

The Craft of Walnut Wood Carving: Production, Circulation and Vicissitudes

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Abstract:

This paper is drawn from my ethnography of the walnut wood carving industry that I conducted in the year 2014. It discusses an important shift in the learning, production and circulation of walnut wood carving work as a result of changes in the buyers' profile and consumption tastes that the artisans and traders of walnut wood carving craft encountered in early 1990s. I examine the shifts by describing the dichotomy between *asal* work and *fiṣṣool* work. Besides explaining how the work of walnut wood carving is reorganised, I discuss the attempts at preserving the traditional objects of craft.

Keywords: wood carving, craft, consumption, art, trade, preservation

Introduction

Downtown Srinagar, in the capital city of Jammu and Kashmir, is known for its crafts. Across the areas of Safa Kadal, Noor Bagh and Fateh Kadal are *karkhanas* (workshop) devoted to crafts such as *pashmina*, copper carving, embroidery and walnut wood carving. Mostly situated in the by-lanes of downtown Srinagar, it is easy to identify a wood carving karkhana from a distance. The periodic hammering of timber and the strong smell of shaven wood makes it distinct. A wood carving karkhana has four to eight people working at any given time. Each one of them holds a distinct skill set: carving, carpentry and polishing. The one who owns the karkhana is known as the *ustad* (master); he could either be a carver or a carpenter by expertise. An *ustad* is one with several years of continuous practice and a robust network of customers along with the capital required to setup a karkhana; factors that are crucial in transiting a *karigar* (artisan) into an *ustad*. A karkhana is either within the premise of an *ustad*'s home or adjacent to it, a property that is either of his own or rented from a relative or neighbour. The seating arrangement inside a karkhana is in a triangular fashion so that the *ustad* is able to closely monitor the progress made by the *karigars*. Its walls are adorned by Qur'anic verses; something that the *karigars* believe

would bring *barqat* (success) to their karkhana. On the corners lie several sandpaper rolls, adhesives and stencils. A karkhana is a site of production where orders for making a walnut wood carved item is worked upon and completed. It is also an institution of knowledge where novices work towards acquiring knowledge of carving through apprenticeship. Learning of the craft and its production are inter-linked. While novices learn to carve, they are also contributing towards the completion of orders. Since production and learning go on simultaneously, a way of understanding what is learnt is by looking at what is being produced in a karkhana.

My research interest in walnut wood craft took me to the karkhana belonging to Ghulam Qadir Sheikh, an ustad of the craft in Safa Kadal. I stayed with his family for a period of eight months, and spent most of my time in his karkhana, observing him and other artisans in the karkhana as they practised their craft, negotiated with their customers and discussed their orders. I also visited other karkhanas to interview other karigars, who worked with walnut wood, in order to understand the nuances of their practice, its production and circulation, as a part of my ethnographic study. Drawing from the study, this paper seeks to present the changes that have occurred in the walnut wood craft industry brought in by changes in nature of buyers and consumption practices (Liebl and Roy, 2004) since the 1990s as a result of neo-liberalism and militarisation. These changes have given rise to issues pertaining to craft authenticity and are analysed in terms of the dichotomy in walnut wood carving between *asal* (traditional crafts) and *fizool* (mass produced/ market-driven) that has reorganised the practice of walnut wood carving.

Locating Asal and Fizool in the vicissitudes of crafts

My initial inquiries about wood carving karkhanas in Srinagar evoked unexpected and mixed responses. Some said, “There are no karkhanas anymore,” and some counter-questioned me, asking, “Karkhanas? Are there any left?” These responses starkly contradicted the trade of wood carved objects and shops dedicated to their sale that I witnessed in market spaces. In the first karkhana that I visited through other sources, I shared my field insights with the ustad. He did not completely disagree with me, and said, “*ab asal kaam bobot kum hota hai, fizool kaam zyada hota hai*”- now there is very little real work that is undertaken; frivolous work takes place more rampantly. Asal and fizool are both Urdu language words. Asal translates into something which is considered to be authentic, beautiful and a practice that has become rare. According to this division, defined by the artisanal community, asal signifies an object that is produced following traditional processes of production, based on knowledge acquired through traditional mode. The

outcome of this is an intricate and refined craft. Fizool, on the contrary, suggests an inferior quality of work which is mass-produced. It caters to the modern preference of mechanised production that leads to an object of low cost and compromised quality. Such dichotomy in craft practice is by no means unique to wood carving in Kashmir. Weber (1999) in her ethnography of *Chikankaari* embroiderers in Lucknow, notes the prevalence of a dichotomy between *asli kaam* or *saaf kaam* and commercial *kaam*. *Asli kaam* in her study signifies the use of traditionally approved raw material, quality of embroidery done with minuteness, clarity and number of stitches. In addition, *saaf* (clean) is a characteristic of embroiderers control over her hands and quality of her work. Mohsini (2016), in her work on *zardozi* (metal thread embroidery) embroiderers in Seelampur area of Delhi, describes segmentation of work as *asli* (real)*kaam* done by artisans and *chalu* (cheap) *kaam* by labour employed in the *zardozi* industry. Mohsini differentiates them on the basis of training and practice. *Asli kaam* in her study is an outcome of long training period that has made them accomplished in their knowledge and practice, as a result of which they produce high quality work. Labour, on the other hand, is characterised by someone who after apprenticing for six months produces basic hand-embroidered work for the mass produced market. Bundgaard (1999) in her study explains that two categories of work, ritual art and tourist art, exist in *Orissan pattachitra* paintings, and the same *chitrakaars* (artists) in order to expand their livelihood possibilities mass produce paintings during the tourist season, and as tourists shrink they coalesce into producing ritual art.

Asli-commercial, *asli-chalu*, tourist-ritual are all synonyms of *asal-fizool* in the practice of wood carving in Kashmir. Taking this conversation forward, I argue that the difference between *asal* and *fizool* reflect changes in the profile of buyers and consumption practices (Liebl & Roy, 2004) brought in by neo-liberalism and militarisation in early 1990s. My research findings reveal that during this period, with the beginning of insurgency in Kashmir and army deployment to tackle it (Rai, 2018), the walnut wood carving industry encountered new buyers, the army officers who got posted in Kashmir region. They immediately took a liking for the craft objects made in walnut wood and also contributed to its material culture by demanding new kinds of products¹. As a response to insurgency, the local artisans and traders expanded their circulation network by focusing on bigger cities for sale. Later, with the internet boom, traders and artisans began to virtually connect with their buyers. These factors not just expanded the profile of buyers, but also horizons of their work. I discuss, in this paper, how these two factors have reorganised the work of walnut wood carving by embarking on new pedagogies of learning and modes of

¹ This included figures of soldiers in uniform with their weapons or soldiers in battle-field.

production and circulation. To do so, I discuss the trajectories of Ustad Ghulam Qadir Sheikh and Abdul Ahad, their karkhanas, apprenticeship, and networks of production and circulation.

In the subsequent sections, I discuss the work of two karigars, and through them, take the argument forward by explaining the modalities of circulation.

The two cases: values of work vis-à-vis values of market

In this section, I discuss the two cases of Ghulam Qadir Sheikh and Abdul Ahad to emphasise on the nature of their work space of a wood carving karkhana, and how it interacts with production. Through these cases, I intend to highlight the discursiveness in the work of wood carving and mark the aspects that segment the two kinds of work – asal and fizool. I explain how a karkhana is a microcosm of various relationships bound by production and exchange, and discuss how it is the ground for underlying tensions that prevail between the two groups that make asal work and fizool work. This section also works as a hinge; providing a context of space, structure, relations and processes that connect the arguments I raise in this paper.

Ghulam Qadir Sheikh: of a glorious past and true work

Outside his karkhana hangs a board that reads, ‘Sheikh Enterprise, deals in walnut carving’ with their complete address – a rare sight for a karkhana – as most operate anonymously. Ghulam Qadir sits in the centre, his eyes and hands in symphony making a *Chinar* leaf motif. His karigars sit around him. The karkhana looks bigger than most others I had seen. The room where work is being undertaken could accommodate many more people than it currently does; there is an adjoining showroom, which has all the finished products. A stairway leading to the terrace has several planks of walnut wood stacked for seasoning. The karkhana is owned by two brothers, Ghulam Qadir Sheikh, whose expertise lies in carving, and Mohammed Siddiq, who works as a carpenter. There are three other karigars in the karkhana. Rahim is a carver, Ahmed is a carpenter and Sabha polishes the finished product. The two brothers established this karkhana in 1975 as the first generation of karigars in their family; their father was a wholesale vegetable dealer. It was Ghulam Qadir who first got interested in wood carving work. When he told his father about his interest, he was initially hesitant, but eventually agreed. After a couple of years, his elder brother, Md. Siddiq, also joined a karkhana to learn the work of a carpenter. “You see, my father had great foresight. He knew that a karkhana would be incomplete without a

carpenter, so he motivated Md. Siddiq towards this work,” he said. To learn to become a carpenter one need not invest as many years as required to become a karigar. Two years of focused learning can make one an accomplished carpenter. A carpenter’s apprenticeship includes learning the nuances of work on wood, like cutting, shaping and smoothening, mostly undertaken mechanically. A carver’s learning is much more tedious because of the expanse of knowledge that one must acquire to become an accomplished carver. The knowledge of carving was methodically transferred following a composite body of knowledge that was, as per an ustad’s discretion, transferred step by step. Ghulam Qadir and other ustad’s of similar stature and past shared what this body of knowledge comprised of that I collate here into a more comprehensive form.

The knowledge of carving traditionally begins with the tools. This is after spending approximately one year on doing menial work in the karkhana. Thorough understanding of all the tools that include their role in carving, how to hold them, when to use them, pressure of hands it requires to give an aesthetic outcome, and most importantly, remembering their names are all a part of this initiation. So, if the karigar has to lower the base through the process called *zameen nikalna*, there are many tools that he would require to complete this process. A karigar must know each by name and must understand the role of each tool in completing the process of *zameen nikalna*. Secondly, the quality of raw material plays a critical role in the quality of the finished product. A karigar must have a good judgment of the raw material (walnut). By looking at the walnut log from the outside, he must be able to judge its quality from the inside². Once the log gets cut, it must be seasoned for at least two years before it is ready to use. A karigar must know exactly for how long the wood would require seasoning³. While working on the wood, he must be able to know if the wood needs more seasoning. If that is the case, he must exactly know when to stop working on it. His touch should tell him everything about the quality of wood. The fibre on the walnut makes it aesthetically appealing. The direction of fibres on the walnut must inform the karigar about the direction in which it should be cut and which portion of wood must be used for a specific portion of a product, so that the fibres are effectively visible. Lastly, the primary role of a karigar is to translate an abstract idea into a tangible item. He must have that imagination. The order that a karigar receives from a customer is a limited description of what the customer actually desires. With the limited information and the raw material that he

² There is no scientific way of knowing it. Some karigars depend on their intuition and others have some mechanisms like putting a stick inside to see if the stick goes in straight or breaks.

³ Seasoning is the process of keeping the log under sun for its moisture content to reduce. As the moisture reduces, the quality of wood strengthens. A non-seasoned walnut old or a log inadequately seasoned due to excess water content can be attacked by bugs, easily breakable and hence has a limited shelf life.

has, a karigar must be able to make an entire product. Also, before he begins to carve, he must draw the design on wood. This guides him to carve, so he must know how to draw. His efficiency at drawing manifests in carving; and drawing also helps a karigar in avoiding any irreversible damage to the wood. All these aspects of knowing the craft must be tacitly⁴ explained to and understood by the karigars (Senette, 2006).

A karigar who follows this system of knowledge thoroughly learns to perform each of these above-mentioned components of the body of knowledge. Mostly done through emulation and replication, it takes approximately eight to ten years of apprenticeship to acquire the knowledge. Apart from these pointed skills that a novice learns to perform, there are those skills that are invisible, as they do not leave a conscious sense of sedimentation. An example of this would be intuition, which plays a crucial role during the purchase of raw material. A strong sense of touch to judge how well the timber is seasoned is another invisible skill. Entwined with the four aspects are also his design skills. The motif that a novice learns to make depends entirely on the expertise of his ustad. Following this, Ghulam Qadir learned this craft from three different ustads. Like craft apprenticeship in other parts of the world, in walnut wood carving too, apprenticeship begins with apprentices doing menial work.

At the age of eight, my father requested our neighbour, Abdul Abad Malik to take me as his apprentice. He became my first ustad. Since I was a new apprentice, no remuneration was paid to me. I had to reach the karkhana early, before others came and clean it, it was also my responsibility to get tea and bread for everyone in the karkhana.

(Interview with Ghulam Qadir Sheikh, 2014)

This was done to acquaint an apprentice to the environs of a karkhana and familiarise him to the other aspects of this work. This kind of work was done for almost six months after which the skill transmission would begin, and the apprentice shifted from an observer to an emulator.

The ustad showed me to do Sumba⁵. He asked me to carefully observe and do as he did. Holding the tool, the posture of body and the position of the timber was all learned by watching him. But after I completed six months in the karkhana, I decided to leave this karkhana and join Ustad Abdul Salam Rishi's karkhana. In the second karkhana, I worked for four years and learned most of what I know in this karkhana while watching and following the ustad. This ustad was very particular about the pace at which his karigars work, yet not compromising

⁴ Sennett (2008) explains tacit knowledge as bedding in of a practice. With the bedding in of practice the action of hands become natural and smooth.

with the quality of work. After two years of working with him, he started paying me one rupee. We started work at seven in the morning and worked till eight-thirty in the night with only half an hour for lunch. It was a lot of hard work. After four years, I again decided to leave this karkhana, and joined Ghulam Rishi's karkhana. This karkhana added finesse to my work because the Ustad stressed on the aesthetic qualities of a product. Watching him do work, I realised what aesthetics is, and how beautiful things could bring money. I practiced and improved my drawing skills here. But he also scolded me a lot for petty mistakes. These bashings were like food, they made us strong karigars.

(Interview with Ghulam Qadir Sheikh, 2014)

The nature of apprenticeship in walnut wood carving in Kashmir is different from what has been described by other anthropologists such as Singleton (1989), Lancy (2012) and Terrio (2000), where the apprentice remains with the same master until he completes his apprenticeship. However, in the case of walnut wood carving, apprentices keep changing their ustads for reasons that could include lack of remuneration, quest to learn more or an argument with the master. They adhere to a verbal bond for a year after which they are free to change their ustad.

In 1975, Md. Siddiq and I decided to start this karkhana after consulting our family. We needed capital that was arranged by both of us, our father, and a brother also willingly contributed. The karkhana space was earlier our outhouse, but soon after, we extended it upwards to make space for storing and seasoning raw material. We received the first few orders through Ustad Ghulam Rishi, who did not have enough resources of his own to complete it. And subsequently, orders kept coming in from a trader in Polo View market, who liked my work. He also recommended me to other traders. Simultaneously, the neighbours also came to order furniture for their daughter's trousseau. In between, I also attempted to make some intricate pieces for the government emporium, but later discontinued because of their sheer negligence towards our needs, delayed payments and lack of respect. I have since then limited myself only to good traders who value this work, who understand the hardship of a karigar and respect them. Also, some families always come to me with their orders.

(Interview with Ghulam Qadir Sheikh, 2014)

An attempt to discuss about the 'other' form of wood carving work with Ghulam Qadir provoked a retort from him. He misunderstood my research interest to be lying there and sternly said, "If that is what you want to learn, then, go find some other karkhana. We don't do that kind of low work... other people do it in other parts (geographically), not us." Ghulam Qadir's

opinion about fizool work and its karigars was as stern as his response. He hesitated from calling them karigars and insisted that they be called labour, who undertook low quality work.

They have spoiled the pride of this work by working on their half-acquired knowledge and producing cheap things out of bad quality raw material. It is not just our pride, but it is through crafts that Kashmir is known to the world. Crafts carry the name of Kashmir throughout the world when tourists buy them. With so much affection for this place, they choose an object that they wish to carry back, something that shall keep reminding them about the beauty and glory of this place. And what do they get? When they are sold such low-quality object then they look at this work and us badly. They have made this work impure and corrupt. As it is Kashmir is so unpopular, they are making it even more unpopular.

(Interview with Ghulam Qadir Sheikh, 2014)

Ghulam Qadir's views can be easily seen as the collective opinion of karigars on this side of the continuum, similar to the responses of others. It highlights layers of discontent that karigars collectively feel about fizool work and those who produce them. But these views do not necessarily translate into a sharp binary between asal and fizool. During an informal conversation, he shared with me some of his concerns about not getting enough orders apart from trousseau orders and some from exporters which had also suffered a sharp fall. A sharp rise in the cost of raw material had also made the finished product expensive.

Some people come with an order but vehemently disagree on the cost estimate that we give them. They desire cheap objects, things that are not very expensive. Hand-made or machine-made does not make any difference to them. So, during such bargaining, we also sometimes agree to make low-quality products simply because of the dearth of orders coming in. How else can I sustain this karkhana and continue to do what I take so much pride in? Such orders are made using cheap, low quality raw material bought from a mandi (market) and are more mechanised than others.

(Interview with Ghulam Qadir Sheikh, 2014)

Underlying Ghulam Qadir's narratives is the notion that the customers' naivety does not allow them to differentiate between the traditional work and mass-produced work, hand-made and machine-made. The percolation of fizool and its availability and accessibility to them has rendered asal redundant and fizool more dominant.

Abdul Ahad: of displaced aspirations and alternate skills

I met Abdul through a trader in whose store I had seen animal figurines made by him. The trader had referred to Abdul as someone who was an expert in undertaking this type of rough work. “There is a huge demand for such kind of work in the Middle East and Abdul is one of the best that we have,” he said. Abdul Ahad is 35 years old, and lives in the Lal Bazar area in Srinagar with his parents, wife and two children. His father worked in a wood carving karkhana as a carpenter, but was now unable to work due to age-related illnesses. When I reached Abdul’s house, it was his father who received me at their karkhana, a small room at the entrance of the house. He spoke to me about his experience as a carpenter in a karkhana and how different and difficult the nature of work was when he worked in the industry. “It was tedious and took a lot of time, there was no provision for machines like today, and we did everything using the strength of our arms. But now, they are so quick. The amount of orders has also tremendously increased.”

The karkhana was a cramped space with all the corners filled with sacks full of figurines ready to be sent out to traders. The only space that appeared empty was his seat. The floor was spread with tools, sandpaper, polish, stencils and residues. ‘Allah’ was inscribed on the wall a few metres above his seat. Outside this room, was a patio where he keeps all the machines; he spends at least three to four hours working on them every day. There is a machine to shape the blocks of wood that would be shaped into animals, and a machine for smoothening the surface of the wood.

Abdul completed his schooling and aspired to complete his graduation. He could not secure admission in any college, so he enrolled in a computer course in the hope that the knowledge of computers would make him eligible for a job. He kept looking for appropriate opportunities at government offices and in shops, but to no avail. Finally, he resorted to learning basics of wood carving. His father’s experience as a carpenter affected his choice of work. Abdul started working at the karkhana of Abdul Rashid, who lived in his *mohalla* (neighbourhood). Rashid became his Ustad.

My father always believed that craftwork cannot improve the conditions of our family, and that is why he always encouraged me to stay away from it and focus on education. But on failing to find a job even after finishing the computer course, I decided to learn the craft. I had seen my friends doing it. They learned the work quickly and started making it. I started working in Rashid’s karkhana in the same neighborhood. It’s not like I knew nothing about this work, I

had always seen my father do it so the skill was there within me. Rashid helped me to bring it out. When I started working there, in the first four months I focused only on using the machine that cuts and shapes the wood. Next, I worked on smoothening the surface for about two months. Rashid then showed me how to carve. He made animals out of wood, so we carved some strokes on elephants and camels for decorative purposes. Lastly, he taught me to polish. In one year, I had learned everything that this work would require. In the year 2000, I started my own work but remained associated with Rashid for orders. Since I did not buy machines immediately, I used to get shaped wood pieces from him, carve on them, polish and return them to Rashid. Eventually, I bought these machines from a karigar who had decided to shut down his karkhana due to lack of orders. Therefore, it has only been seven years since I began to complete an entire order here in my karkhana.

(Interview with Abdul Ahad, 2014)

Abdul goes to Safa Kadal mandi to buy raw material. It need not be of high quality because of the low price that he must maintain for the finished figurine. “I sell them to traders who are interested in this kind of work. The small shops in Lal Chowk market, the roadside hawkers on Boulevard Road and Shikara hawkers⁵ mostly buy it for the tourists interested in Kashmiri souvenirs. Army officers also buy them regularly in bulk for gifting purposes,” said Ahad.

There are many karigars like Abdul with different areas of specialisation such as creating fruit trays, *shikaras*, houseboats, Chinar leaf curios, key chains, etc. They primarily cater to the large souvenir stores in the local and global markets. These souvenirs also make a transnational and transcultural leap to become a souvenir for other countries in the Middle East, from where a large share of orders come from. During our conversation, Abdul pulled out a few such pieces from one of the sacks lying in the corner. It had camel figurines with “I love Dubai” carved on the base. The transnational trade between Dubai and Kashmir is orchestrated by traders (mostly Kashmiris who have migrated), whom Steiner (1994) in his study on transnational trade of African arts, calls ‘cultural brokers’ and ‘mediators of knowledge’. The traders (of other countries) collaborate with the local traders in Kashmir in order to establish a market for Kashmiri crafts. Hence, traders play an important role in communicating to the clientele a particular image of crafts and culture (Steiner, 1994) that largely sets the terms of work, value of work and nature of production in transcultural trade. The skilled labour of Kashmir is an

⁵ Shikara is the traditional name for boats in Kashmir used to ferry local travelers from one part of the lake to another. They also ferry tourists from one island to another. Some shikaras are converted into sailing shops that keep varieties of crafts; small wooden objects are one of them.

important factor in the making of such networks. Under the terms of work, Abdul delivers approximately 6,000 pieces of homogeneous figurines in a year. The consignment that goes every month constitutes 500 pieces. Since a target of 500 is very difficult to achieve, Abdul relies on other karigars in his network to complete the order. Abdul's work must mandatorily be completed within the stipulated period, for which he must ensure timely completion of work by other karigars in his network. The network that Abdul is a part of has its advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is in the form of a pre-determined flow of commodities, a robust network and fixed returns. The disadvantage is that Abdul has no control over his work. It is all decided by traders and communicated to him. The karigars work on the set terms. I asked Abdul about prevailing tensions with old karigars who believe that this kind of work is a corrosion of skills and heritage, and represents Kashmir in bad light. Abdul, who is aware of such allegations against him and other karigars like him, said, "Old karigars tell me that I make bad quality items. What is bad quality when there is demand? It is better to do this work than become a sales boy in a showroom. There is demand, so we make. Who buys what they make?"

The two cases that I discuss, of Ghulam Qadir and Abdul Ahad, reveal the underlying tensions between the karigars practicing two kinds of work that arise out of conflicting notions of knowledge and work. Where are these notions embedded? What are the factors that decide the work trajectory that a karigar follows? Does he necessarily produce objects that he learns to produce? In the next section, I address these questions by drawing a connection between artisans and their social milieu.

The social milieu of craft

A karkhana is a structure that produces a karigar within its milieu. It plays a dual role as a site of learning, an institution where the knowledge of carving is passed on from one generation to another and a space of production for walnut carved products. An interplay of these aspects combines to form a unique milieu of walnut carving craft. The milieu of a karkhana determines all the actions that a karigar takes, the way he thinks, how he responds to events and incidents, decisions that he makes, what he learns, how does he learn it, products that he makes, spaces where he sells them and other factors, both explicit and implicit. The social milieu of wood carving guides the transition of a young boy into an accomplished karigar. It is instrumental in shaping the knowledge and skills that he acquires, bodily postures that he takes, routine he follows, the nature of networks and relations that he builds, knowledge of tools and several other

perceptions and actions that come along with it. These dispositions are inculcated schematically in a young boy by one or more experienced masters who have themselves undergone a similar process in different conditions.

Also, a karkhana is an entity that functions within a larger social milieu that affects its work. A social milieu also constitutes events that have the power of altering the social, economic, political and cultural values of a society, thereby influencing the objects in circulation. These factors also cause shifts in value of work and social relationships. That is why, it is more important to trace the shifts in the milieu rather than parochially tracing shifts in objects. This paper does not span the vast historical events that may have shaped the craft (wood carving) as we see them today. But it suggests seeing changes in the buyers' profile and consumption patterns due to militarisation that began in the late eighties as an event that played a crucial role in shaping the crafts.

There is a vast change in the profile of buyers in the domestic market. Liebl and Roy (2004) explain that earlier, the buyers of crafts used to be 'wealthy patrons' (for fine products) or 'ordinary villagers' (for items of daily use). But today, the buyers are from the middle-class with more flexible lifestyle and tastes.

The period of early 1990s brought about drastic and dramatic changes in Kashmir (Rai, 2018). It was a period when military penetration had intensified. A large population of army men started living here and became crucial customers to the karkhanas. During my interaction with artisans, they shared that this period also saw the surge of violence and bloodshed become an everyday mayhem. The conflict between the Indian Army and local militants trampled down every aspect of the routine with frequent announcements of curfew; people got mired in their homes. This conflict and the plunder that came with it majorly affected the movement of people for work and flow of commodities. A major setback was caused to tourists and tourist-based livelihoods, of which crafts production and circulation is a part. Karigars recall that amid curfews and cross-firing, jeeps would stop by their karkhana, confusing neighbours- if there was an arrest happening or sale. Immediately after the men in uniform left, people would drop by to get assurances of their well-being. In a society where military men are abhorred, karigars have tales of friendship and solidarity to share. They attribute the continuance of their work during the lull period to the army men, who refused to pay heed to middlemen and placed their orders directly at the karkhana. They bought furniture, wall panels and curios to adorn their homes and offices. In this process of exchange, they also started a trend of mass -production by ordering souvenirs in bulk.

Another change that occurred during this period was a shift in the notion of market as a restrictive local, to having no boundary. With militarisation at its peak, karkhanas and traders developed mechanisms to expand their outreach to customers. As a result, instead of customers travelling to the karkhanas, traders travelled to them carrying brochures or photographs depicting possibilities of production in their karkhanas. In some cases, they set up exclusive Kashmiri handicraft stores in prime tourist locations in India and abroad. Later, with the internet boom, customers were reached out through virtual platforms, as websites were developed to give a virtual tour of the production process and the collection. Ever since the expansion of the market and interaction of Kashmiri karigars and traders with societies beyond Kashmir, there has occurred a drastic diversification of demand. The new form of demand constituted not only traditionally made walnut wood carved products, but conferred more value on cheap, miniature renditions of traditional products sold as handy souvenirs.

In conceptualising these categories, I do not intend to attribute the emergence of the asal-fizool dichotomy in walnut wood carving only to militarisation or claim them to be a product of neo-liberalism. Making such claims would be undermining the crucial historical shifts that this craft may have undergone owing to various political regimes that ruled Kashmir, and the concomitant cultural shifts that they may have brought (Sufi, 1948). Though I could not come across any written account of their simultaneous existence, from the oral accounts of karigars that I interviewed, it became clear that these categories are much older. It is their meanings that have varied with the change of milieu of production and circulation of this craft. Karigars told me that in the past, the parameters of evaluation were different. Fizool defined the work produced by someone who lacked precision, stability of hands and overall neatness in motif. Lack of skills was an indication of poverty of family due to which the karigar failed to accomplish himself. Due to the flaws, they were less expensive, and catered to families who could not afford the asal. But its significance has now transitioned into something that is desired, altering the meaning and nature of the work. This work is no more a result of familial constraints, but people's deliberate choice to learn fizool over asal. It is easier to learn, and hence, more conspicuous and identifiable.

Circulation: Network, Market and Memorabilia

Objects with certain characteristics are valued more in some realms, and this value may be reversed in other realms. Similarly, asal and fizool in walnut wood carving also have separate realms where they are deemed to be more valuable than the other. This shapes the network they

are a part of for their production and circulation. This section focuses on circulation as a next level to production, also taking into consideration the lapse of time between production and circulation of objects.

When an object is made in a karkhana, based on its specifications (type and quality), it is sold to a trader. The trader⁶ further puts it up on sale to a customer. When a trader receives an order from a customer for making ten jewellery boxes, the trader passes it on to the ustad, whom he believes will do the best work in the given time and cost. The completion of the order then becomes entirely the responsibility of the ustad, who, in order to complete the order, may also loop in another ustad without the knowledge of the trader. Therefore, networks of sales are built on shared knowledge, taste and resources. They are porous entities with new members joining and leaving simultaneously, and built based on necessity of the moment with visible and invisible members in the network.

Igor Kopytoff (1986) explains that things have a 'social life' and commodities follow a 'process of social transformation' involving various phases and changes in status. Kopytoff (1986) argues that any commodity, in its social life, switches between the two phases of 'commoditisation' (stage of exchangeability) and 'singularisation' (prohibition of a thing from being commoditised). Asal and fizool are objects that are produced primarily for the purpose of commoditisation. Production leads to the metamorphosis of a commodity, the timber, into an object that has both, use value and exchange value. Its exchange value is based on certain crucial factors such as time invested on its making, application of knowledge, and to some extent the health implication of its making on the karigar. All these factors together decide the exchange value of a walnut wood carved object. Owing to these factors, the exchange value of asal objects is much higher than fizool. This gap relying on the skill of a karigar measured by investment of a karigar's time in both acquiring knowledge and producing it, claim on high quality of raw material and adherence to traditions, is presented as a rare and valuable commodity in the market. This is also teamed up with its glorification in the description of the one who sells it. In contrast, fizool lacks skill as well as prolonged investment of time and tradition, a manifestly poor quality of raw material. Going back to Kopytoff's description of social life of things, asal and fizool follow largely similar trajectories. However, the temporality of each phase differs. The intent of a karigar is to produce each object for sale in a karkhana. So, the commodity status of an object is inevitable. Once the production is completed in a karkhana, the karigar tries to sell it as soon as possible so as to get

⁶ A private shopkeeper in the market, an exporter or the state (through its various retail stores, including the arts and craft emporiums).

returns. This sale, to either a trader or to a more influential karigar, turns an object into a commodity. The phase of its singularisation or de-commoditisation does not begin until it is sold again. When an asal object is produced in a karkhana, its exchangeability takes longer because of its high exchange value. Hence, it not only takes longer to transit into a commodity but its phase of singularisation is also longer. Fizool, on the other hand, acquires its exchangeability faster. This is because of its quick production and inexpensiveness.

In the case of asal, there are also several instances of deliberate singularisation of a commodity. Kopytoff (1986) explains that it is important for societies to singularise certain commodities by 'pulling them out of their commodity sphere'. Some of the prohibitions are cultural and are upheld collectively, or are the work of the state. These singularised objects are treated as the 'symbolic inventory of the society' like monuments, state art collections, ritual objects, etc. In walnut wood carving, the instances of singularisation are more commonly found to be led by individuals. Some look at it as being informative that new generation can learn from, and others see them as a testimony of past practices, skills and knowledge. Below are some examples of objects being pulled out of their commodity phase:

Ghulam Rassol is a state award-winning artisan. The piece that got him the award was sold few years after he received the award. But he never sold the piece, a wall panel that got his father the national award. When I visited him, I requested him to show me the piece. It was carefully wrapped in a muslin cloth, kept in a paper bag in a suitcase that he pulled out from under a bed. I asked him the price at which he would sell it, but he said that this "piece is priceless". It can never be sold. He told me about several people who contacted his father to sell it to them but he never got the price that he desired. And after his father's death, Ghulam Rasool never desired to sell it. In this case, his desire to preserve the piece his father won the national award for, is an example of singularisation for memorabilia. He insisted that a piece like this would be testimony to the richness of the past to the future generation. A prolonged singularisation also gets operated at the level of an institution or people when they buy a commodity from a karigar with the intent of reselling it, but prohibit them from selling it because of its rarity and beauty that ought to be preserved. For similar reasons, several traders have converted a portion of their shop into a museum with a vast collection of products made in the past that cannot be replicated. Khalil Mohammad's (a renowned walnut wood carving artisan who has won the state and national awards) work was chosen for the art installation at the Mumbai International Airport

under the project ‘Conjoining Lands’⁷. For this project, Khalil made a wall panel that was a cartographic representation of the Hariparbat shrine in Srinagar. This piece carves the contours of structures and route to Hariparbat through the Makhdoom Sahab shrine and the Sikh Gurudwara. It is a depiction of syncretism in Kashmir, and is one of the pieces that adorn the walls of the Mumbai International Airport.

So, as the production of asal becomes rare, it is preferred to be singularised as an act anchored by individuals as well as the state. It is important to highlight here that asal work is not gone. It has become rare because of factors I have gestured towards in this paper. There are connoisseurs, collectors and families that continue to provide patronage to the karigars, who make walnut wood carved objects in its traditional form. However, the circulation of fizool continues to flourish. Karigars predict the evanescence of walnut wood carving as a craft and practice in the next fifteen years. As the new generation takes over the old, this skill will be wiped out from the landscape of valley, they often tell me.

This dichotomy between asal and fizool has inscribed new identity for artisans of walnut wood carving based on parameters of skill and the lack of it. Between the values of local Kashmiri society and global circulation of craft, what the society celebrates is the knowledge, skill and production of craft in its traditional forms, attaching to it pride, notions of heritage and necessity of its continuance. This reality gets reversed in relation to the global circulation of craft objects that supersedes the notions of heritage and skill to emphasise only on making possible the global outreach of these craft objects in large volumes.

Conclusion

In this paper, I discuss the two forms of work in walnut wood carving in Kashmir – asal (traditional craft) and fizool (mass produced) – and explore the ways in which asal is being replaced by fizool due to change in the consumption patterns and buyers’ profile. My study reveals that insurgency in the valley of Kashmir led to deployment of the Army, who superseded the middle men to directly reach out to the karigars practicing walnut wood carving. As a response to insurgency, Kashmiri artisans and traders travelled to different cities to sell the products, gathering diverse demands, a large share of which depicted an inclination for less

⁷ Hasan, I & Gupta, G. (2013) “Mumbai airport to adorn Kashmir’s pride”, DNA [New Delhi edition], 31st May. Available at <http://www.dnaindia.com/>. [Accessed: 29 September 2016].

Narayan, S. (2013) “Airport mural to celebrate art of India”, The National [UAE edition], 18th June. Available at <http://www.thenational.ae>. [Accessed: 29 September 2016].

intricate carving and cheap pieces of work. A demand like this brought transformations in aspects of craft learning, production and circulation. I describe the parallel trajectories through two cases of Ghulam Qadir Sheikh and Abdul Ahad. Through their narratives, I discuss how, for craft work infused in capitalistic ways of work, such dichotomies are not as neat as they may appear to be. To sustain his asal work, Ghulam Qadir takes up opportunities to engage with fizool work, so as to ensure the flow of income, particularly during the phases of low demand for his work. On the one hand, we see this difference blurring between asal and fizool; on the other hand, we see how the state and the individual intervene to reinstate and reify this difference by singularising asal as a rare commodity and an example of past glory.

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