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**GOLDEN THREADS OF WOVEN HERITAGE:
THE DECLINE OF INDO-PERSIAN LAHORE CARPET WEAVING AND
ARTISANAL IDENTITY (PAKISTAN)**

MA Thesis in Cultural Heritage Studies: Policy and Management

Central European University

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May 2025

Golden Threads of Woven Heritage: The decline of Indo-Persian Lahore carpet weaving and artisanal identity (Pakistan)

by

Fattima Naufil Naseer

(Pakistan)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Medieval Studies,

Central European University Private University, Vienna, in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Arts degree in Cultural Heritage Studies: Academic Research, Policy, Management.

Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU.

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28 May, Vienna

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Abstract

The art of creating a Lahore carpet comprises an applied artisanal practice of philosophy, skill, heritage and regional history. The complicated yet appealingly simple crafted product symbolizes the regional complexity of Pakistani history, practices and culture that transcend national borders; it incorporates a representation of microhistory where the process and the product in themselves represent an archive of people and their lives. The study aims to trace the historical story of carpets, the transformation in the craft and why crafting practices are an important witness of people, places and beliefs. In my essay, I explore the historical cultural significance of hand knotted Indo-Persian Lahore carpets, the destruction of the craft and proposal of a policy plan to renovate the craft practice and production, a vital aspect of Pakistani craft heritage.

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Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my roots, the *Khawaja*, people of occupied Kashmir, for their resilience and fight for identity and cultural preservation.

Golden Threads of Woven Heritage:

The decline of Indo-Persian Lahore carpet weaving and artisanal identity (Pakistan)

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Glossary

1. *Karkhanna*: (Persian/Urdu) Industrial/manufacturing setup or specified quarters. These differ slightly from Western industries, as regimentation is less ordained by time and more by role. Communication among the different industry departments is open and should essentially be harmonious. (Coming together for the greater good/vision)
2. *Sufism*: A branch of Islamic theology associated with self-discovery/reflection to find the enlightenment of divine love.
3. *Mansabdaar*: (Persian/Urdu) Governor or regional councilor
4. *Kaukab*: (Persian/Arabic/Literary Urdu) Flower or stars depending on the context of the sentence.
5. *Hijab*: (Arabic/Urdu) Partition, privacy or veil, the meaning of veil does not mean the physical only but can be metaphorical often to indicate the division between the physical and metaphysical world.
6. *Farrash-Khanna*: (Persian/Urdu) Carpet production factory
7. *Desi*: (Urdu/Hindi/Bangla/Punjabi) A regional term used to refer to the people of the Subcontinent
8. *Firdaus*: (Arabic/Persian/Literary Urdu) Heaven or heavenly
9. *Khawaja*: (Arabic/Persian/Urdu) An honorific title meaning master. However, across the subcontinent, it is also associated with the family name/lineage of Kashmiri Muslims and Mizrahi/Baghdadi Jews.

10. *Karigar/Kargar*: (Urdu/Persian) Craftsperson/technician/manufacturer/skilled worker
11. *Naqashband*: (Urdu/Persian) Patternmaker, image maker, engraver (of the heart), reformer of the pattern.
12. *Ustaad*: (Urdu/Persian) Honorific title for master. The use of the term has nothing to do with social status, education, caste, creed, race, or gender. It is solely used to refer to someone considered a master of their craft/art/work/role. In slang, it is also used as a friendly/endearing term.
13. *Shagird*: (Urdu/Persian) Disciple, learner.
14. *Mureed*: (Urdu/Persian) Master or someone you follow as a leader (spiritual/scholarly/political etc.)
15. *Mughal*: "Mughal" is from the Arabized transliteration of "Moghul," or Mongol, the Mughal emperors were among India's greatest patrons of art.
16. *Auliya*: (Arabic/Persian/Urdu) Protectors (title) can be used in different contexts.
17. *Virsa*: (Urdu/Punjabi) Heritage
18. *Fankaar*: (Urdu/Persian) artist/maker/creator
19. *Taalim*: (Persian/Urdu/Hindi) A binary language comprising of O, I that is used to read and draw patterns of a carpet by marking the areas to be knotted according to color to develop a design. Developed sometime in the 17th century to allow for easier reading and drawing of patterns.
20. *Waris*: (Urdu) Inheritors, heir/heirress. Does not necessarily have to be biological inheritance, can be artisanal/scholarly/ spiritual, etc.

21. *Zar*: (Urdu/Persian) Gold

22. *Nur-i-Siyah*: (Persian) Black light

Introduction

In 2021, I was working as a lecturer of textile archives and one part of my curriculum included Islamic textiles. I gave my students an exercise to trace back the roots of symbolic storytelling of a particular product. I too carried out this exercise on Persian carpets out of curiosity. Growing up in Pakistan and coming from a multi-ethnic background I was accustomed to my own mixed heritage. I could trace my paternal side to the city of Samarkand where my ancestors had been textile and eventually carpet manufacturers. Over the course of some generations, they settled in what we in the subcontinent widely call heaven on earth: the valley of Srinagar, Kashmir. I started mapping the history of carpets in my family; they had been successful manufacturers and industrialists, yet over time that craft did not carry on. This research exercise eventually spilled over into the city of Lahore where I was then residing. I encountered the handful of people that were still trying to produce fine, handwoven carpets in the traditional way, incorporating the many symbols, hidden numerology, the aesthetic principles of Sufism and spirituality, and the regional designs originating from areas beyond our borders. These master weavers were working in the historical walled city neighborhoods that once housed a booming textile and carpet producing hub.

In my travels and research, I met and studied people who have tried and are trying to preserve this tradition, people for whom I have immense respect and love; the weavers, the dyers, the sellers, the designers, the manufacturers and my own teacher, carpet conservator/designer Tariq Habib Mirza. These people are in my opinion the architects and guardians of this craft that has

almost died out. I especially admire their loyalty to art, and whatever I understand of the relationship of identity, spirituality and craft comes from them. I am also indebted to my ancestors and family that believed and honored the spiritual nature of this craft. I am also indebted to my teachers, *ustaad*, colleagues and cities that helped me understand my regional craft heritage and culture.

As with many classical works of art and craftsmanship, a resolved artwork has meticulous details and characters that represent the creator and collaborators vision, social and regional contexts and perspectives. The story of the hand knotted carpet starts with fibers of sheep wool and a silkworm, involves meticulous hands that spin the thread, cauldron of dyes that fuse color, artisans that knot and weave, songs that may be sung and allegorical stories illustrated to map the carpet which is eventually sold.

Carpet production has been documented on the subcontinent and Central Asian regions for millennia, developing into and ultimately reflecting a variety of indigenous aesthetic and production systems. The tales of the carpet on the subcontinent can be traced to the time of the silk trade that stretched between the Middle East (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria,) and Asia (Turkey, Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, India, Pakistan, China).¹

However, with the advent of Islam in the sixth century, especially in the regions that encompass Iran, Turkey and the subcontinent, the artform transformed drastically. Islamic carpet production can be narrowed down to certain hubs; in Iran, Turkey, Syria, North Africa, Arabia, Central

¹“The oldest hand-knotted carpet preserved is the Pazyryk Carpet. It was excavated from one of several frozen burial tombs in the Altai Mountains of Siberia in 1949 along with mummified human bodies, a funerary chariot, decorated horses, wooden furniture, and Chinese silks.” The Other in the Carpet, *Everything is Relevant: Writings on Art and Life*, 1991-2018, 255-263

Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. Local regions and cultures in these regions adapted an Islamic aesthetic and the use of symbolism to depict complex concepts, and with time, each region began to create their own visual vocabulary that was used in creating unique carpet design patterns. However, regional variability was not only limited to pattern making but also to the weaving techniques (types of knotting), use of colors and the materiality of the carpet; the types of carpet, the purposes they held socially and their trading/selling in local markets and regionally.

Where carpets are concerned, Turkey, Iran and the subcontinent were the biggest players, having bigger production and export systems. Iran became a key player in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including exports into early modern Europe to satisfy demands of the royal and elite classes. This florescence of carpet weaving also caused a ripple effect in the neighboring regions where Persian carpet manufacture was adapted, localized and transformed. Islamic-Persian carpet craftsmanship peaked during its ‘Golden Age’ in the sixteenth century in Safavid Iran. The Shahs provided heavy patronage to the carpet manufacturing industry, feeding widespread elite markets as far away as Europe.

They were actively invested in the development of this craft into a complex symbolic narration of Islamic concepts which were sometimes derived from Sufi philosophy. This blueprint for carpet manufacturing was adapted from the Persians into the subcontinent via the Mughal empire and independent merchants that traded in the region that now mainly comprises of Kashmir, Punjab (Pakistan) and Northern India.²

² “The Mughal dynasty (1526–1858) was among the richest and longest ruling in India, and at its peak controlled large portions of the Indian subcontinent. The Mughals were Muslims of Central Asian origin, and Persian was their court language. Their intermarriage with Hindu royalty and establishment of strong alliances with the diverse peoples of the subcontinent led to profound cultural, artistic, and linguistic exchanges” MET Museum Online, accessed 3/5/25 <https://www.metmuseum.org/learn/educators/curriculum-resources/art-of-the-islamic-world/unit-five/chapter-four/introduction>

This thesis will begin with the establishment of Islamic-Persian carpet production department or *Farrash-Khanna* by the Mughal emperor Akbar in 1580 in Srinagar, Kashmir.³ It will explore the historical background (religious, regional, cultural), the importance of the craft (production, narrative, community building/involvement), the deterioration of the industry and craft (contemporary issues) and recommendations/suggestions of what measures might be taken when a craft is disintegrating together with a recommendation on policy change and private artisanal practice.

This is the main thread that will entwine this study; what happens when a craft has almost vanished from society; and what can we learn from the remaining practitioners. This study also aims to look at historical issues of colonialism that have disrupted the craft. Furthermore, I aim to see what can or should be done to safeguard and revitalize this dying craft heritage and the implication of the fine carpet weaving craft on social identity and heritage of a culture.

³ So, to deal with the scarcity of carpets, Akbar, following the Persian model, established the carpet department (Farrash-khanah) in about 1-580 and many workshops in different places such as Agra, Lahore. Fatehpur Sikri. Ahmadabad, Gujrat. "From Royal Display to Economic motive: A study of the Carpet Making in the Mughal India, Parweg Aalum, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 2014, Vol. 75, Platinum Jubilee (2014), 262-269.

Methodology

For this thesis study the research design was framed on the question of understanding the link between applied craft practice, the construction of artisanal social identity and how that impacts the heritage of Pakistani textile culture- specifically that of handwoven carpets. The research comprised qualitative data such as conducting in-person interviews, fieldwork, applied practice (weaving or dyeing fibers), conversations with practitioners, recording/photographing products and practices and quantitative data that comprised of secondary data search in government records, archival data and catalogues (written and drawn).

The content was analyzed by comparing the experiences and opinions of current practitioners with historical records and documents. This provided ways to fill the gaps in the personal and subjective experiences of carpet artisans that are perhaps not recorded in historical overviews. For ethical considerations, consent was obtained in interviewing and photographing, although some participants were not willing to be quoted exactly or even mentioned.

Research questions:

1. Historical narrative building and why it is significant for this region/case study.
2. Mapping the traditional heritage of this craft form and why it was so important.
3. Can the carpet-weaving craft keep up with contemporary changes, and should it be preserved?
4. How can policy with regard to fine carpet weaving transform this heritage?

5. Is storytelling significant in preservation of identity in carpet craft heritage?

Chapter One

Assembling the Warp: Historical context

Question to address: Historical narrative building and why it is significant in this region.

1.1 Persian symbolism in Islamic art and carpets

In this section of the chapter, the language of ‘symbolism’ (religious, social, and anecdotal) that developed in Persian crafts, specifically carpet-weaving, will be investigated. To understand the depth of the development of carpet construction, it is important to describe the era when this craft flourished under the early rulers of the Safavid empire (1501 to 1736). The Safavid rulers reflected an impression of royal magnificence with their patronage of highly luxurious projects such as elaborate Islamic mosques in Isfahan, Shiraz, and Yazd and fine silk carpets woven in towns and regional centers like Tabriz, Kerman, Ravar, Neyshabour, Mashhad, Kashan, Isfahan, Nain and Qom. Each regional carpet was characterized by its weaving techniques and use of high-quality materials, colors and patterns.⁴

With royal patronage, the carpet itself flourished in terms of design and technique, becoming highly sophisticated and elaborate. The symbols and patterns of the Persian carpet are not purely Islamic in nature. The designs used were heavily derived from Islamic motifs/symbols/numerology and are aesthetically similar to designs used in Turkey and Mughal

⁴ Ghazizadeh-Tehrani, Parveen. *Persian Rugs; Analysis of selected designs*. Thesis, Oklahoma State University. 1976. 6-10.

India. However Persian carpet makers also added local symbols and patterns reflecting ancient concepts that came from Zoroastrian and folk heritage.⁵ The carpet design excelled at incorporating local and historical elements to the newly adapted Islamic style as well. The products coming out of this innovative industry were increasingly complex and poetic carpets that told a story or were designed for purposes such as elite wedding carpets.

The Persian carpet incorporated a complex and multi-dimensional artisanship that managed to include the producers, weavers, patrons, and viewers within a framework of shared heritage values. Each step became a building block to ensure that a dazzling story or purpose would be quite literally woven into every inch of the carpet.

Persian carpets as an art form developed extensively under the patronage of the Shahs who considered themselves devotees of the Islamic *Sufi/Tasawwuf order*, a branch of Islamic mysticism characterized by introspection and seeking the divine, through love.⁶ The carpets woven at this time reflected the themes of the construction of the Universe, the conflict between good and evil, the state of humankind in the material world, love, separation, devotion, poetic puns, homage to divinity and seeking the self and descriptions of the physical and metaphysical worlds. To incorporate these complex yet abstract ideas in an easily understood way, the

⁵ Cammann, Schuyler V. R. 1976. *Religious Symbolism in Persian Art*. The University of Chicago Press 193-208.

⁶The theological orientation of Sufism – with its inward focus on spirituality – is such that its followers tend to shy away from more political forms of Islam... The emphasis on personal and emotional religious experiences in Sufism made it enormously popular among the masses and led to new forms of religious expression, including singing and dancing (the whirling dervishes of Turkey are a well-known example). Sufism's popular appeal ultimately helped Islam spread across Africa, Asia and Europe. Today, many well-known Sufi orders – such as the Naqshbandis and Qadiris – enjoy a substantial global following.” Pew Research Center, *Sufi Order, Report September 15, (2010)* <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2010/09/15/muslim-networks-and-movements-in-western-europe-sufi-orders/>.

‘language of symbols’ is a technique used in carpet designing that conveyed the messages aligning with mysticism.⁷



Figure 1. Silk animal carpet (detail), second half of 16th century. Iran, Kashan. Silk (warp, weft, and pile); asymmetrically knotted pile, 94 7/8 x 70 1/8 in. (241 x 178 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913

⁷ “...beneath this elegant surface they often expressed the religious fervor of that interesting age, when even the Shahs considered themselves devoted Sufi mystics. For these arts frequently conveyed the deeper sentiments of the time by the subtle use of what may be called “the language of symbols””, Schuyler V. R. Cammann. “Religious Symbolism in Persian Art.” *History of Religions* 15, no. 3 (1976): 193–208. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062524>.

Some Western scholars still insist that Islamic theology banned pictorial depictions in art and that those visual elements that were used_- in what can be broadly categorized as Islamic art_- are ornamental and not symbolic. This, however, is not accurate.⁸

Cammann extensively details the sophisticated and layered process that lay behind the construction of Persian carpets, elements which often were wrongly categorized as merely decorative.⁹ The ideas of life, death, and the hereafter as Islamic and Sufi concepts, are depicted pictorially or through patterns in a carpet. Sufi tradition along with other Asian belief systems also denotes concepts through symbols which can be depicted in geometric patterns that form a repetitive harmony including plants, natural objects and animals. These symbols would often reflect concepts of good, evil, the self, divine power and the trials of the material world.¹⁰ A good example for understanding this pattern reading can be found in the Ardabil Rug, a carpet that while famous for its colors and patterns, was meant to reflect a view of the Heavens above.

⁸ Schuyler V. R. Cammann. "Religious Symbolism in Persian Art" *History of Religions* 15, no. 3 (1976): 193–208. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062524>.

⁹ Schuyler V. R. Cammann. "Religious Symbolism in Persian Art" *History of Religions* 15, no. 3 (1976): 193–208. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062524>.

¹⁰ Schuyler V. R. Cammann. "Religious Symbolism in Persian Art" *History of Religions* 15, no. 3 (1976): 193–208. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062524>.



Figure 2. The Ardabil Carpet, unknown provenance, 1539-1540, Iran. Museum no. 272-1893. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

This purpose can be easily read in the center medallion or ‘Sun Gate’ motif, which represents the entrance to heaven (not to be confused with the actual sun) while the two lamp symbols on the sides of the center represent the Sun and Moon.¹¹ The framing of the carpet itself within its borders, symbolized the *hijab* (Arabic) or *parda* (Persian) in this context denoting a barrier between people and the metaphysical world, thus, transforming the carpet itself into a window into another dimension.¹² The web of flowers spreading across the deep blue background is also

¹¹ Old Islamic symbolism also postulated the four lesser gates at the four corners of the Universe which led from Earth to Heaven. These were called ‘sun-gates’ in reference to the actual sun, as they marked the sun’s four extreme positions during the summer and winter Solstices” Schuyler V. R. Cammann. “Religious Symbolism in Persian Art” *History of Religions* 15, no. 3 (1976): 193–208. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062524>.

¹² Hafiz used many words for this: most often the Persian word *parda*, or its Arabic equivalent, *hijab*, which is used in this connection in the Quran. This concept of a screen or barrier between man and heaven is essential for understanding many Persian rug patterns” Schuyler V. R. Cammann. “*Religious Symbolism in Persian Art.*” *History of Religions* 15, no. 3 (1976): 193–208. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062524>.

a pictorial and poetic pun. The word for flowers, *Kaukab*, can also mean ‘stars’ in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu depending on the context.¹³ To further demonstrate the complex beauty captured in the carpet, a woven inscription (an ode by the poet Hafiz) on the Ardabil carpet by the designer (production leader) Maqsud of Kashan reads:

“But for thy Gate, I have no refuge in this world;/My head has no place of trust except this Door” (S. V. Cammann 1976)

The use of Sufi symbolism is also evident in poetry by Hafiz and Rumi.¹⁴ They make extensive use of symbolic, metaphorical, and visual phrases. This carpet is, in my opinion, a good example of how something intangible was given life through a material medium. The immateriality of spiritual beliefs, puns and poetic understandings of human existence was conveyed in a web of beautiful patterns and colors on a carpet. The transmission of ideas and stories was carried out through natural pictorial elements that could be visually understood by most people although the meaning perhaps resonated more deeply with those who saw beyond the obvious or felt a certain attraction to these symbols/pictures.

The Pan-Asiatic historical influences on Persian heritage are evident from the symbols and colors used in these complex carpets. The variations in symbols can be chalked down to the influences of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and other regional indigenous beliefs. For example, the *ch'i*-lin or phoenix motifs in carpets that became popular under the rule of Shah Abbas in the fifteenth century reflect the fact that the popular trade of Chinese pottery

¹³ Schuyler V. R. Cammann. “Religious Symbolism in Persian Art” *History of Religions* 15, no. 3 (1976): 193–208. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062524>.

¹⁴ ...Sufi poets like Rumi, or others like Hafiz who habitually made use of Sufi vocabulary and imagery” Schuyler V. R. Cammann. “Religious Symbolism in Persian Art” *History of Religions* 15, no. 3 (1976): 193–208. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062524>.

and ornamental motifs had begun to be popular in Persia.¹⁵ The inclusion of these new symbols and motifs are also practical examples of how foreign ideas and art were adapted into local craft heritage via the carpet.

¹⁵ Cammann, Schuyler. "The Systematic Study of Oriental Rugs: Techniques and Patterns" *American Oriental Society* 1975. 248-260.



Figure 3. Details of the Mantes Carpet, depicting the phoenix or chi'lin along with other animals to symbolize the stories and laws of the universe (good, evil, ego, etc) Tapis à décor de jardin de paradis, dit "de Mantes", Place of creation; Iran, Département des Arts de l'Islam, Louvre, Paris, France (accessed 20/5/25)

Symbols and designs in Persian carpets became a mechanism to convey complex concepts surrounding the construction and creation of the Universe, the laws of nature, and poetic sagas that developed an understanding of society. However, there also existed a common understanding of these poetic representations on these carpets that could be understood by societies that were familiar with literary, spiritual, and visual context (in Asia).

1.2 Transregional and historical interlacing of Kashmir, Lahore, Iran and Central Asia

This subsection will explore the links between Persia and the subcontinent - particularly in how administrative and social changes can influence culture and art. A series of network connections can be drawn to show the historical influences within the region from the Safavid-Mughal period and how these influences impacted craft innovation, materiality (technical styles and the object material), and industry.

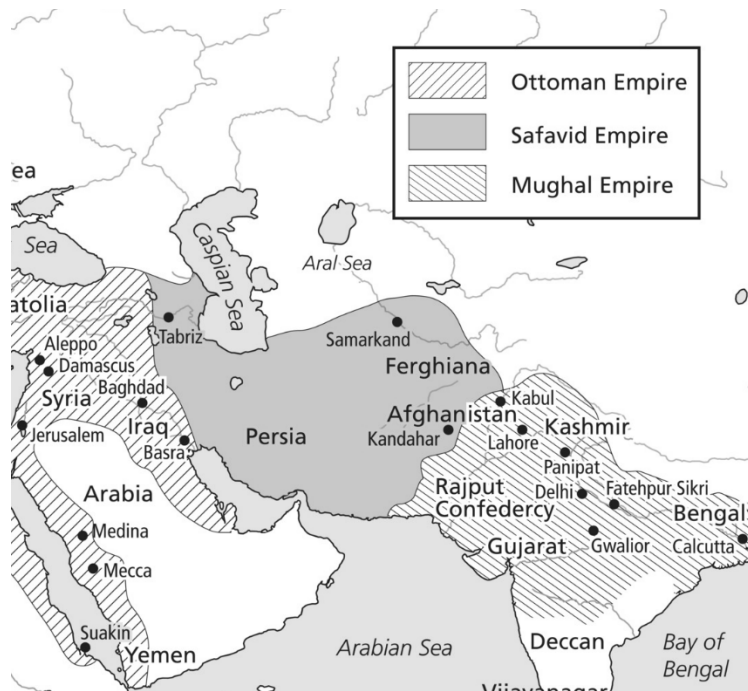


Figure 4 Map of the Mughal and Safavid empires, showing regional trade hubs including Kashmir and Lahore, Cambridge Encyclopedia Maps (accessed online 20/5/2025)

The Safavid and Mughal empires were neighbors, although with very different types of rulership. Each reached their zenith at different times. Cross-regional social movements, trade, and even royal inter-marriages lead to significant cultural influences between them.

The Indo-Persian culture can be defined by the influence of Persian culture on the subcontinent and vice-versa through language, literature, and even mannerisms. An example of this is the adoption of the Persian language as an official court language during the Mughal Empire, although, this phenomenon may also be linked to the Turkic-Mongol-Persianate ancestry of the Mughal rulers. During the sixteenth century, the Mughal and Safavid empires flourished in terms of regional rule and relations under Shah Abbas, Shah Tahmasp, Babur, the Afghan ruler Sher

Shah, and Akbar.¹⁶ Eventually, Mughal court biographers, poets, and philosophers took inspiration from Persian culture or were Persian themselves like Abul Fazl the biographer of Emperor Akbar. Correspondence between the two empires primarily took place in Persian. There exists a very famous letter in the Persian language was addressed to Shah Abbas by Emperor Akbar, calling out the Shah for his fanaticism.¹⁷ Shah Abbas and Emperor Jahangir also exchanged letters written in Persian discussing the calming effect of smoking tobacco in controlled quantities.

Customs and etiquette were also exchanged between the two cultures, with dance, conversation, music and literature being most affected. Language became another example of fusion with the Indo-Persian influence on the development of Urdu, a language constructed using Persian, Turkish, Arabic, and Urdu. Initially known as *Decani* (the courtly language) this language has undergone many phrases, constructions, and has words in common with Persian and Arabic. Therefore, concepts of spirituality, heritage, art, and the deep understanding/contextualizing of crafted art, in this case, carpets, were easily transferrable from one cultural region to another.

Persian Sufis also had an impact on the philosophy of the Mughals and literary circles in the sub-continent. They included such notables such as Amir Khusro, Shams Tabrizi, Hafiz Shirazi and Khawaja Moin-ul-Din Chisti/ Gareeb Nawaz (*May God Be Pleased with them*), the latter having founded the school of philosophy in Ajmer, to date a school with thousands of believers.¹⁸ Sufi

¹⁶ Dehkan, Abul Hassan. "The Influence of Persian Culture in the Sub-continent of India and vice versa, after the advent of Islam." *Proceedings of Indian History Congress. Indian History Congress*. 1970. 269-280.

¹⁷ Dehkan, Abul Hassan.. "The Influence of Persian Culture in the Sub-continent of India and vice versa, after the advent of Islam." *Proceedings of Indian History Congress. Indian History Congress*. 1970. 269-280.

¹⁸ Dehkan, Abul Hassan.. "The Influence of Persian Culture in the Sub-continent of India and vice versa, after the advent of Islam." *Proceedings of Indian History Congress. Indian History Congress*. 1970. 269-280.

saints are, and have been for centuries, an integral part of the culture of the subcontinent. For many people of different status, religions, caste, creed, gender and occupation having a patron saint can be integral to their lives whether this maybe through grand rituals, pilgrimage or simple beliefs. Interestingly, it is possible to be non-religious and still embrace a patron saint out of respect, regional association or simply as a personal alignment (the author would like to add that she does not have a singular patron saint, but absolutely respects the love for all the existing ones and values their importance within the artisan community).

A culture of information sharing, and royal networking even developed between the two empires through poetry exchanges. Scholarly and literary figures became an integral part of cultivating this cultural fusion. Naturally, this also had an impact on the development of arts and crafts within these regions. Persian carpets became one of the many artisanal products that were exchanged and adapted from Persia to the sub-continent ethos.

During the course of the Mughal empire, Kashmir was often called Heaven on Earth by Mughal emperors and royalty or The Golden Bird of the empire due to its natural beauty and resources.¹⁹

Kashmir was a pivotal region for carpet production because this is where the finest carpets and shawls were created in a meticulous process. The manufacture of these items was closely tied to the careful farming of silkworms and the famous fine wool of the Tibetan/Mongolian goat that thrived in the environment on the plain of the Kashmir valley, permitting fine Cashmere and Pashmina wool to be produced.

Under Mughal rule, carpet production gained momentum and popularity. Carpets were used for

¹⁹ Houghteling, Sylvia. *The Emperor's Humbler Clothes: Textures of Courtly Dress in Seventeenth-century South Asia*. Research, Michigan: The Smithsonian Institute and Department of the History of Art. 2017

furnishing palaces, houses, and ceremonial purposes such as coronations, weddings, battles, religious festivities and even as part of elite travel equipment.

Due to the increasing popularity of carpet weaving, various manufacturing units were set up in central regions of India during that period. The most popular center was the city of Lahore in the Punjab (in modern day Pakistan). Under Emperor Shahjahan, carpet production flourished as the carpets began to be exported to European, Asian and Arab markets.²⁰ However, after the fall of the Mughal Empire, the administration and region fell into the hands of the Afghan Durrani Empire and then the Sikh Empire from the late eighteenth to mid nineteenth centuries. During Afghan and Sikh rule, carpet industry exports continued with changes in administration. Nevertheless, considerable changes in design were taking place, reflecting the aesthetics of different rulers. During the Sikh rule, the Indigo dying industry flourished, as the blue color was religiously and culturally significant for the Sikhs. Thus, the carpet color palette was influenced by this too.

From the mid nineteenth century, the subcontinent was in the grasp of colonial rule. Among many of the unfortunate, deadly, and terrible consequences of British rule was the ruthless degradation of craft industries, especially carpets. Handicrafts were either reduced to local performative symbols of Indian culture or seen as a 'low art' due to their functional usage. The European perspective of the time devalued floor/ground art while, in comparison, paintings were associated with walls, and even ceilings were seen as celestial.²¹ It is interesting that in some aspects of Islamic mysticism, the idea of heaven is meant to symbolize something attainable and

²⁰ Aalum, Parweg. "From Royal Display to Economic Motive: A study of the carpet making in Mughal India" *Indian History Congress (Indian History Congress)*. 2017. 262-269.

²¹ Lum, Ken. "The Other in the Carpet." *In Everything is Relevant*. Concordia University Press. 2016 11-31.

closer to the person than when placed on the ground (metaphorically and physically too). ,
Therefore the symbolic meanings of the Persian style gardens were divided neatly to represent heavenly realms and especially the carpets that are meant to be a medium of looking into another world or being looked at too, in contradiction to the western perspective.

1.3 The establishment of carpet production on the sub-continent

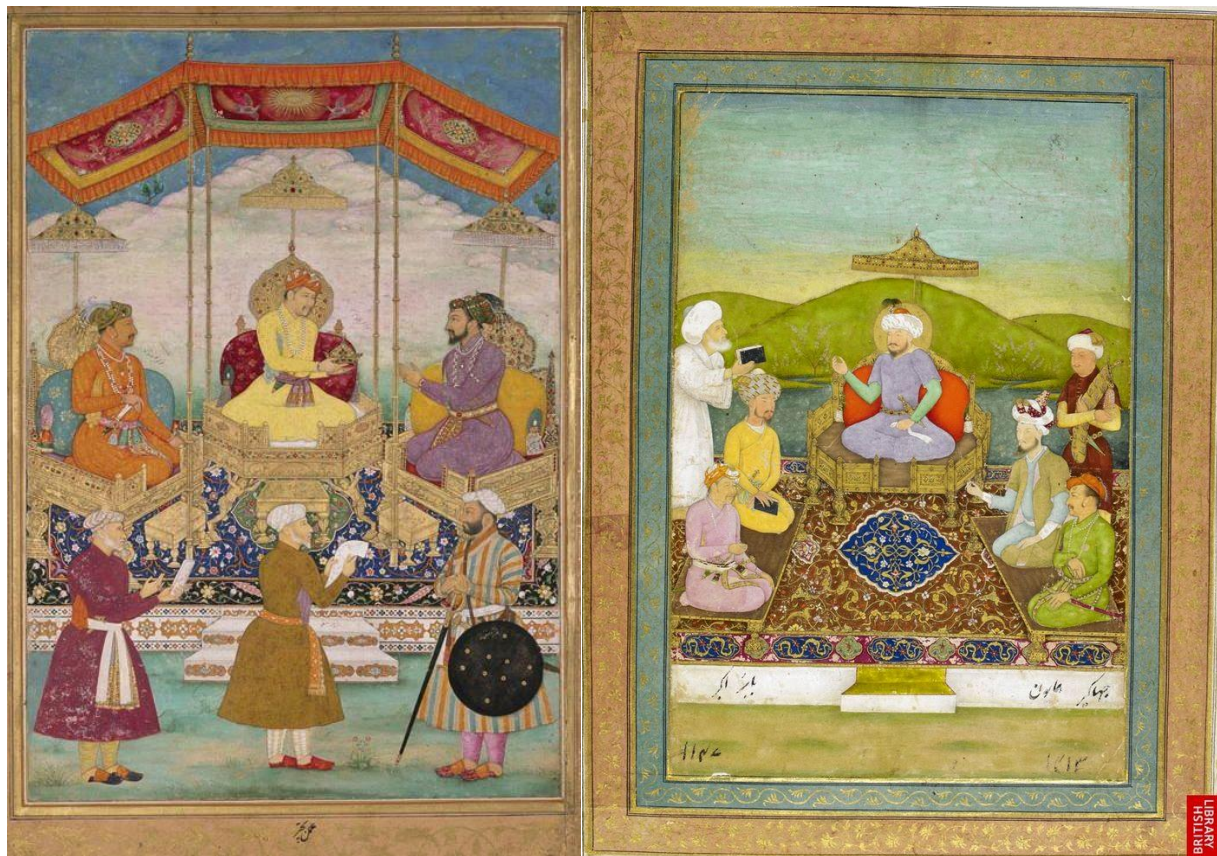


Figure 5: Miniature of Mughal emperors Akbar (left) and Babur (right) with their imperial descendants seated on handwoven carpets- the symbolism shows the cosmos, thus, strengthening the imperial position as decided by the fates. Mughal emperors Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan with their ministers (CBL In 07A.19) Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Ireland.

The establishment of the *Farrash Khanna* (literally; carpet department) during Emperor Akbar's reign is well recorded in historical texts written by the emperor's chief biographer and court

historian Abu'l-Fazal. The *Ain-I-Akbari* contains an exhaustive list of the textiles produced across the Mughal Empire.²² Receiving Kashmiri products, especially carpets and shawls, as gifts was common and significant between royal courtiers. Once, during the time of Akbar, five thousand women received Kashmiri products as gifts together with fourteen thousand *mansabdars*. Demand for Kashmiri carpets on the part of the Mughal aristocracy, the elites of society, increased. Carpets also became popular to furnish large projects such as schools, mosques, offices, palaces and even for comfort during travel. The demand for carpets also increased for ceremonial purposes including festivals such as Nowruz, Eid or even for weddings. The manufacturing of both carpets and shawls involved a complex production process in terms of technique, color palette determination, design construction, and weaving technique. Both kinds of goods, although very different in size, could take up to 7-20 months to produce and sometimes even more for carpets.²³ Emperor Jahangir marvels in his autobiography that the *Jahangirnama* or the natural beauty of Kashmir was reflected in the carpets.²⁴ This description reflects the beautiful process of '*gul-the band* (tie and dye technique) where a cloth could be

²² The "Institutes of Akbar," or *Ain-i-Akbari*, are an unconventional history of the sixteenth century reign of Akbar the Great of the Mughal Dynasty. *Ain-i-Akbari* is actually the third volume of a much larger Persian document, the *Akbarnama*, composed by Abuul Fazl. The *Ain-i-Akbari* itself is a three-volume work, and the material offered in this set represents the first volume of that three-volume work. Included in this collection are the Persian text of the original, along with the English translation of Heinrich Blochmann. The contents of this important historical work consist of administrative documents, statistical records, and even gazetteers. *Heinrich Blochmann (1838-1878), Edited in the original Persian by H. Blochmann. Vol. I. Printed for the Asiatic Society of Bengal in the Bibliotheca Indica, Calcutta 1872.*

²³ Houghteling, Sylvia. *The Emperor's Humbler Clothes: Textures of Courtly Dress in seventeenth-century South Asia*. Research, Michigan: The Smithsonian Institution and Department of the History of Art. 2017.

²⁴ *Jahangirnama* / *Tuzuk-e-Jahangir* is the official autobiography of Emperor Jahangir of Mughal India- Jahangir, Emperor of Hindustan. *The Jahangirnama*. Freer Gallery of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 9-502. 1999. doi: 10.5479/sil.849796.39088018028456.

dyed by fastening various points of cloth in small clusters to represent the bed of roses of the Kashmir valley as was often designed in the background of a carpet.

One of the earliest instances of such carpet weaving is the work done by Sultan Zain-ul-Abideen, a Persian, who along with his *karkahana* and his weavers settled in Srinagar/Kashmir. This enterprise put carpet weaving on a more industrial basis, producing very fine carpets with from 200-900 square knots per square inch.²⁵ The organized manufacturing system allowed for a series of workshops based on this model to be set up in various other cities. By the seventeenth century, Kashmiri carpets were considered superior in quality and design to contemporary Persian carpets. The quality of these carpets resulted in a large increase in the cost and sale per yard of these goods. *Karakhannas* were owned both by the state and privately too, allowing for a variety in styles and production. Kashmiri carpet production flourished till the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Pile carpets became popular after Ahmed Beg Khan, a governor of Kashmir under Emperor Jahangir's rule, recruited master weavers from Andijan Persia.²⁶ The pile carpets attained meticulous perfection with floral designs of mosques, gardens, mystical animals and even elements from folk sagas such as the tales of Laila Majnun (similar to Romeo and Juliet).

The production boom and eventual development of the carpet industries into various regional hubs such as Lahore was evident during the seventeenth century under the rule of Emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan who poured patronage into the industrial set up and having weavers create their own small vocational hubs. Lahore has historically flourished as a craft and trade

²⁵ Zain ul Wahab, Safina Latif, Junaid Bashir, Manzoor Husain Shah, Asia Shah. "*The Persian Influence on the Textile Design of Kashmir*." Science Arena Publications Specialty Journal of Humanities and Cultural Science, 2018. 107.

²⁶ Ashfaque, Farzana. "*Shawl and Carpet Industry in Kashmir under Mughals*." *Indian History Congress*. 2009. 286-296.

center. The city was also a powerful administrative seat over the course of the Mughal, Afghan and, Sikh rules as well as later for the British colonial powers. In 1585, Emperor Akbar shifted his capital to Lahore, bringing Persian influence to the city's architecture, art and of course crafts.²⁷

The city is one of the oldest trade areas and population center. It was already important during the time of the prehistoric Indus River civilization millennia ago, 7000 BCE), during the heyday of medieval the Silk Route, the period of the Ghaznavid Empire (977–1186), the Mughal empire (1526 to 1857), Afghan Rule (1747), the Sikh Empire (1799 to 1849), and eventually, the British Colonial rule (1858 to 1947). Lahore became so famous for its carpet weaving during the Mughal empire, fusing a new style of Indo-Persian, Islamic, and local cultural aesthetics that Lahore carpets came to be considered in a separate category.²⁸ During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Lahore carpets had developed a distinctive color palette (red, orange, yellow, and green), and elaborate floral motifs. Most of the carpets produced were exported to European markets.²⁹ Carpet production had become a lucrative business, and the industry began to attract weavers, designers, farmers, and traders. The impact of the Lahore carpet industry increased in conventional cities and beyond the north Indian regions. A famous example described is the Amber Palace or Sawai Man Singh which became a prominent center for carpet manufacturing. Experiments with gold and silver thread interwoven with silk were carried out here.³⁰

²⁷ Ashfaque, Farzana. "Shawl and Carpet Industry in Kashmir under Mughals." *Indian History Congress*. 2009. 286-296.

²⁸ Aalum, Parweg. "From Royal Display to Economic Motive: A study of the carpet making in Mughal India." *Indian History Congress* (Indian History Congress). 2017. 262-269.

²⁹ Aalum, Parweg, 2009. 262-279.

³⁰ Aalum, Parweg, 2009. 262-279.

The impact of British colonialism in dismantling and mismanagement of these production hubs came about through the emergence of problematic craft erasure and degradation policies. One of the outcomes of this policy were the ‘Jail carpets’, carpets woven by force by prisoners living in inhumane conditions. The punishment was first made popular during the Sikh rule, the British decided to capitalize on this practice and create a system of manufacturing based on the exploitation of prisoners.³¹ At times, prisoners were denied release to ensure that the carpets were woven at no cost and could be sold by the East India Company at hundred percent profit.

Post-partition of the subcontinent in 1947, leading to the creation of Pakistan and India as independent states, had an added effect on the industry. However, in 1947 there were still fifty manufacturing families remaining in the Punjab (Pakistan) alone. Most of the families who possessed the manufacturing units were of Kashmiri or Irani origin and had learned the techniques and methods of weaving/manufacturing through the traditional master and apprentice (*Ustaad/Shagird*) framework.

In Pakistan during the 1950s and 60s, the industry went through a revival of sorts, as the carpets started to become popular in the local and international markets again. This led to an increase in production and once again a social regional movement of traditions and ideas between Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan began.

³¹ The jail carpet weaving industry was widespread in India during the late nineteenth century. It was encouraged by colonial officials and prison authorities who needed productive and profitable (even lucrative) inmate “activities”. By this time, and even into the end of the twentieth century, most of India’s vast carpet production was monopolized by English companies- Omri Schwartz, *History of Inmates Weaving*, 2020.

However, during the 1970s and 1980s, with the neighboring political turmoil in Iran and Afghanistan, initiatives by the government to increase dollar reserves by encouraging foreign exports at faster rates and larger bulk sales slowed down local production. Many traders, to make fast money, imported bulk loads of Iranian and Afghani carpets at low prices, exporting them as Pakistani carpets, damaging many traditional manufacturing units that were unable to compete.

1.4 Significance of the carpet: Socio-religious, cultural, and economic

What made carpets traditionally so important to the culture and communities living on the subcontinent? What was the historical importance and effect of carpet production and use on the communities?

The carpets as a product and as a craft form became important economically and developed into a medium that could convey cultural traditions, social positions/importance, and religious beliefs. The intermix of mysticism and self-reflective symbolism was composed of a variety of designs intended to reflect different perspectives for understanding the material and immaterial world. The pictorial display of ‘hunting’ carpets which often show wild beasts in an ornate garden adorned with plants and the presence of domestic or wild creatures is a famous pattern favored by royals (Persian and Mughal). Cammann,³² however, offers a detailed analogy; the word *dam* means net/snare/trap both in terms of the physical object as well as referring to the metaphorical delusional nets of the material world while the word also refers to animals with horns. In many pictorial carpets, tigers/lions are supposed to symbolize the Sufi or the reflective individual who

³² Cammann, Schuyler V. R, 1976. 193-208.

must navigate through the *dam*/traps of the material world and overcome temptations and weakness towards a path running from the center of the divine Sun Gate which is usually the medallion or central motif in a carpet.

The deer's antlers are often shown in some state of movement also signifying the fleeting nature of vices and the fragile nature of the animal when confronted with startling situations. Of course, the symbolism can be interpreted in a second way, that is, to show the beauty and gentleness of these animals, signifying their importance in the social lifestyles of the time. The puns often included in carpets also gave them a sartorial edge. Such symbols include the symbols of a baby donkey, either as a mystical free agent or an animal bound to work hard. Contrast of colors can also reflect a deeper meaning depending on the context. 'Black light' or *Nur-i-siyah* represents the positive according to Sufism; it can be seen as the natural state of the universe, and 'White light' can be used to indicate blinding harsh light that can be more sinister and crueler in nature.³³ However, the use of color depends solely on the intention and vision of the carpet designer. This description of some of the common scenes depicted in pictorial carpets demonstrates the way the carpet could also be a map for understanding human nature and the relationship between the individual, the ego and the natural world. It is fascinating to see how human beings have always been conscious of their own internal and external conflicts in existence and found a way to depict that, even on carpet, an object that many often see as a simple home accessory. I see these fine carpets as reflections of the complexity of human thought and the need to create consciously - notions imprinted in material culture.

³³ Cammann, Schuyler V. R, 1976. 193-208.

Carpets had been a way for people to tell and share stories through a tangible medium. Folk tales such as Laila Majnun (seventh century Arab tale mentioned above, and a love story engrained in South Asian regional folklore like Romeo and Juliet but with more mystical and Sufi themes) described longing, love and separation. Carpets often contain reconstructions of the south Asian gardens in them. These woven creations have deep, superimposed and sacred meanings. Their very construction also mimics the garden; the four parts of the garden that symbolize the world are reflected within the four borders of the carpet.³⁴ The carpet was also a medium that connected the body to physical space, the materiality of the product and that of the body (clothing) blended the individual into the material culture of society at large. However, modernity and industrialization in the subcontinent, obscured the carpet within the features of coloniality and class, creating a distance between art and craft that dismissed the histories of the subaltern lives, including those of the laborers and indigenous people. With the modernization of societies, the rural and urban areas also changed. There was no longer space for the artisan or the rug weaving craft as art. The understanding of art also changed attitudes within the rug weaving craft, where high art became more associated with paintings and creation for leisure, and low art became something for the ground (devalued) and functionality seen as a working-class concern.³⁵

³⁴ Lum Ken, *The Other in the Carpet*, 2016. 255-265.

³⁵ Lum Ken, *The Other in the Carpet*, 2016. 255-265.

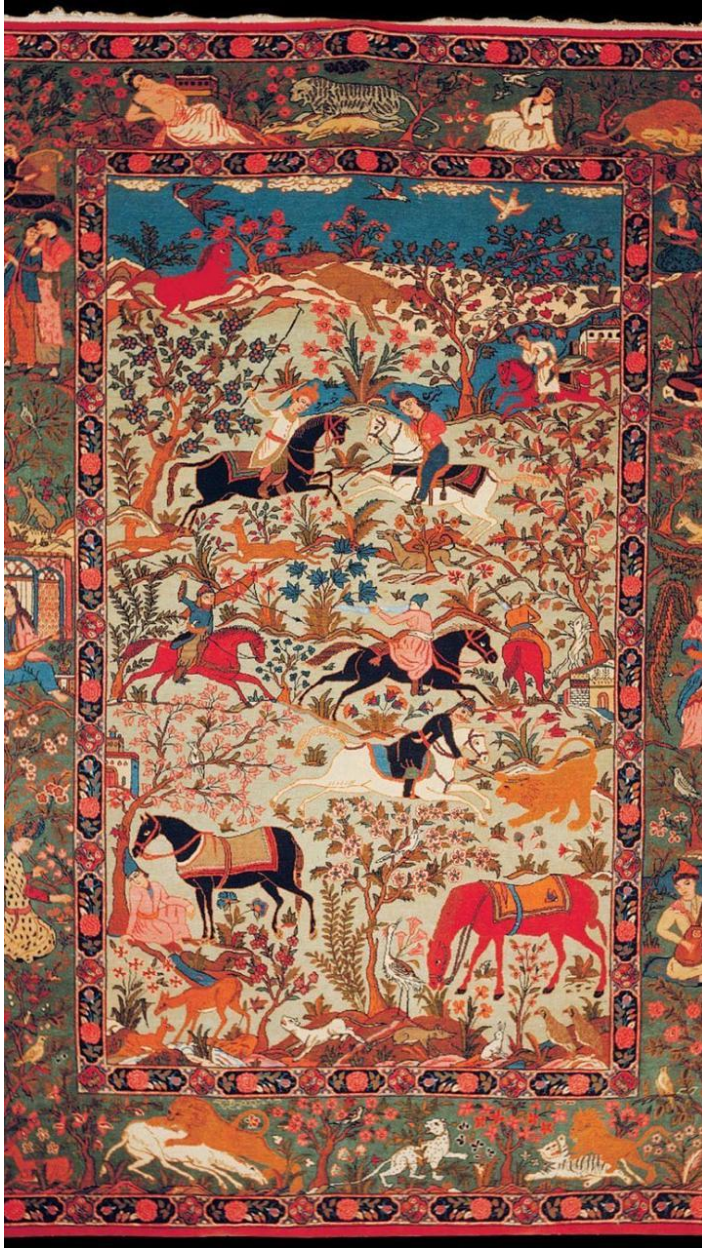


Figure 6 Tabriz style "Farhad and Shirin carpet", Early 20th Century, National Museum of History of Azerbaijan.(accessed 20/5/25)

Credit should be given to artisans, patrons and craftspeople beyond the tasks of merely decorating carpets. They make the decisions to include subtle symbols for an audience who sought inner meaning, the divine or good around them. Carpet-making reflects the cultural

brilliance and innovation that can be developed within a craft, but more so, it reflects a balance between depicting complex ideas through simplicity and producing a simple product with technical finesse. These craftspeople took something that is inherently straightforward but pushed it towards a zenith of dazzling intricacy. This is what makes the craft so special, something as simple as a carpet can be made more valuable than its weight in gold with the collaboration of all the people involved in producing something that was an imprint of their sagas intertwined with the universe itself.

Chapter Two

Threading the Weft: Memory and cultural identity in Indo-Persian carpets

Question to address: Mapping the traditional heritage of this craft form and why/how it was important.



Figure 7 Image of silk hunting or "shikargah" Indo-Persian carpet produced by Tariq Habib Mirza, at the Islamic Art Festival, Lahore, Pakistan, 2025

2.1 Memory of craft - the narrative of constructing a carpet

Before going into the details of the structure of carpet manufacture knowledge-transmission - teaching and learning the craft of rug-making practices, some clarifications are necessary.

Firstly, carpet weaving production in rural and urban areas possess different social and hierarchical dynamics that define the interaction of the artisans with the craft. Urban crafts in cities and other commercial hubs generally have a more market-based approach and often had craft guilds that artisans were members of. Being a part of a guild allowed for group autonomy on dictating trends, conducting material, regional or color research, and client or patron dealings. To further clarify this issue, carpet weaving as an institutionalized practice in the subcontinent has, in part, taken place within urban/industrial-based cities and towns, especially in the case of the Kashmiri Indo-Persian and Lahore fine carpets.

Craftspeople from rural areas had a more ‘shared’ approach towards crafting which was dictated by the way these rugs were used and needed. That in no way denies the aesthetic sensibility of the craftwork produced by rural groups, it only is to contrast the difference in approach to learning the craft and the way each type of rug craft fits within the social contexts of its maker and users. Some of these approaches involve the various methods of skill transference and teaching could be carried out through singing songs about weaving patterns; *naqash kahani*- which was adopted in guilds in urban areas as well.³⁶ Pattern singing as a practice eventually evolved into pattern direction, an oral tradition through which a *naqshband* would direct the

³⁶ ” The first one, known as Naqshe Khani (Pattern Singing), consists of recitals and tunes which serve as a guide of patterns for the weavers while they are weaving. The second one, manifested in the form of storytelling, singing, poetry and prayer recital, is not directly connected to the weaving process but accompanies it and, I argue, influences the labor process.” Mehdi Aminan, *The Role of Singing Cultures around Carpet Weaving in Iran*, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Phd, 2022, <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/vlach/projects/phd-projects/persian-carpet-the-woven-sounds>.

weavers on how a pattern needed to be constructed. The oral directions could be quite detailed, even down to which color should be employed in x number of knots and then switched.

Another major factor is how gender roles shape the craft of weaving a carpet.

In my conversation with my teacher Mr. Tariq Mirza, a charismatic textile designer, carpet conservator, and a monumental figure in the Indo-Persian carpet weaving world of Pakistan, we discussed the historical roles of weavers in carpet making:

“You must keep in mind that before carpet making became an industry, and I mean even before the establishment of *karkhanas* in Persia or Mughal and Ottoman empires, this was something done in villages, primarily by women. Women were making carpets, and the rugs were made, in the beginning, for making the home or a space comfortable, beautiful and reflective of the culture at that time. These women were reactive artists; they made what they saw or knew of - nature, flowers, folktales, the skies, and slowly incorporated other religious or totemic figures and so on. However, this was something women did and managed to technically work out. The blueprint was established by village women and then eventually, when trade started to increase, especially with foreigners who saw what could be made with silk and wool, that is, when men started to come into this as practitioners, when money came into the picture. Then they really set up a system to create, design, trade, account and create a system of transferring the skill usually through oral tradition and then with time it became similar to a guild set-up.”

One of the traditional modes of skill transfer in craftsmanship is through the master/ *ustaad* and apprentice/*shagir'd* framework. The passing on of the knowledge of carpet weaving/dying/spinning and even designing, like many other forms of traditional craft/music/art/performance including pottery, marblework, calligraphy, classical dance, and music, also follows the master-apprentice/ *ustad-shagir'd* model in the subcontinent. Regarding

carpet weaving, this kind of training was especially prevalent in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when the craft became more regionally industrialized due to administrative interests and patronage. To understand the master/*ustad* and apprentice/*shagird* framework it is essential to understand the significance of this framework. In basic terms, the master and apprentice simply comprise a relationship where the teacher imparts knowledge to the student through showing them practically, giving directions and even directing an understanding of aesthetics. The apprentice almost becomes a shadow of the master and will follow and mimic his skill until it also becomes a part of their nature.

However, especially in the arts, the master/*ustad* and apprentice/*shagird* bond works at an individual/personal level and is connected to the wider social importance of this relationship in cultivating an environment of interlaced social connections that was not only based on bonds of blood. Family is a concept that can be used to understand the bond between a master and his apprentice in this context, or even that of parents-children, friends, partners, collaborators, confidants, and other notions surrounding the idea of *humsafar* (fellow traveler), *auliya* (protector) and *aaqa* (master). The classical notions of the craft emphasize the importance of artisanal bonding with the craft itself, the importance of the smallest tasks to ensure the smooth development of the carpet into a larger, finished creation, and the role of craftspeople in maintaining the craft heritage as an integral part of local society.

However, the master-apprentice relationship has, over time, become part of the political economy and labor systems that ultimately changed these dynamics. The master-apprentice relationship has not remained the same with the advent of capitalist systems, gender dynamics and socio-political changes.

This debate is explored in further detail by Chambers.³⁷ His research is an interesting outcome of living with artisan communities and his findings focus on the ways cultural, gendered and religious structures impact the transmission of craft and how much of the master-apprentice framework has also been impacted by colonialism, globalization and capitalist industrialization. He also mentions another important detail, the significance of the neighborhoods that cultivated social hubs for artisans to not just learn the craft but live, market and sell from a craft specific neighborhood. This spatial organization also helped to cultivate a social and economic culture of craft communities where young people could go to become skilled artisans.

As an apprentice, initiation relies heavily on the act of submission needed for understanding the craft. For people that have taken the step to be a craftsman, this is the beginning of a process of molding the body and mind into a synchronized direction. The initial stage for a master who accepts an apprentice requires a lot of patience, mistakes must be recognized, and the pupil must accept the constant demand for repetition of tasks. The apprentice must become fully absorbed into the craft as dictated by its beauty and requirements, to almost fuse themselves within the craft so that carpet and maker act as a single entity.³⁸ The process of learning can also coincide with a parallel process of unlearning or re-learning and especially when to channel emotions through the craft. Much of the process is based on the act of communication, which has mostly been through oral tradition in the Indo-Persian carpet weaving communities of Lahore.

³⁷ Thomas Chambers, *Apprenticeship and labor amongst Indian Muslim artisans*, UCL Press, 2020, 107-134.

³⁸ Thomas Chambers, *Apprenticeship and labor amongst Indian Muslim artisans*, UCL Press, 2020, 107-134.

Marchand underlines the significance of communication in learning and honing craft skills.³⁹ His analysis breaks down the framework of craft transmission between the observer and actor where communication acts as a key to generating expression-based practice. Craftspeople communicate through practice, and therefore skills can be acquired as “motor based mental representations”.⁴⁰ This concept is one perhaps that many traditional craftspeople have internalized for centuries, where and when to reenact an action must be based on absolute conscious clarity in their visual and physical cognition. In carpet-making this process is honed till the act of creating a specific dye or knotting a pattern or designing a carpet becomes muscle memory. As a practicing textile designer, in my experience the way you see things and even conceptualize ideas in your head is broken into the applicability of the learned skills in getting the result you seek.

In my conversation with my weaving master, known to all as *Ustaad ji*, we talked about dyes and getting the color you seek or visualize:

At some point you look at a color and know just by looking at it, how much percentage of which dye you need to add to create that hue. It is imprinted in your thoughts.

³⁹ Trevor H.J. Marchand, Muscles, Morals and Mind: Craft apprenticeship and the formation of person, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Sep., 2008), 245-271.

⁴⁰ Trevor H.J. Marchand, Muscles, Morals and Mind: Craft apprenticeship and the formation of person, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Sept., 2008), 245-271.





Figure 8 (Top and Bottom) Collection of carpet mapping/patterns, gauche on paper. copyright Master Shafi Bandey, 1932.
Lahore, Pakistan

Skilled clarity in crafting allows the craftsperson to mimic or create a reality based on the transmission of ‘truth’ deriving from the inherited carpet-making culture that has been communicated from one artisanal generation to another. Of course, to unlearn one must first learn to the point where certain aspects of the skill such as knotting or threading become muscle memory, a natural part of the consciousness and body just like breathing. Thomas Chambers relates a small anecdote that took place during his research.⁴¹ He decided to become an

⁴¹ Thomas Chambers, *Apprenticeship and Labor amongst Indian Muslim Artisans*, UCL Press, 2020, 107-134.

apprentice, and on his first day, learnt that there was even a skill to sitting. This is an important aspect of understanding the meticulous process of becoming a weaver, dyer, spinner or *naqshbandan*; smaller actions when done correctly can have an essential impact on how you develop your practice. The process of becoming a craftsman is based on their very way of being; how to observe, see, think, understand, listen and organize oneself and your skill. Over time, this changes their way of thinking and creating. When these abilities fuse with individual systems of faith, association and preferences it changes the individual's mindset and in the case of carpets - the product itself.

Carpet weaving and manufacturing groups, specifically those in Lahore which I researched, can mostly be traced to the Kashmiri families and manufacturers which were largely influenced by Islamic or Sufi ideology in the product-making. The influences of Islamic Sufism introduced the concept that one must unlearn and become a mere vessel through which flows the unfiltered 'truth' through their work as the body, mind and soul may dictate.

Philosopher and historian, Syed Muhammad Naquib-al-Attas describes this idea by giving importance to speech.⁴² His notions of the 'rational' individual are different from the European secular philosophy of separating rationality and intellect. Instead, he argues that the Islamic notion of *aql* (Arabic/Urdu for intellect, however, *aql* is a complex-philosophical and practical term in Islamic theology) combines both the rationality of the soul with the intellect of the mind and body.⁴³ It is only through the harmony of all three can an individual truly gain knowledge

⁴² Syed Muhammad Naquib Al Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 1993, 105.

⁴³ Literally meaning understanding, perception, sober-mindedness and prudence, as a term, 'aql is a Divine light with which a person can perceive the things that cannot be comprehended with external senses.' Fethullah Gülen, *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism-3*, 2009, accessed 2/5/2025.

and actualize that knowledge. This is an important aspect of applied practice in design philosophy as it means the craftsperson must be in a conscious and focused mindset, which should also be applied in speech (the words one says, directions one receives and gives) and in the physical aspect of movements that allow the artisan to create. A consciously created work is the reflection of a genuine artisan and artist.

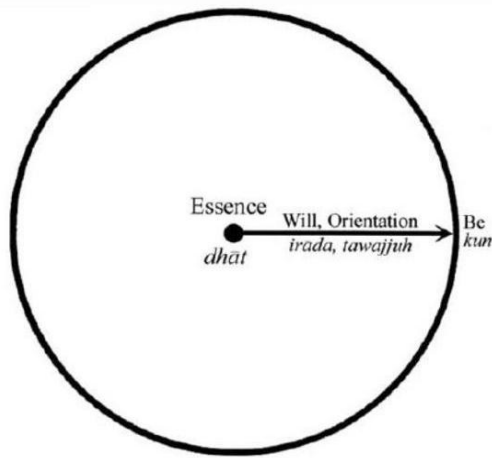


Figure 9 Geometric representation of the essence of man that can exist when orientation is present in the form of zero/sifr according to Ibn Arabi. *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam: An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas*, Samer Akkach, 2005

Two concepts emerge as important here because the concepts of *sifr* or zero and *alif* or one, help define the beauty and aesthetic design principles that are the basis of pattern making in Islamic Indo-Persian carpets. Almost every pattern makes use of the circle and the I in its construction whether it is the medallion and sun motif or the minaret, web, tree and other vertical designs that are meant to mimic one. In Islamic art there is much emphasis given to the reduction of design

into geometric layouts. In carpets as well this is always inherently present, even with the use of organic shapes or pictorial elements. The layout of the carpet always follows a geometric numerical division in the pattern comprised of zeros and divisible lines of zeros and ones. This is also usually how the pattern is constructed from simple motifs to elaborate ones. An Islamic style carpets will use geometric designs, often incorporating symmetrical, repetitive patterns of shapes like circles, polygons, and stars. These patterns, sometimes combined with arabesques or calligraphy, create a sense of harmony to reflect unity, infinity, and a spiritual connection to the divine. In non-Islamic pictorial carpets, elements of geometric harmony are also used, however, the connection to nature, the divine and regional ancestors are often depicted through plant and animal symbols. However, in the case of Indo-Persian Lahori carpets, the designs usually incorporate elements that are Islamic in nature along with other regional inspirations such as tribal, regional and trading symbols (ships, flags - sometimes of another country).



Figure 10 A rare imperial Mughal pashmina carpet, northern India, ca 1650, Private Collection, October 1992

However, the meticulous creation of the carpet is only possible when it is created by an equally honest and genuine craftsman/designer/artist who has embodied the strict defining principles the design demands into their persona and sense of being.

Mr. Tariq Mirza, relates a small story from his time in Tehran, Iran when he took over his family's carpet manufacturing business:

“It was a hot day he recalls; his office was in the main bazaar, and he would often walk around as the dyers and traders were usually all located in the same vicinity. “I pass by a blacksmith, creating a custom dragon statue of sorts, he is doing some finishing engravings on the face. I returned after a few hours and found him still there! As I call out to him, I see that he is now

carving something in the inside of the half-open mouth of the dragon and I say; ‘But who would look inside the mouth?’ The man turns and with a smile says, what is a craftsman who does not honor the reality of creation? ‘Nobody will look in the mouth, but I will know, and how can I sleep knowing I made something that was not complete?’ I smiled and realized I had made the mistake of questioning the integrity and diligence of a craftsperson, he was so engrossed in the authenticity of a creation that he saw the product as its own reality.”

For a craftsperson, the goal is to integrate all three aspects (soul, body and mind) into a harmony that can create a symphony reflecting the ‘truth’ around them. They shed the angles of economic or social advantages and disadvantages and bring a reality into existence, almost making the product alive. Thus, the master/*ustad* is there with their lantern of knowledge to lead the apprentice/*shagird* and light the lamp that later will be carried on, illuminating the path for others to seek. The craftsperson must be true to their authenticity and the nature of the craft; some can have a very puritan mindset when creating. Mr. Mirza shares another anecdote on authenticity:

“I remember, I was working for the royal Iranian carpet company in London, and at this point I was still a young practicing weaver. So, in the studio there were many weavers from different regions of Iran creating different designs and we all sat on the same floor weaving. There was a lady in a chador, Izaat *khatun* who sat adjacent to my loom and for a few days she didn't come into the studio, and on one of those days the CEO of the royal Iranian carpet company came to see the floor.⁴⁴ Noticing the empty loom, he created a fuss and insisted a weaver must sit on the empty loom despite many of us protesting taking over her carpet. Izzat comes to work after a few days and seeing her loom, freezes and then unleashes hell! She was mad that someone had dared

⁴⁴ Lady in Urdu/Persian

to touch her carpet. During this commotion, the CEO came running down after she threatened to cut up the entire carpet. She looks at this man who was a prince, and scolds him, she said; 'You, who knows nothing about even weaving a thread think you have rights over my carpet? What do you know about creating or living, or breathing? Do you not realize two different paths and hands cannot touch one carpet; it will be ruined - it won't make sense anymore. 'And what a sight it was for all of us to see an academically uneducated veiled village woman scolding a prince, but you know he apologized - literally begged for her forgiveness. Imagine that I witnessed this, the respect for the craft and the craftsman.'"



Figure 11 Excerpt from an interview with Tariq Mirza, Lahore, Pakistan, 2022 copyright Fattima N Naseer

Shahid Hassan Sheikh, owner and managing partner of Lahore carpet manufacturing company, one of the oldest carpet manufacturing companies in Pakistan, shared a small tale from his childhood. Coming from a family of industrialists harking back at least four generations, Sheikh *saab* was used to a life of comfort and accessibility. However, every day after school and for

longer periods during summer vacations he recalled, he would sit for hours at the loom/*khadi* under the guidance of his *ustad* to learn how to knot carpets:

“It was a given of course, it didn't matter if I was the son of the owner so to speak, I still had to learn and respect the beauty and difficulty of the craft. That is how it was done, I had to work under my *ustad*, otherwise I would never understand.” It was a wonderful revelation to see a man surrounded by comfort and having grown up in it be subjected to the same workload, processes, and nuances of learning to earn his way to be a craftsperson. The tone of respect he had for his master/*ustad* still carried through the conversation, and at one point he remarked; “...no I am an average weaver, but my *ustadji* he could weave rivers of silk.”

He further mentioned that it was not customary that your relatives became your master/*ustad* so that they did not interfere with the learning journey. Chambers notes that crafting as a skill should be acquired independently, a craftsperson must earn their merit.⁴⁵ Having a crafting background might be an advantage but only if the apprentice/*shagird* proved their worth, not so that it would in any way make the process faster or easier.

The stature of talent, the importance of family, and economic or social changes necessarily impacted the craftsperson and the craft itself. Roy details the blurring of the master and apprentice dynamic with the emergence of industrial manufacturing which fused modes of training and recruitment, and centralized models of labor control.⁴⁶ Due to this blurring of roles, being a ‘jack of all trades’ gave individuals, often among the employers/traders/sellers, a greater

⁴⁵ Thomas Chambers, *Apprenticeship and Labor amongst Indian Muslim Artisans*, UCL Press, 2020, 107-134.

⁴⁶ Tirthankar Roy, *The Guild in Modern South Asia*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 95-120.

advantage.

2.2 The heritage of craftspeople

To grasp the historical and current situation of the craft, it became essential to map out the few people in Lahore, the historical cultural hub and the provincial capital of Punjab, Pakistan, who understand the past and present of this once thriving carpet industry. The city of Lahore itself is an ancient monument comprised of stories, architecture, scandal, cultural fusion, battles for power, politics, art, literature, food and historical milestones. The author, Bapsi Sidhwa, describes the rich nature of the city in her book - *City of Sin and Splendor* (2005):

“Lahore—the ancient whore, the handmaiden of dimly remembered Hindu kings, the courtesan of Moghul emperors—bedecked and bejeweled, savaged by marauding hordes—healed by the caressing hands of successive lovers. A little shoddy, as Qasim saw her; like an attractive but aging concubine, ready to bestow surprising delights on those who cared to court her—proudly displaying Royal gifts.”⁴⁷

The Mughal kings invested heavily in making Lahore the industrial and cultural hub that it became known as for centuries after Emperor Akbar established it as the capital of the empire. This imperial gaze also impacted the industrialization of carpet weaving in the region. Workshops were established equipped with bulky looms and weavers were employed from

⁴⁷ Bapsi Sidhwa, *City of Sin and Splendour: Writings on Lahore*, 2005, 9.

different parts of India, Persia and Central Asia to produce fine silk and wool carpets.⁴⁸ There is also the question of what sort of social class the weavers came from as, according to Aalum earning a living wage by just weaving carpets was not sustainable.⁴⁹ Thus, it is likely that the craftspeople employed in these commercial urban workshops came from financially comfortable backgrounds. However, there was also a distinction to be made between the conditions in commercial workshops and the royal carpet weaving workshops, as those employed in the latter earned more and were entitled to extra benefits.⁵⁰ This may also be the probable reason for the production quality of royal carpets being far superior in terms of quality, technique and material as well as the fact that trends in carpet-weaving were usually established by the royal workshops.

The role of the weaver became more difficult as the demand for greater technical finesse increased. Technical quality was determined by the number of knots that could be woven into the weft per square inch. To increase the weaving quality that was produced, the role of the *T'alim* weaving language became crucial.⁵¹ The *T'alim* managed to streamline work and increase the speed of production, and, in a way, it also managed to bridge the language gap, as many weavers and traders could easily communicate using this professional language to understand and

⁴⁸ Aalum, Parweg. From Royal Display to Economic Motive: A study of the carpet making in Mughal India." *Indian History Congress* (Indian History Congress 2017. 262-269.

⁴⁹ Aalum, Parweg, "From Royal Display to Economic Motive: A study of the carpet making in Mughal India." *Indian History Congress* (Indian History Congress) 2017. 262-269.

⁵⁰ Aalum, Parweg, "From Royal Display to Economic Motive: A study of the carpet making in Mughal India." *Indian History Congress* (Indian History Congress) 2017, 261-279.

⁵¹ "The practice of creating the *talim* originated in making Kani shawls. When the shawl weavers changed to carpet weaving, they created this practice. Although the *talim* may be only a small part of weaving a rug, creating the *talim* requires experience and skill, as a minor flaw in the *talim* could ruin months of work on a carpet." Understanding Taalim, rug weaving code, 2020, <https://www.landryandarcari.com/blogs/news/understanding-talim-rug-weaving-code>.

produce the designs they needed without the need for long discussions. This notational system also made it easier for buyers and traders to simply show the design they needed to order/get for their customers. Any carpet weaver or manufacturer worth his salt, in the past and today, is not only familiar with the language but can interpret it to form the basis of the design the instructions ask for.

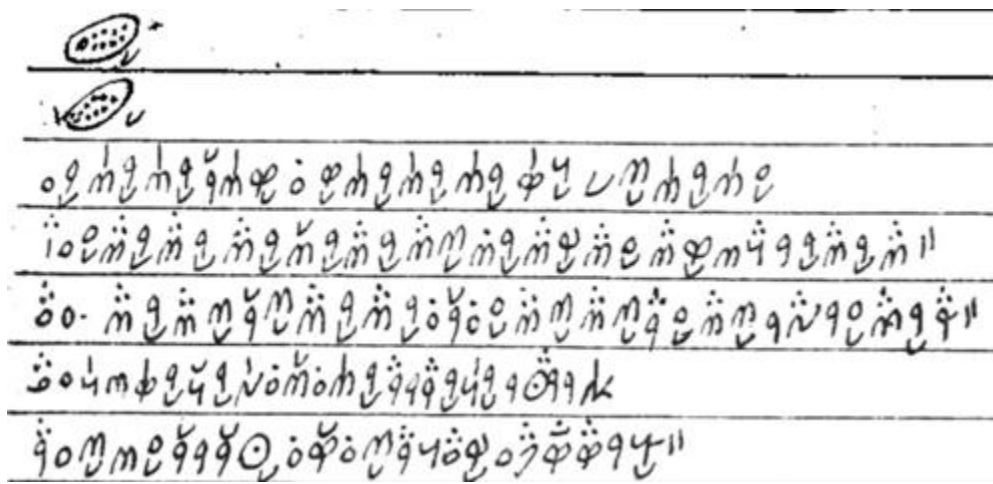


Figure 12 Taalim instructions, Excerpt of a shawl talim (1882), https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Carpet-talim-by-Leitner-1882_fig2_311086773 (accessed 21/4/25)

There are, however, some issues that came with the development and usage of the *T'alim*. Carpet conservationist and manufacturer Tariq Mirza explains it thoughtfully;

“I for one am against this language completely. Yes, I understand that technically it is sophisticated and an effective way to communicate, especially in the trade business. But in my opinion, it is the worst thing to have happened to this craft...” he pauses taking in the very surprised reaction garnered at this admission “... the reason I believe it is the worst thing ever is because quite simply, it killed the creativity of the craftsman. They were no longer thinking and therefore no longer an active part of carpet creation. What is the point of making something

with no mental or emotional involvement? You are simply reading and copying, and after a while the whole process becomes too mechanical, the essence of the weaver is removed. Secondly, the language was originally developed for weaving *kanni* shawls, and for that style of weaving and product, the language fits that better.”

Mr. Mirza’s opinion poses a very significant argument that has been plaguing the debate of art and industrialization since the latter was invented, about the conflict between man versus machine in creating and producing design. In this case, however, it is important to understand the impact this system has had on the history of carpet-weavers and the extent of their input in the production/creation process. Mr. Mirza further elaborated;

You see...traditionally and historically, carpet weaving was a communal process. People sat together and determined together what they wanted to achieve on the carpet. What were they trying to say? To show or reflect, what they felt about certain materials or patterns and what was their personal analysis of the colors or the symbols. It was a very different kind of art; it was based on this relationship of people coming together to create something together. There was no ownership or complete direction, it was all done mutually... and we have lost that.

To further elaborate, I questioned him. Has he ever created such a carpet, made in the traditional collaborative process he described;

When I had my *karkhana* in Iran in the 60s, I mean this is how we made carpets, of course it was longer and much more detailed process and therefore our carpets differed from ones produced relatively faster. A few years ago, I tried to do this again, but things are now very

different. However, some time ago I had a Portuguese artist (name redacted) visiting me to learn about sourcing organic dyes, and we collaborated on designing a carpet. The process was similar in some parts to the traditional way - he would design/draw some parts, I would add something else, we had the weavers come in and we would sit and discuss the process. We had the dyers come in and we talked about color palettes; the spinners came in and we talked about the quality we had to achieve. The spinners in turn connected us to the farmers/sources, creating a long chain of interdependent craftspeople. Then, we talked together about what sort of carpet we were aiming to make... it was a wonderful and quite long process, which we took step by step, slowly taking in and debating everyone's direction until we all had come to the same conclusion on resolving the carpet. It was a wild project and there was so much talking, music playing throughout my studio, debating, arguing even but it was one of the best carpets I ever designed.

Mr. Mirza was adamant that the traditional process was achievable even in contemporary times, but emphasized repeatedly that the relationship between the craftspeople, the sources of raw materials and the designers had to be in complete union and be essentially democratic.



Figure 13 Amjad weaves a carpet, following the Taalim, Institute of Handicraft Association, Lahore, Pakistan, 2021

To understand the issues that now affect the role of the craftsperson, the historical changes in the traditional role and the problems regarding social and economic changes need to be examined. These factors have also managed to affect the professional identity of the craftsperson and the very nature of the carpet-weaving craft.

2.3 Shaping cultural identity through carpet crafting

Esther Leslie's published work; *Walter Benjamin, traces of craft*, expands on the concept of storytelling experiences through hands. Benjamin reflects on storytelling highlights a central theme: the story as a lived experience that takes place in the physical world and is shaped through the action of the hands. For Benjamin, storytelling is a mode of communication deeply embedded in tradition, social interaction, and, importantly, craftsmanship. The “hands” in this context represents both the literal physical actions involved in craftsmanship and the metaphorical act of communication in storytelling.⁵² The labor of the hands in craft can be applied to handcrafted carpets, which is both a process of creation and an act of knowledge transmission. It is the gesture, the touch, and the repetitive nature of the work that embeds a story into the material world, connecting the artisan or storyteller to a larger cultural tradition. This physical engagement with the world creates, in a way, a kind of archives of craftsmanship.

⁵² ” The hand touches, has practical experience of life.” Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Traces of Craft*, Oxford University Press, Vol 11, *Craft, Modernism and Modernity*, 1998, 5-14.

Leslie's analysis of Benjamin's work 'The storyteller' highlights the historical and key relationships between craftsmanship and storytelling, especially before the rise of industrialization. The storyteller in earlier times was someone who lived through their work, their struggles, and their communal experiences. Their stories, often forged in hardship or through manual labor, were also shaped by travel and local lore that formed the way craftspeople designed their creations. This same process was applied to the symbolic animals, colors and patterns used in carpet designing, especially enriched by regional variations (styles) and changes of the design over time.

Furthermore, the concept of craft as elaborated by Benjamin, and its role in shaping personal and communal identity, draws on the embodied aspect of labor. Craftsmanship is tied to the idea of labor as an act of self-expression and identity formation of the craftspeople linked to the skill they possess and the art they can create. This notion aligns with the view that human history and culture cannot be fully understood outside the context of the labor and physical actions that form part of human life. In the act of making or crafting something with one's hands, there is a fusion of the makers' multiple identities and the object: the hands, in their work, shape the person as much as they shape the object.

Talking to Tariq Mirza and Hassan Shaikh, both bring up the changes that had to be made to the craft. The changes were so profound that they required weavers, producers and clients to adapt to them. While Mr. Mirza has retained as much of a traditional approach as he can in his carpet production, he too is clear about the stress these changes have placed on the weaver and the repercussions on the creative process because of it. During our conversations, he pointed out that when the industry/sector transformed into a run-for-profit industry, the relationship the carpet creator has to the product changes, the invested labor becomes more about quantifiability, the

goal is about meeting deadlines and ultimately everything is tied to money. What was once perhaps a more creative, flowing and maybe sacred or valuable relationship and artform has become less about the invested intention and more about the profitable outcome. The process, the relationship and the connection to the craft has changed with industrialization. The “aura” of an artwork—the unique experience of interacting with the dyes, threads, looms and designs has disappeared into the mass-produced copies or handwork that lacks connection and is about making more to sell more.

After the industrialization of the carpet industry, the pressures Pakistan faced post-independence (1947) to compete in the global market, issues with labor practices, product banning due to problematic practices of some employers and, government industry incentives gone wrong, the handwoven carpet industry shrunk with time. The weaver bore the brunt of the changes more so than any other group involved in the carpet supply chain. It was the weavers whose earnings were squeezed, let go off and forced to change or give up their craft when financial situations became dire. Eventually, this led to less labor demand and less skilled carpet weaving labor training which caused the practice to dwindle further. With time, the experience of craftsmanship became commodified or was replaced by machines, and as storytelling moved away from oral tradition to more detached, written, and visual media in the form of instructions, the personal, physical connection to the narrative was weakened.

Walter Benjamin laments the loss of this embodied, hands-on form of communication and its impact on human experience, and in a larger sense, the loss of identity.⁵³ In this view, the work

⁵³ Esther Leslie, Walter Benjamin: Traces of Craft, Oxford University Press, Vol 11, *Craft, Modernism and Modernity*, 1998, 5-14.

of the hands is not only a means of creating material objects but also an integral part of human existence, shaping both individual and collective memory. The replacement of the craftsman as more of an automated mechanical worker and less of a creative active artisan, is something that is not just limited to the handmade carpet craft.

Looking specifically at Lahori carpets as an example shows that an ancient city such as Lahore that has been at the crossroads of trade and innovation for centuries is now at a point where one of its most historically identifiable artforms is diminishing. The beauty of Lahori carpets can be seen in ancient pieces in local museums, state buildings, internationally and even in homes.

Unfortunately, this art no longer involves the social group comprising of artisans or manufacturers that were once an essential part of the societal fabric and that reflected the cultural identity and economy of the region. Carpet weaving neighborhoods in Lahore were once a place where Mughal emperors commissioned silk pashmina carpets that were made in Lahore, or where Sikh maharajas set up production units to introduced gold threads into handwoven carpets. It was a place where artisans could finesse their technique and a time when craftspeople were integral to society as storytellers, weavers, carriers of tradition and even represented artistic splendor. Now it seems, without such an integral labor group, the loss to the quality of the social fabric of the city may be greater than appears at first glance.

Chapter Three

Weaving the Thread: symbolism, guilds and current issues impacting the industry

Question to address: Can the carpet-weaving craft keep up with contemporary changes and should it be preserved?

In the following chapter I aim to establish the current issues impacting the carpet industry and link it to the way British colonialism changed the existing practices of craft and specifically, hand knotted carpet weaving and production. One of the key issues is that the western and British views of craft, art and design was obsessively categorized within strict paradigms that were quite different and, at times, seen as quite basic by rug weavers in the subcontinent. Design, craft and art were interlinked in the daily lives of the local people in the subcontinent. Hence, many artisans there lived through or with their creations. The first aim is to look at the particular ways and conditions under which carpets, symbolism and guilds changed. Through field interviews and participant observation I will aim to outline where and how things started to go badly for the industry. Finally, by examining the effect this decline in manufacturing had on craftspeople down to the present day something can potentially be said about the future of fine rug production in this region.

3.1 Carpet weaving industry during the period British colonialism and its impact on brown bodies and identity

On June 2, 1881, in the Crystal Palace, London (United Kingdom), the scions of the British Empire sought to showcase the finest crafts, arts and industrial production that the empire had to offer. Among the various exhibits showcasing these curated ‘heritage products’ from the colonies were the jail carpets, that had been stripped of their material associations, cultural significance and even the traditional impact of these crafts/products.

The jail carpets as a production practice first started in the Jaipur Central Jail, by the Maharaja of Jaipur, Sawai Ram Singh II, in the early 1850s.⁵⁴ Carpets were finished or amended and, at times, partially woven by inmates as a bargaining chip to get a reduced sentence. In 1857, the British had seized complete control over all territories of the subcontinent that came under the East India Company.⁵⁵ The jail carpet came into being through a combination of colonial

⁵⁴ “A practice of weaving carpets by incarcerated craftspersons, jail carpet weaving is credited to Maharaja of Jaipur, Sawai Ram Singh II, who initiated it as an occupational therapy at Jaipur Central Jail in the 1850s and later in 1892, at the newly constructed District Jail, Chandpole Gate. Both prisons had workshop sheds where besides carpets and *dhurries*, the craftspersons also made cotton dusters, towels, paper and bamboo goods. Prisons of Allahabad, Lucknow, Benares (now Varanasi), Fatehgarh, Agra, Hissar, Jhelum, Multan, Dera Ismail Khan, Sialkot, Peshawar and Ratnagiri were famous during the nineteenth century for their carpets and *dhurries*.” MAP Academy, April 21, 2022, <https://mapacademy.io/article/jail-carpet-weaving/>.

⁵⁵ “On the very last day of 1600, Queen Elizabeth I granted a charter to a group of London merchants for exclusive overseas trading rights with the East Indies, a massive swath of the globe extending from Africa’s Cape of Good Hope eastward to Cape Horn in South America. The new English East India Company was a monopoly in the sense that no other British subjects could legally trade in that territory, but it faced stiff competition from the Spanish and Portuguese, who already had trading outposts in India, and also the Dutch East Indies Company, founded in 1602...England, like the rest of Western Europe, had an appetite for exotic Eastern goods like spices, textiles and jewelry”, Dave Roos, Updated: June 29, 2023 , Original: October 23, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/east-india-company-england-trade>.

economic expansion and the dismantling of local trade/units. For the colonial and local administrators, this was a good opportunity to use prisoners as free labor. Carpets and their production were an important part of the cultural and economic system of Punjab and a valuable export too. As such, their manufacture created an opportunity with economic benefits that could be profitable if controlled.

Jail carpet production was concentrated largely in Lahore (Punjab, Pakistan) and Amritsar (Punjab, India), however the process by which the material carpet culture was seized and reconstructed was different in both cities. The city of Lahore was already undergoing institutional colonial reform through the establishment of British art schools, jails, museums and exhibitions.⁵⁶ This impacted the kind of patterns and style of the carpets that were created; usually the designs that were used were based on foreign demand or were copies of Persian and Mughal designs. At the time, the British fascination and demand for the so-called ‘oriental’ design, meant that the styles were aligned to Persianate aesthetics, symbolism and color palettes, which weavers copied from the often-mixed group of designs provided them. In this case, the *t’alim* now was less of a tool for sharing patterns and more of mechanical instruction which also led to the fading role of the *naqshabandan* (designer).

The increasing preference for Persian designs was also fueled by the British choosing to

⁵⁶ “The British set out to revive the carpet making industry in Punjab, first for economic reasons, and then as part of the British project to define and preserve what they saw as “traditional” Indian culture. Arindam Dutta has vividly evoked the dynamism - of the colonial process by which Britain took possession of the material culture of India, reimagining and physically remaking it to dovetail with the British imperial agenda.” Dorothy Armstrong, *Wandering Designs; the Repossession of the Oriental Carpet and Its Imaginary*, 28. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357193816_Wandering_Designs_The_Repossession_of_the_Oriental_Carpet_and_Its_Imaginary (accessed 2/4/2025).

associate themselves with the glory of the Safavid and ancient Persian Empires in preference to the Mughal Empire that even in its ending days continued to resist the British.⁵⁷

Jail carpets helped to strengthen the economic potential of Indian crafts for British capitalism. They became an example of an Indian “tradition” which was popularized by Parisian collectors, reimagined by the British in Punjab, then re-exported globally. The ‘reimagined’ Indian design and craft under British rule would re-enforce the imperialist propaganda of progression of the colony. An example of this can be traced to the 1881 Punjab exhibition organized by the then governor general of the province to:

“...to test the progress that has been made in quality and technical excellence of manufactures in last 17 years; second to encourage and reward the production of genuine native work, designed and carried out in indigenous styles of construction and ornamentation; ...we do not wish to see Indian workmen forsaking the beautiful patterns of Oriental carpet; ...what is wanted is to elicit the old original and traditional styles in every form of native art and manufacture.”⁵⁸

The exhibition also had an appointed jury that selected and awarded a prize of 262 rupees (18 British pounds) for a jail carpet now currently housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The humble prize money went to the manufacturers – certainly not to the jail or its inmates but to the government of Punjab - controlled by the British.

⁵⁷ Dorothy Armstrong, *Wandering Designs; the Repossession of the Oriental Carpet and Its Imaginary*, 29.

⁵⁸ *Report of Punjab Exhibition 1881-1882*.



Figure 14 One of two knotted wool pile carpets made in Lahore Central Jail and purchased by Caspar Purdon Clarke from the Punjab Exhibition 1881-2. V&A Museum, June 25, 2009, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O472054/carpet/> (accessed 4/5/2025)

The Punjab Exhibition of 1881 reinstated the significance of *native art*, an art that was open to adaptation to a range of European fashion requirements that supposedly improved it. If the style and overall aesthetic of the crafted pieces required ‘polishing’, the materials and ornament nevertheless had to be local. While some official documents (British gazettes) reported their ‘delight’ in the ability of native workmen to produce copies of carpets in a European style, the main objective of the exhibition was, to encourage and promote indigenous native art. Or anyway, a version of native art as reconstructed under these new influences.

In a way, these carpets are a good example of the way craft and identity can be contorted, controlled and transformed in a way that distances the craft from its traditional form and identity.

It is true, that culture in general is in a constant state of change, however, the changes that occur from enforced exterior factors such as colonialism and post-colonial mentalities have resulted in a significant modification of the craft culture and its craftspeople.

Jail carpets reflect a record of the British colonial power over the creativity and artistic traditions of Punjab, but also over brown/colonized bodies. The colonizer managed to exercise control via ‘punishment’ and reduced the brown body to a cog in the machine, serving a purpose confined to material production: such as the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition held in London, where Purdon Clarke’s Indian purchases were displayed.⁵⁹ The five and a half million people who visited the exhibition saw the jail weavers displayed alongside their products.

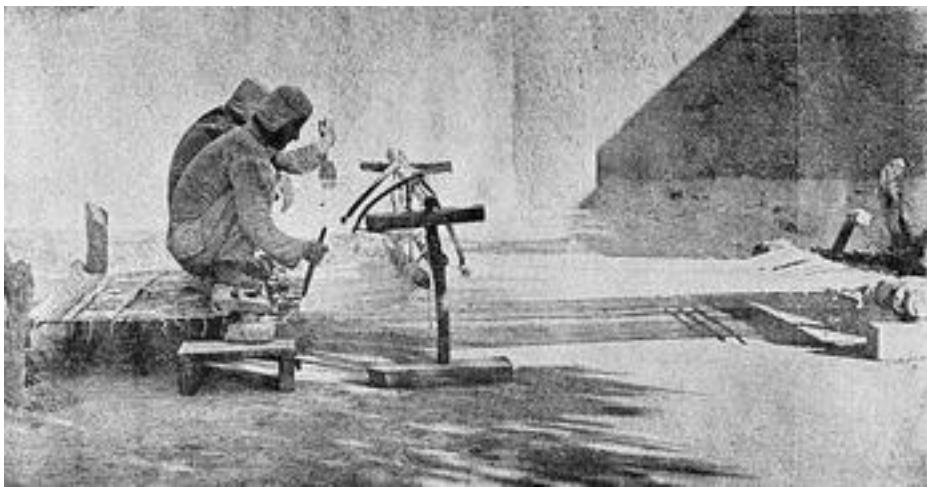


Figure 15 Convicts weave a carper in Lahore, McGowan, Abigail. “Convict Carpets: Jails and the Revival of Historic Carpet Design in Colonial India.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 72, no. 2 (2013): 391–416

During my interviews, I asked Mr. Tariq Mirza about the jail carpets in relation to Pakistan and Indias complicated and entwined shared history, especially regarding Punjab, a province split

⁵⁹ Briefel, Aviva. “On the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition” <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911813000028> Accessed 29/3/25.

between the two countries. For him, jail carpet weaving was a cruel way to punish weavers but also had deeper implications for the carpet demand hierarchy, economy and labor exploitation that, he elaborated, has continued in certain ways. The problem he explains is twofold - one impact pertains to design and reliance on foreign aesthetic demand for certain types of products; the second impact lies in how production is carried out. The creation of the jail carpet concept meant that there was now a way to create a product that maximized profit margins to almost unattainable levels. In Pakistan, the repercussions of this exploitative production were even still being felt almost over a century later. In the 1970-80s, many carpet “traders”, in order to earn dollars, managed to get containers of carpets from Iran (that were in a surplus in their region and had been swiftly embargoed post the 1979 revolution), made some alterations in the carpets and sold them internationally as Pakistani carpets.⁶⁰ For existing carpet manufacturers, and weavers, this ploy became nightmarish as there was no way to compete with the cost/profit margins of these traders unless weavers were paid almost next to nothing. This led to a significant imbalance in the industry, tense relations between the weavers and manufacturers, and a general disdain for the local carpet craft that was no longer considered valuable but rather as more of a burden. Secondly, the design hierarchy changed completely. Post partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the Pakistani industry adopted an attitude aimed at breaking away from orthodox design expectations of carpets and establish a niche for itself through creative reinvention. However, because the past century under Western rule and craft still catered to the European and North American markets the tastes and expectations of the customers still impacted the way designers

⁶⁰ A. Seyf. “The Carpet Trade and the Economy of Iran, 1870-1906.” *Iran* 30 (1992): 99–105. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4299873>.

and manufacturers approached their designs.⁶¹ Pakistani carpet production had entered a problematic relationship with carpet manufacturing which was determined by the ideas surrounding ‘oriental’ design prominent in the West.⁶²

Pakistan’s reinventions and versions of oriental carpets raise questions about tradition, authenticity, and export wares at the core of the nineteenth-century rejection of change in oriental carpets. Tariq Mirza elaborated on this notion; once the design and, in this case, foreign demand for a product like when carpets cater to foreign markets in the West and not the local markets, the aesthetic sensibility changes as does the economic progression of the craft. Mr Mirza states;

When the product is no longer being made for the local market, the craft starts to lose its own distinction. In the long run, the craft can no longer survive, because if demand is reliant on the outsider, it cannot be self-sustaining.

3.2 The carpet manufacturing guilds and subsequent changes to the industry

⁶¹ Armstrong, *Wandering Designs; the Repossession of the Oriental Carpet and Its Imaginary*, 30, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357193816_Wandering_Designs_The_Repossession_of_the_Oriental_Carpet_and_Its_Imaginary, accessed 28/03.

⁶² “With the 1978 publication of his book *Orientalism*, Said shifted this subject of study. No longer was Orientalism a study of the Orient and its culture, rather it became the study of how the Orient is viewed, stereotyped, and thereby dominated by its opposite, the Occident, or the West.” Beck, Wahab, *Orientalism, Oppression, and Contemporary Social Work*, 428-434, 2015 <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.28066-5>. Accessed 2/4/2025.

The carpet industry has been fundamental to Pakistan's economy and national identity since 1947, and within the region since the fourteenth century. Guilds in their special regional iteration played a crucial role in the establishment and continuation of the craft. However, due to the societal changes linked to industrialization - the concept of guilds and industry changed. Historically, the subcontinent was a major player in the global textile market, which also included handwoven carpets among many other crafts. The way craft guilds functioned differed from guilds in the Western mercantile contexts, which functioned as a link between government and local urban populations as a form of council.⁶³ In the subcontinent, guilds operated on a simple purchase/manufacture contract and were a form of a social subgroup connected to craft/specialization/function.

Most craft guilds in the sub-continent have been described as beings closely bound to a kinship system but that is not completely accurate as the distinction between the professional side and the social-cultural character of these collectives was often blurred. As discussed previously, the understanding of family in guilds is not tied to blood and often goes beyond class, caste, ethnicity etc. Similarly, with the development of carpet-making as an industry, most of the textiles were produced in regional areas that often specialized in certain crafts, and the set-up of the industry was less about mass production and more about craft creation. The establishment of the *karkhanas* gave some semblance of institutionalized structure during the Mughal era in the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, although these structures had already existed in some form within the carpet craft. However, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, during colonial

⁶³ "Guilds functioned as link between the government and the urban population, as 'instruments of the municipalities", Roy, Tirthankar, *The Guild in Modern South Asia*, 95-120, 2008.

times, most of the Indian textile industry was deindustrialized away from the traditional structures that had allowed the craft to flourish.

The deindustrialization was the result of the introduction of British manufacturing in the form of urban factories and British goods that flooded the regional Indian market.⁶⁴ Due to low costs (and low quality) local industry could not compete with the prices or the variable quality grading. This led to the destruction of local craft goods and industrial markets; individual artisans simply could not compete with an assembly line.

In my interview with Mr. Shahid Hassan Sheikh, I ask him to elaborate on how the historical changes in industry affected the nature of carpet manufacturing pre-and post-partition of India. His family is among one of the oldest carpet manufacturers in Pakistan; Lahore Carpets was established in 1920 and operated in Amritsar (India) before it was forced to move to Lahore in the new state of Pakistan. He describes the issue to me as something that emerged from necessity, as a means of survival. For his father and grandfather, this was a way of organizing new kinds of manufacturing units that were quite alien to them but were the only way to remain in the market. The cycle he described continued for him and now for his son. Demand has changed drastically as have the issues, and in a way, he acknowledges that the craft is no longer what it was. During my visit to the Lahore carpet factory, I was introduced to all the different production units, but in each unit, I was told how much production methods had changed from those employed historically. The only things that perhaps remain similar are the dyeing and the weaving methods.

⁶⁴ “A country deindustrializes due to a deterioration in home manufacturing productivity and/or competitiveness” Clingingsmith & Williamson, *India’s Deindustrialization in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, 2-56, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/Economic-History/Assets/Documents/Research/GEHN/GEHNConferences/conf7/Conf7-Williamson.pdf> accessed 3/4/2025.

In my visit in October 2022 to the Pakistan handicraft association in Lahore (Pakistan), the same pattern emerged of conversation and comparison. The floor manager guided me through the design process, now mostly digitized, as well as the quality control, raw material procurement and weaving. All the while, he continuously drew comparisons to the past, doing timeline jumps from pre and post partition:

Even the weaving has changed, if I am being honest, the contribution of the weaver is very different now and it is mechanical - they simply follow the design and it also makes sense, why would you spend any more time than necessary considering the money you make. Wages are much lower, and the industrial set up is not one that allows for much social or creative interaction.

Briefly, a weaver talked to me about his own experience, he talks more about the *t'alim*:

“*t'alim* is helpful and efficient but also takes away from the weavers' own understanding and contributions to the design, I simply read, and apply/weave as directed, it is just like following orders.”

For me, this brings up issues about what it means to follow the 'right' way to manufacture because that has now become a global norm. Are such structures really suited to a craft and society such as ours? Do these global norms even benefit us in the long run, or does it contribute to a dismantling of whatever fragments of carpet crafting still remain?

According to Tariq Mirza, introduction of global norms of manufacturing are destroying the weaver and the craft but for the benefit chiefly of industrialists for whom these norms are efficient and almost a necessity. Historically speaking, the Pakistani carpet industry has had its

share of scandals with labor practices that were a result of economic greed, drug cartels connected to socio-political politics and the general lack of respect for the carpet craft as an art where it is seen as more as a money-making gig.

The carpet industry in Pakistan illustrates how political, social, economic, and cultural power works to modify the material culture of the people it dominates and the agency, if it still exists, of indigenous makers to resist that power. However, the issue is not that simple and nor can it be so easily concluded. For a region that had over fifty carpet manufacturing families during partition, now reduced to less than five families, there are many other issues which have played their part in the decline in carpet making such as problematic labor scandals, international embargos, corruption and governmental mismanagement that have forced manufactures out of the business or to leave in order to cut their losses.

Debates on apprenticeship and passing on the skill/craft is another prominent issue for fine carpet production, especially given the backdrop of Pakistani social problems that can form a hinderance. The importance of the guild or the master-apprentice system is also largely reliant on urban neighborhoods or *mohalla* that is a specific requirement for certain aspects of craft/material/cultural reproduction.⁶⁵ The changes in the Pakistani urban landscape pre and post partition has also removed the cluster of physically inter-connected specialized groups in areas of the town where carpets could be easily manufactured. In my field study, I interviewed the specialists I had access to and investigated old records to pinpoint the old carpet manufacturing neighborhood/*mohalla*; a whole area behind Laxmi junction/ *chowk* (Lahore).⁶⁶ During my visit,

⁶⁵ “Form of neighborhood creates a sense of identity and belonging for those entering trades...” Chambers, *Apprenticeship and labor among Indian Muslim artisans*, UCL Press, 111, 2020.

⁶⁶ ” noun: marketplace, bazaar, also : a main street” , Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “chowk,” accessed April 7, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chowk>.

I observed and saw some small carpet shops, many selling factory-made or cargo carpets (usually from old imported or wrecked storage shipped cargo) along with fabric shops, including a small workshop that primarily was a small operation practicing carpet cutting and cleaning. My interviews with some of the shop owners led me to Hussain Shah who had been in the business for over fifty years and had live through all the issues that had led to the current situation of the carpet industry. For him, the neighborhood was always an essential component to the craft business and these neighborhoods are now forgotten and had disintegrated into shops selling second hand or old products. Mr. Shah stated:

“I mean, things are nothing like thirty, forty years ago, I was a very young man when I got into this business - primarily because of my uncle... but if I think about this neighborhood, then and now- the differences are monumental. This was a thriving area at one point, people would come from everywhere to see what was new, it was a place filled with craftspeople from various regions and designers creating things we had not seen before. If I think about the people I talked to then, old manufacturers and businessmen, the stories they told me of their youth which was over a century ago were even more odd. They saw the *mohalla* destroyed and then resuscitated, people came together after the civil unrest and then partitioned to save some parts of what they held valuable, and carpets were one such thing. Of course, if you compare this with its even older history, this neighborhood is so different. Once, it was the center of trade in Lahore but has since been reduced to a small forgotten street.”

We talked a bit more about the social changes that impacted the urban area and consequently the craftspeople and their carpet craft. However, his assessment did not hold one factor as being more destructive to the carpet industry over the other; various factors came together, and the complex history of Pakistan itself added to this issue.

In our conversation, the issue of how much cultural and social structures impact the transmission of craft was also raised. At what point does the transmission of craft become transformative or destructive. Should craftspeople, manufacturers and consumers be held responsible for upholding and safeguarding such traditions and at what point did the multitude of problems and social change make protection of carpet production beyond their agency.

3.3 Did carpet craft keep up with changes after the creation of Pakistan?

The carpet industry in Lahore, Pakistan, once a cornerstone of the nation's economy, experienced a significant decline over the past few decades. This downturn has been influenced by various factors, including shifting global market demands, increased production costs, and competition from other countries. The city became renowned for its hand-knotted carpets during the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Carpets from Lahore enjoyed a comeback in the 1960s and were highly sought after in international markets. In the early 2000s, Pakistan's carpet exports peaked at approximately \$276.82 million in profits in 2005.⁶⁷ However, the industry has

⁶⁷ The carpet export statistics data by year from 2004 to 2023 reveals a gradual yet significant fall in earnings in the following period until 2020. In 2005, there was a peak in carpet exports valued at \$276.82 million, followed by a consistent decline to \$54 million in 2020. However, there has been a modest recovery in recent years, with values reaching \$87 million in 2023.” Hasan, Munawar, Carpet Industry loses sheen as exports plummet, *The News of Pakistan*, 23/06/24, accessed 24/03/25.

faced a consistent decline since that peak. By 2020, exports had fallen to around \$54 million, marking a significant decrease in profits.⁶⁸

Several economic factors have contributed to the industry's decline:

1. Global Market Shifts: There has been a global shift in demand from hand-knotted carpets to tufted and woven varieties. In 2019, the demand for hand-knotted carpets dropped to 5.8% of the market share, while tufted and woven carpets accounted for 79.67% of global demand.⁶⁹
2. Increased Production Costs: Rising costs of raw materials, labor shortages, and high energy prices have made production less competitive. The acute shortage of electricity, soaring inflation, and high mark-up rates have further exacerbated these challenges.
3. Policy and Taxation Issues: Recent changes in taxation policies have added financial burdens on exporters. The withdrawal of the fixed tax regime and the introduction of new tax definitions have raised concerns among manufacturers about the industry's future viability.

In my understanding, the trade development reports and archives on Pakistani carpet industry produce a concise understanding of economic reasons and factors that have led to the downfall of the industry. However, the official records naturally present an ideal world, where the government is only trying to resolve issues caused by previous bad government policies,

⁶⁸ Hasan, Munawar, Carpet Industry loses sheen as exports plummet, *The News of Pakistan*, 23/06/24, accessed 24/03/25.

⁶⁹ Nawaz, Muneeba, Carpets; Product Report, *Trade Development Authority Pakistan Lahore*, 3-34, <https://tdap.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/CARPET-REPORT-converted.pdf> accessed 3/4/2025

international issues and overall change worldwide trends. While there is some truth to this, it does not take into account the craftspeople who have been left to fend for themselves, and the lack of recondition and understanding the importance of shared memory for the traditions of carpet weaving craft in a society that once held it to be a source of pride and beauty.

The carpet craft may have in some ways adapted to changes in order to preserve the craft, the issue of adaptation is a loaded one. To include all the social, historical and economic factors creates a larger narrative, however, the perspectives and issues faced by the craftspeople, manufacturers and other associated specialists raises the question of whether the cultural narrative of understanding heritage needs to include the complexity that emerges in regions marked by complex social systems that have been altered and re-arranged in ways that cannot be defined within the limits defined by heritage preservation. This brings up the point of how we understand preservation and development and if this understanding needs to be amended depending on the complexity of the case including the Pakistani carpet craft.

Chapter Four: The craft, the people and society

Question to address: How can policy transform heritage?

In the previous chapter, I have provided an outline of the many problems facing heritage at large in Pakistan, given its complex and diverse history, the uneven value judgement on handicrafts and the narratives that are now institutionally embedded and need to change. What changes, instituted at a policy level would secure better preservation and retain the carpet weaving heritage and crafts in the region?

4.1 Heritage in Pakistan

Pakistan has a very rich and ancient cultural past that is a blend of empires and civilizations including the Mughal, Sikh, Gandharan, Durrani, Indus, imperial colonialism through the British, the regional heritage of various provinces with different cultures from the northernmost Kashmiri mountains to the Sindhi coastline. For a country with such a vast difference of land, culture, taste, aesthetics, stories, customs and traditions, textiles have historically been and are presently a dominant part of the material culture across the landscape. Woven cotton in Pakistan can be traced back to 5000 B.C.E and so the importance of fabric with the people is and has been tied together for centuries. This deep history also provides depth to the understanding of the socio-cultural and economic importance of regional crafts, weaving practices, manufacturing, dying, spinning and all aspects of producing, selling and using textiles.

When it comes to the preservation of the heritage of textile production and use, specifically with fine carpets, many of the existing laws, legislation and policy are based on colonial laws. The problem with this situation is that the at basis of colonial laws was a desire to exert control, systematically segmenting and isolating what could be produced locally and therefore controlled and exploited by the administration. After the creation of Pakistan in 1947, not much of the legislation was changed and if it was, it was not redone to accommodate the issues of a post-colonial society that needs policy initiatives that are independent from the past but which do not completely cut off aspects that are essential to its cultural identity and heritage.

In Pakistan, the current Acts and legislations are mostly based on twentieth century legislation passed in British India during colonial times, with little amendment. A lot of the legislation at the time was mostly focused on architectural monuments and sites with not much addressed being to textiles specifically. In 1975, the Antiquities Act and its amendments were passed. These laws aim to prevent the illegal removal, trade, or damage of antiquities, including items of textile heritage significance. Additionally, provincial legislation, such as the Baluchistan Antiquities Act (2014) and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Antiquities Act (2016), further strengthens heritage protection within their respective jurisdictions. However, even in these acts, the product is subject to detailed legislation regarding protection, maintenance, repair, guardianship, ownership, movability, destruction, movability, dealing, and counterfeit items. However, very little is stated about extending a similar framework to the production process - which includes the intangible heritage of crafting, creation, and the transfer of skills.

The list of unprotected heritage sites and monuments is much larger than the list of protected heritage sites. The current Antiquities Act needs modification and improvement by the concerned provincial departments dealing with nature, culture, and state of heritage.

Additionally, there are no separate and specific laws for national and world heritage sites. The heritage law of Pakistan is uniformly applicable to all classifications of monuments, regardless of their nature, state, and cultural values, which is an approach that needs several modifications.

The heritage acts specific to Pakistan can be traced from the British 1863 ‘Act XX’. This legislation was passed to prevent damage to and preservation of buildings, which would later inspire the 1904 legislation, which was adopted into the Pakistan Antiquities Act 1947 (post-partition). The 1947 Act developed into the Antiquities Act in 1968 and then the Antiquities Act in 1975 legislation. It appears that, at times, there are problems with post-colonial development pressures to adapt quickly to changes. The heritage legislation sometimes does not reflect a specific policy for the region and are really only an extension of previous legislature with some updates. The problem with these policies and laws is also that they may not fit regional needs and end up usually being based on regulations from another country or general protective policy guidelines provided by institutions such as UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization).

This tendency to adopt old legislation and borrow from heritage institutions outside Pakistan can also lead to unfinished policies, cutting corners (corruption), lack of necessary structuring reflecting the actual demands of society. On the other hand, legislation can be regionally specific as seen recently with the Baluchistan Antiquities Act (2014) and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Antiquities Act (2016), regulations that strengthen heritage protection but only within their respective jurisdictions/provinces.

Unfortunately, legislative protection seems to be a continuation of existing guidelines that were made for different purposes (colonial projects) and changes necessary to protect cultural identity

especially ones linked to textile and craft heritage have not been implemented. This policy gap is a problem for a post-colonial country that needs to focus on protecting centuries old heritage like carpet making, even though it may require a different plan of action and inspection compared to older practices. This issue is especially true in the case of textiles as Pakistan which has not yet really been instituted in a conscious national initiative to protect its centuries old textile practices and heritage or the communities that practice or uphold these traditional crafts.

In my conversation with Mr. Tariq Mirza, he recalls that at various points in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s he reached out within his professional network to chairs in ministerial departments, museums and educational institutes and tried to initiate carpet heritage conservation plans by proposing solutions connected to vocational and educational training, craft villages and even the creation of media campaigns tied to the value of carpets as part of wedding gifts and collectables:

“Nobody cared, really it was no longer about the craft and the art of it. I was even going as far as to make my own contacts with organic farmers, dyers, weavers and loom makers available to help create a set-up with the educational or government institutes, given my insider voice on cementing a practical plan... but it did not matter. Everyone was more concerned about just exporting the carpets to foreign countries and making some money, regardless of where those carpets came from - usually Iran, or even who made them - usually Afghan refugees or some other form of fast and cheap labor. It [the situation] was just getting worse.”

I asked him if he thought there might be a chance to salvage whatever is left of this craft, but he did not answer.

4.2 Policy plan recommendations and artisanal protection suggestions

The handwoven carpet industry in Pakistan has been facing declining exports, rising production costs, and sanctioned access to global markets. The industry is also losing any of the connections that the younger generation might have had with the traditions of the craft, because of the low wages for weavers and disregard of the status of carpet crafting resulting in a lack of innovation. Additionally, the political and social embargos on the carpet industry from 1970s-80s coupled with the problematic use of child labor and drug pedaling associated with Pakistani carpets has led to certain negative stereotypes still being associated with the product and craft. Not much has been done to, safeguard, protect and renovate the industry even in liaison with private companies. The trickle-down effect of conservation of craft, product, people, skill, industry, material resources and the entire social culture around carpet weaving has not been taken into consideration as an essential part of the community.

Some of the additional issues that I also discussed during my visit to the Pakistan handicraft association were the high raw material costs, declining demand for traditional handwoven carpets, competition from mechanized carpet production in other countries, especially India and China. Artisan knowledge and skills are no longer valued as highly as they were years ago when carpet manufacture was a source of social and economic pride for associated carpet-producing groups. Additionally, over time and with the demands of globalization and the global capitalist market, a lot of financial success is also reliant on marketing and branding of goods. The Pakistani carpet industry has not exactly managed to position itself or the products as beautifully

as its associated history would suggest either locally or globally - a situation that has led to yet more issues.

My recommendation is to tackle the problem through policy and socio-economic cultural branding. The survival of the handwoven carpet tradition must be ensured to keep, this part of Pakistan's cultural heritage alive for future generations. Preservation of this artisan tradition can be supported through awareness and projects in educational art institutes, in literary material, museum exhibits, archeological exhibits and even incorporating the carpet culture into fashion marketing, branding and home/interior platforms.

- Carpet weaving schools and workshops can be set up. and establishing Vocational training institutes and workshops can be set up to teach traditional handweaving techniques, targeting younger generations to preserve artisan skills. Government, private and public institutes can offer certification for weavers and designers to enhance the credibility of products and ensure quality. Working with artisans and designers to create low-tech innovations such as motorized looms to help artisans improve efficiency while maintaining traditional methods.
- Artisan Welfare: Improve working conditions, fair wages, and community development for carpet artisans, again a lot of this hinges on transparency of working conditions and giving respect to the craft through good pay and inclusion of artisans in the design process, allowing for flat hierarchy. Secondly, vocational education or skills should not be treated as inferior to academic education on textile/and or craft. Financial incentives and support can also be given in the form of subsidies for raw

materials - giving financial support or subsidies for high-quality raw materials like wool and silk to reduce production costs or promoting local farming of this raw material since Pakistan is a cotton and silk producer.

- Microloans and Credit: The ministry of culture can introduce low-interest loans for small-scale producers and weavers, enabling them to expand operations and helping them understand how to operate in new markets or giving a small entrepreneurial course to guide them- this can also be done by private platforms.
- Sustainability: Promote the environmental sustainability of handwoven carpet production. This can be done by incorporating the sourcing agents; farmers, spinners, importers, dyers etc. more actively in the design process and emphasizing with them the importance of quality product that is sustainably produced. Grant programs for research into new designs, marketing strategies, and product diversification, and this can also be done in collaboration with regional or international platforms.
- Global outreach: Positioning, Pakistani handwoven carpets as a luxury product in international markets through re-branding and incorporating the history and heritage of the product through gorgeous and high-end optics. Storytelling will go a long way in the marketing of carpets, it can also help create a national brand for Pakistani handwoven carpets that highlights their cultural value, unique designs, and craftsmanship.
- Increase participation in international trade fairs, art-museum exhibitions can also showcase Pakistani carpets to various audiences and attract global buyers and designers.

- Currently, social media can play a somewhat positive role through online marketplace where artisans can sell directly to global customers, with a focus on luxury buyers and interior designers.
- Public awareness campaigns can also be carried out to educate consumers about the value and heritage of handwoven carpets, emphasizing the traditional work patterns, long traditions, craftsmanship and ethical production.
- Lastly, monitoring systems should be established that can keep check on workers, craftspeople and the manufacturers to ensure fair wages, and correct practices are being followed - these systems can also be a good way to learn business innovation tactics and help the craftspeople better understand client demands to increase profits.

Conclusions: Preserving storytelling and identity in carpet craft heritage

I believe that storytelling is a powerful medium for relating to audiences and storytelling through physical objects can provide a sense of tactile bonding to a culture. As a textile design practitioner and fashion historian, the significance of craft is for me very closely tied to the people that practice and use it. The carpet industry is, in my opinion, a potential gold mine of sorts for Pakistan; it incorporates a philosophical understanding of Islamic and local aesthetics, regional symbolism, indigenous colors and scenery, a representation of a micro-history that quite literally records individual lives through oral tradition and tactile creation, along with being a form that is functional and representational of individual style.

When I talk to Mr. Mirza, or Mr. Hussain or various other master weavers, I am constantly reminded of how much distance has grown between the creators and their work. In this rat race for modernization there seems to be a loss of communal values - a notion that is important to those mostly closely linked to the creation of carpets and not to those that benefit from their sale. Many of the craftspeople that have left this tradition refused to pass it on or spent their lives wrapped in it but carry with them a sense of detachment and pain from no longer having a bond with the craft. While these statements may seem fanciful and romantic, the problem that is plaguing the carpet weaving craft in Pakistan is its removal from the beauty of design/creation to the consumerist attachment that now plagues it. Eccentric fashion editor and columnist Diana Vreeland once commented in a 1985 interview; to paraphrase that humans love beautiful things and have wanted to be around them and make them, she also added in her documentary that that beauty was not solely about physical perfection, but also about embracing individuality, passion,

and a unique point of view. What Ms. Vreeland says is vital for understanding carpet craft heritage.

Beauty is something human beings are and will always be attracted to, and in an ideal world we could create for the sake of it. However, consumerism often no longer allows such a model to thrive. Pakistani carpets have the rich history and encompass ingenuity, value and beauty to become a staple item of timelessness within the country and across international boundaries. It is rare to see something that incorporates such complex ideology and intricate technique, and hidden symbolism, yet tells something so simple connected to humanity's love for nature and life. These fine carpets are objects that allow us to surround ourselves with the divine beauty of creation. It is what fuels the artisans, the soul, memories and the associations with the land and her people. The complexity of the human, soul and art connection is evident in the heritage of the Pakistani carpet, and its remarkable construction is worth preserving and protecting.

As a textile practitioner and design instructor, my solution also comprises of an applied practice approach, I do think the best way to preserve the authenticity of a craft and in this case carpet weaving is to re-integrate the traditional ideals of craft identity. By this I mean, the craft should be re-examined and practiced in a way that supports the local heritage, need of the craft and craftspeople in Pakistan. In our obsession with modernizing society and ourselves, fueled by the western philosophy concerning what is considered 'progress', we put pressure on the emerging and existing artists, designers, students, and businesses to align with what would be more successful in terms of capital and would be successful in western markets. However, in the process of doing so, we have sidelined our craft and in turn our understanding of ourselves as people who supported, communicated and literally lived in the ideals that we used to define our society and ourselves.

A craft is a way of supporting your identity, and the greater identity is the collective identity. It is in my opinion important to understand and create a world that is built on beauty, philosophy and mysticism, if we are in touch with the world around us through what we make and what we see are we truly understanding our own selves and more secure individually and collectively. As a Pakistani educator and an artist- a woman from the ‘third world’ tied with the threads of tradition, post-colonialism, gender, politics and expectations weighed against the labels I am given (regionally and beyond) I believe in the importance of responding to your immediate environment by observing what is needed not what is expected and understanding the context that defines us culturally. Perhaps it is my personal bias, but I believe that the fundamentals of spirituality that are underlying in design/art, that have translated and adapted into our regional craft can help us understand a world beyond orthodoxy- one that is built on collective social creation and empathy.

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