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The Dor Making Tradition and its Significance in Kite Flying Culture of Punjab

Abstract

Kite flying has been one of the major cultural activities for the people of the Subcontinent. The paper elaborates the art of dor making in the kite flying culture of the Punjab. It discusses that how the changing mode of kite flying in the Subcontinent contributed to the development of the tradition of dor making. It describes the materials and processes involved in dor making and the context in which the tradition thrived and then faded away. The study maintains that after the division of India into princely states, it was the competitive environment that was responsible for the development of dor making as an expertise.

Keywords: Kite, Kite flying culture, Tradition, Thread, Dor

Introduction

The traditions of a region are the integral foundations of a culture. The Kite flying tradition of Punjab has been one such example. Since traditions develop and sustain over time, they have their own peculiar life. The modifications are slower and contribute to strengthen the tradition. A tradition continues to live as the people maintain their cultural identity. The influences and changes coming from within and without impact traditions in various ways. Most of the times, the change or transformation of a tradition happens to be a gradual process but sometimes external factors abruptly affect a tradition. The change in the policies of ruling class also result in truncating traditions. The kite flying tradition which

was once a thriving cultural force in Punjab, and particularly in Lahore, was put to a halt a few years back. The reason was the injuries and deaths caused by the dor (line), which denotes the thread used for kite flying. The year 2009 was the last year in which the festival was celebrated in Lahore. The Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz (PML-N) led local government restored the ban in 2010. The prohibition on one of the last remaining ways for having fun for Lahoris has been in place since that time. In 2013, the Caretaker Chief Minister tried, unsuccessfully, to restore Basant celebrations. Whether such a ban was right or wrong is a different debate altogether, however, at present we are just focussing on the tradition of dor making which persisted side by side the kite making and kite fighting tradition.

The dor making tradition involved a certain level of expertise and secrecy as the thread used for preparing the door went through application of various ingredients and processes. The secrecy was a logical outcome of the fact that the business factor involved made the dor makers realize that it is through unique nature of their products that they can prevail in market. The Shagirds that were recruited by Ustaads followed a strict discipline, and were not allowed to work with other competitors. The dor making became a specialized process since it was the sole ingredient that ensured a win in the kite flying competition. In the hands of the experts of dor making, the materials and processes were tailored according to the needs of the kite fighters and the types and sizes of the kites used. Many individuals made their names in the field but they are now lost in the mist of history. The art of dor making still survives in pockets and many of the Shagirds still retain the right knowledge of dor making but the days of competition are over. The following study elaborates upon this tradition of many secrets preserved through an oral tradition of knowledge transmission.

The Significance of Dor Making

The cultural roots of kite flying tradition are mainly associated to the celebrations of the Vesakhi, a festival which once an epitome of happiness associated to the agrarian populations of Punjab. Since agriculture was the main economic frontier therefore weather was of acute importance. The festival of Basant became associated to the Vesakhi due to the fact that both events celebrated the arrival of spring. Basant therefore found its

place in local culture as a tradition of welcoming spring season. However, the kite flying tradition gradually transformed from a leisure activity to a competitive one. We find initial references of kite flying tradition with reference to the arrival of Sufis in the Subcontinent. There are instances which are associated to NizamuddinAuliya where Basant was rigorously celebrated.¹ Shah Husain uses the symbol of kite flying to explain relationship between man and God. He says that God is Kite-Flier and the individual souls and kites. Through the thread of His Will, He is directing the kites, the souls.² The tradition of kite flying was a popular one in the Mughal period as well.³ However, the activity remained within the confines of amusement.

The division of India into princely states also created the environment of competition. Commenting on the the culture of British India and particularly of the Muslims a study in the Asiatic Journal and its Register for British India noted the youth of the Subcontinent would draw pleasure from kite flying contests. The manner in which the contests took place has been clearly spelled out in the following words written in 1832:

The neighbouring gentlemen, having provided them with lines, previously rubbed with paste and covered with pounded glass, raise their kites, which, when brought in contact with each air by current of air, the topmost string cuts through the under one, when down falls the kite, to the evident amusement of the idlers in the streets or roadway, who with shouts and hurrahs, seek to gain possession of the toy with as much avidity as if it were a prize of greatest value: however, from the numerous competitors, and their great zeal to obtain possession of it, it is usually torn to pieces. Much skill is shown in the endeavours of each party to keep the string uppermost, by which he is enabled to cut that of his adversary's kite.⁴

The Sikh period in the Subcontinent also fostered an environment of competition. MahrajaRanjit Singh has been known to hold regular kite

¹*The Herald* (Pakistan Herald Publications., 1999), 132.

²*Sufis of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* (KitabBhavan, 2002), 78.

³Mohammad Azhar Ansari, *Social Life of the Mughal Emperors, 1526-1707* (Shanti Prakashan, 1974), 92.

⁴*The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Miscellany* (Wm. H. Allen & Company, 1832), 213.

festivals in which for ten days, kite flying competitions would take place. The Mahraja, his queen, soldiers and ordinary people would wear yellow dresses as symbols for spring arrival.⁵

The partition of the Subcontinent was ideological and geographical, however, on cultural front, various traditions found their way in the newly emerged country. The festival of Basant and the spirit of kite flying competition remained popular in the city of Lahore, which was a cultural hub. Previously it was a part of larger Punjab and inherited its culture. After partition, the tradition of kite flying continued with the zeal and zest associated to the agrarian culture of Punjab.

Wherever, kite flying became popular in the Subcontinent, it transformed from individual amusement to a competition amongst teams and guilds. In Lahore, as a continuity from the past, two main groups of kite flying flourished. One group developed its skills of kite flying under the renowned Ustad Jalal while the other was led by KhalifaHadura. *Ustad*Jalal’s team was comprised of *Ustad*Jalal himself along with *Ustad* Afzal Khān, *Ustad*Bodi, *Ustad*Mehar Kala, *Ustad*Siddique, *Ustad*MīrDeen, *Ustad*AltāfKhān, *Ustad*Ashraf alias Piddi, *Ustad*Wājid°AliShāh, *Ustad*Fayyād, *Ustad*°AbdulWahīd alias WeediSayein, *Ustad*Javed alias Chhanga, *Ustad*Parvaiz alias BilluPehalwān, *Ustad*HājiKhālīl, *Ustad*Mīr, *Ustad*Nannha, *Ustad*Bādshāh and *Ustad*Allah Bakhsh. Whereas the other team of *Ustad*Hazura included *Ustad*BholaPehalwān, *Ustad*Naseer, *Ustad*Jāni, *Ustad* Nikka, *Ustad* Allah Dīn, *Ustad* Mullah Rafique, *Ustad*Parvaiz Butt, *Ustad*ChachaNazīr, *Ustad* Hafiz Shāhid, *Ustad*SulaimānPiya, *Ustad*Sultān (BoorayWāla) and *Ustad*ChhimaPehalwān. The extent of the popularity and significance can be understood from the following posters.

⁵NazirAhmad Chaudhry, *Basant: A Cultural Festival of Lahore* (Sang-iMīlPablikeshanz, 2001), 28.



Figure 1. A Poster of kite flying competition published in 1989.



Figure 2. The Founder Groups of Kite Flying in Lahore

These two groups exhibit a legacy spanning over two centuries. These groups promoted organized kite flying in which small groups of expert individuals would compete. Later on, kite flying tournaments found their way in the culture of Lahore particularly in the Walled City. Nazir Chaudhry noted that there were famous 'Khilaris' in Said Mitha, Wachhowali, MachhiHata, SutarMandi, Rang Mahal, Ravi Road, Sheranwala, Lohari, Dhobi Mandi, Qila Gujjar Singh and GawalMandi, etc.⁶The competitive environment of such tournaments did not remain limited to groups of individuals. It, in fact, seeped into homes, where on the day of Basant, individuals would compete with their neighbours. The environment of competition became the principal reason for specialization in Manjha making since competition encouraged to use sharper and sharper Manjha to cut the kites of the competitors. The Manjha makers therefore had to come up with Manjhas with great quality and this gave rise to the tradition of Manjha making with secrets that lived through oral transmission of knowledge.

The Art of Dor Making



Figure 3:*Dor – Charkhi and Pinna.*

The dor that is used in Lahore and other regions of Punjab is prepared from pure cotton thread. The thread which is used as its principal material is a special thread, which is prepared from multiple thin fibers. The number of fibers determines the strength of the door and kite fighters select a thread on the basis of the type and size of kites they fly. The selection of thread also depends upon the expertise of kite fighter; the tricks he uses while competing. In Lahore, the thread that was available after the Partition ranged from 2 to 9 fibers. Later on, new threads were

⁶Chaudhry, 27.

added with 18, 25 and 30 fibers. The additional types of thread had more tensile strength and were quite difficult to break.

With the arrival of new threads, the methods of engaging into a kite fight also changed. Instead of the tricks an expert kite flyer used, the strength of the thread became the reason for sustaining a kite. Initially, the threads came from Germany and England but later on the Chinese addition offered a greater variety to kite flyers. The popular threads from European countries were 50 and 70 okalsay and 50, 70, and 100 squat.

India was a competitor in thread production, the Indian thread became popular in local market in the 1980s. Amongst the notable threads 2 and 5 *reech*, 5, 7 and 8 *panda* got fame because of their good quality and low price. Traditionally the common threads used are; 12 *hiran*, 50 *ghora*, 8 *sughal* (China), number 30, number 24, number 10, number 35, number 16, number 25, 12 *kukkar*, 7 *machli* (India), 50, 100 and 555 blade, etc. These threads have their own distinct treatment of grounded glass and color.

The tradition of kite fighting in the Subcontinent developed along a different trajectory in comparison to that in the West. In the West, and also in some parts of India, only a 100 meter Manjha would be used and the rest of the thread would be just raw thread without glass grounding. This technique was used primarily to reduce cost of kite flying and saving fingers from getting injured. The kite fighters of Lahore, in contrast, used a glass grounded thread or Manjha throughout. The reason was competition in which the matter of pride for kite fighter was the number of kites he has cut in the competition.

The groups of kite fighters that hailed from Walled City observe figure injuries as part of the game and are the main customers for dars of sheer cutting quality. Depending upon the type of Manjha being used the Ustaads and Shagirds had a body of knowledge that comprised of various tips and tricks of engaging into a Paicha (Kite Fight). They formed a considerable clientele for Manjha makers. Moreover, when any of their kites was cut, it would benefit the looter with best quality of Manjha available. Interestingly, many kite fighters became Manjha makers and vice versa. The legendary players and Manjha makers such as *UstadChannanDin* and *UstadJhanda* contributed a great deal to the kite fighting competitions.

The materials and processes involved in dor making are crucial in deciding the fate of the kite and the nature of Paicha. It also affects the techniques of fighting and the mood of kite fighter. The main ingredients used in dor making are the thread, grounded glass, Nishasta, color pigments and water. Water acts as a solvent and the color is used for beautification. The grounded glass is the most important ingredient as it determines the cutting power of the dor. Some of the dor makers who are not the top notch experts of the field also use ‘pitch’ of rice instead of nashasta.



Figure 4: *Material and process of dor making.*



Figure 5: Thread and its stretching or *Adda*.

The process of dor making begins at an *Adda*, which is a term used for a place where two wooden poles of equal height (each being 7 feet) are pegged in the ground with a distance ranging from 40-50 meters. A number of wooden hooks are fixed on these poles and then the tread is stretched between the poles upon these hooks. Many lines of thread are then treated. The process is traditionally called *Tann Posh*, which means covering the body.

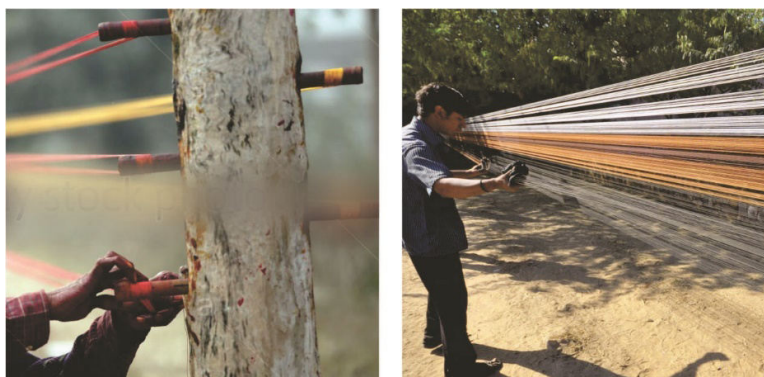


Figure 6: “*Adda*” and process of *tann posh*.

The mixture that is applied on the thread is initially *Nashasta* which is diluted by water. A required color is added and then the solution is applied on the thread by a piece of cloth dipped in the solution. This initial treatment makes the surface of the thread even and smooth and also plays

the role of a binding agenda for the grounded glass or Manjha which is applied later on. Some dor makers also use Ispaghul husk as binding ingredient.



Figure 7: *Mānjha* – Applying on the thread.

The *Mānjha*s prepared by mixing grounded glass with nashasta and is applied to the thread with a certain degree of pressure generated by hands. It is after several layers of application that a dor is finally prepared and is left to dry. The layers of Manjha, the duration of application, the grounding of glass, and the movement and pressure of hands in each applied layer are the secrets that dor makers keep to themselves.



Figure 29: Wrapping *doron charkhies*.

The dried dor is then wrapped around a plastic ball or Khiddu to form a pinna or around a cylinder to prepare a charkha. The quality of the dor depends upon the right mixing of all ingredients and the right timing of the process involved.

The above process of traditional dor making became a lost art since the arrival of ‘Chinese’ dor. The popularly called Chinese dor is nylon based instead of cotton and is also cheaper. It is prepared in India but has acquired the name Chinese Manjha probably due to low cost. It is almost unbreakable and is therefore responsible for injuries. It's not just humans, even thousands of birds either die or get injured due to this dor. The material applied on the nylon string also includes metal dust, which is considered a health hazard by many experts.

Conclusion

The tradition of kite flying developed in the Subcontinent along with the local preferences and tastes. Initially, it was an activity that was recreational but later on as the social fabric changed, the transformation to kite fighting can be witnessed. The division of India into princely states was probably the reason why a sense of competition ensued. The completion amongst states became a major force in the Indian culture spearheaded by Rajas and Nawabs. In this environment, the tradition of kite flying also underwent a change and the art of dor making became more and more important. We do not find evidence of state level competitions but there are multiple accounts where historians mentioned the kite fighting competitions among groups of people. The dor making tradition developed within a competitive environment therefore it involved professional secrecy. The dor maker became the most important man for a kite fighter since he ensured his win in a furious competition. Various guilds of dor makers formed in different regions across India and introduced their signature brands. It was the unattended sense of competition that continued in Pakistan and the last decade witnessed a surge of nylon threads in the market. The injuries resulting from the use of nylon based dors, the loss of human lives as a result of dor cutting their throats is a grave concern. The ban put by government of Pakistan is justified. If there is a need to revive the culture of kite flying and kite fighting, a special place in the suburbs of the city should be dedicated to prevent any loss of human life.

Some recent media reports had rekindled hope among fans of the festival that once defined the city’s cultural scene that the government could allow a ‘safe’ basant this year provided there was no major law and order situation and protection of life was ensured during the related festivities.⁷ However, it did not translate into reality. Sadly, the art of dor making has not been given proper attention by our scholars. As we enter the world of dor makers we realize that they have preserved a serious craft that had many innovations. The remain in a state of nostalgia with a hopelessness about future.

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