

Social Empowerment by Skill Enhancement Workshops- A Case Study of the Impact of Intervention by a Self-Help Group on the Well-being of Phulkari Women Artisans of Nabha Village, Punjab

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ABSTRACT

'Society', is a relational term, embodying a cluster of individuals, inter-woven with each other through their proximity, relationships, rituals, beliefs and traditions, forming a cultural bond. Individual as a social being, continuedly endeavoured to achieve and maintain her individual and cultural well-being within the social realm. By virtue of their artistic and emotional abilities, craftswoman engage in crafts, showcasing their manual dexterity and aesthetic sense. On one hand, these crafts sustained their livelihood, while on the other hand, they become a symbolic, individualistic expression of their creativity, significantly impacting all aspects of the artisan's life, especially their individual and social well-being. This brings us to the concept of Social Interdependence and Wellbeing. Amartya Sen's (1985,1991,2002) idea of well-being has been taken as the theoretical construct for this study. Well-being can be considered as the sum total of wellness of an individual perceived from various contexts-the most basic being physical and leading to more complex aspects like-emotional, economic, creative and social. Social well-being plays an important role in development of symbiotic and accommodating relationships between the members of society. It is affected by all other individualistic elements and has a cascading effect, snowballs into an overall positive upliftment of the wellbeing factor. Traditional handicrafts, have been practiced by many rural men and women in the Indian society. These are symbolic of their social and cultural bonds and are like a thread connecting them into fulfilling relationships. One such traditional, beautiful handcraft is an embroidery from Punjab, called 'Phulkari'-a Punjabi term, derived from two words: *Phul* and *Akari*, *Phul* means flower and *Akari* means shape. This research focusses on social wellbeing of Phulkari artisans, impacted by the intervention of the Self-help group, leading to improving the social status of these women.

Key Words : Crafts, Craftswomen, Society, Rural, Social Well-being, Women empowerment, Self-help group

INTRODUCTION

The Conceptual Framework:

Time and again, positive interventions by government, NGO's and other social organizations lead to transformations in crafts, thus transforming the social fabric of the life of these artisans.

This study, is a case-study of one such intervention done in district Nabha, in Punjab. The researcher had a first-hand enriching experience of being actively involved

with the women artisans, belonging to minority Sikh community of Punjab, who created beautiful hand embroidery craft of Punjab-Phulkari. The Ministry of Minority Affairs started a project USTTAD (Upgrading the Skills and Training in Traditional Arts/Crafts for Development) which aimed at promoting and preserving the rich heritage of these crafts being done by minority communities. It was to ensure dignity of labour and designed to positively impact the social well-being of the artisans who would undertake workshops with designers.

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The researcher coordinated four workshops under this project, interacting with 35 women from Nabha who had been trained in basic Phulkari embroidery by a Self-Help group (SHG) called- 'Phulkari Mahila SHG', under The Nabha Foundation. This is funded by the Royal Khemka family of Nabha, who were invested in preserving this dying, authentic technique of doing traditional Phulkari by thread-counting method.

The artisans were trained with the original thread counting method, which was slowly getting extinct due to its time-consuming nature and requirement of high skill level. The market was full of the commercial Phulkari done by tracing motifs but losing the authentic beauty. During training, artisans were encouraged to break the moulds of lines, forms and colours they had been following over the years. They broke mental barriers and overcame fears and created new and authentic collections for market with reflecting the need of the present time. They also learned social media marketing. This one-on-one interaction with SHG and women artisans led to close, persistent and prolonged one-on-one interactions, giving a chance to the researcher to delve into the life-journey narratives of these artisans and it shed a lot of insight into their social well-being.

The Theoretical framework:

Marriam Webster dictionary defines 'Craft' as an occupation, trade, or activity requiring manual dexterity or artistic skill. It is common practice in villages for women to learn crafts from their family members or community peers. Some get the opportunity to be trained and thus enhance their skills. The women artisans who are part of this study were trained by the self-help group in their district.

A SHG (Self-help group) is a community-based group with 10-20 members. They are usually women from similar social and economic backgrounds, all voluntarily coming together to save small sums of money, on a regular basis. Self-help groups are seen as instruments for goals including empowering women, developing leadership abilities among poor and the needy people.

This research is an attempt to search, narrate and interpret how this kinetic, yet shrouded, interrelationship between craft and the individual, and their contextual significance for the individual and social well-being. It sheds light on the impact of training intervention by selfhelp group on the well-being of the artisans, especially social well-being.

Research Questions and objectives:

We intended to explore following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of the self-help group facilitator facilitating artisans for making and promoting the Phulkari craft?
2. What can we learn from these lived experiences about the functioning and contribution of the Self-Help Group in the life of the artisans and contemporizing the Phulkari craft?

Thus, Key Objectives are:

1. To understand the motivations and ideology of the Self-Help Group-The Nabha Foundation, behind intervention to help Phulkari women artisans in Nabha.
2. To explore the role and impact of Self-help group in enhancing the well-being of the artisans, especially in social context.

Review of Literature:

Well-being and development:

Traditionally development of the individual and society has been viewed as the possession of material wealth or the ability to derive utility from material objects. Amartya Sen (1991,1993) in his pioneering work on capability argued that both these concepts are inadequate to evaluate the wellbeing of an individual. His capability approach is a theoretical framework that involves two core normative claims. First, the assumption that freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance. And second, that freedom to achieve well-being must be understood in terms of people with capabilities (Sen, 1993). The freedom to achieve well-being is the precursor for the development.

According to him, on one hand, freedom is the primary objective of development, and on the other hand, it is the principal means of development. The human being is an engine of change. Thus, just freedom is not enough, one also needs capabilities to utilise this freedom for change.

Internal capability is what helps to extract attributes of a commodity and use it for one's benefit. Once there is a perfect match of freedom and capabilities, the functioning to extract benefits is to the maximum. Sen (1999) distinguishes the following conversion factors: i) personal heterogeneities; ii) environmental diversities; iii) variations in social climate; iv) differences in relational perspectives; v) distribution within the family. All these

play a pivotal role in achieving well-being of a person.

Social wellbeing is directly linked to the women empowerment. As per Anna Lungbila (2016), the term empowering may be understood as enabling weaker sections like poor women, especially tribal women to acquire and to possess power and resources, in order to make decisions of their own. Their primitive way of life, economic and social backwardness, and low level of literacy, superstitious beliefs, out dated system of production and marketing, absence of value systems, scanty physical infrastructure in backward tribal areas and demographic quality of tribal areas show urgency for empowering women. Empowerment is envisaged as an aid to reduce gender gap considerably. In the Indian situation, this would mean helping women to enjoy their constitutional and legal right to equality in real life.

According to Khobung (2012) empowerment is defined as a process of enhancing the capacity of women to make purposive choices and to effectively transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Empowerment process, he says, passes through two stages: firstly, access to or control over various material and non-material resources, secondly, the power or capacity to convert them into desired outcomes in three aspects. These are: economic, social and political empowerment. Economic empowerment includes facilitating women's control over household resources or access to financial markets. Social empowerment relates to enhancing women's roles as social actors in community's and family's decision making. Political empowerment refers to facilitating women's participation in political institutions at the local, state and national levels and their ability to publicly voice their opinions to affect the composition, functioning and processes of political institutions.

Thus, understanding the role of Self-Help Groups in developing capability of the artisans and endorsing their personal, social and emotional wellbeing is critical.

The researchers have used this theoretical lens to view the role of Self-Help Group.

Research Paradigm and Methodology:

A constructivist research paradigm with narrative inquiry and an interpretative / qualitative research methodology, appropriate for the purpose of the research has been followed. In attempting to make sense of the social world, social constructionists view knowledge as constructed as opposed to created. Society is viewed as

existing both as a subjective and an objective reality (Andrews, Tom, 2012). As Steedman (2000) notes, most of what is known and most of the knowing that is done is concerned with trying to make sense of what it is to be human, as opposed to scientific knowledge.

A triangulation of methods of research, collecting different data has helped collect substantial, credible data. The researchers have actively engaged, listened and observed, noted and later connected the dots and recorded them in form of a chronological detailed narrative. Due to prolonged and persistent engagement of the researcher with artisans and self-help group over a span of nearly 7 years, the ease of interaction and develop a strong trustworthiness, has helped to get genuine narrative of self- help group.

Qualitative methods have been used like Case study, Participant/Non-participant observation, Narrative and Conversation analysis, Field texts and Reflexive journal.

Selection criteria:

A 'purposive sampling' was done, where the Self-Help Group under The Nabha Foundation, was studied, with whom the researcher had first hand experience and prolonged interaction. They had been undertaking artisan training at Nabha.

About Phulkari:

One of the most beautiful embroideries of India, Phulkari, translating to flower work, remains synonymous with the history of undivided, pre-independence Panjab. While the exact origin of the craft remains obscure, mentions of Phulkari appear in ancient texts as far back as the 7th century to references in Heer Ranjha in the 17th century.

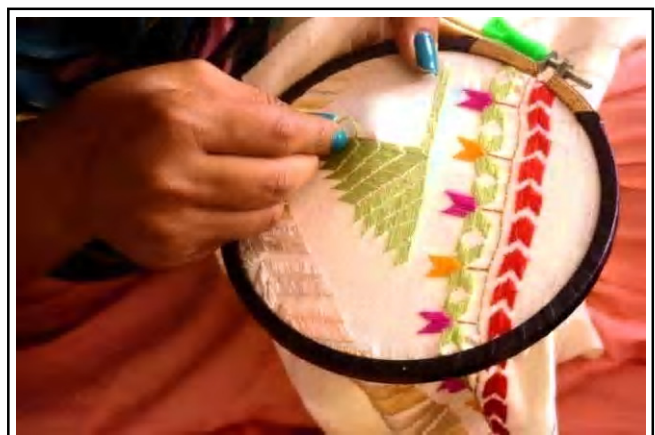


Fig. 1 : Phulkari

Traditionally practiced by rural women as a family tradition, Phulkari is a visually graphic craft where every motif, colour, pattern symbolizes emotions of auspiciousness and cultural beliefs. From a young bride to an expecting mother, distinct embroidered Phulkari shawls or *odhni* played a notable role.

Back in the times when the household women sat idle and rested peacefully during the day, their vested interests to express their thoughts and worldviews came into the picture through sheer artwork of Phulkari on a khadi piece of cloth. The contemporary haute couture was brought to the Central Asia by the Jat community post the devastated partition of India and Pakistan which is one of the reasons for the downfall of this traditional craft. The beauty of Phulkari is exhibited exclusively through colourful and vibrant threads interwoven on naturally, dyed fabrics with signature embroidery staples passing over the generations. Following the legacy of mothers and grandmothers, Phulkari dupattas, sarees, salwar kurta are one of the most prized possessions for every traditional woman. Rooted deeply in the Punjabi culture, Phulkari is generally created as an epitome of bonding and love for the wedded wife of a son in the house or daughters also sew their own Phulkari as a part of their dowry.

Self Help Group (SHG) and Capability Building:

A self-help group (commonly abbreviated SHG) is a community-based, financial intermediary group started by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), that generally have broad anti-poverty agendas. They are generally self-governed and peer-controlled. Most selfhelp groups are in India, though they can be found in other countries, especially in South Asia and Southeast Asia.

Structure:

An SHG usually consists of 10-25 members, generally local women, between the ages of 18 to 50. The members are usually women from similar social and economic backgrounds, all voluntarily coming together to save small sums of money, on a regular basis. They pool their resources to become financially stable, taking loans from their collective savings in times of emergency or financial scarcity, important life events or to purchase assets.

Members may also make small regular savings contributions over a few months until there is enough

money in the group to begin lending. Funds may then be lent back to the members or to others in the village for any purpose.

Role and advantages: They play critical functions in the society mainly by capacity building and acting as the voice of the poor and marginalised sections of society. They act as an important source of microfinance services to the poor, acting as a go-through for formal banking services to reach the poor, especially in rural areas. They even offer collateral-free loans to sections of people that generally find it hard to get loans from banks. They help eradicate many social ills such as dowry, alcoholism, early marriage, illiteracy, etc. SHGs also help by simplifying government schemes for the rural population and helping them to take advantage of these incentives. By teaching women vocational skills, they make them socially and financially empowered and help steer the nation towards true gender equality and reduce social injustice.

The Narrative of Ms. Shubhra, The Nabha Foundation head, managing the Self-help group:

The Nabha Foundation has been established in 2003 in response to a felt need for holistic development of Nabha and aims at transforming and establishing Nabha as a model for mid-sized towns in India. The key areas of focus are -Sustainable and integrated urban and rural development, education, health, livelihood, sanitation and heritage conservation.

It seeks to bring together the state and union governments, national and international development agencies, academic and research institutions and above all the people of Nabha, to engage in a creative dynamic action through integrated and sustainable programs that focus on environmental health, economic profitability and social and economic equity, in the areas of education, livelihoods, health, youth employment, women empowerment and heritage.

The vision and mission of this foundation is 'Area Development Approach'-focusing on Nabha area, in Punjab. Many programs are run related to Health, Education, Skill development for women and men, Agriculture, etc. for overall all-round growth and development.

The 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 Self-Help Group- was formulated to bring about a structural change in the community otherwise entrenched with inequality. It aims to empower the marginalized rural woman, generate sustainable home-based employment, which leads to greater participation in the society, giving these women a sense of fulfilment and economic independence.

This programme 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 meaningful changes in the life of these women. It has brought change in their economic position but also in the way they see the world.

The researcher met Ms. Shubhra, the Managing Trustee and CEO, Nabha Foundation, at her Delhi office and conversed with her, to understand the philosophy of the Self- Help Group, for Phulkari.

The Phulkari project was initiated under Heritage revival, in the women empowerment portfolio. Two main agenda were kept in mind while starting this Self-Help Group.

One, the upliftment of the socio-economic status of women and challenging all kinds of social taboos that they were facing in their society. They strongly felt that it was very important to give some sort of an economic tool to these women who had the potential to become artisans and obviously increase their say in their own respective family situation.

The other key aspect was to preserve the heritage of the original method of doing Phulkari, which made it authentic. Mrs. Jeet Nabha Khemka, the daughter of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh, the last Maharaja of Nabha, patronised this so that the authentic traditions did not fade away with time and get extinct. The market was being flooded with commercialised Phulkari, made by tracing method and quick, long unruly stitches (*chaapa* method).

On being asked about the challenges faced by them in the initial stages, Ms. Shubhra replied,

Initially there was resistance from the women themselves, because they were not used to this kind of phulkari, everyone was in a comfort zone just doing the *chaapa* method with limited motifs, with loose threads. We started by making them aware of their own heritage and starting skill trainings with them, by calling experts.

What really gradually helped was, when these

women realized the significance and importance of their own heritage and they started taking pride in doing it in the authentic way. They started understanding the value of the heritage heirloom pieces embroidered by their mothers and grandmothers in their trunks and started remembering the stories. We encouraged to bring in narratives from their own families and it helped to connect them to their identity and heritage. They found it difficult to do this technique but soon took it as a challenge and started being experts in it. Today we can proudly say that all of our experts and trainers are from the local women trained by us.

I could feel the happiness and sense of achievement in her voice. I asked if they got support from the families of these women?

Ms Shubhra replied,

The families were resistant at first, to let women step out of the house, fearing they would get spoilt with external exposure. We wanted them to come for embroidery training and social skill training and to make them as cohesive group. The foundation was trying hard to create a group with strong identity not just acting as individuals but together acting as a self-help group themselves, who believe in each other and have a certain trust in each other and they take pride in this collective identity. Our team members had to constantly go and counsel the families to talk to them to make them understand why it is important for these women to step out, and come out of their shells to explore a new beginning. Initially there was resistance even in bringing them to the village gurudwara where the training was conducted. However, when they observed the beautiful work being done by the women, and their confidence, they also supported our efforts.

She went on to emphasise that these local women experts became role models and this helped to create a sense of security and trust in the mind of the families. They felt it safe to send their daughters, mothers, sisters, to them for training.

We tried to facilitate training in their villages itself, but sometimes did it at our own centre. Some beautiful internal role models were created and this helped strengthen our mission and get closer to our vision. The appreciation received by them for their work, and orders which helped them earn a livelihood increased their confidence. Now they

were travelling for exhibitions, displays and participating in fairs. Nabha Foundation also tied up with AICA (All India Crafts Association), NIFT (National Institute of Fashion Technology), and many other institutes for imparting skill trainings and workshops for these women.

The foundation worked very hard on the marketing side and making sure that necessary linkages were made and soon established a website and presence on social media platforms like Instagram. They have their own page called 'Nabha Phulkari' which is also a registered brand name under which they sell the products made by these artisans and help to get future orders and make networking connections.

They have developed a 'Phulkari motif logo' and added tags and flyers in packaging to educate the consumer about the authenticity of Phulkari, which is a GI craft. It works on a self-sustainable model. The page informs the world about the good work being done by the self-help group and showcases the new products. The videos of authentic Phulkari being made, also educate and attract the consumers who believe in buying local, and authentic work. The young girls from village are trained in handling the social media along with their team.



Fig. 2 : Visuals from Instagram page of 'Nabha Phulkari' -brand

'So, what makes you the happiest when you see these women in the workshop? Were there any surprising observations?'

Ms Shubhra smiled and replied,

Today I'm most happy that when I go for these workshops, I see these young girls who are very interested. They are fast learners and they have

the 'to-do' attitude ! They come with that VISION for themselves - to make their own identity-*Pehchan*. This was not seen before. Initially they used to think this is a source of livelihood only, but now I am glad they are thinking on these lines, which is a great step. They are representing Nabha and Phulkari, at major exhibitions in Delhi-Lal Qila, Bengaluru, Mumbai and getting lot of orders. It has boosted their confidence in themselves and also increased support from their families. Basically, we feel very reassured that the journey is going on in the right direction. We started with a vision and we have achieved very good milestones in that journey, trainings nearly 800 women .We also train women as beauticians and in computer skills like basic office and social media marketing



Fig. 3 : Stories of Artisans- on Nabha Phulkari Instagram page

I proceeded to ask her about the future vision of the SHG.

For the future, our vision is that their work should be globally appreciated. More and more people see and appreciate talent. One target is the niche market who appreciates high quality handicrafts -so reaching out to them is the goal. This includes collectors, curators and NRI families too. We would also target high end hotels and create home ranges and artworks for their spaces. Intricate *Sainchi* Phulkari pieces, fully covered Bagh's can be made customised and like couture range.

But on other side, we want to venture into small affordable product ranges that would fit into the lifestyle of the consumers. This would be commercial range- the craft would be authentic but affordable pieces like spectacle cases, phone cases, slings, hairbands, diary covers, waistcoats, small bags etc. will be worked out. We need to productivize it in an affordable way to reach more people and make it part of their life.

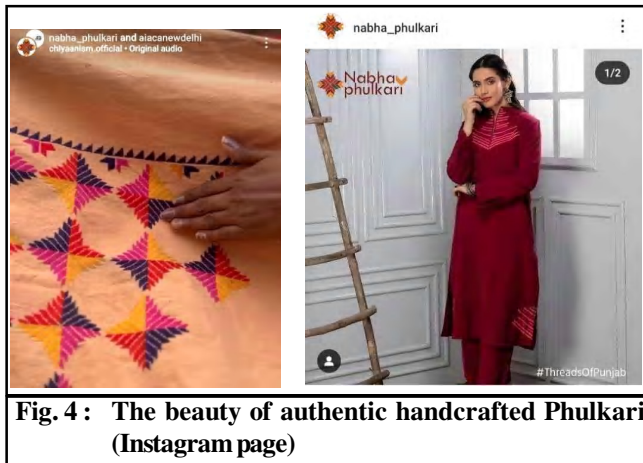


Fig. 4 : The beauty of authentic handcrafted Phulkari (Instagram page)

It was an enriching conversation which shed light on the genuine efforts being made by The Nabha Foundation, to help enhance the socio-economic position of women artisans of the minority Sikh community of Nabha. They were creating powerful role models for the future and creating authentic Phulkari, a piece of heritage, for everyone.

Significance of the study and Knowledge created:

This case study is very significant as it clearly indicates how small efforts by an organisation, have made a world of difference in the lives of women artisans living in the small district of Nabha, Punjab. Efforts like going to artisan's home to convince their family, simplifying the learning process by demonstration, helped break false prejudices and biases. The women are empowered today to earn their livelihood and also set an example, a role model, in their own community, inspiring other women across ages. This study has made the SHG more aware of their role, and help share their strategy as an inspiration to others to work in the same direction, towards women empowerment.

The marketing strategies adopted by the Nabha Phulkari brand, help spread awareness about authentic

Phulkari and thus bridge the gap between artisans and consumers.

By understanding their life stories and then narrativizing them, brands, like the one created by this SHG, can create a more humane connection between the consumers and artisans. They can share these stories through creative and interactive packaging, reels, QR codes with information, etc. This will help increase the motivation in the artisans and uplift their spirits, on the other hand the consumers will feel pride and a warm connection to the artisan. These kinds of connections will help in improving the social relationships and bridging the gaps of distance and social classes. This respect for artisans, in the mind of consumers, will help them value the products more and thus they become ambassadors to propagate their handmade skill. Thus, artisans, will feel motivated to create more, to explore their creative freedom and therefore their social and economic position will rise. The long-term impact of this is a subject for future study, along with delving into artisan life narratives.

An empathetic and sensitive mentality, which appreciate the uniqueness and creativity of individuals will give rise to more humane society, making this world a better place to live.

Conclusion:

To Summarize, Capability, is the ability to perform a set of functions, that we have risen to value. Functionality is doing and being- which basically means ability to tap one's Internal capability to be the best one can be. By getting training from the SHG, the artisans are able to tap their inner capability and achieve – ability to create aesthetic products by value addition, achieve economic independence and freedom, and also keep their traditional values, culture, knowledge alive. This wellness state of theirs was a result of their self and social interactions and relationships. They had become Torchbearers of their culture, and were playing an important role in retaining and nurturing local talent and inspiring many by being their role models. Their enhanced capability, is thus enhancing their, and the overall social wellbeing of their community. The beautiful transformative journey, has just begun...Miles to go and many lives to be transformed.

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