Women Beyond Boundaries

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PHULKARI PROGRAM

The Nabha Foundation launched the Phulkari Traditional Craft Program in 2007. Nabha is a region where economic inequality has a social basis. The sex ratio of the area is deeply unsettling. The problem of poverty has a gender bias. Economic dependence on the male members of the family; further increases the inequality reinforcing the inferior position of women in the social institutions. The phulkari program aims to bring about a structural change in the community otherwise entrenched with inequality. It aims to empower the marginalized rural women and generate sustainable home based employment, which leads to greater participation in the society giving these women a sense of fulfilment and economic independence.

The phulkari program is leading a process to mainstream Nabha’s heritage into contemporary life and also using it as a means to transform the community. It is not just a commercial venture but has brought about a 360 degree turn in the life of these women. It has brought change in their economic position and also in the way they see the world.

Phulkari is a traditional form of embroidery which has great significance and sentimental value.
in the area. It had lost its popularity with the coming of market economy and thus couldn’t compete with the cheaper and varied machine made garments. The phulkari self-help group organizes women artisans as a substantive unit. The women are imparted with niche skills in embroidery and design, making them the finest phulkari artisans in the country. The group produces one of the finest qualities of phulkari which has helped them retain their exclusive appeal. Phulkari thus has found a new meaning and varied modern interpretations. It was a traditional craft which had great historical value, but now it’s a source of livelihood and a part of everyday life of the women of Nabha.

Today these women are unstoppable. They have polished their skills and mastered the art of fine phulkari embroidery. Due to the excellent workmanship, it is now a symbol to own such an exquisite piece, which is worked upon painstakingly and over a period of time. These women are juggling working in the fields, embroidery work and their home chores & families, all with great élan. They are also focused on marketing their products and regularly participate in exhibitions trying to learn new skills wherever they can.

The Nabha Foundation's focus is on continued capacity building of the artisans. The venture is certified by Craftmark and NIFT Delhi, has conducted workshops to train the artisans. A garment range by our artisans has been showcased at the Lakme India Fashion Week, 2017 in Mumbai. The program aims to establish “Nabha Phulkari” as a coveted brand.

These women from rural Nabha are bright, hardworking and full of enthusiasm. By way of our monthly newsletter, we will be sharing updates and stories about these women when we talk about our Phulkari Program.

“My Say”

Lakhwinder’s journey with the Phulkari program

“I come from a very conservative household. I had never stepped outside the house alone, never used to even answer the door. When Nabha Foundation Team came to give training, they persuaded my mother-in-Law to let me train. I joined the Phulkari program as a trainee in the first batch trained on Phulkari. I learned very fast and started getting paid for the work. I was determined to continue to work and earn for my family and my daughter’s future. I slowly started to venture out of the house to go to the Gurudwara sahib to sit and work with the other girls. This gave me confidence in myself and my work. I used to travel by bus from my village to office or other villages and it used to take me all day. I still remember how scared I was the first time I went to another village to train.

Today, I work with the program as a trainer and travel on my scooter all across Nabha without any fear. I persuade other young women to join the program and give them my example of what they can achieve. When I look back at my journey from this young timid girl afraid to step out of the house to how far I have come to walk on the Lakme India Fashion Week ramp, in front of so many people in Mumbai, I feel very proud. I thank everyone who has helped me to get here and I know if one works hard nothing is beyond reach”
An email received from Sheeba, one of our buyers regarding the Phulkari dupatta she purchased from the Nabha Foundation for her wedding

As a millennial Punjabi raised in South Delhi and educated at LSR and the US, I have always struggled to get my gidda and pindi chholey right. But I knew I was going to get it right with my wedding Phulkari dupatta. The Nabha Foundation was recommended to me by no less than Jasleen Dhamija, the grand doyenne of Indian textiles. The Nabha Foundation is a shining beacon in a landscape where Phulkari in its original form has almost disappeared. As a Punjabi culture vulture who travelled to Patiala, Bassi Pathana, and beyond in the quest for the perfect Phulkari dupatta, I was elated when my journey ended in 2015.

This year, I have in my hands a precious work of art. I feel fortunate that I do not have to drape myself in a hideous dupatta which most likely (horror of horrors) would either be machine work or one of those dupattas made for commercial use by women who are paid less than minimum wage. In my observation, unhappy women do shoddy embroidery and that leads to unhappy customers. The colors of dupattas and stoles retailed at major stores, emporiums, and haats are so bright and hideous leaving one to wonder why the hangover of the Europeanized versions of Phulkari designed to be curtains still persists. I have personally been to the gurudwara in Nabha where the women do the embroidery as their children attend school. It is truly a heartwarming sight to see these women work contentedly and transfer those good vibes to the dupattas and stoles.

When I wear the dupatta at my marriage ceremony in June 2019, I will know that I will carry forward a tradition that dates as far back as the 7th century AD. For me, Phulkari is synonymous with Punjab and what was once a vibrant culture. My grandmothers are no more, but I am sure they would be happy that this Phulkari dupatta will be an integral part of my marriage ceremony in New York to a Jewish man from New Jersey.

The customer service by the Nabha Foundation team is commendable. I was kept in the loop and consulted about every single stage in the process: from picking the color of the base cloth to the color of the threads. I was constantly updated about the progress of the work with stunning pictures over WhatsApp. The phulkari stoles and scarves available at the e-commerce sites pale in comparison to what I have with me. It is the recipient of many oohs from Indian influencers in New York City. The pricing is a steal and if I could give more than a five-star rating, I would :)

"What Makes Me Happy"

Komalpreet Kaur, Class 5th, Navi Disha School, Sahouli

When I am drawing, my heart feels happy. Whatever I like, I try to draw it. I even forget to go out and play when I am drawing something. I like to draw and paint using variety of colours. I also like our craft class because it gives me an opportunity to make beautiful things out of waste material. My favourite are a welcome sign using a thread, dolls made out of the candy wrappers and a pencil stand. All these things are displayed in my house and it makes me very happy to look at them.
Talking Through Pictures.....

Phulkari Program

Education Program

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We apologize for any errors or omissions