

# Languishing Wood Inlay Works in Punjab

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**Abstract – Man has been creative since ages. The conception of some shape or image in his mind got transformed into concrete form with the innovative activity of his head and hands resulting in a new creation called the craft to which the heart with its sensitive feelings, emotions and passions further spurred the creative hands to add curves, contours and grooves for inlaying white and colourful chips on them- thus fixing beauty to this form to produce an artful, alluring and ultimate design christened as 'Inlay Work'. Around 3000 BC its origin lies in Egypt on wood, glass, ivory, quartz and obsidian. In the 16th century in Italy at Florence, this exceptional, matchless and distinctive work was reborn. In India this craft has been mainly carried out in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. For wood inlay in Punjab Hoshiarpur, Jalandhar, Amritsar and Bhera are known for their distinct styles. Hoshiarpur with its surrounding villages and towns like Chhauni Kalan, Boothgarh, Bassi Ghulam Hussain and Adamwal became the renowned centres of this craft. Artisans experimented further, contributing to the legacy of their art to their generations to come. The Wild Life Protection Act 1989 banned the use of ivory. The Government recommended a substitute in high quality plastic in which again these artisans excelled and achieved the heights. The business flourished. But the loss of patronage, exploitation by the middlemen, the indifference of the governments, the costly raw material, shortage of wood and immigration of the artisans is giving a big jolt to this craft. Timely and suitable steps by the government, the financial help, the interest of the N.G.Os, the co-operative societies, banks and Educational Institution is the need of the day.**

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## INTRODUCTION

More exulting than my uncle's visit to us last month was the present he brought to us- an elegant wooden inlaid table that bedecked our drawing room beautifying its corner. I gazed, watched and observed the intricacies in it. I heard the unheard melodies, I saw the unseen spots, I treaded the untrodden paths and I read the unread messages that filled my heart with pleasure and gratefulness to my uncle as well as to the artisan who had stamped and glued in it his ideas, feelings and emotions enlivened with the culture, the history and the way of life of his times with sincere honesty. But soon a thought of the withering condition of this work of art made me doleful. This paper is a study from its origin-the past in the light of the present to read its future. For this I went from place to place to adore the esteemed craftsmen shouldering the art and reminiscences of our forefathers, I talked to them and let them unfold their happy experiences, painful moments and worries about this decaying craft in the cut throat competition with machine made but heartless replicas.

## INLAY WORK IN PUNJAB

Punjab is celebrated for its ivory and brass inlay in wood. Many woodwork centres are functioning in

Punjab with their own distinct styles. Ornamental products and furniture are the speciality of Hoshiarpur, Jalandhar, Amritsar and Bhera etc. Hoshiarpur has developed a different style of carving in low relief in geometrical and floral patterns. The small designs are prepared singly in pieces and then they are inlaid closely to create an overall pattern. Ivory inlay is exclusively practiced in Hoshiarpur. This district produces dark Sheesham wood, best suited for inlay.

The craft depicted floral and geometrical patterns on wood. No written record about the history is available, so the only source is the interviews of the artisans working in the field. When contacted, Mr. Ashok Kumar Jain<sup>1</sup> (70) of Hoshiarpur, the recipient of State Merit Certificate in ivory inlay craft, narrated the history and development of this craft. He revealed that this craft was established in Hoshiarpur nearly three centuries ago. Hoshiarpur was the centre of ivory bangle making (*Churrah*) which a bride was supposed to wear during and after the marriage.

During the process of making bangles or combs of ivory, many cut pieces were left wasted. This small cutting of ivory was considered as a waste of no use. Some craftsmen out of their creative instinct used these cuttings on the inkpots or other small

objects and created beautiful designs. Britishers, residing in a *Chhawani* (army camp) also called Ram Colony Camp, promoted this style and got many things inlaid out of these cuttings. They used to purchase whatever was made by these artisans to take them to their land. This industry started flourishing in this area.



**Mr Ashok Kumar Jain, and his state merit award certificate, Hoshiarpur**

Mr Madhu Sudan Jain<sup>2</sup> (58) opines that nearly one thousand artisans were into the practice of this art. The inlaid articles created by them were exported to European and American countries. Many Muslim, Hindu and Sikh artisans had been practicing the inlay craft. It faced a shattering blow during the partition days in 1947, when several Muslim artisans migrated to Pakistan. In 60s the demand of the inlay work grew up and the industry got momentum. Many craftsmen in the villages like Chhaunikalan, Boothgarh, Bassi Ghulam Husain, and Niarah etc. acquired the knowledge of this art. Booth Garh and Bassi Ghulam Hussain became the centres where the artisans used to work in their homes and supply the craft items to different firms in the city (Hoshiarpur). Many firms in the city were having their own workshops. The workers, working under the

patronage of old firms, established their own business for their generations to come.

## METHOD AND MATERIAL

Ivory inlay is done mainly on Sheesham wood but occasionally black wood and rose wood are also used. Choosing the proper kind of wood and to identify the texture of the wood before its selection for carving or inlaying is very important. The texture, color and type of wood give direction to the scope of the craftsman's work. Wood is not strong from all sides. The direction of fiber of the wood which is strongest is known as grain. An inlay artist Mr. Shammi Lal (62) told that the delicate parts of a design are arranged along the grain instead of across it. The slender part of stalks or leaf-points should not be far removed from their surroundings. He showed many damaged pieces which were prepared against these rules. Sheesham is considered as the best kind of wood for this purpose as it is durable and tough but not very hard for the craftsman to work upon it. Besides Sheesham, work is done on the chestnut, American walnut, mahogany and teak wood also. Another craftsman Ranjeet<sup>4</sup> (47) told that Italian walnut, sycamore maple, apple, pear and plum woods are also chosen by some artisans for fine work. Pine wood is good for the items that are not too delicate and don't need to be painted. He further told that mango wood is also used which is cheaper but lacks a good shelf-life.

Sheesham wood locally known as Tahli is the best choice for this craft as it is durable and not easily attacked by the insects or borers. So it is used extensively. However the present sourcing of Sheesham is facing shortage as wood used for this craft needs to be at least of fifty years old. Due to the depletion of forests at high rate, government has imposed prohibitions on forest reserves; the craft industry is facing scarcity of wood these days. Artisans are forced to use rosewood but its higher cost affects the final cost of the product. Baru Ram<sup>5</sup> (67) opines that he prefers rosewood to Sheesham as its dark color, almost black, brings out a better contrast with the inlay and is more sturdy and durable than Sheesham.

Initially the craft was practiced with the ivory. But after it was banned by the government, the artisans started using camel bone, metal and acrylic sheets. The craftsman continued with the same designs but different material for inlay. The use of acrylic has proved to be very beneficial for the artist as ivory was not only very costly and scarce but very tedious to use. Milky white acrylic of thickness from 0.72mm to 2.5mm is used as required. .

The craft involves the first step of procurement of wood at the timber depots in markets. Wood procured from there is unseasoned and comes in large logs. These logs are converted into planks of

required size and thickness. This process is done at saw mills or with the cutting machines. Previously it was done with the big *arries* (hand saw) by the artisans themselves. Inner heart- the kernal of the log is used in this craft for best results.



**Wood is procured from the market and then seasoned in a special plant (Hoshiarpur)**

After cutting the logs into planks the process of seasoning is practiced. The traditional method of seasoning practiced by the artisans is keeping the logs out in the sun and rain at least for six months exposing them to the natural weather. Each plank is stacked with ventilation. Longer the seasoning better the quality of the wood.

After the seasoning the craftsman chooses the plank and cuts it into the size required for his design and product. The next step involves the Planning or *Randai* which involves the smoothening of the surface. This is done with the help of planers. Lathe work or *Kharad* is required to make certain parts like legs of a table or chair or any round and cylindrical article.

Then comes the *naqashi* part. For this the design which is to be inlaid is transferred onto the surface of the wood. Mr. Matharu (59) of Shergarh said that when his father was practicing this craft the drawing was done free hand and so copy or duplication was

not possible. If repetitive pattern was needed, the artist used to reproduce it from a perforated stencil called the *khaka*, was made of the goatskin and as an important family heirloom. In the process of transferring the design on to the wood, charcoal powder was passed through the tiny perforations of the *khaka* and to the pre-prepared surface of the medium. The design on the wood was made firm by inking. These days the artisans use stencils, the *farmas* made of paper or cardboard, tin or zinc sheets. The motifs are drawn on the sheet and the stencil is cut, the pattern is reproduced on the wood by stamping or by tracing it with the pencil. Some artisans directly stamp on with a chisel and mallet which leaves slight indents on the wood surface. The indents are chiseled and deepened to create the 2-3 mm deep linear or circular grooves for inlaying. For linear grooves chisels are used while for circular grooves hand drill is used.



**Fig -- Transferring the motif onto the wood with the help of Khaka**

In the next step inlay strips and chips for small designs are cut in the acrylic sheets. Inlaying or *bharai* is done by fitting in the cut strips and pieces of acrylic into the grooves with the help of a hammer and a guiding tool.



**The process of cutting of the strips and the *Bharai***

The tools commonly used are crude like *aari* or saw for all kinds of cutting; *kanchi* scissors for cutting of thin sheets of acrylic; the *churri* or knife for paring and rough shaping.; the *sohan* or file for shaping and finishing; *birkas* or chisels of different sizes; gouges, drills, punches; the *randa* or plane; the *rethi* or curved rifflers.

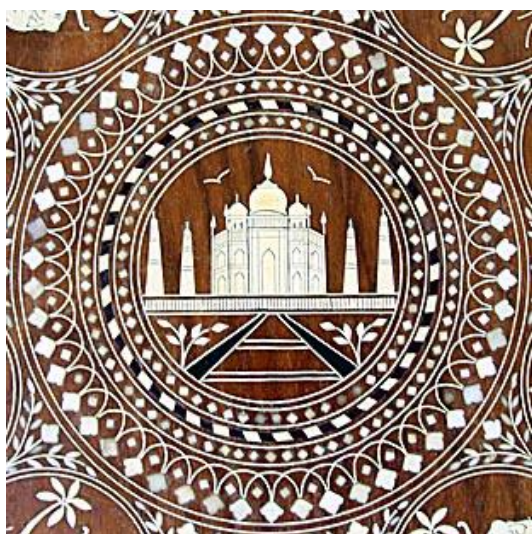
Then comes the buffing in which sand papers of various degrees are used on the surface for a fine plain even face. The uneven dentures and grooves which are left after inlaying are filled with the help of putty, a paste of adhesive and saw dust. The putty is left on the surface for 4 to 5 hours to be dried followed by final touch of buffing with the sand paper. The inlay work appears clearly and the blank spaces around the motifs are filled.

According to Kuldeep<sup>6</sup> (47) of Chhaunikalan wax (*moom*), *rara*, chalk *mitti* (chalk powder), color (laal, peeli mitti etc.) are mixed in an open mouth pot called *Baati* and placed it on fire. The whole material is mixed in the liquid wax. Then the liquid paste is poured on the floor for cooling. After it gets a little dried, they make small bricks of this paste to use in the process of *murammat*. The surface of the inlaid product is cleaned with the sand paper of No.80. The

*murammat* is applied (wax bricks are rubbed) on the surface filling the holes. Then the whole surface is whipped with a scale like tool called *patti*. With the use of sand paper no. 60, the surface is smoothed again. Sand paper No. 120 is rubbed for extra fineness. The artisans use different types of polishes like varnish, spirit, wood touch, wax, melamine etc. for the required shine. Oil and shellac are used for a glossy finish.



**Fig – preparation of putty and application of wax**



### FINAL PRODUCTS WITH INLAY WORK

Wax polish is traditionally used for the finished products. These days the artisans use branded wax polish which is used to get shine in vehicles. After applying the wax it is left for five minutes. With the help of fine cotton, *mukhmal* cloth also called *sutti*, the surface is rubbed to clear the extra wax and to get shine followed by spirit polish. To bring better quality in the final product the craftsmen have started using melamine polish which is waterproof and scratch resistant but expensive.

### SUSTAINABILITY

It was a setback to this industry when the use of ivory was banned under the Wild Life Protection Act. Due to its ban the export and sale of ivory products was also forbidden. For the survival of this craft and the craft persons, Govt. of India recommended a very high quality plastic for use in inlay work which looks like ivory. The industry adopted this material. Only an expert can distinguish the inlay material of plastic and ivory.

The cut throat competition of this craft with the fast growing machine products has discouraged the workers. They fear to lag behind both in price and the finish. Marketing is another impediment on the way. Poor worker is often fleeced by the middleman. He lacks the know-how of marketing. Financial weakness comes in the way of purchasing the raw material which growing costlier. For such reasons, this industry has not been able to flourish in present times. These craftsmen are not willing to bring their children in this profession as it is less paying in comparison to other jobs they may join.

The Government of India, Ministry of Textiles and All India Handicrafts Board came for the rescue of this craft. To encourage the artisans, National Awards and National Merit Certificates were given to the top artisans for their products. The artisans namely Mr Sukhdayal Plaha of Bassi Gulam Hussain, Sardar Parkash Singh of Hoshiarpur, Mr. Atma Ram of Boothgarh and Mr. Roopan Matharu were honored with National Awards. Mr. Ashok Kumar Jain of Hoshiarpur, Mr. Jagannath Dhiman of Piplanwala, S. Mohan Singh of Boothgarh were honored with National Merit Certificates. Accordingly State Government started giving State Awards. Several Artisans like Mr. Shammi Lal of Shergarh, Mr. Madhu Sudan of Hoshiarpur, Ram Parkash of Bassi Daulat Khan, Gurbaksh Singh of Bassi Gulam Hussain, Ved Parkash and several other workers were awarded State Awards.



But with the passage of time the Government became reluctant in honouring the artisans. Not only this, even the training of plastic inlay work being given by the Punjab Government at Govt Industrial School, Hoshiarpur, was discontinued several years back.

As a result, this art and industry are fast hurling towards oblivion. This industry can be revived with Govt intervention by giving grants, loans, awards and other incentives to the artisans. The Co-operative societies, the N.G.Os, banks and training institutes must rise to the occasion for the sustainability of this craft.

## REFERENCES

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2. Mr. Madhusudan Jain (58), An entrepreneur in the field of plastic inlay, Sessions Chowk, Hoshiarpur.
3. Mr. Shammi Lal (62) an inlay artist from village Shergarh, Hoshiarpur
4. Ranjit (47) inlay craftsman from village Manderan, Hoshiarpur
5. Baru Ram (67) Inlay craftsman from village Bassi Ghulam Hussain, Hoshiarpur
6. Kuldeep (55) use to polish the final product with wax, village Shergarh, Hoshiarpur

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