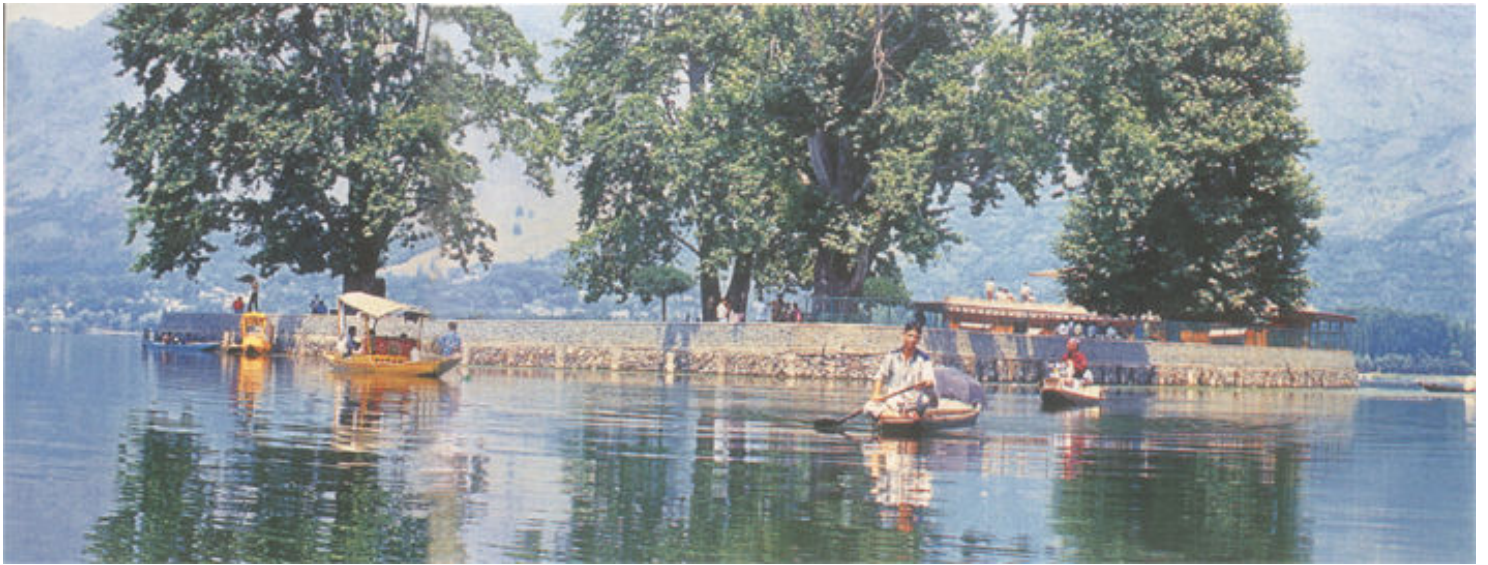


Text and photographs by Gopika Nath

THREADS OF THE VALLEY

A first person account of a designer's interaction with chain stitch embroiderers of Kashmir at a two-week workshop





Clockwise from facing page far left: A scarf embroidered at the workshop; the Dal lake; an embroider works on a design

WHENEVER I HAVE the opportunity to work in the crafts sector, I come away feeling privileged to have been an active part of a tremendously rich heritage and its continuance. Imagine the wonder then of doing such work in Kashmir! And that too when Delhi temperatures were soaring at 45 degree C.

The crafts in Kashmir have developed over hundreds of years through four different periods of political rule by the Mughals, the Afghans, the Sikhs and the Dogras successively. Each culture

brought its own unique contribution to the crafts as well as the development of the region.

The prospect of visiting Kashmir after almost 30 years was exciting though the precarious nature of the current situation did bring a certain trepidation into play. At the closing of the two-week workshop which I had gone to conduct for the J&K Handicraft (S&E) Corporation, the artisans presented me with a cloth 'chinar leaf' on which they had embroidered, in chain stitch, all



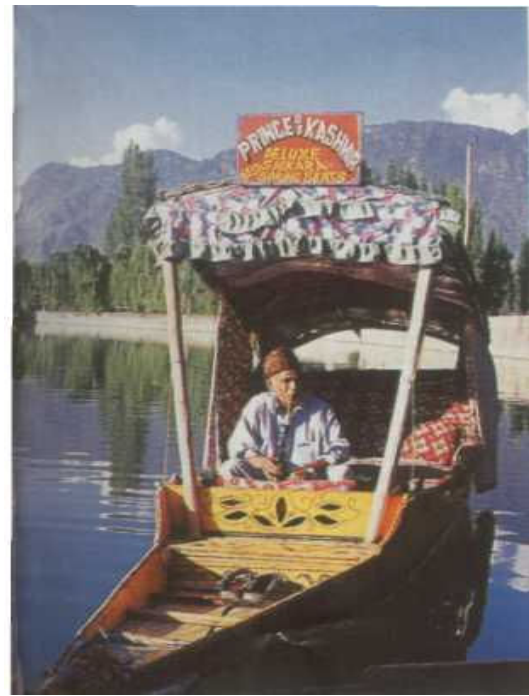
Above: A cushion worked in chain stitch

their names and mine, along with all the details of the workshop. It wasn't the most beautiful piece of work I had seen emerge from their hands but the beauty of their gesture will always remain with me. This is the essence of Kashmir. Perhaps the people are able to keep their spirit alive despite the tough circumstances because they are so close to nature in all its magnificence.

Chain stitch, crewel and *ari* work are the different names given to the chain stitch embroidery done all over the country using the awl or hook. Originating from the humble cobbler's tool-kit, this instrument has created some of the finest embroideries the world has ever seen.

CHAIN STITCH from Kashmir is unlike its counterpart in any other part of the country. Traditional Kashmiri chain stitch designs are usually done in floral and paisley motifs. Years of working the *ari* over these have left the craftsmen so habituated to the form that straight lines become curved and leaves often become *ambis* without their even realising it.

The distinctive look of their work, I noted, is almost entirely because of the yarn they use. For silk or woollen fabrics, they use staple cotton in two or three ply and for cushion covers and rugs they generally work with rayon filament in multiple ply. This is locally referred to as 'silk', reflecting the silken nature of the yarn but is misleading in terms of the fibre.



Clockwise from top:
A shikara at the Dal; a
chain stitch embroidered
top; an embroider at the
workshop

Craft

THREADS OF THE VAL



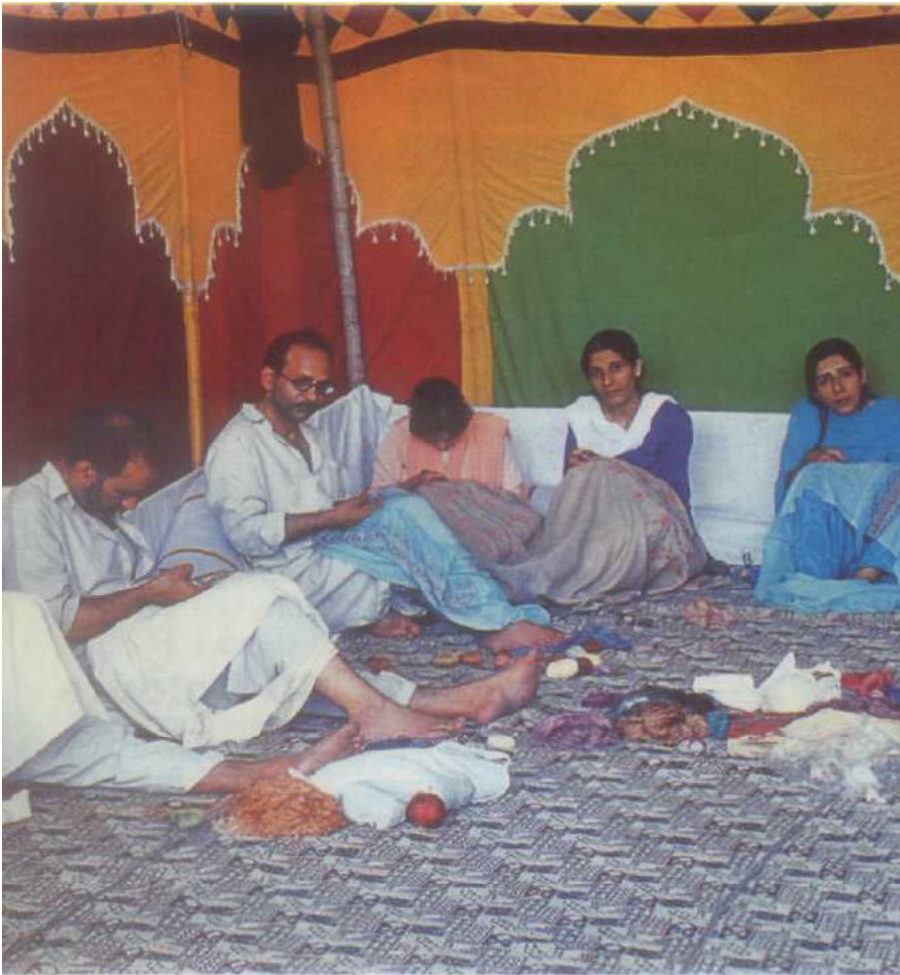
In Delhi, the *ari* workers use a fine viscose yarn which enables them to do some delicate work. The Kashmiris cannot parallel this. The thickness of the yarn makes it impossible to aspire for intricate details but I have to confess that this in itself has a charm of its own.

THIS PROJECT was part of a comprehensive package for employment, development, relief and security, with a thrust on generation of new employment opportunities for the youth of Jammu and Kashmir. In the form of a design and technology upgradation workshop, the purpose or the design brief given to us by

the Development Commissioner of Handicrafts, Delhi, was to explore the potential of existing crafts in ways to generate enhanced value through design innovation and upgradation of skills.

Jalakdozi is the native name of chain stitch in Kashmir. I chose to work with this rather than the more delicate *Sozni*, done by the needle, on expensive Pashmina shawls, essentially because I am fascinated by the stitch itself. In Kashmir particularly, they use it to fill the ground areas of carpets and cushions in a circular direction which creates a very rich texture. During this workshop I managed to persuade them to make a cushion cover

Clockwise from top:
Embroiderers look at their work; a scarf worked along Gopika Nath's design brief; a cushion at the workshop



Above: Embroiderers gather in a group at the workshop work

Right: A top worked with intricate Kashmiri embroidery



using the finer cotton thread as opposed to rayon or wool, which is the norm, and the eventual piece is a dream come true.

ABDUL RASHI WANI, the craftsman who embroidered this piece, worked with intense concentration and patience. He loved having his photograph taken so to keep him happy, I took numerous photographs of this work in progress. This process enabled me to study the careful workmanship and I had the pleasure of seeing up-close, a white piece of fabric literally become a jewel.

To me, in this age of computers where a creative idea can be manifested at a

singular command in a manner of seconds or less, handwork presents us with a unique quality where the process of working is like some deep meditation. Today we tend to value things primarily for the place they have in our lives merely on material and/or decorative terms. I think it would be a fitting tribute to the craftsmen of our country if we could see the beauty they created with their hands as a reflection of the beauty within a human being and the 'product' all the more precious because it does not defy the bounds of time and space, but painstakingly transcends them, leaving a trail of beautiful stitches and colours for us to adorn our lives with. ❏