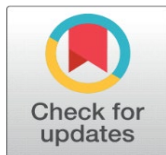
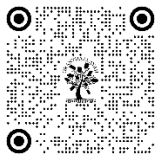


SUSTAINING THE CULTURAL HERITAGE: HANDLOOMS IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

Traditional textiles in India have been a reflection of its rich cultural heritage for ages. In today's global world, these products have been extensively commercialized to the extent of losing their authenticity. The artisan communities need to be abreast with current market trends in order to create a demand for their products. The empowerment of the craft ecosystem demands sincere efforts on the part of craft practitioners to facilitate product diversification and wider market reach. However, artisanal products need to be put at the forefront of any design intervention without losing the essence of the original craft.

Himachal Pradesh is not only rich in biodiversity but also in various crafts like metal, weaving, knitting, and painting. In this paper, an effort has been made to catalog the products of traditional Kullu Handloom weaving with the raw materials used, the process followed, motifs and colour palette etc. Moreover, initiatives taken by Ms. Anshul Malhotra, a well-known craft entrepreneur in Himachal Pradesh for popularizing the traditional woven designs of the Kullu and Kinnaur region in India and abroad have been reported. Design interventions made by combining new colors and exploring different combinations of yarns and weaves by Ms Anshul Malhotra would serve as a guiding source for the design and artisan communities alike.

Keywords: Design Intervention, Kinnaur, Kullu, Traditional Handloom

1. INTRODUCTION

The state of Himachal Pradesh, also known as *Devbhumi* or the Land of Gods, is situated in the Northern region of India. Its rich culture is a testimony to its history and heritage. The rich cultural legacy of the state is represented by folk dances, music, costumes, indigenous food etc. The state is biodiverse in flora and fauna which is reflected in its rich textiles as well. The major communities in Himachal Pradesh are Brahmin, Rajput, Choudhary, Kannets, Rathi and Kolis, whereas the tribal population comprises the Gaddis, Kinnars, Jadun, Tanolis, Gujjars, Pangawals and Lahaulis. [Copley Patterson \(2002\)](#)

The handicrafts of Himachal Pradesh are carpets, leatherwork, shawls, paintings, metalwork, and woodwork which are practiced by the hardworking local people. Weaving, carving, painting, or chiseling are considered an important part of Himachali lifestyle. Women and men both take part in giving final shape to the various forms of handicrafts. There are several craftspeople available that produce beautiful handicrafts, which is why Himachal Pradesh is recognized for its textiles like shawls, carpets, chamba rumals, gaddi blankets, himachali caps, Kullu shawl, loi / chaddar, borders, Kullu cap, pattoo, muffler, patti, thobi, numdha, gudma and many more.

Weaving craft: Himachal Pradesh is known for its weaving, which is not only a utilitarian need but also has roots in the region's ancient tradition. The chill of autumn and the cold of winter have compelled the people of Himachal to create a living art that is warm, soft and colorful. It is said that weaving has been practiced in the Himachal for about 5000 years. The Himachal region falls in the wool road known to extend from Punjab in India to Tibet, Central Asia and China. The art of weaving began in the Kinnauri village of Shubnam and was introduced to different regions by migrating craftsmen. The craft's origins also go back to China and Tibet. The weaving craft practiced in other places such as Palampur, Chamba, Mandi and nearby areas is inspired by the Kullu weaving of the Kullu region in Himachal Pradesh. The craft came into existence when local people were forced to make their own garments due to a lack of transportation. The cold climate of hilly region of Himachal Pradesh was suitable for sheep-rearing and woven clothes were warm enough to protect the locals from extreme winter conditions.

Different textile and accessories like Kullu topi, shawls, muffler, pattu, patti, etc are handwoven using different indigenous varieties of wool. Kullu shawls, known for their unique colourful designs, vibrant geometric patterns and diverse utility have given them a unique positioning in Himachal textiles. As quoted in a study by Kapoor, 2008, every house would have a pit loom and everyone could be observed hand-spinning a yarn. Initially, pit looms were commonly used for weaving, and handlooms were introduced in the late 1930s. Shawls were initially woven in the Kinnaur district however later craftsmen brought the craft to Kullu Valley with migration. People wove plain shawls originally but later patterns were introduced.

Figure 1



Figure 1 (a, b) Tribal Costumes in Himachal Pradesh

Raw materials: Most of the raw materials used in making of Kullu textile products are locally sourced wool from byangi, deshkar and imboo bread of sheep. They mostly buy local wool from the Gaddi tribe of Chamba which is mainly coarse wool. Owing to the increasing demand for fine woolen products, weavers have started using Pashmina, Angora, Australian merino etc. Colourful designs are woven using acrylic yarns which are procured from Ludhiana. The raw materials used include:

- Merino Wool
- Yak wool
- Sheep Wool
- Cashmilon
- Blends

Sheep wool is the primary raw material used for weaving in Himachal Pradesh. Shawls are manufactured using angora, pashmina, wool, and other handspun materials. These may also be blended to make different varieties. The yarn used for warp and weft is usually 2/44 to 2/64 count. Other than this, other types of yarns are also available in nearby markets. Mill spun yarns dyed in various colours are used for the ground, while a vast range of coloured acrylic yarns is used for patterning the borders.

Figure 2



Figure 2 (a) Woman Hand Spinning Yarn (b) Yaks

Designs and colours: A plain body with bold, colourful borders in geometric patterns, is the mark of a Kullu handloom product. Kullu shawl patterns are found in red, magenta, yellow, green, blue, orange, white and black while the background colours are primarily white, black, natural grey and brown. Currently, their bright colours are often being replaced by pastel hues. Commonly, geometrical designs are used but floral designs can also be seen on the corners or the borders. The designs and motifs woven today have primarily been derived from detailed and complex Kinnauri designs that have been magnified enormously and simplified with the passage of time. The geometric motifs & colors being used in the woven products derive inspiration from the surrounding flora & fauna of the weaver. They are woven with vibrant colored synthetic yarns in tapestry or extra-weft technique.

Commonly used motifs are:

- *Gandu Bel* (onion motif),
- *Patta Bel* (leaf motif),

- *Ghanti Bel* (vine plant),
- *Jala* (overall design),
- *Aloo matar* (potato and peas),
- *Dhoop Chaon* (sun and shadow)
- *Bubul chasm* (Nightingales eye),
- *Kanchi Tara* (crossed stars),
- *Kanghi* (comb),
- Butterfly,
- Akhrot
- Keedha
- Kingri
- Chasham
- Kanghi-Chasham
- Dhaari
- *Swastik*,
- *Chinar*
- *Leaf*,
- Lotus, etc.

Figure 3



Figure 3 (a) Spinning Wheel (b) Small Loom for Patti Weaving (c) Loom for Muffler Weaving (d) Loom for Shawl Weaving.

Source Palampur Weaving Cluster

The artisans work based on previously existing designs and also innovate their own. They have a set of drafts that they can mix and match together. Motifs may be small or large in size. Smaller motifs are quicker to do whereas the larger motifs take time.

Sitting on large loom, passing the bobbin wrapped with weft yarns through the warp and working in the precise detail of the geometrical motif produces the most alluring and valuable designs which have become a worldwide attraction.

Weaves: The shawl, muffler, or stole's body is woven in plain, twill, herringbone, diamond, or basket weave, and on either side of it, a vividly colored "patti" is weaved. The artisan makes this with one, two, three, or even more pattis, enhancing the beauty of the woven material.

Figure 4**Figure 4 (a)** Traditional Motifs

Source Craft Research Documentation, NIFT Kangra

Design Intervention by Craft entrepreneur Anshul Malhotra

Ms Anshula Malhotra is a second-generation handloom weaver and designer, who after obtaining a bachelor's degree in textile engineering, continued the handloom business of her father. Her father Om Prakash Malhotra is a Shilp Guru Awardee appreciated for his contribution to preserving the handlooms of Himachal Pradesh. The handloom unit Krishna wool, furnished with many handlooms, hand-spinning charkha, machines for yarn spinning, etc is located in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh. Ms Anshul Malhotra herself is a Nari Shakti award winner by the President of India, for promoting and preserving Himachali handlooms. She is known to train 200 underprivileged hill women and the creation of 2200 handloom designs are to her credit. She has been extensively working towards the upliftment of women artisans by providing them with required training and engaging them in sustainable livelihood opportunities. She has taken handloom products to various exhibitions and competitions like Handloom Haat, Delhi, Heimtextil, Frankfurt, the first China Innovation and Entrepreneurship International Competition, and Interior Lifestyle Awards. Yak wool fine quality handloom shawls designed by Anshul are displayed in various countries like Slovenia, China, Germany, Nepal, Russia (St-petersburg and Moscow). [Freese \(2023\)](#)

With changing fashion trends, people want to use traditional crafts in different designs and contemporary colours making it part of their everyday lifestyle. Design intervention in terms of design diversification and product diversification as per contemporary aesthetics and demand is very suitably executed by her.

Figure 5**Figure 5** Anshul Malhotra Awarded by President Ramnath Kovind

Intervention in the form of colour: Traditionally very bold and vibrant specific colours are used in Himachali Handloom products. However, today's sophisticated consumers prefer a wide range of colour palette including soft pastels hence many new colours and shades have been introduced to tap the urban market by Ms Anshul Malhotra. Moreover, a mixture of two or more shades in the body adds a rough, rustic visual touch to the soft merino wool fabrics. Complementary colours are used in borders and design patterns creating a contrasting yet balanced effect.

Figure 6



Figure 6 Kullu Shawls in Diverse Colours.

Source Himalayan Textiles Facebook Page

Intervention in the form of design: Apart from traditional designs, simplified motifs and combination of different design elements bring some newness and freshness to the designs. Even combining the traditional motifs with stripes, checks have yielded excellent results in terms of customer acceptance. A range of checks, stripes, wavy lines and plain colours in softer natural hues for mufflers and scarves, and running lengths in twill and small checks are made. A variety of fine textures that add sophistication and contrast to the traditional rough textured plainly woven pieces are also created.

Figure 7



Figure 7 Diversified Kullu Designs.

Source Himalayan Textiles Facebook Page

Intervention in raw materials: Fashion and preferences of people keep changing and craftsmen need to adapt to changing trends in order to stay relevant in today's competitive market. There is an increasing inclination towards sustainable textiles by conscious consumers. Ms Anshul Malhotra is catering to

sustainable textile design by using organic natural materials, dyes, handspinning techniques etc. Hence Krishna wool has been successful in blending yak wool with various other wools to come up with exclusive collections. Sustainable textiles being the major trend at present, it fulfils the sustainability criteria as well.

Figure 8



Figure 8 Shawls in Different Wool Blends

Women empowerment through Handloom: More than 200 artisans living in the Himalayan foothills, the majority of whom are women have been employed by Krishna Wool. These tribak women artisans are able to work from the comfort of their homes as required raw materials are supplied to their respective places. From sheep rearers to wool processors to yarn spinners many artisans living in Himalayan villages are provided livelihood opportunities by Ms Anshul Malhotra.

2. CONCLUSION

Each craft of India deserves due recognition and appreciation from craft enthusiasts. Not only is weaving part of India's age-old heritage, but it also promotes our vibrant culture that must be preserved. The global market today demands novelty and trendy products. It is the responsibility of budding designers to take inspiration from such craft practitioners and revivalists like Ms Anshul Malhotra and preserve these age-old traditional handicrafts. Her efforts have rendered a new identity and global acceptance, at the same time protecting the traditional Himachali wollen handwoven textiles. Product diversification of Kullu weaving not just in clothing and fashion accessories but also in home décor, lifestyle-based products, corporate gifting, souvenirs, etc could further ensure its wider reach and penetration in various segments. [Sharma et al. \(2008\)](#), [Sharma & Sharma \(2009\)](#)

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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