



THE CHINAR LEAF MOTIF OF KASHMIR: AN INSIGHT INTO ITS DEPICTION AND USAGE

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Abstract: *The handicrafts, textiles and arts of Kashmir are famous all over the world. The shawls and carpets are probably the most recognisable of all Indian textiles and have a high prestige value associated with them. The crafts of Kashmir have naturalistic motifs on them, which are further developed in their designs and aesthetics. The Chinar leaf motif is one such and possibly the most recognisable of all. It is native to the Kashmir valley and is not found on any other art form from other parts of the country. It is one of the traditional motifs and is profusely used on all handicrafts and textiles of this region. In fact, the presence of the chinar motif is one of the identification marks of Kashmiri products. Today it is popular amongst the tourists and has a high souvenir value. This paper documents the usage, depiction and popularity of the Chinar leaf motif. It also seeks to examine its historical background, changes and development. To understand the deep importance this motif has, interviews were conducted with local artisans, craftsmen, merchants and dealers of various crafts. Visits were also made to the local cottage industries and studios of the workmen to study its reproduction and development. This work will help to throw light on this motif, as there are very few studies which focus on the Chinar leaf design. It is important that we document and study this motif, as it is indigenous to this area and also as the Chinar tree itself has a significant cultural and religious value.*

Keywords: *Chinar leaf, Handicrafts, Kashmir, Motif, Textiles*

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Introduction

Kashmir has a very well developed handicraft and handloom industry which brings in considerable

revenue to the artisans and craftsmen of this region. Be it in textiles like shawls and goods like bronze works, *papier mâché* decorative

objectives, or walnut woodworks Kashmir has its own distinctive style and signature. The Chinar tree (*Platanus orientalis kashmeriana*) has a deep rooted significance in Kashmir and is closely intertwined with its cultural development. This tree is essential and innate to the landscape of Kashmir and is found in nearly all its regions. According to folklore, it is not a native of the valley but was brought by Emperor Asoka. In local language it is known as *Boune* however it is popularly known as the Chinar (Fig 10.1). It was so named by Emperor Jehangir after he saw a grove of these trees during autumn when the leaves turn orange and red. According to popular lore he is believed to have exclaimed “*Chi naar*” translated to “What a blaze”. The Chinar was popularised by the Mughals and was planted in their gardens, along roads, on the premises of mosques, shrines and other important structures. In the year 1586 Akbar is said to have planted around seven hundred and fifty trees on the shores of Dal Lake and Hazratbal mosque. The Mughals not only planted these trees but were also very much involved in their care; for example, during Aurangzeb’s reign when a major fire destroyed the Grand Mosque of Srinagar, the emperor personally enquired about the Chinar trees thriving in the vicinity and remarked “The mosque can be rebuilt in a year or two, but it would have taken a long time to beautify it with chinars” (Daily Pioneer:2013) Not only Mughals even the Dogras who reigned from 1887-1947 planted hundreds of them in Srinagar and the regions around the city (Daily Pioneer:2013). The chinar tree as it ages develops a hollowed trunk which provides shelters to man and animals alike. According to *Akbarnama* Emperor Jehangir as well as Akbar both found refuge in its trunks during storms. Besides providing protection from storms, the tree trunks have also hosted mediating sages and are venerated by Kashmiri *pandits*. This tree also forms part of daily rites and rituals for Kashmiri Pandits, at Ganderbal it is a pre-requisite to pay obeisance to it before any wedding ritual. The chinars trees have become so interwoven with the

lives of the locals of Kashmir that many of them are named accordingly for example *Naid Boune* in under whose shade a barber set up shop, *Mandar Boune* is found near temples, *Astan Boune* is found near shrines and *dargahs* (mausoleums of Islamic saints).

Besides having spiritual and cultural importance chinar trees also have medicinal value, the bark has anti-rheumatic and anti-scorbutic properties, the bark is also boiled and given in cases of dysentery, fresh leaves help in eye infections and dried leaves are used in *kangris*- a device in which hot embers are placed to keep people warm during winters. It is but natural that the chinar would find its representation in the handicrafts of this region (Manhas; 2013: 1466). Chinar trees and specifically the chinar leaf motif are depicted on objects of *papier mâché*, shawls, textiles, carpets, furniture, utensils, and jewellery.

Studies have been done on other motifs such as the Paisley motif, but there is a clear absence of any work done specifically on the Chinar Leaf Motif. It is very important that we document this motif and further study its development. It is necessary to evaluate and trace its cultural connect and meaning to the local populations as it is an integral part of their heritage.

Motifs

A motif is the simplest and formative unit of any design. It is the smallest unit of a pattern; each pattern is repeated to create a particular design which forms an overall part of a composition. Use of motifs in any composition is guided by careful thought and need, as they have their own unique identity and representation. Motifs are generally categorised into four types: Geometric, Natural, Stylized and Abstract. The chinar leaf may be classified as a natural motif. Natural or realistic motifs are a direct representation of the environment around they include simplified depictions of flowers, trees of importance, animals or human figures. The natural motifs are also categorized as novelty designs as they do not employ the creativity of a designer (Azmat & Hadi 2018: 21-26)

The design industry and development of the distinct motifs and elements reached its pinnacle at the time of the famous Sufi saint from Persia, Hazrat Mir Syed Ali Hamdani (1341-1385 CE). He traveled to Kashmir to preach and spread his teachings and in the process brought along skilled artisans and craftsmen; this was the formative base of the cottage industry in the Kashmir valley. Further, during the Mughal rule, the textile industry along with other industries prospered. Emperor Akbar also brought and settled weavers from Persia in Kashmir. Weaving took hold during the time of Zain ul Abidin, and subsequently the carpets, shawls and textiles of Kashmir attained worldwide fame. At present also Srinagar has the largest concentrations of weavers and embroiderers who continued the traditions of their fore fathers and have maintained unbroken designs and their elements. Of all the design elements, motifs, particularly the natural and realistic motifs, form an integral part of the textiles and objects. Flowers like sunflowers, tulips, roses, marigolds are used in combination with stylized and abstract designs (Singh & Dar:2014:54-58).

Handicrafts of Kashmir

Kashmir has a rich, diverse and a thriving handicraft industry. It forms a major part of the state economy and also brings in considerable foreign exchange. Handicraft industry also provides employment to seasonal agricultural force, thereby providing throughout the year employment invariably leading to an increase in the living standards of people. The Jammu and Kashmir government in the past recognized this and thus opened training centers and schools. Averages of around 8500 persons are trained annually via the 553 state run training facilities. Keeping up the trend and demands by 2014 nearly 3005 were registered in the region. These societies also provided subsidies on tapering basis to the artisans and cooperative societies (Shah 2019). The total revenue brought in by the handicraft industry in 2013-14 was 2017.82/- (Rs in crore), in 2014-15 it was 2175.00/- and in 2016-

17 it was calculated at 2650. Around 1695.65 /-(Rs in crore) worth goods were exported in 2013-14, in 2014-15 it was 1287/-, in 2015-16 it was 1059 and in 2016-17 it was 1151/- (Majeed 2018: 976-989 ; Yasmin & Bhat:2013:367, 80.) The main handicrafts of Kashmir are : Carpet and tapestries, shawls, woodcraft, metalwork, wicker-craft and papiermâché.

Carpets and Tapestries

Kashmiri carpets are famous world over however, they are not an indigenous craft and were developed under the reign of Sultan Zain ul Abidin (1420-1470 CE). He brought craftsmen from Samarkand to teach and train his own artisans and *kaarigars*. It did not take long for the artisans to master the skill as they already knew how to weave shawls, resulting in rapid development of this craft industry. During the Mughal period, as well as during the reign of Ranjit Singh, carpet weaving was patronized and even exhibited to the world. Kashmiri carpets are handmade and are knotted. The major centers for carpet weaving are at Srinagar, Anantnag, Bandipora, Ganderbal, Budgam, Pulwama, Kulgam, Baramulla, Kupwara and Shopian (Gravis 1954, Kaur 2017:509-524 , Majeed 2018:976-989; Saraf 1987,1989,1990). Besides carpets other types of floor covering found in Kashmir are the Namdahs, Wagoos and Gabba. Wagoos are economical and easier to make and maintain. They are used to cover the floors in mosques, boats and generally form the base over which any carpets or Namdah is laid. These mats are generally woven by women. The Gabba is made on the principle of recycle and reuse and is made from old blankets and woollen covers. The artwork on Gabba is of three types: appliqué, embroidered or a combination of the two (Jaitley 1990: 155-171; Kamudi 2005; Pande 2019:24-26; Pirie & Pirie 1909). Namdahs are basically felt rugs, and are also very famous and in high demand by the tourists. The artwork on this felt rug is embroidered using chain stitch to depict motifs inspired by nature and environment (Mir & Ain,:2010: 220-227; Pande: 2019:24-26).

At the beginning the designs and patterns of the carpets were Persian, but slowly the artisans developed their own designs deriving these new patterns from the natural surroundings, and started to incorporate the local flora and fauna to give their own interpretations. The most recurring motif is of the tree of life in different combinations and patterns. The Naqash community is responsible for the design development of the carpets (Pande:2019:24-26; Latif. *et al*: 2019: 1-11). The carpets are categorized according to the design elements. Dajidar carpets have an all over design with repeating motifs to create a pattern, Mihrab has a single arch pattern, Chand Chauthai design has a central motif within a field termed as *chānd*, the corners decorated to form quarters (*chauthāi*) hence the name (Pande: 2019:24-26). According to folklore Namdah was introduced by Emperor Akbar as a suitable riding cover for his horse during the extreme winters. A type of Namdah rug is also indigenous to Yarkhan region which unlike the Kashmiri Namdah is plain.

Tapestries are rugs that are generally made on canvas. The canvas is fixed on a frame after which the design is traced. Cross stitch and needle work embroidery is used to bring out the design and pattern. Two types of threads are used - silk and woollen, sometimes a combination of these is used which further enhances the design. Here also the chinar leaf is a common motif and is beautifully interwoven into the patterns (Fig 10.2).

The Kashmiri Shawl

It is one of the most famous and recognizable textiles of the world with a high prestige value. Kashmiri shawls pre-date the Mughal period, but subsequently gained patronage during the rule of the Mughal emperors. Akbar was fond of the Kashmiri shawls and introduced the *Do shalla* pattern (where two shawls are sewn back to back hiding the undersurface) (Bhatnagar 2004). Kashmiri shawls were also given as robes of honor (*Khilat*) to courtiers and ministers to show favor and as a reward during the Mughal period. The Mughal *Khilat* would

include pashmina shawl with gold and silver embroidery (Maskiell: 2002: 27-65). Besides India, Kashmiri shawls have been in demand around the world,

There are three basic types of the Kashmiri shawl depending upon the textile used and further differentiation is based upon the work. The three types are: Ruffal, Pashmina and Shatoosh shawls. Ruffal shawls are made from merino wool. The Pashmina are high quality cashmere wool (pashm) shawls made from the under belly of the wild Asian goat *Capra hircus*. The pashm fiber is nearly five to six times finer than human hair; it is an excellent thermo conductor and traps heat. It is soft, lustrous, light and exclusive due to its scarcity. Shawls are generally made by mixing pashmina fiber along with silk as pure pashm fiber is not suitable for weaving. The pashmina shawls are further categorized into two types depending on the type of work: Kani is a woven type of pashmina shawl, also known as jamawar while Sozni is the embroidered variety. At present pashmina shawls are also embellished using *papier mâché* and *aari* work.

The Shahtoosh shawls are made from the hair of the wild antelope known as Chiru. The hair is taken from the soft undercoat. This is even superior to pashm fiber, the shahtoosh is nearly seven times finer than human hair and is very delicate. It needs considerable expertise to handle. These shawls are very delicate and are generally left bare without any work or designs. The shahtoosh shawls are retained in their original colors and are seldom dyed. These shawls are very rare because to obtain the raw material it would require killing of the animal, which is now banned, secondly there has been a reduction in the weavers and artisans handling the shahtoosh.

Kashmiri shawls are generally made in the colour combinations of yellow, black, blue, green, purple, scarlet and crimson. The designs are inspired by nature and the chinar leaf is one of the dominating motifs along with flowers such as tulips, apple blossoms fruits and birds (Fig 10.2) (Bhatnagar 2004).

Woodcraft

Kashmir has a thriving wood craft tradition and industry. Most of the wood is sourced locally. Walnut wood craft also known as Doon lath kaem being the predominant type, furniture of walnut wood is famous across the country for its colour, durability, sturdiness and resistance to termites. Besides furniture, the Khatumbandh work for ceilings is also renowned. This work is made by interlocking thin panels of pine wood and does not require any nails. An advantage is that the entire ceiling can be dismantled and transported if need be. These ceilings help in keeping the room warm during cold winters, and free from drafts. Besides making furniture, ceilings and other items of day to day use, wood carving from Kashmir is what sets the wood work apart. Walnut wood is most used and sought after, the carving on this wood is done by hand. The motifs used are similar to the ones used on shawls and *papier mâché* work. These are again of more naturalistic type and the chinar leaf being the predominant motif. Other motifs used are roses, grapes, lotuses and irises. Words from Rubaiyat by Umar Khayyam also started forming a part of this kind work. Walnut carvings, unlike the Khatumbandh, do not use geometrical patterns but follow a free flowing and more natural design. There are basically five distinct styles - Khokerdan (Undercuts) is usually done on panels and has multiple layers; Jalidahr Shobokdahr (Open Lattice work) is a type of open lattice work with chinar leaf being the main motif; Vabora Veth (Deep carving) is a type of raised work with lotus being the dominating motif; Padri (semi carving or engraved carving) are thin panels alongside a central motif while Sadai Kaam (plain carving) are shallow carvings done over a flat surface (Fig.10.3) (Saraf 1987).

Metalwork

This industry gained fame and momentum during the Mughal period wherein the craftsmen were mostly employed for producing blades and gun barrels. Once they had mastered the art of metallurgy, the artisans began producing other

objects. The chinar gold leaf jewelry is particularly very famous today and is unique to this state. In 1965 the chinar leaf motif was used for the first time in jewelry. Since then it has gained fame and popularity amongst the locals and tourists alike. Copperware is also distinct to this state, the Samovar a type of kettle in which the local brew Kehwa is brewed is also made from copper. Copper wares are generally used as kitchenware and cooking utensils. This copperware craft is also known as Kandkari, and involves engraving the copper utensils with motifs, the most recognizable being the Samovar (Din: 2015: 1213-1215) Kashmir has its own distinct cuisine which would require its very own serving ware and utensils for preparation. Because of this they form an important part of the bridal trousseau (Fig.10.3) (Pal: 1975:41; Saraf 1987).

Papier Mâché

Papier mâché craft is also of Persian origin and was brought to the state by Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin. The trade routes of the 16th and 17th century took this art form to Europe. Initially the shawls exported to Europe were packaged in *papier mâché* boxes, from where they caught the fancy of the populace and became in high demand. So much so, that the traditional name of this craft was changed from *Kar-i-kalamdani* to *papier mâché*. The original name of this art form also came from the type of objects first made, which included *kalamdans* or pen holders (Fig10.3) (Shah & Ghosh: 2020: 5)

The production of this craft involves two separate stages - Sakhtasazi which is basically making the object and Naqqashi which is the decorative stage consisting of painting the prepared surface. The motifs are again of naturalistic type inspired from the surroundings, and here also the chinar motif plays an important part. Some common design patterns involving flowers are the *gul andar gul* (Flower within flower), *gul vilayet* (dear flowers), hazara gul (thousand flowers). Kashmiri *papier mâché* artisans use a very fine brush made from the tail hair of jungle cats. The kind of brush work is very

fine with delicate shading which gives a rich look to the object (Saraf 1987).

Research Objectives

The main aim of this study was to study and possibly trace the usage and development of the Chinar Leaf motif. This motif is profusely depicted on most of the handicrafts of this region, as can be gathered from above mentioned excerpts. Besides its aesthetic value, the Chinar motif has a deep cultural value and is symbolic of Kashmir. Nowhere else is this motif represented except in Kashmir, which gives it a unique identity as a cultural marker.

Methodology

For this study a thorough literary survey was done, being based in Srinagar first-hand experience of use of this motif was documented. Local shops were visited to get a sense of the most common objects with chinar leaf on sale. Local factories and *Kharkhannas* (workshops) were also visited coupled with interaction with the artisans involved in producing and depicting this motif.

The study was not only restricted to Srinagar but regions like Baramulla were also visited and use of this motif documented (Fig.10.4). Here Chinar leaf is most commonly depicted on the Phiran, the traditional Kashmiri woollen dress for women. Besides, interactions with shopkeepers and merchants revealed that tourists also mostly prefer objects and textiles with the chinar leaf motif, thus maintaining its demand in the market. The motif has gained as souvenir value and tourists do invest in some item or the other with this design.

Discussion

Kashmiri handicrafts have a strong Persian influence. The cultural exchange between Kashmir and Central Asia is well documented and studied, and goes back in antiquity. Proofs of this can be seen at various sites such as the tiles of Harwan monastery near Srinagar, use of decorated tiles to list official designations (Kak

:1923:4-65, Mohibbul :2003:412, Sofi 2017). To briefly trace the Persian roots, in the year 1386 Shah-i-Hamdan came to the valley with a large number of artisans, who were skilled in weaving, book binding, calligraphy and in tile mosaics (Sofi 2017). Many novel and exotic crafts were introduced such as Kar-i-kalamdani, Khatamband, namdaahs. Next in the 15th century, cultural association and relations were encouraged with Samarkand, Bukhara and Khurasan, many new industries were introduced at the time (Sofi 2017). Important developments took place under the patronage of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin; he laid down systematic methods to improve and further the handicraft industries, he wanted to mimic the Central Asian Model for these local industries, for these he extended invitations to many artists from these areas, and enrolled them in his pay (Sofi 2017; Srivara :1986:151).

The motifs and design patterns on the handicrafts of Kashmir are primarily naturalistic in their style, development, concept and execution. The artisans instead of masking the material used tries to focus upon the form and nature of the material in the products. An artisan draws his/her inspiration from nature, visualizes the pattern and then elaborates and brings it to life through his/her art. A good example of this is the wood work - the natural look of the walnut wood is maintained



Fig. 10.1: A Multihued Chinar leaf

Source: Novocop.com

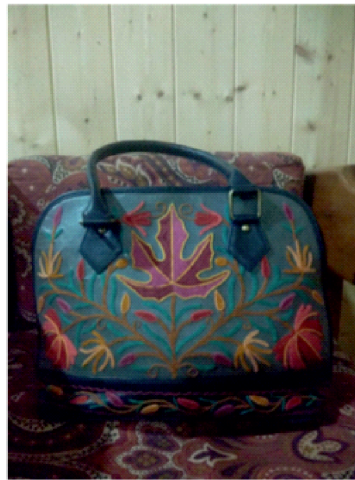


Fig. 10.2: The Chinar leaf motif on Kashmiri Textiles

A Woollen coat; B & C Kani work on Jamavar Shawl; D Stole; E Chinar motif as a large motif on a cotton suit; F Chinar leaf in Needlework embroidery in two different motifs on a crepe sari; G Chinar motif hand embroidered on a bedspread



A



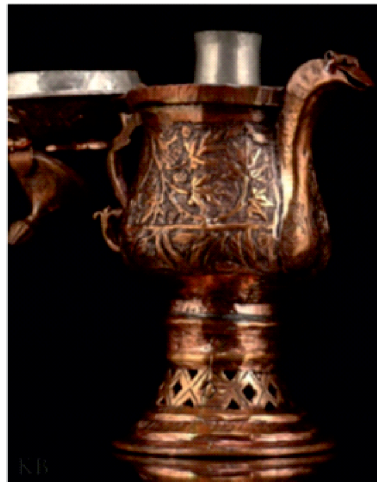
B



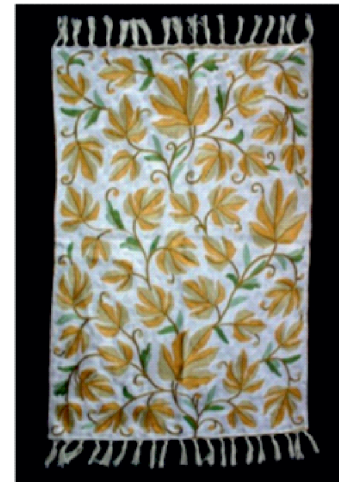
C



D



E



F



G

Fig. 10.3: Chinar leaf motif on common handicrafts of Kashmir

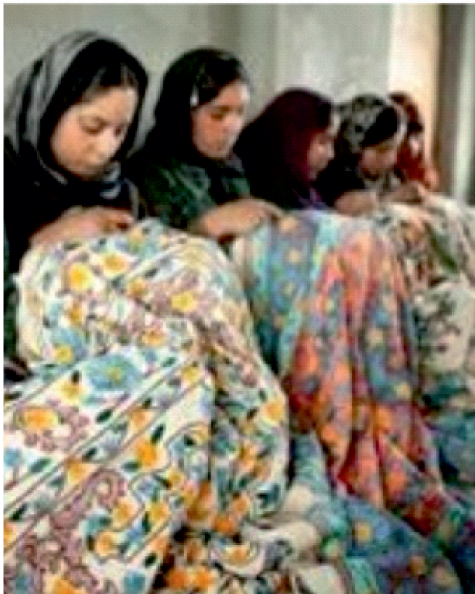
A. Suede pouch; B. Pure Sheep leather handbag; C. Gold jewellery; D. Paper mâché boxes; E. Samovar (Source: Google images); F. Chinar leaf motif in chain stitch upon a Namdah (rug); G. The motif on a carved walnut wood jewellery box (Source: Google images).



A



B



C



D

Fig. 10.4: A Walnut wood carving workshop, Srinagar; B Pashmina workshop, Srinagar;

C. Women at a weaving and embroidery centre, Baramullah; D. Copper workshop, Srinagar.

without using the coloured varnish. The idea is to preserve the natural grain of the wood. The dominant designs of the woodcraft are floral with chinar motif being the most important pattern. Even the textiles, both woven and embroidered employ naturalistic patterns as a tribute to their land. The colours, contrasts, designs all evoke movement and life in static mediums. Another

famous textile is the Kashmiri shawl, which once draped expresses the skill of the artisans as well as the natural abundance of the land. Objects of art such as *papier mâché* items have beautiful designs of meadows, lush valleys, colourful landscapes with flowers and birds; here also the chinar leaf motif is the central motif (Sofi 2017).

Conclusion

In the Kashmir valley, the handicraft industry and arts have been patronized and have a widespread popularity. It is very important to study regional specialization and development of patterns and this is also true for the craftsmen of Kashmir. As discussed above, Srinagar has one of the largest concentrations of weavers and embroiders. The artworks are as popular today as they were in the past allowing the continuation of the centuries old crafts. For generations these artisans have lived and worked in the Kashmir valley. They perhaps played a key role in the development of the many traditional motifs that are so popular today and the chinar leaf motif is also part of this heritage. Although the exact origin of the chinar motif is not clear, it can be dated at least as far back as the Mughal period when embroidery and designing reached its zenith (Kallan :2018:172-180). This motif is native to the region and there is a complete absence of it in any other artworks from other parts of the country (India). But here in the Kashmir valley, its full expression is seen in objects of daily use, as well as high value crafts. The state has used the chinar motif to express its identity. It is associated with many public offices and is commonly seen on many public buildings around the city of Srinagar. It is symbolic and has a deep cultural value for the local people and is also revered. Today we see many different styles and interpretation of this motif, the basic shape is maintained but redesigning is seen in the length of the leaves, controlling the depiction of fluidity, the combination in which it is portrayed, etc. From a very simple basic design where only the shape is portrayed to highly stylised forms with multiple detailed characters, the chinar leaf is one of the most recognisable patterns on any Kashmiri handicraft.

This is a preliminary study wherein use of this motif is studied, and its popularity expressed. Furthermore in depth studies would be required to fully understand this motif and its impact on the artworks.

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