

Life Of An Artisan..... The Generation Dying Away

Abstract

Not much has ever been written about the artisans of Lahore nor the occupants of the city were interested in documenting their works. The visual evidence, located with great difficulty, revealed that Lahore has been thriving with artistic activities since centuries. Apart from artefacts associated to the city, an important source of information is the innumerable descendents of these artisans.

Most of the information in the current research is based on the interviews of the family members who were linked to art, architecture and crafts.¹ Many of them still reside in the walled city of Lahore, inside Mochi Darwaaza, Mori Darwaaza, Bhati Darwaaza, Lohari Darwaaza etc. But some have shifted outside the walled city, living in Shad Bagh, Mughalpura, Wasan Pura and other areas. During the research an interesting fact was revealed that some of the children of those great masters are pursuing art related professions even today.

The artisan discussed in the paper is Imam Din who was active in the 20th century. He belonged to a family who had been practicing arts since centuries. Their creations show the true trends of those Lahori artists whose families continued with the arts and crafts traditions even in the worst of times.

Artists of the Soil

It was a trend of the Subcontinent that many families used to be active in different arts and crafts and they carried on the legacy for hundreds of years. Sons adopted the profession of their fathers and continued the *Larhi* i.e. chain system. Famous Astrolabe makers of Lahore are a classic example in this regard.² Innumerable families were associated with different professions. However it is very rare that we come across a family that has some record about their forefathers and if they do, it is even rarer to find the artefacts produced by their ancestors as well. During present research, information and artefacts, both were discovered.

Interviews of many artists of Lahore revealed that it was the trend of many families, related to the constructional procedure of the buildings that they were also associated to the profession of painting, Kashi Kari, carpentry etc. It was ideal for a nobleman to hire a group or a family of masons/craftsmen/artists who would not only construct the *Haveli* or palace but later on decorate it as well. Having paintings on the walls or elaborately carved wooden doors and balconies in the *Havelis* was a routine that's why those families flourished which had a *Naqqash* (Illuminators), carpenters, painters and masons under one roof. Usually the families divided their members to different professions as a result carpenters, masons, *Naqqash*, sculptors all existed in one house. Prominent among these

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families is the Chughtai family who had architects (Ahmad Bakhsh Lahori), illuminators (Miran Bakhsh) and painters (Abdul Rahman Chughtai).

One such family was discovered in the city of Lahore who were artists/craftsmen of a high merit. By caste they are Mughals, descendants of the great rulers of India. Later on their forefathers were associated with Maharaja Ranjit Singh's *Darbar* and almost every member was related to some artistic skill. This is Imam Din family and they were primarily carpenters. Their ancestors enjoyed art patronage of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's period, then they faced decline under the British Raj, but like true survivors, joined other related fields of arts like printing, photography, theatre etc. Even in those troubled periods they were able to produce good painters.

They could trace back their ancestors till 17th century when they owned some land in an area adjacent to Lahore called Khud Pur in Sharaqpur. The oldest name remembered is Mian Lakha, who apart from farming, also worked as a carpenter.



Plate A.

(Plate A)

Soon his son Mian Saudagar joined him. They became such experts in their work that they shifted to Lahore and started living inside Shah Alami *Darwaaza* near *Sunehri Masjid* in *Muhallah Sondhian*. Here the sons and grandsons of Mian Lakha thrived because their *Tikai* work and carved floral pattern in Kashmiri style were bringing customers from every walk of life. Arrival in the city polished their technique and skill and they were one of the best woodcarving families of Lahore.



Late Haji Muhammad Bashir

Haji Muhammad Bashir, (**Fig. 1**) a descendent of the family informed in one of his detailed interviews that his family members made many balconies and doors of the walled city of Lahore. They specialized in making wooden arches with the most delicate designs that was the hallmark of Lahori woodwork since Ghaznavide Period.³

All the sons of Mian Saudagar were either carpenters or *Naqqash* (Illuminators) of high merit. A few were *Maimars* (masons/architects) including his elder son Fazal Din, a specialist in cut brickwork. But the most brilliant of them all was Imam Din.



Late Imam Din

(Fig. 2) Born in 1846, he joined the profession at a very young age and was soon declared an expert in *Tikai* work. Furniture made by him was always in demand and if an ordinary bed was sold for one hundred rupees, a bed from Imam Din's workshop was sold for three hundred rupees because of its high standard of workmanship. He died in 1969 at the ripe age of one hundred and fifteen years.

Haji Bashir revealed another interesting fact that the brother of Imam Din's wife, Ghulam Muhammad was a good painter of Lahore. Ahmad Baksh Yakdil did mention a painter of Lahore by the name of Ghulam Muhammad who was active in 1847.⁴ There is quite a possibility that he wrote about Imam Din's brother-in-law because there are many examples when elder brothers were far older than their younger sisters due to multiple marriages of their fathers.

Haji Bashir was very close to his grandfather Imam Din who used to tell him lots of stories about his family and old Lahore, that in 19th century, much of the Muslim population of the city, were either painters, *Naqqash* (Illuminators) or masons. Most of them were completely illiterate but brilliant in creative and manual work. This is confirmed by other senior painters as well that Muslims were great artists but they were mostly uneducated and just followed what their highly accomplished forefathers had been doing. Mainly it was due to the fact that the arrival of the British and change of the official language from Persian to English discouraged the local Muslims so much that they preferred to stay at home and teach their youngsters their family professions instead of sending them to British educational institutions.

Haji Bashir's family had very close relationship with the late 19th century contractor Sultan Muhammad *Thakedar*.⁵ Since Sultan Muhammad *Thakedar* had no child of his own, he adopted Haji Bashir's maternal grandfather (*Nana*) Mahmood Din who later on joined Railway Department. Mahmood Din's father was also a painter but unfortunately no one knows his name. A very different aspect of the Saudagar family is that one of Imam Din's cousins was the father of Ghazi Ilam Din Shaheed, a famous martyr of Lahore. They all used to live in the same *Muhallah Sondhian*. Ghazi Ilam Din Shaheed and Abdul Ghani (Haji Bashir's father) were of the same age. Ilam Din used to work in a shop of hardware in the famous bazaar of Anarkali owned by Mian Ramzan who later became Haji Bashir's father-in-law.⁶ An attractive field for the children of the old artists and craftsmen was photography and printing. Many youngsters were encouraged to join these professions because the traditional arts and crafts were losing their importance in the late 19th and early 20th century. Haji Bashir's younger brother Nazir Ahmad was also one of them and he became block maker and cameraman in a printing press.

Nazir Ahmad said in one of his interviews that he did not go to any institution but learned from different *Ustads* of Lahore. He revealed a very sad reality of that time that many *Ustads* treated their young apprentices as slaves, forcing them to do household chores. They were not taught properly because the *Ustad* did not want his student to become his rival. Most of the apprentices used to runaway and those who were really keen to learn spent year after year filling the tobacco in their *Ustad's Huqqah Chilam* (smoking pipe). This was a routine practice. By the end of the 19th century, most of these techniques and methods

were lost because the artists passed away without transferring them to any one. Seniors tried not to share their knowledge and experience and this was the attitude of the whole society. Muhammad Latif gives one such example when he writes, “With regard to Kashi work at Lahore, it may be mentioned here that there lived in 1876, in that town, an artist in the work named Muhammad Bakhsh. He was ninety-seven years of age and with him the secret of Kashi work probably died, for he steadily refused to take pupils.”⁷

Nazir Ahmad was very lucky in this regard because he learned from a very accomplished painter Mairaj Din who was Qamar Din’s brother. Mairaj Din was also a highly skilled block maker and taught his students all that he knew. Later Nazir Ahmad joined Packages, a prestigious printing company of Pakistan and spent all his life working there. Now he is living a very quiet, retired life in Lahore. Another fact revealed by Haji Nazir about his family was that they were sculptors also and their forefathers were famous for their sculptures in Lahore and its vicinity. Haji Bashir’s other brother Munir Ahmad completed his studies from National College of Art in early 1959 and spent his life pursuing the profession of his family.

Haji Bashir’s eldest son Dilshad Farooq worked as a carpenter and younger son Shahid Parvaiz has an office in Urdu Bazaar where he works as a designer. Some other members are also involved in different artistic activities but their work lacks the mastery of their ancestors. Haji Bashir and Shahid Parvaiz shared with me whatever was left of their forefathers.



Documents at Haji Bashir’s House

(Fig. 3) Tools, tracings of old designs that were copied by the later generations and some drawings of British style furniture that were made in the early 20th century, are still with the family. Shahid Parvaiz showed a wooden carved piece and a *Payah* (support of a table or bed) that was made by his great grandfather Imam Din.

These are the sad memories of a glorious past of an important artist/craftsman family of Lahore. In fact Haji Bashir promised to show a few surviving doors and windows that he knew were made by his forefathers in the walled city but unfortunately he passed away on 26th August 2007. Now, nobody in the family knows the location of those balconies because they left their ancestral home in 1950, bought a nine room bungalow in Wasan Pura for six thousands three hundred rupees, which was previously owned by Khurshid Begum, famous actress of Lahore.

In many historical books there is a mentioning of families of the artists and artisans that practiced but identification of an exact family of such pattern is very rare. This one particular family that I discovered is one of the rare examples in this regard and a good addition to the existing body of knowledge and I hope the specimen of this research will prove to be a precedent for the future researchers.

Notes and References

- ¹ All these people were generous enough to spare their time for long and interrogative interviews. They also shared whatever small evidence they had of the art of their forefathers. But most of the time the collections were either taken away by some clever art dealer or destroyed due to the damp or termite.
- ² For details see Introduction Part III of thesis '*Lahore School of Painting in the 19th Century*' (Punjab University 2011)
- ³ For details see "Wooden Doors of Lahore". Introduction Part II. of thesis '*Lahore School of Painting in the 19th Century*' (Punjab University 2011)
- ⁴ Abdul Rahman Chughtai, *Lahore Ka Dabistan i Musawwari* (Lahore: Chughtai Museum Trust 1979), 38.
- ⁵ A Kashmiri by origin, Sultan Muhammad *Thakadar* supplied bricks for different buildings in the late 19th and early 20th century. The main source of supply was the old buildings of the city and he has been declared responsible for the destruction of innumerable ancient monuments of Lahore.
- ⁶ Interview Haji Bashir Din, June 2015
- ⁷ R. P. Srivastava, *Punjab Painting* (New Delhi: Hans Raj Gupta & Sons 1983), 66.