



Artistic Genesis in Varanasi: Deciphering the Creative Process Behind Soft Stone Jali Craftsmanship and Design

Mr. Praveen Srivastava a,b (Corresponding author),
Mr. Vikas Kumar c

a Research Scholar, Department of Mechanical engineering, Integral University, Lucknow India

b Assistant Professor, Department of Fashion & Lifestyle Accessories, NIFT, Raebareli, India

c Assistant Professor, Department of Fashion & Lifestyle Accessories, NIFT, Raebareli, India_

Abstract: Over the ages, the *jali* craft work on the soft stone in the Varanasi city of Uttar Pradesh has come to be recognised as one of the rich traditions in the domain of stone craft with this wisdom being transferred from one generation to another. The soft stone *jali* work of Varanasi has created its own unique identity not just in the domestic circuit but in the global markets too. While, earlier, this craft was used mostly on temples, sculptures of gods and goddesses, and some other architectural structures; today, it has also evolved to cater to the utility and decor needs of the market. Consequently, the artisans have started creating utility products using the *jali* craft like – pen-stands, paperweights, coasters, tiles, lampstands, trays, bowls, boxes, tabletops, etc.

This paper attempts to study the ideation processes going into the determination of the designs of the products created using the craft. It aims to capture the strategies applied in understanding the design needs of the market in creating the products and the factors that artisans consider before finalising the designs of their crafts. Methodologically, the paper builds on a qualitative approach deploying in-depth focus group discussions (FGDs) and a semi-structured questionnaire, focusing on design inspirations, historical influences, market demands, and product evolution for data collection with the soft stone jaali work artisans of Varanasi. The data collected through these methods would be transcribed and analysed using qualitative data analysis techniques. In terms of contribution, the findings of the paper would underline the recent trends and innovations in the craft from a design perspective which may be seen as a humble addition to the existing knowledge.

Index Terms - Soft stone, craft, *jali* work, Varanasi, Product design, Ideation process etc

I-INTRODUCTION:

Arts and crafts have been integral parts of human culture across the globe. With the socioeconomic developments of human societies, the arts and crafts have also changed over the ages keeping pace with the changing artistic and crafts-related needs. The use of stone for craftwork can be traced to the beginning of human civilisation as it was one of the first materials that the pre-historic people exploited to create usable tools for themselves.

While stone has been a part of various human civilisations worldwide, the tradition of stone carving has been one of the richest in India, with the history of stone carving dating back to the 7th century BC. The skills of stone carving transformed various kinds, with time, passing from one generation to another. Many of the artisans practicing the craft in different parts of India have ancestral linkages to the stone-carving traditions.

When one looks at India in terms of stone-carving work, one finds a profoundly rich legacy of this tradition of craft in several parts of the country like Gwalior, Tikamgarh, and Jabalpur cities of Madhya Pradesh; Durgi, Allagadda, and Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh; Ambaji in Gujarat; Ajmer, Udaipur, Jodhpur, Bikaner, and Jaipur in Rajasthan; Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, etc. Uttar Pradesh has many places where various kinds of stone craftwork are carried out, including – Jhansi, Hamirpur, Mathura, Agra, Varanasi, and others. This paper, particularly, studies the soft-stone jali (lattice) work being carried out by some stone artisans in the holy city of Varanasi.

As a part of the methodology, the paper takes shape based on data collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and a semi-structured questionnaire, focusing on design inspirations, historical influences, market demands, and product evolution for data collection with the soft stone jaali work artisans of Varanasi. The interactions with the thirty (30) artisans took place both in-person and telephonically with the respondent-artisans engaged in the soft stone jali work. The data collected through the interviews, semi-structured questionnaires, and FGDs were transcribed, and then thematic analysis of the transcribed texts was carried out to understand the factors that influenced the designs of the crafts that the artisans created. Some parts of the paper also build on the existing literature and scholarships accessed through the internet in digital forms and a few in the forms of books and articles in physical forms available to the authors.

The paper is structured through five sections in total. While this first section introduces the study through a broad contextual background, the second section underlines the evolution and growth of the soft stone jali work tradition in India, particularly in Varanasi. While the penultimate section discusses the story of how the city of Varanasi emerged as a hub of the soft stone latticework tradition in India, the fourth section explains the study by weaving every section together and summarising the key observations and findings, the final section concludes the Interventions in Soft Stone Jaali Work in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh.

II. Evolution of the soft stone jali work

India's tradition of stone craft is one of the richest in the world. Stones have been the main component of Indian architecture for centuries, and as per the historical evidence, the guilds of masons and stone carvers were created in India as early as the 7th century BC (Mishra). Some of such exquisite architectures carved out of stones in India as testimonies to such rich stone carving culture are – the Konark Temple, Khajuraho Temple, Elephanta Caves, Kailasa Temple of Ellora, Sanchi Stupa, etc.

It is believed that early forms of jali or jaali stone craft or perforated stone work existed in geometrical shapes in the architecture of the buildings constructed through stones which later got transformed into finely carved flora-based designs during the Mughal period. According to Walker (2019), a rudimentary form of stone carved apertures existed in India as early as the 8th century as it is seen in the Kailasa Temple of Maharashtra and Pattadakal Temple in Karnataka, the jali or the net-like work in stone architecture became popular mainly during the Mughal period as a part of the social norms to serve as purdah (veil) at the gender-specific areas of a building. The jali craft work out of stone is an 'epitome' of the Indian subcontinent, which was a smart way, then, to prevent harsh sunlight from entering a space while at the same time allowing the natural light to enter it and maintaining air ventilation to keep a place cool naturally (Walker, 2019).

Similar observations are underlined by Kamath and Daketi (2016), who believe that the jali work in the architecture could be, metaphorically, equated with the branch of a tree, which on the one hand, provides the person underneath its protection from the sun and on the other ensures enough light sometimes forming interesting patterns in through the lattice created by the leaves on the branches. As one looks at the climatic benefits of the jali patterns in the building structures closely, one finds that small holes present in the walls of the buildings enhance the velocity of the air passing through them, leading to deeper and more forceful penetration of even the mild breezes like that of an air-conditioning machine's compressor causing the cooling of the air too (Kamath and Daketi, 2016).

Historically, thus, the lattice screens or the jali between the walls and pillars of the buildings, particularly during the Mughal period, were used for three reasons – cultural, aesthetic, and functional. In cultural terms, the lattice screens created a separated space between the men and women, serving as purdah or veil for the women; aesthetically, the jali screens enhanced the beauty of the structures creating different patterns and designs while in the functional context, it helped the buildings deal with the hot weather effectively by cooling the inside environment through ventilation (Kamath and Daketi, 2016; Joshi, 2018; Walker, 2019; Mohdiwale & Agrawal, 2021; Kasturi, 2012).

During the 1970s in India, the stone carving work started shifting beyond the domain of architecture in constructing buildings and temples as the artisans in some pockets of the country began experimenting with

the craft to create other utility and decorative items out of the stone (Mishra). As time progressed, the craft of stone carving in general and jali (soft stone) started gaining popularity in various parts of the country, with both national and state governments extending support to revive the traditional Indian crafts. Among the many Indian cities where the craft of soft stone jali work saw significant growth, Varanasi of Uttar Pradesh province of India was one.

III. Varanasi as a craft hub

Besides holding immense religious significance, Varanasi has been a center of learning and knowledge creation for almost 3,000 years. It is in this city that Siddhartha Gautama, or Buddha delivered the first sermons to his disciples after attaining enlightenment in Bodhi Gaya. Varanasi has been a home to learning centers from all major religions in India like Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and others. Over the ages, in addition to being the centre of knowledge, philosophy, wisdom, and culture, it also emerged as an important center for developing art and craft.

The presence of the river Ganges led to the flourishing of various cultures as the human settlements developed at this place from primitive times. These cultures' confluence helped Varanasi emerge as a cultural hub, which led to the development of arts and crafts of various forms in this part of the country (Greaves, 1909).

This paper will discuss the soft stone jali work of the Ramnagar area of the 'holy' city that is seen as one of the important crafts to have developed here and become a part of Varanasi's identity. It particularly attempts to understand the ideation processes that go into deciding the designs of the products that are created out of this craft. This study will identify the factors that the artisans take into consideration for finalising the designs of the products.

IV. Artisans' reflections from Ramnagar

Ramnagar is a city with a municipal board in the Varanasi district of Uttar Pradesh. The history of stone craft in Ramnagar city is traced from the ancient period with various dynasties using stone carving in the architectural designs of the forts and buildings during different ages. However, the stones started to acquire the shape of miniature forms and figurines during the 20th century in the northern parts of India, including Varanasi and Ramnagar (Panigrahi, 2017). Over the decades, the craft has been sustained by the artisans of Ramnagar since then, even as they had to sometimes resort to some other means of livelihood to make up for the deficit in the income from this work they witnessed and on.

To understand the present conditions of the soft stone craft in this area, 30 artisans were interviewed as a part of the study. The following discussion around the craft and the design ideation is based on the formal and informal conversations that took place with these artisans during a field visit to the craft cluster of Ramnagar with the accessory design students of the fifth semester of NIFT, Raebareilly. Formal conversations were carried out in the form of interviews using the interview guide prepared for the purpose.

While responding to the question about how is the design of the products created, Rajesh Kumar Pal, who has been engaged with this form of soft stone craftwork for around eight years, said, "We think of the purpose for which the product is being developed. If it is going to be a daily use product in the households, we try to come up with a design that will make it more useful for the customers using it while at the same time also making it look aesthetically attractive." Another artisan who has experience working with this craft for around three decades, Dayaram Karma, aged 45, said that things are changing with time. "Earlier, we would come up with the designs of our products based on our imaginations and by following the senior members of the family and artisan community and sell it to them in the market. However, they were purchased by only those who appreciated the art and craft products and used them mostly for decorative purposes in their houses or workplaces.

Furthermore, those who purchased our crafts were mainly rich people. In the last decade or so, we have seen that even common people have started liking crafts and are buying them. Most of the customers are looking for utility products with a little bit of art and aesthetics component to them", Karma pointed out.

Echoing similar thoughts, Pushpa Gupta, who has been practicing the craft for around two decades, informed that the artisans are trying to understand the market trends and accordingly design their products. "In the past few years, our interaction has increased with the governments, marketing agencies, and vendors, has helped us keep track of the market trends. We have learned to mould our crafts according to the market's demand that we keep an eye on through different stakeholders", the 45-year-old artisan said.

Sunita Devi, who has been in this occupation for around a decade, said that with interventions of the governments to support and promote their work, some new innovating designs and colours have also been incorporated into their work. From the conversations with these artisans, it was found that the governments both at the centre and the state keep organising some workshops and fairs for them to help them interact with some renowned national and international artists and artisans as well as to give them a platform to showcase

and sell their crafts. The workshops, through the deliberations of the relevant stakeholders, offer them the insights to innovate new designs and colour themes in their work that help them find more buyers in the market.

It was divulged from the interactions with the artisans that despite all the innovative practices, patterns, and designs coming into their craft work, even today, most of their work is produced following the traditional designs. While some new designs have become a part of their craft products that are derived from external sources and influences, most of the designs that they create are the result of their imaginations, peer consultations, and deliberations based on their understanding of the craft.

Of late, there has been a massive demand for smoking pipes made from soft stone in the global market. When such demands were put on the artisans of Ramnagar, they brainstormed among themselves and came up with a design that was appreciated by one and all asking for it. "Such new range of products have been included in our collections of jali stone keeping pace with new demands from the market", pointed Shivpujan Jaiswal, a national awardee artisan.

However, one key observation that could be drawn from the discussions with these artisans was that since the craft was brought into existence by their ancestors several decades ago, the most significant source of inspiration for all the designs that they created and products that they developed was nature. "Prakriti mein aaspaas jo cheezein dikhti hain unhi ko dekhkar hum alag-alag cheezein banate hain. Har cheez toh "Prakriti ka hi hissa hai" (We create different things by observing the things we have in the nature around us. Everything is there in nature itself.), articulated Kalik Prasad, a 54-year-old artisan of Ramnagar who has been engaged with this craft for over two decades.

The inspiration that the artisans draw from nature and its flora and fauna is reflected in the items that they create, like - animals - undercut elephants, elephants within elephants (to indicate the conceiving of a mother elephant), crocodile, lion, fish, and other aquatic creatures; birds - peacock, owl; and other creatures of the nature like flowers, trees, etc.

V. Interventions in Soft Stone Jaali Work in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh

The evolution of the soft stone jaali work in Varanasi, particularly in the Ramnagar area, provides a glimpse into the multidimensional influences on the art form. As the craft grew and adapted, three significant interventions can be highlighted: artist intervention, designer intervention, and buyer intervention.

Artist Intervention:

The primary contributors to the development of the jaali work have been the artisans themselves. Their deep-rooted cultural understanding passed down through generations, has been instrumental in maintaining the essence of this craft.

Traditional Influence: Many artisans, as reflected in the words of Kalik Prasad, often derive inspiration from nature. The creations often mimic the flora and fauna, including animals like elephants, birds like peacocks, and elements like flowers and trees.

Modern Adaptation: In response to changing market demands, artisans have shown flexibility and innovation. The crafting of smoking pipes out of soft stone, as pointed out by Shivpujan Jaiswal, showcases their adaptability and the merging of traditional techniques with modern demands.

Designer Intervention:

Designers, with their understanding of contemporary aesthetics and market trends, have played a pivotal role in the evolution of soft stone jaali work.

Workshops and Training: Through various government initiatives, artisans have had the chance to interact with renowned national and international designers. These interactions, usually in the form of workshops, have facilitated the exchange of ideas, enabling artisans to incorporate newer design themes and colors in their craft, as mentioned in the interactions with Sunita Devi.

Blending Tradition with Modernity: Designers assist artisans in marrying rich, traditional motifs with modern aesthetics. This blend ensures that the craft remains relevant and appealing to the current generation.

Buyer Intervention:

The demand and preference of the buyer community have heavily influenced the trajectory of soft stone jaali work.

Shifting Preferences: As Dayaram Karma noted, while earlier the crafts were primarily purchased by the affluent as decorative pieces, in recent years, a broader segment of the population has shown interest. This change necessitates a shift towards more utility-based products that retain an artistic touch.

Market Trends: Interaction with vendors and marketing agencies has kept artisans updated about market trends. Pushpa Gupta highlighted how this market awareness is now crucial in deciding the design and utility of their products.

Global Influence: The global market has opened new avenues for the artisans of Ramnagar. The international demand for specific products, such as the aforementioned smoking pipes, has further broadened the scope of the craft.

In summary, the soft stone jaali work in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, is a testament to the intricate balance of maintaining tradition while adapting to contemporary influences. The triad of artist, designer, and buyer interventions has ensured the craft's survival and relevance, making it an integral part of India's rich tapestry of arts and crafts.

6. Conclusion:

The arts and crafts of all forms that we have around us evolve through time and space. The case of fretwork or jaali work in the Ramnagar city of Varanasi district of Uttar Pradesh is no different. The stone carving craft that was once only confined to the architecture of the buildings found itself reinvented into a popular stone craft form that caught the eyes of not only Indian craft lovers but also became popular globally for its aesthetics and usefulness.

Even as the soft stone craft of Ramnagar has most of its design coming from the traditional methods of working, some innovative and creative designs are making their way to the minds of the artisans through their increasing interactions with various stakeholders like market agents, governments' departments, customers, designers, crafts persons and vendors. The ideation process that goes into designing the products created through this craft mainly involves discussions and consultations with fellow artisans from the community who are more skilled and experienced. However, the artisans are also open to the suggestions and insights that they gather from various workshops and fairs in which they take part.

Even as they draw motivation from their interactions with various stakeholders on various platforms for creating new designs, the primary source of all the designs for these artisans still is mother nature. And this manifests from the most iconic stone craft they have created using the jali craft. This undercut elephant has become their trademark item in the domestic and international markets. Moreover, the profound nature is reflected through other products that are created, like forest scenes, floral patterns, leaves, etc., using inlay techniques.

Declaration

Declaration of Competing Interest The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgment

- The manuscript communication number: - IU/R&D/2025-MCN0001630 has been provided by the Research and Development Cell, Integral University, Lucknow to this article. The authors would like to acknowledge the contribution of F&LA of NIFT, Raebareli, for their support in data collection work during the fieldwork. Their names are – Isha Khare, Sadia Siddiqui, Vasudha Garg, Akriti, Harshit Raj, and Vidisha Thakur.
- References:
- Greaves, E. (1909). Kashi the city illustrious, or Benares. Allahabad: Indian Press.
- Joshi, D. K. (2018). Passive cooling Techniques in Ancient Indian Buildings-A study. International Journal of Architectural Heritage, 1 (2), 11-20.
- Kamath, L. G., & Daketi, S. (2016). Jaalis: A study on aesthetics and functional aspects in built environment. IJSEAS, 2 (2), 98-104.
- Kasturi, M. (2012). The Lost and Small Histories of the City of Patronage: Poor Mughal Pensioners in Colonial Banaras. In M. S. Dodson (Ed.), Banaras: Urban Forms and Cultural Histories (pp. 149-191). New Delhi: Routledge.
- Mishra, P. M. (n.a.) Diagnostic Study of Stone Carving Cluster, Bhubaneswar. UNIDO.
- Mohdiwale, A., & Agrawal, S. (2021). Jaalis: Lattice Screens of India. JETIR, 8 (5), 405-411.
- Panigrahi, A. (2017). Cultural Diversity of Varanasi & Its Impact on Visual Identity of Soft Stone Craft, Ramnagar: A Perspective of Design Led Innovation to Empathize Multiplicity. In T. Gupta, B.

Mistry, & B. S. Gupta (Eds.), A treatise on Recent Trends and Sustainability in Crafts & Design (pp. 51-62). New Delhi: Excel India Publishers.

- Walker, G. F. (2019, April 8). Across Space and Time: The Jaali in Indian Design. Retrieved November 30, 2022, from Paper Planes: <https://www.joinpaperplanes.com/across-space-and-time-the-jaali-in-indian-design>.
- Y. Prakash, B. Charwak, P. Vijaya Kumar, Textile industry in new India: challenges and opportunities, Int. J. Indian Culture Bus. Manage. 21 (4) (2020) 435–458.

