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Weaving Traditions along the “Wool Road” in India

by Suzette R.. Copley Patterson

Introduction

Although the “Silk Road” is by far the most famous network of trade routes connecting China, Central Asia, and India, there are other significant, ancient trade routes between these regions of which many may not be aware. One such trade route, known informally as the “wool road”, connected the plains of the Punjab in India to Tibet, Central Asia and China¹. This route, and several others, passed through the Kullu and Kinnaur regions of the northern Indian state known as Himachal Pradesh. The “wool road”, which was really merely a donkey trail, was the traditional main trade route in the region, and was so important that it was later widened to motorable width to boost trade in the region and came to be known as the Hindustan-Tibet road². Two groups of artisans that can be found along this important route are the weavers of Kullu and Kinnaur. Their strategic location on these routes caused their weaving to be greatly influenced by the ancient trade and traffic along it. Their weaving traditions have a long and intertwined history and their shawls are quite famous throughout India; however, their distinct and skillful weaving is nearly unknown to the outside world.

The “Wool Road”

The state named “Himachal Pradesh”, meaning land of snow, is located in the northernmost part of India, sandwiched between the Indian states of Kashmir to the Northwest, Uttar Pradesh to the South and Punjab to the Southwest. To the East, it forms India's border with Tibet and Nepal. It is comprised of hilly and mountainous regions with altitudes ranging from 350 to nearly 7,000 meters above sea level.³ Although the majority of the population is Hindu, there are a significant number of Buddhists, especially in Kinnaur.

Interrelated History of Kinnauri and Kulluvi Weaving

It is said that weaving has been practiced in Himachal Pradesh for at least 5,000 years.⁴ Master weaver Dhuni Chand stated that the art of weaving decorative motifs on wool garments began in the Kinnauri village Shubnam, and that the craft came to Kinnaur from Tashkent, in Uzbekistan, via China and Tibet.⁵ The fact that Kinnauri weaving was influenced as a result of their location along this busy trade route is evident in many of their traditional motifs, such as the *diwar-e-chine* (great wall of China).

*¹ Poonam Minhas, Traditional Trade & Trading Centres in Himachal Pradesh. (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 1998), pp. 14, 58.

² Ibid, p. 110.

³ Ram Chand Garg, “Institute of Tribal Studies”, October, 2001, <<http://hpuniv.nic.in/tribal.htm>>, (July, 2002).

⁴ R.K. Bhardwaj, "Kullu Shawl: A Study". Documentation project (sponsored by All India Handicrafts Board, New Delhi), National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, India, 1978.

⁵ Master Weaver Dhuni Chand, Manali, Himachal Pradesh, India, July 1997.

One can say that Kinnauri weaving is the predecessor of the style of weaving for which Kullu is famous. The Kinnauri style of weaving was first introduced to Kullu valley in the 1830s when weavers from Rupa village in Kinnaur fled to the Kullu valley to escape persecution by the local king.⁶ After migrating to the Kullu valley, these weavers continued their craft and were given incentives to teach their patterning techniques to the Kulluvi people.⁷ Decoration in Kulluvi weaving, prior to the arrival of the Kinnauris, was restricted to variations in twill weave, checks, and plaids. Their shawls and *pattus* were devoid of any kind of motifs. Border patterning, as well as the red selvedge border known as the *khanni* or *khushti* first appeared on *pattus* in the 1920s, about 93 years after the Kinnauris migrated to the Kullu Valley.⁸ The intricate patterns decorating the ends of the Kinnauri *chhanli*, *lengcha* and *dohru* were the source of inspiration for Kulluvi motifs. The bright, bold patterns for which Kulluvi shawls and *pattus* (traditional Kulluvi women's outer garment) have become famous originated from Kinnauri motifs that were enlarged and simplified over time.⁹ Although the weaving techniques of Kinnaur and Kullu are almost identical, the bright, almost florescent, colors and bold, graphic style that have become the hallmark of Kullu weaving are definitely unique and separate from those of Kinnauri weaving.

Traditional Products

Many wool items are produced in Kullu and Kinnaur for both personal consumption as well as the commercial market. Traditional products include: *lengchas*, *chhanlis*, *dohrus*, *pattus*, shawls, *chaddars/lois*, caps, border strips, *patti*, and *kamrudar pyjamas*. However, the most significant product by far is the Kullu shawl, for which the region has become famous.

Chhanlis, Lengchas & Dohrus

Kinnauri women's shawls are known as *chhanli*. They measure 2 meters in length x 1 meter in width and have three lines of continuous motifs known as *phools*, interspersed with three lines of separated motifs, known as *taras*, running across each end of the shawl. The selvedge edges often have a 2" border running the length of the shawl on both sides. *Lengchas* are another sort of "shawl" woven in a smaller size, about 1 meter x 1 meter, that have *phools* and *taras* all over the body. It is worn draped over the shoulders and fastened in the front by a brooch known as a *digra*. The Kinnauri woman's outer garment is called a *dohru*. *Dohrus* have a plain or chequered ground with a border that measures about 15 - 20cms on the lateral ends and are classified by the intricacy of

⁶ Neeru Agarwal, "The Woven Shawls of Kullu". Documentation project, National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, India, 1978.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Suman Kharab, "Kullu and Kinnaur: A Documentation of People and Their Costumes". Documentation project, National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, India, 1994.

⁹ Vivek Sharma, and Suresh Anand, "Project Report on Study of Kinnauri Shawl" (Indian Institute of Handloom Technology, Varanasi, India, 1991-1992).

the patterns on the borders.¹⁰ The border on more expensive *dohrus* is embellished with a variety of colorful and intricate patterns. They are generally woven in handspun wool from the local flat-tailed sheep or from yak tail-hair.

Pattus

The Kulluvi woman's traditional outer garment is called a *pattu*. *Pattus* range in length and width from 2.5 meters (length) x 1.33 meters (width) to 3 meters (length) x 1.5 meters (width). The earliest *pattus* were woven in natural black and white.¹¹ Prior to the arrival of the Kinnauri weavers, *pattus* in Kullu were woven in a combination of squares and rectangles, as well as chequered patterns.¹² This kind of *pattu* is still woven and is popular for daily use. *Pattus* are classified by the number and type of motifs used. *Pattus* having a black background with a red *khusti* and many *phools* and *taras* are the most popular combination to wear for weddings and festivals. Traditional bridal *pattus* have a white background with a red *khusti* and are highly decorated with *phools* and *taras*.¹³

Kullu Shawls

The idea for the patterned shawl originated from the patterned *pattu*, which was inspired by the patterned *chhanlis*, *lengchas* & *dohrus* of the Kinnauris.¹⁴ Most reliable sources credit Master weaver Tanjenram Bhagat for weaving the first Kullu shawl, and starting Kullu's first weaver's cooperative society. He was commissioned by a Mrs. S. Bhagwandass in 1942 to weave a Kulluvi *pattu* design across both ends of a shawl. Mrs. Bhagwandass provided the specifications and pashmina yarn was used.¹⁵

Weaving Techniques

Most products are woven in 2/2 twill, while patterned areas are woven in a tabby weave using the dovetail, and sometimes, slit tapestry technique.¹⁶ There is one difference in weaving techniques between the Kinnauri and Kulluvi style: Kulluvians use a double, rather than single, thread for patterning, which results in a somewhat coarser design.¹⁷ Although a plain ground seems to be the most popular style presently, variations

¹⁰ Kharab.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Interview with Master Weaver Tanjenram Bhagat, Sarsei, Himachal Pradesh, India, July 1997.

¹⁵ Interview with Master Weaver Dhuni Chand, Manali, Himachal Pradesh, India, July 1997.

¹⁶ Subashini Aryan, and R.K. Dutta Gupta, Crafts of Himachal Pradesh. (Ahmedabad, India: Mapin Publishing, 1993). p. 118.

¹⁷ Bhardwaj, R.K. "Kullu Shawl: A Study" (Diploma documentation project, National Institute of Design, 1978).

on the regular twill weave as well as plaid patterns have often been used in the production of shawls and pattus and are still popular.

Equipment

There are several types of looms used for weaving in Kullu and Kinnaur. Traditional looms are the pit loom, muffler loom and the border loom. A pit loom can be found in almost every household in the region.¹⁸ Weavers that use a pit loom generally weave their shawls and pattus in handspun *deshkar* or *bihang*. Locals prefer pattus and shawls woven on a pit loom and in handspun yarn, as the fabric produced is denser and therefore tougher and warmer.¹⁹

The non-household industry of the Western Himalayan region largely depends upon imported "throw-shuttle" and fly-shuttle frame looms. The fly-shuttle has the advantage of accelerated production and produces a more uniform fabric. A weaver using a fly shuttle-loom can produce a shawl or pattu in 2 - 3 days, which is equal to about two to three meters per day, while a weaver using a pitloom only produces about one to two feet per day.²⁰

Fibers/Yarns

Wool is regarded as pure by the Himachalis and must be worn during all rituals. For example, during a marriage ceremony, the bride and groom are wrapped in a wool shawl to protect them from the "evil eye".²¹ The main varieties of fleece used to weave shawls include: *deshkar* (the fleece from local, lowland sheep, *bihang* (the fleece of sheep from Kinnaur and even higher altitudes), imported Australian merino tops (*raffal*), *pashmina* (the fleece of the Cashmere goat, *Capra hircus*), and angora (the fleece of imported German angora rabbits), which is a recent introduction. At one time, *shahtoosh* (the fleece from the endangered Tibetan antelope) was also used, but it is now illegal.²² Presently, the most common Kullu shawls produced for commercial purposes have a ground woven in chemical-dyed, mill-spun merino, while brightly colored acrylic yarn is used to weave the border motifs. *Pattus* and *dohrus* are still often woven in *deshkar* and *bihang*. Some *dohrus* are also woven from yak fleece.

¹⁸ Aryan and Gupta, p. 115.

¹⁹ O.C. Handa, Textiles, Costumes and Ornaments of the Western Himalaya. (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 1997).

²⁰ Asha Bansal, and S.M. Phadke, "Hand Woven Kullu Shawls". The Indian Textile Journal, vol. 107:5, February 1, 1997, pp. 58.

²¹ Aryan and Gupta, p. 115.

²² Brenda Wright and Ashok Kumar, Fashioned for Extinction: An Exposé of the Shahtoosh Trade (New Delhi: Wildlife Protection Society of India, [1997]), p. 2.

Traditional Motifs & Color Schemes

The Kinnauri Palette

Usually one color is used predominately for the motifs in Kinnauri weaving, while other colors are used sparingly. Red is generally the predominant color, which gives the Kinnauri products their trademark overall brick-red appearance. It is combined with yellow and blue, with smaller amounts of white and green. These colors symbolize the five elements and when the Buddhist motifs are executed in these five colors, they represent a “mystico-spiritual core”. This combination represents a blend of spirituality, truth and transcendental wisdom that imparts a certain religious, as well as aesthetic value to the shawls, making them more akin to a *mandala* (a circular design containing geometric forms, which symbolizes the universe in both Buddhism and Hinduism) than merely a decorative piece of clothing.²³ Bright Kinnauri palettes include: red, royal blue, orange, lemon-yellow, green, white, black, and purple, while sober palettes include combinations of sky blue, mustard, coffee, golden brown, dark brown, olive green and maroon.²⁴ However, the most common combination is the previously mentioned palette that contains the five religiously significant colours.

The Kullu Palette

Kulluvis were known for their skills in the craft of dyeing. Harcourt wrote in 1868 that: “In Lahoul there are no dyers, the whole of the trade being in the hands of the men from Kooloo, who occasionally pass through the valley... In Kooloo a great variety of tints are produced by the dyer's art.... The most vivid blues, reds and yellows are to be met with everywhere, with the gradations from grey to burnt sienna, madder and black.”²⁵ Kulluvi color schemes are usually comprised of seven colors used in equal amounts.²⁶ Colors traditionally used for borders include red, blue, green, yellow, pink, orange, white and sometimes black. Kullu patterns tend to be woven in much brighter colors than those used for Kinnauri motifs. Findings from my research suggest that the color palette each tradition draws from is most likely a result of the yarns available when the tradition began. At the time that patterned borders began to appear in Kulluvi pattus, imported, mill-spun, brightly dyed, Japanese yarns were available in the Kullu valley. These brightly colored yarns must have seemed quite spectacular to weavers accustomed to using vegetable dyed yarns and they probably were eager to weave their new product, the patterned pattus, in equally innovative color schemes. In the long run, these bright colors turned out to be quite problematic though, and two relatively new trends have developed in Kulluvi weaving in response to these problems. The first problem is that many of the dyes that rendered such bright colors on wool are no longer produced mostly because of the health risks they pose.²⁷ The second problem is that, although modern dyes can

²³ Handa.

²⁴ Kharab.

²⁵ A.P.F. Harcourt, The Himalayan Districts of Kooloo, Lahoul and Spiti. (Delhi: Vivek Publishing House, 1972 (reprint of 1868 original)).

²⁶ Bansal and Phadke, p. 59.

produce the same bright colors as their toxic predecessors, the brighter colors tend to not be colorfast.²⁸ Two responses to these problems began to emerge. Some, if not most, weavers started to use acrylic instead of wool yarn for the colored borders. By using acrylic yarns, the weavers were able to retain their traditional color schemes and did not have to worry about the product deteriorating after washing or fading over time. The other trend that developed was that weavers who did not wish to use acrylic yarns began to use wool yarns in more subdued shades and incorporated colors heretofore not used. In some cases, even the seven-color format has been disregarded. Some weavers have even begun to weave traditional motifs in monochromatic colors rather than the traditional seven-color palette (albeit they still usually use seven shades of the same color). This change, in particular, has dramatically altered the look of Kullu shawls in the market today.

It has been the tradition in both Kullu and Kinnaur to weave the base of the shawl in natural wool, which is either off-white, grey, fawn, dark brown or black. This custom however, has been altered over time in response to the commercial market, so now many shawls are woven with a colored ground.

Motifs

Kinnauri designs have been inspired by the weaver's surroundings, religion, traditions and philosophy of life. According to Handa, Kinnauri shawls have a profound religious significance and many of the motifs represent Buddhist religious symbols. The following is a short list of a few of the many traditional Kinnauri and Kulluvi motifs:

- 1. BODTANKA (Kinnauri)** - design formed by the combination of small squares in such a manner that a multicolored round shape is formed. One of the most common border designs in Kinnauri shawls.
- 2. BULBUL CHASM-** Nightengale's eye (dark colors around a brighter dot).
- 3. CHABI** - keys.
- 4. CHATHAM (Kinnauri)** - a large cross woven in dark shades with smaller crosses at each end.
- 5. CHHORTEN (Kinnauri) (Buddhist)** - Buddhist temple in a stylized form. It is believed to keep evil spirits away.
- 6. CHIRIYA (Kulluvi)** - A bird or usually a flock of birds, formed by small crosses in various colors arranged in diagonal patterns.
- 7. DABBIDAR KIRU (Kulluvi)** - spotted snake.
- 8. DIWAR-E-CHINE** - "Great wall of China". This motif was inspired by tales about China told to the Kinnauris by Tibetan traders.
- 9. DHARI-** stripe or line.
- 10. DORJE (Buddhist)** - thunderbolt.
- 11. GAU** - Locket
- 14. GUDDI (Kulluvi)** - a stylized doll with raised hands.
- 15. GULAB-** rose.

²⁷ Interview with Ashok Rai, Indian Cornucopia, New Delhi, March 1997.

²⁸ Interview with Anil Goel, Dev Bhoomi Spinning Mills, Bhuntar, Himachal Pradesh, August 1997.

- 16. GUR GUR (Kinnauri)** - numerous reversed “v”s on their sides that give the impression of sharp teeth.
- 18. GYATUNG or TANKA-** a hexagonal motif , considered a symbol of welcome, commonly found on Buddhist temple gates.
- 19. KANGHU (Kulluvi)** – comb.
- 20. KENCHU-** scissors.
- 22. KIRAH - (Kulluvi)** - snake.
- 23. LAHERIYA** - waves.
- 41. MANDIR-** Hindu temple.
- 24. PALPAY (Kinnauri)** - one of the most commonly used designs, also found on the gates of Buddhist temples, formed by multicolored, interlocking squares.
- 26. PHOOL (Kulluvi)** - flower.
- 27. SIRHI-** staircase. Symbolizes the steps to a temple, God or to Heaven.
- 28. SWASTIK-** a cross pattern with legs attached at right angles to the outer extremes. Symbolizes the cross-roads where the four directions meet and/or the guiding light in darkness.
- 31. TARA (Kulluvi)** - star.
- 32. TIPU (Kulluvi)** - drops.
- 33. TRISHUL (Kinnauri) (Buddhist)** - A cross with a trident at each end.
- 34. YUNG-RUNG (Kinnauri) (Buddhist)** - four “T”s in a square with the heads pointing outwards (also a swastika motif –between the “T”s).
- 35. Y’URA HUA GANESH / JURA HUA GANESH-** interlinked swastikas.

Conclusion

The weaving of both the Kinnauris and Kulluvis form an important part of India’s cultural heritage and deserve the recognition that is their due for the beautiful works of art that they are. However, these national treasures are under siege. The weavers in this region are facing increasing economic hardships due to rapid and unequal changes in India’s economy as a result of recent trade liberalization policies, the cost and difficulty in procuring raw materials, and competition with the power loom sector. As a matter of fact, hand weavers all over India are facing similar problems. Articles in Indian papers over the last few years tell stories of weavers who are starving and have even been driven to suicide because of their poverty. Traditional weaving all over India is being lost and/or degraded, as weavers find that it is more cost-effective to weave coarser, simpler motifs which are less labor intensive and therefore cheaper and easier to sell in greater quantities. The result is that many of the finer, more intricate, traditional patterns are lost because they are no longer woven. This is especially so for Kulluvi and Kinnauri weaving, as “jalas” are not used, as in other weaving traditions, to record motifs. Also, in some cases, the art is in danger of simply dying out because the younger generations are not interested in working so hard to earn such a meager living. They prefer to learn some other more lucrative trade. This is where documentation projects can play an important role. They can serve to both document the history of the craft and its traditional motifs as well as to educate the public about the craft and create a discerning appreciation for them. Bringing this craft to the attention of a larger, discerning audience can help to create a wider market for these artisans’ products. Hopefully, these larger markets may increase sales enough to revive faltering traditions and help to sustain them.

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