

# Transmission of Crafts from Central Asia to Kashmir

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## Abstract:

Kashmir situated on the old Silk Road, in spite of being nestled by high mountains, has been exposed to cultural influences from various lands. The famous Silk Route which began to be used from about the first century BC not only carried traders, raiders and armies but also immigrants, philosophers, thinkers and men of artistic talent acquainted with religious philosophies. This route also carried cultural influences and ideas across the borders. Kashmir occupied an important place on the cultural map of Central Asia and is up to this day famous for its richness of culture and beauty of its arts and crafts. She maintained close relations with different parts of Central Asia since ancient times. The Buddhist missionaries from Kashmir, which at that time was a great centre of Buddhism, were the first to spread the Buddhist philosophy in Central Asian territories across the Hindukush in Afghanistan, in China and Tibet as a result of which a new religion took roots in these lands. Many Buddhist scholars from these lands travelled across the deserts and mountains for their schooling in Kashmir. As a result the ancient arts of Kashmir, be it sculpture or architecture, show many similarities in designs, in iconography or in skills of production with the centres of excellence that existed outside Kashmir at that time. The exchange of ideas placed Kashmir at a very high pedestal in such productions and was known all over the region for such artistic creations. These connections were further advanced by political relations, matrimonial alliances and employment of Central Asians in Kashmir establishments.

**Key words:** Central Asia, Craftsmen, Kashmir, Arts, Zain-ul-Abdin, Silk Route, Crafts

## Introduction:

The relations of the ancient times were carried forward when Muslims established their rule in Kashmir. This happened after Dulacha or Zulju, a Mongol from Turkistan, invaded Kashmir in AD 1320. He shook the Hindu power and paved the way for the

establishment of Muslim rule. With the foundation of Sultanate in AD 1339, Kashmir became the magnetic attraction for the Muslim missionaries, Sufis, saints and Ulema's (Muslim theologians) from Central Asia<sup>i</sup>, who propagated the message of Islam in the region. Most of the time they comprised men from all walks of life to introduce Central Asian skills and technologies as well. Tradition says that Syed Ali Hamdani, the learned saint from Central Asia visited Kashmir in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century for the purpose of propagation of Islam in Kashmir and brought with him over seven hundred disciples, some of whom were said to be skilled craftsmen<sup>ii</sup>. These missionaries also brought with them their own life style, language, dress pattern, food habits, etc. that subsequently got disseminated among the local people. The influx was such that it was feared then that all these new cultural waves shall engulf the inhabitants<sup>iii</sup>, which subsequently did happen<sup>iv</sup>.

The contacts between Central Asia and Kashmir increased during the reign of Zain-ul-Abdin<sup>v</sup> as he had experienced the glory of Central Asia in person<sup>vi</sup>. Central Asia was then ruled by Timur who had collected in his capital skilled artists, craftsmen, writers and philosophers of countries conquered by him and none of them were permitted to cross the Amu Darya or to leave the imperial capital, without special permission of the Amir<sup>vii</sup>. During his stay in Samarkand, the prince moved freely in the city and became deeply impressed by the work of craftsmen. On his return to Kashmir he brought a few artisans with him and when he ascended the throne he sent emissaries to Samarkand and Bukhara to persuade the artists and craftsmen of these lands to come to Kashmir and settle in his court<sup>viii</sup>, thus laying the foundation of the crafts of Kashmir on the pattern of the settled crafts of Central Asia. The great monarch was so deeply involved in the development of these crafts that whenever a travelling artist or a craftsman from Iran, Khurasan or Turkistan passed through the Valley, he would induce him to teach his people whatever he knew and often he would not permit him to leave until he had done so<sup>ix</sup>. Sultan Zain-ul-Abdin also took pains in persuading the rulers of Persia and Central Asia to extend their help in remodelling Kashmir after Persian and Central Asian culture and at times sent some intelligent persons, mardan-i-zirak, to some industrially renowned centres of these places to receive training in different arts<sup>x</sup>. Because of these efforts a number of Central Asian artists and craftsmen were able to stay in the Valley and teach the locals to make newer crafts like multi heddle looms for silk weaving<sup>xi</sup>, wood carving, enamelling, stone cutting, stone polishing, bottle making, window cutting (tabadan-turash)<sup>xii</sup>, calligraphy and book binding<sup>xiii</sup>, carpet making<sup>xiv</sup>, and above all the unique and extraordinarily beautiful art

of shawl making<sup>xv</sup>, and a number of other arts and crafts which sooth the eye with their intricacies flowered under the impact of Central Asia. The Sultan was himself a symbol of these introductions and put on such dresses that were regarded excellent, beautiful and colourful<sup>xvi</sup>. These were in silk as a new technology was introduced when the use of weavers brush and loom for the weaving of silk in Kashmir were attempted<sup>xvii</sup>. It can be deduced with a fair degree of accuracy from Pundit Srivara's account that Zain-ul-Abdin introduced multi-huddled looms from Central Asia or Khurasan in which were weaved circular plant designs besides animated figures<sup>xviii</sup>. Besides the weaving of new silken cloth, another craft of far reaching dimensions introduced at this time from Central Asia was the needle work or the embroidery to stitch designs on the textiles, as colourful silken threads were used to decorate these. Embroidery or Kashida Kari is a highly specialized fine art in Kashmir. Following its introduction fine quality needle work garments, shawls table covers, etc. are to be only admired for their fine quality workmanship and mastery in the skill.

### **Conclusion:**

In this way during the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abdin art, culture, fine arts and literature flourished in Kashmir, particularly that of Bukhara and Samarkand. After some time local people started working on the original models from Iran and Central Asia, in many cases they experimented with new models that led to the evolution of new forms and movements. The fresh introductions must have taken roots deep even after the death of the Zain-ul-Abidin as seventy years latter MirzaHaidarDughlat records the glory of these crafts in these words: "in Kashmir one meets with all those arts and crafts which are in most cities uncommon. In the whole of Mavara-u-Nahr except Samarkand and Bukhara these are now here to be met with while in Kashmir they are abundant. This is all due to Sultan Zain-ul-Abdin". A further boost to the crafts of Kashmir may have taken place when the Central Asian noble MirzaHaidar invaded Kashmir and his subsequent ten years political domination of the country contributed significantly to the technological and cultural/transfusion from Central Asia to Kashmir. His personal and perspective patronage gave a renewed boost to these industries and commerce, the benefits of which were later enjoyed by the Chak rulers who followed him. The Valley henceforth experienced its second cultural resurgence whose impact lasted long enough for Mirza's illustrious nephew (Jahangir) to appreciate as he introduced various types of musical instruments, new types of windows and doors, and also made innovations in dress and diet. In this way

he stretched a point in favour of Kashmir's culture. As a result of such close relations the arts and crafts of Kashmir show exuberant influences of Central Asia.

## References:

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- <sup>i</sup>A.Q. Rafiqi, *Sufism in Kashmir*, Good word Publishing, Sydney, Australia, (1976), II revised edition, 2003, pp. 16-25.
- <sup>ii</sup> Haji Muinu'dDinMiskin, *Tariekh-i-Kabir*, Amritsar, 1892, pp. 12-14; MohibbulHasan, *Kashmir under the Sultans*, Ali Mohammad and Sons, Srinagar, 1959, p. 56.
- <sup>iii</sup>Srivara, *Kings of Kashmir*, (English tr. J. C. Dutt), Vol. III, (1898), Mittal Publications, New Delhi, reprint, 1990, pp. 150-160.
- <sup>iv</sup>These Muslim missionaries were not interested merely in the theoretical conversion of Kashmiries to Islam but were zealous in the complete transformation of their whole way of life. These Muslim missionaries were actually persuading them to adopt Islamic culture. Syed Ali Hamdani persuaded reigning Sultan Qutbdin for giving up Hindu dress in preference to what was in vogue in the Muslim countries; Haji Muinu'd-din Miskin, *Tariekh-i-Kabir*, Amritsar, 1892, pp. 12-14.
- <sup>v</sup>He was the son of Sultan Sikander. He ascended the throne in AD 1420 and ruled up to 1470.
- <sup>vi</sup>In 1398 AD when Amir Timur invaded India, Sultan Sikander the father of Sultan Zain-ul-Abdin sent his son to pay tribute to the Amir. Amir distrusted the promise of allegiance of Sultan Sikander and took his young son hostage. The young prince spent seven years at Samarkand; G.M.D.Sufi, *Kashir Being a History of Kashmir*, vol. II, (1949), Capital Publishing House, New Delhi, reprint, 1996, p. 571.
- <sup>vii</sup> John Irwin, 'Arts and Crafts', *Marg*, Vol. III, March, 1955, p. 112.
- <sup>viii</sup> John Irwin, 'Arts and Crafts', *Marg*, Vol. III, March, 1955, p. 115.
- <sup>ix</sup>Anonymous, *Bahristan-i-Shahi* (English tr. K.N.Pundita), Firma KLM Private Limited, Calcutta, 1991, p. 64.
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- <sup>xi</sup>Srivara, *Kings of Kashmir*, (English tr. J.C.Dutt), Vol.III, (1898), Mittal Publications, New Delhi, reprint, 1990, p. 151; MirzaHaidarDughlat, *Tarikh-i-Rashidi*, (English tr. D. Ross) (1895), Sagar Book House, New Delhi, reprint, 1991, p. 434
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- <sup>xiv</sup> Hassan Khoyhami, *Tariekh-i-Hassan*,(Kashmiri tr. DrShama-ud-Din),Vol.II, J&K Academy Of Art, Culture and Languages, Srinagar, 1999, p. 279.
- <sup>xv</sup>If the woolen fabrics called soha is shawl then it was also introduced from there, as were strong and fit for kings; Srivara, *Kings of Kashmir* (English tr. J.C.Dutt), Vol. III, (1898), Mittal Publications, New Delhi, reprint, 1990, p. 151.
- <sup>xvi</sup>Srivara, *Kings of Kashmir*, (English tr. J.C.Dutt), Vol.III, (1898), Mittal Publications, New Delhi, reprint, 1990, p. 151.
- <sup>xvii</sup>Srivara, *Kings of Kashmir*, (English tr. J.C.Dutt), Vol.III, (1898), Mittal Publications, New Delhi, reprint, 1990, p. 151.
- <sup>xviii</sup>Srivara, *Kings of Kashmir*, (English tr. J.C.Dutt), Vol.III, (1898), Mittal Publications, New Delhi, reprint, 1990, p. 151.