

A RESOLUTE GLOBAL ENDEAVOUR TO PROTECT TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE: CONCERNS FOR TRADITIONAL ART AND CRAFT IN KASHMIR

*Written by M. Afzal Wani,
Professor, University School of Law and Legal Studies,
Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University
Delhi (India)*

Perspectives

Art and artisanship is a cherished heritage of the people of Kashmir and a substantial support to its economy.¹ It is distinctly remarkable that the spiritual benefactors as well as certain rulers have made efforts to support the people of Kashmir by promoting the artistic works by making them popular in aristocracy and other well to do circles within and outside the Indian subcontinent. They have also helped them by expanding their nature of art and promotion of more and more skills. This sense of responsibility of those rulers and spiritual benefactors is a role model to have a parallel in modern concept of state responsibility.

Development of wood carving

The art of wood carving has developed and flourished in Kashmir under the fostering care of Budshah, Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin who, during his reign, patronised art and attracted artisans from the then splendid art centres of Samarqand, Bukhara and Persia. He, according to the Sultan's court chronicle, Pandit Srivara, provided all amenities of life to those foreign craftsmen and they popularised their art and craft among the people of Kashmir. The wood work of the 'Muslim period' bears an eloquent proof of the fact that this art received a great stimulus under the Sultans of Kashmir.²

Promotion of carpet weaving and textiles

During the Muslim Sultans, the approach of the rulers towards artisans and merchants was very cooperative and, therefore, supportive of the industry as such. The industry was strengthened to develop a stable merchant community who fostered production of raw materials and maintained a grip on the markets also by safe guarding the overall interests of

¹ . Kashmir is the popularly known tourist place "Valley of Kashmir" (India)

² Sultans were the Muslim kings of Kashmir.

the people of Kashmir by not allowing the Europeans to penetrate their commercial bases in Central Asia.³

(i) *Promotion of shawl*

Shawls, though primarily, have been the warm protective garments of the aristocracy and the kings and queens since ancient times, with the flourishing of democracy, these have in the low cost forms come to the use of other sections of the people also. The Mughals Emperor Akbar would keenly use to wear and spread shawls of different varieties and styles to boost up the shawl industry and encourage weavers to look for new motifs. The shawl is generally used as a shoulder mantle, in existence in India in diverse forms since times immemorial, benefiting the users by giving them charm and by protecting them from biting cold.

(2) *Designing*

Designing has born with man and has ever remained his closest friend. It is always a contemporary and with silence speaks out and reflects the mode of life and social atmosphere of a particular society at a particular period of time. It is a pattern of life, a depiction of tastes, aspiration, vision, happiness and sorrows of a certain age. Every article of use has a certain size and features defined for it by the very use it is destined for and this has never been missed by any designer, primitive or modern. A designer designs an article and decorated it with relevance to its use or the function for which it is needed and the nature of the materials available. A design is closely associated with the industrial, civic and religious life of people, translated by the artist into practical terms.⁴

(3) *Papier mache*

Papier mache is an art and virtue; an effect of the around and a reflection to reflections in the scene or circumstances. It is a beauty to try to match a beauty that beautifies. Truly it has been noted that environment has its effect in moulding a man so as to develop good or bad taste. This helps us in understanding how the inhabitants of Kashmir have been able to reproduce the scenic beauty of the valley through their dedicated artisanship in its various manifestations.

Constitutional Obligation

³ The travel accounts of Desideri, Bernier, Moon Craft and other Central Asian travellers' accounts are replete with such information. The 'Secret files' of Central Asian activities also have many references to this effect. See *supra* note 8.

⁴ *Id.* at pp.37-38.

With great appreciation the Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir, 1956 has expressly provided in its Article 17 under its Directive Principles of State policy that:

The State shall, in order to rehabilitate, guide and promote the renowned crafts and cottage industries of the State, initiate and execute well considered programmes for refining and modernising techniques and modes of production, including the employment of cheap power so that unnecessary drudgery and toil of the workers are eliminated and the artistic value of the product enhanced, while else full scope is provided for the encouragement and development of individual talent and initiative.

Governmental Programmes and Action

The government in Kashmir is not ignorant about marvellous art in Kashmir and its miraculous craftsmanship. Recently in Srinagar on 23rd February 2013 the representatives of the Kashmir government termed the artisanship as the backbone of its economy. The truism is that if the economic interest of the artisans continues to be ignored the ‘art’ could face extinction, however. The innovative measures, if taken in hand, cannot only save it but can definitely lead to a better developmental phase and growth of ‘art’ and the artisans associated with it. Presently there is an institutional mechanism in place in the state that is supposed to promote and make available measures to sustain this industry and heritage. The main organisation constituting the state apparatus for over all operation of the artisan welfare and promotion activities is the Jammu and Kashmir Handicrafts (S&E) Corporation. To be effective, this and all other state measures would need a continuous evaluation, assessment and innovation.

The J&K Handicrafts Corporation

The main objects of the corporation are:

1. to run, manage and administer the Kashmir Government Arts Emporium or any other State Undertaking as may be notified by the Government from time to time, in a manner as would ensure their efficient, economical and better management and operation;
2. to undertake sale in India and Export of handicrafts, Handloom products, Khadi and products of village Industries and other products produced and manufactured in the State of Jammu and Kashmir as supplement to private voluntary effort;
3. to establish trade connections, sale depots, selling agencies, office or distributing agents etc.
4. to open publicity-cum-information centres, showrooms, sale depots and warehouses at suitable places in foreign countries;

5. to organize production through co-operatives, artisans or its own production centres; and
6. to make available technical, financial and other assistance to co-operatives, producers, small traders and their associates, to produce and supply raw material. Tools and equipments, trained artisans to set up Common Facility Centres and to establish a system of inspection and quality control.

Projects

- a) *Paper pulp manufacturing plant*
- b) *Carpet washing and drying unit*
- c) *Walnut wood seasoning unit*
- d) *Kani shawl project*

Craft Development Institute⁵

Craft Development Institute (CDI) at Srinagar is an autonomous Institute, known really to not all who should know it. It was given birth by the office of DC-Handicrafts, Textile Ministry, Union Government and the State Industries and Commerce Ministry (Directorate of Handicrafts) in February 2004. The Institute is under the management of an executive committee which is headed by the State Principal Secretary (Industries and Commerce).

- (a) *School of Designs-Crafts Museum*

In Kashmir, which has one of the richest craft tradition, has kept alive its crafts largely as a tourist trade, but the same designs had more or less been continued decade after decade with very little variations. In order to give more colour and life to the designs of Kashmir Handicrafts a design unit called School of Designs was established here in 1957. It has done a marvellous job by improving upon the old designs and creating thousands of new designs. It has truly become a treasure of master piece designs. Much of the good work done by it has remained unknown and unnoticed. It is time to bring out these designs for popular use. Its website can serve that purpose. These new designs offer a variety of items and are appreciably based on and connected with the traditions.

Local constituency based training centres

The government has established art training centres under the corresponding scheme of local training centres at different places in various election constituencies. For example, in Budgam

District there are 10 such centres in the main Budgam constituency, 6 in Narbal, 2 in Chadoora, 12 in Natipora, 12 in BK Pora, 10 in Beerwa, 3 in Khansahib and 12 in Chararisharif. These centres are established in villages chosen by the local MLs. There is a need for monitoring of this scheme as the results so far have not been booming as the case should have been.

Curriculum for training

Artisanship being considered as the sheet anchor of the Kashmir economy training programmes for artisans should be oriented to preservation and promotion of skills, employment generation and creation of wider base for production and consumption. It should be purposive, tangible and productive. Each training module which under the new scheme is being adopted for training centres is expected to focus on developing comprehensiveness in approach and action. The ingredients of the module would be:

- a) General introductory inputs (basic exposure to tools and techniques);
- b) Guidance for vision development;
- c) Capacity building training inputs;
- d) Building capabilities for networking

For building capabilities for networking there should be programming for the artisans in the areas of basic communication skills, networking, negotiating and business accommodating. The training inputs should cover, in particular, sensitive aspects like customers' preferences for specific colour combinations, cataloguing and ways about off-take of the product. The language should be simple but appropriate.

Impact of governmental action

The report about the art learning centres established by the government in various constituencies, available on its website, has not been revised since 2007. No literacy camps have been held in the areas of people mostly depending on art productions for their living.⁶ Hence, the launching of the schemes and establishment of the institutions for promotion of Kashmir art is welcome, but will have to be made effective by proper monitoring.

XI-Conclusion

A challenge to be marked by the government that is causing a lot of the damage to Kashmir art industry is the continuing threat from the vendors of spurious items in the name Kashmir productions. The government is not with clear policies on this issue. However, providing Radio Frequency Tags to the shawls manufactured in Kashmir to guarantee their purity and genuineness is being considered.

For making above mentioned measures effective all concerned, especially those who have been engaged by the government to play their role for this purpose, should rise to the occasion and contribute to the best of their ability. The people in general should also treat artisans with due dignity to make it more acceptable socially.

