



## 'Papier Mache' Kashmir's window to outside world

Col Satish Singh Lalotra

*'There is no wrong way to make pretty things'----*  
Anonymous.

Art and the craftsmanship of an individual can't be bound in any manner and has to be given an unfettered genius it deserves to flourish far and wide in order to take out the best out of an artist. It calls for an unqualified attempt on the part of all concerned to promote the art in its varied forms, if at all it has to make its presence felt far and wide. In fact art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known. Kashmir's Papiermache' is one such art form which has developed from generation to generation adapting to the ever changing times. Unfortunately, there are more exceptions to this than there are rules in the recent times. The niche art forms are the life and blood of art form all over the world and Kashmir's papiermache is no exception. The Kashmir papiermache art is a beautiful way of brightening up your home and filling it with objects that will spark delight and discussion. 'Papiermache' art was first introduced in India in the 14th century by the Persian (Iranian) mystic 'Mir Syed Ali Hamdani. The mystic was visiting Kashmir region from Persia and brought skill artisans and craftsmen along with him. The Persian method of making papiermache melded with similar art forms from central Asia and lo, behold a unique art form was born --- Kashmir papiermache'.

Over time the Kashmir artisans added their own flourish and flavor to this art form bringing to their creations from all over the world. My interest in this art form got a shot in the arm during my not so frequent visits to the valley /Pahalgam in the mid-80s as also after a long hiatus in the mid-1990s and early 2000. I was witness to its growth by leaps and bounds before the scourge of militancy hit the area with full fury; and saw how the Kashmir papiermache shops eagerly catered to a wide horde of tourist influx that made a hard bargain in their various transactions. For the uninitiated there are two important aspects to this unique form - 'Sakhsazi' and the 'Naquashi'. The first step Sakhsazi involves making the foundation of the papiermache or object with the paper pulp, while 'Naquashi' is the final step of painting and decoration. In the Sakhsazi stage of making a Kashmiri papiermache item, the paper pulp is soaked in water for 3 to 4 days and then put in a stone mortar and ground so that all of the paper is uniform in its consistency. The pulp gets left in the sun for drying before getting mixed with 'atji', a kind of rice glue. A mould made of clay or wood allows the artist to shape the paper and glue mixture around it. The paper is taken off the mould before it is completely dry and then shaped and lacquered to make the outside smooth.

The item having gone through above smoothening process is further applied a thin layer of butter paper which protects the outside and keeps the outer layer of paint from cracking off the finished product. 'Sakhsazi' as an art form was conceived about 700 years ago and is still the cynosure of the artisans of Kashmir. Despite its fine



form, 'Sakhsazi' is losing its sheen among its popular people and going down the popularity graph. The prime reason for this is because of the political situation in the valley which always remains on the edge. Due to almost nil incentives coming their way, either from local dispensations over the years or the lack of connoisseurs of this great art the workshops of the artisans are in a dilapidated state. As brought earlier, since Kashmir papiermache is a combination of Sakhsazi and Naquashi techniques, with the artisans equally committed to their profession the absence of any incentives has got this team split with most of them working either from their homes or work stations. Adding to their woes is the advent of new technologies and manufacturing techniques thereby sounding a death knell for the traditional art form. The econom-

ic viability has taken a massive hit due to machine carving too. The art and its products mostly cater to the premier luxury sector with the price range on the upper side thereby again acting as a dampener for the masses to indulge in its purchase. Lower quality, cheaper machine products have given a tough challenge to the sector, with artisans struggling to keep the sector going.

Thus the market forces /dynamics instead of helping the artisans have in fact acted as a deterrent. Though the Kashmiri papiermache art is one of the oldest in India, it does not command the type of media attention which it deserves from various media barons and industry sources either in the past or even during the present times. Media blitzkrieg catapults any art form into the public gaze and increases the visibility quotient of an item thereby dou-

bling its market value which unfortunately has not happened over here. This obscurity has cut into the price tagging of the items leading to a situation where they have remained stagnant for the last 20 years or so without showing any forward movement. Correspondingly the price inflation has made the raw material very prohibitive in cost thereby tossing the artisans and their calculus into a tail spin. Coming to the Naquashi stage in the overall buildup of an item, it is sufficient to know that this is the final stage of making a papiermache object. It involves of making a base coat of paint and applying to the item. Thereafter the artisan makes the designs of his choice by hand on the outside of the item, which means no item of Kashmir papiermache is same. This also proves that on an item of Kashmir papiermache, the artisan has carved out his personality, mood and professional acumen all combined for everyone to see and appreciate.

Traditional artists often use colours derived from minerals, organic or vegetable bases with common themes appearing on these objects to include Kashmiri symbols like almonds and chinar leaf with its 5 pointed corners. This ancient form continues to the present day taking a new hue and ideas but intrinsically staying true to its foundations brought to Kashmir by Mir Syed Ali Hamdani. Coming Back to the crucial question of saving this precious art form falling into the abyss of oblivion and resurrecting it to its past glory; changed business ethics, marketing strategy and finance has made it mandatory that this unique art form be connected to all relevant national and international art and culture platforms for its better visibility and worldwide reach. Despite intervention by the way of introduction of new and newer designs and figuring out the limitations of its craftsmen, the need of the hour is to tackle this problem in a more professional and humane manner. To take it to a global level this art form will require oodles of will power, good intention, and entrepreneurship from all and sundry to include artisans, the connoisseurs of this art, the local government of the day as well as the Central Government at New Delhi. Though this art form figures in the GI-TAG of intellectual property rights as enunciated by the GOI to take it to the next higher level but linking it to institutes like the 'India heritage walks' will infuse it with the much deprived oxygen it needs at this stage. The idea is to form some sort of collective organization to band together all these disparate groups of Kashmir artisans and craftsmen, strengthen them by design intervention and marketing exposure to push the boundaries of this craft far and wide. It is never too late to breathe an air of optimism, hope and expectancy into the Kashmiri papiermache art by the stake holders, both at the center and at the UT level. In the past several years, the unprecedented floods, abrogation of article 370, which gave special status to J&K, the COVID-19 pandemic lock down have all combined to break the back of this art form. The only viable solution in the present times is to dispel the gloom cast by the above situations by hand holding the art form and its artisans with a genuine intention.

(The writer is a retired army officer)

## Asha Parekh The Silver Jubilee queen

*Since the Dadasaheb Phalke Award was instituted 68 years ago, only seven Indian women from Indian cinema have been bestowed with the award. Asha Parekh happens to be only the seventh one. Shoma A. Chatterji profiles one of the most successful heroines of Hindi films who received the honour from President Droupadi Murmu on Sept 30.*

Asha Parekh ruled the Hindi screen much before the term 'Bollywood' was even conceived with one hit film after another. And to think that she was rejected by director Vijay Bhatt for her first film role in the lead role for Goonj Uthi Shehnai on grounds that she did not have a screen presence. She was heartbroken. But soon after, like a fairy tale guardian, Sasadhar Mukherjee, his brother Subrata Mukherjee along with writer-director Nasir Hussain picked her for Dil Deke Dekho (1959), an instant box office hit. She never looked back from then on. A star was born.

"They had called Sadhana and me for the screen test but Sadhana failed to turn up for the audition and it turned out to be lucky for me. Sadhana got her break in another film under the same unit called Love in Simla which was also a hit. Shami Kapoor, my first hero became my favourite hero and friend. We acted in three more films. Among these, my favourite remains Vijay Anand-directed Teesri Manzil (1966) which gave me the opportunity of showing off my dancing skills. I loved Vijayji's approach to direction and the way he handled his technical crew and his actors," said Parekh in a recent interview.

Asha Parekh was the only child of her parents, her mother being a Bohra Muslim and her father a Hindu Gujarati. Though she projected as an impish, tomboyish heroine in her hit films like Ziddi, Jab Pyar Kisise Hota Hai (1961), Love in Tokyo, Phir Wohi Dil Laya Hoon (1963) she seamlessly and effectively changed tracks when certain roles and directors demanded her to and did extremely well in these films too. Among these, the names that easily come to mind are - Kati Patang, Main Tulsi Tere Aangan Ki, Caravan, Chhaya, Baharon Ke Sapne, Do Badan (1966).

She won the Filmfare Best Actress Award for her role in Kati Patang, produced and directed by Shakti Samanta. In the film she played the role of a sober, pretty young woman who was forced to step into the shoes of a widow with a child though she was single and was not a mother. This was opposite Rajesh Khanna as the hero which was not only a very big box office hit but the songs of which are popular to this day.

Asha Parekh acted in 95 films, produced a few, mainly in Gujarati but stopped some time after she had graduated to character roles and so on and switched to

television to produce her own programmes.

Parekh was bestowed the Gujarat State Award for Best Actress for her first Gujarati film Akhand Saubhagyavati (1963). Her Life Achievement Award from Filmfare came in 2002. Among other Lifetime Achievement Awards, are the Kalakar Award in 2004, the International Indian Film Academy Awards in 2006, the Pune International Film Festival Award in 2007 and the Ninth Annual Bollywood Award in Long Island, New York in 2007. She also received the Living Legend Award from the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry.

A notable film in which she played a character different from her routine song-dance-thriller-comic genre is Kaalia (1981). This was the only film in which she shared screen space with Amitabh Bachchan. But she calls these roles belonging to an "awkward phase" of her career.

So she stopped acting in films, and her friends recommended that she become a television director. She took their advice and became a television director in the early 1990s with the Gujarati serial Jyoti. She formed a production company, Akruiti, and produced serials like Palash ke Phool, Baaje Payal, Kora Kagaz and a comedy, Dal Mein Kaala. She was the president of the Cine Artistes' Association from 1994 to 2000.

In her memoirs Hit Girl, co-authored with Khalid Mohammed published in 2017, Parekh openly admits to her long relationship with her director Nasir Hussain but they could not marry because "he was already married with two growing children and both of us were not keen to break a family. I was also quite close to his wife whose death broke Nasir completely and he passed away a year later, in 2002."

Her regret was that the hospital she established for the poor was shut down. She said with a sigh, "This is not the first time we have had to close down the hospital. It had been closed in 2007. Now, in 2017, ten years later, it looks like it is to be taken over by a hospital chain. My hospital will now be turned into a 5-star health facility. That means the facilities will no longer be available to the poor and the underprivileged. Poor people die due to medical negligence. The government hospitals are overcrowded and understaffed. That's why I ran this no-profit hospital for the poor. It was my parents' dream that I tend to the poor. Alas, the dream has ended." This has since been rechristened BCJ Hospital and Asha Parekh Research Centre.

Among her large repertoire of films, my personal favourites are Do Badan (1966), Chirag (1969) Kati Patang (1970), Pagla Kahin Ka (1970) and Main Tulsi Tere Aangan Ki (1978) where her main co-actor was none other than Nutan. Her favourite among the songs picturised on her is Jaaiye aap kahan jaayenge from the film Mere Sanam (1965).

(The author is an award winning film critic) (TWF)

