

## Exploring Metaphors in the Embroidery of the Punjab: A Study of the Inscriptions at *Bahāuddīn Zakariyā* Shrine

Wardah Naeem Bukhari

*Lecturer Fine Arts, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore*

Prof. Dr. Shahida Manzoor

*Ex Principal, College of Art & Design, Punjab University, Lahore*

### Abstract

This study is all about the investigation of symbolic representation of inscriptions at *Bahāuddīn Zakariyā* & *Shah Rukn-i-Ālam*, their relation to religion and culture as Multan was the main route where business took place. Additionally, Sufi culture & faith of regional occupants also had an effect on these symbols. Multan remains acclaimed for its shrines; mainly, *Bahāuddīn Zakariyā* & *Shah Rukn-i-Ālam* which is taken as an inspiration to discover a connection between visual (design) and literary (inscriptions) references translated in thread crafts of Multan. Inscriptions and calligraphy contain symbolism connecting from *Qurānic* verses to plants, seeds, birds and animals. Crafts visual vocabulary is constructed with it.

**Key Words:** Multan, shrines, symbols, inscriptions, thread crafts

### Introduction

To create a link between the symbols of thread crafts of Multan and the patterns used in Shrine of *Bahāuddīn Zakariyā* & *Shah Rukn-i-Ālam* it is very important to compare the inscriptive metaphors of shrine with the embroidery patterns. This investigation will find an association between the historical backdrop of the symbols utilized in thread work of Multan and the translation of inscriptions mentioned at Shrines.

According to a study in 1920, embroidery is declared as a popular pastime of usually the women living idle in household. Embroidery, now considered as



an art, has been the work of people without jobs or businesses. Women across the world have been embroidering different home based articles ranging from cushion covers, bed sheets, tea-cozies, wall hangings, arm chairs, garments and much more.<sup>1</sup>

The word 'embroidery' is derived from the French word border which means the edges. Embroidery is a craft which is done on a cloth with a needle and a thread. The skill of embroidery is extremely old. People started embroidery to embellish their underwear, handkerchiefs, cushions, caps, canopies, curtains, robes, table runners, bed covers, pillow covers, every day clothes and every other fabric. People started doing embroidery on all sorts of fabrics and materials through which the needle could get through. These materials included silk, cotton, wool and leather.<sup>2</sup>

Needles have been invented as long as first and second century B.C. during the excavation of the sites in India, needles have been found in many places which are as old as third century. The clothes found on the statues in Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro have embroidery on them.<sup>3</sup> The sculptures of Bharat and Sanchi also had embroidered outfits which showed that the embroidery was common as old as second B.C. the sculptures in Ajanta also are shown wearing embroidered clothes.<sup>4</sup>

Although it is difficult to estimate whether these designs were printed or embroidered but since the needle work was very popular at that point of time, hence it can be estimated that the work done is that of needle. When Marco Polo visited India on his way to China during 13<sup>th</sup> century, he observed many people making embroidered mats in which lather was being embroidered with silver or golden thread. He found these embroidered pieces including cushions and covers more skillfully made than any other part of the world.

---

<sup>1</sup>Sheila Paine, *Embroidered Textiles: Traditional Patterns from Five Continents : With a Worldwide Guide to Identification*. (Thames & Hudson: 1997), 9.

<sup>2</sup> A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 2000), 3.

<sup>3</sup>Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* , 3.

<sup>4</sup>Nasreen Askari and Rosemary Crill, *Colours of the Indus: Costume and Textiles of Pakistan* (London: M. Holberton in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1997), 7.

Embroidery has been integral part of the culture of India. There is hardly any society which had such a rich connection with needle work. Embroidery has been common in poor and rich alike. The royals including Mughals were famous for their elaborate embroidered clothes, whereas rural areas also had many skillful craftsmen who would wear colorful embroidered clothes. Embroidery has been popular in India due to dowry as well as mostly all the dowry items were embroidered.<sup>5</sup>

Multan is famous for its distinct, exquisite and traditional embroidery. These embroideries are done on multiple levels including home-run business to professional factories. Embroidery is done in all parts of Multan and is uniqueness of the city. The tools used for embroidery include *ār* (awl) or needle. Both these are used to form discrete designs and patterns. The most popular stitches used are *kachā pakkā tānka*, *kachā tānkā*, *ār tānkā*, *chikan-kārī*, *salma sīāra* and *gotā kinārī*. Embroidery denotes the sharp colors. The famous embroideries include *phulkārī* and *chopé*.<sup>6</sup>

The word *phulkārī* is derived from '*phul*' means flower and '*kārī*' means work, floral work or flowering.<sup>7</sup> In west Punjab this form of embroidery is known as '*bāgh*' which means garden. In *bāgh* the whole shawl is decorated with floral patterns.<sup>8</sup> Phulkari has been part of Pakistani tradition since long time. The designing on *phulkārī* is different usually due to social/regional and religious differences. Due to prohibition of real life figures in Islam, the geometric figures are usually common in Muslim dominant areas however Sikh and Hindu designs incorporate human, animal or bird figures.<sup>9</sup> This difference makes the *phulkārī* done in Pakistan and India distinct from each other on design basis however the technique followed to do the embroidery is same.

---

<sup>5</sup> A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Shailaja D. Naik, *Traditional Embroideries of India* (New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, 2020), 103.

<sup>7</sup> Jasleen Dhamija, *Asian Embroidery* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 2004), 13.

<sup>8</sup> John Gillow and Nicholas Barnard, *Indian Textiles* (Thames & Hudson: 2014), 103.

<sup>9</sup> Gillow and Barnard, *Indian Textiles*, 150.

Inscriptions on *Bahāuddīn Zakariyā* Shrine

شجاع و ابن الشجاع و حاجی  
امیر ملتان زہے مظفر  
باروز میدان یا تیغ بازو  
چہ حملہ آورد چون غضنفر  
چون سرخرو شد با سوائے جنت  
بگفت رضوان بیامظفر

The brave son of the brave, and Hajī Amīr of Multan,  
Muzaffar

In the day of battle, with arm and sword  
He attacked like a loin

When with cheerful face, he set out for Paradise,

The porter of Heaven's gate said, "Come, O Muzaffar".<sup>10</sup>

Symbolism is an important aspect of any art. The symbolism used in arts and crafts of Multan is established around centuries. Above writings symbolize the brave soldiers of battlefield as lions who fight with ultimate zeal. The lion is symbol of agility and action. It symbolizes the golden sun and the directives attached to it. Some Sufis described lions as universal prototypes. According to the Shia beliefs, 'Alī is the symbol of lion of God. In *Mathnā vī, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī* calls 'Alī as the Lion of God.<sup>11</sup>

The gates of paradise are wide open for martyrs. The gate symbolizes a defined place. The passage towards the gate is interpreted as the first step towards the journey of truth. Human beings are symbolized with bridges between heaven and earth as they are the amalgamation of human and divine. Humans are the agents of God on earth hence they are the bridge between heaven and earth. The Sufi interprets this relationship as a vital responsibility

<sup>10</sup>Shaukat Mehmood, "Islamic Architecture in Pakistan to 1707" (dissertation, 1981), 333.

<sup>11</sup> Laleh Bakhtiar, *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 74.

of human beings where humans need a balance between their own natures while understanding the authority of God.<sup>12</sup>

*Darshan dwār* (door way to the divine) *phulkārī* is a religious token of gratitude presented on shrines and tombs to show the love towards their religion. This *phulkārī* is hanged on a visible place where the people come for seeing (*Darshan*) of their religious divinity.<sup>13</sup> Such *phulkārī* shawls are also presented on *Gurdwārās* as a token of thankfulness on getting a wish fulfilled. The shawl has pattern like *kashmīrī* shawl and has embroidery of gates with figures inside them which shows religious devotion. The name of the shawl depicts the purpose. It means that gate from where the God is seen. On the doorways of Shrine of *Bahāuddīn Zakariyā*, same pattern is placed on the bridal dress (*Ghāgra*) in *Zardozi* embroidery which symbolizes the link of human with divinity. The Sufis believe that the *Murshid* shows the path towards God. In the same way we can see the Sufism enveloped in the embroidery of Multan which suggests that Sufism has not only affected the lives of people but also has affected the craft especially thread craft.



Figure I: Divine doorway pattern in *Zardozi*.  
Photograph by Author. August 25, 2019

---

<sup>12</sup> Laleh Bakhtiar, *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> Shailaja D. Naik, *Traditional Embroideries of India* (New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, 2020), 107.



Figure 2: Bahauddin Dhakariya Shrine (door way to the divine).  
Photograph by Author: August, 20 2019.



Figure 3: *Darshan dwār* (door way to the divine).  
Source: (<https://images.app.goo.gl/q2HSIvGA2CmAGxha9>).  
Accessed Date: October 29, 2019.

شد شکم میر ہر کسے از نان	چون بدور شہنشاہ دوران
بچہ چاقوٹ نیست جز ملتان	ہمہ چار و نمودار زانی
اخذ محصول غلہ کرد گران	کسے جز گرسند نہ می میرد
موجب آل اشرف انسان	خاصہ بر خدا و دوست خدا
در بزرگی فزون تر از پیران	فرحت رو غوث اعظم پیر
بہر تفریح رکن عالم دان	روح مخدوم خوش بہاء الدین
تاج بخش سر سلاطینان	وزیرائے دعائے احمد شاہ
بندہ حق علی محمد خان	حاصل غلہ را معاف نمود
با دل شاد و خرم و خندان	تا خلایق دعائے شاہ کنند
سر طلاق شدید بر زن آن	صوبہ دارے کہ حاصل گیرد
سال او حج بخش جاویدان	گفت ہاتھ باسم صاحب پاک

During the region of the Emperor of the World  
When everybody's hunger was satisfied with bread  
And everywhere bread was available at low price,  
Nowhere was famine, except in Multan.  
No one died except from starvation,  
and exaction of dues on wheat tock (grain) has made  
the price very high.  
Now for God's sake and for the sake of God's friend  
(i.e. the Prophet),  
And by the succor of the Sayyids, the holy descendants  
amongst mankind,  
and by the grace and kindness of *Ghawth-ī-Azam Pīr*,  
who in holiness exceeds all other saints (and)  
By the aid of the kindness of the great *Makhdūm*  
*Bahā al-Dīn*,  
And for the sake of *Rukn-i-Ālam*,  
And for the praise of *Ahmad Shah Abdāī*

For whom kings receive their crowns,  
'*Alī Muḥammad Khān* the slave of God  
Has remitted the taxes on grains.  
If any *sūbidār* takes tax on grain,  
May his wife be divorced three times  
A voice from Heaven said in the name of the most Holy, God  
The eternal giver of the treasures (1172 AH)<sup>14</sup>  
1174/ 1760-61

Wheat metaphorically symbolizes the hunger and starvation of poor in the community. In *phulkārī bāgh*, wheat cobs are used is called *kanak da bāgh*. Being an agricultural city, Multan is known for its crop harvesting. The agriculture of Multan is depicted in arts and crafts too. The pattern of wheat in *phulkārī* shawl represents progression, fertility, happiness, growth and life.<sup>15</sup> Multan was the hub of trade that is the reason many civilizations who has different religion has there influences there. Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims usually celebrate their festivals and mostly they become participant of each other's events. In Sikhism, wheat harvesting is an important event. They celebrate it as a festival of *Baysākhī* in the time of wheat harvesting. *Baysākhī* was a famous festival for Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims alike. Before partition, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs used to gather around Ravi River to celebrate *Baysākhī*.

---

<sup>14</sup>Mehmood, "Islamic Architecture in Pakistan to 1707" , 334.

<sup>15</sup>Adele Nozedar, *The Element Encyclopedia of Secret Signs and Symbols: the Ultimate A-Z Guide from Alchemy to the Zodiac* (London: Harper Element, 2010).





Figure 4: *Gandum or Kanak dā Bāgh* (Wheat)

Source: (<https://images.app.goo.gl/ocMRxxS2p8qgbQCV9>).

Accessed Date: October 31, 2019

گفت تاریخ کہ گورش پر نور

Said the date: “May his grave be full of light”<sup>16</sup>.

In the above inscription light symbolizes the divinity and transparency. It shows unending divine beauty which purifies the soul. Light is a symbol of the soul of a mystic. The light is symbolized as the intellect of a Sufi when he reaches the ultimate reality and moves from contraction to expansion. The light begins from the center and moves in all directions which enlighten all the realities around it giving conscious to a mystic.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Shaukat Mehmood, “Islamic Architecture in Pakistan to 1707”, 335.

<sup>17</sup> Laleh Bakhtiar, *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest*, 74.



Figure 5: Tomb of *Sayyid ‘Alī Hussainī*; Embroidered Cover of Cenotaph.

Photograph by Author, September 12, 2019

The ultimate wish and pleasure of a Sufi is to be united with the One after death and this Sufi concept signifies that idea. The grave of a Sufi is dressed as a bride with vibrant colors because in Sufi belief the death is actually a celebration of meeting the beloved lord. This is why the death anniversary of Sufis is celebrated instead of mourned. A true Sufi believes that the world is a place of tests and hardships and death is actually end of those hardships and a time to finally meet this lord.

It is difficult to symbolize a color with a specific concept because a color may be symbol of one thing in one culture and the same color may be symbol of an opposite thing in another culture. The colors are symbolized by the society. It is society that decides what color of kings is and what is that of a common man, what is color of joy and what is color of sorrow. The main colors which are associated with human society are red, white and black. White is often associated with purity and divinity in mostly all the cultures. It is color of life in form of milk and semen whereas the black color is symbolized with the color of earth and decay. It represents the dark aspects of life. In embroidery, black and white play very vital but contrasting role. Red is the most significant color because it is color of blood which symbolizes life as well as death. It's a color of joy, vibrancy and power. The color red is the color of sun, fire, life and power. The red color embroidery and fabrics symbolize marriage, worship, secret powers and demons. In the tribal

embroidery, red is a significant color however it is used to mark and to protect. Red color is the most prominent color among all the colors because of its representation of so many concepts. Red is also symbolized with intensity, jealousy, lust and violence. The use of color is different in different cultures.<sup>18</sup>

In *Pazyryk*, around fourth century B.C, linen shift was found which had the red seams all around its sleeves and neck. Around the same period, the wraps on mummies found in *Paracas* had red boundary. In tenth century, *Coppergate* diggings at York brought out the clothes which had silk ribbon edges all around the neck and cuffs. The color red has been associated with power in different cultures and decorating red cloth on the dresses had differed interpretation in different cultures. For instance, in *Nāgā*, color red is only for a person who has killed someone. The same way this color has been interpreted differently in different cultures. The Benin chiefs of Africa have been wearing red cloth to protect them from the evil eye and as a ceremonial dress of royalty. In other parts of Africa the color red is associated with triumph and achievement. Red is also a symbol of death. When a prominent man dies in Africa, the burial cloth of red cloth is displayed on the top of the house. According to the rituals in Madagascar, the burial cloth is of red color. In the sub-continent, red is a sacred color which is used to decorate several religious institutions. According to Hindu belief system, red protects from all the evils. This is why the red ink is used to start the accounts, a red wrist band made of thread is used to fight with the devils and the sweets wrapped with red clothes are put on the streets to scare away the evil forces.<sup>19</sup>

لا اله الا الله محمد رسول الله

There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Sheila Paine, *Embroidered Textiles: Traditional Patterns from Five Continents : With a Worldwide Guide to Identification*, 148.

<sup>19</sup> Paine, *Embroidered Textiles: Traditional Patterns from Five Continents : With a Worldwide Guide to Identification*, 149.

<sup>20</sup> Mehmood, "Islamic Architecture in Pakistan to 1707", 335.

Above inscription discusses the concept of unity defies all the separate identities and pluralism. It essentially signifies the oneness. I take an eye to see that the center of everything is same, that multiplicity also has unity. All animals, plants and human are designed on this principal of “unity in multiplicity” irrespective of their size. Once humans understand the concept of unity, the ideas of multiplicity vanish away and only unity sustains.

To represent unity in multiplicity the triangular shape of the mountain is the best example. Because base of the triangle is the multiple and so many multiple lines unite in one point.<sup>21</sup> In *Ghunghat bāgh phulkārī* triangular shape is made like a mountain which symbolically related to the unity in multiplicity. *Ghunghat* is veil used by women to cover them. It is a three cornered shawl which is used by the bride to cover her face. This shawl is also used to cover one’s self from elderly as a sign of respect. The *bāgh* is done on the side which covers the face. In east Punjab *Sarpallū* is used which is alternative to *Ghunghat bāgh*. *Sarpallū* as well as *bāgh* have red background on which embroidery is done with golden yellow or multicolored thread.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 6: *Phulkārī; Ghunghat bāgh*

Source: (<https://images.app.goo.gl/EgIQDIQSkziWjm6B9>)

Accessed Date: October 29, 2019

---

<sup>21</sup> Dr. Bhagwant Sahai, *Recent Researches in Indian Art and Iconography* (New Delhi : Kaveri Books, 2008), 45.

<sup>22</sup>Naik, *Traditional Embroideries of India*, 105.

چون شاهنواز خان بملتان شهید شد  
خمدار تیغ قتل برو ماه عید شد  
جتم چو سال شهید آن غازی شهید  
گفتا خرد که حاکم ملتان شهید شد

When Shāhnawāz Khān was martyred at Multan, the curved sword of slaughter appeared to him like the moon of the eid. When I asked the year of death of this soldier of God and martyr, wisdom said “The governor of Multan became a martyr.”<sup>23</sup>

In this literary inscription the symbol of moon which symbolizes the light of this world. Moon used in *phulkārī* embroidery known as *chānd bāgh*. Light is interpreted as the divine knowledge that a mystic has which makes him nearer to God. The soul of mystic is the source of that light which enlightens his entirety. According to Quran, do not say that the martyrs are dead’ (Surah A-i- Imran verse 169-170), and in yet another verse ‘do not think of them as dead, they receive sustenance and are pleased’. The light that is reflected from sun to moon is the spiritual awakened intuition of the mystic. Symbolically, just as the light reflect through surfaces and enlighten them, same is the case with the minds of the followers of Sufi mystics.

The light of spirituality and awakening is transferred to the ones who are receptive and sensitive towards the divine knowledge. These minds are ready to receive the doctrine of spirituality. Such people are considered as bestowed ones because they receive and interpret the divine messages through their Sufi leaders.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Mehmood, “Islamic Architecture in Pakistan to 1707”, 335.

<sup>24</sup> Bakhtiar, *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest*, 59.



Figure 7: Chand (moon) *Bāgh*

Source: (<https://images.app.goo.gl/MjWqHzYYzJsfWben8>).

Accessed Date: October 30, 2019

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that the symbolism used in the embroidery of Multan is similar to the translation of the inscriptions at *Bahāuddīn Zakariyā & Shah Rukn-i-Ālam*. Translation of the inscriptions and the oral narrative of embroidery tradition has some historic references. Inscriptions and calligraphy contain symbolism connecting from *Qur'ānic* verses to plants, seeds, birds, and animals and the same case happened with the visual vocabulary of embroidery. Embroidery of Multan has a deep connection with religion, culture, and rituals. Additionally, Sufi culture & faith of regional occupants also had an effect on these symbols.