



An example of Pinjrakari – Wood lattice-work on a Kashmiri houseboat

Woodwork: A Renowned Kashmiri Handicraft

By Tara Dhar Hasnain

Kashmir reminds one of Europe, especially Switzerland, with its snow-capped mountains and the fir, poplar, pine and walnut trees. Even the climate is similar, with months of snow and long winters, making wood a favoured medium for homes, places of worship, its famous houseboats and Kashmir's answer to Venice's gondolas, *shikaras*. Wood was suitable for a region with long, snow-bound winters, for it kept the houses warm in winter and cool in summer.

Kashmiri woodwork and carving are justly renowned. Artisans take orders for all types of furniture, which are decorated with fine carvings of Kashmir's signature *chinar* (plane tree) leaves, fruit and flowers – even dragons. Most are made-to-order for a discerning, often international clientele and are carved from the walnut, a tree found all over the Kashmir Valley.

Although less known outside Kashmir, the region boasts numerous other acclaimed crafts, many of Persian origin. In the 14th century a Sufi saint, Sayyid Ali Hamadani, from the ancient city of Hamadan, arrived in Kashmir with a band of about 700 followers. He had a profound influence on the valley, convincing large numbers of people, including the king, to convert to Sufi Islam, thus leaving a lasting imprint on the valley's culture. With him came a number of Hamadan's famous artisans who brought many new handicrafts to Kashmir, including fine shawl-making. The Kashmiris proved to be apt pupils and have practised and refined those skills to the present day.

Khatamband (a Persian word) is one such very special craft for ceiling design. It consists of relief patterns made from thin panels of pine wood, cut into geometrical shapes and fitted together without using nails. These ceilings are created entirely by hand; it takes four people roughly 15 days to complete a 100-square-foot ceiling. Such ceilings add a touch of beauty and glamour and are highly



Khatamband ceiling, maharaja's old palace

prized. They beautified the houses of the rich, houseboats and places of worship. One example is in the 17th century Naqshband Sahib Muslim shrine.

Another traditional craft is *pinjrakari*. This delicate wooden lattice-work adorns Sufi places of worship and house fronts and creates the lace-like trim on balconies and houseboats, those floating 'luxury hotels' from old times. Such trim is also found on wooden balconies that jut out from the main structure or may cover the entire front of a house, such as that on a heritage property from 1927.



Balcony, Naqshband Sahib shrine



A heritage property from 1927

These techniques were passed down from generation to generation in clan-based, closed shops. However, in the mid-90s rising costs and a lack of interest from younger clan members threatened the survival of these traditions.

Thankfully, *khatamband* and *pinjrakari* have

undergone a resurgence in recent years, after the families involved in making these lovely creations opened their craft to students. This ensured the crafts' survival and today demand, which exceeds supply, has saved these old traditions from extinction.

Tara Dhar Hasnain has taught at university level for many years, including Delhi University and the Singapore Management University. She is currently working as an editor with Marshall Cavendish International. Tara has lived and worked in Europe, the USA and Asia.

All photos by the author