People, Religion & Culture in Kashmir
Cultural heritage of Kashmir is as multi-dimensional as the variegated backdrop of its physical exuberance which has nursed and inspired it all along. Its sanctity and evergreen stature can be conveniently inferred from the chaste shimmering snow, with its virgin demeanour from top to toe, adorning the towering peaks of its mountainous periphery. Mellowing kisses of the sun endow these summits with a rosy blush lending perennial health to our warbling brooks, roaring waterfalls and sedate and solemn lakes. To crown all, this very nectarine glow has most meaningfully groomed our mental attitude to glean unity amidst seeming diversity.

Culture is always in a flux and ferment. It is a non-stop mental journey with no mile-posts to cool its heels upon. It is, precisely speaking, the cumulative expression of the values enshrined in the heart-beats of the denizens of this Happy Valley. The irresistible stamp of Buddhist compassion, Hindu tolerance and Muslim Zest for life is most unmistakably discernible from the attainments of Kashmiri mind and intellect.
• The cultural significance of Kashmir is great. The people of the region have made great contributions to the world of culture in the form of their oral histories, their native crafts, the written word, science and philosophy. Many people who travel to Kashmir do so specifically to experience the culture and tradition of the area. Throughout the year, various aspects of the culture can be seen at festivals, but the traditions and culture of Kashmir can be seen everyday.

• As a rule, people of the region are welcoming and warm. The region is well known for its hospitality. Homes are often made of wood and are warm and welcoming. The local dress is unique as well, with traditional citizens wearing a woolen robe known as phi ran. These are often heavily embroidered with floral motifs. Culturally, religion plays a large role and several are represented throughout the region.

• The women of Kashmir are well known for their industrious nature. Many have developed business and sell local crafts to tourists. Items such as the traditional earring, pashmina and pendants are popular items for tourists. The woodwork of the region is also well known and offers tourists another opportunity to purchase a little piece of the area.
• Kashmir is an area that is rich in culture. Visiting to the area, a tourist is likely to note the significant impact of several world religions as well as past conquerors of the area. Depending on the region that is visited, a tourist can expect to see a heavy Indian, Chinese or Pakistani influence.

• Kashmir: A Shared Haven for Hindus & Muslims

It may seem that the history and geography of Kashmir and the religious affiliations of its people present an ideal recipe for bitterness and animosity. But it is not so. The Hindus and Muslims of Kashmir have lived in harmony since the 13th century when Islam emerged as a major religion in Kashmir. The Rishi tradition of Kashmiri Hindus and Sufi-Islamic way of life of Kashmiri Muslims not only co-existed, they complemented each other and also created a unique ethnicity in which Hindus and Muslims visited the same shrines and venerated the same saints.
Sufism

Jammu & Kashmir is one place where the roving eyes of travelers come upon one endearing natural vista after another. A visit to this Eden revitalizes everyone - body, mind & soul. Over the centuries saints, seers and followers of all religions have come to Kashmir and left it richer, more spiritually robust. Jammu and Kashmir is dotted by both natural and man made religious pilgrimage sites. Shrines of all faiths exist in a good number here, symbolizing the spiritual and secular character of the Region. Hundreds of Shrines placed in scenic locations all over its hilly landscape.

Origins of Sufism in Kashmir

• Sufism is a mystic tradition within Islam and encompasses a diverse range of beliefs and practices dedicated to divine love and the cultivation of the heart.

• Jammu & Kashmir, the land renowned for its scenic splendours, has been endowed with a rich lineage of Sufi tradition. It is dotted by innumerable Sufi Shrines, which are held in high devotional esteem by people of all religious faiths. These sacred places, today, have become synonyms of religious secularism and brotherhood and symbols of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh unity within Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh.
Kashmir Handicrafts

• From the amusing trinket to a collector's item, you'll find it all in Srinagar. Row upon row of shops filled with handicrafts line the streets. The array is awesome. There are objects to suit every pocket, for the variety within each craft is wide.

• Kashmiri handicrafts are prized everywhere for their exquisite craftsmanship. Kashmir carpets, in both wool and silk with their Persian design, are a lifetime investment and the shoppers’ selection range from the simple to the most extraordinarily intricate patterns handed down the generations.

• Then there are papier-mâché items ranging from jewellery boxes to mirror frames, a range of intricately carved walnut wood furniture and accessories, stone jewellery boxes, beautiful woollen shawls, crewel embroidery on furnishing material sold by the meter and more.
Carpets

• A carpet may well be the most expensive purchase from your trip to Kashmir but it is a lifelong investment. Kashmiri carpets are known the world over for two things - they are handmade, never machine made, and they are always knotted, never tufted. It is extremely instructive to watch a carpet being made - your dealer can probably arrange this for you.

• The yarn used normally is silk, wool or both. Staple carpets are made to fill a slot in the market – customers demand carpets, which are not unlike silk in appearance so as to blend with the decor of their houses. One important difference between silk and staple though is that pure silk is far lighter than staple per unit area.

• Carpet weaving in Kashmir was not originally indigenous but is thought to have come in by way of Persia. Till today, most designs are distinctly Persian with local variations. The knotting of carpet is the most important aspect, determining its durability and value, in addition to its design. Basically, the more knots per square inch, the greater its value and durability. Count the number of knots on the reverse of carpet in any one square inch, and it should be roughly the same as the dealer tells you, give or take 10 knots.
Namdas

• Far less expensive are these colourful floor coverings made from woollen and cotton fibre which have been manually pressed into shape. Prices vary with the percentage of wool – a namda containing 80 per cent wool being more expensive than the one containing 20 per cent wool. Chain-stitch embroidery in woollen and cotton thread is executed on these rugs.
Chain Stitch And Crewel Furnishings

- Because of the high quality of embroidery done on wall hangings and rugs, Kashmiri crewel-work is in great demand throughout the world. Chain stitch, be it in wool, silk or cotton, is done by hook rather than by needle. The hook is referred to as aari, and while maintaining the same quality, hook work covers a much larger area than needle work in the same amount of time.

- All the embroidery is executed on white cotton fabric, pre-shrunk by the manufacturers. The intrinsic worth of each piece lies in the sizes of the stitches and the yarn used.

- Crewel is basically similar to chain stitch. It is also chain stitch done on white background, but here the motifs, mainly stylised flowers, do not cover the entire surface, and the background is not embroidered upon.
Papier Mache

• At first glance, all papier mache objects look roughly the same, but there is a price differential which depends on the quality of the product. However, besides at least three different grades of papier mache, some are actually cardboard or wood! The idea, however, is not to hoodwink the unwary, but to provide a cheaper product with the look of papier mache.

• The designs painted on objects of papier mache are brightly coloured. They vary in artistry and the choice of colours, and it is not difficult to tell a mediocre piece from an excellent one. Gold is used on most objects, either as the only colour, or as a highlight for certain motifs. Besides the finish of the product, it is the quality of gold used which determines the price.
Shawls

- There are three fibres from which Kashmiri shawls are made - wool, pashmina and shahtoosh. The prices of the three cannot be compared - Woollen shawls being within reach of the most modest budget, and Shahtoosh being a one-in-a-lifetime purchase. Shahtoos is a banned commodity nowadays. Woollen shawls are popular because of the embroidery worked on them, which is unique to Kashmir. Both embroidery and the type of wool used bring about differences in the price. Wool woven in Kashmir is known as raffel.

- Many kinds of embroidery are worked on shawls. 'Sozni' (needlework) is generally done in a panel along the sides of the shawl. Motifs, usually abstract designs or stylised paisleys and flowers are worked in one or two, and occasionally three subdued colours. The fineness of the workmanship and the amount of embroidery determines the value of the shawl.

- Pashmina is unmistakable due to its softness. Pashmina yarn is spun from the hair of goat found in the highlands of Ladakh, at 14,000 ft above sea level. It is on pashmina shawls that Kashmir's most exquisite embroidery is executed, sometimes covering the entire surface, earning it the name of 'jamawar'. A Jamawar shawl can, by virtue of the embroidery, increase the value of a shawl threefold.

- A second, less frequently seen weave done only on pashmina, covers the surface with tiny lozenge shaped squares, earning it the delightful name of 'chashm-e-bulbul,' or "eye of the bulbul". As this weave is a masterpiece of the weaver's art, it is normally not embroided upon.
Copper and Silverware & Basketry

- The old city abounds with shops where objects of copper line the walls, the floor and even the ceiling, made generally for the local market. Craftsmen can often be seen engraving objects of household utility - samovars, bowls, plates and trays. Floral, stylised, geometric, leaf and sometimes calligraphic motifs are engraved or embossed on copper and occasionally silver, to cover the entire surface with intricate designs which are then oxidised, so as to stand out better from the background. The work, known as 'naqashi', determines the price of the object, as does the weight.

- Willow rushes that grow plentifully in marshes and lakes in Kashmir are used to make charmingly quaint objects, ranging from shopping baskets and lampshades to tables and chairs, all generally inexpensive. To increase their life span, unvarnished products should be chosen and frequently sprayed with water, particularly in hot, dry climates, to prevent them becoming brittle.
Wood Carving

- Kashmir is the only part of India where the walnut tree grows. Its colour, grains and inherent sheen are unique and unmistakable, and the carving and fret-work that is done on this wood is of a very superior quality.

- Chinar leaves, vine leaves and flowers can be either carved along borders or can fill entire surfaces. The artistry of the carving and its abundance dictates the cost. Trinket boxes and the larger jewellery boxes should have invisible seams. Other walnut wood objects are salad bowls, nut bowls, photo frames, trays and furniture, which range from simple telephone tables to elaborate dining tables with six chairs. In the case of furniture, the price is dictated by the thickness of wood used.
Traditional Folk
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