

Traditional handicrafts and handloom of Kullu district, Himachal Pradesh

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Handloom weaving and handicraft are the cultural heritage of the Himachali people and an indispensable part of the lives of *Kulluities*. The activity of preparing a wide range of handloom and handicraft products was originated to suffice local needs but it gradually took a turn towards commercialization. In the study, handloom and handicrafts of district Kullu of Himachal Pradesh have been presented. The local weavers besides following their ancestral traditions and skills are intentionally making some alterations in the designs and motifs to cater to the needs of modern buyers. The various handloom and handicraft items of the Kullu district include shawls, caps, borders, *pattoo*, *muffler*, *patti*, *thobi*, *numdha*, *gudma*, hand knit woolens, *kilta*, *patari*, etc. which have been described in detail in the paper.

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Himachal, the Land of snowy mountains, with abundant rainfall and rich forests, have not been able to keep pace with the development in the plains because of inherent problems of topography, terrain and consequent isolation, climatic conditions, lack of roads and transportation. But despite their tough life, the people of Himachal Pradesh are hard working and talented, and this reflects in their art and craft. The arts and craft of any region is a reflection of its environment, people and traditions and so is in the state of Himachal Pradesh. In the hilly regions of the state, there takes place non stop activity of making several handicrafts throughout the year. Handloom weaving and handicrafts are the cultural heritage of the Himachali people. In the pre-independence days, secondary occupations like handicrafts, spinning and weaving were most common throughout the state. There were cottage industries in districts Kullu, Kinnaur and Lahaul & Spiti¹. The range of craft that come out of the state include shawls, carpets, paintings, metal ware, woodwork and leather works. From the upper reaches of Lahaul & Spiti down to the lowlands of Kangra valley, every district has its own specialty. The artisans of Kullu valley preserve a rich heritage of handloom and handicrafts. There is a vast variety of beautiful handloom and handicraft products in district Kullu. In the paper, an attempt has been made to

document the handloom and handicrafts of district Kullu of Himachal Pradesh.

Handloom

The extreme cold winters of the district necessitated wool weaving. Thus, the cold climate prevalent is suitable for sheep and goat husbandry, which fulfills the necessity for woolens. Almost every household in the district owns a pit loom and every one can be seen spinning yarn on a spindle. These local people weave for themselves as well as for commercial purposes. Handloom have expanded as a key cottage industry in Kullu valley (Fig.1). There are thousands of people wholly and partially occupied in this sphere. Kullu shawl, *loi / chaddar*, borders, Kullu cap, *pattoo*, *muffler*, *patti*, *thobi*, *numdha*, *gudma*, etc. are some of the best known woven products of the district. Kullu shawl is one of the famous art works of the Himachali people for their elegant look, brilliant geometrical patterns and vibrant colours. A shawl is a light woolen fabric draped around the shoulders and chest by women. It is usually 2x1 m in size (Fig. 2). This craft originally belongs to Kinnaur valley (the higher hills of Himachal Pradesh). In the later years, some craftsmen migrated to Kullu valley and settled here and introduced the craft of weaving to the people of Kullu.

Initially, local wool was used as a raw material for weaving Kullu shawls. This wool is acquired from sheep (*byangi*, *deshkad* and *imboo*) bred in Himachal

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Pradesh. Thus, some of the weavers depend on their own flock of sheep for wool, while most of them procure the raw wool from the *Gaddis* (tribal community of district Chamba, who travel along with their flock to the high pastures of Rohtang pass in summers). But due to its coarseness, rough texture and increasing market demand of products, weavers are now making use of fine wools, which are obtained from goat (*Pashmina* wool) and rabbit (*Angora* wool) or other wools like Australian merino or wool of wild goats. The wild goats shed their fleece against thorny shrubs and sharp rocks, which is later collected by the weavers. The process of shawl weaving consists of making reels from Ruffle, *Pashmina* and *Angora* wool yarn first. Most of the shawls for commercial use are woven on the frame loom, while the shawls to be used for local use are still woven on the pit loom.

Motifs / designs and patterns of

Kullu shawls

Earlier, the *Kullvi* people used to weave plain shawls but after the arrival of *Bushahari* craftsman from Rampur, Shimla district of Himachal Pradesh, the trend of patterned handloom came into existence. Typical Kullu shawls have geometrical designs on both ends (Fig. 4). Besides geometrical designs, the shawls are also woven in floral designs, which may run all over, on the corners or on the borders only. Each design may have one to 8 colours. Traditionally, bright colours, viz. red, yellow, magenta pink, green, orange, blue, black and white were used for patterning and white, black and natural grey or brown were used as the base in these shawls. But in the present times keeping in mind the customer demand, these bright colours are being replaced gradually by pastel colours. Price of any shawl depends upon quality of wool and the number and width of patterns used in it. Owing to the high cost of labour involved in the sorting of fine *pashmina* fiber, the shawls prepared from *pashmina* wool are expensive.

Loi / chaddar

Loi is also termed as *chaddar* by the local people. It is a gent's shawl, which is usually bigger in size (Fig. 3). The size of a *loi* may vary from 1.15 x 2.30 m to 1.40 x 2.80 m. *Loi* is woven in light woolen fabric and is usually plain or with a narrow border at the ends. These are generally available in shades of brown, gray and white. *Pashmina lois* are the costliest ones.

Borders

Borders are narrow laces (Fig. 5), which are woven only on tiny handloom (Fig. 6). These are long stripes having varied widths depending upon design. Initially, local weavers weave them to use for Kullu caps, but now these borders are being used for decorating other handloom products also, like shawls, jackets, neck ties, ladies suits, etc. Pure wool is used for weaving the borders. The designs are almost similar to those of woven in the shawls.

Kullu caps

The traditional yet stylish headgear has derived its name from the place of its origin. Locally, it is called as *Kullu topi* and is an important part of a local man's attire/apparel/garments. Alike Kullu district, in some of the other districts also, cap is an important part of male's attire. The designs of the caps represent the area. The Kullu cap is round in shape and is flat on the top (Fig. 8). A band of colourful border brightens the front with beautiful pattern, which is separately woven on small looms and the back portion, which covers the head is made of local woolen yarn and sometimes is also made of cotton or any other light material. These days, plain velvet caps in maroon and green colours are also available in the market. Once use of bright colours in the cap was the significant feature of the caps but nowadays, vegetable colours are being used. These caps are categorized as small, medium and large. The price of a Kullu cap depends on the cloth used and the pattern on the border.

Pattoo

Pattoo is the traditional dress of local women folk of district Kullu. It looks like a shawl but is thicker, heavier and longer as is available in sizes of 2.80 x 1.40 meters and 3 x 1.50 m (Fig. 9). *Pattoo* is worn over the clothes (suit, which consists of shirt up to knees and *salwar / pyjama*) and is draped like a *saree* with a difference that instead of taking the end to only one shoulder, both the ends of the *pattoo* are pinned just below the shoulders on the front side with local silver pins/broaches, locally called *boomani*, which is a long silver chain (Fig. 7). *Pattoo* is tied around the waist with a piece of cloth called *gachchi* (belt). The most characteristic feature of *pattoo* making is that being the traditional dress of the localities, it is manufactured as well as purchased by the local community and thus woven with local wool only. Most of the local women still prefer to wear *pattoo* as it is a very

comfortable dress, which allows them to do their daily chores besides keeping them warm.

Pattern

The ladies use plain or check *pattoos* as their daily wear, but the ones worn during functions are patterned with beautiful designs. *Pattoos* have been named according to the pattern designed on them. Plain *pattoo* has vertical and horizontal lines (*chhiyan*) all over it and red coloured border (*dhari*) on both ends. *Chitra pattoo* has black and white colour combination with red coloured border at both ends. *Daba pattoo* has black and white combination with one traditional pattern on both ends. *Ek phulwala* has different colour combinations and one traditional pattern on both sides. *Teen phulwala* has different colour combinations and three traditional patterns. The cost of *pattoo* depends upon the colour combination, pattern used and the quality of wool used.

Muffler

Muffler is a woolen article worn around neck. It is woven usually with *pashmina*, merino or *angora* wool having threads of different colours. The process of weaving muffler is same as that of shawls, but the smaller looms are used for mufflers. Gents mufflers measures 1.70 meters x 0.30 m, while ladies mufflers are little bit longer in length with same width.

Pattern

Alike *pattoo*, the mufflers are also patterned as plain (made up of single colour wool without any design or pattern), *ekphulwala* (made up of single colour having one traditional pattern on both ends) and *teen-phulwala* (made up of single colour with 3 traditional patterns on both ends).

Patti

Patti is a short width coarse fabric made of sheep wool. It is woven on the handloom and measures 46-51 cm wide having an appropriate length (Fig.10). *Patti* fabric is generally used for making close neck coats, pants, *suthan* (*pyjamas*), jackets. Initially women folk used this *patti* as *pattoo*, which was thicker and heavier than the *pattoo*. It is a tradition among the local people that for making *chola*, i.e. male gown, the wool obtained from the first shearing of a lamb is used.

Thobi

Thobi is a type of floor covering, which is spun from goat hair. It is woven in 2 portions of half width

and later joined from the centre with very complicated stitches. It is rough in texture, but provides warmth. *Thobi* is usually plain or available in checks or bands of black and gray (Fig.12). The size of the *thobi* varies from 2.15 x 0.9 m to 3.5 x 1.50 m and weighs approximately 600-800 gm. *Thobis* are generally woven for fulfilling personal needs; they are seldom produced for sale.

Numdha

Numdha / *Nimda* is the local name for a mattress, which is made by felting the wool rather than weaving it. It is prepared by mixing low quality wool with a small quantity of cotton. *Numdhas* are usually plain or decorated with embroidered colourful designs (Fig.13). These mattresses come in different sizes as 1.82 x 0.91 meters or 3.65 x 3.04 meters. The price of *numdhas* depends on its size, quality of wool and the pattern.

Gudma

Gudma is a soft but heavy blanket, which is woven especially in the Kullu valley as this place has a special kind of clay that is used to clean and finish a *Gudma*². It is made of *Byang* wool having long fibres. *Gudmas* are woven in natural wool colours and finished with red or black trimmings. Size of *gudmas* is similar to those of *numdhas*. Cost of *gudmas* also varies according to size.

Hand knit woolens

In district Kullu, the women are expert in making hand knitted woolen articles, which include woolen socks, gloves and caps. During winter season, they are generally free from the agricultural work, thus earn money by spending most of their time by knitting different woolen products.

Woolen socks

Woolen socks are knitted from local wool or cash melon thread. They have geometrical designs woven with bright colours along the top of foot (Fig.14). A typical characteristic of these socks is that they are knitted with 4 needles instead of two.

Woolen gloves and caps

Similar to woolen socks, the gloves and caps are knitted from indigenous wool with geometrical designs over them displaying brilliant colours. The price of hand knitted woolens depends on the quality of wool and the pattern used.



Fig.1 Lady weaving on loom



Fig.2 Kullu Shawls



Fig.3 Loi/chadder



Fig.4 Geometrical designs



Fig.5 Borders



Fig.6 Tiny loom for border weaving



Fig.7 Boomani



Fig.8: Kullu caps



Fig.9. Different patterns on Pattoo



Fig.10: Patti



Fig. 11 Pullan



Fig.12: Thobi



Fig.13 Numdha



Fig.14 Woolen socks



Fig.15 Killa



Fig.16 Patari/Tokri



Fig.17 Mandri

Handicrafts

There is a wide range of handicrafts of the district, which include following articles:

Cane craft

Different items prepared from bamboo cane in Kullu district include *kilta* and *patari*, which are prepared for personal use as well as for commercial purposes.

Kilta

It is a cone shaped basket made of a local species of bamboo called *nargal*. To make a *kilta*, bamboo is cut into 1.9 cm wide strips and then woven (Fig. 15). It is available in different sizes but usually 0.91-1.06 m *kilta* is preferred. *Kilta* is an all purpose basket of hilly regions, which is used to carry any type of load like animal waste, fuel wood, fodder or fruits as well as for storing grains or wool. It is carried on back with the help of rope, which is tied to the *kilta*.

Patari / Tokri

It is a small round woven bamboo basket with a lid and a handle for carrying it (Fig.16). Local people utilize it as a container to keep the *chappatis*, other food material or to carry fruits.

Mandri

Among the different local crafts of district Kullu, *mandri* is a carpet made out of paddy straw (Fig.17). The raw material used for a *mandri* is paddy straw and jute thread. Paddy growers of the valley used to make *mandris* in large number as they had a tradition to present it to their relatives on festive occasion and to their daughters on marriage. The *mandris* are used as floor coverings. Now with the passage of time, *mandri* as a craft is replenishing day by day and have been replaced by carpets. In remote villages, *mandris* are still in vogue but their appearance has been modified by using a cloth cover over them.

Pullan

It is a handicraft most popular in Banjar valley of Kullu district. *Pullans* are grass shoes which are used as footwear. This footwear is made out of fibers procured from the bark of a wild bush, *bhang* (*Cannabis sativa* Linn.). The upper portion of *pullan* is made of goat hair and is decorated with colourful designs using threads while the bottom of footwear is made of *bhang* fiber (Fig. 11). These are available in different

sizes and local people consider them as warm footwear.

Status of handloom and handicrafts

The tradition of handloom weaving and handicrafts arose due to the geographical and climatic conditions of the state, which necessitated the initiation of these crafts, but these days it has taken the form of a fashion. It does not mean that the local people are neglecting their tradition instead being very faithful to their culture they are not ready to give up ancestral customs, design and skills, but are intentionally looking for avenues, which will allow them to preserve their tradition as well as cater to the needs of modern buyers. With the passage of time certain alterations have occurred in the designs, motifs, and patterns along with the alterations in modes of processing, which have worked towards enhancing the status of weavers and the looms. Traditionally, all the products of the valley were characterized by bright striking colourful geometrical designs but with changed demands of customers, bright colours have been replaced with pastel shades. The colours used are also made of both natural and chemical dyes. As regards shawls, along with local wool, other wools like yak wool, *pashmina* wool and *angora* wool are also used. Extra weft woven shawls have been introduced in the industry due to limitation in geometrical designs. In these types of shawls, many new designs can be woven by imparting extra weft for patterning in place of typical patterning. Formerly woollen yarn was used for base of *pullans* or for borders or embroidering *numdhas* but owing to durability and fast colours, the acrylic yarns (cashmelon) are preferred by the present weavers. Along with these traditional crafts, the cooperative societies like *Bhuttico* and *Him bunkar* have introduced new products like neckties, woollen bags, ponchos and stoles which are becoming quite popular among fashion conscious women. Kullu being a tourist place, the weaving activity that was originally practiced to meet the personal needs/ requirements gradually took a turn towards commercialization. In the present times, the handloom and the handicraft industries play a vital role in the economy of Himachal Pradesh. Nearly every dwelling in the valley is involved in this craft. There are about 20,000-22,000 weavers in Kullu district of which 50-60% are regular weavers. The rest weave independently at their homes and then sell their products at the cooperative societies and the independent units³. In Kullu

valley and surrounding areas, there are various co-operative societies, which are providing employment to thousands of weavers directly or indirectly.

Conclusion

Handloom and handicrafts form an indispensable part of the lifestyle of the Kullu people. But economic conditions of the craftsmen / weavers /artisans, who are passing this tradition from one generation to another is not satisfactory due to non-availability of raw material, insufficient quantity, poor quality and very high cost of raw material. Thus, raw material depots can be started at craft concentrated areas or the quality of local woolen yarn can be improved by carrying out research. Secondly, the handloom weavers also have

to compete with the shawls manufactured on power looms. So, certain efforts should be made on the part of the Government to impart some technical knowledge about these looms to the weavers. As regards marketing, which is the most crucial problem, the craftsmen should be assisted in marketing their products directly from their looms to the market.

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