



## PHULKARI WORK IN THE PUNJAB.

BY MRS. F. A. STEEL.

THE word *phulkari* means a "flowering work," and might therefore be applied to any embroidery. It has, however, in a great measure, been restricted to one particular kind, which is only employed as a decoration for the *chaddars* or head veils of women, and in one or two districts to the petticoat also. By the natives themselves the work is divided into three branches: 1st, the true *phulkari*, where the pattern is diapered at intervals over the cloth; 2nd, *bagh*, or garden, where the whole surface is ornamented by a connected pattern; 3rd, *chobes*, where the edges alone are ornamented and the centre left plain. The distinctive feature of the original *phulkari* work, uncontaminated by exotic amendments, is the stitch, which is purely and simply a darning stitch, done entirely from the back. It is a curiously distinctive work, following the track of certain peoples and tribes with unvarying certainty, modifying itself to new conditions, and so becoming of positive ethnological value.

It seems indubitable that wherever the stalwart Ját tribes of the south-eastern plains came from, with *them* came the original *phulkari* workers; for the art, almost unchanged, lingers still in its best form among the peasants of Rohtak, Hissar, Gurgaon, Delhi, and to some extent in Karnal. Rohtak may be said to be its home, and here, say the census returns, the Hindu Ját, untouched by Muhammadanism or Sikhism, thrives thickest. Here it is a work of leisure—the work of women, who, after doing yeoman's service with father or husband in the fields, sit down in the cool of the evening to watch their threshing floors, and leaning, as I have often seen them, against the heaps of golden grain, darn away with patient, clumsy fingers at the roll of ruddy cloth upon their lap. It is a work of faith, savouring somewhat of sowing seed in the red-brown soil, for nothing save a few tiny stitches shows the pattern growing on the inner side of the folded cloth. Its beauty is to be manifested later on, with the rare holiday-making, when the worker will, perhaps, for the first time, unfold the veil, to see and wear the fruits of her labours. The first two (1 and 2) patterns in the accompanying illustrations show the oldest specimens of pure *phulkari* work I have been able to secure. It will be observed that the green and white threads are cotton. This points probably to an older time still, when silk was unknown, or too rare for common use; this is the more probable, because we find some tribes in Hissar using wool. Another peculiarity is that the fabric itself is employed geometrically as an inner decoration; so that the medallions and diamonds, &c., are not merely patterns of silk worked on, but a combination in yellow and madder-brown. This is distinctive of the original work, and is only possible where absolute accuracy of thread-counting is observed. It is only to be found nowadays amongst the true Hindu Ját, even the infinitely more refined workers in Hazára and Jhelum being unable to work the small stitches and big spaces required in this mixed decoration. The next patterns show the modern work of the Hindu Ját, which in method, pattern and colour remains unchanged *as yet*.

Then follows the beautiful *bagh* work of Hazára and the neighbouring districts. It is worthy of remark that Mr. Ibbetson, in his "*Punjab Ethnology*," remarks that the very tract where we find this *bagh* work at its best was originally peopled by Hindu Ját, who were afterwards conquered by Muhammadan tribes. Curiously enough, the modification in style is just what might be expected under such circumstances. The fabric becomes finer, the labour in consequence infinitely greater; while the embroidery ceases to be a decorative adjunct, and becomes the cloth itself. At the same time, the distinctive stitch, the distinctive merits, which had caught the stranger's eye, remain. It is free-work in servitude; and while in Rohtak at the present day the Ját woman works for herself, in Hazára and the neighbouring districts the fine work is all done to rich orders, and most big houses keep dependents constantly embroidering. I have purposely chosen the most perfect specimens of this *bagh* work I could secure. They are done with unusual care, yet even here the first "rift within the lute" may be detected, which, I have no



doubt, led to the present degradation of the *phulkari* art. I allude to the preliminary sketching out of the ground work by threads, to avoid the almost inevitable mistakes which were sure to arise in counting such fine threads. One miss, prolonged over a whole diagonal, throws out the whole pattern; so the women, by "plane-tabling" the ground into squares, provided for the rectification of small errors. It is beautiful work, but quite unsuited, with its surface of floss silk, to life in the fields; and the natural result is to be seen in the next series of patterns, which show so clearly, that there is no need for words, the gradual degradation which followed, as a matter of course, from the employment of a flimsy *chansi* or *pamsi* cloth instead of the good old home-spun *kadr*, with its clear thread and canvas-like texture.

So far the mistakes, such as they are, have, it appears to me, arisen undoubtedly from over-refinement of the strong, purely decorative diapering of the original work. After this steps in the fatal facility with which the native, despite his much vaunted sense of beauty, turns to the inartistic when it is presented to him. Manchester goods came into the market, ousting home-spuns in the more advanced districts, and the women began at once to work head-coverings to match the new fashion; hence, through endless variations, to what I have called the Manchester *bagh*. On turkey red the *phulkari* stitch is lost, and so long stitches, eye service, and illegitimate patterns creep in. The specimen given is peculiarly inoffensive, but I have seen town-made handkerchiefs and veils hideous with pea-green fishes and magenta roses, with a "sahib" and a "mem sahib" perhaps worked in a corner, if the decorator happens to belong to a female school. There is a lower depth still, the enormity of which may be seen in the pattern I have ventured to call Jubilee *bagh*. I bought it in a shop in Lahore much frequented by our winter visitors, and it is probable that kindred atrocities are now teaching the beauties of Indian art to many an admiring circle in England. That such absolute caricatures of *phulkari* work should find a sale anywhere is incredible; but as a matter of fact there is a large demand for them, while the better specimens are set aside as too dear. The delusion that everything is to be had for a song in India requires to be exposed. The commonest *bagh* worked in true style will require about Rs 2 worth of silk, and the worker's remuneration, being one anna for every anna's worth of silk, increases the price to Rs 4. If the remuneration seems too high, let the objector try working on one drachm's weight of silk for one poor penny-worth of pay. Then the cost of nine yards of *kadr* is about seven annas, which, with the dyeing, brings the whole to close on Rs 5. A really fine *bagh* from Hazara takes about Rs 10 worth of silk, and cannot be worked by one hand under two months, while it generally takes three. Intending purchasers, then, should remember that *phulkari* work is a true art, insomuch that it must be the outcome of love and leisure, not of haste and greed; and they should be prepared to pay for art. If not, the products of many a loom are at their disposal. It is also a difficult art, taking years to acquire, each pattern having its own formula, and the proficiency of the worker being tested by the number of patterns she knows.

In judging *phulkari* work, invariably look at the back and classify merit by the smoothness and regularity of the stitches. It may also be set down as an axiom that in so far as the pattern changes from pure geometrical lines, so far has it deviated from the ancient art, which was essentially a diapering, not a flowering in silk. The colours of the ground work are best confined to two, viz., different shades of madder-browns and indigos, while the silk should be either yellow, or white, or green. Crimson is admissible on indigo grounds, but it is modern. There can be no doubt that under the influence of Manchester goods and the quasi-aestheticism which craves for cheap "draperies," the art is in danger of becoming extinct. What keeps it alive is the relatively backward state of districts like Rohtak, and the fact that *phulkaris* are still a necessary part of a Hindu and Sikh bride's trousseau, while one must be worn during the *phera* ceremony of marriage. Year by year, however, the *phulkari* being less worn lasts longer, so that one trousseau is handed down from mother to daughter. Year by year, also, the railways extend, and Manchester goods seem cheaper when the *banyia* is harder. What peasant nowadays can wear Rs 5 worth of silk when a gaudy stamped cloth is to be had for one?

But to those who have seen the stalwart young Jâtî of twenty, still unmarried, coming home from her father's field with a swing of russet and gold draperies matching the millet sheaf on her head, it will be a shock to think of her in white calico arabesqued in aniline dyes, and *not* to think of her as sitting out in the open amongst the corn she has raised, darning away with patient, tired hands at her wedding garments. Nevertheless, beyond pointing out the real characteristics of this work, and so inducing buyers to be more critical in their choice, little can be done to prevent its gradual decadence and death. I have twice attempted to start schools for this work, but have utterly failed. It is, in fact, not work that can be done for many hours consecutively, and the temptation to scamp, when working against time, is unconquerable. It is not like other embroideries where a false stitch can be rectified by another over it, and a generally dressing up is possible to originally faulty work; here a miss in counting alters the whole slope of a pattern, and is conspicuous. A growing demand for pure style at fair prices is the only remedy; and that lies in the hands of the buyers. The great fault of the original work—the narrowness of the cloth—is easily rectified; for many cotton mills now sell a cloth in every way suitable for the work with a width of  $1\frac{1}{4}$  yards. But so surely as Jubilee *baghs* sell, and buyers say "no one will see the work when it is draped at the top of a door with a Japanese fan and a peacock's feather," so surely will the *phulkari* art be forgotten. Already the native women look at some of my most cherished treasures critically and remark: "Those must be very old; we don't work like that nowadays."

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## ILLUSTRATIONS.

TWENTY-EIGHT EXAMPLES OF PHULKARI EMBROIDERY.