



7 PAPER CRAFTS

Paper came to India with Muslim traders, in the eleventh century C.E. It only slowly and gradually displaced the Corypha palm leaf, the use of which had the sanction of age and religion among the conservative Indian literates who looked with distrust upon this new product...

There is no Sanskrit word for paper. The Chinese word is kog-dz, the 'paper made of the bark of the paper-mulberry tree'. When the Arabs, in the eighth century, learned paper-making from the Chinese, they adopted the Chinese name for their own paper made of linen rags. The Persian word for paper, kaghaz, became kagaj in Hindustani.

By the fourteenth century, paper became popular in India. By the beginning of the seventeenth century paper had displaced Corypha leaves throughout northern India.

– A. F. R. HOERNLE, 'Palm-leaf, Paper and Birch-bark',
Journal of Asiatic Society, Vol. LXIX, 1901

How Paper Is Made

Can you imagine a day in your life without paper? A time when there was no paper or books or when people looked with distrust at it? Originally clay, stone, birch-bark, cloth, aloe bark and palm leaf were some of the materials on which writing was done.

Paper is one of the raw materials for making various types of craft items like folk paintings, illustrated manuscripts, lamp shades, photo-frames and a variety of decorative artefacts.



Factory-made paper



Handmade paper

Factory-made paper is now generally made of tightly packed and pressed fibres of rags, straw, wood, bamboo etc.

Handmade paper is made of pulp (obtained from the bark of certain trees) mixed with glues, and waste cloth from garment manufacturers.



Paper toy, Delhi



Sanjhi, Mathura

Paper toy, Delhi



Paper Toys

Toy-makers, especially those living in cities and industrial areas, make use of materials like paper, cardboard, palm-leaf, clay, bamboo strips, pith, and papier-mâché along with other recycled materials to create toys for children. Discarded items including newspaper, string, rubber bands are recycled to create toys. The toymaker creates a number of different playthings such as kites, puppets, string-manipulated toys, rattles, drums, *damrus* and whistles, moving toys like wind-wheels, animal toys like the jumping snake, mystery boxes, and jack-in-the-box kind of toys. Apart from toy-making, Indian craftsmen also produce a wide variety of decorative and utilitarian items by using plain, white and coloured papers.

Paper Cuts: The craftsmen of Mathura–Brindavan area make intricate paper-cut designs (locally known as *Sanjhi*) depicting various *Krishnalila* scenes. During festivals and marriages the craftsmen make exquisitely beautiful paper-cut flowers and varied colourful items that are used for decoration.

Stencil: A stencil is a piece of paper, plastic or metal which has a design cut out of it. When the stencil is placed on a surface and paint applied over it, the paint goes through the cut out portions and leaves a design on the surface when the stencil is removed.

Use of Paper Craft in Different Societies

- ◆ During Muharram a model of the tomb of Imam Hussain called the Tazia is adorned with floral designs made out of coloured papers.
- ◆ In Poland people use paper-cuts of the 'Tree of Life', guarded by two cocks. The symmetry of the paper-cut technique is said to protect the house and home.
- ◆ The Mexicans use cut-paper flags with designs of planets, plants and a repetitive border with triangles that symbolise male and female energies. While sowing, farmers place a paper man to represent the male spirit of germination, while the harvest is represented as a female doll.
- ◆ In China, peasants have developed paper-cuts into a rich individual popular art. The paper cuts are stuck on walls or window-panes of their cottages and changed frequently. The most popular themes are the 'Tree of Life', cocks and hens, etc. that are all symbols of life.

History of Papier-mâché

Papier-mâché is used to create moulded forms of a variety of objects. It involves ornamentation of smoothened surfaces built up of paper pulp or layers of paper. The most sophisticated form of paper craft appears to be papier-mâché.

The tradition of papier-mâché in Kashmir began in the fifteenth century. While in prison, in the magnificent Central Asian city of Samarkand, a young Kashmiri prince observed the craft of using paper pulp as the base for painted objects. This prince soon became King Zain-ul-Abidin and invited accomplished artists and craftsmen from Central Asia to his court to make papier-mâché objects.

The craft was originally known in Kashmir as *Kar-i-qalamdan*, being confined to ornamentation of cases then used for keeping pens as well as some other small personal articles. The craft was also known as *Kar-i-munaqqash* since it was used for ornamenting smooth surfaces made of paper pulp or layers of polished paper.

The Mughal period saw the art extended to palanquins, ceilings, bedsteads, doors and windows. In the old days the technique of papier-mâché was artistically applied to wood work, especially windows, wall panels, ceilings and furniture as is evident from the fine ceiling at Madin Sahib Mosque (1444), the ceiling at the Shah Hamdan Mosque at Fatehkadal and the Mughal Gardens at Shalimar in Srinagar.



During the seventeenth century, early European travellers discovered this highly decorative and marketable craft. Papier-mâché artists of Kashmir tailored some of their production to the needs and taste of a western market that demanded nested boxes (a set of boxes that fit into each other), vases and other suitably exotic trinkets. Just as the export of Kashmiri shawls boomed, so did the papier-mâché business.

Papier-mâché box



Set of papier-mâché coasters and box

Papier-mâché: a French term meaning 'mashed paper'

Papier-mâché of Kashmir

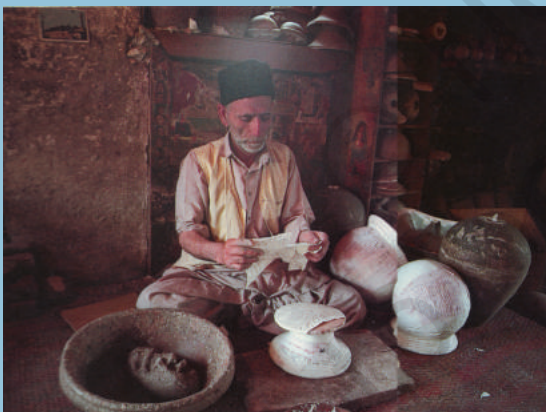
The raw materials used in making papier-mâché articles usually include old newsprint, *methi* (fenugreek) powder, Multani *mitti* or clay.

In South India, waste paper pulp is hand-beaten into a soft substance and mixed with local clay. It is rolled out into thin sheets placed over any complicated mould. The articles are finally dipped into a thin solution of paper pulp and white clay to provide a smooth uniform surface. The objects are then painted in oil or water colour.

The process of papier-mâché making in Kashmir, which described below, is rather elaborate and interesting and undertaken by a group of people called Sakhta makers.



1. Waste paper, cloth, rice straw and copper sulphate are taken together and ground into pulp.

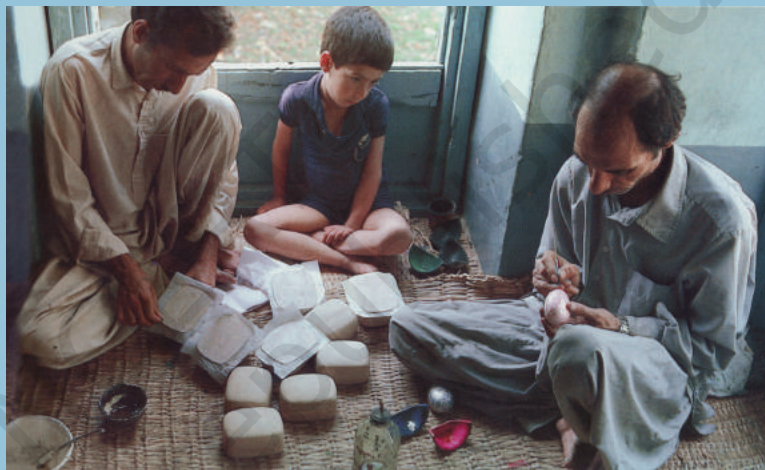


2. After the pulp is ready, clay, wooden or brass moulds are used to give it the required shape. When the pulp is dry the shape is cut away from the mould in two halves with a fine saw and glued together again.



3. The surface is coated with a white layer of gypsum and glue and rubbed smooth with a stone or a piece of baked brick, called *Kurket*.

4. Then the object is pasted with layers of tissue paper to prevent it from cracking.
5. Finally, the object is sand-papered and burnished, ready for the colourful artistry of the *naqash* or painter, who seals his work with several coats of a varnish made of linseed oil and pine resin.
6. The ground may be in colour or gold or tin foil; it is burnished with a piece of agate after drying.
7. It has to dry naturally and only then is the design drawn and painted in water colour.
8. These days painting is done in distemper colours. The colours are made from pigments diluted in water to which some glue is added to fix it to the ground. The brushes for painting objects are made from the bristles of the hair of cat, goat or ass.
9. The final varnishing is done with a very pure and transparent glaze of copal dissolved in turpentine.



Painted Designs

In the papier-mâché of Kashmir the rich and varied floral designs include the *chinar*, the *iris*, the Persian rose, the almond, cherry blossom, the tulip, narcissus, and hyacinth. The most famous is the *hazara* (thousand) pattern which seeks to display every conceivable flower on the smallest of objects and *gulandergul* or 'flower within flower'. The kingfisher and the bulbul are common bird forms.





Papier-mâché in India

The craft is practised in a number of States, namely, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Delhi, Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal.

In **Kashmir**, a large variety of both utilitarian and decorative papier-mâché items are produced such as writing table sets, dressing table wares, boxes, bowls, bangles, lamp-stands, flower vases, cups, boxes, powder cases, trays, shields, wall plaques, panels for ceilings, picture frames, caddies, screens and cabinets.

Nazir Ahmed Mir was born in Srinagar on 16 February 1969 in a family engaged in this traditional craft.

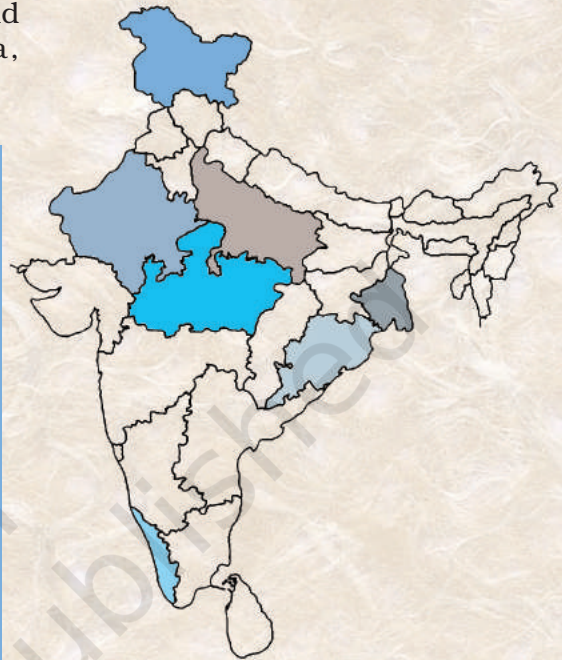
While he was pursuing his studies in school, the sudden death of his father forced him to earn a livelihood for the family.

He developed great skill and interest in papier-mâché craft which inspired him to make many new, uncommon and delicate designs. There are at least twenty of his designs in the market.

Nazir Ahmed Mir received the National Award for excellence in papier-mâché craft in 2000 and 2001.



In **Rajasthan** too, papier-mâché is a traditional craft with a concentration of craftspeople in Jaipur. The products include animals and birds, particularly cocks, parrots and pigeons. Papier-mâché bowls are also produced in Banasthali.



In **Madhya Pradesh**, a wide range of products are available in papier-mâché, such as human figures, birds, animals, caricatures, statues of gods and goddesses, models of Khajuraho and Sanchi. Important centres for this craft are Gwalior, Ujjain, Indore and Harda.

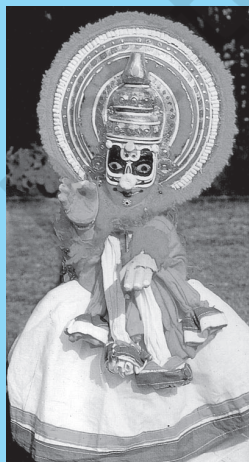
Amusing folk toys with detachable or hinged parts such as nodding tigers and elephants, old men and women with comic expressions, are made in papier-mâché in **Orissa**. Masks of popular mythological characters are also made. The craft is concentrated in Puri, Cuttack and Ganjam.

Subhadra Devi was born in 1936 in Darbhanga District, Bihar. She started working with papier-mâché at the age of fifteen. At first she made idols for festivals. As her interest grew, she joined Shilp Anusandhan Sansthan, Patna for training. In 1980 Subhadra Devi was given the State Award in appreciation of her artistic merits. She has exhibited her craft all over India and received the National Award for excellence in papier mache craft in 1991.



In **Bihar**, the craft is found in various parts of the State. Papier-mâché figurines and different kinds of birds are made by women from Madhubani and Darbhanga Districts. Though papier-mâché containers cannot be used to hold liquids, it is used for the storage of dry items.

Papier-mâché is also popular in **Kerala**. Trained artists in Kozhikode make a large number of figures based on Kathakali and temple models out of paper pulp. They also produce lively figures of animals and birds that are in great demand.



The craftsmen of Purulia in **West Bengal** make a variety of masks of mythological characters that are used during folk festivals by the Chhau dancers of both Orissa and West Bengal.



The Future

Paper-craft objects are mainly created by people either for their personal use or for a limited clientele with whom they are in touch. The items are disposed of through the following marketing channels:

- ◆ sale at residence
- ◆ local fairs or seasonal *melas*
- ◆ weekly *haats* or bazaars
- ◆ hawking
- ◆ local shops
- ◆ exhibition-cum-sale
- ◆ export

Except for papier-mâché items made by the master craftsmen of Jammu and Kashmir, no other paper-craft item appears to have found a market abroad. Besides the export and urban markets there exists another large market which caters to the needs of the millions of rural and poor urban consumers.



Many of the paper crafts described above use recycled materials and hardly use any chemical or harmful substances. In a world now growing conscious of the need to preserve the planet, paper crafts and our Indian toy-maker have a lot to teach.

Product designers, design institutions and development corporations need to apply themselves to study the needs of this developing craft. After all it is still the toy-maker and the kite-maker who bring joy to thousands of children in India!

Institutional Assistance

Development measures that would increase and improve production are urgently needed. Craftsmen require assistance in refining and improving their techniques, gaining access to good quality raw materials and development of new designs. These artists need access to credit, direct marketing channels, and protection of their interests by ensuring adequate wages and socio-economic benefits.



Paper-cutting: a Disappearing Art

One of the few accomplished exponents of the disappearing Indian art of paper-cutting — devasthankala or sanjhi — Prabal Pramanik has single-handedly built a bewitching repository of his art in the hills of Himachal Pradesh.

In Mathura, Brindavan, Bengal and Orissa, where Vaishnav communities lived and enriched the lore of Radha and Krishna, this rare art manifested itself in different schools through sharp silhouettes and stencil forms.

The forms cut out in devasthankala take little time but it requires years of patience and practice to “attain the skill of cutting out balanced compositions without the aid of drawings”, Pramanik says as he deftly shapes a charging bull.

A unique feature of paper-cutting is that the design to be cut is never traced out.

“Only superb neuro-muscular coordination, a sense of balance and composition, knowledge of anatomy and proportion enable the ‘ustad’ to lift his work to a high level of perfection.

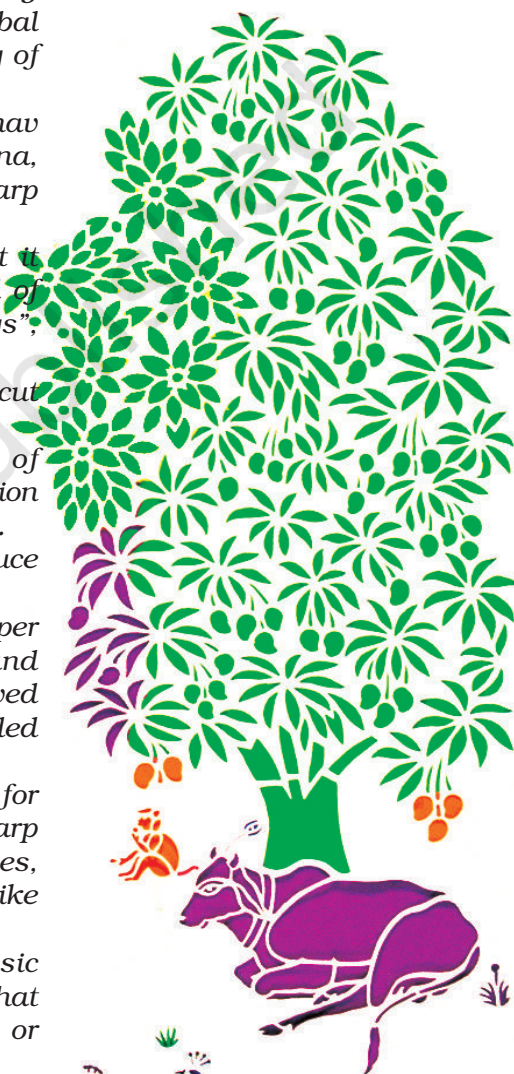
“Paper as a medium was cut, folded and fashioned to produce everything from animals to pirates,” he recollects.

“The hours passed silently and day by day this world of paper widened in form and vision through new experiments and experience... The depth and diversity of this world has allowed pieces of paper to fill the vacant moments of my life and added an innovative touch to my imagery.”

He says it flourished in the community of Vaishnavas for hundreds of years. “Ustads or masters plied scissors and sharp cutting blades, creating amazing art works to decorate temples, nat-mandirs and kirtan sabhas during Vaishnava festivals like Ras, Janmashtami and Jhulan.

“I have experimented with composition, using the basic traditional techniques, and have proved through my work that this medium or art is just as flexible as water colour, oil or tempera in its diversity, depth and rhythm.”

– Extract from a report in The Times of India



EXERCISE

1. *Many motifs and designs painted on paper products reflect the immediate environment of the craftsperson. Pick three examples from different parts of India to illustrate your answer.*
2. Originating from Kashmir, how has papier-mâché been adapted in Bihar, Rajasthan and Kerala?
3. Looking back at your childhood, describe three objects made of paper that you either bought or created.
4. *Craftsmen need assistance in refining and improving their techniques, gaining access to good quality raw materials and developing new designs. These artists need access to credit, direct marketing channels, and protection of their interests by ensuring adequate wages and socio-economic benefits. Prioritise the above issues and devise a strategy to address some of them over a period of five years.*
5. Find out the word for paper/clay/stone in at least fifteen Indian languages.
6. A hundred years ago Kashmiri shawls were exported in large papier-mâché boxes. Find other examples in which two or more crafts compliment each other.
7. Design a series of paper-cut stencils capturing contemporary life and ideas.