Reed Weaving Traditions in North India: An Ethnoarchaeological Discussion into Material Culture and Social Identity

Shriya Gautam[1] **and Ira Bhatnagar**[1]

[1]. Speaking Archaeologically, Kshitij Krishna Niwas, Shilly Road, Solan, Himachal Pradesh - 173 212, India *(Email: shriya.gautam@arch.oxfordalumni.org; irabhatnagar04@gmail.com)*

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Abstract: *This paper analyses the two similar practices of weaving items of daily utility in two prominent regions in North India. The first region is Western Uttar Pradesh, especially the non-industrialised munj grass (Saccharum munja) weavers of Allahabad (present day Prayagraj). The locality was surveyed and studied by way of direct interaction and recording of activities of families of munj weavers to understand the relationship between the material culture and social identity of these artisans. The second region studied for this research is Eastern Himachal Pradesh, where kusha grass (Desmostachya bipinnata) is used for similar weaving activities by an informally organised community of low caste weavers, that is considered socially inferior. Through this paper, the authors attempt to understand the influence material culture has on social identity as well as probe into questions of preference for raw material, technique of make and history of reed weaving in India.*

Keywords: Ethnoarchaeology, Material Culture, Reed Weaving, Munj Grass, Kusha Grass, Basketry, Handicrafts

Introduction

Although a subdiscipline of anthropology, ethnoarchaeology is a tool to conduct ethnographic research, by studying non industrialised present-day communities and their material culture, in order to form an understanding of the past (David and Kramer, 2001). It uses this information to draw analogical inferences about the past societies, their culture and their communities, sometimes serving as a way to understand migration patterns and movement of people in the past. In the case of the present research, ethnoarchaeology has been employed to understand the history of reed weaving communities in India and the symbolic as well as social significance of this craft for the communities in question. The subsequent sections will discuss these in detail. The first part shall talk about the *munj* grass weaving in Uttar Pradesh with respect to the artisans. It studies the art of weaving with respect to the community's response to its natural environment in order to evaluate the behaviourist approach to material culture (*cf.* Harris, 1979).

The second section, meanwhile, analyses the structuralist approach to material culture (cf. Hodder, 1978) as observed in the case of Himachali weavers, who interpret the raw materials (*kusha* and *munj*) as active parts of their social beliefs and customs.

History of Reed Weaving in India

Reed weaving is a common craft all over India. While this study takes into consideration weaving traditions from two Northern Indian pockets, it must be clarified at the very outset that the use of *munj* and *kusha* is not limited to the areas discussed in this study. Reed baskets, mats and hats are common all over the country and the weaving traditions can be archaeologically dated back to the Neolithic Period (c.3000-1400 BCE) in North India (Chakrabarti, 2001). *Kusha* and *munj* notably also find mention in the *Rig Veda* [*Rig Veda* 1.191.3] as sacred grasses, which could be used for seating during performance of religious rites (cf. Mahdihassan, 1987). Resultantly, their continued use till today is a direct indicator of their structural aspect as a preferred raw material among non-industrialised communities. That being said, it was observed that the mere appearance of these grass species in a religious text is not the only reason for their use. Rather, each community had different reasons for their preference for *kusha*, *munj* or both for weaving the desired article of use. The following sections will elucidate this for the two broad cases observed in this study and shall attempt to evaluate whether this selection was a functional necessity or had local structural associations.

Case 1, Munj Weaving of Uttar Pradesh: A Functional Necessity

Although a fairly common reed, *Saccharum munja* or *munj* grass, is used extensively for basketry in the Naini-Mahewa area of Allahabad district (now Prayagraj) of Uttar Pradesh (Dev and Bhatt, 2019). Confined to the region of riverside small farmers, the use of this thick stemmed grass for basket weaving can be understood as a functional and practical necessity. Most artisans involved with *munj* weaving are small farmers, settled close to the Ganga-Yamuna doab, usually women from small agricultural households. The resultant artefacts are, therefore, chiefly baskets (Figure 1), which can store a wide array of agricultural produce.

The technique employed is intermittent knotting followed by coiling, which gives the baskets their twined patterns. Food colouring is used for dyeing the baskets, most likely on account of its edibility, so that the baskets are fit for storing food grains and edible products.

Depending on use and requirement, the shapes and the sizes of the baskets vary. Although thoroughly utilitarian, recently, these baskets have been produced as handicrafts by the artisans, who sell these for nominal prices. Upon survey, it was noted that the income received from the sale of these products is usually insufficient for the artists to earn their livelihood solely from basketry. Despite this, there is a willingness in most families to pass down the tradition to their children as a part of their legacy and cultural identity.

While conducting this study, several artisans were consulted and their approach to the material culture was recorded. It was observed that no specific myths, legends or local beliefs were associated with the preference of raw material. The reason stated by each of the participants in the survey was unanimously the easy availability of the *munj* grass close to the artisan's house as well as the durability of the fibre. It was, thus, understood that geographical location and availability had a larger role in determining the material culture in this case.

Figure 1: Basket made of Munj Weaving, Allahabad

Case 2, Munj and Kusha Weaving of Himachal Pradesh: Material and Symbolism

Prolonged cold weather in Himachal Pradesh has a direct bearing on its indigenous material culture. Even in the present times, a heavy reliance on natural fibres, which

can be locally sourced and processed at home, governs the preference for raw materials for various items of utility (Handa, 1998). Unlike Uttar Pradesh, where grass and reeds are predominantly employed for basket weaving, various regions in Himachal Pradesh use the same raw materials for making footwear (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Traditional Himachali Footwear (*Pullan*) of Kusha Grass

Functionally, this can be understood on account of two main factors: the ready availability of both hemp and *munj* grass in the regions; and the durability of such footwear especially in areas where leather is either scarce or hard to maintain once wet. Also, the grip provided by this footwear in snowscapes as opposed to that of leather

accounts for their continued use, especially in rural populations of the state. Similar to the case of *munj* weaving in Uttar Pradesh, the strength and thickness of these natural fibres serve as a reason for their use in footwear. Table 1 shows the types of hemp and *munj* footwear of Himachal Pradesh against the areas of their production.

Table 1: Showing types of Reed Woven Artefacts from Himachal Pradesh

Region	Raw Materials	Traditional names and details
Panghi, Chamba	Kusha (Hemp) rope and Munj grass	Locally called *pullan*, these have an extra sole of goatskin, with embellished woollen top that is hand-knit
Chohar, Mandi	Munj	Woven footwear that traditionally does not use any raw material obtained from animal skin, fur or hide. It has an upper covering only for the fore-part of the foot and keeps the heel unprotected
Kinnaur	Kusha	Locally called *Zomba*, it has thick, rough sole that can hold grip in slippery surfaces also
Saraji, Upper Shimla	Kusha	Traditionally multicoloured , made of well twisted hemp rope and wool embroidery
Other parts of Shimla District	Kusha	Locally called *Lobate,* these are homemade shoes without much ornamentation
Jaunsar-Bawar Region (originally part of Sirmaur but now in Uttarakhand)	Kusha	Locally called *Khursa*, these are everyday shoes similar to *Lobate*

(Derived from text by Handa, 1998)

From Table 1, the functionality of these artefacts is apparent. However, in Himachal Pradesh, each region has a different structural approach with respect to what is woven out of reeds and why. In the Pangwal and Chohar regions, it was observed that the use of reeds to weave shoes is accredited to the local *devtas*, who supposedly forbid the use of animal skin and hide for shoemaking, on account of this rendering the shoes and the wearer impure. Resultantly, the eventual use of goatskin sole in the *Chamba pullan*, is

explained as a result of the reluctance of the queen, a Katoch princess of Kangra region, to wear shoes made of grass. The said queen is believed to have been the wife of King Charhat Singh (1804-1844 CE), who supposedly brought her own cobblers as a part of her dowry from among the shoemakers of Panj Bari near Nurpur region (Handa, 1998). Thus, the modern-day *Chamba pullan* is understood to be a result of this incident instead of the fact that goatskin makes these shoes both more comfortable and warmer in colder weather. In Chohar region, however, the heelless, toe covering shoe is still used, supposedly in compliance with the wishes of the local *devtas*. Also, here *munj* is used instead of *kusha*, most likely on account of its abundance in the region but this, too, is accredited to the divine sanction of purity of *munj* instead of functionality and local availability. Thus, it was observed that the shape and form of the shoes as well as the materials used are intimately connected with ideas of regional and cultural identities as well as religious beliefs of the communities in Himachal Pradesh, although the functional and utilitarian aspect of the artefact remains unchanged.

Another aspect associated with reed weaving in Himachal Pradesh, is the association of the craft with lower caste groups, especially women belonging to low caste communities. Although, in the past, the craft was fairly common to households of all castes and communities in the Shimla region, it has eventually become limited to families already involved with shoemaking. Recently, however, articles of daily use, especially baskets made of *kusha* have also surfaced in the market, although their appearance results more from their commercial viability and likelihood to be purchased instead of their traditional use. This has resulted from the state government's initiative to promote rural craft industries among women.

Conclusion

There has been an ongoing debate among ethnoarchaeologists about the functional aspect versus the structural aspect of raw materials among traditional communities, in order to understand the relationship between people and their environment in the past. While several arguments have been produced in favour of each approach, the study of reed weaving communities in these two regions in India shows that the picture in the past was essentially more complex than the present understanding of these factors. Both the studies show that humans are invariably affected by the environment they inhabit and their choice of raw materials is governed by the availability and accessibility as well as their personal utility.

In Nani-Mahewa, it is clear that the use of *munj* for basketry arose out of a practical, utilitarian problem, namely the need to store food grains and agricultural products in an area that has abundant availability of *Saccharum munja*, that grows naturally close to the confluence as well as small water bodies. Here, the raw material is locally available, durable and serves a practical purpose. Also, its dyeing and colouring is governed by practicality rather than embellishment. The decoration of these baskets, therefore, are completely devoid of cultural symbolism in the sense of exhibiting a particular social affiliation of the weaver.

However, the grass weaving in Himachal Pradesh takes the functionality to a different structural aspect altogether. Here, not only does each region associate a particular social reason for the choice of raw material and the appearance of the end product, but it also attaches a cultural value to the weaving patterns and the communities involved. The end product, therefore, is more than just an artefact of continuing traditional practice but also has socio-cultural underpinnings that go beyond raw material procurement and the process of weaving.

Thus, the purpose of this juxtaposition was to highlight the immense scope for ethnoarchaeology in India, especially the need to study traditional handicrafts as more than just handicrafts. Whilst it is accepted that there is a need to protect and patronise the artisans and make these crafts economically more sustainable for the craftsmen, there is also a need to study these artefacts from the lens of ethnoarchaeological debates in order to detangle their place in past societies. This, in turn, will result in a paradigm shift in the future studies of similar nature, which will look at traditional objects from beyond the lens of art-historic approaches and study them with respect to broader archaeological contexts such as an aid to understanding patterns of human migration in the past, their settlement and the rise of different ethno-linguistic communities in the Indian landscape.

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