



Promoting Phulkari: Cultural Identity, Gender Dynamics and Economic Empowerment

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Abstract

Phulkari, the vibrant embroidery tradition rooted in the cultural fabric of Punjab, India, has undergone significant transformations in the face of modernisation and globalisation. This paper draws exclusively upon secondary data such as scholarly publications, official policy documents and market reports to examine how Phulkari production preserves cultural identity and fosters economic and social empowerment for women. The research explores Phulkari's enduring cultural significance by analysing historical accounts and contemporary case studies, particularly its role in reinforcing Punjabi identity through motifs, colour schemes and ceremonial usage. It further investigates the craft's implications for gender dynamics, spotlighting opportunities and challenges for women artisans, who have traditionally served as the custodians of this heritage. The paper also addresses the economic dimensions of Phulkari, evaluating how government initiatives, non-governmental organisations and digital platforms have supported or in some cases hindered, the craft's commercial potential. Three core themes emerge through a thematic synthesis of secondary sources: the preservation of intangible heritage, the intricacies of gender-based labour structures and the viability of market-driven economic models. Ultimately, findings suggest that strategic collaborations spanning policy, private sector investments and cultural institutions

are crucial to promoting Phulkari in ways that are both ethically responsible and economically beneficial. These insights underscore the craft's potential to maintain cultural vitality while advancing women's financial independence and social standing in Punjab.

Keywords: Phulkari, cultural identity, women's empowerment, traditional crafts, Punjab, economic development, heritage preservation and gender dynamics.

1. Introduction

Phulkari, a vibrant and intricate embroidery tradition from Punjab, India, holds a distinguished position in the region's cultural and artistic heritage ^[1]. Characterised by its bold use of colour, densely stitched patterns and deep connection to local customs, Phulkari has historically been passed down through generations of women artisans. While its primary function has been to embellish garments and enhance social celebrations, Phulkari is a cultural artefact that encapsulates Punjabi identity, rituals and narratives ^[2]. Against the backdrop of rapid globalisation, digitisation and shifting consumer preferences, Phulkari is now at a crossroads—poised to either evolve and flourish in new markets or risk losing its authenticity and traditional knowledge base ^[3].

Phulkari's significance lies not merely in its vibrant threads or distinct motifs but in its embodiment of collective memory and cultural inheritance. Historically, women invested significant time creating Phulkari pieces for personal use, wedding trousseaus and community gatherings ^[1]. Its ornate motifs often symbolised blessings, fertility and prosperity. Recent studies indicate a renewed global interest in indigenous crafts, offering potential avenues for Phulkari to transcend cultural boundaries ^[2]. Analysing Phulkari through the lenses of culture, gender

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and economy offers a multifaceted perspective on how societal structures shape and shape craft traditions ^[3]. First, from a cultural standpoint, Phulkari preserves intangible heritage values, identity and communal ties integral to Punjab's social fabric. Second, it underscores women's pivotal roles in maintaining craft traditions and how this creative labour intersects with questions of empowerment, decision-making and economic mobility ^[2]. Third, understanding local and global market forces highlights both the potential for sustainable livelihoods and commercialisation challenges. This study relies exclusively on secondary data namely peer-reviewed articles, government reports and market research to gather a holistic understanding of Phulkari's contemporary status and historical evolution. This approach is particularly suitable for three reasons. First, extensively published materials on Phulkari already exist, offering a rich pool of scholarly discussions and empirical findings ^[1]. Second, time constraints and the logistical complexities of fieldwork can be substantial, making desk-based research an efficient alternative ^[3]. Lastly, secondary sources enable cross-regional comparisons by examining multiple case studies and policy reports, thus ensuring a broader analytical scope.

Research Objectives

- Examine Phulkari's role in shaping cultural identity. This entails reviewing how textiles, motifs and embroidery practices reflect and reinforce Punjabi identity in historical and contemporary settings ^[2].
- Explore how women's involvement in Phulkari affects gender norms and empowerment. Secondary data is investigated, discussing changes in household dynamics, income control and social recognition due to craft engagement ^[3].
- Assess economic opportunities and constraints for Phulkari artisans. It focuses on factors like market competition, pricing structures, supply chains and policy interventions, as documented in previous studies ^[1].
- Identify best practices for promoting and sustaining Phulkari through policy and institutional support. Examines evidence from successful government programs, NGO initiatives and commercial partnerships to highlight scalable strategies ^[2, 3].

Research Questions

1. In what ways does Phulkari contribute to Punjabi cultural identity?
Seeks to synthesise existing scholarly perspectives on Phulkari's symbolism and its evolving role in community life.
2. How do existing studies characterise the relationship between Phulkari production and women's empowerment?
It aims to gather insights from publications that measure empowerment indicators linked to craft participation.
3. What do secondary sources reveal about artisans' economic challenges and successes?
Attempts to identify recurring obstacles (e.g., intermediaries exploitation, lack of branding) and

success stories (e.g., e-commerce uptake, cooperative models).

4. Which promotion and preservation strategies are most commonly recommended or implemented? Evaluates policy frameworks, fair-trade initiatives and collaborations with designers that have been documented in the literature.

This paper proceeds with a comprehensive Literature Review, drawing on scholarly articles, policy documents and market reports to contextualise Phulkari's origins, evolution and current relevance. Next, it presents a Theoretical Framework that aligns cultural identity theory, gender and empowerment constructs and livelihood approaches pertinent to traditional crafts. Following this, the Methodology section explains the secondary research design, detailing search strategies, data selection criteria and thematic analysis methods. The synthesised insights emerge in the Findings and Discussion, which examine Phulkari's cultural, gendered and economic dimensions while spotlighting existing practices and potential innovations in promoting this craft. Finally, the Conclusion consolidates the key themes, highlighting policy implications, practical recommendations and avenues for future investigation to sustain and scale Phulkari as both a heritage asset and an economic opportunity.

2. Literature Review

Phulkari, meaning "flower work" in Punjabi, is a traditional embroidery technique that originated in the Punjab region of India and Pakistan. Historically, Phulkari has been more than just an artistic practice; it has been an integral part of Punjabi culture, symbolising identity, heritage and social customs. The origins of Phulkari can be traced back to the 15th century, with references found in Punjabi folklore and historical texts. While its roots remain debated, some scholars suggest that Central Asia and Persia embroidery techniques influenced Phulkari, which was brought to India through trade routes and migration patterns ^[1]. Phulkari was traditionally a domestic craft practised by women in rural Punjab. Unlike many other textile traditions commercialised early, Phulkari was primarily made for personal and familial use. Women embroidered Phulkari textiles for dowries, weddings, childbirth and religious ceremonies, embedding personal and cultural narratives into the fabric. The art form was passed down generationally, with young girls learning embroidery from their mothers and grandmothers. These handmade textiles were garments and storytelling mediums, often depicting agrarian life, floral patterns and geometric motifs symbolising prosperity, fertility and spirituality ^[2].

The vibrant colour palette of Phulkari, dominated by reds, yellows and deep blues, reflects the exuberance of Punjabi culture. The Bagh style of Phulkari, which translates to "garden," is characterised by heavy, intricate embroidery covering the entire fabric. In contrast, Chope Phulkari features lighter embroidery, often gifted to brides by their maternal relatives. These variations in style indicate the adaptability of Phulkari in different social and ceremonial

contexts ^[3]. Phulkari is deeply intertwined with the religious and social fabric of Punjab. Many Phulkari motifs have spiritual connotations, drawing inspiration from Sikhism and Hinduism. Some patterns resemble symbols in gurdwaras (Sikh temples), while others feature elements associated with local deities and folklore. The Sikh holy scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, references Phulkari, indicating its cultural significance during the time of Guru Nanak in the 15th century ^[4]. In addition to its religious importance, Phulkari played a role in fostering social bonds among women. The embroidery process often occurred in communal settings, where women gathered to stitch and share stories. This practice reinforced a sense of community and solidarity, making Phulkari an artistic endeavour and a social tradition ^[5]. The commercialisation of Phulkari began during British colonial rule in India. European traders and British officials recognised its artistic value and began exporting Phulkari textiles to international markets. However, this shift led to a decline in Phulkari's cultural authenticity, as designs were modified to cater to Western tastes rather than traditional narratives. The partition of India in 1947 further disrupted the Phulkari tradition, as artisans were displaced and many craft practices were lost due to mass migration and socio-political upheaval ^[6]. In recent decades, efforts have been made to revive Phulkari through government initiatives, museum exhibitions and fashion industry collaborations. However, scholars argue that contemporary adaptations often commercialise Phulkari in a way that distances it from its original cultural and emotional significance ^[7]. The challenge remains to balance Phulkari's preservation as a heritage craft while adapting it to modern economic and artistic demands. Phulkari remains a powerful symbol of Punjabi identity, history and artistic expression. Despite the challenges of commercialisation and modernisation, its legacy endures through craft revival movements and continued community engagement. As scholars continue to document and analyse Phulkari's evolution, it is crucial to preserve its cultural roots while allowing room for artistic innovation and economic sustainability.

Gender Roles and Textile Crafts in South Asia

Textile crafts have historically played a significant role in shaping gender dynamics in South Asia. Women have been central to traditional textile production, yet their contributions have often been undervalued, underpaid and overlooked in economic discourses. The case of Phulkari embroidery in Punjab serves as a microcosm of the broader relationship between gender and craft economies in the region. While Phulkari has long been associated with women's domestic labour and cultural identity, its transformation into a commercial enterprise has introduced opportunities and challenges for female artisans. For centuries, textile production in South Asia has been a gendered activity, with women engaging in spinning, weaving, dyeing and embroidery within domestic spaces. Phulkari, like other indigenous textile crafts such as Kantha (Bengal), Chikankari (Lucknow) and Kalamkari (Andhra Pradesh), has traditionally been a non-commercial practice passed down through generations of women. Historically, Phulkari was embroidered by women for personal use, particularly as part of dowries, wedding

trousseaus and ceremonial attire. Unlike other artisanal traditions dominated by male master weavers, Phulkari remained largely a women-led art form, reinforcing its association with female agency and community identity. Research highlights that Phulkari-making was often a collaborative social activity, allowing women to engage in storytelling, knowledge-sharing and social bonding. The embroidery process was an informal education system where young girls learned the craft and cultural narratives embedded in the designs. This reflects a broader pattern observed in South Asian textile traditions, where women's craftsmanship is intertwined with oral histories, folklore and religious symbolism. The commercialisation of Phulkari in the late 20th century marked a shift from household-based craft production to market-driven enterprise. As demand for handcrafted textiles grew, Phulkari artisans found new opportunities for income generation through government initiatives, cooperative societies and fair-trade movements. Studies indicate that women's economic participation in textile production has contributed to financial independence, improved social status and greater household decision-making power. However, despite these advancements, significant structural barriers persist. A key issue is exploitation by intermediaries and private enterprises, often resulting in artisans receiving only a fraction of the profits. Many women lack direct market access, relying on intermediaries who control pricing and distribution. Furthermore, the introduction of machine-made Phulkari replicas has led to declining demand for handcrafted textiles, threatening the livelihoods of traditional artisans ^[1-5].

The role of women in textile crafts is further shaped by caste hierarchies, educational disparities and rural-urban divides. Empirical studies show that women from marginalised communities, such as Dalits and other lower-caste groups, often face more significant difficulties in accessing training, capital and fair wages in the textile industry. In contrast, women from upper-caste or economically privileged backgrounds have greater access to education and market networks, enabling them to participate in higher-value aspects of the craft economy, such as design innovation and entrepreneurship. Additionally, the migration of rural artisans to urban centres has led to shifts in gendered labour dynamics. While urban markets offer broader exposure and economic opportunities, they expose artisans to precarious working conditions, wage disparities and loss of traditional knowledge due to mass production trends. The challenge remains to ensure modernisation does not erode traditional artisans' cultural and economic agency. In response to these challenges, women-led craft cooperatives and self-help groups (SHGs) have emerged as viable models for empowering female artisans. Organisations such as SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) and AIACA (All India Artisans and Craftworkers Welfare Association) have played a crucial role in providing training, market access and financial assistance to women in Phulkari production. Studies suggest cooperative models help women negotiate better wages, develop entrepreneurial skills and secure sustainable livelihoods. Moreover, digital

platforms and e-commerce initiatives have enabled women to bypass traditional intermediaries, directly connecting artisans with global consumers. Platforms like Okhai, GoCoop and India Handmade Collective have facilitated direct-to-consumer sales, increasing women's earnings and visibility in the craft market. However, digital literacy remains a barrier, as many rural artisans lack the technical skills to navigate online platforms independently [6-8].

Phulkari's economic landscape has evolved from a domestic craft into a commercial industry driven by national and international demand. Traditionally embroidered by Punjabi women for personal and ceremonial use, Phulkari has become a key component of the textile market, structured across local fairs, urban handicraft stores, export markets and e-commerce platforms. Despite this growth, artisans face unfair wage distribution, market exploitation by intermediaries and competition from machine-made replicas. Studies indicate that artisans often receive only 15-20% of the final retail price, with intermediaries capturing the majority of profits. To address these disparities, self-help groups (SHGs), cooperatives and fair-trade initiatives have been introduced, enabling artisans to negotiate better wages and gain direct market access. Organisations like SEWA and AIACA have provided financial literacy training, microfinance loans and improved market linkages, helping women artisans increase their earnings by up to 40% compared to independent workers. However, globalisation and mass production have introduced new challenges, with machine-embroidered Phulkari flooding markets and reducing demand for authentic handmade pieces. The Geographical Indication (GI) status granted to Phulkari in 2011 aimed to protect its authenticity, yet weak enforcement allows imitation products to persist. Meanwhile, digital platforms like Okhai and Gaatha offer artisans direct-to-consumer sales opportunities, reducing reliance on intermediaries. However, digital illiteracy remains a barrier, with only 20-30% of artisans proficient in online trade. While commercialisation has brought economic opportunities, structural issues such as income inequality, market access and technological challenges continue to impact Phulkari's sustainability. Moving forward, a combination of policy interventions, fair trade regulations, cooperative models and digital literacy programs will be essential to ensure both the preservation of Phulkari's artisanal heritage and the economic empowerment of its producers [7-10].

Colonial and Post-Colonial Impact on Phulkari

Phulkari, a traditional embroidery of Punjab, has undergone significant transformations under British colonial rule and post-colonial economic and socio-political shifts. Initially a domestic craft practised by women for personal and community use, Phulkari became commercialised and commodified during colonial rule. Later, urbanisation, globalisation and government interventions in post-independence India further influenced its production and cultural significance. This section examines the colonial exploitation of Phulkari, its decline post-Partition and subsequent revival efforts in modern India and Pakistan. Before British colonisation,

Phulkari was primarily an oral and visual tradition that women used to tell stories, celebrate social events and express identity. The motifs and patterns remained regionally distinctive, with no formalised industry or market-based production. However, with the advent of British rule in the 19th century, Phulkari began transitioning from a familial craft to a market-driven commodity. The British interest in Indian textiles, especially handmade crafts, led to Phulkari being exported to European markets. British colonial officials and traders recognised Phulkari's artistic and commercial potential and introduced machine-made versions to meet growing demand abroad. This period marked the beginning of commercial exploitation, where artisans, primarily rural women, saw their work appropriated by colonial merchants who controlled production, pricing and exports. Research indicates that traditional artisans received minimal financial benefit, as British firms monopolised the trade and introduced synthetic dyes and machine embroidery to lower costs. Another consequence of British intervention was the standardisation of motifs and patterns, which reduced regional diversity. The demand for specific styles in European markets led to a decline in local creativity and personalisation, stripping Phulkari of its narrative and cultural uniqueness. By the early 20th century, Phulkari was no longer an exclusively handmade, family-oriented textile but had become a product shaped by industrial and colonial economic demands.

The Partition of India in 1947 caused one of the most devastating disruptions to Phulkari's traditional ecosystem. Punjab, the cultural and geographic centre of Phulkari, was divided between India and Pakistan, leading to mass displacement, loss of artisanal heritage and destruction of production networks. Many skilled artisans were forced to migrate and Phulkari, integral to Punjabi identity, dramatically declined production. Phulkari was further marginalised in the post-independence economic policies of India and Pakistan, as both countries prioritised industrialisation over craft-based economies. In India, the focus on mechanised textile production reduced government support for handmade Phulkari, while in Pakistan, the craft struggled due to a lack of organised initiatives for its revival. Over time, Phulkari became a nostalgic symbol of pre-Partition Punjab, surviving mainly in family heirlooms rather than as a flourishing craft. Despite its decline, Phulkari began experiencing a revival in the late 20th century, driven by government programs, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and fashion designers. In India, institutions like the Ministry of Textiles and Punjab Small Industries and Export Corporation (PSIEC) launched initiatives to support Phulkari artisans through skill development programs, financial assistance and fair-trade markets. The Geographical Indication (GI) status granted to Phulkari in 2011 further aimed to protect its authenticity and promote artisan rights.

In recent years, the fashion industry has played a crucial role in revitalising Phulkari by integrating its embroidery into contemporary clothing, home décor and accessories. However, scholars argue that this has increased Phulkari's

commercial appeal and led to cultural appropriation, mass production and loss of traditional craftsmanship. Many large-scale textile manufacturers now produce machine-made Phulkari, which competes unfairly with the handmade craft, reducing economic opportunities for rural artisans. Diasporic communities and cultural nostalgia have also influenced the post-colonial revival of Phulkari. Punjabi communities in Canada, the UK and the US have contributed to Phulkari's global presence by incorporating it into festivals, exhibitions and traditional attire. Digital platforms and e-commerce sites have further expanded market opportunities, though digital illiteracy and lack of direct access to consumers remain challenges for artisans. Phulkari's transformation through colonial and post-colonial periods highlights the complex relationship between craft, economy and identity. Under British rule, Phulkari was commodified and stripped of its original cultural significance. Post-Partition, the craft suffered due to displacement and economic neglect. However, recent decades have seen a resurgence through government initiatives, NGO interventions and fashion industry adaptations. To ensure Phulkari's long-term sustainability, future efforts must prioritise artisan welfare, enforce GI protections and create direct-to-consumer market channels that benefit the original craftswomen rather than commercial intermediaries [10-13].

3. Theoretical Framework

As an intricate textile tradition deeply rooted in Punjab's cultural history, Phulkari demands a multifaceted theoretical lens that spans cultural identity, gender empowerment and development and livelihood theories. First, cultural identity theory emphasises how material culture shapes and reinforces collective norms, values and beliefs, exceptionally handcrafted textiles [8]. Scholars contend that embroidery traditions such as Phulkari serve as vibrant markers of ethnic identity, as each stitch often encodes generational knowledge, spiritual motifs and community-specific narratives. Through its designs, colours and usage in ceremonial contexts, Phulkari thus becomes a tangible manifestation of personal and communal heritage, reflecting broader discourses on belonging and continuity. This perspective underscores that when artisans produce Phulkari pieces, they are not merely creating textiles for economic exchange but are also perpetuating a cultural dialogue that unites contemporary practitioners with ancestral legacies [10].

Second, gender and empowerment frameworks elucidate how Phulkari production intersects with women's social and economic agency. Traditional crafts in South Asia have long been the domain of female artisans, who often learn these skills informally within family units [4]. By engaging in Phulkari's creation, sale and distribution, women can experience shifts in household decision-making power and income control. Scholars argue that monetising craft labour can enhance self-esteem and elevate women's bargaining position in patriarchal contexts, promoting more egalitarian family structures [8]. Furthermore, collective organisation theories often manifested through self-help groups and cooperatives demonstrate that when women pool resources and

knowledge, they gain increased negotiation power in local and international markets. These supportive networks encourage shared risk-taking and skill-building, reinforcing that collective action is instrumental in overcoming systemic barriers such as limited capital, lack of direct market access and exploitation by intermediaries [4]. Finally, development and livelihood theories provide a broader economic and sustainability-oriented framework by positioning Phulkari within the value chain of craft production. A value-chain analysis assesses each link in the production-to-consumption process from sourcing raw materials and mastering embroidery techniques to marketing and distribution and identifies where artisans can capture more excellent value [10]. By adopting fair trade principles, improving branding and leveraging digital marketplaces, Phulkari artisans can tap into ethically conscious consumer segments, thereby scaling up their economic opportunities. This aligns with emerging trends in ethical consumerism, where buyers are increasingly willing to pay premiums for culturally authentic and environmentally responsible products [4]. Moreover, integrating sustainability measures such as natural dyes or eco-friendly fabrics can bolster Phulkari's appeal to global niche markets, simultaneously preserving intangible cultural heritage and generating resilient livelihoods. Hence, the synergy between cultural identity theory, gender empowerment frameworks and development approaches highlights Phulkari's potential to function as both a repository of Punjabi heritage and a catalyst for socio-economic progress. Collectively, these theoretical lenses affirm that safeguarding Phulkari's cultural authenticity, fostering women's agency and adopting sustainable market practices are integral to ensuring the craft's vitality in an evolving global economy.

4. Methodology

This study employed a desk-based research methodology to collate, examine and synthesise existing literature and documented evidence on Phulkari's cultural, economic and gender-related dimensions. Desk-based research, also known as secondary research, is particularly suited to this inquiry given the abundance of scholarly discussions, government reports and policy documents already addressing traditional crafts in South Asia. The following subsections outline the data collection, selection and analysis procedures to ensure a rigorous and comprehensive approach.

A. Data Collection

The research team began by identifying relevant digital databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR and Google Scholar. In addition, government portals (e.g., Ministry of Textiles, India) and NGO websites (e.g., SEWA, AIACA) were consulted for policy briefs and program evaluations. Beyond academic journals, market research reports and handloom board documents were reviewed to capture economic data and insights regarding Phulkari's commercial trajectory. A keyword strategy was developed to ensure a focused yet comprehensive retrieval of sources. Key terms included "Phulkari," "Punjab embroidery," "traditional crafts," "women's empowerment," "cultural identity," and "economic

development.” Boolean operators (AND OR, NOT) and wildcard symbols (*, ?) were used to refine results. For instance, the string “Phulkari” AND “women” AND (“economic” OR “income”) AND “Punjab” helped isolate texts discussing gender and economic issues specific to Phulkari artisans. While Phulkari has historical roots dating back centuries, the modern socio-economic context has evolved significantly in recent decades. To capture contemporary developments and policies, the primary timeframe for sources was 2005–present. Exceptions were made for seminal older works or historically significant texts that provided essential context for Phulkari’s origins and colonial/post-colonial transformations.

B. Data Selection and Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria: Only sources explicitly addressing Phulkari’s cultural, social or economic aspects were included. Works detailing general handloom or textile crafts were reviewed only if they included a specific Phulkari component or parallel insights applicable to Phulkari. Preference was given to peer-reviewed journal articles and official government or NGO reports. High-quality conference proceedings or authoritative market reports were considered where peer-reviewed materials were limited. Given resource constraints, this study primarily included English-language publications.

Exclusion Criteria: Studies focused solely on technical aspects of embroidery (e.g., stitch mechanics, textile engineering) without discussing socio-cultural or economic factors were excluded. Duplicate or outdated materials repeating the same data or findings without additional analysis were omitted to avoid redundancy.

Screening Process: Titles and abstracts were first screened for thematic alignment with the research objectives (cultural identity, women’s empowerment and economic development). Following an initial screening, the full text of promising sources was examined to confirm the relevance and methodological soundness. Any disagreements among researchers regarding inclusion were resolved through discussion and consensus.

C. Data Extraction and Organisation

Extraction Protocol: A structured template was developed to capture essential information: author(s), publication year, research design, geographical focus, key findings and relevance to Phulkari (cultural, gender, economic factors). Policy documents were reviewed for information on existing government schemes, legal frameworks (e.g., Geographical Indication status) and budgetary allocations concerning Phulkari. NGO and market reports were examined for implementation outcomes, artisan testimonials and micro-level economic data such as income changes, pricing structures or cooperative success stories. All selected sources were catalogued in a citation management tool (e.g., Zotero or Mendeley) to avoid duplicates and maintain a searchable library. This facilitated quick retrieval and cross-referencing during analysis.

D. Data Analysis

The collated data were subjected to thematic coding, whereby recurring concepts such as cultural heritage,

gender-based challenges, market linkages and policy interventions were identified and grouped. Codes were refined iteratively as additional sources were reviewed, ensuring a dynamic and comprehensive picture. A narrative synthesis used these thematic clusters to interpret patterns and contradictions across various sources. For instance, studies highlighting women’s increased bargaining power were contrasted with research pointing to ongoing exploitation by intermediaries. Special attention was given to best practices or policy recommendations within each thematic area to identify strategies that could be scaled up or adapted. The findings were cross-verified by comparing data from multiple sources (academic articles, policy papers and market surveys). For example, artisan income statistics were triangulated with NGO reports and government databases to minimise bias. Any significant discrepancies in data or conclusions were noted and, where possible, explained in terms of methodological differences, regional variations or publication context.

E. Limitations of Desk-Based Research

Lack of Primary Field Data: As no direct interviews or field observations were conducted, this study relies on the accuracy and objectivity of secondary sources. **Potential Publication Bias:** Scholarly journals and official reports may prioritise success stories or focus on specific regions, potentially overlooking grassroots-level challenges. Policies and artisan experiences can evolve rapidly; specific sources may not reflect the latest market or policy shifts if they predate recent economic or technological changes. Despite these limitations, desk-based research remains an effective and efficient approach to understanding the broad contours of Phulkari’s cultural significance, gender dimensions and economic viability, especially given the craft’s extensive historical documentation and the wealth of existing literature on South Asian textile traditions.

4. Findings and Discussion

The desk-based analysis of secondary sources reveals that Phulkari plays a multifaceted role in Punjab’s socio-cultural landscape and economy. Drawing on peer-reviewed articles, government reports and NGO documents, three core themes emerge: (A) the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, (B) gender-based labour structures and empowerment and (C) the viability of market-driven economic models. This section discusses each theme in detail and explores the interconnections among them.

A. Preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage

Cultural Continuity and Symbolism: A recurring insight in the literature is that Phulkari transcends its decorative function to serve as a vessel of cultural memory ^[9]. Embroidery designs from geometric motifs to floral patterns are closely tied to Punjab’s agrarian roots, fertility rituals and spiritual beliefs ^[14]. According to ^[15], traditional Phulkari pieces often incorporate symbols representing blessings, prosperity and intergenerational bonds. Such symbolism underscores the craft’s role in celebrating

major life events, including weddings and religious ceremonies.

Community Identity and Oral Narratives: Phulkari production historically took place in communal settings, where women gathered to embroider and, in doing so, passed down oral histories, folklore and moral values ^[15]. In many rural areas, young girls learned to stitch Phulkari from their mothers and grandmothers, reinforcing community identity and familial ties ^[2]. Consequently, safeguarding these embroidery practices becomes synonymous with preserving local dialects, storytelling traditions and intangible forms of knowledge transmission.

Threats to Authenticity: Several studies point to pressures arising from commercialisation and globalisation. As machine-made Phulkari replicas proliferate in domestic and international markets, the distinctive regional styles and intricate hand-stitching risk being overshadowed by mass-produced goods ^[6]. Scholars such as ^[5] warn that while global demand can revive waning crafts, it can also reduce cultural expressions to mere commodities, stripping them of their deep-rooted social significance. Hence, balancing profitability with heritage preservation remains a central challenge.

B. Gender-Based Labor Structures and Empowerment

Women as Custodians of Craft: A prominent theme across sources is that women have historically been Phulkari's primary custodians, preserving and innovating its techniques ^[10]. From a gender lens ^[3], It is argued that textile crafts like Phulkari often constitute a "hidden economy;" women's labour contributes substantially to household livelihoods yet remains under-recognised in formal economic measures.

Empowerment through Income Generation: With the rise of market opportunities such as craft fairs, e-commerce platforms and designer collaborations some artisans experience newfound autonomy and social recognition. Earning an income from Phulkari can enhance women's decision-making power within the household, allowing them to invest in education, healthcare and other family needs. Some self-help groups (SHGs) and cooperatives have amplified this effect. Artisans can secure better prices and reduce dependency on intermediaries by pooling resources and collectively negotiating with buyers ^[12].

Persistent Challenges: Exploitation and Socio-Cultural Barriers: Numerous studies highlight persistent barriers despite these opportunities. Mediators or intermediaries often control the supply chain, setting prices that undervalue the labour-intensive nature of hand embroidery. In many rural contexts, patriarchal norms can further restrict women's mobility and limit their direct interaction with urban markets or global buyers ^[15, 3, 5]. Additionally, social hierarchies—such as caste and class divisions—affect who can access training, credit and formal market channels.

Skills, Technology and Digital Literacy: While online platforms and virtual marketplaces theoretically expand outreach, actual participation by rural artisans remains

uneven ^[10]. Shows that lacking digital literacy and reliable internet connections hampers direct-to-consumer sales. This "digital divide" often leads to dependence on third-party vendors or cooperatives, reinforcing the need for comprehensive capacity-building programs—spanning e-commerce training, design innovation and financial management.

C. Viability of Market-Driven Economic Models

Evolving Demand and Opportunities: Phulkari's growing global visibility whether through diaspora communities, tourism or fashion presents significant economic prospects? Government initiatives, such as exhibitions at national craft fairs and export facilitation schemes, have sought to integrate Phulkari artisans into larger value chains. Moreover, particular fashion designers and corporate retailers have begun incorporating authentic Phulkari elements into contemporary apparel, accessories and home décor ^[14, 2, 6].

Role of Policy and Institutional Support: To protect authenticity and ensure fair compensation for artisans, Phulkari obtained Geographical Indication (GI) status in 2011. However, many scholars argue that GI enforcement remains weak, partly due to limited local awareness and gaps in policy implementation. Cooperative models and fair-trade certifications can strengthen artisans' market positions. However, long-term success depends on sustained institutional backing, such as marketing assistance, easier access to credit and infrastructure development for rural producers ^[5, 8, 12].

Ethical Consumerism and Branding: Another emerging trend is the rise of ethical consumerism, where buyers are willing to pay premiums for handcrafted and socially responsible products. Brands highlighting Phulkari's heritage, artisan stories and eco-friendly processes can stand out in niche markets. However, there is a tension between scaling production to meet demand and maintaining the meticulous hand-embroidery techniques that give Phulkari uniqueness. As Sharma and Gupta (2020) note, marketing Phulkari as a culturally embedded product rather than a mere fashion trend can preserve its authenticity while enhancing its appeal ^[10, 7, 13].

Integration of Sustainable Practices: Sustainability has become a key consideration for heritage crafts in the 21st century. Some producers have introduced organic cotton or natural dyes to align with environmentally conscious markets (Joshi, 2021) ^[6]. Although such innovations can add value, the initial costs may deter small-scale artisans who lack sufficient capital. Government subsidies or NGO-led programs can reduce these financial burdens, promoting greener production methods and safeguarding cultural heritage and local ecosystems.

D. Synthesis: Balancing Heritage, Empowerment and Economics

Taken together, the themes of intangible heritage, gender empowerment and market viability reveal Phulkari's capacity to serve as both a cultural identifier and a driver of rural livelihoods. The literature affirms that:

- Cultural Preservation requires mindful interventions that respect the craft's historical context and symbolic meanings. Over-commercialisation or standardised designs may undermine Phulkari's rich tapestry of personal narratives and regional identities.
- Women's Empowerment hinges on equitable market structures, support for self-help groups and dismantling socio-cultural barriers. Income from Phulkari can uplift artisans' social standing, but only if the underlying conditions allow them to negotiate fair terms and retain decision-making power over production and revenue.
- Economic Development strategies must navigate between promoting scale and maintaining authenticity. While increased demand and global outreach can bring financial gains, unregulated mass production threatens the very qualities that make Phulkari valuable its intricate handwork and cultural resonance.

In this context, collaboration among policymakers, NGOs, private enterprises and artisan communities emerges as a decisive factor. Practical cooperation can bridge resource gaps, enhance skill sets and champion ethical consumer practices that honour tradition while adapting to modern markets. Scholars emphasise capacity-building, digital literacy and policy enforcement (particularly around GI protections) to sustain Phulkari's heritage-based economic potential [16, 5, 11].

Summary of Key Observations

1. Phulkari as Cultural Conduit links historical practices with evolving contemporary expressions, reflecting Punjab's identity and oral narratives.
2. **Women-Centric Ecosystem:** Female artisans stand at the forefront of production, negotiating new forms of empowerment against structural inequalities.
3. **Economic Prospects and Risks:** Global recognition opens diverse commercial avenues but necessitates vigilant preservation efforts to uphold authenticity.

The findings underscore Phulkari's enduring cultural importance and dynamic role in shaping and reshaping women's social status and economic livelihoods in Punjab. By highlighting the interconnected themes of heritage preservation, gender empowerment and evolving market structures, this discussion provides a nuanced understanding of Phulkari's present challenges and future potential.

5. Conclusion

Phulkari stands at the intersection of Punjab's cultural memory, women's empowerment and evolving market systems. Drawing from various secondary sources, this desk-based study reveals that Phulkari's rich heritage is more than ornamental craftwork; it is a repository of narratives, rituals and community values passed down through generations. The embroidery's motifs and colour schemes evoke blessings, prosperity and identity, underscoring Phulkari's profoundly spiritual and social roots in Punjabi life. However, contemporary forces of globalisation and mass production have placed this cultural

treasure under strain, accentuating the need for strategies that preserve authenticity while welcoming innovation.

From a gender perspective, Phulkari production continues to be a predominantly women-led practice, offering opportunities for empowerment and exposing systemic challenges. Initiatives such as self-help groups, cooperatives and fair-trade collaborations illuminate how collective action can enhance women's bargaining power, foster financial independence and elevate their social standing. Nevertheless, persistent barriers such as middleman exploitation, patriarchal constraints and digital illiteracy underscore the complexity of achieving widespread empowerment through craft alone. The gender-based labour structures embedded in Phulkari production call for sustained policy interventions and resource allocations that explicitly address socio-cultural inequalities.

Balancing Phulkari's economic potential with heritage preservation requires multifaceted solutions. Government policies, including Geographical Indication (GI) protection, can safeguard authenticity, but enforcement mechanisms and local awareness must be strengthened. Similarly, e-commerce and branding platforms present lucrative avenues, provided artisans receive digital literacy training, fair compensation and ethical market access. Ultimately, the sustainability of Phulkari hinges on strategic collaborations among policymakers, NGOs, private enterprises and artisan communities. By integrating heritage conservation, capacity-building and equitable commercial practices, Phulkari can continue to flourish as both a vibrant cultural emblem and a catalyst for women's empowerment in Punjab.

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