

Stitching Sustainability: Phulkari as a Model for Tradition-based Women's Enterprises

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“Kadh Kasida Pehreh Choli, Ta Tum Janoh Nari”

“Only then you will be considered an accomplished lady when you will embroider yourself your own blouse”

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2025.1411000075>

Received: 16 November 2025; Accepted: 22 November 2025; Published: 12 December 2025

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the dynamic intersection of traditional knowledge systems and women-led entrepreneurship through a case study of Phulkari, the iconic embroidery art form of Punjab. Rooted in the cultural and social fabric of Punjabi life since the 15th century, Phulkari has historically been practiced by women to commemorate significant life events, transmitted through generations via oral and experiential traditions. The study traces Phulkari's evolution from a domestic and ritualistic craft to a commercially viable industry, examining how this transformation has opened new avenues for women of rural and semi-urban areas to engage in entrepreneurship. Women artisans in the 21st century, through cooperatives, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and digital platforms such as Amazon Karigar and GoCoop, have leveraged Phulkari not only as a means of socio-cultural reclamation and innovation but also as a sustainable source of income. This paper also discusses the critical challenges faced by the sector, including limited market access, exploitation by intermediaries, digital illiteracy, and the erosion of authenticity due to mass production, all at their times. To combat these, the Geographical Indication (GI) tag was awarded to Phulkari in 2009 is evaluated as a potential tool for safeguarding community intellectual property. The study argues that Phulkari-based women's entrepreneurship serves as a replicable model for inclusive and sustainable development, proving how indigenous traditions can be harnessed for both economic empowerment and cultural preservation.

Keywords: phulkari, women, heritage, sustainable development, and entrepreneurship.

METHODOLOGIES AND OBJECTIVES

This paper is based on the qualitative analysis of secondary sources, such as academic journals, web sites, and available case studies, to trace the transformation of the traditional tapestry of Phulkari, from a traditional and ritualistic embroidery art form to a commercially viable industry. The study evaluates how this event unfolded in the context of women's entrepreneurship in rural and semi-urban Punjab. Special focus is laid on the manner in which women turned towards Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and e-commerce platforms to transform this heritage craft into a livelihood activity and socio-cultural empowerment. In this review, key challenges impacting the sustainability and originality of Phulkari have been realized. These include restricted access to market, persistent presence of exploitative

intermediaries, digital divide in the inclusion of the artisans, and fear of dilution of the quality of craft through mass production. The paper also deals with the effects of the Geographical Indication (GI) tag that Phulkari received in 2009, critically examining literature arguing its relevance in safeguarding the artisans' rights and heritage.

Crafting Identity Through Phulkari

Textiles and handicrafts have been a fundamental aspect of the cultural heritage of our country India. Developing across generations, these artistic traditions, especially craft in the form of thread, have been carefully interwoven into the Indian communities and their socio-cultural fabric. “Traditional handicrafts have been coexisting with

the modern textile industry in most Asian countries in today's time. Similarly, in India as well, the Indian textile industry has been showcasing a vibrant range of hand-spun and hand-woven textiles on one end and extremely capital-intensive, highly developed machine-made products being produced on the other end".¹ The small-scale handloom industries have an essential role to play in the economies of various developing countries, one such being India itself. It not only tackles the problem of unemployment in the country by acting as a livelihood for craftspersons in rural and semi-urban areas but also serves to preserve the rich cultural heritage of our country. Thus, putting forth the central question of "How can Phulkari serve as a sustainable model for empowering women through tradition-based enterprises in contemporary India?" To answer this question, one must understand the process by which the Phulkari came into being. How is it made? Why was it made? And most importantly, what does it signify?

Gupta, A. H., & Mehta, S. (2014). Patterns of Phulkari: Then and now. *Bonfring International Journal of Industrial Engineering and Management Science*, 4(4), 179–185.

Historical Roots & Cultural Significance (15th - 18th Century)

Phulkari, which consists of two words - "phool" (meaning flower) and "kari" (meaning work), thus translating to "flower work," is a traditional handicraft art that has its roots in the Punjab region. The earliest literary evidence to a Phulkari can be traced back to its mention in Waris Shah's epic *Heer Ranjha* in the 18th century, signifying that it had gained widespread cultural significance by this time and was very well familiar within the society.

The process of making a Phulkari was a community-based, collective process, wherein the women of a family embroidered together, laughing, sharing stories, teaching younger generations and creating generational legacy."² Therefore, Phulkari was not just an artistic form but also the vehicle of intangible cultural knowledge, transmitted from generation to generation and based in the social context of Punjabi home life.

Phulkari held a significant part in the lives of the people of Punjab. It was included in all their major life events, especially in weddings, sometimes as dowry while sometimes gifted as heirlooms. According to legends, brides had a minimum of 21 embroidered Phulkaris in their dowry trousseau, each representing skill, hard work, and family status. The quantity and complexity of these works were not only a reflection of the bride's talent and

imagination but also of her family's wealth and cultural education. Household women—particularly mothers and grandmothers—spent years sewing these pieces, making embroidery a marker of domestic schooling and marital preparedness. Girls learned Phulkari as children, thereby making the tradition trans-generational.

The actual designing of the Phulkari included motifs such as geometric shapes, flora and fauna or scenes from daily life, put together on handwoven Khaddar (coarse cotton), with the use of colourful silk threads. In most cases, each of these designs had symbolism and meaning. The flora motifs for instance, were a symbol of fertility, prosperity, and the human connection with nature.

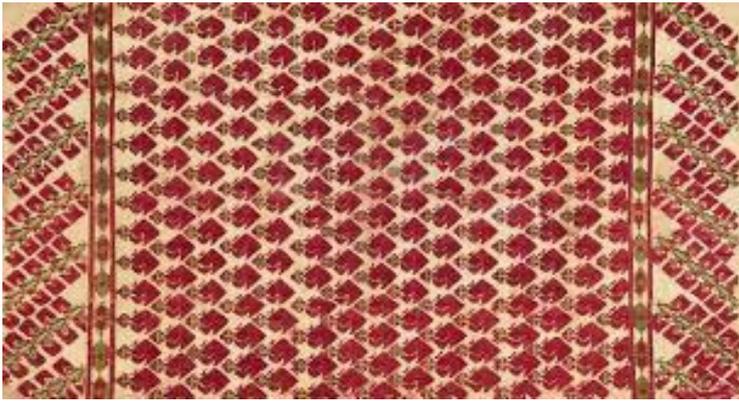
Styles like Choppa, a red cloth embroidered along the borders and gifted by the bride's maternal uncle, embodied emotional and familial symbolism. "These crafts were typically passed down orally, with techniques and motifs shared informally within families and communities."² Nonetheless, the most authentic sources of Phulkari are from the folklores, like "Mein Kadna Dili Darwaza, Pachian Di Lia De Logri". This is from a folk song, sung at the time of Giddha, and translates to "I will embroider the Delhi gate, Oh, get me twenty rupees worth of yarn".

There exist three broad categories of phulkari – phulkari proper; bagh; and choppa. Phulkari proper is where the design is scattered at equal intervals across the fabric and the foundation can be seen. Bagh phulkari is where the whole surface is decorated by an unbroken pattern. Choppa phulkari or choppa phulkari is where the borders of the fabric are decorated and the center is left bare.

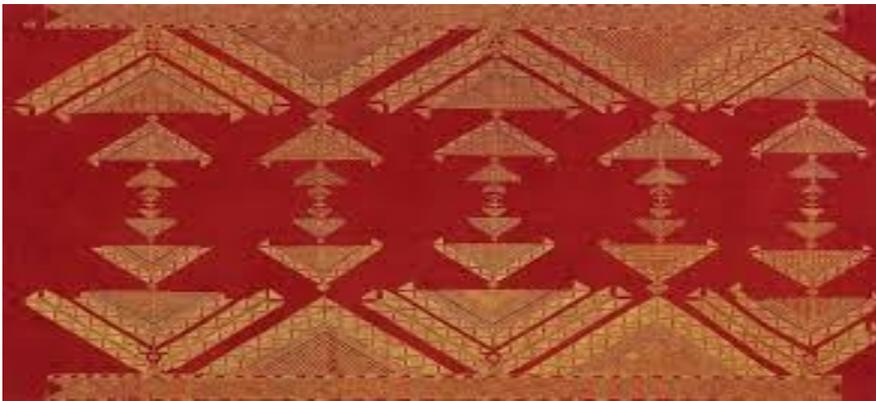
Kaur, R., & Gupta, I. (2014). Phulkari and Bagh folk art of Punjab: A study of changing designs from traditional to contemporary time. *American International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, 5(1), 35–43.

The Different Types of Phulkari Can Be Divided as Follows:

- Thirma – Embroidered upon a white background, it was used by the elder women and the widows.



- Chope – It was presented by the maternal grandmother on her granddaughter's pre-wedding last bath.



- Suber – Just like Chope, it was presented to the bride by her maternal grandmother, to be put on by her on her phera.



- Vari da bagh – It was presented by either the mother-in-law or the bridegroom's grandmother to the bride when she entered her new home. It is executed on a red ground with yellow silk thread in minute lozenges.



- Dasharn Dwar – It was offered to religious institutions upon the grant of a wish.



- Sainchi – It symbolized rural life in the Punjab villages. These were worn daily.



- Til Patra – It was gifted to the domestic servants on auspicious occasions, such as marriages.



The Phulkari's have intricate compositions with pleasing and harmonious colours. The designs are geometric and stylised. "Most of the motifs are inspired by life existing around the artists, and so are their names. Like "karela bagh, mirchi bagh, chandrama bagh, kakri bagh, dhania bagh, mor bagh, tota bagh, etc.³ The Phulkaris have a beautifully painted color scheme, and the most popularly used colors are yellow, gold, red, orange, cerise, dark blue and white. The motifs are a geometric subtlety as the embroidery is done over counted threads of cloth. This is done in a way that even the empty spaces result in motifs or the outlines. Phulkari was, and is still part of heirloom, passed from generation to generation. It was also used as cover for seats for honored guests and decorated in the household. These embroideries express their societies, their needs, and their obligations.

From Domestic Ritual to Commercial Renaissance-Women's Entrepreneurship & Economic Empowerment (Late 18th To Late 20th Century):

The British colonial era profoundly influenced the Indian subcontinent, particularly in its economic, political, and social structures. During the colonial period in India, the British Administrators and ethnographers were highly attracted to this colourful tapestry of Punjab and so began collecting as well as categorizing these textiles as representative of the Punjabi Culture. The British introduced the notion of "art for art's sake" and looked to display Indian crafts in museums as exotic artifacts. This step however, further objectified these Phulkaris and initially divorced them from their social and cultural contexts. It took them from their true meaning of a strong cultural representative, a culmination of unwavering relentless effort and perseverance to something that was seen as a mere object. Following this, these Phulkari pieces were appropriated as "folk art", displayed in museums and fairs, associating them to a newer narrative. From domestic artifacts, they were now seen as objects of aesthetic and ethnographic interest, stripping away its domestic and feminine origins. However, "this shift is seen as detaching the embroidery from its original cultural context and from the women who created it."⁴

In colonial Punjab, the pressure to monetize women's domestic labor appeared as poverty, war, and dislocation prompted families to sell heirloom textiles. Phulkaris, which once embodied a woman's creativity, status, and

community identity, were now appraised for their market value. The demand for Phulkari in colonial exhibitions led to a rise in commissioned pieces for export, often under time constraints and specific aesthetic expectations. This shifted the process from a meditative, familial labour of love into a hurried production to satisfy an external gaze. Colonial economic policies, such as the import of British-made textiles and the taxation of Indian-made goods, disrupted traditional livelihoods. Women's embroidery became a survival strategy rather than a celebratory or spiritual act, giving rise to an early, informal form of women's entrepreneurship. Although this shift did bring income into households, it also redefined women's relationship with their craft—from a cultural expression to a commodified task, distanced from the personal and ritualistic values it once held.

The introduction of industrialization and the push for mass production during the colonial period had a direct effect on artisanal practices. The emergence of mechanized textile production led to the decline of handloom and hand-embroidered textiles, including Phulkari. With a change already initiated in its narrative, it was transformed from an intimate practice into a symbol of Punjabi cultural identity curated for outsiders. As a result, the colonial administration's interest in Phulkari also led to its commodification (the action/process of treating something as a mere commodity). Moreover, the colonial emphasis on industrialization and mass production led to a decline in traditional crafts. The period marked the beginning of a shift in Phulkari's identity—from a symbol of cultural expression to a marketable commodity.

Women artisans saw this as the silver lining of the entire situation. The embroidery was started to be mass-produced for commercial purposes, with its traditional forms and methods altered to suit the demands of the market. Phulkari had evolved from a family occupation to a significant mode of living for village women, enhancing their economic independence and social status. “The embroidery, which started with hand-spun khaddar with the use of untwisted silk floss (pat), represented leisure, imagination, and civilization, had now

been commercialised with the arrival of the British.”⁵ They brought it out from the threads woven by women confined within their homes, into the forefront of the markets—making it visible to all, and finally giving it the attention and interest it deserved.

Even though the commercialization of Phulkari under colonialism was exploitative, it provided rural women a way to cope with economic hardship—especially during displacement, poverty, and partition.

Women who traditionally embroidered for ceremonial use began to sell their works, either directly or through traders. The Phulkari was the first type of women's enterprise in Punjab, although its commercial production took away some of the creative freedom of women, their income provided them with more influence over family decisions, their social status and gave them an opportunity to earn, preserve their heritage. It acted as a bridge between tradition and livelihood, allowing women to step into the economy using a culturally rooted skill.

The craft allowed women to use a domestic skill—passed through generations—for income generation without stepping outside patriarchal boundaries. Furthermore, the skills honed during colonial commercialization laid the groundwork for post-independence cooperative movements, government training programs, and SHGs that later empowered women artisans.

Maskiell, M. (1999). Embroidering the past: Phulkari textiles and gendered work as “tradition” and “heritage” in colonial and contemporary Punjab.

The Journal of Asian Studies, 58(2), 361–388. Kaur, R., & Gupta, I. (2014). Phulkari and Bagh folk art of Punjab: A study of changing designs from traditional to contemporary time. American International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, 5(1), 35–43.

Contemporary Globalization and Commercialization - Innovation & Digital Growth (1980s – 2000s):

Post-independence modernisation, Western influence, and mass production diluted traditional practice. Restored by campaigns by institutions like the Handicrafts Board and cultural figures like Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, Phulkari began re-emerging in exhibitions, museums, and fashion again. In the twentieth Century, Fresh applications were discovered—file covers, bags, home decoration—and embroidery ended up on to lighter fabrics like chiffon and georgette. Designs now tended to be more commonly printed and machine-served,

dilating the pace of artisan originality. Even after commodification, the craft remained empowering. “Through Self-Help Groups (SHGs) women have grown their craft, rebuilding the craft’s legacy on the commercialization model presented by the British.

This growth of the Phulkari has appeared as a driving force for women's economic empowerment in rural Punjab, changing lives through collective, organized effort. “Since the early 1980s, efforts spearheaded by the Patiala Handicraft Workshop Cooperative Society (PHWCS) and artists such as Rekha Mann have enlisted more than 3,000 women into these 50 self-help groups, gaining them formal training, design R&D, and market access, unavailable to them earlier. This systematic aid funded by NABARD (National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development), SIDBI (Small Industries Development Bank of India), MSME (Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises), and SFURTI (Scheme of Fund for Regeneration of Traditional Industries) program—allowed women to increase their incomes, modernizing Phulkari with new-age applications on items such as wallets, cushion covers, and phone cases.”⁶

Government has also started the process for training the women by giving them training to make them qualify for development as entrepreneurs. Phulkari and bagh on exhibition in museums or other places are extremely old ranging from 50 to 150 years. These showcased collections are gathered by retailers for cash or in return for rural areas' kitchen utensils from the Punjab province, on collection these were offered to dealers who trade with

museums in major cities or can say in metro cities such as Delhi or Peshawar.⁷ Their products have even reached international shores—with Phulkari shows in Malaysia, Bahrain, and China—while partnerships with organizations such as NIFT Ahmedabad and Weavco have lent market acceptability and enhanced exports. Most importantly, the aggregation into cooperatives and clusters under government initiatives not only helped save cultural heritage but also provided women economic autonomy, legal status (e.g., PAN cards), and social security—thereby improving their standing at home and in society. The Phulkari Digital Saksharta Yojana, led by Phulkari WOA and CACMS, offers free digital literacy training to youth and women, bridging gaps in online selling and brand – building kills. (Jantaserishta. Com) Phulkari empowers women in punjab- komal amit gera (2013) Gupta, A. H., & Mehta, S. (2014). Patterns of Phulkari: Then and now. Bonfring International Journal of Industrial Engineering and Management Science, 4(4), 179–185.

Stability and Sustainability - Case Studies of Phulkari Art Supported by Women Enterprises and Empowerment:

Phulkari Art: A Tool for Women Empowerment in Patiala:

A survey conducted in Patiala's Tripuri area among artisans showed that most were content with Phulkari work because of the returns it yielded and the cultural pride it kept. Most women also showed high willingness to innovate within Phulkari by altering products such as potli bags, file organizers, and tablecloth to be compatible with today's market demands. These innovations were market-led and have allowed artisans to meet local and global tastes. Notably, the women were more willing to sell their products through training centres than through dealers to enjoy wider margins of profit. Economic self-sufficiency through Phulkari also empowered women to resist social problems, such as domestic violence and exploitation in the name of dowry, allowing them to speak out and assert themselves at home. In addition, the craft allowed community and support building to occur, especially when women were trained and sensitized towards market intermediaries. While limited contact with Self-Help Groups (SHGs) was witnessed, the research placed emphasis on them to enhance the role of artisans in empowering themselves more through increased access to enterprise support and credit.

Nabha Foundation - The Nabha Foundation Instituted the Phulkari Traditional Craft Program:

The Phulkari programme looks to combat gender-based poverty and inequality in Nabha by empowering rural women through sustainable livelihoods from home. Historically reliant on male relatives, these women now become financially independent and socially engaged through skill-based training in Phulkari embroidery. Organized into self-help groups, the artisans have become some of the finest Phulkari designers in the country. Their fine work has ensured that the art's tradition is not lost without losing modernity. This was once a cultural practice, but now it is a source of lifeblood income and identity. Continuous ability development is at the core of the program. Craft mark certified and trained through NIFT Delhi; the artisans even took part in Lakme India

Fashion Week 2017 highlighting their designs. The project seeks to place Nabha Phulkari as a brand name in the limelight, taking local heritage mainstream and turning livelihoods not only around but lives as well.

Jasbir Kaur From Thuha Village

“Just a few years ago, Jasbir Kaur (45) of Thuha village in Patiala district could not have dreamt of becoming economically independent at the age of 40. Today, as skilled embroiderers, she and many other women of her village command the respect of male members of their families.” Jasbir Kaur, along with others like Suresh and Pratibha Rani are “among 3,000 women in Punjab, who have earned recognition at various national and international forums for propagating ‘phulkari’, the state’s traditional hand embroidery. With a grant of Rs 10 million and panchayat land at Thuha village, the society operates a common facilitation centre. The rural

women undergo training in embroidery and are instructed in current fashions in the craft.”⁸ The phulkari cluster of Punjab is now one of the 79 clusters in India constituted under the Cluster Development Programme run since 2007. The cluster, aside from triggering the preservation of an art form dying for lack of patronage, has empowered rural women and given them exposure to health projects and insurance schemes run by the Union government.

The Effect of Colonization and Globalization in the Shaping of Phulkari: A Case Study of the Textiles of Punjab, India" by Dr. Shalina Mehta.

Passion Phulkari by Weaving Dreams

“It all grew from a vision: To bring fashionable and functional items, with a touch of India to the World, fuelled by a profound love for the Phulkari.”

Passion Phulkari is a culture-based, women-owned entrepreneurial initiative started by Dr. Gagandeep Kaur **Gulati**, with the aim of reviving and reimagining the traditional Punjabi embroidery art of Phulkari. Sensing the decline of this ornate artwork in modern fashion, Dr. Gulati envisioned Passion Phulkari as a fusion of heritage and modernity—providing traditional artisanry in the form of contemporary, functional, and fashionable products. The brand features a wide variety of handmade products such as dupattas, sarees, jackets, laptop sleeves, tote bags, pouches, accessories, and home decor, all beautifully embroidered in bright phulkari thread work, addressing contemporary needs by culture. By shifting phulkari from ritualistic use to daily utility, the brand has managed to revive this craft into mainstream visibility. Most importantly, Passion Phulkari stands on a robust platform of social responsibility and women empowerment. It gives rural women artisans employment as well as skill-based training, many of whom had few economic opportunities, thus making them economically independent and culturally integrated. Through this venture, not only has Dr. Gulati set up a sustainable business model based on ethical fashion and cultural heritage but also contributed to the socio-economic empowerment of women and the revival of Punjab's rich textile heritage. The venture is a model example of how entrepreneurship can be purpose-driven as well as impact-driven and use tradition as an instrument of empowerment and innovation.

Fig. 1.1: A few products by Passion Phulkari



We also invited the founder of Passion Phulkari to give us a first-hand account of the condition of a handicraft's entrepreneur in the modern world and tell us about their experiences and challenges.

Question 1: What Inspired You to Start Working With Phulkari, and How Has Your Journey Evolved As A Woman Entrepreneur In This Traditional Craft?

Being in Delhi always felt like I was missing my Punjabi culture more, so I wanted to do something about it. Thus, during Covid I did an online certification from IIM Bangalore, that helped improve my entrepreneurial skills further.

Question 2: How Many Artisans Are Associated With Your Brand, And Could You Share The Gender Ratio and Educational Background of The Women Involved?

I just thought of making something in the field of Phulkari, starting with one pouch and one girl. Now we have more than 20 products with 1 patent and 2 trademarks. Our team too, has grown from 2 to double digits.

Question 3: Do The Women Working With You See Phulkari As A Form Of Cultural Expression, A Passion, Or Primarily A Source Of Livelihood?

It is a source of livelihood for them with passion intertwined in it.

Question 4: What Are The Major Challenges You Face In Sustaining This Craft—Economically, Socially, Or Culturally?

The Handicrafts industry is facing various challenges. People have little to no knowledge of these. One of the biggest challenges is that most people hesitate in buying traditional crafts. Although the government is promoting handicrafts, still people are reluctant to buy many times due to cost. They perceive that Handicrafts are not as perfect in quality as machine made goods. The skilled artisans are not getting the recognition and wages they deserve, especially the rural female artisans.

Question 5: In Your Experience, How Has Working With Phulkari Changed The Lives Of The Women Artisans?

I believe working with Phulkari has brought financial independence, social respect, and changes in their roles within their families and communities, changing their lives overall.

Challenges in the Phulkari Ecosystem

Phulkari faces the dual challenge of preserving authenticity while adapting to contemporary fashion. Designers must balance traditional motifs and techniques with modern aesthetics, requiring both cultural sensitivity and creative innovation.

Another key challenge is the labor-intensive nature of Phulkari embroidery, which can take weeks to complete. “As demand grows, streamlining production without compromising quality is essential.

Phulkari offers vast potential through experimentation with new materials, techniques, and textile fusions—like combining it with block printing or weaving. Embracing sustainability by using organic materials, promoting fair trade, and supporting local artisans aligns with the global shift toward ethical fashion.”⁹

Phulkari, a once vibrant, community-based embroidery craft in Punjab, has been dramatically altered with the burden of economic, social, and technological pressures. With origins in home and ceremonial life, phulkari was never produced for sale but for the purpose of personal and cultural expression by women. But with the beginning of markets during colonial and post-colonial times, artisans—rural and excluded—had limited access to consumers and had to rely on go-betweens who set prices and appropriated most of the gains. These intermediaries, situated in urban areas, generated a structural imbalance, leaving the artisans economically vulnerable while insisting on designs that appealed to commercial interests. This twist came to mark the beginning of phulkari's disconnection from its roots, transforming a sacred, intimate art into a marketable

commodity.

Problems have only become more complex in the last few decades.

- As mass production gained momentum, machine-stitched phulkari began flooding markets—particularly from factory hubs like Ludhiana—undercutting the value and uniqueness of pieces made by hand.
- The generalization of computer-aided designs not only diminished the quality and durability of phulkari but also lost its cultural symbolism and narratives.
- At the same time, the digital revolution presented new possibilities and new challenges: while e-commerce sites ostensibly enable artisans to sell to a global audience directly, most struggle with digital literacy, weak connectivity, and inadequate training.
- Most are unable to use online marketplaces or social media, thus unable to escape traditional retail chains or exploitative traders. Even as visibility and demand rise, most artisans are kept out of the complete economic value of the work, and cultural authenticity of phulkari continues to be destroyed with commercial and technological pressure.

Contemporary Adaptation of Phulkari Embroidery in Fashion and Textile: A Cultural Resurgence Beant kaur and Prof (Dr.) Smriti Agarwal

Summary

Dimension	Key Insights
Cultural Roots	15th-century origins, communal, symbolic embroidery
Economic Viability	Low pay; machine-driven market pressures
Organizational Strength	SHGs and cooperatives enhance empowerment & earnings
Policy & GI Protection	2011 GI tag; need for better artisan awareness
Digital & E-commerce Reach	Mission Phulkari + Amazon support drive access and skills
Education & Youth Training	Digital literacy initiatives are bridging critical gaps
Future Needs	GI/digital education, transparent value chains, heritage branding

RESEARCH AND FINDINGS

Overall, our findings underscore that the growth of the Phulkari has appeared as a driving force for women's economic empowerment in rural Punjab, changing lives through collective, organized effort. Phulkari is a dynamic convergence of economic empowerment, gender equality, and cultural conservation—hence an exemplary model for sustainable rural women's enterprise in India in overall terms. The future of Phulkari lies in innovation rooted in tradition—ensuring its relevance and growth in the dynamic world of fashion. Phulkari-based women’s entrepreneurship exemplifies how indigenous knowledge, and traditional arts can be harnessed for inclusive development, economic empowerment, and cultural preservation. Phulkari exemplifies the intersection of cultural preservation and women’s economic agency. Ensuring its sustainable future requires reinforcing GI knowledge, digital ability, cooperative models, and premium positioning grounded in authentic artistry.

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