Journal of Futures Studies
2026,Vol. 30(4) 129-136
DOI: 10.6531/JFS.202606_30(4).0013

Essay

Phulkari Futures: Collective Stitching as Feminist Futuring and Healing

Rubina Singh

Rafunaama, India

Abstract

In this essay, I explore phulkari embroidery as more than just a cultural tradition but as a living practice of memory, care, and imagining futures. Rooted in intergenerational and communal making, phulkari has long carried women's stories, hopes, and quiet resistance, even through histories of rupture like the 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent. Bringing together personal narrative, research, and two "Phulkari Futures" workshops in 2025, I reflect on stitching as an embodied way of thinking about the future. In these workshops, participants engaged with the histories of the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom while collectively imagining futures of justice, healing, and solidarity. Through this work, I reimagine phulkari as an evolving, intersectional practice that holds space for remembrance, repair, and hopeful world-making.

Keywords

Collective Stitching, Feminist Futuring, Textile Making, *Trinjan*, *Phulkari*

ਚਿੱਟੇ ਪੱਟ ਦਾ ਮੋਤੀਆ, ਤੇ ਸਾਵੀਆਂ ਡੰਡੀਆਂ ਪਾ,
ਕਿਸੇ ਨੇ ਸਿਰ ਤੇ ਪੱਲਾ ਕੀਤਾ ਸੂਹੀ ਫੁਲਕਾਰੀ ਦਾ।

Pearls of white silk, along with green stems
Adorn the red *phulkari* upon her head.

- Unknown (Randhawa, 1960)

Introduction

Phulkari has been woven into Punjabi culture for centuries. First mentioned in poet Waris Shah's 18th-century epic Heer, (Kaur, 2015) it holds a prominent place in the language, arts, and everyday lives of Punjabis around the world. *Phulkari* was never just decorative. It was a way to imagine the future: women stitched alongside mothers and aunts, hoping for better lives for daughters and granddaughters, weaving their hopes and stories into cloth (Gill, 1977; Bukhari, 2019).

Phulkari, meaning "flower work," is an ancestral embroidery craft practiced mainly by Punjabi women for generations, connecting memory, care, and hope across traumatic histories like the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 (Kaur & Kallan, 2018; McKnight Sethi, 2015; Ratan, 2023). Through stitching, women dreamed of futures beyond their present, rooting the craft in shared hope, joy, and also quiet resistance. The patterns told personal histories, social messages, hopes for good lives, and desires for freedom. At its core, *phulkari* was about linking dreams and intentions across generations.

This essay explores *phulkari* not only as an artistic tradition but as a vibrant feminist method for collective healing and futuring. This essay combines personal narrative, scholarly reflection, and documentation of two workshops I hosted in 2025 that reimagined *phulkari* embroidery as a method for feminist futuring, asking critical "what if"

* *Corresponding author*.
E-mail address: rafunaama@gmail.com (Singh R.)

Received: 26 November 2025 and Accepted: 1 December 2025

questions and envisioning healing futures in embodied making, intersectional solidarity, and radical hope.

The Collective Healing and Futuring Roots of *Phulkari*

Phulkari's labour is intensely social and intergenerational, traditionally involving collaborative stitching on handwoven *khaddar* cloth, embroidered with silk floss from places like Afghanistan and Kashmir. The embroidery is made from the reverse side of the fabric by counting threads, often using geometric motifs referencing local flora, fauna, and everyday life. These motifs carry symbolic meanings like hope, fertility, protection, etc. and embed narratives of family, resilience, and happiness (Kaur, 2011; Ratan, 2023). *Phulkari* patterns and designs would vary from community to community and location to location. For example, *Sainchi Phulkari* showcase motifs from rural or farming life, whereas, *Bagh Phulkaris* are known for their intense designs which fill up the entire fabric like a garden. Irrespective of the motifs, *phulkari* was almost always created with a futures thinking mindset. Particularly the *phulkari*s made for daughters in the family would carry stories, hopes, and dreams of a better future imagined while stitching by the older women.

A *phulkari* piece was often a shared effort, passed among family and community over months or years (Kaur and Kallan, 2018; Kaur, 2011; Ratan, 2023). Gathering in domestic spheres in what is colloquially referred to as *trinjan*, women would use this time to connect, reflect, and share stories while stitching (Kaur, 2021). This ritual and its consequence, a *phulkari* shawl or *dupatta* (tr: stole) would be gifted to the younger women in the family. At times, when a daughter was born, her grandmother would begin stitching her *phulkari* and it would be ready by the time of her marriage. It was a fabric gifted to the daughter by her maternal ancestors as she headed into her marital home, making it an intrinsic part of wedding rituals in Punjab.

Fig. 1: A phulkari embroidered by the author's maternal ancestors over 100 years ago. (Photograph by author)

Figure 1 shows the *phulkari* embroidered by my great great grandmother and other female ancestors which was gifted to my grandmother during her wedding in the 1920s. This *phulkari* was co-created in a similar ritual to one shared above where my ancestors came together in *trinjan* over many years. During the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, my Sikh grandparents were displaced from their native land in present day Pakistan and came to present day India. Along with some money and gold jewellery, this *phulkari* was one of the only objects they considered important enough to carry with them during that difficult period. Thus, *phulkari*'s act of making was

historically one of the few social commons for women in a patriarchal context, fostering transmission of knowledge, cultural identity, and emotional care (McKnight Sethi, 2015). Through collective embroidery circles, women built solidarity and envisioned futures marked by hope and quiet resistance (Gill, 1977; Bukhari, 2019).

As much as *phulkari* embodied commons-based creativity, it was also shaped by norms of gender and caste. Participation in traditional *phulkari* making was often limited by social boundaries, reflecting larger inequalities (McKnight Sethi, 2015). The colonial era brought commodification and mechanization, transforming *phulkari* from a living, communal craft into a market-driven object often produced by marginalized castes under exploitative conditions (Maskiell, 1999; McKnight Sethi, 2015). Partition's violence further disrupted transmission, fracturing communities essential for sustaining this embodied practice (Kaur, 2011). Now, post-colonialism and post-partition, embroidering *phulkari* is seen as a largely economic means to an end and often relegated to women and men from marginalised caste communities (McKnight Sethi, 2015; Maskiell 1999).

Feminist Futuring, Textile Praxis, and *Phulkari*

Textile arts, especially stitching, have historically been rooted in women's lived experiences as communal, creative, and care-centred practices. This history aligns textile making with feminist futuring, which centres marginalized voices, collective caregiving, and speculative imagination to create more just and inclusive futures (Milojević, 2025). Feminist futurists critique dominant technocratic and patriarchal foresight approaches for excluding women's, especially, marginalised women's, embodied knowledge and community wisdom and instead advocate for research and design honouring intergenerational wisdom, nonlinearity, and justice-centred world-making (Milojević, 2025; Wilcox, 2025; Abdullah, 2025). *Phulkari* operates as a practice of world-making because the act of communal embroidery mirrors the collaborative construction of future scenarios. Each stitch becomes a small decision about colour, pattern, and meaning as an intentional act that parallels how communities collectively negotiate emerging possibilities. In this sense, stitching is a slow resistance, intergenerational form of imagination, where women's hands have long encoded hopes, warnings, and visions into cloth.

These approaches also resonate with Indigenous futurities, where storytelling, ceremony, and craft sustain futures through relational responsibilities (Hickey, 2019; Mejía Zapata & Puig de la Bellacasa, 2025). Indigenous futures thinking as detailed in the Stockholm Resilience Centre's report, shows how community-led dialogues and eco-cultural mapping employ storytelling, ceremony, and cyclical time understandings to maintain intergenerational knowledge and resilience (Tengö et al., 2021). Such embodied practices parallel how textile-making enacts relational continuity and creates material archives of cultural memory and responsibility.

Stitching and textile art also uniquely contribute to futures thinking by combining embodied making, cultural memory, and collective imagination beyond what abstract scenario methods can achieve (Ganesan & Srikanth, 2024). *Phulkari* also offers an embodied form of foresight. While futures thinking is often treated as an abstract or cognitive exercise, *phulkari* grounds imagination in touch, rhythm, and material presence. The physical act of stitching makes the future something you literally work with your hands, turning speculative thinking into a tactile, lived, and culturally situated practice.

Ganesan and Srikanth (2024) argue that "textile ways of thinking" provide methodologies that weave complex systems, knot connections, and mend ruptures, especially within trauma-informed and socially engaged contexts. Here, stitching, patchwork, and mending symbolize repairing social fabric, helping participants process lived experience and visualize transformed relationships and structures (Ganesan & Srikanth, 2024).

Embroidering or weaving can thus be regarded as Indigenous futurity where indigenous people and their worldviews are centered (Hickey 2019), physically manifesting histories and speculative futures through textiles imbued with cultural knowledge and responsibility. They cultivate participatory, relational, and hopeful modes of imagining futures, where sewing and stitching become world-making acts interweaving histories and futures in tangible, generative forms.

Phulkari Futures Workshops: Context and Methods

In my practice, I reimagine *phulkari* as an expansive feminist commons, inviting diverse participants to share narratives and stitch futures of healing and justice. Inspired by design justice and feminist futures methodologies, I aim to make *phulkari* a site of political imagination and collective repair (Costanza-Chock, 2020). This aligns with the growing feminist futures scholarship advocating holistic, systemic change that transcends gender to address coloniality, environmental justice, and intergenerational accountability (Abdullah, 2025). *Phulkari*'s collective making is a material modality for such futures grounding speculative hope in embodied solidarity.

This work is also rooted in my own histories. I come from the Sikh community and the last two generations of my family have been displaced – first in the 1947 Partition and second in the 1984 Sikh Genocide. One thing that found its way to me despite the violence that the last two generations of my family endured, was my grandmother's *phulkari*. I embedded this work in the history closest to me, the 1984 Sikh Genocide.

The 1984 Sikh genocide, also known as the anti-Sikh riots, was a state-backed violent pogrom against Sikhs in India following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards (Devgan, 2018). Gandhi was assassinated to avenge Operation Blue Star - a military operation carried out by the Indian Army in June 1984, aimed at removing Sikh militants, who had fortified themselves inside the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar, the holiest Sikh shrine. The operation involved intense fighting with artillery and tanks, causing significant damage to the temple and resulting in many casualties, including civilians. This assault deeply hurt the Sikh community worldwide and set off a chain of events, including the assassination. The mass violence, concentrated mainly in Delhi, resulted in the deaths of thousands of Sikhs and the destruction of homes and livelihoods, with eyewitness accounts reporting organized attacks and complicity by political actors linked to the ruling party (Gharu, 2024). The targeted killings, marked by extreme brutality, have left a lasting trauma on the Sikh community, who continue to seek justice and recognition of the events as genocide (Devgan, 2018; Gharu, 2024).

To mark the 41st anniversary of the 1984 Sikh genocide, I led two stitching circles, "*Phulkari* Futures", one in early June during the anniversary of Operation Bluestar, and another in early November aligned with the pogrom commemoration. Designed as half-day, intergenerational sessions, these workshops invited participants to sit with the history of 1984 while collectively imagining futures of healing for Punjab, Delhi, and the wider Sikh and Hindu communities. Our groups included people who had lived through the violence, those who had inherited fragmented memories from family narratives like myself, and participants who were encountering this history for the first time. This intergenerational mix created a space where lived experience, inherited memory, and new learning were woven together through the medium of *phulkari*.

Each session began by reading a narrative account of 1984 aloud. This shared moment functioned as an anchor: it grounded our speculative work in the reality of violence, while also foregrounding the compassion, courage, and solidarity that emerged in the midst of terror. After the reading, participants exchanged personal stories and then transitioned into guided reflective stitching. The movement from storytelling to making allowed the group to shift from recounting the past to materially imagining alternative futures.

Fig. 2: Healed imagination of Delhi using fabric and *phulkari* stitches by Priya. (Photograph by Priya)

One participant in the June session offered a particularly powerful example of how the *phulkari* circle opened space for complex identity and memory. Priya (name changed), born in Pathankot, Punjab in June 1984, was known in the hospital as the "Blue Star baby" and carried a layered, perhaps conflicted relationship to the events. Through the workshop, she translated this complexity into a stitched map of a healed Delhi creating an embroidered vision of what reconciliation might look like for a city still haunted by communal wounds that were reopened in 2020. Her work shown in Figure 2, illustrated how stitching can host contradictions, ambivalence, and yearning simultaneously, offering a tangible form for imagining a future that goes beyond inherited narratives.

The workshop prompts invited participants to think with needle and thread as tools of foresight. As we transitioned into stitching, I encouraged them to reflect on the acts of kindness, resilience, and collective care that had broken through fear in 1984:

> As you pick up your needles and threads, reflect on the acts of kindness, resilience, and collective care that can break through fear and violence. What symbols, colours, or stitches can you create to honour this shared humanity? How can your stitching hold and reimagine the strength of coming together, weaving futures of healing and hope?

Participants were then invited to embroider motifs representing hope and connection like traditional flowers or stars reimagined for renewal, interlocking chains symbolizing solidarity, words expressing humanity, or abstract forms that captured gestures of care. Warm reds and oranges for compassion, greens for regeneration: colour became another vocabulary for future-making.

Two speculative prompts structured the sessions. The first asked participants to imagine an unheard voice from 1984:

> Imagine a story of someone whose voice was never heard during the 1984 riots. What was their life like before, during, and after the violence? What dreams did they have that were never realized? Stitch the unheard story using symbols, colours, and patterns that express their struggles, hopes, and untold memories.

The second prompt invited futures of justice:

Imagine a future where justice has been done for the victims of the 1984 violence. What does that world look like? What are the people, neighbourhoods, and families doing in this world of healing and equality? Stitch using bright, hopeful patterns that express justice, dignity, and thriving community life.

Fig. 3: Embroidered piece by Reshma made during the second Phulkari Futures session. (Photograph by Reshma Khatoon*)*

While several participants in these workshops were already aware of what occurred in 1984, there were some who were learning about this history for the first time. In the second workshop, Reshma Khatoon, was one such participant. During the reading and interaction with Ajeet Cour, a survivor of the 1984 pogrom, Reshma learnt about the true extent of the violence against the Sikh community. The turban was used during the pogrom to identify and torture Sikh men during the pogrom leading to Sikh men discarding their turban and cutting their hair (Mukhopadhyay, 2024). To imagine a more a hopeful, healed future using *phulkari*, she stitched the artwork in Figure 3 showcasing the Sikh Turban with vibrant floral pattern alongside the words 'Never Forget 1984'.

Across both workshops, the ethos of *phulkari* became a method of collective world-building that enabled reflection on intergenerational violence and invited participants to envision alternative pasts and futures through communal stitching and futures design prompts. The workshops' approach echoes feminist futures frameworks emphasizing care, systemic critique, and cultural recognition central to reshaping futures away from oppressive structures (Abdullah, 2025). The intimate act of stitching becomes a tool for accessing memories and co-creating alternative, hopeful social worlds.

Reflections

Participants reported that collaborative stitching provided language for grief and solidarity often denied in dominant discourses about 1984 and Punjab's histories. Some felt empowered to imagine futures grounded in justice and healing, articulating solidarity beyond partitioned social identities. While the artworks deviated from the actual stitch of *phulkari*, they took forward the future focused ethos of the practice: gathering in community, connecting across vulnerabilities, and imagining better futures. Finished artworks emerged as living archives, weaving individual and collective stories, forming connective threads between past suffering and intergenerational futures. Workshops also surfaced critical dialogues about inclusivity and caste, highlighting ongoing work needed to keep the commons open.

"*Phulkari* Futures" illustrates the practice's role in feminist futuring as method, metaphor, and political act. It demonstrates that embroidery is not simply craft or heritage, but a real method of repairing and imagining new worlds. Each stitch is an enactment of memory, resistance, and hope that threads together rupture and repair. For

Punjab and all communities facing legacies of violence, such collective making opens vital spaces of care, solidarity, and transformative possibility.

References

Abdullah, N. A. (2025). Feminizing futures. Journal of Futures Studies, 29(3): 35-47. https://doi.org/10.6531/JFS.202503_29(3).0006

Bukhari, W. N. (2019). The Embroidery of Emotions - Phulkari Bagh's of Punjab. Journal of Research (Urdu), 35(2), 5e3d00b3713ca. https://jorurdu.bzu.edu.pk/website/journal/article/5e3d00b3713ca/page

Costanza-Chock, S. (2020). Design justice: Community-led practices to build the worlds we need. The MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12255.001.0001

Devgan, S. (2018). A haunted generation remembers: The Sikh genocide of 1984. Journal of Genocide Research, 20(4), 541-564. https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504218812867

Ganesan, S., & Srikanth, N. (2024). Textile Ways of Thinking as a trauma-informed design tool to research and understand communities. In Textile Society of America 2024 Symposium Proceedings. https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/1246/

Gharu, R. (2024). The Making of a Monster: The perpetrators of 1984 Sikh Genocide. Contemporary Challenges the Global Crime Justice and Security Journal, 5: 48-63. https://doi.org/10.2218/ccj.v5.9368

Gill, H. S. (1977). A Phulkari from Bhatinda. Department of Anthropological Linguistics, Punjabi University. https://doi.org/10.1177/006996677701100207

Hickey, A. (2019) Rupturing settler time: visual culture and geographies of Indigenous futurity, World Art, 9(2): 163-180. https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2019.1621926

Kaur, A., & Kallan, A. (2018). The Threads of Emotions- Phulkari. International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development, 2(4): 583–590. https://doi.org/10.31142/ijtsrd12978

Kaur, J. (2015) The past and present of Phulkari. The Tribune. https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/comment/the-past-and-present-of-phulkari-50112/

Kaur, M. (2021). Traditional and Technical Assets of Punjabi Culture: Phulkari, Bagh and Chope Embroideries. In Recent Trends in Traditional and Technical Textiles: Select Proceedings of ICETT 2019, 145-154. Singapore: Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-9995-8_13

Kaur, P. (2011). Revival of Punjab's traditional handicraft: Phulkari. Asian Journal of Management 2(1): 28-38. https://ajmjournal.com/HTMLPaper.aspx?Journal=Asian+Journal+of+Management%3BPID%3D2011-2-1-6

Maskiell, M. (1999). Embroidering the Past: Phulkari Textiles and Gendered Work as "Tradition" and "Heritage" in Colonial and Contemporary Punjab. The Journal of Asian Studies, 58(2): 361–388. https://doi.org/10.2307/2659401

McKnight Sethi, C. R. (2015). Producing, Collecting, and Displaying Phulkari Embroidery from Punjab, c.1850 to Present. UC Berkeley. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9s12c9kq

Mejía Zapata, J., & Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2025). Mama Coca Chronicles: Navigating ancestral heritage and future narratives. Journal of Futures Studies 30(1): 27-48). https://doi.org/10.6531/JFS.202509_30(1).0003

Milojević, I. (2025). Feminizing futures. Journal of Futures Studies, 29(3): 35-47. https://doi.org/10.6531/JFS.202503_29(3).0006

Mukhopadhyay, N. (2024). Sikhs: The Untold Agony of 1984. Westland Non-Fiction. P. 30

Randhawa, M. S. (1960). Punjab: Itihas, Kala, Sahit, te Sabiachar. Patiala University. P. 45-46 https://archive.org/details/punjab_202205/page/n65/mode/2up

Ratan, P. & Kaur, S. (2023). Patterns of Phulkari: past and present. International Journal of Science, Engineering and Technology, 11(6): 1-5. https://www.ijset.in/wp-content/uploads/IJSET_V11_issue6_580.pdf

Tengö, M., Darriet, L., Gebeyehu, F., Gebremariam, G., Kamau, E., Kinya, J., Malmer, P., Megersa, A., Mitambo, S., Muriuki, M., Mwongera, V., & Oussou Lio, A. (2021). Indigenous futures thinking: Changing the narrative and re-building based on re-rooting (SwedBio report). Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm,

Sweden. https://swed.bio/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/UNIV-8247-SRC-Report-Futures-Thinking_WEB.pdf

Wilcox, E. (2025). How might feminists transform futures for the production and use of evidence in public policy-making? Journal of Futures Studies. https://jfsdigital.org/2025/03/07/how-might-feminists-transform-futures-for-the-production-and-use-of-evidence-in-public-policy-making