

**ARCHITECTURE OF KASHMIR: A CASE
STUDY OF WOODEN MOSQUE IN
NEELUM VALLEY (AJK)**

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Architecture stands as a strong linkage between past and present. It reflects how beliefs, esthetics and various cultural ideas evolved and transformed into its present form. The Mosque architecture of Kashmir reflects the continuity of an architectural tradition that evolved in the region over millennia. Islamic cultural influence came from Central Asia into Valley of Kashmir and spread towards Neelum Valley, and Gilgit Baltistan. The wooden mosques of Neelum Valley are one of the ways of preserving the architecture traditions of the region. This study is based on documentation of an ancient mosque carried out by this researcher during field survey of 2015 in Neelum Valley, Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The paper examines the main architectural features, material and ornamentation of a structure which is representative of local as well as external influence visible in monumental and vernacular medium of construction. Furthermore, comparative study in this paper underlines the transformation and cross-cultural reflections which are present in the form of artistic elements and fusion of traditions in the region.

Key Words: *Mosque Architecture, Wooden Material, Kashmir Architecture*

Introduction

The history of Neelum valley is as old as other great civilizations of the region and it remained a facilitator of the social- cultural evolution

in the region through connecting route of Silk Road. The 14th C.E., witnessed subsequent development of Islam in the region which owes a lot to the activities of hundreds of Sufi saints' who travelled over long distance to reach Kashmir.¹ Since Neelum Valley is nearer to Central Asian approach towards the Indian subcontinent, and it also shared similar environment to that of Central Asia, the Sufi saints made this area their abode. Number of Islamic sites; shrines, mosque and old graves were documented by this researcher from Neelum Valley during field survey of 2015-16.²

The Kosab Pura mosque is an old surviving structure situated in the village of Nagdar, in the Neelum Valley. It stands prominent on the right side of the Nagdar *nullah* (watercourse), at the distance of 5 kilometers from Nagdar *bazaar*. This mosque is also mentioned in the *Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladakh 1890*, as an old structure; which confirms its antiquity, and it was most probably built in the Mughul era.³

It is one of the examples of Kashmiri wooden architecture and ornamentation, besides having traditional architectural features of the adjoining places, the mosque has rich engraved designs and decorations with Central Asian influence. The mosque has been partly renovated by the local community in 2016; thick layers of oil paints have been applied on wood which affects the originality of the structure. Instead of the traditional wooden spire the roof of the mosque is now covered with tin sheets for weather protection. The removed construction fragments; stone rings, wooden panels of roof spire are still lying in the premises which has been included in this study.

Main architectural features of the mosque

The Kosab Pura mosque (Fig: 1 & 2) is built on a high plinth, consists of a central main prayer hall, small *hujra* (small open room attached to the hall), with a decorated arch and "L" shaped verandah on its eastern and northern sides (Fig: 3). The western side of the mosque enclosure is occupied by the prayer room which is rectangular in plan. The flowing water stream is the main source of water supply near the mosque. The eastern side of the veranda is closed by blind wooden arch screens and the entrance has a wooden door, while the southern side is open. The trefoil pointed arches are typically of Central Asian type (Fig: 4). There are three blind arches with decorative geometrical patterns on the west side and five on the northern one. The partitions of the veranda have different geometrical and floral carvings on each side (Fig: 4 & 5).

The base shaft, capital pillars of the central hall are beautifully decorated in Tibetan style along with geometric pattern. The pillars are highly decorative with different designs along the supportive capitals.⁴



Fig 1:
Nagdar, Front view of the wooden Mosque

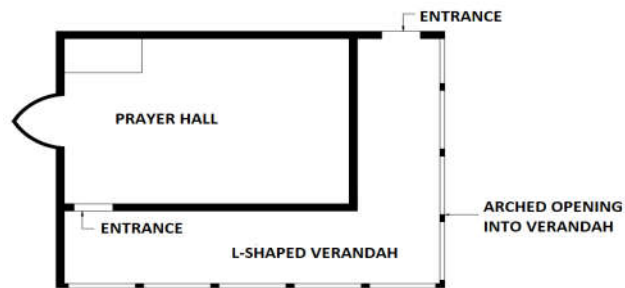


Fig 2:
Mosque's plan; main hall and 'L' shaped veranda of mosque



Fig 3:
The mosque veranda

**Fig 4:**

An arch of the mosque veranda

**Fig 5:**

Geometrical and floral carvings, view on the outside of the mosque, south side.

In Gilgit, Baltistan and Hunza region, brackets (a joining between a column and wall or roof) are mostly missing in the building structures and the roof beams rest directly on the pillars. In some cases, particularly in Baltistan the eastern façades of the mosques show a row of arches; sometime these arches rest on slender, tapering pillars placed on highly decorated cornices. On the other hand in Swat, Dir and Kohistan areas of Pakistan, massive brackets are seen. These types of supportive brackets were also used in the cornice of the Buddhist stupa, which not only hold the structure but also serve a decorative purpose.⁵ The Kosab Pura mosque at Nagdar represents the continuation of the mosque architecture witnessed in Gilgit Baltistan, Srinagar and other parts of Kashmir.

Material

The basic construction materials for the foundation and walls are stone blocks and pebbles. These stone blocks are held together with the support of wooden beams with *dhajji-diwari*⁶ and *taq*⁷ construction method (Fig: 6). The wooden *mihrab* of the mosque is decorated and faces west, towards the Nagdar *nullah*. On the ceiling of the main hall instead of wood there is use of the bark of an indigenous tree, locally known as *bhojpathar* (bark of a tree). The bark is fixed to the ceiling in such a manner that at first look one cannot guess the type of material it is. The bark of *bhojpathar* has the property of keeping structures warm during harsh climates and snowy weather and it also saves wood from decay.⁸



Fig 6:

Wooden beams on mosque ceiling with *dhajji* and *taq* construction method

Ornamentation

The most significant feature of the mosque is the wood engravings and artistry which is evident from its exquisite motifs. This ornamentation is on various parts: façade, wooden doors, pillars, roof, and ceiling of the structure (Fig: 7). These delicate designs of wood carvings in the mosque structure also reflect the workmanship of Kashmiri artisans. The engraved motifs of cypress tree and garland decorations are a continuity of Mughul theme of ornamentation along typical Mughul column.⁹ The prayer chamber is exquisitely decorated as in the main gateway, depicting floral geometrical wooden panels with fine *jali* (lattice screen). This ornamentation is applied on the walls, ceilings, soffits- arches of the structure (Fig: 8 & 9).



Fig 7:

An ornamented wooden carved panel on the mosque ceiling



Fig 8:

Decoration of the mosque facade



Fig 9:

Variety of the engraved motifs on the frame of mosque door.

There is a variety of wooden panels bearing composite flowering plants, geometrical patterns, on plain background. The star like patterns filled with miniature decoration spread out on the ceiling of the veranda in the form of encircling motifs. There are plenty of inverted lotus string rows in the engraved wooden panels of the mosque structure. Similar types of lotus patterns were frequently used in the Buddhist art of Gandhara. Identical decorative vocabulary was utilized in the building architecture of Gilgit and Baltistan, directly derived from the Kashmiri monuments of Shah Hamdan. The art of wood carvings, *pinjara*¹⁰ and *khatamband*¹¹ were originally brought to Kashmir Gilgit Baltistan and adjoining regions by Shah Hamdan.¹²

The carved door frame of the prayer room shows circular arabesque motifs, embossed patterns, interconnecting squares, rectangular panels in old style. The upper part of the door frame has geometric motifs within the broad pointed arch of the old style. Few engraved designs, lotus, acanthus leaves and chain motif of this mosque are found similar to the wooden engraved graves (coffin) in Nagdar village a few kilometres far from this place.

Origins and Continuity of Design

Originally the Kosab Pura mosque had a towering spire which was partially damaged due to environment degradation. This old spire has been completely demolished during the renovation that took place in 2015 and an additional tin spire was added. The construction material: carved round boulders, wooden logs, ring stones of the old spire are still scattered near the mosque area.

It seems that round stones of different sizes were placed one by one in a way to create a huge spire over the roof of the mosque. This technique of making spire is similar to the one used for making the “umbrella” placed on the top of the Buddhist stupa structures. In the 2nd-3rd centuries C.E., this method had been used in the stupas of Gandhara for the construction of harmika *Chattra*, which is a representation of the Buddha sacred tree. The *Chattra* spire and railing harmika of the stupa had greatly influenced the later architectural designs of the Islamic age.¹³ There are a number of tombs and mosques in Gilgit Baltistan, Kashmir Valley and the adjoining areas of the Neelum Valley showing this type of towering spire. This way of conceiving the upper part of the building is also known as “eastern style” since roofs having a towering pyramidal spire in the centre are mostly seen in Gilgit, Hunza and Baltistan. In

Swat, Dir and Kohistan all the mosques have, instead, flat roofs, according to a “western style” of architecture. According to Ahmed Hasan Dani: This type of spire in the area is a copy of the Buddhist relic’s chamber, if this is correct then the tall spire is a stylised form of the receding umbrella that one sees on the top of the stupa. The popularity of such spires in this region also emphasises the survival of local Buddhist element in the architectural style.¹⁴

This tower like tapering spire is derived from Kashmir, where it is first found in a building associated with the name of Shah-i-Hamdan, the famous Sufi saint of 14th - 15th century C.E. who was responsible for the spread of Islam in the valleys of Kashmir, Gilgit Baltistan and Neelum. Hundreds of followers of Shah-i-Hamdan settled in various parts of Kashmir. Apart from the services to religion and spreading Islam, they established academic institutions, along with arts and craft centres.¹⁵

The ruins of the earliest mosque of Neelum Valley have been identified in the village of Salkhala, built by Baba Abdullah around 1500 C.E. People of the area strongly believe that Baba Abdullah was also a Sufi saint of the *Reshi* order from Central Asia who played an important role to spread the message of Islam and to initiate the construction of the first mosque in the area. Though it is difficult to date the original construction of the Salkhala mosque, the material structure of this mosque is stone, mud plaster and wood. The 16th century Kashmiri mosques were built by mud and wooden structure derived from the conventional architecture of the adjoining region. Similar types of mosques are in Gilgit Baltistan near *Sher Qila* fort and *Shakyal* Mosque near the old fort which is the combination of mud logs and engraved wooden structure.¹⁶

Conclusion

Wooden architecture of Kashmir has a very ancient history. The Kosab Pura mosque in Nagdar, at first glance, looks like a traditional Kashmiri mosque. However, close inspection reveals that its features have been shaped by years of architectural history in the region where mosques were built in the ancient wooden style of Hindu temples and Buddhist viharas and later evolved by the Muslims. The uninterrupted continuity of wooden architecture of Kashmir was supported by the easy availability of Deodar wood in the valley. Devoid of dome and minarets, the mosque has conical spire on top of its roof, the same as in Buddhist architecture, representative of the continuation of local Buddhist features in the architectural style.

The wooden engravings, motifs and architectural features of Kosab Pura mosque are also continuity of earlier designs of the region. These elements are present in the form of a huge spire of roof, brackets joined to column within the stupa harmika, trefoil Mughul arches; the use of indigenous materials such as birch barks. Moreover, the architectural motifs, wood carvings, arts and crafts which are still in fashion, strengthen the notion of the Central Asian influence on the ways of life of this land. This artistic fusion is an endorsement of the spiritual dynamics of Kashmir.

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3. Charles Bates, 1873,, *A Gazetteer of Kashmir*, New Delhi, Light and Life Publishers, p.285.
4. Rukhsana Khan, 2019, "Discovering the Traces of Cultural Heritage :A Case Study in Neelum Valley", unpublished MPhil thesis 2014, pp. 21-24.
5. A.H.Dani, 1989, Islamic Architecture,; *The Wooden Style of Northern Pakistan*, Islamabad, National Hijira Council, pp. 50-55.
6. *Dhajji-diwari* (Persian) literally means "patch quilt wall" is a complete timber frame with a wythe of masonry forming panels within the frame. It is used alongside *taq* system of construction.
7. *Taq* is a bearing wall masonry construction with horizontal timber lacing embedded into the masonry to keep it from spreading and cracking. Taq and Dhajji-Diwari traditional architecture have their roots in the Kashmir valley, designed to counter the high seismicity of the region.
8. Khan, 2019, pp. 84-85.
9. A.H.Dani, 1989, pp. 58-60.
10. *Pinjara* is a craft of making lattice screens from pieces of wood.
11. *Khatamband* is a craft in which thin pieces of wood are worked into geometrical patterns.
12. K. Warikoo, 1989, pp. 58-60.
13. Dani, 1989, pp. 51-54.
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