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The Centuries old Legacy of Kakaz Manufacturing in Srinagar, Kashmir

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Abstract

Kashmir from ancient times has remained one of the known places for art and craft, among these the art of quality paper making was one of significant gifts (Habib 2012). The transmission of this craft to Kashmir occurred during the reign of Sultan Zainul Abedin (1420-1470) from Samarkand, Uzbekistan and subsequently flourished to its pinnacle during the era of Akbar the Great (Lawrence 1895; Hassan 1971; Sufi 1952). Kashmiri paper attained widespread demand across the Indian subcontinent, especially for manuscripts and was utilized by all who intended to impart dignity to their correspondence. This research seeks to elucidate the historical context in which paper manufacture flourished in Kashmir.

Keywords: *Paper Production, Kashmir, Traditional Knowledge, Samarkand*

Introduction

The antiquity of paper making originates from ancient China and subsequently spread throughout Central Asia and Persia by means of a transcontinental trade route that connected the Pacific Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. This intricate journey traversed formidable geographical features such as the Gobi Desert, the Taklamakan Desert, and the Tarim Valley, culminating in the city of Samarkand. From Samarkand, this craft diffused further westward, reaching influential centers such as Baghdad, Damascus, Egypt, and Morocco. Remarkably, this diffusion process spanned approximately five centuries before papermaking technology eventually found its way to Europeans further Chinese captives in Samarkand introduced it to Arabs (Hunter, 1943; Tsien 1985; Bloom, 2001). After acquiring the knowledge of paper making, the Arabs enhanced it by combining linen with flax and other vegetable fibers. In the early 8th century CE, they introduced Khorasani paper to India for the first time, and it continued to be imported for several years thereafter (Rahman 1998).

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The origins of Kashmiri Paper, “locally known as "*Koshur Kakaz*,” can be traced back to the era of Sultan Zainul Abedin, who ruled the area from 1420 to 1470. During his reign, Sultan Zainul Abedin actively sought expertise from skilled artisans hailing from Samarkand (Firiahta 1612; Bamzai 1994 Hassan, 1959). Subsequently, the papermaking industry was established in Nowshera area of Srinagar city and Ganderbal in center. Under royal patronage, this sector thrived, leading to the creation of paper of outstanding caliber that could be cleansed, dried, and then utilized again. This remarkable attribute was documented in historical records, such as Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi's letter to Abdul Qadir Badauni, which explicitly attested to the fact that the ink on Kashmiri paper could be completely washed off and reused again for writing (Haig, 1973). After Kashmiri Sultans paper industry gained significant recognition and become an article of extensive commerce, during Mughal and Afghan period, eventually considered superior to any paper in India (Forester 1798; Hugel 1845; Lal 1954). Kashmiri paper enjoyed considerable demand from the era of Emperor Akbar until the late 19th century. This heightened demand extended to various regions within the Indian subcontinent due to a growing requirement for writing materials. Notably, these regions encompassed Sialkot (Punjab), Zafarabad in Jaunpur district, Bihar, Bengal, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, Aurangabad, and Mysore (Bates 1873; Lawrence 1895). This study portrays the traditional production methods and social conditions of craftsmen working in *Kakazghari* industries. Therefore, it provides crucial knowledge on the lives and means of living of the craftsmen who played vital roles in these manufacturing processes.

Manufacturing Process for Paper (*Kakaz*)

The main two centers for paper manufacturing in Kashmir were Nowshera (Fig. 1) and Ganderbal, besides these there were pulp mills in and around Srinagar. The locations like Hari Parbat fort, Dal Lake, Lar Pargana and Dachigam (Fig. 2) were the prime centers for pulp mills (Koul 1978; Bellew 1966). Within the locus of Nowshera approximately 32 factories were established over, which serves as a major source of income for a considerable number of people who depend on papermaking for their livelihood. But during winters these factories remain closed due to frozen water, impacting the operation of waterpower machinery (Bates 1873; Lawrence 1895). Typically, the workers recommence their operations following the winter season. Nevertheless, the cyclical nature of this business has had an impact on economic stability, offering sustenance for a restricted duration.



Fig. 1 Papermill in Nowshera, Srinagar with paper drying out on the wall. (1917). (Source SPS Library)



Fig. 2 Paper pulp block making unit at Dachigam, Srinagar. (1917). (Source SPS Library)

Paper manufacturing process requires specific raw materials such as rags, starch, and *sazi* (Bates 1873; Lawrence 1895). The mould holds equal significance for papermakers as the loom does for weavers. The moulds in Kashmir consist of two separate components: the mould frame and a mould cover (Hunter, 1970:104, Fig. 76). The mould frame is usually made of deodar wood (*Cedrus deodar*). It serves as a support for the cover and contributes to the creation of a suction effect when lifting paper from water. The mould cover is constructed from desiccated grass (*Andropogon micranthus*) and secured with horse tail hair at regular intervals. The horse tail hair lacing, also referred to as 'chain lines', is typically black or brown in colour.

The process of manufacturing paper requires a significant amount of manual labour. The first stage involved extracting dust particles from the rags by splitting them into smaller strips and immersing them in water for the purpose of cleaning. Later, *saz* and lime were added and then mashed by a pestle and mortar at regular intervals (Fig.3). This beating process was repeated until a finer condition of pulp was achieved (Fig. 4) (Sufi, 1979). Then pulp was drained, flattened into cakes and left to dry in the sun for bleaching (Fig. 5) (Lawrence, 1895; Khan 2020). After initial processing, the next step involved moulding. The washed, bleached, and beaten pulp cakes were mixed with water in an earthen pot by vatmen using their feet until the pulp achieved a desired consistency. The thickness and weight of the paper sheet were controlled by the vatmen by assessing the consistency of the pulp. (Fig. 6) (Bates, 1873).



Fig.3 Mortar and Pestle powered by the water mill pounding the mixture of hemp and rags (1917)(Source SPS Library)



Fig.4: Workers adding lime and some kind of soda to whiten the pulp which is prepared in the mills then washed and cleaned at the Nallah at Dachigam. The blocks of pulp can be seen drying under open sun. (1917). (Source: SPS Library).



Fig.5 Pulp blocks drying out in the sun at Dachigam. (1917) (Source SPS Library)



Fig.6 A vat man removing the reed frame from the trough and sending it for pressing to drain out the water. (1917)(Source SPS Library)

Subsequently, the next step involves couching. Here, wet sheets of paper are stacked on top of one another in a block containing 72 sheets and left overnight to dry (Bates, 1873; Sufi 1979; Khan 2020).

Following this procedure, the paper sheets were gently detached from one other and meticulously placed onto a specifically prepared, even mud wall that had been exposed to sunshine. Afterwards, the sheets were skillfully cut to achieve the necessary measurements. Each sheet was manually polished using a pumice stone called "*karkutta*", followed by the application of rice starch. This extensive process allowed the paper to handle the ink applied with a reed pen (Fig.7) (Blochmann 1873).



Fig.7 Workers pasting the well paper sheets on the mud plastered wall of the paper mill at Nowshera for drying in open Sun. (1917)(Source SPS Library)

The last stage of the paper-making process was glazing. The sized paper's surface was further polished by rubbing it with a polished agate. The glazing procedure was employed to achieve a sleek and refined appearance for the ultimate paper product (Fig. 8). This task was performed by the *moharkash* (Bates 1873; Sufi, 1979; Khan 2020).



Fig.8 Preserved sheet of handmade Kashmir Kakaz. (1984)(Source Field Work)

In Kashmir, the finest paper was referred to as *Farmashi* or *Maharaji*, often known as Royal paper. It possessed a smooth finish and was crafted from a mixture of hemp fiber and rags, with a ratio of two parts hemp fiber to every sixteen parts of rags. The second type was *Dahmashti*, commonly used and made from pulp containing three parts of hemp fiber to every 177 parts of rags (Koul, 1978; Khan 2020). Another thin straw-colored note paper called *Dahki* was also manufactured (Bates 1873; Khan 2020). The third category, *Kalamdani*, was of lower quality and didn't contain hemp fiber (Lawrence, 1895).

Decline

Kashmiri paper, noted for its usage, was extremely important not just in Kashmir, but across the region. The manufacturing method included indigenous raw resources such as hemp, lime, *Sazi*, and rag, and it required a substantial quantity of manual labour as well as extensive experience and knowledge. The *Kakazgars*, known for their artistry, played an important role in conserving this complicated art form by passing down their knowledge from one generation to the next.

Factors Leading to the Decline

The Kakaz manufacturing sector in Srinagar, Kashmir, experienced a grievous downfall and a precipitous decline, despite its distinguished traditional history. A combination of factors contributed to this decline:

- a. Industrialization and Modernization:** The traditional Kakaz industry has been affected by the introduction of contemporary paper making processes and the widespread availability of inexpensive, machine-produced paper (Habib, 2012). Contemporary paper was not only cheaper but also more easily accessible, resulting in a decline in the need for handmade paper.
- b. Economic Challenges:** Kashmir's socio-economic environment has faced several challenges, such as political instability and recurrent conflicts. These challenges have been a significant cause of hardship. The prevailing circumstances have had an adverse effect on the local economy, resulting in a decline in the financial viability of conventional crafts. Artists have expressed that it was ever more difficult for them to sustain their careers only via the making of paper.
- c. Loss of Skilled Artisans:** The younger generation, confronted with a scarcity of economic prospects and the appeal of more secure occupations, has exhibited a diminishing inclination to execute the ancestral practice of Kakaz production. Consequently, there has been a substantial decline in the number of highly competent craftsmen, posing a serious risk to the preservation of the trade.
- d. Lack of Government Support:** Although there have been attempts to encourage traditional crafts, the assistance provided by the government and other organizations has frequently been insufficient. The implementation of policies and efforts aimed at revitalizing and maintaining old sectors has often been ineffective, resulting in a limited impact.
- e. Globalization and Changing Consumer Preferences:** The collapse of industry can be attributed to the globalization of markets and shifting customer tastes. Contemporary consumers have a greater preference for ease and

economic efficiency, frequently choosing modern alternatives over old artisanal goods.

- f. Environmental Concerns:** Often, the traditional techniques of paper manufacture involve processes that were not ecologically sustainable. The Kakaz manufacturing sector faced mounting pressure to adjust in response to the growing awareness of the problem and the stricter enforcement of environmental restrictions. Many emerging artists were facing this difficulty. The vulnerability of this business to collapse was worsened by its seasonal nature.

Cultural and Social Impact

The decrease of paper production has both economic and substantial cultural and social consequences. The art of paper manufacturing in Kashmir was intricately connected to the region's cultural legacy, symbolizing a rich history of creative and intellectual customs that have spanned over ages. The decline of this sector symbolizes a detachment from the historical and cultural origins of the region.

Moreover, the societal cohesion of communities engaged in Kakaz production has been impacted. Artisans in Kashmir, who were formerly highly skilled and valued for their workmanship, has faced an uncertain future in the cultural economy. The gradual disappearance of conventional expertise and wisdom represents a significant depletion of the region's shared cultural legacy.

Efforts at Preservation of Craft

In order to preserve this distinctive art, several projects were undertaken with the goal of revitalizing Kakaz manufacture. Several cultural institutions and non-governmental organizations had initiated training programmes to inform the younger population about the ancient methods of paper production. The objective of these initiatives was to foster a renewed sense of enthusiasm and reverence for the artistry. Numerous initiatives had been implemented to forge connections between traditional crafts and the market, such as the organization of festivals, the utilization of internet platforms, and the organization of exhibits. Craftsmen were afforded the opportunity to highlight their work to a broader audience and enter new markets through these initiatives. In order to offer support to traditional craftspeople, the government had implemented subsidies and initiatives. These included a variety of support mechanisms, including infrastructure improvements, grants, and monetary assistance, all of which were designed to enhance the economic well-being of the artists and guarantee the craft's long-term sustainability. It was imperative to preserve the history and practices of Kakaz production by

documenting them. This endeavour involved the creation of digital material, publications, and archives that underscored the significance of the craft and its role in the preservation of Kashmir's cultural heritage. Innovative implementations of traditional Kakaz techniques were achieved through collaborations with contemporary designers and artists, resulting in the development of innovative products that appealed to contemporary consumers while maintaining the craft's fundamental character. None of these endeavours were able to perpetuate the heritage of the Kakaz making business, which ultimately met a quiet demise and today exists just as archive remnants.

The traditional craft of producing handmade paper has already disappeared as a result of increasing demand and evolving client preferences. The utilization of modern technology and sophisticated production methods, which need less time and effort, has resulted in the decline of this traditional expertise. Hence, it is imperative to document the traditional artistry of the region and analyse the elements contributing to its deterioration.

The artisanal paper business persisted into the 19th century. Nevertheless, with the increasing influence of the British rule in the late 1800s, they started to import paper and progressively banned the use of handmade paper in India. Consequently, there was a reduction in the demand for handmade paper, leading to the final downfall of India's handmade paper sector. This was a major catalyst for the industry's downturn.

Due to a decline in demand for handmade paper, the scarcity of raw materials resulted in increased manufacturing costs. Additionally, attempts by artists to transition to alternate materials proved unfeasible. The advent of the industrial revolution led to increased availability, affordability, and accessibility of materials used in industrial manufacturing, which in turn contributed to the decline of the handmade paper industry.

The production of handmade paper in Kashmir served not only as an economic industry, but also as a cultural heritage that symbolized the region's cultural past. The eradication of this artistic expression symbolizes a loss of cultural legacy and a disruption from past customs.

Conclusion

The journey of papermaking from China to Central Asia, Persia and eventually to Kashmir reflects on the advancement of technology and interconnectedness of past civilizations. The enduring legacy of papermaking in Kashmir stands as a testament to the ingenuity, creativity, and craftsmanship of diverse population who contributed to paper making. It also illuminates the profound cultural exchange and knowledge diffusion that have occurred across

different regions over the centuries. Kashmir played a significant role in the introduction and establishment of papermaking industry in India. Kashmir's papermakers excellent skill has contributed to the region's long cultural history.

Kashmir's traditional papermaking sector, based in Nowshera and Ganderbal, emerges as a significant contributor to the region's economic and cultural legacy. The study focused on the numerous procedures involved in paper manufacturing, from raw material preparation to finished paper sheets. The papermaking process was labor-intensive, requiring operations such as rag washing, pulp beating, sheet forming, and glazing, demonstrating the artists' skill and dedication.

Despite issues such as seasonal closures due to frozen water in the winter, the sector survived owing to its dedicated workers. The sector manufactures a diverse range of paper sheets, including high-quality Royal paper, *Dahmashti*, and *Kalamdani*, demonstrating its ability to meet diverse demands and tastes.

Overall, this study contributes to our understanding of the historical and socioeconomic aspects of papermaking in Kashmir, emphasizing its significance as both an economic activity and a cultural art. The paper industry has been replaced by the expansion of machine-made products, since it was unable to fulfill the growing demands of the large market. The main reasons for the industry's decline include raw material shortages, technology obsolescence, financial constraints, and infrastructure challenges.

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