

Vanishing Realm of Basketry in Punjab

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ABSTRACT

Since its origin man has started weaving his dreams into reality. He acquired the beautiful art of obtaining, assembling and integrating the material found in nature to create articles of daily use. With a disposition to weave he observed in vegetable fibres something supple and flexible like grass. Out of it he produced Baskets, Chhabas, Chhikus (containers) of different shapes having lids, Chhaj and Tokries etc Different types of baskets, interlaced work, knitting and embroidery added to the Dowry of the bride. Bohias, Chikkus also served as an air conditioning containers for Chapaties (Indian traditional bread) to be preserved. With the passage of time the best communities of artisans came but got destroyed in the invasions particularly in Punjab. Natural calamities also added woes to worries in this field. Consequently the children of the artisans are helpless to prefer jobs to their legacy of basketry. It is not only difficult but impossible also to compete with the products of modern machine. However there is a ray of hope that love of handmade articles will surely save the craft from going out of breath in its race with the machine. Society must be sensitive to its sustainability. It is suggested that government and the NGOs must initiate to revive, promote and preserve this craft. This beautiful token, the spirit of our forefathers' culture and its creators- the artisans must be saved.

1. Introduction

Often when I peep into the big iron box of my grandmother, full of antiques and rarities, my heart leaps up when I behold two round shaped, colorfully designed baskets (the Chhaba and the Bohia) with interlacing straw defying their age in respect of their colors and form. Really, a great work of art by some skilled craftsman must be having some message of the people in the motifs woven on it. Being an art lover I felt a dire need of research in the realm of baskets. This paper studies the origin, techniques, importance and sustainability of this craft in Punjab.

Punjab has been very rich in the magical touch of the rural artisans. The different handicrafts developed as per the availability of the raw material. The 'Baskets' of Hoshiarpur, Jalandhar, Gurdaspur and Nawanshahar, the 'Durries' of Nakodar, the 'Phulkaries' of Patiala and the 'Inlay work' of Hoshiarpur all speak of the songs sweet and sad, the pangs and joys of life of the people. Each stitch tells a different story.

Giving a practical shape to visual arts by shaving off thin straws of grass, its moulding and interlacing is of course an activity which by adding utility transforms it into something beautifully useful - called basketry. Like pottery, basketry and mat weaving are the earliest of man's creations. Since his origin man had started weaving his dreams into reality. With a disposition to weave he found in vegetable fibre something supple and flexible like grass. Thick grass known as *Serkanda* due to its pliability easily gets knitted, interlaced and plaited. Man's visionary brain discovered *Corn Brush, Munj* (type of Grass), *Palm Leaf, Magar* (a type of bamboo), *Date Leaf* and *Reeds* found mainly in Hoshiarpur, Jalandhar, Gurdaspur, Patiala and Amritsar making these regions the centres of basketry. This clever and skilful weaving woven with reeds and corn husk produces baskets, Changairs, Chhabas,

Chhikus, containers of various shapes having lids, Chhaj and Tokries, Peshawari Pakha, Kundaldar Pakhi (Hand fans), carpets and Chiks (curtains). The meticulous artisan converted this hard and difficult job into attractive and beautiful articles, the basic needs of the culture of Punjab, with all the precise elaborations.

2. Artisanal Community

Due to the material and the task, the codification of artisanal communities placed the basket and mat weaver among the lowly castes. The reference of the basket maker also comes in the old scriptures but as a person of low status. The Puranas refer to the king Vena as the first low born among the forest dwellers' tribes from whom the bamboo workers descended.¹

In Punjab these basket makers belong to the low caste called 'Mahasha'. Either they are small land owners or landless workers who collect their raw material from local forest areas and sit by the road sides, weaving and selling the baskets, unnoticed by the passersby.

3. Method and Material Used

Bamboo, cane, reeds, grasses, palm leaves and wheat straw are used as raw material for basketry. There is a lot of difference in making various types of baskets in Punjab only. In Doaba region the people in many villages use a type of grass to make commercial baskets, where-as in Malwa region the women in the houses make baskets with wheat straw.

There are families in Alawalpur, district Jalandhar, who buy this raw material and sit together to make the baskets. They also make fans, winnowing trays and chicks (mats made of bamboo). A variety of reed grass used in basketry, grows in abundance in the marshes near the rivers, lakes or seasonal

tributaries called *choes* in Hoshiarpur and Jalandhar districts of Doaba region.

For Chiks the bamboo of different gradations is purchased. It is then cut into long thin strips. In Hoshiarpur District, there is a whole-sale market of bamboo near Salwara and Banjarbagh area. These strips are then woven on a

simple loom consisting of four pegs on the ground with a warp of sturdy cotton string. The string wound through the weft of bamboo shafts is attached in a fret like design. This Chik not only saves the people from the direct and hot rays of the sun but also gives a beautiful lacy appearance. They are made to hang in *varandahs* (semi out door use). Sometimes thicker strips of cotton are also used with cotton cloth lining.



Fig 1 Loom for the Chiks



Fig 2 making of the Chiks

Bamboo is the principal material used all over India. It is split into required width with the knife.



Fig 3,4 The artisan splitting the Bamboo with a knife at Alawalpur, Jalandhar



Fig 5,6 - The pieces of bamboo or the reed grass are woven together, with the warps radiating out with from a central base.

The foundation is laid by coiling the cane round the central core at the base, then building up spirally, gradually widening until the desired height and form are attained.²

4. Case Study -1

Mr. Sohan Lal³ (60) of Hazipur (Hoshiarpur) acquired the knowledge of all the curves, contours and colors of basketry watching and beholding the dexterous hands of Sh. Roshan Lal- his father who had stepped into the shoes of his own father Sh. Mukhi Ram years back when he used to accompany him to the Baisakhi fare at Kaleshwar, near river Beas, District Kangra with their fresh, colorful and vibrant products.

In interaction with him Mr Sohan Lal got emotional and reminiscent while giving the detailed account of the value of



Fig- Mr. Satpal working on road side, Alawalpur

Mr Satpal⁴ along with Mr. Ashok Kumar and Mr. Bodh Raj shared their views. According to Mr. Ashok Kumar⁵ about 120 skilled Basket makers having their ancestral skill are making baskets without any aid from state or centre government. Facing the challenge from machine made articles and poor marketing this craft is in the dying status. The future generations did not opt for this profession. The legacy of past will end in being called the belongings of the past.

The tall golden-white *Sarkanda* (kanna) grass grows in Punjab, Haryana and Delhi. Hence these places have become the important centres for the manufacturing of moorahs and chairs. The basket makers cut long strips of sarkanda grass with a curved knife and clean the outer layer. The sarkandas are tied in a criss-cross fashion and are wrapped with wheat straw at some points to hold them together. They are covered with bright colored cotton or nylon ropes. *Sarkanda* is stitched together with the use of the date-palm leaf. Dyed date-palm leaves are worked in intricate patterns, similar to the geometric patterns of the *Phulkari*.⁶

6. Uses

In olden times girls remained at home doing interlacing, knitting and weaving thus adding to the items of Dowry. Baskets had a major place as they were safer and secure

Basketry of the days of his grand-father. His father Mr. Roshan Lal did not join any job but preferred the ancestral legacy of Basketry. He took to the workshop of his father Mr Mukhi Ram at home. Sohan Lal himself attended the school up to tenth class only on the grounds that they had a hereditary skill and a shop of basketry of their own. But with a heavy heart he told that his son has no taste for this non lucrative craft and instead has joined the Marriage Band in the city.

5. Case Study -2

One can see the families of artisans sitting and making baskets in the open on the road side (the link road leading from Adampur to Kishangarh , Jalandhar). The quick activity of their hands is encouraging. But in an interaction with them one feels pang and agony of their hearts.



Fig- The finished Basket

containers for keeping needles, threads, pins, buttons and cotton in them. These baskets were of different shapes and colors. The multicolored cotton thread used in hand fans, *chhabas*, *bohias* and *chhikoos* with different shapes and margins made the items all the more beautiful and swelled the treasure of their dowry. As the greater was the *katnee* (dowry), the greater was the value. In this way the showcases of their in-laws remained studded with this embellished work of art.

The Chhaba (Chapati container) was often hung from roof in the middle of the kitchen to keep the freshness of the chapatis and to save them from cats or dogs. The lady of the house used to go to fields having breakfast for the bread winner in the round basket – the *Chhaba*, the *Bohia*, the *Chhiku*, keeping the *Chapaties* fresh in its heat and cold absorbing form. The importance of basketry lies in the way it is made of natural material in a simple manner leaving space for air.

7. Decline

Going back in the deep and dark regions of history the instinct of the craftsmanship is found in the stone age as well. With the passage of time the best communities of artisans

came but got destroyed in the invasions especially in Punjab. Natural calamities also added woes to worries in this field.

Growing needs of the increasing population are eating into the very vitals of the places known for *sarkanda* grounds. The children of craftsmen have grown into tillers and have transmuted the *sarkanda* grounds into corn fields.

With the society progressing in leaps and bounds, the individual's needs increased and the man had to step out of the thresholds to face the increasing price rise and inflation and to join other professions under the helplessness of the decaying and withering conditions of handicrafts languishing for sustenance

The progress of Science brought forth the attractive duplicates of the craft products and the original ones tumbled down and got lost.

8. Sustainability

The concern of 'handmade' is again felt in the modern age, which ironically itself is responsible for strangulating it with the iron hands of the modern machine. But again time and need being the great masters brought a new ray of hope for the dying crafts. The love of design, beauty, color and creation gave birth to the revival of crafts. Although basketry has to vie with the modern machine race yet this love of hand-made articles saves it from going out of breath.

References

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This charming, bewitching and native work involves women folk also. The declining crafts got support when women rose to the occasion in the absence of his man, who has preferred job to basket making, took up the needle, the *punja*, the *sarkanda* and the fiber. To stand by the sustainability of the handicrafts is to empower the woman of Punjab who is bold brave and hard working but it needs a strong backing to revive the dying crafts and their fading colors.

Society must be sensitive to the sentiments, feelings and the utility attached to this craft. The government and the NGOs must initiate to revive, promote and preserve this craft. For assisting and maintaining the old vigour of the artisans Proper incentives, grants and training should be given. The government institutions like Punjab Small Industries and Export Corporation (PSIEC) should give proper place to basketry in its agenda of development.

9. Conclusion

The aim of the paper is to study the origin, existence and future sustenance of basketry- the dying craft of Punjab. It is found that culturally this craft enjoys much importance. The material used is easily available in different regions of Punjab. Still it is losing grounds in viability against the machine made products. However it is a very good and suitable field for rural employment and women empowerment. To save it from extinction society itself, N.G.O.s and the Government must come forward with suitable incentives, grants, training and marketing strategies for proper sale of their products.