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Shrines and Cultural Continuity in Kashmir: Architecture, Literature, Music and Craft

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Abstract

This paper examines the cultural role of Muslim shrines in Kashmir as repositories and living transmitters of architecture, craftsmanship, literature, poetry and devotional music. Rather than functioning merely as places of interment or pilgrimage, shrines have historically provided spaces in which artistic traditions are produced, preserved and reproduced. The architectural vocabulary of major sites such as Khanqah-I-Mu'ala, Dastgir Sahib and other Kashmiri shrines demonstrates the blending of indigenous timber construction with Persianate and Islamic decorative traditions. Techniques such as *khatamband*, *pinjrakari*, wood carving and papier-mâché contribute to the distinctive aesthetic identity of Kashmiri religious architecture. Shrines have also supported the preservation and transmission of Persian, Arabic and Kashmiri literary traditions, including *tazkiras*, *malfuzat*, *manqabat* and Sufi poetry. Devotional musical traditions, particularly *Sufiana Kalam*, further connect sacred space with Kashmiri performance culture. The paper argues that shrines should therefore be understood as living cultural repositories whose significance extends beyond religious practice to the preservation of Kashmir's historical and aesthetic identity.

Introduction

Culture survives not only in museums, archives and libraries but also in places where communities continue to practise, perform and transmit inherited traditions. In Kashmir, shrines constitute some of the most visible examples of such living cultural institutions. A shrine is simultaneously a sacred space, an architectural object, a repository of memory and a setting for artistic expression.

The cultural significance of Kashmiri shrines is particularly evident in their architecture. Timber, masonry, carved wood, painted surfaces, latticework and decorative ceilings combine to create a distinctive visual vocabulary. **Khanqah-e-Mu'ala in Srinagar**, associated with Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, is the most celebrated example. The building is recognised for its traditional Kashmiri wooden construction, tiered roof, carved timber elements, *khatamband* and richly decorated interior. Its original structure dates to the late fourteenth century, although the building has undergone reconstruction after successive fires.

The cultural role of shrines, however, extends beyond architecture. Religious manuscripts, genealogical traditions, Persian and Kashmiri poetry, devotional narratives and musical forms have historically circulated around Sufi institutions. Through recitation, teaching and performance, shrine culture has helped transmit traditions from one generation to another.

This paper therefore examines four interconnected dimensions of shrine culture: **architecture and craft, literature and textual memory, poetry and oral transmission, and music and performance**. The shrines function as living repositories rather than static museums. Their cultural value lies precisely in the fact that traditions remain connected to community practice.

2. Shrines and the Formation of a Kashmiri Aesthetic

The emergence of Islamic religious architecture in Kashmir did not produce a complete break with the region's established building traditions. Instead, Islamic institutions adapted to the Valley's environmental conditions, available materials and established craftsmanship.

Kashmir's seismic landscape encouraged architectural systems that combined timber and masonry. Traditional techniques such as *taq* and *dhajji-dewari* employed timber in ways that provided structural flexibility. Traditional architectural documentation identifies timber construction, *pinjrakari*, *khatamband* ceilings and the use of wood, mud and brick as characteristic elements of the region's architectural heritage.

Shrines consequently became important spaces in which local construction techniques were employed for Islamic religious purposes. The result was neither simply Persian architecture fused into Kashmir nor an unchanged continuation of pre-Islamic architecture. It was a distinctive regional form of Islamic architecture.

This distinction is important. The cultural history of Kashmir is often described through the interaction of Persianate and indigenous traditions. Shrine architecture provides tangible evidence of that interaction.

Khanqah-I-Mu'ala: Architecture as Cultural Memory

Khanqah-i-Mu'ala provides the clearest case study of the cultural role of shrines. Situated on the right bank of the Jhelum in Srinagar's old city, the building was originally commissioned during the reign of Sultan Sikandar in memory of Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani. The present building incorporates the results of several phases of reconstruction, particularly following fires in the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Its importance lies partly in the manner in which it combines religious purpose with local architectural practice. The building uses timber extensively and has a characteristic multi-tiered pyramidal roof crowned by a *brangh* and spire. Its interior is distinguished by carved wood, *khatamband* ceilings and painted papier-mâché decoration.

The building is therefore a cultural document in its own right. Its construction records the skill of Kashmiri craftsmen; its decorative vocabulary reflects Islamic and Persianate artistic influences; and its repeated reconstruction demonstrates the community's determination to preserve an important sacred landmark.

Khanqah-i-Mu'ala has been reconstructed more than once, yet each reconstruction sought to preserve the architectural identity of the institution. The cultural object is therefore not simply the original timber but the accumulated tradition of building, repairing and decorating the shrine.

Woodcraft

One of the most distinctive cultural traditions associated with Kashmiri religious architecture is *khatamband*. The technique involves assembling small pieces of wood into geometric ceiling patterns. The resulting designs combine mathematical order with visual ornamentation.

Shrine interiors provide particularly impressive examples of such craftsmanship. Khanqah-i-Mu'ala contains decorative *khatamband* work, while other important religious buildings in Kashmir demonstrate related forms of woodwork and lattice construction. The significance of these techniques is not merely aesthetic. They represent specialised knowledge transmitted through generations of craftsmen.

Pinjrakari, or wooden latticework, similarly demonstrates the relationship between function and ornament. Lattice screens can regulate light and air while simultaneously creating intricate geometric patterns. The use of timber allows the craftsman to transform structural elements into works of visual art.

Such craftsmanship is increasingly vulnerable because traditional construction is labour-intensive and expensive. The replacement of wooden elements with modern materials can therefore result in the loss of both architectural authenticity and specialist knowledge.

Shrines have consequently served as important patrons of traditional craftsmanship. Their continued maintenance creates opportunities for carpenters, woodcarvers, papier-mâché artists and other specialists to practise inherited skills.

Papier-mâché and Decorative Arts

Papier-mâché is another important component of Kashmir's artistic heritage. At major religious structures, painted and decorated surfaces transform the interior into a richly ornamented environment.

Khanqah-i-Mu'ala is particularly notable for its painted papier-mâché interiors and floral decoration. Contemporary heritage documentation identifies painted ornament, carved wood and latticework among its defining features.

The shrine thus became a setting in which decorative art was not detached from everyday life. A worshipper encountered calligraphy, geometric design, floral decoration and woodcraft as part of the religious environment itself.

Shrine Libraries and Literary Heritage

The literary significance of Sufi institutions is equally important. The *khanqah* historically functioned as a centre of teaching, discussion and textual transmission. Persian was particularly important in medieval and early modern Kashmir as a language of administration, scholarship and literary expression.

Religious institutions could therefore become associated with manuscripts, copies of devotional works, genealogical records and texts relating to Sufi lineages. Such materials are valuable not merely as religious literature but as evidence of intellectual history.

Among the literary genres associated with Sufi traditions are *tazkiras*, which preserve biographies and memories of saints; *malfuzat*, which record sayings and conversations attributed to spiritual personalities; and works of devotional poetry. These genres helped construct and preserve the memory of Sufi figures.

The transmission of literature was not exclusively dependent upon libraries. Texts circulated through recitation, teaching and memorisation. A verse could survive in the collective memory of devotees even when access to the written manuscript was limited.

The shrine therefore represents two interconnected forms of literary preservation: **the material preservation of texts and the oral preservation of traditions.**

Kashmiri Sufi Poetry and Oral Tradition

Kashmir possesses a remarkable tradition of mystical poetry.

The verses associated with Sheikh Nuruddin Rishi, are especially important to Kashmiri cultural memory. His *shruks* contain reflections on morality, spirituality, human conduct and the relationship between humanity and nature.

The well-known ecological verse concerning forests and food illustrates the ability of devotional poetry to carry ethical ideas across generations. Such sayings survive not simply because they are printed in books but because they continue to be recited, taught and remembered.

Shrines provide a social environment in which such oral traditions can remain meaningful. During religious gatherings, devotional poetry may be incorporated into recitation and discourse, thereby connecting literary heritage with contemporary religious practice.

Manqabat, N'at and Devotional Performance

Shrine culture has also contributed to the development and preservation of devotional poetry. *N'at* praises the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, while *manqabat* celebrates Sufis and other revered religious personalities. *Munajat* expresses supplication, and these forms may be recited individually or collectively.

The language of devotional expression in Kashmir has historically included Persian, Kashmiri and Urdu. The multilingual nature of shrine culture itself reflects the region's historical connections with different intellectual and literary worlds.

The annual *urs* is particularly important in this regard. An *urs* is not merely a commemorative date. It can become a large cultural gathering involving recitation, sermons, devotional poetry and shared participation.

The shrine consequently provides a performance space in which literary texts acquire a social life.

Sufiana Kalam and Kashmiri Musical Culture

Music constitutes another important dimension of Kashmiri shrine culture. **Sufiana Kalam** developed as a distinctive tradition of devotional music associated with Kashmiri musical life

and Persian Sufi poetry. The tradition has historically employed instruments including the *santoor* and other instruments associated with Kashmiri musical practice.

Its relationship with shrines is significant because devotional music connects textual heritage with collective listening.

The cultural importance of *Sufiana Kalam* therefore extends beyond entertainment. Its repertoire carries Persian and Kashmiri poetic traditions, while its performance practices preserve musical knowledge transmitted through generations.

At the same time, it is important not to treat every shrine gathering as a musical performance. Practices vary considerably between shrines, Sufi traditions and local communities. Some emphasise recitation and *zikr*, while others have stronger traditions of devotional singing.

Cultural Repositories

Although Khanqah-i-Mu'ala provides the strongest architectural example, other major shrines demonstrate different dimensions of cultural preservation.

Hazratbal is distinctive because its central significance is associated with the revered *Mou-e-Muqaddas*, the sacred relic attributed to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. The gatherings associated with the relic bring together religious practice, public memory and devotion.

Dastgir Sahib in Khanyar, associated with the Qadiri order, provides another example of the integration of religious devotion and Kashmiri decorative arts. Its interior incorporates traditional *khatamband* and papier-mâché work, demonstrating the continued use of regional craft vocabulary in a functioning religious institution.

Tsar-i-Sharif, associated with Sheikh Nuruddin Rishi, represents a different form of cultural repository. Its principal significance lies in the preservation of the memory and teachings of the Rishi tradition, particularly through poetry, devotional recitation and oral transmission.

Aishmuqam, associated with Sheikh Zain-ud-din Wali, similarly demonstrates the geographical spread of Sufi sacred culture beyond Srinagar.

These sites collectively reveal that Kashmir's shrine culture cannot be reduced to a single architectural or musical style. It is a network of local traditions connected through Sufi memory, devotional practice and inherited craftsmanship.

Shrines as Living Museums

The expression 'living museum' is useful provided it is understood carefully. A museum generally separates an object from everyday life and preserves it for observation. A shrine does the opposite. Its architecture, literature, music and objects remain embedded within religious practice.

A carved wooden pillar is not merely an artefact. It supports the building. A *khatamband* ceiling is not simply an exhibit. It forms part of the sacred interior. A devotional poem is not merely a literary text. It is recited. A musical composition is not merely recorded. It is performed.

This integration of material and intangible heritage gives shrines exceptional cultural value.

They also provide opportunities for intergenerational transmission. Craftsmen learn techniques from older practitioners; devotees learn poetry through repetition; custodial families preserve

genealogical memories; and visitors encounter historical architecture within a functioning religious environment.

Challenges of Preservation

The survival of shrine culture faces several challenges. Fire is one of the most serious threats to timber architecture. Khanqah-i-Mu'ala has experienced repeated fires and subsequent rebuilding, demonstrating both the vulnerability of wooden structures and the resilience of preservation traditions.

Modern materials and renovation practices present another challenge. The replacement of traditional timber, decorative surfaces or handcrafted elements with mass-produced materials may reduce maintenance costs but can diminish architectural authenticity.

Preservation should therefore not mean merely keeping the outer shell of a shrine standing. It should include the **skills, techniques, texts, music and oral traditions** associated with the institution.

Documentation is equally important. Photographic surveys, architectural drawings, manuscript catalogues, oral-history projects and recordings of traditional music can create valuable records for future researchers.

Conclusion

Shrines occupy a distinctive position in Kashmir's cultural landscape because they preserve culture through continued use. Their importance cannot be confined to religious history. They are repositories of architecture, craftsmanship, literature, poetry, music and collective memory.

Khanqah-i-Mu'ala demonstrates the richness of Kashmiri wooden architecture and the integration of timber construction, *khatamband*, *pinjrakari*, carving and papier-mâché. Dastgir Sahib demonstrates the continued presence of traditional decorative arts within a functioning religious institution. Dargah Hazratbal illustrates the cultural significance of sacred objects and collective memory, while Tsar-i-Sharif preserves the literary and spiritual legacy associated with Sheikh Nuruddin.

Shrines are particularly valuable because tangible and intangible heritage remain interconnected within them. Architecture is inhabited, poetry is recited, wanwun or folk songs are rendered, manuscripts are remembered and Sufis' teachings continue to circulate.

The future of Kashmiri cultural heritage depends partly upon recognising that these sites are **active cultural institutions in which the past continues to acquire meaning in the present.**

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