaze articulated in silk. Unlike the geometric rigour of *baghs*, *sainchis* and *darshan duar* wove



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SHREYA SHARMA, CURATOR

abandon her textiles during migration, she “could not resume the practice easily” later. Decades on, after she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, her daughter Aditi Khatri began stitching *phulkaris* so the lineage could continue. Textile historian Rta Kapur Chishti urges caution in interpretation. “It should not be read as the visual language of women denied literacy. They were, more often, a dowry that travelled with a woman into her marital home to demonstrate her skills, dexterity, and aesthetic accomplishments.”

Beyond expression and inheritance, textile work was also embedded in domestic economy. A diary dated 1926-27 belonging to Dr Devi Chand and Leelavati ji of Haran Pur lists

“When you own a *phulkari*, you also inherit its labour. People want to conserve it due to memories attached.”

DEEPSHIKHA KALSİ, TEXTILE CONSERVATIONIST

figuration into cloth—folklore, domestic scenes, mythology, and historical intrusion. The legend of Shrawan Kumar from the *Ramayana* appeared alongside colonial trains and British figures. Silhouettes echoed those found in *kantha* and *baluchari* textiles of Bengal. Other motifs faded altogether. The *pachran-ga*—five colours symbolising the five rivers of pre-Independence Punjab—became rare after borders redrew geography and severed rivers. What once marked belonging became too painful to revisit.

For some, the rupture altered practice permanently. Late Saraswati Khatri, who migrated from Sargodha and later settled in London, was known for her *phulkari* work. Forced to

the contents of a *peela* trunk: *rumaal*, silk, *phooldaar* satin, *kameez*, *Japani* suit, *reshamiladha*, *dhaaga*, *mardane* suit. Written in Hindi and Punjabi, it reads like an inventory of lived necessity.

For Deepshikha Kalsi, textile conservationist and founder, Textile Conservation Studio, whose great-grandparents kept this diary, such records shaped her understanding of textiles as life's work. She says, “You don't just own a *phulkari*, you inherit, too, the labour of a woman's soul.” Over time, she came to see them as a living map—stitched year by year, occasion by occasion—marking a woman's maternal and marital passage. She believes that it was this “touch” and proximity that later led her to conserve textiles as pieces of art.

This belief was at the heart of *Sut Te Saah: Stories Woven in Phulkari*, a recently concluded exhibition at Latitude 28 in Delhi bringing together over 40 pre-Partition *phulkari* textiles sourced from the personal collections of Bhavna Kakar and collector Amit Hansraj. The collection was guided neither by taxonomy nor by rarity, but by lived experience. “Each textile,” curator Shreya Sharma notes, especially given their pre-Partition provenance, “carried the intimacy of hands, and households.”

Caught between skill and survival, inheritance and markets, *phulkari* does not ask to be rescued. It asks only to be seen again for what it has always been. The next time you encounter a *phulkari*, recognise that it is not merely a garment. It is a whispered legacy, a cultural heartbeat, carrying forward stories of a profoundly lived tradition.



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