Traditional wicker handicraft by the Shaakhzaazi communities of rural Kashmir

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Wicker handicraft, the technique of basket and furniture weaving, is a well-known forest based cottage industry of Shaakhzaazi communities, playing an eminent role in the socio-economy and cultural heritage of Kashmir. The study is an attempt to document the indigenous knowledge pertaining to wicker handicraft practices. Multi-stage random sampling was employed to select one hundred Shaakhzaazi households from twenty sample villages in district Pulwama of Kashmir. The data were collected using ethnographic research methods, interviews, observations and discussions. In all, the historical and socio-religious aspects of Shaakhzaazi communities, collection of wicker species, processing practices, tools used in weaving, weaving techniques, livelihood mainstay, problems and prospects and gender analysis in wicker handicraft are discussed.

Keywords: Traditional wicker handicraft, Shaakhzaazi tribal, Kashmir

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Wicker is woven handicraft made of plant stalks, branches or shoots formed into a rigid material, usually used for baskets or furniture. Wicker is traditionally woven from natural hard fibers of plant origin such as rattan, cane, bamboo, swamp grasses, reeds and thin tree branches, especially willow. Wicker baskets and furniture are light, sturdy, durable, inexpensive, weather resistant and adaptable to many services, making it ideal for outdoor as well as indoor uses. Antique wicker products are well known for its aesthetic, bio-degradable and eco-friendly substitution for the conventional synthetic materials. The shiny dusky golden colours with wild temperate essence make the wicker handicrafts enchanting and attractive and add dignity to people. Wicker handicraft is a prominent traditional small scale forest based cottage industry of Shaakhzaazi communities of Kashmir, existed since the time of immemorial and deeply rooted in local folk tradition. It is certainly the country's most common and most popular handicraft and the handicrafts are marketed and used almost in all parts of the country. The wicker handicrafts weaved from withies of Indigofera pulchella Roxb., Parrotia jacquemontiana Decne., Cotoneaster baciliaris Wall. ex Lindl., Salix triandra L., etc., have won worldwide acclaim for their exquisite designs, craftsmanship, aesthetic elegance and functional utility. In form, wicker handicraft presents diverse shapes and sizes and comprises circular, spherical or cylindrical artifacts of caskets, containers and furniture. The colourful vases, hand fans, prayer mats for mosques, ‘chicks’ for doors, lamp shades, sofa sets, cupboards, tables and chairs, kangri (fire-pot), dakri, kargul, apple basket, chhanpa, oval arm basket, laundry basket, bakers basket, multi-purpose basket, dustbins, cradle for children, tray, pet baskets, round basket, lunch basket, picnic basket, kitchen basket, flower baskets, fancy basket, duck basket, basket for food items and sarpoosh, curtain rings, cycle baskets, etc., are the most widespread and admired handicrafts of wickers in Kashmir. The wicker baskets and containers are used to store chapaatis, vegetables, trinkets, clothes, etc., and carrying loads. The ‘Kangri’ is a special basket containing chafing earthen pot which is used to counter severe cold during winter by the Kashmiri people. The wicker sieve is extensively used for separating husk, seed, seed coat, small dusts, debris from grains or condiments. Likewise, other wicker handicrafts occupy a prominent place in the socio-economic and cultural life of Kashmiri people.

The wicker handicraft embodied with unique indigenous knowledge and intricate skill of workmanship transferred from generations has

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achieved a distinctive place in the weaving craft of India. The skilled weavers whether housewives or fulltime artisan painstakingly interweave the thin and flexible withies into nice and fancy products not merely cater to the needs of the individual, the household or the community, but also to satisfy their personal urge for self expression and creative impulse. The wicker handicraft does not require heavy capital investment and infrastructure such as machinery, buildings and power and thus, have made a significant contribution to the rural industrialization in Kashmir. Hence, the wicker handicraft plays vital role in livelihoods, socio-economy, cultural heritage, art and craft and poverty alleviation of rural Kashmir.

Unfortunately, due to limited rights and concessions to access wickers from forests, influx of synthetic products, lack of organized marketing system and lack of funding, finance and subsidies, the Shaakhsaazi communities are facing a lot of problems in wicker collection, production of wicker handicrafts and its marketing. The study is an attempt to document the art and architecture of wicker handicraft practiced by the Shaakhsaazi communities in district Pulwama of Kashmir valley.

Materials and methods

Sampling and data collection

Multi-stage random sampling technique was employed to select the sample villages as well as households. In first stage, twenty villages having four sample villages from each block namely, Tral, Pampora, Kakapora, Keller and Pulwama of the district were selected. In II stage, one hundred Shaakhsaazi households, five from each sample villages were selected. The sample was consisted of 25 % of the total number of the households owning small scale wicker handicraft based cottage industries. Household heads or eldest members were treated as the respondents. Structured interview, participant observation, assistance of key informants and focus group discussion were used to accumulate the data regarding the art and architecture of wicker handicraft of the Shaakhsaazi communities. Ethnographic/folkloristic research methods were also followed to collect the data. Fieldworks in the natural context of craftsmanship had been carried out in the sample villages to enrich the study.

Shaakhsaazi communities

The Shaakhsaazi communities living in the Kashmir valley derive their name from the Kashmiri words Shaakh and Saazi, meaning slender pliable branches and the act of weaving, respectively. They are mainly immigrants from Central Asia and belong to the Indo-Aryans stocks. They are concentrated in Srinagar, Hazratbal, Soura, Haren and Shalabag (in Ganderbal and Anchar), Doru, Dyalgam in Qomoh in Anantnag town and at Charar-e-sharif in Badgam district. They include persons with surnames of Bhatt, Mir, Wage, Malik, Dev, Wani, Ganai, Dar, Shah, Khan, etc. They profess Islam and belong to the Sunni sect and observe all Muslim fairs and festivals. They perform the birth rituals of sundr, zerkashi and khatmahal. Gandum, doonlaiz, dapandbata, menzirat, nikaah, withal, etc., are the marriage rituals. The dead are buried and the cheharum and chehllum are the main rituals observed on the fourth and fortieth day, respectively. Nuclear family prevails in the communities and property inheritance takes place through the male line from father to the eldest sons. Though endogamy is preferred, marriage with any Muslim community of the Sunni sect is not prohibited. Polygamy is permitted but monogamy is the general form and residence after marriage is patrilocal. Parallel and cross cousin marriages, levirate and sarrorate are common. Remarriage of divorcee, widower and widow is also allowed. They speak Kashmiri and use Perso-Arabic script. They are basically landless or marginal land holders depending on their traditional handicraft and primary occupation of basketry. Disputes and problems among the people are solved by a council of community elders.

Collection of wicker

The wicker species mostly used to weave handicrafts by the Shaakhsaazi communities are Parrotia jacquemontiana Decne., Indigofera pulchella Roxb., Cotoneaster baciliaris Wall. ex Lindl., Salix triandra L., S. viminalis Balb., S. puprpurea L. and S. daphnoides Vill. (Table 1). The wicker handicraftsmen collect withies of Parrotia jacquemontiana Decne., Indigofera pulchella Roxb. and Cotoneaster baciliaris Wall. ex Lindl. from nearby Himalayan Dry Temperate Forests (Fig. 1), which is completed in three phases as: spring collection (Sonth-e-kain) from April to May, summer collection (Wahraat-e-kain) from May to July and autumn collection (Harud-e-kain) from October to November. The withies of Salix triandra L., S. viminalis Balb., S. puprpurea L. and S. daphnoides Vill. are collected from plantations grown in homestead or agro-forests by the handicraftsmen. The quantity of wickers
collected depends on wicker types, availability of the wickers, market demand and season. The wicker collection is a labour intensive operation spending a sizeable person days of the wicker handicraftsmen.

**Processing of wicker**

The processing of the wickers includes cutting of branches or twigs and cleaning (Fig. 2), grading of wickers for different handicraft designs, soaking in water for 10-24 hrs, peeling off the bark (Fig. 3) and vertical stacking for drying either in shade or in the open (Fig. 4) before storage. In case of willow, the withies are boiled in a tank for up to 10 hrs instead of soaking and processed subsequently. Finally, the withies are tied up into bundles (bolts) for storage (Fig. 5) or sale. All these operations are carried out just after collection of raw wickers. The quality, pliability and tint of the withies depend on boiling season and subsequent operations.

**Tools used in wicker handicraft**

The tools for making wicker handicrafts are traditional, simple and inexpensive. The chief item is the “plank” which rests on the ground to form a firm workplace on which the weaver can set his materials. A sloping “lapboard” resting on the weaver’s lap is the platform on which the handicraft is made. Fingers and teeth are also the main tools of weaving. Fingernails are used for gauge and teeth act as third hand or nipper. The other tools and equipments (Figs. 6-10) required for weaving of wicker handicrafts are:

- **Hook** (Aari) is used for making holes.
- **Shave** (Chorez) is used for shaving the pith from the skeins.
- **Shears** (Kanchi) is an efficient pruning tool.
- **Knives** (Ande and Darko) are used for cutting wickers and finishing touches on weaved handicrafts.
- **Bodkins** are used for inserting stakes and handles into weaving.
- **Rapping iron** is used for beating down the weaving. The ring is used to straighten thick rods.
- **Grease horn** contains cheesecloth soaked in tallow. The bodkin is inserted into the tallow in order to grease it prior to use.
- **Screw block** is used for weaving square lids and bases. It is made of red oak and is 76 cm long, carriage bolts included.
- **Skeiner’s tool** (Kundli) is used to shave upright and reduce the rod to three thin even-width strips or skeins.
- **Upright** is used for making the shaved skeins into an even width.
- **Rush threader** is a lacing tool for use in all rush work.
- **Sharpening stones** are used for sharpening of other tools.
- **Willow brake** is used for peeling the bark from wickers.
- **Machine** is used to make the wickers smooth.
- **Coiling tool** is used to pull out thin wicker pieces for coiling.
- **Champak or Chalan** is used for mixing charcoal in the Kangri.
Weaving of wicker handicrafts

The techniques involved in the weaving of wicker handicrafts by the Shaakhsaaizi communities are plaiting, wicker, twining and coiling (Figs. 11-14). These weaving techniques have distinctive subtleties of design, colour, and form and thus, possess a unique skill. The withies are re-soaked in water for 2-3 hrs then left overnight to mellow and ensure pliability. Afterwards, the withies are cleaned and cut into uniform sizes to facilitate weaving.

Plaiting

Plaiting or checker work is a style of basket making where the warp and the weft elements are interwoven over and under each other at right angles.

Wicker

In wicker, the handicraftsman weaves the weft material over and under a stiff foundation or warp of rods or bundles of fiber.

Twining

Twined work begins with a foundation of rigid elements, or warp rods around which 2, and sometimes 3 or 4, weft elements are woven. The wefts are separated, brought around a stationary warp rod, brought together again and twisted. The action is repeated again and again while building the handicraft. Subtle and elegant patterns are made by changing the number of wefts or the number of warps. A weaver may use a number of twining variations in a single handicraft. False embroidery, a technique in which a decorative element is wrapped around the wefts, on the outside face of the view, is sometimes seen on plane twining.

Coiling

Coiling begins at the centre of the handicraft and grows upon itself in spiral rounds, each attached to the round before. Weaving coiled handicraft is a sewing technique, as the weaver uses an awl to punch holes in the foundation through which the weaver draws sewing strands. These strands are single pieces of plant fiber that have been trimmed to a uniform size. The foundation is made up of one, two, three, or sometimes more slender plant shoots, bundles of grass or shredded plant fibers, or a combination of grass and sticks. Imbrication, a decorative technique unique to coiled handicrafts involves folding a strip of grass, bark, or other fiber under each sewing stitch on the outer surface of the basket. The wicker handicrafts (Figs. 15-16) produced through plaiting, wicker, twining or coiling techniques are then soaked in vegetable oil or tallow to add strength and improve the quality.

Results and discussion

Basket weaving is the most primeval art of India and is practiced all over the country. The basketry is the most intricate handicraft that involves the delicate intermingling of twigs, bamboo or wild monsoon grass from the nature. It is an integral part of the traditional arts and crafts of many communities across the country which has helped tremendously in strengthening their cultural heritage, livelihoods and the standard of living. Each community excels at craftsmanship and their excellence manifests itself in the various handicrafts they produce. Every region confers upon the art of basket making its own originality, uniqueness and flavor making it distinct. The rich arts and crafts of different communities portray the artistic caliber and creative imagination of the regional craftsmen of the country.

Weaving of wicker handicrafts generated an average income of ₹ 59534.70 household\(^1\) annum\(^1\) with an employment opportunity of 366.61 mandays household\(^1\) annum\(^1\). Kangri contributed the highest (₹ 39385.00 annum\(^1\)) to the wicker handicraft based cash income while sarpoosh fetched lowest earning (₹ 8.00 annum\(^1\)) in the sample households. Of the wicker handicrafts weaved, the market rate was maximum (₹ 2500) for a set of table (1) and chairs (4) while, the dustbin fetched minimum (₹ 50). Kangri was the major wicker handicraft contributed
highest employment opportunity (162.50 mandays household\(^1\) annum\(^1\)) whereas, basket for food items generated lowest employment (1.10 mandays household\(^1\) annum\(^1\)). Although, the items of wicker handicrafts may be marketed through the Anjuman-e-Shakhsaazi (co-operative) and Government emporia, but the craftsmen usually sell the products themselves in the nearby markets. They sell bulk of their wicker handicrafts directly to the consumers while some of the wicker handicrafts move from producers to the wholesalers, from wholesalers these handicrafts reach to the consumers through retailers. In all, the wicker handicraft contributed to 66.97% of the total household income in the Shaakhsaazi communities\(^13\).

Wicker handicraft is an important source of income and employment for lakhs of rural people for sustaining their livelihood security. The wicker handicraft based small scale cottage industries are mostly sustained by the Shhakhsaazi artisans, who are operating through their own convenient yardstick using traditional skilled human resources, machineries and supply of other local resources. The cottage industries are more suitable for the local entrepreneurs, rather than factory-based industrialists. The wicker handicraft being labour intensive in nature, this industry involves reasonably large number of people, thus it has a good scope to expand and generate employment opportunities in rural Kashmir. Generally, the wicker handicrafts are made to satisfy the local demands as the majority of the handicrafts are used for domestic use in Kashmir, while, with high tourist attraction there is a specialist market for traditional handicrafts to boost this trade. Weavers in this cottage industry often face numerous problems while competing with the factory-based businessman.

Despite, the notable livelihood significance of traditional small scale industries, the modern small enterprises have been given an important place in the state’s economic planning. Hence, some immediate and wise measures need to be taken for solving the present problems and for sustained life of wicker handicraft in the region. Further, to uplift this industry
as an economically viable option for the Shhakhsaazi communities, special attention needs to be given by the policy makers, scientists and extension workers.

Gender analysis in wicker handicraft

The wicker handicraft is a male dominant forest based cottage industry where all the regular activities, viz. collection of wickers, processing of wickers, weaving of wicker handicrafts and their marketing were mostly performed by the men but there was also a joint participation of women along with men to a certain extent. Cleaning of shed and courtyard, water supply for soaking of wickers, care of wickers and wicker handicrafts during storage, etc. were mainly performed by women. Although, decisions on all the regular activities were taken independently by men but a definite division of labour among men and women in making wicker handicrafts is existing and the women share their responsibilities with men to a varying degree. Hence, women’s contribution to wicker handicrafts manufacture is undoubtedly extremely significant.

Conclusion

Wicker handicraft is an integral part of the rural culture and socio-economy of Kashmir. Indeed, the wicker handicraft is a significant forest based cottage industry, traditionally practiced by the Shhakhsaazi communities of Kashmir. The wicker handicrafts are world famous artifacts due to uniqueness in art, quality and design, which attract tourists overwhelmingly. Despite tremendous livelihood significance of the distinctive industry, the craft is in constant jeopardy because of intense competition with synthetic products, lack of modern techniques, unorganized marketing facilities and lack of Governmental support. Hence, the typical cottage industry needs organized support in capacity building, skill development, modernization, funding, finance and subsidies, so that it can survive, flourish and further develop. The traditional knowledge of the old age industry practices will provide valuable inputs to make efficient use of this handicraft for sustainable development of the Shhakhsaazi communities. Further, the understanding will help to conserve and preserve the traditional craft and cultural heritage of the Shhakhsaazi communities of Kashmir at large. Hence, the wicker handicraft deserves a planned and continuous attention of policy makers, scientists, social workers and extension providers towards livelihood security of Shhakhsaazi communities through exploration, verification, modification and scientifically validation of handicraft practices.

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References