Textiles & Tales
Punjabi women in Victoria

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Textiles and tales

“Who doesn’t know how to weave a dari?”, asks a group of Punjabi women in Melbourne. Yet we could only find seven Punjabi women who know how to weave.

All of them are in their fifties and sixties. They come from villages in Punjab, in northern India. A few did not go to school for long. Traditionally, a women’s value was in her spinning and weaving skills. Other women who were formally educated and who worked, kept weaving during their summer holidays, enjoying the togetherness with kin.

Today, in Victoria, none of these women weave. As happened in the earlier migration to Malaysia, Singapore, and the United Kingdom, migration has spelt the end of weaving.

From the fields to the bed

The women talk of afternoons spent on the verandahs of their houses weaving dari – the first layer of the bed covering. This was when the base of the bed was also woven. Daris were usually woven red, yellow, blue and white. Most often the designs were geometrical and repetitive, though skilled weavers could replicate any image they fancied. Over the dari would come the khes – a softer textile with a denser weave. Then followed the sheets.

Parkash K. Khaira, in her early fifties, remembers the scene in her village, Sidhwan, 30 to 40 years ago. She went to school for five years. After that she learnt how to weave and embroider. “No one taught me. I looked at others and learnt,” she says.

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**Dari** Thick decorative cotton textile placed over woven base of a bed.

**Khes** Softer textile with denser weave placed on top of the dari. Also decoratively woven.

**Bagh** Shawl heavily embroidered in fine silk, often in gold, white, orange, magenta and green.

**Pulkhari** Similar to a bagh but less densely embroidered.

**Dupatta** Scarf-like garment worn over the shoulders with the two-part salwar kameez.
Women collected the cotton from the fields in the hot sun, carrying it on their heads in a 15-20 kilo bundle. They then separated the cotton from the seeds before the cotton was sifted and fluffed up. It was then made into thin noodle-like strips. Parkash would sit on her verandah in front of the spinning wheel, the *charkha*. “I would be able to spin three or four balls of yarn in an hour.” The yarn was then made up in skeins, then dyed – sometimes with vegetable dyes.

The wooden loom was the size of a single bed, but lower, so that you had to sit on a low seat and weave. Mothers and daughters, grandmothers, aunts and neighbours would come to talk, weave and embroider. Gian Kaur, 53, who was a school teacher, wove during the summer holidays. “There was no other entertainment” she recalls.

**The dowry**

Amar, 62, heaps the daris, khes and sheets on a chair. They are the remnants of her dowry. Like many Punjabi women of Victoria she received seven sets of bedding. She took them to her marital home in Singapore in a tin trunk.

The traditional dowry also included fans - woven, crocheted or embroidered. The fan was used by the bridesmaid or matron to fan the bride on her wedding day. Even the drawstrings for the Punjabi trousers – the *salwar* – were woven.

The showpieces of the handmade dowry were the large shawls called *baghs* and *phulkaris*. *Bagh* in Punjabi means a garden and *phul* means flowers. The metaphor of a *garden of embroidery* is common to both these garments. The *bagh* is...
densely embroidered so that no part of the cloth is seen. The phulkari is less closely embroidered. The silk embroidery for both is predominantly yellow on thick maroon cotton.

Randheer, 60, from Singapore, remembers how she held a phulkari over the head of her daughter as she took her ritual beauty bath before her wedding. Afterwards, she was wrapped in a phulkari. Randheer’s son also walked under the phulkari for his wedding procession – the phulkari held up by his sword. Supriya, 58, remembers how she wore the bagh on her wedding day. It had been embroidered by her great grandmother.

The baghs treasured today have most often been embroidered between 60 and 80 years ago. The phulkaris were embroidered 30 to 40 years ago. Only one woman in Victoria embroiders a modern version of the phulkari stitch for the dupatta, the veil that is always worn with the Punjabi dress, the salwar kameez.

A triple migration

For many Punjabi women their settlement in Victoria has involved a double or triple migration. Many of the older women and their heirlooms migrated from Pakistan to India at Partition in 1947 – then to Malaysia, Singapore, United Kingdom or Fiji – and finally to Victoria.

The skills of dari and khes making, as well as pulkhari and bagh embroidery did not travel as well. There was no loom, no cotton in the fields, and no spinning wheel. Moreover, there were no close female kin on the verandah in the afternoon to pass on the skill.

(Top)
This pulkhari shows a floral motif in the popular colours of white, red, green, orange and magenta. Unlike the bagh, more of the cotton cloth is visible.

(Bottom)
The silk dupatta is worn with the salwar kameez, the traditional dress of Punjabi women.
All Sikhs regard themselves as Punjabi as their ancestral roots are in Punjab. There are also many Punjabi-speaking Hindus and Muslims from India. Punjabi is also the dominant language of one of the regions of Pakistan.

**In a tin trunk**

For Punjabi women the daris, khes and phulkaris continue to be the medium through which kinship in the village is expressed. Even now, when families from Victoria travel to meet with kin in their villages in Punjab, they come back with daris, khes, fans and drawstrings. These gifts bring back the memory of kin and village.

These textiles together with those from their dowry, often remain hidden in the tin trunks in which they originally travelled. They are no longer a necessary part of everyday life. “I never used the dari,” Amar says. “We had a double bed with a mattress.” The dari is at times placed on the floor in the prayer room, but seldom used elsewhere. The baghs, phulkaris and the khes remain in a safe place. So an important part of the heritage of Punjabi women remains in mint condition. It has not found its place in their homes in Victoria.

(Top) Tin trunks were often used to transport and store the many textiles in a Punjabi woman’s dowry.

(Bottom) Brightly decorated fans played part in a woman’s wedding ceremonies. Because of their size fans were often the only things that survived migration.

(Front cover left) Cotton dari.

(Front cover right) Bagh embroidered in gold silk over maroon cotton, made around 1920.

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