

NARRATIVIZING PHULKARI: CHANGING NOTIONS OF WORK ETHIC AND APPRENTICESHIP - (A CASE STUDY OF PUNJABI EMBROIDERERS)

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Craft is an elusive category, its rubric seems to contain a wide variety of practices and objects ranging from making of brass vessels, knitting Kashmiri shawls to embroidering Phulkari. While all these activities are easily encompassed in the term craft, it is hard to find a common denominator which binds these items together and differentiates them from other objects. Each craft brings with it its own specificities in terms of the usage of material and techniques of making to serve various purposes. However the meaning of craft cannot be understood by merely restricting oneself to the functions that a crafted item fulfills. Taking an example of Phulkari, as a dupatta used in marriage ceremonies it can be easily replaced by any other if its only significance was of being a head scarf. But there is something more which makes the presence of Phulkari an indispensable aspect of the ceremony. Even in the everyday usage of Phulkari there is a special place accorded to it in the attitude of the consumers towards it. Crafted item stands apart from other commodities in its distinctive appeal to the people. The question that this ethnography tries to unravel is what makes this distinctive appeal come into being? It does so by inquiring into the kind of spaces and practices under which Phulkari is made through the narrative of the Phulkari embroiderer herself. The discourse around craft is closely linked with the post colonial identity of the nation state in India which sets apart the craft from the mechanized modern commodity. Craft is seen as the repository of the cultural heritage valorizing the labor of hand over the labor of machine which is seen as a threat to the social. In imagining the nation as a community craft has played a crucial role to encapsulate a timeless tradition. This spirit of the nationalist project is rightly captured by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay as she says “to understand Indian life is to understand Indian handicrafts, or vice versa to understand Indian handicrafts is to understand Indian life.” Thus handicrafts stood as a microcosm for the post colonial identity of the nation state embodying the “traditional modernity” of India. Trapped in these nostalgic moorings the craftsman emerges on the scene to produce a heritage which is imposed on him from this nationalist discourse. With the beginning of Nehruvian era this nostalgic trap was furthered by setting up institutionalization of Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC), the Crafts Museum, state-level crafts development agencies and All India Handicrafts and Handlooms Export Corporation of India (estd. 1962). Such initiatives tethered the artisans more and more to a utopian past which always needed an outsider to preserve it. When the handicraft item enters the commodity chain the craftsman’s work is packaged as an embodiment of tradition and heritage to be sold in the global market. The particularities of every culture concretized in these crafted items become universalized acquiring a “homogeneous language of culture and ethics constituting a global

hierarchy of value” (Herzfeld). The author of this narrative is not the craftsmen rather his biography is overwritten by the discourses of state and market.

PURPOSE OF STUDY:

As outlined above the dominant narratives around handicraft elucidate an image of the craftsman as a repository of the cultural heritage. His craft is seen as pivotal to produce the identity of the nation-state however what becomes of the craftsman’s identity in this process is little known. This project through a case study of Phulkariembroideres in Patalia tried to recuperate the narrative of the craftsman and his relationship to the craft. The paper will highlight that the craftsman is not a homogeneous category producing the timeless tradition of a glorious past rather is embedded in the social matrix of caste and gender relations. It focuses on the process of making Phulkari and the various associations that emerge through this process. Furthermore the paper will argue against the general conception of the craft as emerging from the organic solidarity of the social in which the craftsman is placed by showcasing the ways in which there is a co-presence of community and competition among the craftsmen. This ethnography was conducted over a period of two weeks in two primary sites in Patiala, one in the rural setup and the other in the urban milieu. Fieldwork in the rural area was conducted in the villages of Simbroo and Allowal through conversational interviews and focus group interviews. In the urban landscape Adalat and Tripadai bazaar formed the major locus of study. The paper asserts that there is little resemblance between the overarching narratives surrounding handicrafts to the way craftsman conceptualize themselves and their craftsmanship. The experience of the craftsman will be located at the fulcrum of this study.

APOTHEOSIS OF CRAFT – THE HISTORTICAL NARRATIVE

The etymological root of Phulkari comes from two Sanskrit words *Phul*(flower)and *Karya*(to do), meaning “to do flower work”(Khurshid 1992). It is an ancient art of embroidering flower designs on women’s shawls and dupattas on the cloth usually made of a particular variety of cotton called khaddar(khadi).The embroidering of Phulkaridupattas has been an integral aspect of the Punjabi tradition where Phulkariconstitutes an indispensable part of a woman’s dowry(Dhamija 2004,2007). In the Punjabi context Phulkari can be dated back to the fifteenth century. However there is no definitive narrative around its origin, the earliest mention of the word Phulkari appears in the famous text of WarisShah(1725-90) called *HeerRanjha*. In addition to this in a seventh century text called “Harishcharitra” authored by Bana Bhattthere are several mentions about people embroidering flowers on the reverse side of the cloth. Based on these historical evidences, it has been argued by JasleenDhameja that this art might have been prevalent since the seventh century and somehow managed to survive in Punjab.However few studies on Phulkari have attributed its origin to the Irani art form called “Gulkari”. Thus amidst these multiple claims there is little clarity about where Phulkari came from. The earliest specimens of Phulkari shawls

embroidered in the Chamba style are preserved at the Gurudwara Dera Baba Nanak situated in the district of Gurdaspur. It is said to belong to *Bebe Nanaki*, the sister of first Sikh guru - Guru Nanak.

Traditionally Phulkari was embroidered on hand-woven cloth “khaddar” with a silk thread called “pat”. The thread colors used were usually bright red, yellow, green and golden among others. It was done without the help of any tracing or printed drawing pattern. The silk thread came from various places like Kashmir, Afghanistan and Bengal and was dyed in Amritsar and Jammu. The making of Phulkari can extend from a week to few months depending on the design, pattern and expertise of the embroiderer. The motifs of Phulkari are as varied as its history ranging from geometric shapes to fruits and floral patterns. Depending upon the color of the thread used and the motif embroidered Phulkari can be classified as thirma, chope and suber, saloo, Vari-da-bagh, BawanBagh and darshandawar or darwaza, tilpatrashishedar Phulkari and surajmukhi (Hitkari).

Moreover references to Phulkari are inundated in Punjabi folklore. From the folk dance Gidda to popular songs and proverbs this art has received bountiful descriptions such as:

*Utte Phulkari, main rahandikuwari,
Sassu put perdes nu toriya aye.
Kadhana a Bagh, sassusuti aye jag,
Sassu put perdes nu toriya aye.
Tandhnahipani, meriayhaljawani,
Sassu put perdes nu toriya aye.
Chamba, rawail, sassubichade mail,
Sassu put perdes nu toriya aye.*

Veiled in a Phulkari, I wish I had remained a maid,
My mother in law has sent her son to foreign lands!
A whole ‘Bagh’ awaits embroidery, O, mother in law wake up!
My mother in law has sent her son to foreign lands!
Not a stitch will I work, O, look at my youth!
My mother in law has sent her son to foreign lands!
Jasmine and morning glory, O, mother-in-law, let the parted meet!
Why ever did you send him to alien shores! - From a spinning bee song

As evinced from these examples Phulkari is closely related to the ritual of marriage. It stands as a symbol of journey of the woman from her natal home to her marital abode. In earlier times, girls started embroidering Phulkari from a very young age for their marriage as a part of dowry. Phulkari made the transition from domestic sphere to the world outside for the first time in the colonial era. It started being showcased at various exhibitions and fairs. However by the turn of the twentieth century it registered a decline particularly during the Independence movement (Brijbushan, 1990 Pal, 1955). The revival of Phulkari was initiated post independence through a process of preserving lost heritage on which the new national identity could be forged. Colonialism was seen as the reason for the destruction of a traditional work ethic and it was considered

customary to restore it to create a distinct identity from the west. In the words of Coomaraswamy, "...adoption of foreign values was culturally impoverishing...A single generation of English education suffices to break the threads of tradition and to create a nondescript being deprived of all roots-a sort of intellectual pariah who does not belong to the East or the West, the past or the future"(site).The work of the Craftsman stood as a trenchant critique of western modernity embodying the cultural connotations in contrast to the western mechanized good. It is for similar reasons that the idea of Swadeshi goods gained currency in the struggle against the British Raj (Bayly). The Orientalist discourse of the west was criticized by upholding the 'superior spiritual identity' of the colonized over the colonizer. It is this independent inner domain distinct and superior to the material domain of the west which becomes the kernel of postcolonial nationalist imaginations (Chatterjee).The institutionalization of Khadi Village Commission, HandiCrafts Museum and several other efforts by various reformers to preserve various crafts highlighted the privileging of a particular work ethic of the hand. This work ethic imagined traditional craftsmanship as a spiritual domain reflecting the discipline of a yogi and embedded in an organic society marked by relations of caste solidarity (Greenough). The work of the craftsman becomes an iconic representation of this inner spiritual domain. The Orientalist figure of the native as represented by the West is critiqued by reproducing another romanticized figure of the traditional craftsman. The rhetoric of the nationalist imagination of an untainted and unscathed past before colonization seeks validates itself through this celebration of the work ethic of the craftsman.

(UN)MAKING PHULKARI : A RURAL PERSPECTIVE

Interviews conducted in rural landscape in Pataila revealed that handicraft which is eulogized in common folklore and nationalist discourse stood in sharp contrast to the ways in which different Phulkari embroiders engaged with the work of Phulkari making. It was observed that the craftsman was not a homogeneous figure but was marked by social, cultural and economic determinants.

In the district of Patiala Phulkari making is spread across numerous villages. Among these, Simbroo and Allowal were the sites of this project's fieldwork to understand the particularities of the work ethic in the rural arena. Multiple interactions with the women involved in Phulkari making here revealed that it was only a means to an end mechanism for most of them. The women who were mostly employed in Phulkari making were from the lower caste groups. In the absence of any other means to earn a livelihood Phulkari making served them as a means to obtain meager income. The drudgery of making Phulkari permeated the narratives of the women while the payment for the work barely compensated for their everyday needs. As remarked by one of our informants, Sarabjit when asked for the reason why she engages in this work:

"We used to get free wheat from the ration shops . Now they have stopped distributing it. If I make one Phulkari in a month, we are able to procure wheat."

Everyday penury forged a major reason for women to pick this work among the lower castes. In conversation with a Ravidasi household, the young woman said, *“Our mother is a daily wagalabourer. We are three sisters. My father is ill with kidney failure. Who will marry us? How else can we make money?”* In the background of the somber condition of their household the bright coloured green peacocks on the Phulkari the three sisters were making stood in sharp contrast to the paleness of their faces. Phulkari making in these instances provided a semblance of hope to fight the everyday pangs of poverty. This was evident in the general disinterested disposition of the Phulkari embroiderers towards the craft. On being asked if they would shift to any other profession if it paid more, Jyoti, a woman of twenty who had been doing this work since five years now promptly answered, *“We barely make Five hundred rupees by knitting one Phulkari. I sit for four to six hours everyday and it takes a month for me to complete it. My eyes pain everyday. It’s difficult to keep up a straight neck while continuously being involved in it. Who would want to do this work?”*

Instead of the general idea of the idyllic connection between the craftsman and her craft the process of making Phulkari is majorly intercepted by the figure of the middleman who dictates both the time and money that a certain item will be awarded. Sarabjit accounted that, *“We can’t ask for more money. If I will refuse to work, he (the middleman) has many others standing in line ready to work for him. Why will he listen to us?”* on being asked if she had any say in the money she got for the embroidering work. As the work is carried out within the realm of the household, it increasingly became evident through the interviews that the domestic space is transformed into an informal workshop where every day four to five hours have to be devoted in making a product which the craftswomen refuse to recognize. There might not be a foreman present in the house supervising the work and inculcating a factory discipline yet the specter of the middleman is a sufficient deterrent to replicate a sense of formal discipline in the household.

Contrary to popular references it was observed that the work was not conducted in a common courtyard where all the women congregate and knit while simultaneously engaging in everyday conversations. Instead the work progresses silently in each home interrupted sometimes by the breaking thread or the silent groans of pain let out when the needle accidentally pricks a finger. As we moved from one dilapidated house to another the economic logic of this cultural activity was laid bare in the stories of these Phulkari embroiderers. The cult of the craftsman celebrated and preserved in exhibitions and Crafts Museums hardly finds a place in the narratives of these women. The tradition which exalts the craftsman in the mission to preserve its essence paradoxically ends up marginalizing them further. The contradiction between the exalted timeless tradition and the lived experience of the work became even stark when we asked a young woman who was getting married herself if she had embroidered anything for herself and she answered with an apologetic smile, *“tusi Mazak kyunkarde ho? (Why do you make fun of me?) In two months I am going to get married. I will get seven hundred rupees by knitting this Phulkari. My marriage will take place at our house only. We need money to feed the guests.”* In analyzing the symbolism of Phulkari, H.S. Gill observes that Phulkari is not only a dupatta worn by a woman but “on it are

embroidered the semiological patterns of the discourse of her cultural destiny. It's a small world where nature is not very distant from culture.”(Gill 1976:45)

The folksongs and the popular narratives represent a singular biography of Phulkari. As remarked by Harjot, a school teacher in the village school, “*Phulkari is a labor of love. Every woman used to knit it for her marriage. There are many songs popular in the folklore on Phulkari and wedding.*” She narrated to us how her mother made her a Phulkari for her wedding. From dyeing the cloth to embroidering it, everything was done by her mother. Recollecting an old folksong she sang:

“*Nikki jehisui ,batwadhaaga ,*

Baithkaseedhakadrahiaa.

Babal mere vyahrachatameinpardesan ho rahiaa.”

The song captures the pathos of the woman who will have to leave her father's home after marriage. The Phulkari in this journey becomes the symbol of this transition from the maternal home to the in-laws place in the process of her becoming a woman from a girl. However the making of Phulkari reveals varied associations and different forms and stories are weaved around it. Moreover, in the same village the hierarchy among the Phulkari embroiderers also becomes a remarkably visible factor. The work revealed how caste subtly informs the dynamics of Phulkari making and the relationship of the craftsman and her craft. In the rural setup as observed in the two villages the occupational arrangement was largely caste driven. Therefore in a conventional understanding of a village community the roles ascribed to different people will be because of their caste status. The art of Phulkari making is not attributed traditionally to any specific caste but is seen as a norm that all Punjabi women follow alike. Yet in the villages there was a observed a general trend in which the women mostly engaging in making phulkari for the market came majorly from the ravidasi caste.

In contrast to the ravidasi women was Jaskaur whose house was significantly bigger and better furnished. Unlike other houses it was a two storeyed building with a cemented floor and a refrigerator. She was knitting a bed sheet when we entered her house. She enthusiastically spoke of her work “*Oh I love making Phulkari. For the past ten years I have been making Phulkari. Earlier I used to knit only dupattas. Now I also do embroidery on bed sheets, pillow covers and suits as well. Knitting is a part and parcel of my life. People have even named me as the 'chandranwali' (bedsheet maker)*”. She laughed with a joyful pride in her voice and continued, “*Eh gharmeinapnekamtohkhadakitae. Mere admitohzyada Kaman diaamein(This house which you see, I have built through my work. I earn more than my husband).*”

In its lack of similarity to the women we had interviewed before, JasbirKaur's story felt a puzzling one. However social underpinnings behind her narrative started to unfold more clearly as the conversation unfolded. *"I get ten rupees for each flower I knit as compared to four rupees which other women get"* she said. She revealed that the one who got the Ravidasis in this village work. They were de facto employed under her. In her conversation she incessantly insisted again and again *"mein par ravidasinhiaa(I don't belong to that lower caste though)."* She maintained a distinction between the quality of her work and the work done by the lower caste people in the village. Attributing it to her higher status she reiterated, *"Phulkari mere layekalahain.Doojeyanlayetesirfkamai da eksaadhan(Phulkari is an art for me. For others it's just a means to make money)."*

She saw herself as an artist being distinct from a craftsman saying that *"Mein karigarnhi, kalakaarhaan(I am not a craftsman rather an artist)."* In her story the desire to see her work distinct and different from a craftsman resonates with the aura of romanticism surrounding the term artist. Defining her work as being driven by purely artistic curiosity she differentiated it from the work of the ravidasis which seems adulterated with immediate material constraints to her. However, it is certain that once in the market, her Phulkari will be stacked along with all other Phulkaris. A distinct trademark of her work through which she wants to individualize her Phulkari vanishes when it enters the commodity economy of the market. Her cult of an artist might be acknowledged in the name *"Chadranwali"* by which she is addressed in the village milieu but those chants quickly vanish into silent whispers when one leaves the village of Simbroo, unheard in the markets where her Phulkari will be sold.

JasbirKaur's desire to be seen as a *'kalakaar'* (an artist) raised many pertinent questions. In the discourse of Phulkari, Who is an artist? What is the privilege that makes the assertion of being an artist possible? How is being an artist different from a craftsman? The distinction between art and craft comes from western philosophy where art evokes individual genius while craft is seen as a collective endeavor. These distinctions are blurred and questioned in the making of Phulkari. In a conversation with Navneet, a woman in Simbroo, it emerged that Phulkari could be seen as both art and craft as she said, *"you can't put your own designs on a Phulkari to be sold in the market. The sample is given, the design decided for us and we have to embroider. Even the different threads are provided to us. One can't even replace green for red. But when I make a Phulkari suit for myself or few other people in the village, I make a variety of designs. The last time I made butterflies instead of peacocks on my Phulkari. Everybody appreciated it."* Phulkari's status as a traditional craft also suggested that only few designs which have become associated with it had to be replicated in exactly the same manner. The interview brought to fore that it is not that the Phulkari embroiderer cannot embroider new designs and patterns. Rather what matters is the space which allows such maneuvering. The only audience for innovation in the case of Phulkari is closed universe of the embroiderer, for the market it is a traditional craft distinct from other commodities but cohesive within the realm of tradition. Phulkari becomes a craft which is endowed with replicating and re-presenting a lost culture, a forgotten heritage. It is the spokesperson of tradition

in the modern times. While the craftsman carries the burden of being the repository of tradition, the artist stands as the precursor of the future. The artist prophesies, the craftsman re-tells. The artist makes an interruption, announces a disjunction. The craftsman disguises the discontinuities to tell a tale of continuum as Navneet further said, *“I cannot change the patterns when I make Phulkari for the market it is only for myself the one with the peacocks. Such things are not allowed in market work”*.

The cult of the craftsman therefore does not base itself on the idea of an individual but always affirms a collective pattern. Art is seen as specific and individual and artist is rewarded with the epithets of this specificity and individuality. The same attributes function as a taboo for the craftsman, she affirms her identity through the collective by replicating the traditional pattern. This embeddedness of craft in the traditional framework makes it a highly valuable ingredient in the making of Indian modernity which is seen as quintessentially different from the west as it looks towards the future by basing itself in the foundations of the past. The craftsman is therefore called forth to narrate a lost tale and can never be an innovator for sustaining this narrative. Bounded in a collective orientation, the craftsman retells, represents, recasts to a changing audience. The craftsman's role blocks its entry to the cult of the genius. The innovation will silently happen in the blind alleys of the domestic household where a Navneet can embroider peacocks for herself.

Furthermore, the artist therefore always stands in a hierarchical position to the craftsman. The cult of the artist gains recognition and rewards over the craftsman. Even though the fate of the craft rests in the hands of the craftsman she becomes a marginal figure to the craft. It is for these reasons that Navneet and Jasbir's passionate will towards their work and their desire to be called a 'kalakaar' become a destabilizing anomaly to the category of the craftsman. Even though Phulkari is entrenched in the traditional worldview based on replication and reproduction of a certain pattern it cannot be seen as a monolithic category. Craftsman gives it her own meaning as well, the engagement of different Phulkari embroiderers with the craft of making reveals disparate stories. The craftsman finds little solace in her work. The romantic fiction trapped in nostalgic moorings freezes the identity of the Phulkari embroiderer. That identity imagines the craftsman tethered to the past. The narratives however are not only skeptical of this past but refuse to acknowledge this as the vantage point from which their work should be viewed. The theatre of the everyday where this work is performed reveals different dynamics. Phulkari emerges as a tool of struggle rather than a craft to be embodied.

(UN)MAKING PHULKARI: AN URBAN PERSPECTIVE

In the urban landscape of Patiala fieldwork was conducted in Tripadi and Adalat Bazaar both of which are infamous for their Phulkari collection. The facades of shops were decorated with the bright shades of blue, red and green Phulkaris. From a hand woven Phulkari to one produced by a

machine the street was bustling with customers hopping from one shop to another greeted with varied choices. Tripadi bazaar is surrounded on its periphery by different colonies of houses and it is within the houses in these colonies that Phulkari making is carried out.

In our visit to the colonies we observed that in the evening, outside the houses one comes across women embroidering Phulkari. While in the village milieu it is mostly the household where work is done here the street served as a site for the making. Sitting outside their houses near the doorstep, the different Phulkaris being embroidered in rows demarcate one street from another. The everyday conversations served as the background against which the work of embroidery takes place. The workmanship as observed in these households is in marked contrast to the households in the villages. On being asked about their relationship to this work, one of our respondents spoke jovially, *“I have been doing this work for many years now. It doesn’t seem like work anymore. It’s become a habit.”* The woman sitting next to her further added, *“I definitely make a bit of money out of it. But it’s part of my every day. Everyday I make a Phulkari for three to four hours. It’s a good way to spend leisure time. How else one kills time?”* The work of Phulkari is dovetailed in the everyday intricately such that the narratives of the women in the urbanscape neither seem to look at it as a form of drudgery as evinced in the rural milieu nor they romanticized this activity as crucial to preserving some age old traditional glory. This attitude towards making Phulkari registered an important difference with the way women dealt with other household chores. They cherished doing it as they saw it as their own hobby rather than being a social responsibility towards the household. When asked if they will be interested in taking up any other work which pays more than Phulkari making, Harsharan thoughtfully remarked, *“I like doing it. I wouldn’t do any other work even if given more money. I am able to make a suit per month out of this money. I am satisfied.”* Another respondent promptly replied, *“I would definitely want more money. Who says no to that? But I will never leave this work.”* Neither the worry of shrinking income nor the drudgery of the work surfaced in these conversations. Considering the household condition and the narratives of the women it could be fathomed that these women were relatively well-off as compared to the women in the villages and hence had different notions associated with their work. In addition to this, further interviews revealed a connection between caste and the work of Phulkari in the urban space as Satnam Kaur, a woman sitting with her neighbors making Phulkari remarked, *“We all are from the bhagalpuri caste. It’s our people who brought Phulkari to Patiala after partition. That’s why Tripadi is the most popular market for Phulkaris.”* Thus there is a renegotiation of the dominant historical paradigm through this construction of alternate histories.

The claim of an alternate history was further strengthened by our respondents on being asked how they learnt the craft of Phulkari making. The usual reply that kept surfacing was *“Ji eh tekudratiee”* (*this is something natural*). In the case of Phulkari making the skill is not learned in specific workshops. Instead embroidering is considered a ‘naturalized’ embodied skill acquired by a daughter from her mother. The skill is understood as something that a woman is born with rather than something which can be learnt or acquired. This appears in stark contrast to the way the relationship between skill and craft is usually understood. The skill is either transferred from one

family to another or acquired from other skilled workers through the process of apprenticeship. Therefore, the skill functions like an asset which must be guarded and kept like a secret from the competing families or workshops and is only imparted through consistent perseverance (Herzfeld 2004). Whereas in the case of Phulkari, the technique of embroidering is seen as always already inscribed on the female body. This claim is strengthened by drawing on cultural idioms substantiated through religion as Satinder, another woman in Adalat Bazar profoundly told us that, “Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of Sikhism in one of his verses wrote “*KadKasidhapahrehcholi tan tujaanenari*” meaning that a woman is only recognized as a female when she can embroider her own costumes. In conversation with Kamalpreet, an 80 year old woman, elaborated that “*every woman is born with this skill. This can’t be acquired.*” The technique of this skill was attributed to words like ‘*kudrat*’ (nature) or ‘*jamandaru*’ (knowledge by birth). Thus rather than being a cultural phenomenon the knowledge of the skill seemed like a biological fact where every woman involved in Phulkari making was seen to possess it by birth. As reflected in the folkloric narratives as well it is through naturalization of gendered division of labor it is showcased how the woman is “girled” as if she would not be complete as a woman if she did not engage in the work of making Phulkari (Butler 2004b). This process further resonates with the gender laws of the Punjabi kinship structure where culture is naturalized to emphasize the fixity of gendered practices. According to Das, Punjabi kinship is “a dialectic between the rules deriving from nature and the rules deriving from culture” (1976:1) The division of work particularly in Phulkari making draws on these notions of nature and culture “seeking to naturalize or denaturalize cultural constructions of relatedness and gender” as revealed by the manner in which women talk about this craft (Brara 2015). It was only on being asked why men are not employed in embroidering Phulkari that under the guise of giggles they let out the social fact “*Ji eh teduniyadaari hain*” (This is all culturally dictated). Thus while comparing their work among the women the trope of “*kudrat*” is used to valorize oneself but in relation to the absence of men from this profession “*duniyadaari*” becomes the central explanation. However, with the mechanization of Phulkari, more and more men are getting employed in making what in popular parlance is called ‘*machini Phulkari*’. The work is usually done in Ludhiana in workshops unlike the work of women bound to the household. The work is also contrasted to the feminine embroidery as opposed to the masculine machine work. While one respondent narrated the drudgery of the work in the Allowal village we interrupted her to ask whether she would appreciate her husband’s help in the making process. She blushed and covering her mouth with the dupatta let out a laughter saying “*mera aadmi jnani thodi?*” (my husband is not a woman). Thus division of labor within the craft plays on the kinship matrix reinforcing the gendered hierarchies at play in the larger social milieu.

The craft of Phulkari making thus oscillates between ‘*kudrat*’ and ‘*duniyadaari*’. The dichotomy of nature and culture resurfaces in these idioms. The technique of producing Phulkari naturalizes these dichotomies engendering a strict division of labor. Maria Mies describes this process as the housewifization of labor. The feminine body is circumscribed within the realm of the household by the weight of cultural idioms. And the world and the work outside the home get legitimated as the masculine domain. The demarcation of the public and private resurges in the exercise of

Phulkari making as even when women make Phulkari for the market their presence is limited to the bounds of the everyday household life. They do not identify themselves as a “*karigar*”; however the men employed in the making of mechanized Phulkari are bestowed with the distinction of being “*karigars*”.

PHULKARI COMMUNITY: COHABITANCE OF COPRESENCE AND CONFLICT

Instead of the romantic backdrop of organic solidarity that is often eulogized in the discussion on Phulkari our ethnography revealed that the relations among various Phulkari women both in the village and the urban space oscillated between oppositional negation and communitarian affirmation. Moving from one household to another after every conversation we were asked this question “*So is my work better than her?*” ‘*Her*’ here standing for the woman from the previous household we had been to. In order to valorize their own skill personal details of other women would spill off frequently. The carelessness in their neighbour’s work would be attributed to their ‘*burekaram*’ (bad actions) or ‘*jalan*’ (jealousy). Every woman artisan saw the other in competition with her. “*I can make a Phulkari in much less time than her*”, said another respondent. Sitting in one of the households Navneet opened a trunk where she had neatly stacked two Phulkaris and spreading them on the bed she claimed with pride “*Mere hath jinni safaikisekolnihain*” (Nobody is as nuanced as me in this skill).

However this competition did not translate into persistent jealousy or enmity. On the other hand the same neighbor who would be characterized as jealous of their skill in the narratives would also be acknowledged as the companion for getting thread from the market, wood from the fields or money from the middlemen. Thus JasjeetKaur while referring to her neighbor contradicted her own statement “*I make better Phulkaris than her. Everyone says so. You should see her burnt face then.*” She added further “*But we don’t go the market without each other. If I am away she cooks food for my children sometimes.*” The relatedness between the various artisans oscillated between these potentials of hatred and admiration for each other. These relationships of hostility and concern for each other reflected the agonistic intimacy which they inhabited with each other (Singh).

Similar conception of relatedness characterized the relationship between the middlemen and the Phulkari women embroiderers. The middleman was often hurled abuses during work for being dictatorial “*Saanukamm di jaachhain. Sir tekhade ho k eh kyunnachde ne.*” (We know our job. He doesn’t need to stand on our heads). On other occasions his generosity was also acknowledged as remarked by a respondent, “*Kammteohna ne dita. Chahe change chahemaada*” (He brought us employment for better or worse). The middleman was usually despised for those meager incomes they received yet he was also sympathized for being a cog in the wheel like them. Yet the marked hierarchy implicitly determined the relationship between the middleman and the various artisans as respondents often remarked that “*They (middlemen) can give work to anyone. We need work. We can’t argue too much with them*”. The middleman therefore charted various trajectories of relatedness in their day to day conversations. Respected and despised, feared and sympathized the

relationship between various artisans and middleman could not be understood in the resistance – domination paradigm exclusively.

CONCLUSION

The term craft cannot be understood as a monolithic category simply articulating a paradigm of replication and reproduction of the culture. As evinced through the case of Phulkari the craft is given meaning in heterogeneous ways by the embroiders and largely depends upon their placement in the matrix of social and economic relations. The ‘metaculture of tradition’ which is emphasized by the nationalist project is challenged by the embroiders manipulation of the given norms in the process of making Phulkari (Greg Urban). Women do make different patterns and personalize this craft just like an artist even though their audience of appreciation is limited. Secondly, instead of being antithetical to the hierarchies of caste, the association of the women with Phulkari was largely located in caste relations. The narrative of the craftsman thus emerged as a critique of the eulogization of craftsman as an epitome of cultural reproduction. Engagement with the work was dictated by both economic hardships as well as needs of everyday subsistence. The celebration of the domestic sphere in the folklore is also contested by the disciplining of the household because of demands of the middleman in the rural context and the everyday evasiveness of the urban milieu. The naturalization of the gendered division of labor is also a major theme that surfaced in this study. It is important to remark that the experience of craftsmanship is quintessentially gendered in the case of Phulkari. Women even though engage with the public sphere by selling their Phulkari’s in the market yet their participation is continually circumscribed within the household. In addition to this the narrative of idyllic existence of the craftsmen is deconstructed by the multiple instances of competition and a general inquisitiveness about reputation of work within the community of women. These findings problematize the metanarratives of both the state and market economy. It is of pertinent importance to place the voice of the craftsman in this context to situate the abyss that marks the ideological assumptions and the lived social experience.

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