

The Art of Wood Work in Kashmir

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Wood has long been used in Kashmir for making houses (Stein 1900: 451-452)¹, but it was not preferred for the construction of monumental worship architecture for a long time. It was for the first time that large worship buildings were made when Islam arrived there (Hasan 1959: 268).² Thereafter, not only wooden structures were constructed either exclusively or in association with stone and/or brick masonry to raise huge monumental buildings that exist till date but also they were decorated with wooden ceilings, walls, doors, cornices, facades on balconies. This time common houses were built of wood and were most beautifully decorated as Mirza Haidar narrates:

‘In the town, there are many lofty buildings constructed of fresh-cut pine. Most of these are at least five storeys high; each storey contains apartments, halls, galleries and towers. The beauty of their exterior defies description and all who behold them for the first time, bite the finger of astonishment with the teeth of admiration’ (Dughlat 1991: 425)

Sultan Zainul Abidin also got built a palace for himself all of wood in Nau Shahr (*Ibid*). It has twelve storeys, some of which contain fifty rooms, halls, and corridors. It was surmounted by a golden dome, and its spacious halls were lined with glass (Srivara 1990: 137). This tradition of wooden architecture and craft seems to have developed and flourished under the Sultans in particular under the fostering care of Sultan Zainul Abidin whose patronage attracted master artisans for various crafts from different parts of the Central Asia. According to Pundit Srivara, the court chronicler of the Sultan, the great king provided all amenities of life to such craftsmen and they popularized their arts and crafts among the Kashmiris (Srivara 1990: 101).

As said above that while all Hindu and Buddhist buildings of ancient Kashmir are built of stone, on the other hand many of the mosques and shrines, that were built subsequently, are either made entirely of wood or decorated finely in this medium. Many such splendid buildings still exist as models of the carpenters’ craft such as *Khanqah-i Mu’alla*, Makhdum Sahib’s shrine, Jami Masjid in Srinagar, *Khanqah-i Naqashband* Srinagar etc. Their facades, even though partly built of brick masonry, have yet eloquent use of wood in the form of structural material as well as decorative element. The wood has been utilized to build the pyramidal roofs, balconies, verandahs, arcades, porticoes, paneled walls and painted ceilings. The Madani Mosque in Srinagar, a small building but the earliest surviving example, has its roof in the pyramidal wooden style supported on long wooden columns with a paneled ceiling in *khatamand* as is the case in the *Khanqah-i Mu’alla* in Srinagar. Even though this roofing pattern has not been found in Central Asia or Iran, yet the wooden coping on the stone plinth used in the *Khanqah* is quite old in appearance and richly carved carrying Saracenic scrolls (Nicholas 1955).³ The carved ornamentation allows us to believe that the building, which was damaged on many occasions, has somehow preserved this wooden piece to exhibit the influence of Central Asia/Persia in the wood craft. Another such example is found in the door of the Madani Mosque, which is carved like that of Ahmad Yasavi’s doors at his tomb near Bukhara carrying geometric designs and scrolls. These and many buildings in and outside Srinagar have elaborate carving on the base and

capital of the pillars as well as wooden ceiling in *khatamband* design. Their superstructures in the form of arcades and porticoes, their opening filled with lattice work, *pinjara*, and enriched carved wooden insertions enhance charm and accentuate the stylishness of this architecture.

Pinjara (Akhter 1981: 12)⁴, a lattice work on wood (Sarraf 1987: 107)⁵, has remained a novelty of decorations in Kashmir and is done on the fences, doors, railings, ventilators, room partitions, screens and windows. All the existing buildings in wood have such work in different geometric designs. There is but one example on stone at the Madani Sahib Tomb (15th century) (Srinagar) (Sufi 1996: 511)⁶, which has carved lattice scrolls instead of geometric designs. This work on the tomb built during the reign of Zainul Abidin indicates that the lattice craft was known at that time even though there is no work left in wood of that era and it may have served as a forerunner to the wooden craft. It may have been introduced during the reign of Sultan Zainul Abidin for him, being the founder and architect of many such works in Kashmir and for which he introduced many craftsmen from Central Asia. This craft was already existing there at that time as in some of the buildings like *Tilakari Madrasah* in Samarkand, Bukhara Citadel in Uzbekistan (*Central Asian Art* 2003: 6) and may have therefore reached Kashmir to be used by the carpenters. The 12-storeyed palace of the Sultan in Srinagar was one of the buildings in Kashmir to use windows having wooden screens, either carrying arabesque like the tomb of Madani or geometrical designs as found in the late period buildings like the *Khanqah* in Srinagar or Pampore (Khoyhami 1999: 270-273; Riazuddin 1988: 358). Such a craft was in existence then is testified by Mirza Haidar who finds its existence also at Samarkand and Bukhara (Dughlat 1991: 425). In Central Asia the craft was possibly introduced after the Arabs had mastered the mathematical patterns and created various designs of '*Mashraqbiya*' or lattice in a number of simple and complicated designs that were used for the window screens, fences, doors, railings, ventilators, and room partitions. During the Mughal period, stone architecture was reintroduced into Kashmir for monumental architecture and in their buildings stone screens instead of wood have been used on the Mughal pattern as in the *Madrasah* and mosque of Mulla Akhund. However, it seems that wooden screen works did not suffer as Bernier who visited Kashmir during the reign of Aurangzeb (1658-1707 CE) makes a special mention of the latticed doors of the houses of kings and nobles, which screened from view the beautiful ladies of the harem (Bernier 1891: 402). The Jami Masjid in Srinagar rebuilt on the earlier pattern during his time has retained the lattice designs that existed earlier.

Many designs of the *pinjara kari* were made in Kashmir (Zahid 1987: 53).⁷ The most popular being those of the rising sun and cobwebs. The best kind of *pinjara* work was known by the Kashmiri names of *posh kandur*, *chaharkhana*, *sadae kandur*, *shas sitira*, *shah pahl*, *dwazedh-sar*, *shekh sar*, *juggari*, *shirin* and *tota shesh temez*. All these designs however do not differ from the mathematical designs of the Arabs or that used by the Central Asians in limited form. What Kashmiri craftsmen added was mastery of the craft in fine form and its survival till date speaks of its popularity in the past and as such figures frequently in the folklore of Kashmir.

‘*Zaile pinjara tile nazar trav, Bali asimi tamblav*’

(Bestow upon me one glance from behind the Pinjara. Oh young beauty, pray do not tantalize me) (*Ibid*).

Like this craft, *khatamband* has survived in Kashmir for centuries but remains secluded among a small group of craftsmen in Srinagar. They piece together small slices of wood to make beautiful geometrical designs without joining them with nails or glue. The art is said to have been introduced by Mirza Haidar Dughlat in 1541 CE (Sufi 1996: 586; Sarraf 1987: 107) when he ruled Kashmir. However, the existing specimens show that in Kashmir certain innovations were made in the craft that replaced the ivory, bone, mother of pearl, brass and silver and in this place pure wooden pieces were painted with floral motifs as in the mosque of the Madani where minute carvings were made to enhance the beauty of the panels. It was also sometimes painted to give different hues to separate geometrical panels or other inscriptions written, as on the panels of the wall in the *Khanqah* at Srinagar. Such innovations even though make the craft different from the *khatamkari* in the outlook yet these make it more beautiful. In the past this craft may have been very popular and has been appreciated for its beauty: '... beautiful ceilings of perfect design, cheap and effective, are made by few carpenters, who with marvelous skill piece together thin slices of pine wood. The result is a charming ceiling in which the various shades of the pine-slips blend together in perfect harmony' (Lawrence 2004: 380).

Besides, Kashmir has remained famous for its production of wood carvings that were used for the decoration of buildings, in particular the decoration of doors, their jambs, cornices, eaves, wall paneling, columns, furniture articles, etc. Most often they show variety both in execution and subject matter. The subject matter in most of the cases has been scrolls and flowers set in such simplicity that complicated themes become understandable quite easily. Again it goes to the credit of Zainul Abidin that carving craft was introduced then and the mosque of Madani stands as a testimony. The main door of the mosque is profusely carved with floral motifs. Although now worn out due to age and weathering, it still preserves the excellent workmanship of the bygone days displaying arabesques in seven panels on each door shutter. As said above, it has analogy with Central Asian examples like that of the doors in the Khawaja Ahmad Yasavi's mosque (14th century CE) and may have as such been introduced from there. There is possibility that this craft may have got established quickly in Kashmir as stone carvers of the previous times may have found it quite easier to work on wood than on stone on which they worked for centuries together. The stone carvers now turned carpenters seem to have excelled most in such carving executions in Kashmir and copied the most famous lotus stone carving of earlier times on wood once the wooden carvings were introduced as in the mosque of Madani. These lotus carvings on the ceiling look wonderful and show how purposefully the craftsman changed its complexion and location from that of a ceiling of a temple to the new worship house. The new masters of the wood craft made structural designs of the buildings in such a way that allowed them to show their mastery in making porticos, verandahs, hanging balconies with designed columns and/or wooden screen fittings in harmony and blending them with ornamentation. The carved decoration of cornices, eaves, etc was to further make the facades more exquisite as all these things are found in the *Khanqah* at Srinagar. The wood craft and craftsmen may have enjoyed an extended period of luxury to work in Kashmir following their learning from their masters from Central Asia and they busied themselves in creating such wooden structures across the land⁸ that within next two hundred years there was left hardly any mason in the land to work on stone structures.⁹ In addition, they became famous for making carved furniture, and set up workshops to make other utility things and Bernier, accompanying Emperor Aurangzeb in 1665 CE, noticed the workmanship and beauty of palanquins,

bedsteads, ink stands, boxes and spoons and such daily items were exported and found all over India (Bernier 1891: 402). Such and other articles of wood carvings are still exported and one finds very little difference in their workmanship from those carved in Central Asia except in their traditional patterns and articles in use.

Notes

- ¹ History tells of the old five storeyed high wooden palace of Srinagar, which was unfortunately set on fire by invaders during the reign of Harsha. From the year 1028 CE onwards wood craft related to architectural intricacies had begun to flourish. This was because the new palace was set up on the bank of river *Vitasta*, were close to the rich forest of Tashwan.
- ² Use of wood became more popular under the Sultans. This is perhaps due to the fact that the change of religion required the hasty erection of buildings for public worship on a much larger scale than had been required by Hindu worshippers.
- ³ The consistent use of Saracenic detail and the fact the style was and is still applied to Muhammadan tombs and mosques and not to the Hindu structures, indicates in the first place that much of its character was introduced into Kashmir from abroad and secondly that it came into Kashmir with the arrival of Islam.
- ⁴ *Pinjara* has a story of its own. There is a belief that the wood carvers of Kashmir copied it from the Chalukyan sculptors and stone masons. But since there is no trace of any extant specimen earlier than the Mughal period, it is difficult to say with certainty where the art originated. No doubt the Saracenic influence, which predominated during and after the reign of Zainul Abidin in arts and crafts of Kashmir had a lot to do with the designing and manufacturing of *Pinjara* panels. This form is said to have evolved because of *pardah* system of Islam. The sexes have to be segregated, and yet there were occasions when the women needed to see what was going on in the men's section.
- ⁵ *Pinjara* is a lattice work built of minute lathes arranged in geometric form so as to display edges. They are held in position by the pressure they exert, one against the other, by certain main lines being dwelt together and by the frame of the panel within which it is assorted. They are rarely, if ever glued together and in wood work are so accurately fitted and balanced that they do not fall to pieces even the frame is removed. The *Budlu* or *Kair* wood was used for making *Pinjara*.
- ⁶ Sayyid Al-Madani came to Kashmir during the reign of Sultan Sikandar (1398-1444 CE), died during the reign of Zainul Abidin (1420-1470 CE). As a token of reverence, Zainul Abidin built beautiful mosque at Madin Sahib for the Sayyid, mostly in stone masonry, collected from a pre-Islamic building. An inscription in Arabic on the lintel above the door records the date 844 H (1444 CE).
- ⁷ The tools used for making *Pinjaras* were those used by the ordinary carpenters and included straight and curved chisels, plane hand saw and piles, both rough and smooth, various kinds of plinners, and woo screw, etc.
- ⁸ Kashmir is full of such buildings where wood has been extensively used such as Naqashband mosque, Shrine of Nund Rishi at Qiamoh, Shrine of Zain-ud-Din Wali, Shrine of Amir-i Kabir at Dooru, Shrine of Sayyid Simnan at Kulgam, Jami Masjid of Srinagar, Shah-i Hamdan mosque, Jami Masjid of Shupiyan, Shrine of Marofi Basri at Srandu, etc.

- ⁹ For the construction of fort, Akbar brought two hundred masons from outside Kashmir; Persian text of the Kathi Darwaza inscription.

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