



Jandi Art

At the crossroads

A Study by:
Education Development & Research Cell
The Sindh Education Foundation

The province of Sindh in Pakistan is famous for its rich culture and diverse crafts. Amongst the numerous traditional forms of art, Jandi (lacquer work on wood) has been of particular identification for the area and a source of livelihood and sustenance for artisans and their families for many years. The Sindh Education Foundation (SEF), a semi-autonomous organization, committed to endorsing the richness of indigenous knowledge and advocating the necessity of preserving and promoting it, studied Jandi art and artisans living in Hala in order to get an insight into the history of the art, its process of production and to highlight the artisans' experiences and concerns.

Although the practice of lacquering objects originated 4000 years ago, in Asia region Jandi work can be traced back to the dynasty periods of India and China¹. Early records of Sindh indicate its presence since the 14th century Samma period². At the time, usage of Jandi was utilitarian as lacquer was applied to add sturdiness to wooden objects in daily use. Religious leaders held lacquered staffs during prayers and traders measured grain in wooden pots with lacquer work on them. In addition, lacquer was used to decorate boxes and swings for royalty and other vessels and containers for common household use.

Over time, the art improved and matured through encouragement and support provided by various rulers. It reached its apex during the 18th century under the Kalhora dynasty when Jandi found its present home in Hala, in the district of Matiari. The Khanote area (in Hala) became the main art centre probably because Bihan trees (botanical name) whose wood is used in jandi were found in abundance in the region.



Bihan Trees

1. Source: Lacquer Arts of Asia (Asian Art Mall - www.asianartmall.com/articlelacquer.htm)
2. Source: www.geocities.com/syndicateint/history.html

It is commonly claimed that the Vighamal tribe pioneered the art in the area in the early 18th century; Mir Mohammad Khan Kalhoro brought craftsmen from Balochistan³ and settled them in Khanote. After 1975, with the establishment of an artisan colony in Bhit Shah in the Hala Tehsil, many Vighamals, besides other artisan communities migrated and settled near the shrine of the Sufi saint, Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai. The number of families doing jandi work in Bhit Shah and Khanote numbers around fifty. While the majority of them belong to the Vighamal clan, generations of artisans of the Bhutto, Kumbrani and Wadha tribes too are living in this area.

Today old Hala, Khanote and Bhit Shah engage artisans in the production of a variety of items including furniture, decorative pieces, souvenirs, domestic utensils and toys that are sold in the local markets of Hala and Hyderabad and exported as well. Other than Hala, jandi work is done in Luqman and Kashmir in the upper Sindh region.



3. Vighamal, Khamiso Khan, 'Jandi Jo Hunr' In Dr. Nawaz Ali Shauq (ed), *Sindh Ja Hunr* (Department of Culture & Tourism, Government of Sindh, 1990), pp. 545

The process of creating jandi engages both men and women. At first the wood is chiseled in keeping with design specifications. Wood obtained from the Bihan tree is preferred owing to its resilience and fine quality. Once cut and shaped, the wood is coated with indigenously prepared herbal coloring material (lacquer) to obtain a base for designed objects. Lacquer for painting the handicraft is prepared by female family members by combining colors with lac, a natural resin obtained from the sap of trees. Sap from the Babool (botanical name) tree gives quality of choice whereas other trees including Sarhein and Beir (botanical name) also serve as sources for the resin. The artisans are discreet when it comes to color preparation and interestingly educate their daughters-in-law in mixing colors but not the daughters who will eventually get married and settle in other households. After it is coated with colors, the decorative patterns are made either by etching the surface superficially or by hatching and inlay work. The final layer is a glaze of sarsun (mustard seed) oil varnished to give the article smoothness, radiance and durability.



The entire process is highly labor-intensive and requires both dexterity and patience. Skills are transmitted from one generation to the next through informal learning that takes place while children grow up in the work environment participating in activities alongside their elders. Early familiarization with the art enables a child to learn and acquire refined skills by the time he formally adopts the profession. However, despite the fact that the learning of the skill continues within a family, those currently associated with Jandi realize that the profession does



not provide gainful employment in the long run. The low financial returns for the arduous labor have caused a general lack of interest in successive generations of younger artisans and continue to discourage new persons from acquiring the line of work.

Several factors that threaten the craft and the artisan's livelihood have been cited. The most critical is the paucity of basic raw materials. Until the early 20th century, artisans in Hala obtained Bihan wood at low cost from the nearby forest of Rajri Belo. The forest hit by widespread deforestation has vanished completely. Environmental degradation has directly affected the economy of local artisans who are now forced to buy wood from upper Sindh at a high premium. The freshly cut wood is wet and has to be dried in cool shade for 3 to 12 months in order for it to be ready for use. Since artisans have neither funds nor the space to dry such quantities in bulk,

they do not buy from the open market at competitive rates. Instead as required, retailers supply them with dried wood, the price of which varies between Rs. 95 to 120 per maund (40 kg). The cost is treated as a loan and adjusted in the final price of the product. Very rarely other types of wood (Kandi and Babool) are substituted but since they attract termites and



lack sheen, artisans prefer not to use them. Glass or mirrors are often used in place of wood. However due to its brittleness glass is difficult to handle during production. The coat of lacquer disintegrates if the smooth surface of the finished glass item comes in contact with cold water. Glass therefore remains a less favored alternative; glass products are only made to order. Other inputs including powder colors, oil and coal are inexpensive and are readily available but lac that is used in preparing the colors. Lac has been an expensive raw material in the past⁴. Today locally produced lac is available

4. 'Sindh ja Hunr' by Narain Das Malkani, 1927

at Rs. 200 per kg, the bulk of which is discarded during distillation carried out to remove impurities. The eventual cost of production is thus very high. The artisans buy ready raw material imported from India, at the steep rate of Rs. 400 per kilogram, as it costs less.

On average, an artisan earns around Rs. 250 on an item such as a bed which has a high market demand. The retailers who buy from the artisans sell the products at almost double the price. Since the craftsmen are heavily burdened by loans (debt on each family is around Rs. 30 to 40 thousand on average), they have no choice but to sell their crafts to the middle men mafia. If the artisans default in paying back their advances (which happens quite often), they are forced to vend their merchandise at cut-rates to the very retailers who initially lent them money. Low returns perpetuate a vicious cycle of debt and the artisans remain trapped in poor living conditions. In spite of this, some workers view the credit arrangement as beneficial because it comes with assurance of work in future.

The retailers have another story to relate. They complain of the quality of output for which they believe that the craftsmen use substandard raw materials in order to produce at lower price. The attitude of workers is casual and they rarely make deliveries on time. The artisans rationalize these claims on grounds of fluctuating power supply and shortage of resources that limit their productivity.

Thus environmental degradation, low returns, restricted exposure to open markets and monopoly of the middle man contributes to continued uncertainty. The artisans' laid-back attitude has highly marginalized the sustainability of the art and the artisans themselves. The Government of Sindh in the past has tried to create an enabling environment for the artisans especially through the establishment of an artisan colony at Bhit Shah. A community based organization called Jandi Multi-purpose Cooperative Society was formed during the mid 1980s with artisans as members. Although the association is dormant now, the workshop set-up at Bhit Shah is still used as a workplace by various artisans. A non-governmental organization called Artisan Development Welfare Association established in 2004 is presently working for the rights of artisans.

The declining art calls for urgent measures on the part of the Government and civil society. Some key recommendation that include facilitating closer coordination between the artisan community, relevant ministries (Culture, Forestry, Agriculture, SMEDA, etc.) and non-governmental agencies; providing the artisans with easy access to raw materials at competitive prices; wider marketing of handicrafts; promotion of linkages with artisans of other regions for mutual learning; art enrichment through research, product innovations and improved work ethics may well enhance the earning prospects of the artisans. Such concerted efforts by the Government and increased investment for the development of the art are indeed needed to salvage a beautiful cultural practice from extinction.



Sindh Education Foundation

Plot 9, Block 7, Kehkashan, Clifton 5, Karachi-75600 Pakistan.
UAN: (021) 111-424-111. Fax: (021) 9251652
Email: info@sef.org.pk Website: www.sef.org.pk