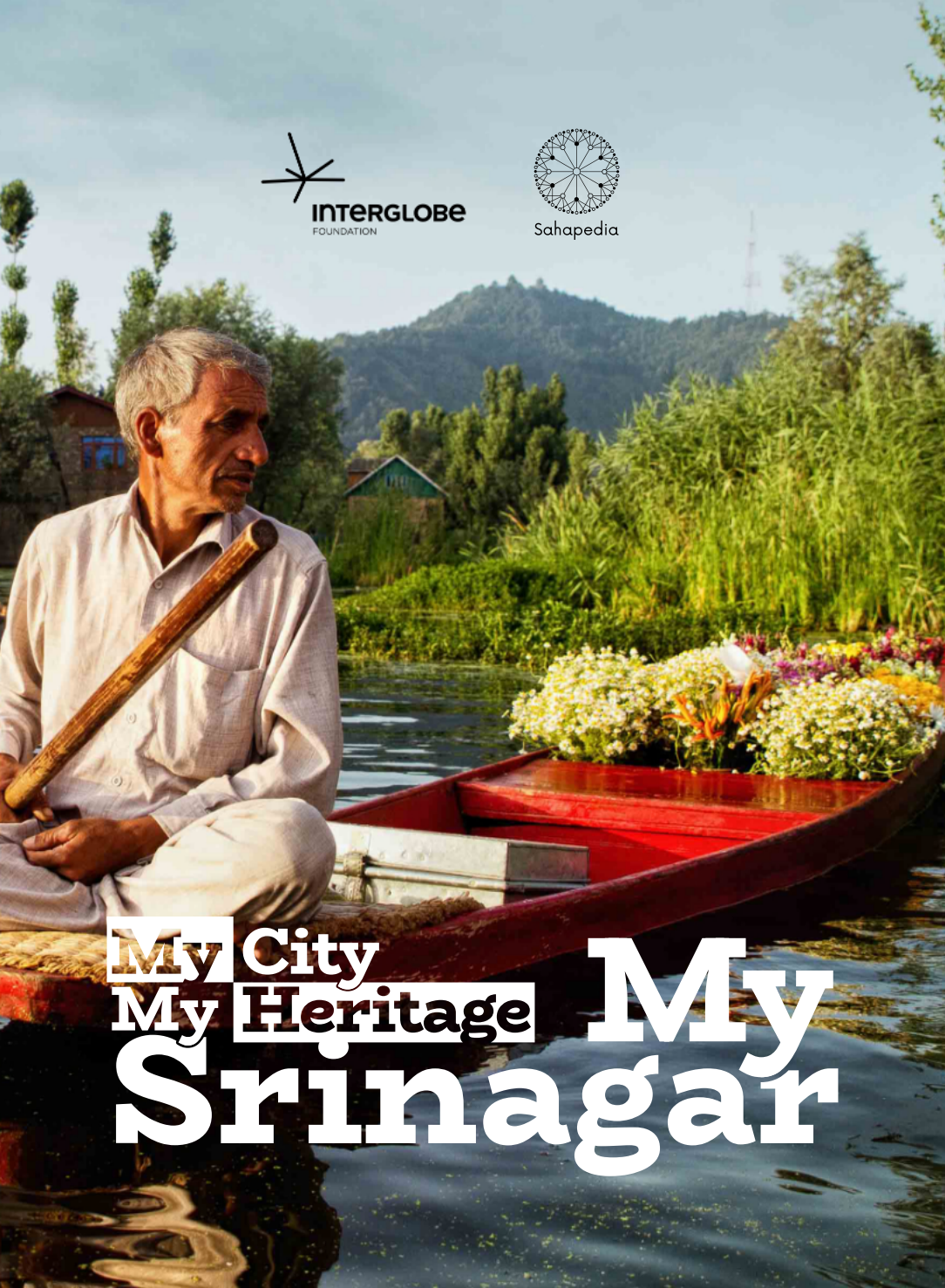
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My City
My Heritage
My
Srinagar

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My City
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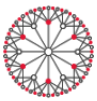


Sahapedia

Foreword

It is with great pleasure that we present to you this compendium of booklets showcasing some of the lesser known and overlooked treasures of select cities in our country. Over the past decade, the InterGlobe Foundation (IGF) has been steadfast in its commitment to preserving and restoring India's cultural and built heritage. Initiatives such as the restoration of Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan Tomb in New Delhi and the Qutub Shahi Tombs in Hyderabad have not only rejuvenated these historic sites but have also empowered local craftspeople and communities.

Launched in 2019 in collaboration with Sahapedia, the 'My City My Heritage' project aims to document and celebrate the cultural fabric of Indian cities. With the vision to promote the intangible culture and vibrant heritage of our country, with the support of Sahapedia, the project was launched in 2019 documenting the cultural heritage of India cities. Each city has its own unique story to tell—stories rooted in its monuments, crafts, festivals, and the lived experiences of its people. By documenting these stories, this project not only preserves our cultural fabric but also inspires pride and awareness in local communities and visitors alike. In this new and expanded phase, 'My City My Heritage' continues its journey, extending its scope to include more cities across the country.

As custodians of a shared heritage, we at IGF believe that initiatives like this are crucial for exploring a deeper connection between the communities and the spaces they inhabit. We also hope that in each of the project cities, a group of concerned citizens, institutions and government will come together to carry forward this beautiful curation of their city's history. We hope these booklets will entice you to discover these cities and their treasures and share them with others. We welcome more organizations, individuals and researchers to build on the repository created here.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the team at Sahapedia and my colleagues at the InterGlobe group of companies, as well as the researchers, photographers, and local communities who have contributed to this endeavor.

With best wishes,

Rohini Bhatia

Chairperson,
InterGlobe Foundation

Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to introduce this collection of city booklets created under the 'My City My Heritage' initiative, a collaboration between Sahapedia and the InterGlobe Foundation (IGF). These booklets celebrate the rich and layered cultural heritage of Indian cities, bringing to light their stories, unique traditions, and enduring legacies.

At Sahapedia, our journey since 2011 has been defined by a vision—to document and share India's vast and diverse cultural knowledge. Over the past 14 years, Sahapedia has established itself as an open, digital resource dedicated to exploring the histories, arts, and traditions that define our shared heritage. The Sanskrit term '*Saha*,' (together with), embodies the spirit of collaboration that fuels our efforts in documenting local contexts and pluralistic traditions, and creating meaningful engagement with India's cultural legacy.

'My City My Heritage,' launched in 2019, has become an extension of this vision. With the generous support of IGF, this project underscores the role of cities as living repositories of history and culture. Beyond research and documentation resulting into City Booklets, the project engages communities, scholars, and enthusiasts in celebrating their cities' unique identities. Initiatives like heritage walks and *Anubhutis*—Sahapedia's initiative for children with disabilities and marginalized groups—have redefined heritage engagement.

Each booklet reflects research, thoughtful curation, and a commitment to accessible heritage. This endeavor owes its success to the unwavering support of IGF and the contributions of researchers, photographers, local communities, and Sahapedia's team.

It is my hope that these booklets will not only serve as resources for exploration and education but also foster a sense of responsibility for our cultural legacy. I invite you to dive into the stories within and to share in the joy of our collective heritage.

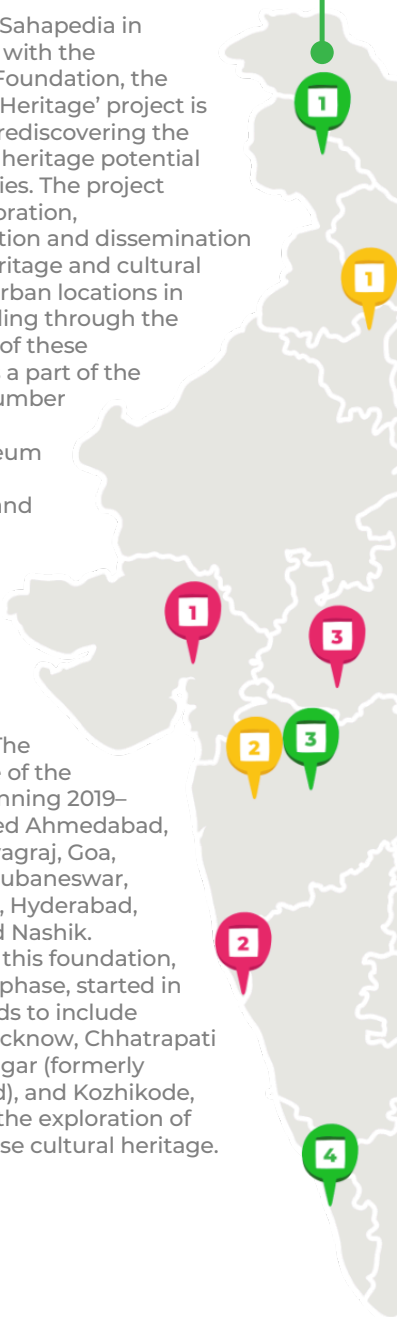
With warm regards,

Sudha Gopalakrishnan

Executive Director,
Sahapedia

My City My Heritage My Srinagar

Initiated by Sahapedia in partnership with the InterGlobe Foundation, the 'My City My Heritage' project is focused on rediscovering the culture and heritage potential of Indian cities. The project entails exploration, documentation and dissemination of varied heritage and cultural aspects of urban locations in India, including through the publication of these booklets. As a part of the project, a number of heritage walks, museum tours, *Anubhuti*s and engaging educational activities for school students and general audiences were organised. The initial phase of the project, spanning 2019–2022, covered Ahmedabad, Indore, Prayagraj, Goa, Shillong, Bhubaneswar, Chandigarh, Hyderabad, Kolkata, and Nashik. Building on this foundation, the current phase, started in 2024, extends to include Srinagar, Lucknow, Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar (formerly Aurangabad), and Kozhikode, continuing the exploration of India's diverse cultural heritage.



More about the project

The ‘My City My Heritage’ project caters to a wide user group, including but not limited to children with disabilities and from financially and socially marginalised backgrounds, culture enthusiasts, scholars, heritage professionals and tourists. The project aims at creating opportunities, building interest and capacity of young local scholars through collaborative research, documentation and mapping.

An equally important and compelling goal is to create fresh avenues for residents, local administration and local businesses to re-engage with their cities’ living cultural heritage and renew old as well as create new relationships of participation, community and ownership within these places. This booklet is a small step in that direction. More detailed versions of all pieces covered in this editorial and more information **about each city can be found on our website.** Scan the QR code to visit our portal and get access to our entire encyclopaedia.

Phase 1

Ahmedabad, Goa, Indore, Prayagraj, Shillong

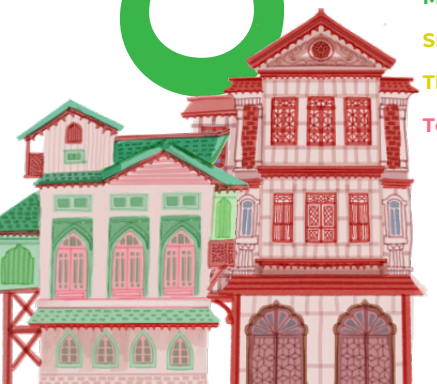
Phase 2

Chandigarh, Nashik, Hyderabad, Bhubaneswar, Kolkata

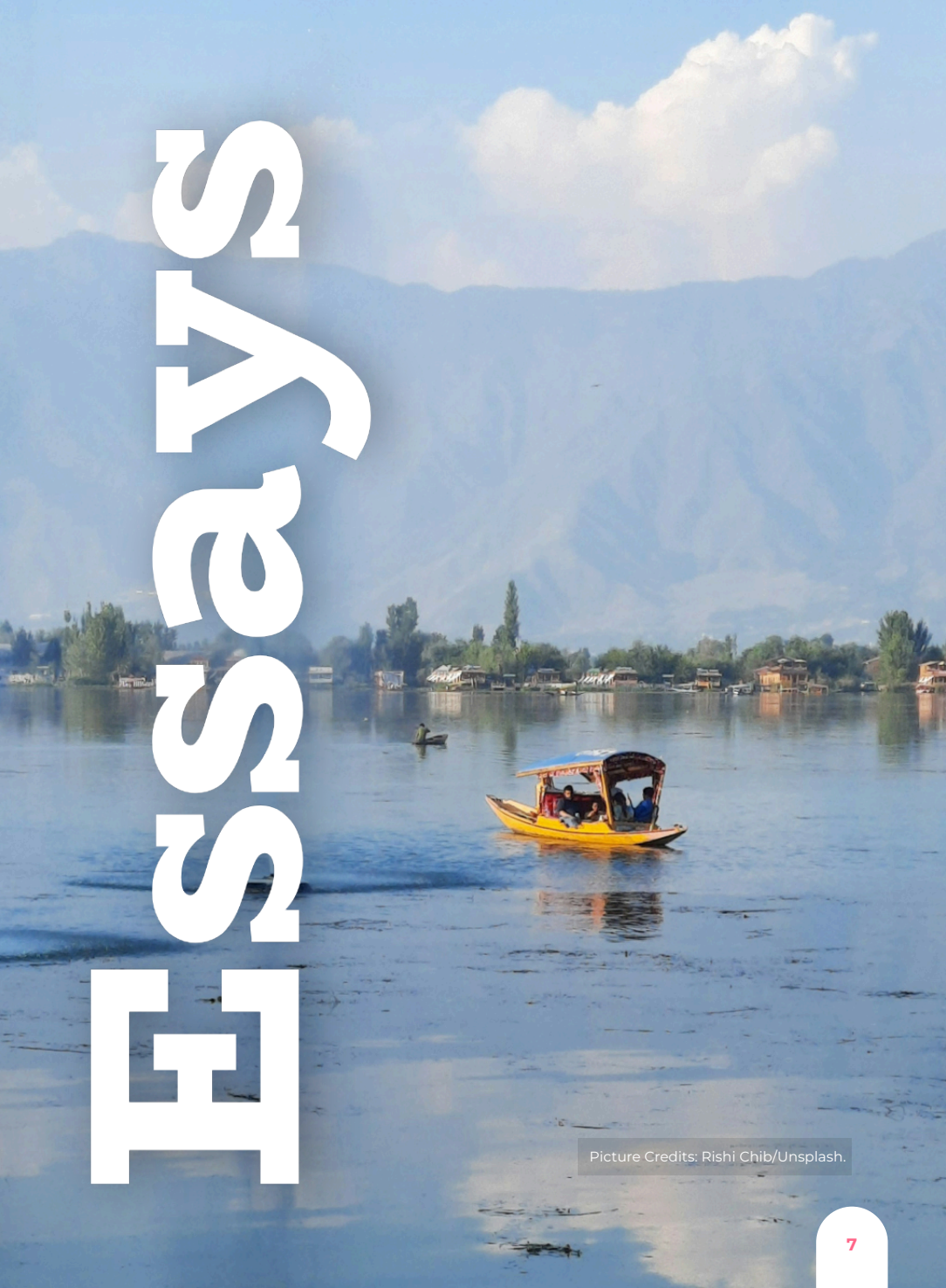
Phase 3

Srinagar, Lucknow, Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, Kozhikode (more to come)

Contents



Essays



Picture Credits: Rishi Chib/Unsplash.

Introductory Note

Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir, is a city defined by its dramatic geography, rich history and vibrant cultural exchanges. Nestled in the Kashmir Valley along the banks of the Jhelum River, the city's origins date back to ancient times, with Buddhist and Mauryan influences shaping its early identity. During the medieval period, Srinagar flourished under the Kashmiri Sultanate and later the Mughals, credited with the building of notable monuments, religious buildings, and the beautification of its lakes and gardens. The arrival of Persian and Central Asian artisans enriched its artistic traditions—a legacy recognised in 2021 when UNESCO designated Srinagar a Creative City for Crafts and Folk Arts. Later, despite successive Afghan, Sikh, Dogra and British interventions, Srinagar has preserved its distinct character in its arts, crafts, culture and social fabric.

This booklet presents a curated journey through Srinagar's many dimensions. *A Historical Outline* traces the journey of Srinagar from prehistoric times to the modern era, highlighting remnants of the past that still stand as silent storytellers. *Shehr-e-Khaas* offers a poetic ode to the city's old quarters along the Jhelum, where architectural elements such as *pinjrakari*, *zoon daeb* and *dhajji dewari* define its unique urban fabric, making it a living heritage.

The Mughal gardens, a hallmark of Srinagar's landscape, come alive in *Paradise in Bloom*, while *Life Around Dal* captures the essence of the

Photo by Sharmistha Dutta

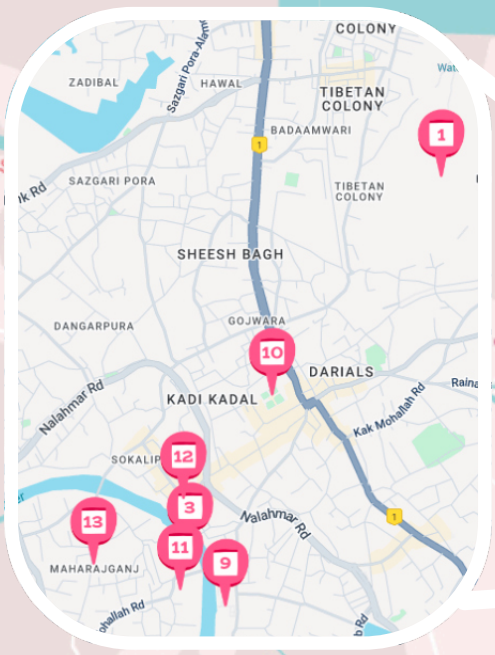
iconic lake as both a cultural and economic lifeline, home to houseboats and *shikaras* that float through time.

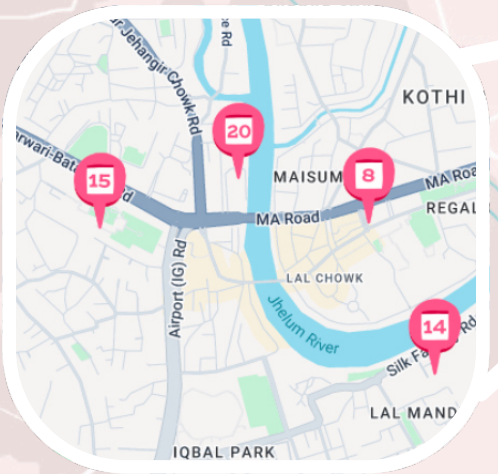
The city's celebrated culinary traditions find space in *Wazwan: A Culinary Legacy*, which delves into the artistry of the *wazas* who craft elaborate wedding feasts. *Baking with Baraka* takes readers to the heart of *kandur* shops, where the aroma of freshly baked bread fills the air. The legacy of Kashmiri saffron and the people of Pampore unfold in *Kong Posh: Beyond the Crimson Stigma*.

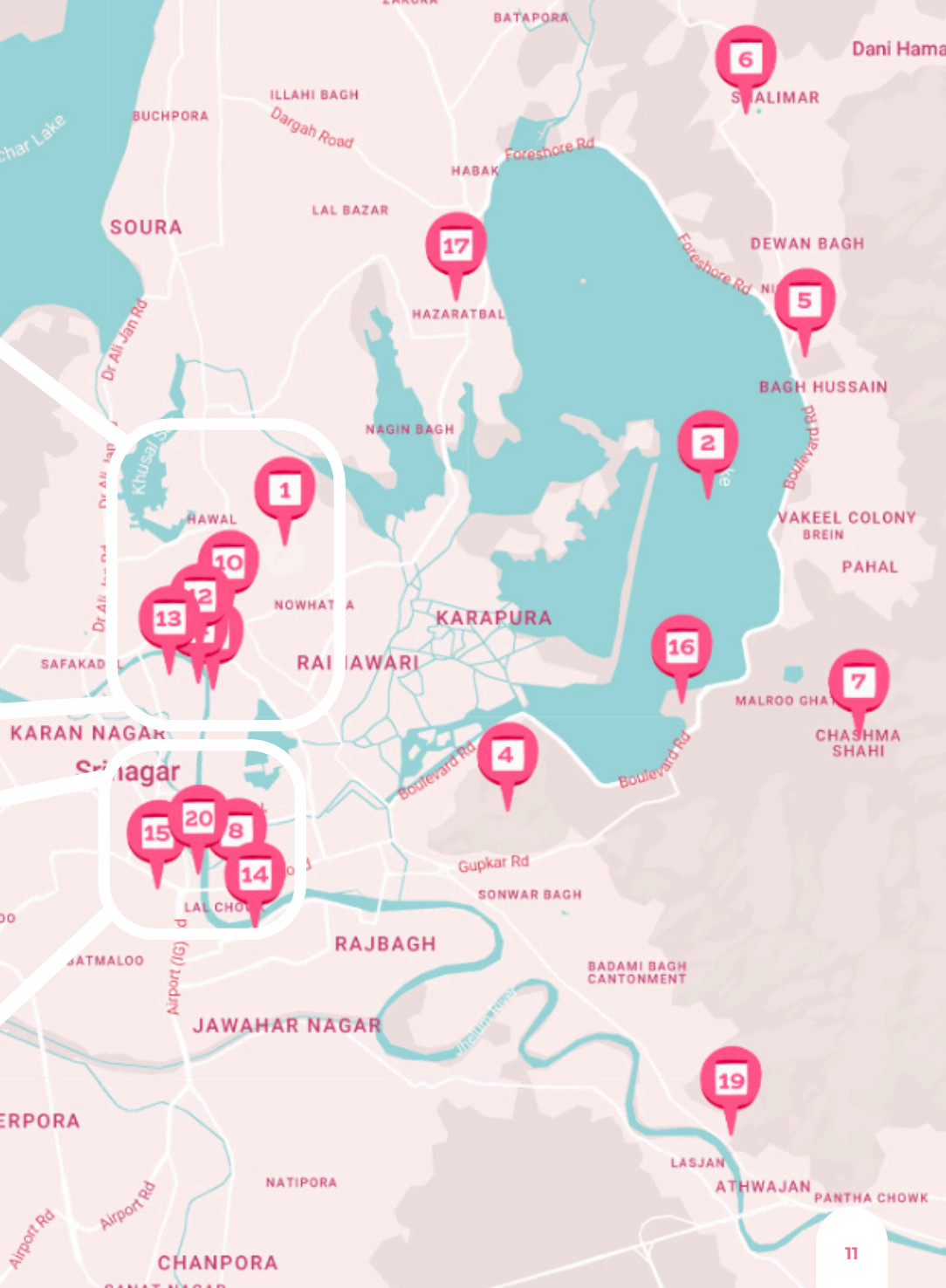
Srinagar's rich artistic heritage echoes through its music and dance, explored in *Echoes of the Valley*, while *From Hands to Heart* and *Stitches of Tradition* celebrate the masterful weavers and embroiderers who define the city's textile legacy. *The Last Defenders* brings forth the stories of artisans striving to keep the dying art forms alive.

Beyond traditions, Srinagar's evolving modern identity is reflected in *Srinagar's Best-Kept Cafe Secrets*, which explores the city's thriving cafe culture. *Tracing Modern Architectural Footprints* highlights the architectural legacy of Achyut Kanvinde, Joseph Allen Stein and Raj Rewal Prasad, showcasing the city in a new light. This booklet brings these stories together, inviting you to explore the city through its many layers.

1. Hari Parbat
2. Dal Lake
3. Zaina Kadal
4. Shankaracharya Temple
5. Nishat Bagh
6. Shalimar Bagh
7. Chashma Shahi
8. Lal Chowk
9. Khanqah-e-Moula Masjid
10. Jamia Masjid
11. Pathar Masjid
12. Mazar-e-Salateen
13. Gurdwara Maharaj Ganj
14. SPS Museum
15. Crafts Museum
16. SKICC
17. Kashmir University
18. Pampore
19. Pandrethan
20. Shergarhi Palace






BATAPORA
Dani Hama
6
SHALIMAR
ILLAHI BAGH
BUCHPORA
Dargah Road
Foreshore Rd
HABAK
LAL BAZAR
SOURA
17
DEWAN BAGH
Foreshore Rd
5
HAZARATBAL
Dr Ali Jan Rd
BAGH HUSSAIN
NAGIN BAGH
2
Boulevard Rd
1
HAWAL
VAKEEL COLONY
BREIN
10
12
PAHAL
13
NOWHATTA
KARAPURA
16
SAFAKADAL
RAINAWARI
7
MALROO GHAT
KARAN NAGAR
CHASHMA SHAHI
4
Boulevard Rd
Boulevard Rd
15
20
8
14
Gupkar Rd
SONWAR BAGH
LAL CHOWK
RAJBAGH
BATMALOO
Airport (IG)
BADAMI BAGH CANTONMENT
JAWAHAR NAGAR
19
LASJAN
ATHWAJAN
PANTHA CHOWK
NATIPORA
Airport Rd
Airport Rd
CHANPORA

A Historical Outline

Abdul Rashid Lone

Marble Pavilion of Shalimar Bagh
Picture Credits: Sam Clickx/Pexels.

Bird's-eye view of Srinagar city from Hari Parbat. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Srinagar, nestled in the Kashmir Valley at 1,585 meters, is bordered by Kargil, Ganderbal, Pulwama, Budgam and Anantnag. The Jhelum River, once a vital trade route, winds through the city, while the Dal and Anchar Lakes add to its charm. Home to the famed Mughal gardens—Nishat, Shalimar and Harwan—Srinagar is a hub of tourism. With settlements dating back to the Neolithic era, its rich heritage underscores its historical and economic significance.

Since the dawn of its history, Srinagar has remained the capital city of Kashmir. Its significance is not limited to it being the seat of government but also a testament to enduring resilience, despite facing numerous challenges throughout its chequered history.

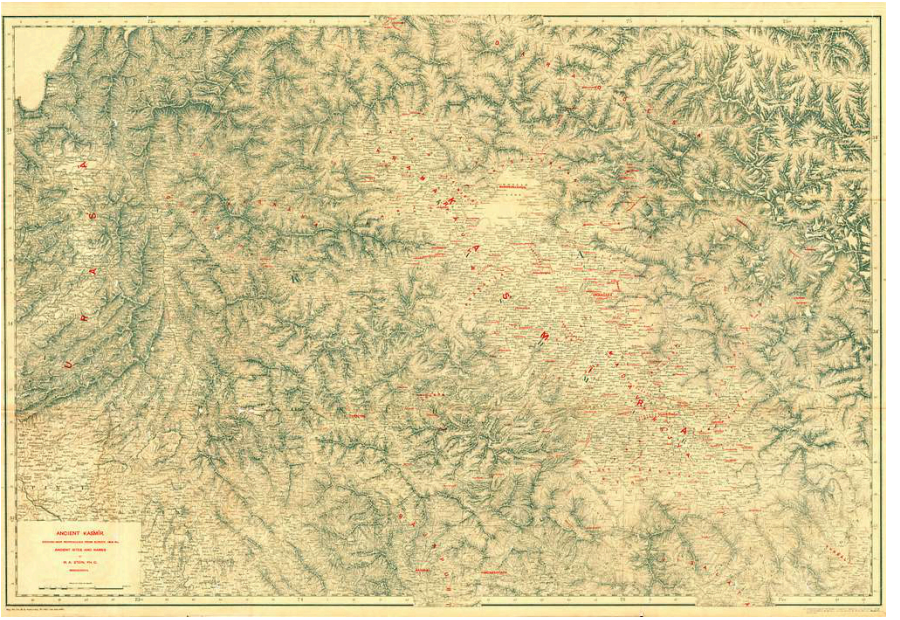
The city's artisan communities shaped its economy, making it a key trade hub. Its strategic location linked major towns like Anantnag, Baramulla, Jammu and Leh, securing vital trade routes to India and Central Asia.

Home to industries like carpet weaving, silk production, metal crafts, leatherworking, and wood carving, Srinagar's commercial and cultural significance ensured that all efforts to shift the seat of government ultimately proved futile.

Early History

Burzahom, the city's earliest known settlement, dates back to the fourth millennium BCE. Discovered near Dal Lake in 1935, excavations (1960–71) by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) revealed four cultural phases—Neolithic I and II, Megalithic and Early Historic.

> The earliest mention of Srinagar appears in Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* (twelfth century), which notes that ancient Kashmir had multiple capitals, with Srinagari—founded by Ashoka in 250 BCE—being the most prominent.



Map of Kashmir from the representations in Kalhana"s *Rajatarangini*, 1900. Picture Credits: Marc Aurel Stein/Wikimedia Commons.

Named after Goddess Lakshmi, its location can be roughly identified as present-day Pandrethan, derived from Puranadhisthana (old capital), a key Buddhist and Brahmanical centre. Identified by British archaeologist Alexander Cunningham in 1848, the site contains a rich repository of architectural fragments and artefacts. Later excavations led by Rai Bahadur Dayaram Sahni (renowned as the first one to excavate Harappa) in 1913 uncovered Brahmanical and Buddhist sculptures, stupas and a monastery enclosure dating to the early medieval period.

Kalhana, in his account, also mentions Jushkapura, a town founded by Jushka, which was under the rule of the Kushana dynasty in Kashmir. The ruins of this town were identified by M.A. Stein near Zakura, a modern village north of Srinagar.

Ruins of a 10th-century temple at Pandrethan, near Srinagar, 1868. Picture Credits: PICRYL.

Cunningham, during his 1847 visit, had reported finding at the site, ‘a considerable number of stone pillars and mouldings of the style of architecture peculiar to Kashmir…’

Ancient terracotta tile from Harwan. Picture Credits: Cleveland Museum of Art/Wikimedia Commons.

Another important site is Harwan, a village northeast of Shalimar Garden. Situated on three terraces overlooking Dal Lake, the settlement was first excavated by R.C. Kak in 1920. Harwan features unique pebble masonry, building bases and an apsidal temple with terracotta tiles adorned with intricate motifs and Kharoshti numerals, dating to the third-fourth centuries CE. Linked to the Kushana period, the site was likely a Buddhist centre before being abandoned after the fifth century CE, possibly due to Huna invasions. Harwan’s findings illuminate Kashmir’s historical significance as a spiritual and artistic centre of the early historic times.

Srinagari was the capital of Kashmir until the mid-sixth century CE, when King Pravarasena II founded Pravarapura near Hari Parbat, on the right bank of the Jhelum. However, the name Srinagari remained in use due to its popularity.

Chinese traveler Xuan Zang, who visited in 631 CE, referred to two capitals: the new city (Pravarapura, identified with modern Srinagar) and the old city, possibly Pandrethan, southeast of it. The *Rajatarangini* vividly describes Pravarapura as a bustling city with towering wooden mansions, markets and waterways (such as the Dal Lake and Jhelum River) and canals that facilitated riverine commerce. It also mentioned the cool and refreshing waters of the Jhelum River and the Hari Parbat offering views of the city’s grandeur. Pravarapura's temple ruins and other structures, built by successive rulers, align with modern Srinagar’s layout. As per scholars, these sites show continuity from ancient to modern times. Key remnants include the Jhelum embankments and an old Muslim cemetery near Hari Parbat. Architectural historian James Fergusson noted the scale and carvings of these ruins, reflecting the city's early grandeur. Emperor Lalitaditya Muktapida established Parihaspora 22 kilometres northwest of Srinagar. By the twelfth century,

Hari Parbat Fort. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

urban development expanded to the left bank of the Jhelum, with the royal palace relocating, signalling a new phase in the city's growth.

During the Medieval Times

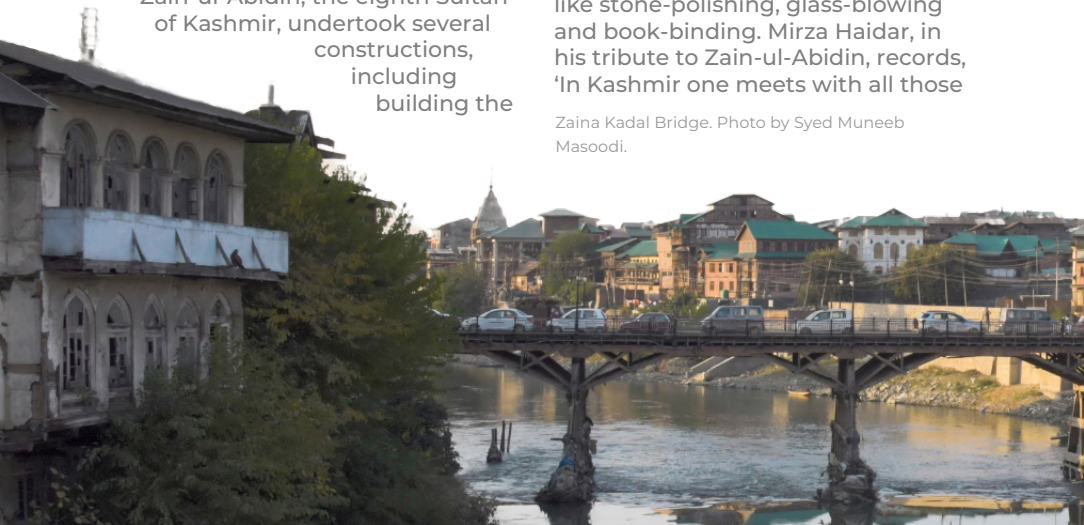
With the onset of Muslim rule in the Valley, the city's name shifted. Most Mughal-era accounts, including those by Mirza Haidar, Abul Fazl and Emperor Jahangir, as well as French traveller François Bernier, refer to it as Kashmir or Shahr-e-Kashmir.

> During the Sultanate and Mughal rule, Kashmir's spiritual landscape changed significantly. Sufi saint Sayyid Ali Hamadani, who visited during Sultan Qutbuddin's reign, made Srinagar his base and helped spread Islam in the region.

Sultan Sikandar, Qutbuddin's successor, built the Khanqah-e-Moula mosque in Hamadani's memory, which became a centre of sociopolitical activity. Sikandar also built the famous Jamia Masjid at Nowhatta.

Zain-ul-Abidin, the eighth Sultan of Kashmir, undertook several constructions, including building the Zaina Kadal Bridge over the Jhelum River, connecting the city's two halves. He also constructed a stone shrine at Madan Sahib and a brick mausoleum for his mother, which is also his burial site. Zain-ul-Abidin is known for promoting shawl and carpet weaving, papier-mâché and wood carving, and introducing crafts like stone-polishing, glass-blowing and book-binding. Mirza Haidar, in his tribute to Zain-ul-Abidin, records, 'In Kashmir one meets with all those

Khanqah-e-Moula Mosque. Photo by Stuti Mishra.



Zaina Kadal Bridge. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

arts and crafts which are, in most cities, uncommon..... In the whole of Mavar-u-Nahar except Samarqand and Bukhara these are nowhere to be met with, while in Kashmir they are abundant. This is all due to Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin.'

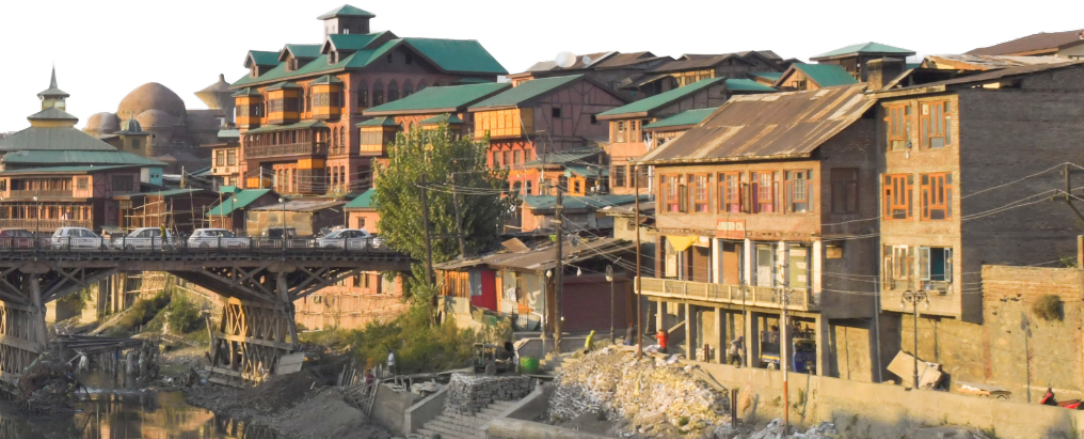
Kashmir was annexed by the Mughal Empire in 1586 after internal instability. The political history of Kashmir during this period revolves around sites like Hari Parbat Fort, Takhat-e-Sulaiman hill, Nowhatta, Nauh Shahr and areas around Jamia Masjid. Akbar visited the Valley thrice (1589, 1592 and 1597), founding Naagar Nagar around Hari Parbat and commissioning a shrine dedicated to Sheikh Hamza Makhdoom.

> The Mughal influence grew under Jahangir and Shah Jahan, with the establishment of gardens around Dal Lake, including Shalimar and Nishat Bagh. In 1623, Nur Jahan began the construction of Pathar Mosque.

Shah Jahan made Kashmir a separate province in 1683, and Aurangzeb laid the foundation of Aali Masjid. In 1699, the *moi mubarak* (sacred hair) of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was brought to Srinagar by Khawaja Nur-ud-Din Ishbari and enshrined at a mosque at Hazratbal, establishing a new spiritual seat.

In 1753, Kashmir came under Afghan rule, lasting until 1819. During this period, Afghan governors Amir Khan Jawansher (1770–76) and Ata Muhammad Khan Barakzai (1806–13)

Hazratbal Mosque. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.



commissioned significant constructions, including the Shergarhi Palace and a fort atop Hari Parbat hill. This era ended with deteriorating conditions and rising communal tensions in Srinagar, marking the end of a significant historical chapter in Srinagar's evolution.

The Modern Times

Kashmir came under Sikh rule in 1819, restoring the name Srinagar to the city. The period was marked with urban decline and restrictions on Muslim practices, including the closure of the Jamia Mosque until 1843, while communal tensions manifested in events like the Shia–Sunni riots of 1837.

With the 1846 Treaty of Amritsar, Dogra rule began, making Srinagar the capital of Jammu and Kashmir, but the city faced severe challenges, including overcrowding, poor sanitation, culminating in the catastrophic 1877–79 famine that wiped out half the population, alongside recurring cholera outbreaks and natural disasters.

> The 1872 Darbar Move introduced seasonal capital shifts between Srinagar and Jammu.

In 1886, the formation of a municipality brought about urban development, including sanitation improvements and the rise of tourism around Dal Lake, with houseboats catering to British officers. Under Dogra rulers Pratap Singh and Hari Singh, the Shergarhi Palace was modified, and parks were developed.

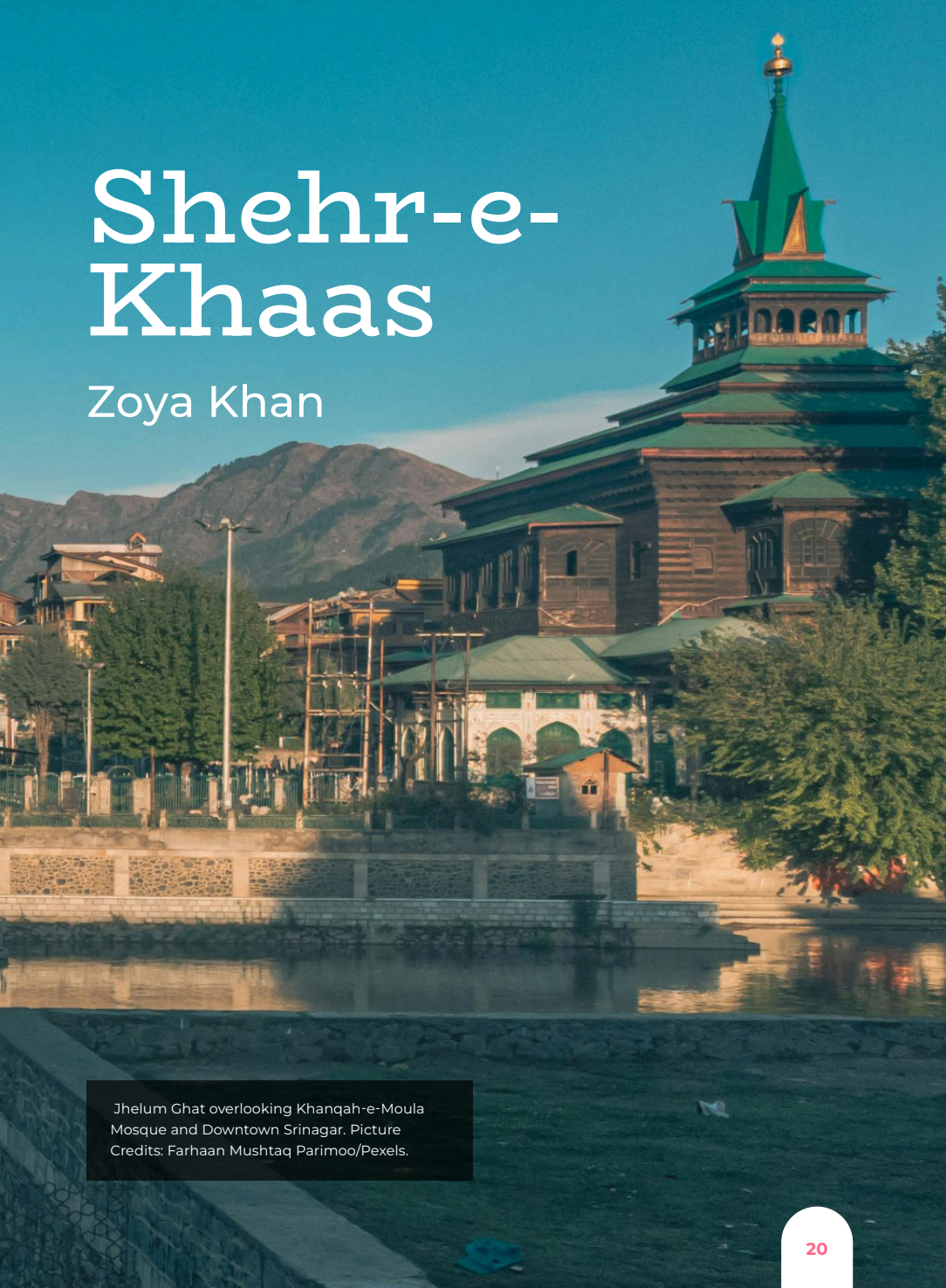
> From 1891 to 1941, Srinagar expanded rapidly due to migration, economic growth and improved public health, alongside the arrival of Punjabi traders and administrators.

After Independence, Srinagar became the summer capital of the state and was granted a special status. Following unrest and the 1990 Pandit exodus, Jammu & Kashmir became a Union Territory in 2019, with Srinagar as its capital.

Hari Parbat Fort. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Shehr-e-Khaas

Zoya Khan



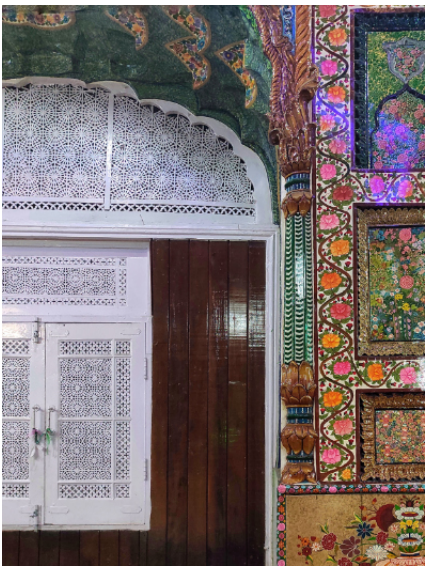
Jhelum Ghat overlooking Khanqah-e-Moula Mosque and Downtown Srinagar. Picture Credits: Farhaan Mushtaq Parimoo/Pexels.

“Kashmir wa digar hech.”
(Kashmir, and nothing else.)

—Emperor Jahangir’s dying words, as recorded in GMD Sufi’s Kashir: Being A History of Kashmir

The Old City of Srinagar encapsulates its historical and multicultural legacy within its urban and architectural fabric. Known for its ghats, *khanqahs* (Sufi shrines) and temples, the city has attracted artists, travellers and emperors, who found inspiration in its beauty. This ancient city has preserved the soul of Kashmiri culture and is a testament to the region’s aesthetic and architectural traditions.

In the shadowed folds of the Himalayas, Old City—or Shehr-e-Khaas as it is popularly known—unfolds like a forgotten verse, a city where architecture and memory intertwine like the filigree of its famed *pinjrakari* windows. Shehr-e-Khaas is not merely a relic of Kashmir’s past but a living entity, a space where architecture, memory and community converge to create an atmosphere that is both historic and contemporary. In Peter Zumthor’s framework, architecture is about creating atmospheres that engage all senses, and Shehr-e-Khaas is a quintessential example. The materiality of the Old City—from Maharaji bricks to timber framing—offers a tactile journey through its streets. Here, ancient mosques, shrines and homes showcase vernacular wisdom, blending Islamic, Hindu and Central Asian architectural styles alongside modern interventions. This unique aesthetic reflects Kashmir’s rich history and cultural significance, highlighting the connection between architecture, environment and local craft practices.



Pinjrakari-style lattice windows and papier-mâché artwork at the Shrine of Sheikh Hamza Makhdoom. Picture Credits: Wikimedia Commons.

Sunlight dances in latticed shadows, winding through narrow alleys, mingling with the sounds of morning calls and evening laments. Walking down Srinagar’s narrow lanes, one experiences the cool smoothness of bricks alongside the warmth of timber.

> The latticework windows and traditional *zoon daeb* (overhanging enclosed balconies) offer glimpses of hidden courtyards and gardens.

Sound is equally integral to Shehr-e-Khaas. The sounds of daily life, the

Traditional homes along the Jhelum River (Vitasta). Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

call to prayer, footsteps on cobbled streets and the murmur of the Jhleum River compose a rhythm that defines the city's atmosphere. This sensory experience heightens one's connection to their environment, embodying the cultural memory and historical continuity of Old Srinagar.

Urban Structure, Social Fabric and role of Jhelum

The Old City grew along the Jhelum River, using its banks as a foundation for trade, daily life and spiritual activities. The urban layout of Shehr-e-Khaas follows the *mohalla* system—a community-centered social fabric based on kinship, profession or religious affiliation. This dense arrangement of narrow lanes, vibrant bazaars and tightly clustered homes forms a living, breathing cityscape where history and community are inseparable. Each *mohalla* is a microcosm of Srinagar's traditional way of life, where neighbourhoods are not just residential spaces but hubs of craft and economic activity.

The Jhelum River, historically known as Vitasta, has been crucial to the city's physical and cultural development. Traditional homes along its banks were built with elevated floors to protect against flooding, with upper levels offering views of the river and the Himalayas. The riverfront ghats (*yarbal*), once vibrant with trade, transport and cultural activities, served as communal spaces for gathering. Artisans set up workshops along the river, utilising its waters for transporting goods. Thus, the riverfront was not only a commercial hub but also a vital space for social interaction and community gathering.

Craftsmanship in Living Architecture

Crafts are integral to Shehr-e-Khaas, home to artisans specialising in wood carving, papier-mâché and *pashmina* weaving. Traditional

Dhajji dewari-style heritage buildings in Srinagar. Picture Credits: Sheikh Basim/Pexels.

Dhajji dewari—traditional Kashmiri houses with timber-brick lattice framework. Photo by Taha Mughal.

Kashmiri homes showcase intricate woodwork and craft practices that go beyond functionality, embedding cultural significance into architectural details. Elements such as *khatamband* ceilings (interlocking wooden panels) and *pinjrakari* lattice windows reflect a balance of aesthetic beauty and structural ingenuity.

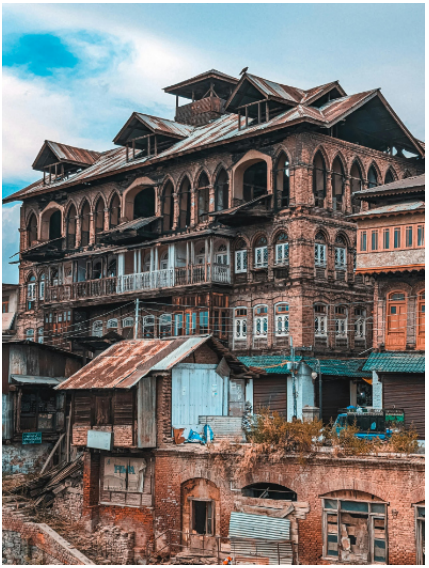
Mr Majeed Bhat, a resident of Shehr-e-Khaas, shares:

> **"Growing up, I always remember in the winter months we used to spend our days in the carpet-making *karkhana* (workshop). The hand-written *taleems* (instructions/lessons) on scrolls of brown paper strewn across the looms and radio playing in the background. My father used to say winters are for hibernating and staying indoors—to create and to perfect your craft. Unfortunately, I did not take up the craft due to personal reasons, but my childhood memories remain strong to this day. It's sad to see our crafts taking a back seat day by day. Modernisation will consume these traditions."**

This reflection underscores the intimate relationship between craft, community and memory in Shehr-e-Khaas, highlighting the need to preserve these invaluable traditions for future generations.

One of the most iconic architectural features of Shehr-e-Khaas homes is *dhajji dewari*, a timber framework filled with brick, allowing the

Khatambandh—intricate hand-crafted wood paneling in traditional Kashmiri architecture. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.



Traditional wooden building in Shehr-e-Khaas. Picture Credits: Umar Andrabi/Pexels.

structure flexibility—a necessary adaptation given the region's seismic activity. Hanging balconies and large lattice windows add to the building's aesthetic while allowing light in and preserving privacy. These homes, usually multi-storeyed, are constructed using local materials such as wood, brick and stone, creating harmony with Kashmir's natural surroundings. Each house is designed to withstand seasonal changes, with thick walls to retain heat in winter and inner courtyards to allow cooling in summer.

Spiritual and Cultural Monuments

Srinagar is dotted with shrines of Sufi saints, such as the shrine of Hazrat Sheikh Hamza Makhdoom (Makhdoom Sahib), which stand as powerful memory sites in the Old City. These shrines are centres of spiritual gathering, particularly during *Urs* (a religious ceremony commemorating the death anniversary of a pir or saint), which become focal points for collective memory and spiritual reaffirmation. The Jamia Masjid and Khanqah-e-

Interiors of the Sufi shrine of Makhdoom Sahib. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Interiors of Jamia Masjid, featuring grand wooden pillars showcasing Kashmiri craftsmanship. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Moula, notable heritage structures, highlight Kashmiri craftsmanship with their grand wooden pillars and decorated ceilings. These religious buildings incorporate similar architectural features as traditional homes, including *khatamband* ceilings and intricate wood carvings.

Shehr-e-Khaas as a Living Heritage

Old City Srinagar offers a rich, multisensory understanding of space that goes beyond architecture and urban planning. It is about how the city's residents live, feel and experience their environment in ways that are deeply rooted in memory, tradition and community. From the textures of wood and stone to the sounds of the river and mosques, from the social dynamics of the *mohalla*s to the historical weight of time, Shehr-e-Khaas remains a living heritage.

Today, the future of Srinagar's traditional architecture stands at a crossroads. Modernisation, urban expansion and socio-economic pressures challenge the survival of these structures. Walking through Shehr-e-Khaas, one encounters time-worn buildings struggling to maintain their place in the contemporary cityscape.

As the city is growing, the mohalla system, once the backbone of community life, is being replaced by modern housing developments that favour economy and density over cultural heritage.

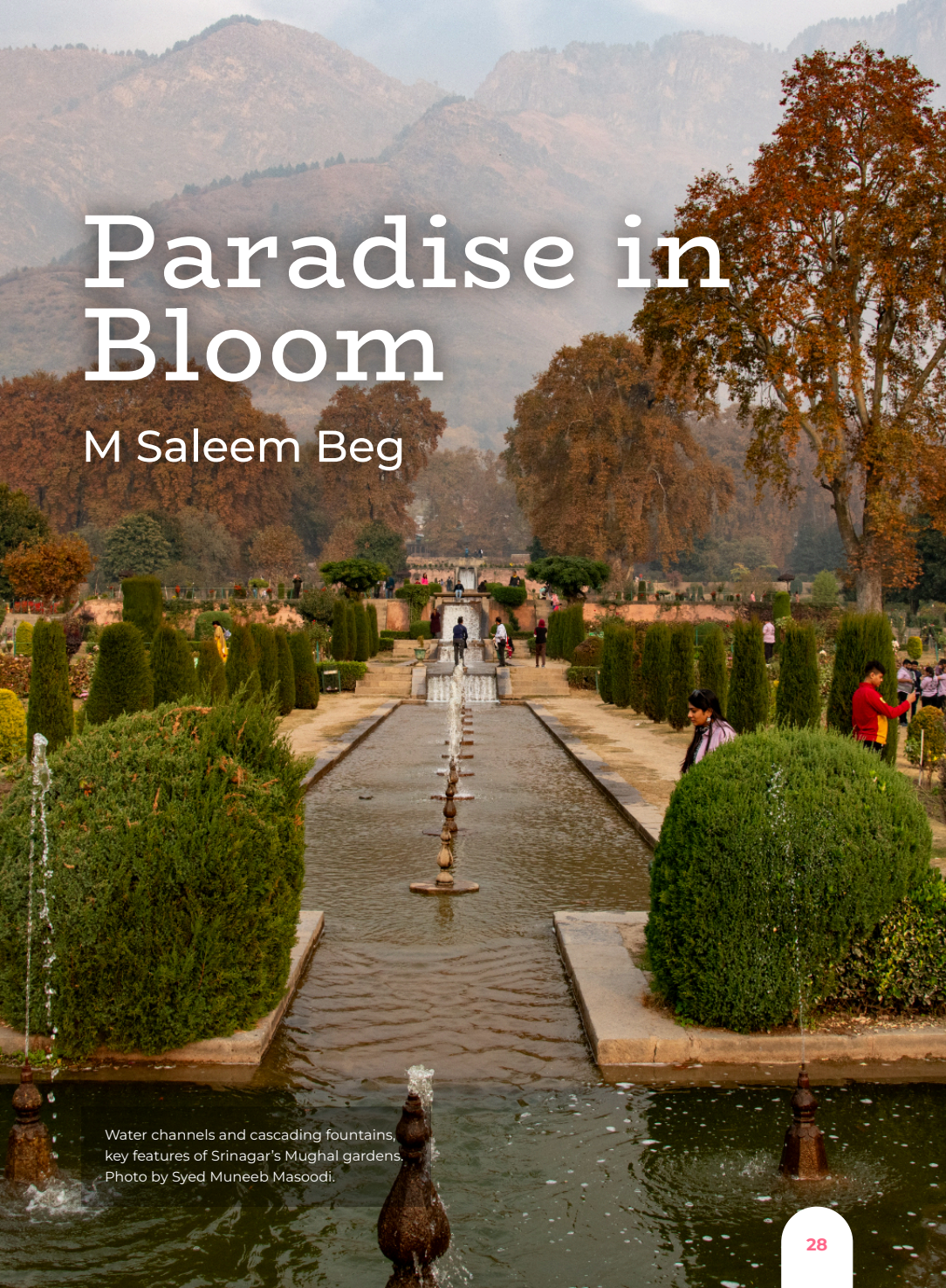
Perhaps more concerning is the steady erosion of traditional craftsmanship as younger generations, seeking financial security, are turning away from ancestral trades towards contemporary careers. This shift not only threatens the survival of traditional arts and crafts but risks severing the chain of knowledge passed down through generations.

However, in recent times, efforts to preserve heritage have been initiated, including projects to restore the Jhelum Riverfront and conserve key buildings.

Traditional buildings in the old quarters of Srinagar. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Paradise in Bloom

M Saleem Beg



Water channels and cascading fountains, key features of Srinagar's Mughal gardens. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

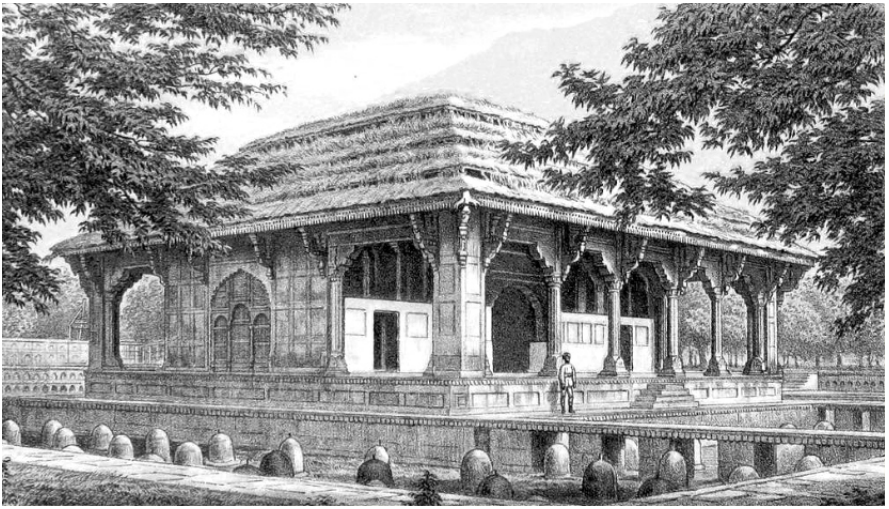


Image taken from *The Happy Valley: sketches of Kashmir and the Kashmiris* by William Wakefield (1879), showcasing the beauty of Kashmir. Picture Credits: British Library.

The Mughal gardens of Kashmir are among the region's most significant cultural and natural treasures, drawing visitors from around the world. Developed after the Mughal Empire took control of Kashmir in 1586 CE, they showcase the Mughals' mastery in blending art, architecture and nature into spaces of extraordinary beauty. Inspired by the concept of an earthly paradise, deeply rooted in Islamic philosophy, these gardens reflect the enduring appeal of the 'Garden of Paradise' in Islamic architecture, poetry and design.

Following the *Chahar Bagh* or *Charbagh* layout, a central water channel divides the space into four symmetrical quadrants adorned with lush foliage, orchards and intricate water features like pools and cascades.

> Water played a dual role, both for sustaining the gardens and as a key aesthetic element, reinforcing symmetry, tranquillity and a sense of divine order.

Each Mughal emperor contributed distinct innovations to these gardens, particularly in securing a sustainable water supply and enhancing their paradisiacal appeal. Typically located at the foothills of mountains with access to streams or springs, these gardens demonstrate the Mughals' ingenuity in adapting to challenging terrain. By skilfully utilising natural landscapes and water resources, they achieved a seamless blend of functionality, aesthetics and symbolism, making these gardens more than just decorative spaces.

Emperor Akbar, after annexing the Valley of Kashmir, envisioned Kashmir as a garden, or bagh, and celebrated its beauty by planting gardens laden with majestic chinar trees. However, it was Emperor

Jahangir (and his consort, Empress Nur Jahan) who made Kashmir integral to the Mughal aesthetic imagination. The sacredness of springs at Verinag and Achabal inspired Jahangir to adorn these ancient sites by expanding or laying out gardens around them. The Achabal garden was dedicated to Nur Jahan, who also became co-sovereign during Jahangir's reign. This garden was named after her as Begumabad.

Though the tradition of laying gardens came into prominence during Jahangir's reign, it was Shah Jahan who is credited with creating some of the most iconic Mughal baghs in Kashmir.

Mughal historians such as Abdul Hamid Lahori, who chronicled the reign of Shah Jahan, documented several of these gardens in the *Padshahnama*. The gardens mentioned by Lahori are set up around lakes, springs and more specifically at the foothills. Out of these, the gardens surviving in more or less their original setting are Shalimar, Nishat, Chashma Shahi, Pari Mahal, Verinag and Achabal. Some of the prominent gardens mentioned that survive only by their names recorded by Lahori include:

A manuscript of *Padshahnama*. Picture Credits: Royal Collection Trust/Wikimedia Commons.

1. Bagh-i-BaharAra
2. Bagh-i-Illahi
3. Bagh-i-Aishabad
4. Bagh-i-Noor Afshan
5. Bagh-i-Safa
6. Bagh-i-Shahabad
7. Bagh-i-Murad (near Dal Lake)
8. Bagh-i-Afzalabad
9. Bagh-i-Zafar Khan (on Khushal Sar)
10. Bagh-i-Feroz Khan (on the Jhelum River)
11. Bagh-i-Khidmat Khan (on an island in Dal Lake)
12. Jharokha Bagh (in Manasbal)

Beyond their aesthetic and architectural grandeur, the Mughal gardens have long served as sanctuaries for spiritual introspection in Kashmir. Sufi orders, in particular, found in these gardens a perfect setting for quiet reflection. Discerning visitors continue to experience these transcendent qualities, highlighting how Mughal Garden design deftly merges worldly beauty with an other-worldly sense of peace. During the Shahjahani period, Dara Shikoh and Jahanara, influenced by their mystical orientations, set up gardens to serve as abodes for Mulla Shah, the eminent spiritual teacher and renowned Sufi of the Qadri order. Additionally, both Dara and Jahanara owned personal gardens within the royal Mughal city in Srinagar and outside the city along the banks of Dal Lake. Dara or Jahanara also sponsored a garden on the banks of Anchar Lake for Mulla Shah, which still goes by the name Mulla Shah Bagh.

Gardens in Arts and Literature

The Mughal gardens of Kashmir were immortalised in art and literature. Shah Jahan's court poets, Qudsi Mashhadi and Abu Talib Kalim Kashani, composed splendid Persian verses celebrating Kashmir's landscapes and gardens. These poems captured the transcendent beauty of the region:

Talib Amuli

بہ باغ ہای آن چو درآیی گشادہ آغوش
کہ ہر طرف صف حوران بہ حریر اندر است

When you enter its gardens, spread your arms in a wide embrace,

For there are rows of houris everywhere, dressed in finest silks.

Qudsi Mashhadi

نہ دہر دادہ بہ دل جای زینہار بہ از
بہ آرزوی تو ای گلعذار بہ از

نہ در بہشت خرم است و سودش
نہ در بہشت روان است و آبش

No better place where the heart may seek joy,

Than the world-adorned gardens of Kashmir.

Its essence, more delightful than paradise;

Its waters, brighter than Khizr's spring of life.

In later centuries, Persian literary traditions were enriched by Urdu poetry. Hafeez Jalandhari's 1930s magnum opus *Tasveer-i-Kashmir* celebrated Kashmir's gardens as

Bagh-e-Nishat. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

timeless symbols of joy and beauty:

Come, let me show you the attainment of eternal joy,

Morning in the Garden of Breeze (Bagh-e-Naseem),

Evening in the Garden of Delight (Bagh-e-Nishat).

Preservation and Conservation Efforts

The major surviving Mughal gardens in Srinagar include Shalimar Bagh, Nishat Bagh, Chashma Shahi and Pari Mahal. Beyond Srinagar, Achabal and Verinag—located 65 and 85 kilometers away, respectively—also retain much of their original charm. Shalimar Bagh, built by Jahangir and Shah Jahan, epitomises Mughal indulgence and royal grandeur, while Nishat Bagh was commissioned by Noor Jahan's brother, Asif Khan, in 1633 CE. Chashma Shahi, constructed by Ali Mardan Khan, reflects Mughal mastery in integrating architecture with natural springs.

Chashma Shahi. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Painting by Manohar, depicting Jahangir receiving his son Prince Parviz in a garden in the presence of courtiers, opaque watercolour and gold on paper, Mughal, ca. 1610-1615. Picture Courtesy: Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The decline of the Mughal Empire led to neglect and vandalism of these gardens. Some Restoration efforts began during the Dogra rule (1846–1947 CE) and continued post-Independence. In 1904, John Marshall, the then director-general of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), documented these gardens' designs, offering invaluable insights into their layouts. Despite some colonial modifications, such as replacing fruit orchards with open lawns, the core structures of the gardens remain intact.

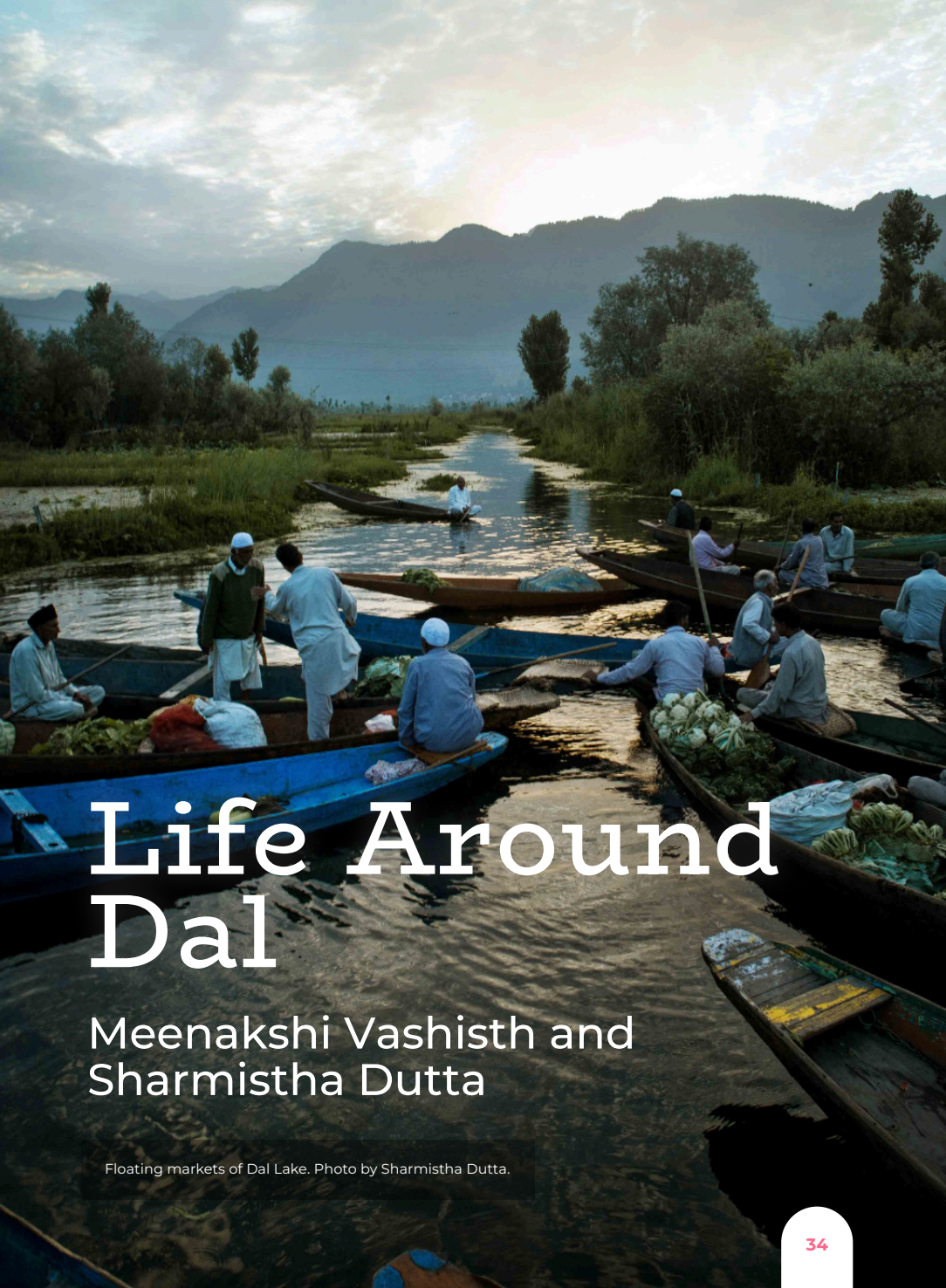
> In 2004–05, the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) was commissioned by the state government for undertaking a detailed survey and restoration programme.

Architects led by INTACH conservation experts recommended reversing inappropriate interventions, restoring water channels, fountains, and retaining walls using traditional techniques. Notably, based on their recommendations, the Hammam at Shalimar Bagh was transformed into a living exhibition space.

Long-term Approach for Restoration

The preservation of Kashmir's Mughal gardens remains an ongoing challenge, requiring expertise in historical landscape management and Mughal architectural practices. With sustained efforts, these 'gardens of paradise' can continue to inspire and captivate future generations, celebrating the timeless harmony between nature and culture. Kashmir's mountainous topography and seasonal variations demand careful ecological stewardship, a principle that resonates from the Mughal era to the present day. Historically, streams and springs were ingeniously channelled to feed intricate waterworks, sustaining lush orchards and sea-sonal blooms. Today, however, the pressures of urban sprawl, water scarcity, unsustainable tourism, and depleted expertise and human resource pose significant threats to this delicate balance. The interventions and conservation efforts must, therefore, adopt a holistic approach—restoring the built fabric and landscapes, upgrading the traditional irrigation systems and mitigating environmental impacts—to preserve both the natural heritage and cultural legacy.

Shalimar Bagh, with its *Chahar Bagh* layout, central water channel, and symmetrical quadrants featuring lush foliage and intricate water features. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.



Life Around Dal

Meenakshi Vashisth and Sharmistha Dutta

Floating markets of Dal Lake. Photo by Sharmistha Dutta.

Dal Lake, Kashmir by Charles W. Bartlett, 1916, woodblock print. Picture Credits: GetArchive.

The Dal Lake is a central element of Srinagar's heritage, intricately linked to the city's history and culture. The city itself was built around the Dal, which continues to be a defining aspect of its identity.

Historical references such as Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* (twelfth century) identify the lake as 'Mahasarit'.

Mirroring the grandeur of the Himalayas in its waters, the lake has the power to captivate even the most sceptical visitors. Its timeless beauty has inspired poetry, art and cinema for centuries. Who can forget Shammi Kapoor serenading Sharmila Tagore on a *shikara* (traditional wooden boats) in *Kashmir ki Kali*?

Often referred to as the 'jewel of Srinagar', the Dal Lake transcends its role as a natural landmark. Located at the base of the Zabarwan mountain range, this serene blue freshwater lake is an intricate ecosystem of water, vegetation and human habitation. Spanning approximately 18 square kilometres, the lake's unique features include *raadh* or *rad* (floating gardens), wetlands and interlinked water channels. These elements nurture a rich biodiversity, including migratory birds such as Mallard, Rock Pigeon, Eurasian Moorhen, Eurasian Jackdaw, Indian Pond Heron, Eurasian Coot, etc. The surface of the lake is often adorned with expansive leaves of aquatic plants, interspersed with blooming lotus flowers and white water lilies. The lake is also famous for its lotus flowers (*Nelumbo nucifera*) that flourish during July and August. These aquatic plants provide food and shelter to fish and other aquatic creatures. However, while parts of the lake are pristine, others are plagued by green algae, which, despite its

Farmers gather at the floating market with their boats laden with vegetables, flowers and fruits. Photo by Sharmistha Dutta.

visual appeal, degrades water quality and requires regular removal.

Cultural and Economic Lifeline

The communities surrounding Dal have ingeniously developed diverse livelihoods. Tourism remains the primary source of income, especially during summers, yet agriculture, water-produce harvesting, local markets, boat-making and fishing also thrive within this ecosystem. The houseboats, intricately carved with traditional woodwork, cater to visitors from across the globe, while shikaras serve as multipurpose watercraft—used for transportation, fishing and vending goods like saffron, handicrafts and flowers.

The lake also supports agricultural activities, including a rich yield of produce cultivated both within the lake and in its surrounding catchment area.

> The floating market on Dal, among the largest in South Asia, epitomises this dynamic interaction between economy and ecology. Operating in the early hours, typically from 5 to 7 am, farmers in *shikara*s trade vegetables, flowers and fruits, conducting business in Koshur (local Kashmiri dialect).

The lake is also home to floating shops that display items ranging from faux designer jackets to traditional Kashmiri shawls and

papier-mâché crafts. Adding to its uniqueness, Dal also hosts a floating post office, which stands as a symbol of adaptability. During the peak tourist seasons of May and June, the floating shops light up in the evenings, with their reflections creating an almost magical ambiance. Life on the waterways of the lake unfolds at a pace distinct from Srinagar's urban sprawl, with the surrounding communities deeply attuned to its rhythms.

Fishing remains a cornerstone of the local economy, with traditional methods yielding species such as Schizothorax and trout. The lake also yields *nadru* (lotus stems) and water chestnuts, popular items in Kashmiri cuisine. Although lotus stem cultivation suffered during the 2014 floods, it has since been revived through the efforts of local farmers.

The intricate network of lakes and canals also functions as a system of roads, with almost every household maintaining a personal boat. For children residing in houses along the lake, boats serve as their primary and an economical means of transportation to schools. Similarly, in medical emergencies, doctors and patients rely on boats due to their accessibility, low cost and speed. Many of the bridges spanning the waterways, some dating back to the Mughal era, bear witness to the region's historical legacy.

Floating Post Office. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Collecting *nadru*. Photo by Sharmistha Dutta.

Houseboats and Shikaras

The houseboats on Dal Lake are synonymous with Srinagar, and staying in one is an essential part of the Srinagar experience. The longest stretch of these iconic floating homes lines Boulevard Road, Srinagar's most prestigious address. Houseboats, typically accessed via complimentary *shikara* rides provided by their owners, are both homes and means of livelihood for numerous families.

These floating dwellings have an intriguing geopolitical legacy rooted

Houseboats and their unique names. Photo by Stuti Mishra.

in the British colonial period. British India was suspicious of the looming Russian presence in Central Asia, and the ensuing manoeuvres by both sides resulted in the 'Great Game'. The Dogra rulers of Kashmir were wary of being a pawn in the game. As a result, the British were not allowed to buy land in Kashmir. Barred from purchasing land in Kashmir, the British circumvented restrictions by building houseboats on the lake—as there were no restrictions on living on the water. Today, these structures retain a colonial charm, complemented by Kashmiri craftsmanship in woodworking, textiles, papier-mâché and carpets. A typical houseboat features five to six fully furnished rooms, with some even boasting earthen fireplaces for the harsh winters. The owners usually reside in adjoining boats.

Another interesting feature of these houseboats is their distinctive names.

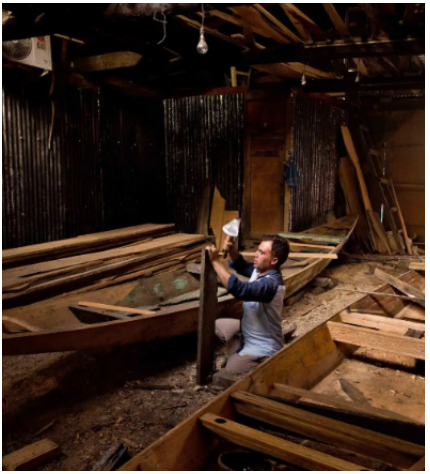
> In the nineteenth century, when Europeans set up floating homes in the houseboats on the Dal Late, they named them after familiar places back home, such as New Buckingham Palace, reflecting their nostalgia.

Over time, Kashmiri owners embraced this practice, infusing it with local culture and spirituality. Names like Firdaus (paradise) and Noor Mahal (palace of light) draw from Persian and Urdu poetry, while Meherban (gracious) and Karam (blessing) reflect the region's spiritual heritage. This naming tradition not only showcases the houseboat's identity and owner's aspirations but also serves as a unique marketing

tool.

*Shikara*s are ubiquitous on Dal Lake, functioning as water taxis and multipurpose vessels. Seating up to six passengers, many of these boats feature canopies to shield against the sun. The Shikara Festival, celebrated annually between March and May, further showcases the cultural and economic significance of these traditional wooden boats. Featuring boat races, cultural performances and other festivities, the event draws locals and tourists alike to celebrate the essence of Dal Lake. The symbiotic relationship between *shikarawallah*s and local traders fosters a bustling lake economy, with vendors selling items such as perfumes, jewellery and semi-precious stones to visitors.

Crafting houseboats and *shikara*s is a time-honoured skill passed down through generations. Made primarily from durable deodar wood, these boats are built to endure. Small workshops and factories scattered around the lake construct boats year-round. A *shikara* takes around 10 days to complete, selling for 1.5–2 lakh rupees, while a large houseboat, with seven to eight rooms, might require six months of labour and sell for 2–3 crores, depending on its amenities.



Craftsman crafting a *shikara*. Photo by Sharmistha Dutta.

Children going to school. Photo by Sharmistha Dutta.

Dal Lake, with its scenic charm and socio-economic vibrancy, continues to shape the lives and livelihoods of those who inhabit its shores. A visit to this iconic waterbody offers a glimpse into a world where nature, culture and history coexist in a harmonious rhythm.

Trami. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Wazwan: A Culinary Legacy

Raja Muzaffar Bhat

Wazwan, a traditional multi-course meat-based cuisine, is renowned for its elaborate preparation and cultural significance in Kashmir, taking centre stage at weddings and social gatherings. The tradition fosters community bonding as guests gather around a *trami* (large copper plate) to enjoy a meal. The custom concludes with guests receiving designated bags of leftovers, emphasising a tradition of sustainability and minimising waste.

Introduced to Kashmir from Central Asia 600 years ago, *wazwan* evolved from a seven-dish meal into a multi-course feast featuring upto 12 to 24 dishes such as *rogan josh*, *gushtaba* and *yakhni*. This culinary tradition has flourished in Kashmir through centuries of innovation and artistic refinement, given Kashmir's strategic position on the Silk Route, connecting China to Europe, which brought diverse cultural and culinary influences, especially from Persia, Russia and Central Asia.

The wooden hammer used for pounding *rista* meatballs, ensures perfect texture and consistency. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

A *waza* cutting marinated meat with *khont* (wooden base) and *kharu* (knife). Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

The term *wazwan* derives from *waza*, meaning 'chef' or 'cook', and *wan*, meaning 'shop', though traditionally *wazas* were set up as temporary kitchens in host's homes — a practice still prevalent during weddings in the region. While historically reserved for weddings, *wazwan* is now served at various family functions.

Authentic *wazwan* is prepared in large copper cauldrons, called *daig*, using dry wood from fruit trees like apple, walnut or plum, each known to impart its distinct flavour. Non-fruit trees like acacia and willow are also occasionally used. Skilled *wazas* lead the process, working in teams based on the event size. A typical wedding requires 200-300 kg of meat and three–four *wazas* with their assistants. Larger celebrations, processing 500-1,000 kg of meat, need larger teams. The *wasta*, or

head chef, supervises the entire preparation process, from slaughtering the meat to cooking. This skilled team of chefs meticulously cut and prepare the lamb meat, ensuring each piece is tailored for each specific dish. For instance, the fine, tender cuts reserved for *gushtaba* or *rista* differ from the robust pieces used for *rogan josh* or the fatty ribs required for *tabakh maaz*. This process involves not just cutting but an intricate understanding of the meat's texture and suitability for various preparations, showcasing a level of expertise that far exceeds traditional butchery.

Signature Delicacies

Tabakh Maaz:

Tabakh maaz is a popular starter in a *wazwan* feast. Fatty lamb ribs are simmered in a large *daig* with a precise blend of water and spices like cardamom, cinnamon, ginger powder, garlic paste and cloves until tender. The ribs are then cut into rectangular pieces and fried in ghee to achieve a perfect balance: crispy, caramelised with a succulent interior. The skill of the *waza* shines through in this delicate balance, earning him particular praise when executed flawlessly.

Tabak Maaz, tender, fried lamb ribs, seasoned with aromatic spices. Photo by Raja Muzaffar Bhat.

Rista:

Rista. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Rista meatballs, typically weighing 80–100 grams each, are served in spicy mutton gravy with rice. Traditionally, one *rista* is served per person around the *trami*.

Rogan Josh:

This iconic dish features mutton pieces, typically 70–80 grams each, from the lower ribs, lower back (*bukhtor*), chest and neck. The meat is simmered in a rich gravy with garlic, ginger, red chili, clove, cardamom, cinnamon and *pran* (shallots) paste. After braising, it is left to simmer on medium heat and served hot with rice.

Aab Gosht:

The dish is made with lamb from the tail, shoulder or shank. The mutton is boiled until tender and cooked with shallot, garlic paste, ginger powder, fennel powder, cloves, cardamoms, cinnamon and salt. Full-cream dry milk is added to create a creamy soup, further enriched with ghee. A generous serving of *aab gosht,* with its creamy soup, is traditionally served with rice.

Yakhni with Gushtaba:

A *wazwan* preparation begins with the lamb slowly simmered in salted water, creating a broth that serves as the base for all dishes. For specialties like *gushtaba* and *rista*, raw lamb is minced with a wooden hammer on a flat stone, mixed with sheep fat until light pink, then seasoned with black cardamom and salt. The mixture is shaped into meatballs, with *gushtaba* being larger than *rista.* These are boiled until soft. *Gushtaba* is cooked in *yakhni*, a thick gravy made from yogurt, mutton broth, shallots, ginger, garlic and spices like cinnamon and cardamom. The dish is served with cumin and dry mint powder. A single *gushtaba* (200–400 grams) serves four and is shared by the group, reflecting the communal spirit of the feast.

Vegetarian Dishes:

Kashmir's vegetarian cuisine, often overshadowed by meat dishes, includes special items like *tamatar chaman* and mushroom preparations. *Tamatar chaman* features paneer cooked in turmeric water, fried in mustard oil, and served with a rich gravy made from tomatoes, fennel, red chili, shallots and dry ginger. Button mushrooms are usually boiled and cooked in a gravy of onions, shallots, and curd. For special occasions, gucchi mushrooms (morels) are cooked in a rich gravy made from milk and cream.

Nadru yakhni. Picture Credits: Wikimedia Commons.

Nadru (lotus stem), another delicacy, is a staple in Kashmiri households, commonly prepared in dishes like *nadru yakhni*, where it's cooked in a yogurt-based gravy with aromatic spices, or *nadur monje*, crispy deep-fried fritters enjoyed as a snack. Its earthy texture makes it a unique ingredient in Kashmiri cuisine.

Kahwa:

The golden-hued drink is a warm conclusion to a Kashmiri feast. It is made by boiling green tea, cinnamon, cardamom, saffron and sometimes rose petals, and usually sweetened with sugar, honey or topped with crushed almonds.

Pran:

Pran (shallot) is one such ingredient that sets a *wazwan* apart from the Mughlai cuisines of Delhi, Lucknow, Hyderabad and beyond, where ginger, garlic, black pepper and cloves are more common. A member of the onion family, *pran* was classified as a separate species until 2010. Grown in Kashmir, it is especially valued during weddings, and can cost INR 500 to INR 1,000 per kilogramme. Preparing *pran* is labour-intensive: women clean and chop the bulbs, which are then fried in large quantities and ground into a paste. For every 100 kilogrammes of *wazwan*, 7–10 kilogrammes of *pran* is used.

Wazpur and the New Generation of Wazas

Srinagar's Wazpur district has been home to the city's top *wazwan* chefs for generations. However, the younger generation is increasingly moving away from the profession due to its demanding nature, with long hours, exposure to heat and smoke and sleepless nights, all of which take a toll on health.

Fayaz Ahmad, a renowned chef from Wazpur, shares,

> **"The new generation is not keen on continuing this work due to the patience and perseverance it requires. We work with fire, smoke and heavy copper vessels, often starting at dawn and working past midnight. During the wedding season, from May to October, we stay away from home for days with little sleep. The younger generation is not ready for these challenges. Interestingly, former helpers from remote areas of Kashmir are now leading the profession. Wazpur is slowly losing its charm."**

Jahangir Ahmad, 29, is a second-generation *waza* from Kralcheck, Budgam district, Kashmir. His father, Ghulam Hassan, 60, has 35 years of experience and trained under senior *waza* Farooq Ahmad in Srinagar. Jahangir and his father are highly sought after in rural Chadoora, where they lead a team of 10–15 workers. 'From May to November, we are always busy with work. Our workers are seasonal and are paid based on their skills. Some wash the large *daig*, some prepare rice, and others mince the meat for *gushtaba*, *rista* and *seekh kebabs*. My father oversees the work while I, along with two other chefs, cook the dishes. Even beginners earn INR 700 per day, while trained *waza*s can earn INR 2,000 to 3,000 per day,' shares Jahangir Ahmad.

In an age where culinary practices are rapidly changing across the world, *wazwan* stands out as one of the few traditional cuisines still prepared and served in the old way. This living tradition, thus, deserves protection for future generations.

Wazwan being prepared in traditional *daigs*. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Baking with Baraka

Taha Mughal

Traditional Kashmiri bakery displaying an assortment of freshly baked breads. Picture Credits: Wikimedia Commons.

In the Kashmir Valley, where the crisp morning air carries the aroma of freshly baked bread, the *kandur* (traditional baker) begins work long before sunrise. As Muslim devotees rise for *Tahajjud* (pre-dawn prayer), smoke billows from *kandurwaans* (bakeries), veiling Srinagar's dense neighbourhoods in an ashen haze. Inside, a *tandoor* (large clay oven) glows, its heat sealed by the *damgeer* (iron lid). It was under such a damgeer that fourteenth-century mystic Lal Ded found refuge, leaping naked into the *tandoor* only to emerge miraculously clothed in flowers.

Archival images of 1957 captured by Photographer Brain Brake during his visit to Kashmir, showcasing the traditional *barakas*, reflecting their cultural life. Picture Courtesy: Taha Mughal.

Ever since, *kandurs* believe their craft carries *baraka* (divine blessing) of Lal Ded. The *tandoor*, likely introduced via the Silk Route, traces its origins to the Persian *tanur*, connecting Kashmir's baking traditions to Central Asia and Iran.

While similar bakers exist across Pakistan and Southern Caucasus, bread-making in Shehr-e-Khaas transcends mere baking; it represents the rhythm of life and community ties. Its cultural significance is reflected in folklore and literature, from Mahmood Gami's verse *Chaytmo chini pyalen chai hato* (1855), where a woman offers tea to her beloved, to Zareef Ahmad Zareef's satire *Kandur Kaar* (2015). Both highlight how the shared warmth of tea and bread remains central to Kashmiri identity. For most families, mornings are incomplete without a visit to the *kandur*, with each *mohalla* (neighbourhood) having its own *kandurwaan*.

In Srinagar, bread is a staple enjoyed throughout the day, often paired with tea. Alongside *Chinipyala* (a handleless bone china cup), the *khos* (a rare bronze vessel of Kashmiri Pandits), or an ornate *samovar*, a wicker basket filled with *lavasa* and *girda* remains a breakfast tradition in Kashmir's villages. While modern crockery has replaced these vessels in cities, bread—with more than fifteen variants—remains essential from dawn to dusk. The Crewel-embroidered bags that carry these breads symbolise a tradition that unites Kashmiris across socioeconomic divides.

The Setting

A *kandur*'s shop is typically located on the ground floor, its modest facade often lacking a signboard yet exuding warmth. Outside a *kandurwaan*, an elderly man in a *pheran* is often seen puffing a

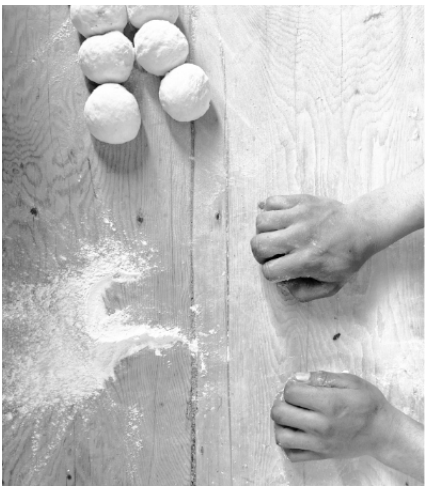
hookah, seated beside a wooden *galdaan* (cash box). The recessed wood counter displays baked goods through glass panels, with shelves sometimes lined with newspapers. A small handrail (4–10 inches high) marks the shopfront boundary, where customers wait their turn to order from the *vaste* (lead baker).

Traditional shops had ceiling-high shelves for heat retention and windows for transactions. Early photographs by Capt S. Hogg (1917) document the use of *hatab* (witch hazel) and *waguv* (reed mats) as sunshades, now rare. Images from the 1940s–1950s show breads stored in repurposed oil tins with glass inserts being sold in wooden carts and wicker baskets—practices that have mostly disappeared, though the essence of the *kandurwaan* remains unchanged.

Archival images of 1917 captured by Capt. S. Hogg showcasing the traditional *barakas*, reflecting their cultural life. Picture Courtesy: Taha Mughal.

The Layout

A typical *kandurwaan* is divided into a sitting area and a recessed workspace for bakers, aligning with different stages of breadmaking. The sales area features a wooden till and a low platform for displaying breads.



Preparing the dough balls on an elevated *takhte* or wooden board. Photo by Taha Mughal.

> The central tandoor with its lid (*damgeer*) is placed nearby. The workspace, typically four feet below the customer area, has designated stations —one for dough preparation on a *takhte* and another for baking. Tools include a scraper (*khurchan*), skewers and weighing scales (now often digital). A secondary oven (*matte*) stores half-burnt firewood (*sokhte*) for low-temperature baking.

While modern exhausts and

chimneys improve ventilation, walls still accumulate soot. Maintenance involves applying fresh mud coats (*lyiwun*) every few weeks, with open entrances aiding airflow.

The Process

The bread-making process begins the night before baking with the preparation of *mayye* or *zyevrun*, a pre-ferment of maida flour and water (*aedrawun*) left overnight to develop into a paste-like consistency. A portion of this is mixed with more maida and water to form the dough.

At dawn, an apprentice fetches apricot firewood for the *tandoor* and sweeps the shop, while the baker kneads the dough in a large copper pan (*taev*) for morning breads like *girda*, *lavasa*, and *gyev tschot*. After resting, the dough is weighed, shaped into palm-sized balls, and covered with a damp cloth (*tarpoosh*) to retain moisture.

Crafting indentations on a flattened dough to prepare *girde* on a marble base. Photo by Taha Mughal.

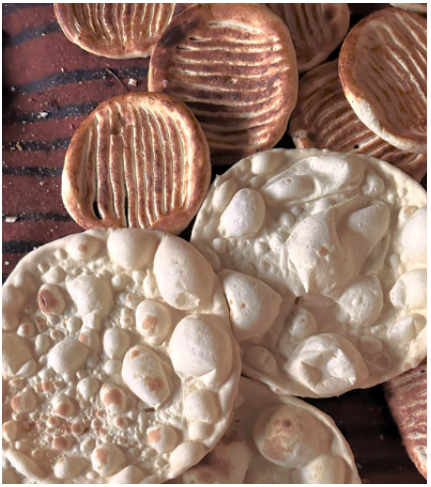
Uniformly sized dough balls kept awet by a cloth. Photo by Taha Mughal.

Flattened on a marble slate (*devri*), it is then applied to the *tandoor* walls using hand pressure or a cushion-like pad (*ribde*).

A seated baker adjusts the bread using a hooked rod (*seekh*) and spatula (*ramme*) for even baking. The process, yielding about a thousand breads daily, involves a synchronised effort of three–five people, often family members.

The Varieties

A Kashmiri *tandoor* runs all day, baking different breads according to the oven's gradually decreasing temperature. At its hottest, flatbreads like *tschot* (made from maida flour, milk and salt) are baked until golden. A breakfast staple, they are served with *nun chai* and butter. As the *tandoor* begins to cool, *ghee tschot*, enriched with *ghee*, is baked, commonly served with tea or *rogan josh* at weddings or during Ramadan. Following that, the bakers



Lavasa and *gyav tschot*. Photo by Taha Mughal.

move on to the thinner *lavasa* (similar to naans), served as wraps containing barbecued mutton or chickpeas. Then comes *tsochwor* (sesame-seed sprinkled doughnuts), usually had with *nun chai* or curd.

Golden brown *girde* with sprinkled poppy seeds. Photo by Taha Mughal.

By afternoon, *kulchas* are baked—sweet ones paired with nun chai, while the savoury variety with nuts is served at celebrations. *Khatai*, a sweet *kulcha*, and mildly sweet *sheermal* flavoured with date milk are best enjoyed with *kahwa*. For special occasions, such as at weddings and engagements, *bakerkhani*, a layered, *ghee*-rich puff pastry, is served. *Roath,* another sweet, sponge-like bread containing dry fruits, is prepared for significant social occasions, such as childbirth or the arrival of a new bride, with the tradition of distribution known as *Roath Khabar*.

Tandoori *kulcha*. Photo by Taha Mughal.

> Different regions in Kashmir have developed its signature bread varieties—Baramulla is known for its *namkeen kulcha*, Pampore for *sheermal*, Shopian for *krip*, and Anantnag for *katlam*.

These varieties often have extended shelf lives, making them suitable for

transport to other regions. The expansion of *kandur* shops beyond Srinagar, in places such as Jammu, New Delhi, Noida, Amritsar and even the United States, has created cultural extensions of Kashmiri identity abroad.

Despite rising costs, hygiene concerns and waning interest among the youth, the tradition of *kandur*s endures. The economic pressure on the tradition is evident in the 100 per cent price hike in 2024, doubling the price of a *girda* from INR 5 to INR 10. Yet, despite inflation and competition from modern bakeries, the *tandoor* persists, perhaps sustained by Lalla Ded's prayer for its eternal flame. From the 200-year-old Batta Kandur in Ali Kadal to Palhallan, where forty households still handcraft *tandoor*s, its fire burns strong. More than just a livelihood, the *kandur* remains a symbol of continuity, shared identity and a lasting connection to home—wherever Kashmiris may be.

Two level floors in a typical *kandurwaan*. Photo by Taha Mughal.

Saffron flowers. Picture Credits: Rubaitul Azad/Pexels.

Kong Posh: Beyond the Crimson Stigma

Meenakshi Vashisth

Zafran in Persian or *kesar* in Hindi, the very mention of the word conjures images of vibrant crimson threads, their delicate aroma whispering of exotic lands and culinary delights. Scientifically classified as *Crocus sativus* and often referred to as 'red gold', saffron is believed to have originated in Persia (modern-day Iran) and is now cultivated across the globe, including Central Asia, the Mediterranean region, Asia, Europe, North Africa and North America. For Srinagar, and the neighbouring fields of Pampore, saffron is more than just a spice—it serves as a cultural touchstone. While its culinary and medicinal uses are well-documented, the story of Kashmiri saffron—locally known as *kong*—extends far beyond the kitchen and the apothecary, delving into the realms of identity, resilience and the delicate balance between tradition and modernity.

Historical Roots and Legends

The history of Kashmiri saffron blends historical records with local lore. While its precise origins remain debated, twelfth-century poet Bilhana, in *Vikramankadeva Charitam*, links saffron cultivation to the sacred Takshaka Naga spring near Zewan. This account aligns with the Mughal chronicler Abul Fazl's account in the *Ain-i-Akbari* of an annual pilgrimage to the site during the saffron season (in the Hindu month of *Jyaishtha*).

Walter Lawrence's *The Valley of Kashmir* (1895) recounts a legend where a Naga chieftain, cured of an eye ailment, gifted a saffron bulb to a *vaidya* (physician) of Padmapur (present-day Pampore), linking its introduction to the seventh-century Karkota ruler Lalitaditya Muktapida. However, earlier records suggest saffron's presence before his reign.

> While Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang (seventh century CE) noted its existence in his *Travels in India*, another Chinese Buddhist traveller O'Kong (eighth century CE) also documented its use in Buddhist *viharas* for sacred rituals, as paint for religious scrolls and *thankas*.

Another legend attributes saffron's spread to twelfth-century Sufi saints Khawja Masood Wali and Sheikh Sharif-u-Din Wali. Legend has it that after recovering from a serious illness with the aid of a local chieftain, the grateful saints gifted a saffron crocus bulb as a token of appreciation, thereby initiating its widespread cultivation in Kashmir. By the Mughal era, saffron was a prized commodity, with the *Ain-i-Akbari* documenting large-scale cultivation in Pampore. Emperor Jahangir recorded an annual yield of 18,600 kg, calling it unparalleled. Today, saffron remains central to Kashmiri culture, playing an essential role in the region's celebrated *wazwan* feasts and aromatic *kahwa* tea.

The Pampore Fields

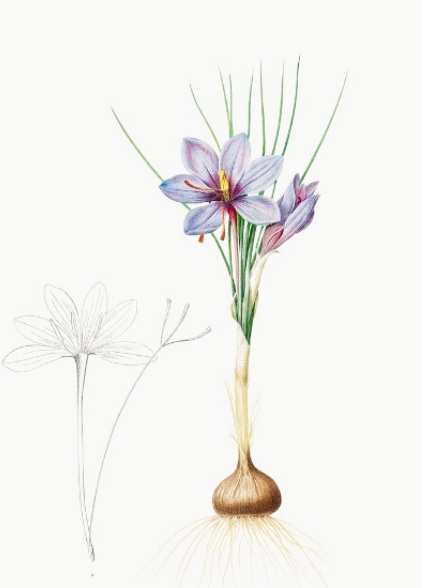
In Jammu and Kashmir, saffron is grown in four districts—Pulwama, Budgam, Srinagar and Kishtwar. However, Pampore, about 15 kilometres southeast of Srinagar, is the heart of its cultivation, earning the sobriquet 'Saffron Town of Kashmir'. The process, from planting corms (the bulb-like underground stem) to hand-picking delicate

stigmas, is a sacred tradition passed down through generations. Around 30,000 families in Pampore rely on saffron farming. As per the 2011 census, nearly 11,000 women in the Kashmir Valley work in the saffron farming sector, and about 50 per cent of the workforce are engaged in this.

> In Pampore, the landscape transforms into a breathtaking sight of purple in autumn, as countless *Crocus sativus* flowers simultaneously burst into bloom, and the air is thick with the sweet, almost intoxicating fragrance of saffron.

These fields, typically situated on *wudar* (plateau lands) with a specific soil composition, locally known as *karewa* (rich in potassium and nitrogen), undergo careful preparation and maintenance. Farmers prepare the land by creating square beds, each measuring 1.5 meters, with narrow trenches on all sides to prevent water accumulation, ensuring optimal drainage and aeration, essential for the delicate saffron corms.

The process of saffron cultivation is labour-intensive. The corms, typically sourced locally and often passed down through generations of farming families, are planted in late summer, usually September, in well-drained, slightly alkaline soil. The selection and preservation of healthy corms is a crucial step, ensuring the quality and yield of the saffron crop. Farmers use traditional tools like *kuh* (a type of hoe) and *zoon* (a rake) for land preparation and corn planting. The flowers bloom for only a few



Crocus savitus. Picture Credits: The Cleveland Museum of Art/Rawpixel.com.

weeks in autumn, usually late October and early November.

The harvesting process is a race against time, as the delicate stigmas must be plucked before they wither. This task is performed almost entirely by hand, often by women from saffron farming communities who have been doing this for generations, their nimble fingers carefully separating the precious stigmas—just three per flower—from the petals.

> This meticulous process, traditionally carried out in the early morning hours, requires skill and patience. The harvested flowers are collected in baskets and brought to homes or designated processing centres. The separated

> stigmas are then dried, a process that requires precision and care to preserve their colour, aroma and flavour.

Traditionally, this involved drying the stigmas in controlled temperature, but modern methods also include using specialised drying equipment to control temperature and humidity. It takes thousands of flowers, often upwards of 1,60,000, to produce just a kilogramme of finished saffron, highlighting the extraordinary effort involved in its production. After processing, the complete form, with both red and yellow parts, is known as *lacha*. Red stigmas, the darkest ones, are the most expensive variety and known as *mongra*. Just one strand is enough to infuse an entire dish with a rich aroma and flavour. The separated yellow stigmas, known as *zarda*, too, are used for medicinal purposes and in the beauty industry.

Beyond the Stigma

The story of *kong* goes beyond its vivid hue and aroma; it embodies Kashmir's deep-rooted traditions and evolving landscapes. From the sacred lore of Takshaka Naga to Pampore's *karewa* soil, saffron has shaped and been shaped by history. Yet, its cultivation faces challenges—climate change disrupts blooming patterns, unregulated construction threatens soil composition, and cheaper Iranian saffron pressures Kashmiri farmers.

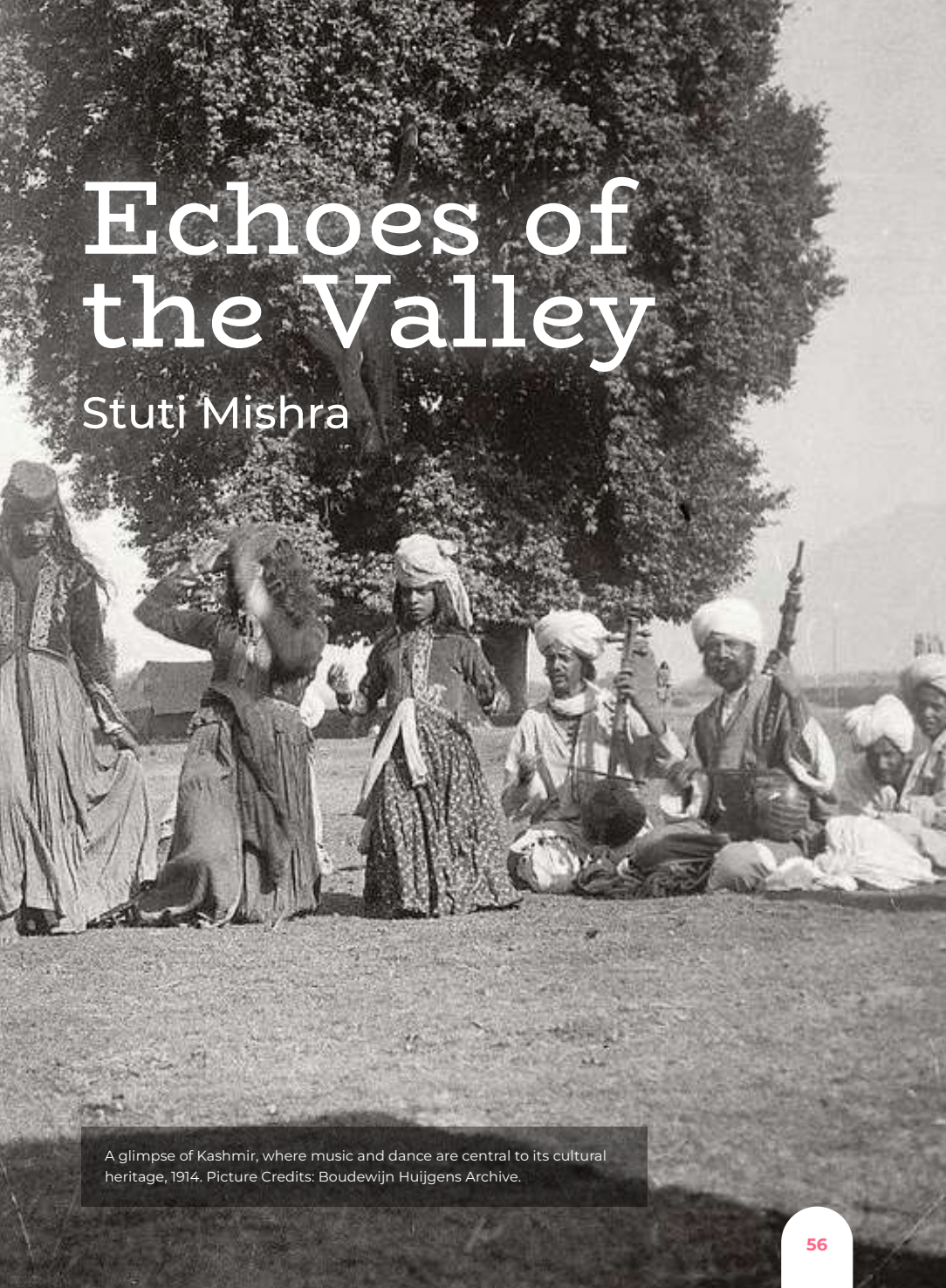
Recognising these challenges, the National Saffron Mission (NSM) was introduced in 2010 to revitalise saffron farming in Kashmir through targeted irrigation projects, technological interventions and direct financial support to struggling farmers. However, inconsistencies in implementation of such initiatives and climate unpredictability remain hurdles.

In response, a new generation of saffron cultivators is turning to innovation—indoor saffron farming, a promising alternative method of cultivation in controlled environments using advanced hydroponics. By eliminating dependence on unpredictable seasonal conditions, this approach not only stabilises yields but also consistently ensures higher quality saffron. Experiments with vertical saffron farming have also helped maximise production within limited space, offering a sustainable path forward.

Despite these technological transformations, the essence of *kong* remains deeply rooted in the land and the lives of those who cultivate it. Each strand of crimson saffron carries the wisdom of centuries-old practices and the hope of an evolving future while continuing to weave itself into the cultural and historical landscape of Kashmir.

Echoes of the Valley

Stuti Mishra



A glimpse of Kashmir, where music and dance are central to its cultural heritage, 1914. Picture Credits: Boudewijn Huijgens Archive.

Kashmir, renowned for its breathtaking landscapes, is equally distinguished by its deep-rooted artistic heritage. Its music and performing arts have flourished across centuries, shaped by religious and cultural influences. These traditions remain integral to the region's identity, spirituality and communal life.

Historical records such as the *Nilamata Purana* and *Rajatarangini* underscore the significance of music and dance in religious rituals and royal ceremonies. The *Nilamata Purana*, a sixth-century *Mahatmya*, details festivals featuring musical concerts, ceremonial bathing in the river *Vitasta* (Jhelum) and communal singing in the evenings. The Harwan archaeological site in Srinagar, once a thriving Buddhist centre, features terracotta tiles depicting musicians and dancers.

Kashmir's musical heritage has its roots in Vedic and epic traditions, where choral singing and instrumental performances were vital. Under Raja Kalasa (r. 1063–89 CE), structured compositions emerged, including *upangagita* (choral songs) and refined court dances.

> The *Rajatarangini* (eleventh century) records royal patronage and diverse instruments, noting earthen pots, brass vessels and the *hadukka*, a large pipe-like instrument.

The Domba community played a key role in these artistic traditions.

Abhinavagupta, the Kashmiri aesthetician's significant contribution includes the *Abhinavabharati* (tenth century), his commentary on the *Natyashastra*, where He elaborated on instruments, playing techniques, notes (*svara*), scales (*grama*), rhythm (*tala*), tempo (*laya*) and song classification. Engaging with earlier scholars, he offered alternative interpretations, enriching Kashmir's musical traditions.

Kashmiri rulers like King Harsa, a linguist and poet, composed songs, while King Bhiksacara (r. 1120–21 CE) played instruments and popularised the *Chhakri*, a choral singing tradition still cherished in Kashmir.

With the Sultanate's rise in fourteenth-century Kashmir, Persian and Central Asian influences transformed its performing arts. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin (r. 1420–70 CE) made his court a cultural hub, inviting musicians and dancers from Persia, Khurasan, and Turkistan. Mughal historian Abul Fazl's records in the *Ain-i-Akbari* includes mention of masters like Khwaja Abdul Qadir Khorasani and Mulla Jamil Oodi, crediting them with enriching Kashmiri music. Sultan Haidar Shah (r. 1470–72 CE) was a skilled lute player who advanced musical instruction, while Sultan Hassan Shah (r. 1472–84 CE) expanded patronage of the arts, welcoming 1,200 performers, including famed dancers Ratnamala and Dipamala. This era shaped Kashmir's artistic identity, forged through a harmonious fusion of indigenous and foreign traditions.

During Mughal rule in the sixteenth century, Dal Lake's *shikara*s and Srinagar's Mughal gardens hosted musical soirées, also known as *Guldasta-e-Mausiqi* (floral bouquet of music), where musicians

performed pieces blending Persian melodies with Kashmiri folk traditions, creating a multisensory experience. Emperor Jahangir, inspired by Srinagar's beauty, is also known to have commissioned compositions celebrating its natural charm.

Sufiana Mausiqi

Sufiana Mausiqi, Kashmir's classical music, took root in Srinagar as early as the fourteenth century. Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, the revered Persian saint, is believed to have introduced this tradition to the region, which was further enriched by Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Noorani's spiritual legacy. The music resonated deeply in the alleys of Srinagar, where traditional *mehfil*s (musical gatherings) once flourished in the grand wooden *haveli*s and Sufi shrines, like the Khanqah-e-Moula.

> The *santoor*, perfected in the city's workshops, became synonymous with the genre,

Rabab. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Santoor in a workshop in Srinagar. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

> accompanied by the *sehtar*, *madham*, *rabab* and *wasool*. The distinguished Shams Faqir and Ghulam Mohammad Qaleenbaaf gharanas nurtured generations of musicians, including the legendary Ustad Ghulam Mohammad Saznawaz, who regularly performed in the intimate courtyards of Srinagar's historic homes and at the sacred shrines of revered saints.

Despite challenges, *Sufiana Mausiqi* remains deeply embedded in Srinagar's cultural fabric. Ustad Mohammad Yaqoob Sheikh, a Srinagar native, has dedicated his life to mentoring young musicians, ensuring that the melodies continue to echo through the city's ancient bylanes. *Santoor* maestro Abdul Ghani Namtahali carries forward the legacy by continuing to perform at

Rababs in a workshop. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

venues like the Tagore Hall and participating in Sufi festivals that still draw devoted audiences. Events such as the Shashrang Festival and performances at the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages have rekindled interest in these musical traditions, though it continues to struggle against modern influences and declining institutional support.

Folk Musical Traditions

Srinagar's folk music echoes through old city quarters, festive gatherings, and Sufi shrines. One of the most cherished folk traditions is *Wanvun*, a lyrical communal singing style performed at weddings and other celebrations. In neighborhoods like Rainawari, Habba Kadal and Safa Kadal, one commonly encounters groups of women seated in a circle, their voices rising in perfect harmony, punctuated by rhythmic clapping of hands. The songs, often passed down through generations, comprise poetic blessings for the bride and groom. The tradition has become so integral to Kashmiri cultural identity that even during periods of unrest, *Wanvun* gatherings in Srinagar have remained spaces of collective resilience and joy.

Renowned *santoor* performer Ustad Ghulam Mohammad Saznawaz. Picture Credit: Sahbir and Kaiser/Wikimedia Commons.

A *sarangi* maker testing the soulful resonance of his handcrafted instrument. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

> Another significant folk form is *Rouf*, a celebratory dance-song performed primarily by women, especially during spring festivals. Often performed in the open courtyards of Srinagar's old havelis, *Rouf* is characterised by synchronised footwork and lilting melodies.

Chhakri, another beloved genre, still thrives in the city's Sufi shrines and cultural gatherings. Accompanied by

instruments like the *rabab* and *sarangi*, *Chhakri* typically narrates mystical poetry, drawing inspiration from revered poets such as Lal Ded and Habba Khatoon. The influence of Sufi musical traditions remains strong in Srinagar, especially at places like the Dargah of Hazratbal and Khanqah-e-Moula, where devotional songs seamlessly merge with folk rhythms.

Dance Forms

Classical and theatrical dance forms further enrich Srinagar's cultural landscape. *Hafiz Nagma*, an elegant dance form closely associated with *Sufiana Mausiqi*, was once a highlight of elite cultural gatherings and Sufi shrines, performed by *hafiza*s (female dancers) interpreting mystical poetry through graceful movements. In contrast, *Bach Nagma*, a lively dance-drama featuring male dancers portraying female characters, dressed in colourful attire, brought festive cheer to Srinagar's old quarters.

More dramatic folk performances include *Dumhal*, the ritual dance of the Rauf tribe, where men in elaborate robes and towering headgear move rhythmically to drumbeats, creating a grand spectacle.

> Theatrical traditions like *Bhand Pather*, a satirical folk theatre blending dance and storytelling, have long entertained audiences in public squares and festive fairs.

Colonial policies, sociopolitical upheavals and shifting patronage led to the decline of Kashmir's performing arts. The ban on *Hafiz Nagma* during the Dogra rule marginalised this classical dance, while the waning influence of Sufi shrines affected *Sufiana Mausiqi*. Folk theatre, once vibrant in markets and villages, struggled against modern entertainment. Late twentieth-century unrest further disrupted traditions, forcing many artists into obscurity. Despite these setbacks, Kashmiri artists and institutions continue striving to revive and sustain these cultural legacies.

In recent years, the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture, and Languages, INTACH Kashmir, and Sangeet Natak Akademi have actively promoted the documentation and dissemination of traditional Kashmiri music and dance forms. Festivals like Jashn-e-Kashmir and the Kashmir Music Festival showcase veteran and emerging artists. Musicians like Abhay Sopori and Aabha Hanjura have introduced Kashmiri folk music to wider audiences through contemporary adaptations. Radio Kashmir and Doordarshan Srinagar keep folk music and storytelling accessible, while digital platforms help young artists share traditions like *Rouf*, *Chhakri* and *Sufiana Mausiqi*, ensuring their continuity.

Yarns hanging in a handloom workshop, prepared for weaving. Photo by Taha Mughal.

From Hands to Heart

Stuti Mishra

A family engaged in shawl making, 1867, chromolithograph by William Simpson. Picture Credits: Wikimedia Commons.

Srinagar is a living museum of artistry, with centuries-old handloom and handicraft traditions reflecting generations of inherited knowledge. The region's unique geography and climate nurtured distinct crafts, utilising local resources like wool and timber. Early archaeological evidence points to weaving, pottery and metalwork laying the foundation for later sophistication.

The Mughal era elevated these traditions into refined art forms. Emperors like Akbar encouraged *pashmina* weaving and established *karkhana*s (workshops), introducing Persian design influences seen in *kani* shawls and carpets. Colonial exposure brought global recognition but also market pressures, a challenge artisans continue to navigate.

The Dance of Threads

Handloom Traditions

Pashmina Shawls: 'Soft gold'—this moniker aptly describes *pashmina* shawls, woven from the delicate *shahtoosh* (undercoat) of the Changthangi goat, found high in the Ladakh region. The journey from raw fleece to finished shawl is a testament to human patience and

Sozni or sozan *kaari*. Picture Credits: Wikimedia Commons.

A weaver immersed in craftsmanship at Safa Kadal. Photo by Taha Mughal.

artistry. In areas like Safa Kadal, artisans meticulously spin and weave the fine threads by hand, a single shawl often requiring months of painstaking work. The embellishments further elevate these shawls to works of art. *Sozni* embroidery, with its delicate needlework, creates intricate floral and paisley patterns. *Tilla* embroidery adds a touch of opulence, using metallic threads of gold or silver to create raised, shimmering motifs. *Aari* work, known for its chain-stitch technique, outlines the motifs, while *kashida* embroidery fills them with rich, vibrant colours.

> One often-repeated anecdote tells of how *pashmina* shawls were once tested for quality by passing them through a ring—a proof of their fineness.

While this may be more legend than fact, it captures the essence of their prized status.

Kani Shawls: Hailing from the village of Kanihama, these shawls are woven masterpieces. Artisans use small wooden needles, called *kanis*, as bobbins to create intricate, nature-inspired patterns in a dazzling array of colours. The process is incredibly slow and labour-intensive; a single shawl can take months, even years, to complete. Legend has it that Emperor Jahangir commissioned a *kani* shawl that took so long to weave that it secured the master artisans' patronage for life. These shawls are

Kani weaving includes patterns using wooden needles, a process that can take months or even years. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

not merely garments; they were symbols of prestige and enduring artistry.

Kalbaff: Hand-knotted carpets, known locally as *kalbaff*, are renowned for their intricate designs, a beautiful fusion of Persian and Mughal influences. Floral patterns, hunting scenes and Islamic calligraphy are common motifs. For generations, families in

neighbourhoods like Eidgah and Zaina Kadal have dedicated themselves to this craft. These carpets are prized for their durability and artistry, their reputation extending far beyond Kashmir.

> One story from Eidgah tells of a carpet presented to Queen Victoria, its complexity so impressive that it cemented Kashmir's reputation for exceptional craftsmanship.

The origins of *kalbaff* can be traced back to the fifteenth century during the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, who invited skilled weavers from Persia and Central Asia. These artisans introduced new knotting techniques that revolutionised local

The art of *kalbaff* weaving. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

weaving, leading to the creation of these exquisite carpets. The craft reached its zenith under the Mughals, becoming a prized possession in royal courts.

Namda and Gabba: These traditional

Namda felting and *gabba* patchwork. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

felted wool rugs offer both beauty and practicality. Crafted in Srinagar's Downtown area, *namda* involves felting wool into intricate patterns, while gabba utilises recycled fabrics to create colourful and functional rugs, showcasing resourcefulness and artistic expression.

The Language of Materials

Handicraft Traditions

Papier-Mâché: This captivating craft, introduced in the fifteenth century by Persian artisans, involves moulding paper pulp into decorative objects, each meticulously painted with intricate floral and geometric designs. Artisans in areas like Nowshera and Rainawari continue this tradition, creating exquisite vases, boxes and ornaments, often inspired by the natural beauty of Kashmir. One artisan from Nowshera, Zahida Begum, recalls how her grandfather's delicate creations were once

An artisan from Nowshera showcases papier-mâché artefact. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

showcased in European exhibitions, bringing global recognition to the craft. Papier-mâché remains a popular souvenir for tourists.

Walnut Wood Carving: A deeply ingrained Kashmiri art form, walnut wood carving showcases the skill and precision of artisans, primarily from areas like Rajbagh and Lal Bazar. They create intricately carved furniture and home décor, blending traditional Kashmiri motifs with contemporary design. From ornate tables to elegant mirrors, these pieces are both functional and artistic, embodying generations of inherited expertise.

A walnut wood workshop in Lal Bazar where artisans craft ornate furniture and decorative pieces. Photo By Stuti Mishra.

Copper Vases with traditional *taan kaam* engravings. Photo by Taha Mughal.

> A local anecdote from Lal Bazar speaks of a single walnut tree, planted generations ago, that has provided wood for countless carvings, from royal thrones to modern masterpieces, symbolising the enduring nature of this craft.

Copperware: The creation of copperware, or *taan kaam*, is an integral part of Kashmiri heritage. Artisans in Zadibal and Saraf Kadal craft beautifully engraved copper

items like *samovars* (tea kettles), trays and bowls. These pieces are not only functional but also prized for their intricate patterns, often featured in Kashmiri weddings and festive occasions. A story from Zadibal recounts a samovar presented to a visiting dignitary, who described it as 'a treasure of warmth', capturing the cultural significance of these copper creations in Kashmiri hospitality.

Khatamband: This unique architectural craft involves assembling small pieces of wood into complex geometric patterns to create nail-less ceilings. Practised in areas like Rainawari and Nowhatta, *khatamband* combines aesthetic beauty with remarkable engineering ingenuity. One master craftsman from Rainawari recalls how

Khatamband ceilings—crafted without nails, featuring interlocking wooden patterns. Photo by Taha Mughal.

khatamband adorned royal residences, each ceiling telling a story, often inspired by the iconic Chinar leaf.

The Future of Tradition

Resilience and Hope

Srinagar's handlooms and handicrafts are more than just objects; they are expressions of the city's soul and enduring spirit.

> The resilience of Kashmiri artisans is evident in stories like that of Zahida Begum, the papier-mâché artist who has trained over 100 women, empowering them to carry on this tradition.

Similarly, Bashir Ahmad Wani, a carpet weaver, speaks of how his craft sustained his family through difficult times. In Kralpora, a women's cooperative has gained international recognition for their *aari*-embroidered garments. These artisans have not only preserved their heritage but also demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of adversity.

As these traditions navigate the challenges of the modern world, it is crucial to celebrate and support the artisans who keep this heritage alive. Through initiatives promoting education, showcasing these crafts at festivals and expanding global outreach, Srinagar's legacy of artistry can continue to inspire future generations and thrive in an ever-evolving world.

Stitches of Tradition

Sadaf Shabir

A *sozni* artisan stitches delicate patterns inspired by Kashmir's natural beauty onto fine *pashmina*. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Kashmir, known for its stunning landscapes, is also celebrated for its rich cultural heritage, particularly its centuries-old embroidery tradition. The 2024 UNESCO designation of Srinagar as a 'World Craft City' brought global spotlight to this craft.

This recognition goes beyond an accolade—it celebrates the generations of artisans whose skilled hands have preserved and perfected Kashmir's textile traditions. Among the most exquisite forms of Kashmiri embroidery are *aari*, *sozni* and *kashida*—each a testament to the region's deep-rooted artistry, blending tradition, craftsmanship and storytelling into every intricate stitch.

Aari

The Age-Old Art of Intricacy

Aari work is one of the oldest forms of embroidery in the region, tracing its roots to the twelfth century, later flourishing under the Mughal patronage. This versatile embroidery style is not confined to a specific fabric—artisans craft their designs on cotton, wool, silk and linen, often used for household items such as curtains, bedsheets and cushion covers. Its delicate patterns feature floral motifs like the famous Chinar leaf, a symbol of Kashmiri identity, and animals inspired by the region's natural landscapes.

Artisans use a pen-like needle to create elaborate designs, often taking weeks or months to complete a single piece. The intricacy of the work ensures that each item is unique, with no two designs ever being the same. Despite the high level of skill involved, many artisans struggle to keep up with mass-produced, machine-made alternatives that have flooded the market. Faced with such a competitive modern market, these artisans end up selling their work at only a fraction of what they are worth. Even as their craft remains a source of pride and identity for the region, many artisans are on the verge of giving it up as a profession.

Artisan brings *aari* designs to life using a hooked needle. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

However, innovations are being made to keep this art form alive. Mir Abdul Majid, a master craftsman from Old City Srinagar, has introduced contemporary landscape designs into *aari* embroidery, earning him a state award from the Government of India. His fusion of traditional motifs with modern aesthetics has captured the interest of younger generations and art enthusiasts alike.

Sozni

A Masterclass in Precision

Sozni, or *sozan kaari,* originally adorned Kashmir's famous *pashmina* shawls but has since expanded to garments like jackets,

Inspired by nature, *sozni* embroidery transforms fine wool into a canvas of paisleys, florals, and Chinar leaves. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

stoles and other accessories. Known for its meticulous needlework, *sozni* is characterised by its detailed floral, geometric and paisley patterns, each symbolising aspects of Kashmir's natural beauty and cultural heritage.

> The creation process begins with senior artisans engraving the designs onto wooden blocks, which are then transferred to fabric using chalk or charcoal. Afterwards, the artisans meticulously weave the designs using fine needles and colourful threads.

The needlework is so precise that the patterns appear identical on both sides of the fabric. This painstaking process can take anywhere between a few days to several years, depending on the complexity of the design, making *sozni* pieces highly coveted and often quite expensive.

Artisans like Ghulam Mohammad Beigh and his brother Mehboob Ali Beigh have dedicated their lives to this art form, practising *sozni* embroidery for over four decades. They learned the craft from their grandparents, a legacy passed down their family line. Their efforts at preserving the craft have earned them recognition not just in India but around the world, with Ghulam Mohammad Beigh receiving numerous state awards for his contributions towards the craft's international acclaim.

Kashida

Versatility and Elegance

Kashida embroidery brings Kashmir's landscapes to life with vibrant threads and bold, nature-inspired motifs. Picture Credits: Wikimedia Commons.

Kashida is known for its vibrant, colourful patterns and thick, skilful stitching. This art form adorns materials like wool, cotton and silk, making it particularly popular for warm clothing and home decor items. Its designs celebrate nature through depictions of birds, flowers and leaves, all rendered in vivid hues that reflect the beauty of the Kashmir Valley.

> One of the most distinctive features of *kashida* embroidery is its signature reversible designs. Artisans craft the embroidery in such a way that the patterns appear on both sides of the fabric, which doubles its value.

Various terms are used to describe the different types of *kashida*, such as *kashir jaal* for embroidery limited to the sleeves and neckline of a garment, and *jaama* for designs that cover the entire fabric.

Preservation Efforts and Government Initiatives

The Kashmiri government has taken steps to protect its traditional crafts in recognition of their importance not just as cultural artefacts but also as a source of livelihood for thousands of artisans. The Handicraft Department has pushed for Geographical Indication (GI) tags for many crafts, ensuring that they are recognised for their authenticity. Several government schemes, such as the Artisan/Weavers Credit Scheme, the MUDRA Scheme and educational benefits for artisans' children, aim to provide financial support and resources to those in the handicrafts sector.

In addition to government efforts, institutions like the Craft Museum in Srinagar play a crucial role in preserving and promoting Kashmiri crafts. The museum serves as a living archive, showcasing traditional art forms such as *pashmina* weaving, papier-mâché, woodcarving and *kani* shawls. Visitors can watch artisans at work, offering a rare glimpse into the techniques and skills that have been passed down through generations. The Craft Museum also organises events and workshops, connecting master artisans with younger generations who wish to learn these age-old skills. By partnering with schools and design institutes, the museum helps integrate traditional crafts into modern design, ensuring that these crafts remain relevant in contemporary markets while retaining their authenticity.

In Srinagar, initiatives like Noor Aari, which employs over 600 artisans, mostly women, have been launched by NGOs and cooperatives. By collaborating with national brands, these centres provide artisans with sustainable income and expand their market reach. Crafts like *sozni*, *kashida* and *aari* face challenges from machine-made replicas that devalue the authenticity of handmade pieces. While government support through financial schemes and cooperative programmes is in place, more action is needed to safeguard these traditions. As consumers, we must also value and support authentic, handmade products.

Handcrafted turquoise jewelry. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

The Last Defenders

Fahim Mattoo

In the winding, narrow lanes of the old city of Srinagar, the legacy of Kashmir's rich artisanal heritage still lingers. The traditional art and crafts, passed down generations, were once integral to Kashmiri identity and thrived as flourishing industries. However, in recent decades, these conventional crafts have faced numerous challenges. In an era dominated by mass production and shifting consumer demands, artisans who once took great pride in their laboriously created works are now struggling to keep such traditions alive.

Ghulam Mohammad Zaz

The Last Santoor-Maker

Near Zaina Kadal bridge, a small, nearly deserted workshop still echoes with the sound of the hammer and chisel. This is the domain of 75-year-old Ghulam Mohammad Zaz, Kashmir's last traditional *santoor* maker, who has dedicated over six decades to this fading craft. The 100-stringed *santoor*, once central to Sufi music and royal courts, remains deeply rooted in Kashmir's musical heritage.

Zaz, inheriting the craft from his forefathers, shapes each instrument by hand in his walnut-scented workshop, a sanctuary from the bustling streets outside. 'It's about creating something with a soul, a resonance that carries our heritage,' he says, emphasising the painstaking process that can take weeks. The *santoor* gained prominence through maestros like Pandit Bhajan Lal Sopori and Shiv Kumar Sharma, who introduced it to Indian classical music.

Despite receiving the Padma Shri in 2003, Zaz fears for the craft's future. With no sons to continue the legacy and younger generations shifting to secure careers, he observes, 'Awards are recognition, but they do not guarantee survival.'

Ali Mohammad Giru

The Harbinger of Khatamband Renaissance

Ali Mohammad Giru, a master craftsman, revives the fading art of *khatamband*. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Khatamband, a traditional Kashmiri interior design technique, involves creating ornamental ceilings using tiny polygonal wood pieces fitted into geometric patterns and secured with beadings. In recent years, this craft has played a crucial role in restoring the Valley's medieval charm, even as modern concrete structures are rapidly replacing traditional household aesthetics. The old city's marketplace and master carpenters are at the forefront of this design renaissance. Ali Mohammad Giru's workshop in Safa Kadal is a testament to this craft's resurgence.

Khatamband's vibrant geometric patterns blend tradition with timeless elegance. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Ali Mohammad recalled the craft's near decline two decades ago, saying, 'We entered a market indifferent to us.' Despite the challenges of replicating *khatamband* then, he remains optimistic today. 'I am incredibly appreciative that even my highly educated children are interested in this, as it is my ancestral business,' Ali Mohammad remarked, highlighting the craft's renewed appeal to the younger generation.

Mohammad Hanief

The Last Turquoise Jewellery Artisan

The once-flourishing art of Kashmiri turquoise jewellery-making is now on the brink of extinction. Mohammad Hanief, a 65-year-old artisan from Srinagar, is one of the last surviving craftsmen engaged in this centuries-old craft. His small workshop in Fateh Kadal is filled with all sorts of tools of the trade and embodies the rich legacy of this traditional craft.

In its heyday, Kashmiri turquoise jewellery adorned royals and nobles, prized for its exquisite craftsmanship. Skilled artisans like Hanief would meticulously set turquoise stones into silver and gold, creating cherished heirlooms that were passed down through generations. However, the trade has sharply declined, leaving Hanief as its sole practitioner. 'After me, no one will continue,' he lamented, citing its diminishing economic viability as a deterrent for the younger generation.

Mohammad Hanief, one of Srinagar's last turquoise jewelry artisans. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masood

Mehraj-ud-Din Bafanda

Aari Embroidery's Struggle for Survival

In Noorbagh, Mehraj-ud-Din Bafanda's workshop buzzes with artisans skilled in *aari* embroidery. This needle art, introduced in Kashmir by Persians in the twelfth century, is renowned for its intricate floral designs on various fabrics. *Aari* work

is celebrated for its versatility, suited for all seasons and featured on a wide range of items, from suits, stoles and shawls to even home furnishings.

'This art is our legacy,' reflects Bafanda, acknowledging how the craft has survived through tumultuous times. Despite its enduring popularity, the craft faces challenges from machine-made designs and government neglect. 'Customers now go for cheap machine-made designs,' laments a middle-aged *aari* worker, highlighting the economic pressures on artisans.

Ghulam Nabi Dar

Walnut Wood Carving Legacy

Walnut wood furniture from Kashmir, renowned for its durable and intricate designs, stand among the region's most-celebrated crafts. A master woodcarver based in Safa Kadal, Ghulam Nabi Dar's journey from an impoverished child labourer to a Padma Shri recipient is a testament to a craftsman's passionate dedication to his craft.

Dar recalls, 'There were days we had no food. I dreamt of studying, but circumstances didn't allow it.' Forced to leave school after class 3, he became an apprentice in woodworking, which became his lifeline. He and his brother worked under master carver Abdul Razaq Wangnoo, earning just one rupee a day to support their family.

He then moved to Abdul Aziz Bhat's workshop, producing goods for the well-known Subla & Company. Bhat recognised Dar's potential and taught him the art of walnut wood carving. Reflecting on his journey, Dar shared,

Ghulam Nabi Dar, Padma Shri laureate and master walnut woodcarver from Safa Kadal. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

> **"After a lot of effort, my work paid off. I pray to God for a long life so I can continue with this art.'**

Farooq Ahmad Mir

A Legacy of Kani Weaving

Farooq Ahmad Mir, a 72-year-old master artisan from Srinagar, was honoured with the Padma Shri in January 2025 for his exceptional dedication to the traditional craft of *kani* shawl weaving. Born in 1953 in the Khaiwan Narwara area of Srinagar's old city, Mir began his journey into this ancestral craft at the age of 10, dedicating over six decades to mastering and preserving this intricate weaving technique, which involves weaving elaborate patterns using wooden spools known as *kani*s instead of a shuttle to create intricate *pashmina* shawls. Dating back to the

Mughal era, the craft follows a *talim* script to guide weavers in forming

Farooq Ahmad Mir, a Padma Shri awardee, honoured for his dedication to *Kani* Shawl weaving. Photo by Majid Mir.

elaborate motifs inspired by nature, such as paisleys, florals and chinar leaves.

Farooq Mir's, and later his children's, commitment not only preserved this centuries-old tradition but also inspired a resurgence of interest among younger generations. Despite the challenges posed by modern manufacturing, Mir's unwavering passion has ensured that the legacy of authentic Kashmiri *kani* shawls continues to thrive.

Bashir Ahmad Dar

Preserving Srinagar's Dying Carpet Weaving Tradition

Once a thriving industry in Srinagar, carpet weaving now faces a steady decline, struggling against economic hardships and dwindling interest from the younger generation. Bashir Ahmad Dar, one of the few remaining master weavers, paints a grim picture of the craft's future: 'The younger generation has little interest in learning to make carpets,' he laments.

Economic pressures and shifting market dynamics have severely impacted artisans, with wages plummeting to as little as INR 250 per day during winter—far less than what unskilled labourers earn in other sectors. This growing disparity makes it increasingly difficult for craftsmen to sustain their livelihood or pass their knowledge to future generations. As a result, a tradition once handed down through families for centuries is now at risk of disappearing, leaving the fate of this ancient art hanging by a thread.

A traditional carpet loom. Photo by Taha Mughal.

A finely carved walnut wood piece depicting deer and lush flora, crafted by Padma Shri awardee Ghulam Nabi Dar. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Srinagar's Best-Kept Cafe Secrets

Fahim Mattoo

Chai Jai, which was also featured in *Laila Majnu* (2018). Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

In Kashmir, the tradition of people gathering over a cup of humble chai runs deep. Chai spots have long been social and political hubs, where conversations flowed across all walks of life. From roadside stalls to bustling bazaars, tea gatherings shaped discourse and community bonds. While this tradition endures, Srinagar is now witnessing a growing cafe culture.

This new wave of cafes uniquely blend contemporary design with traditional Kashmiri elements. While the traditional *wazwan* cuisine remains central to Kashmiri dining, the Valley has welcomed restaurateurs from across India and beyond, introducing diverse culinary traditions. The evolving cafe culture reflects this dynamism, offering everything from Turkish *kebab*s to authentic Tibetan dumplings. Owners are reviving historical practices, with some incorporating vintage furnishings and mud utensils, merging nostalgia with modern dining. This fusion attracts locals, tourists and the film industry, with cafes like Chai Jai, known for its ambiance and Kashmiri kahwa, gaining fame after featuring in the film *Laila Majnu* (2018).

A Mix of Flavours

The Tibetan Muslim community, concentrated in Srinagar's Hawal area, has significantly contributed to the local cafe scene. Operating from the Tibetan Colony, this community runs several small restaurants where they serve Tibetan *momo*—steamed dumplings filled with various ingredients, often served with spicy chutney—that have quickly gained popularity among younger Kashmiris and have become a staple on many cafe menus across the city. These restaurants also offer *shifale* (fried dumplings), *thukpa* (noodle soup) and other Tibetan specialties. Some cafes even blend Tibetan recipes with Kashmiri flavours, creating unique dishes that reflect the area's cultural diversity.

A humble setup with a rich legacy, Laila Sheikh and Sons, has served chai near the old Residency for over a century. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Everyday treats from Kashmir's enduring bakery culture. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Historical establishments such as Laila Sheikh and Sons, founded by Lala Mohammad Sheikh in 1890, exemplify the significance of Srinagar's cafes. This 153-year-old tea point, that was run by Mehboob Ali until his passing in 2023, initially gained fame for its cream pastries, cakes, chocolates and imported confectionery from the USA.

> However, with the rise of modern cafes, they shifted their focus to selling only chai and patties, which also became popular among locals. Its location near the former English Residency (now Emporium Garden) attracted politicians and international visitors, contributing to the naming of Residency Road.

For over 128 years, Moonlight Bakery in Srinagar's Hazratbal has maintained its reputation for its signature walnut fudge, a delicacy made with walnut, honey and dates, and is a cult favourite throughout Kashmir. Established in 1896 by Ghulam Mohammed, this family-run business is now managed by the third generation. Initially launched at Dalgate near Dal Lake, the bakery expanded with a second outlet near Nigeen Lake to attract tourists. However, in the 1990s, due to unrest in Kashmir, the family relocated the business to Hazratbal and later opened another outlet in Parray Pora, Hyderpora. The walnut fudge remains the bakery's star item, its secret recipe closely guarded. Despite offers for collaboration from major outlets, the family prioritises quality over mass production.

In 2018, Kashmir's beloved RJ Haya (Wafa Vakil), the programme head of 92.7 FM, and her husband opened Café Liberty in Lal Chowk, drawing its name from the eminent Bollywood director, Imtiaz Ali, who shares a close bond with the Vakil family. Housed within wooden walls, the old-school decor and charming, quaint interior adorned with free-spirited imagery and antiques, the cafe offers a much-needed respite from the vibrant chaos of the city. The menu features an exquisite blend of local Kashmiri cuisine and international flavours—from aromatic *wazwan* delicacies like rogan josh and gushtaba to flavourful vegetarian options such as *dum aloo* and *haak*, each dish is prepared with locally sourced ingredients.

The Transformation of Srinagar's Nightlife

> The city at night, once a quiet and dormant scene, has now transformed into a vibrant space, largely due to the Smart City project that has

given parts of the city a modern facelift with its lively nightlife and cafe culture.

The iconic Ghanta Ghar or Clock Tower. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

One of the most noticeable changes is along the newly renovated Raj Bagh Bund and Polo View areas. At night, these areas transform into dazzling spaces, with food vans set up on the streets, offering locals and tourists a taste of Kashmiri street food against the backdrop of the city's glowing lights. This development, which started gaining momentum over the past two to three years, has drawn growing crowds eager to explore Srinagar after dark.

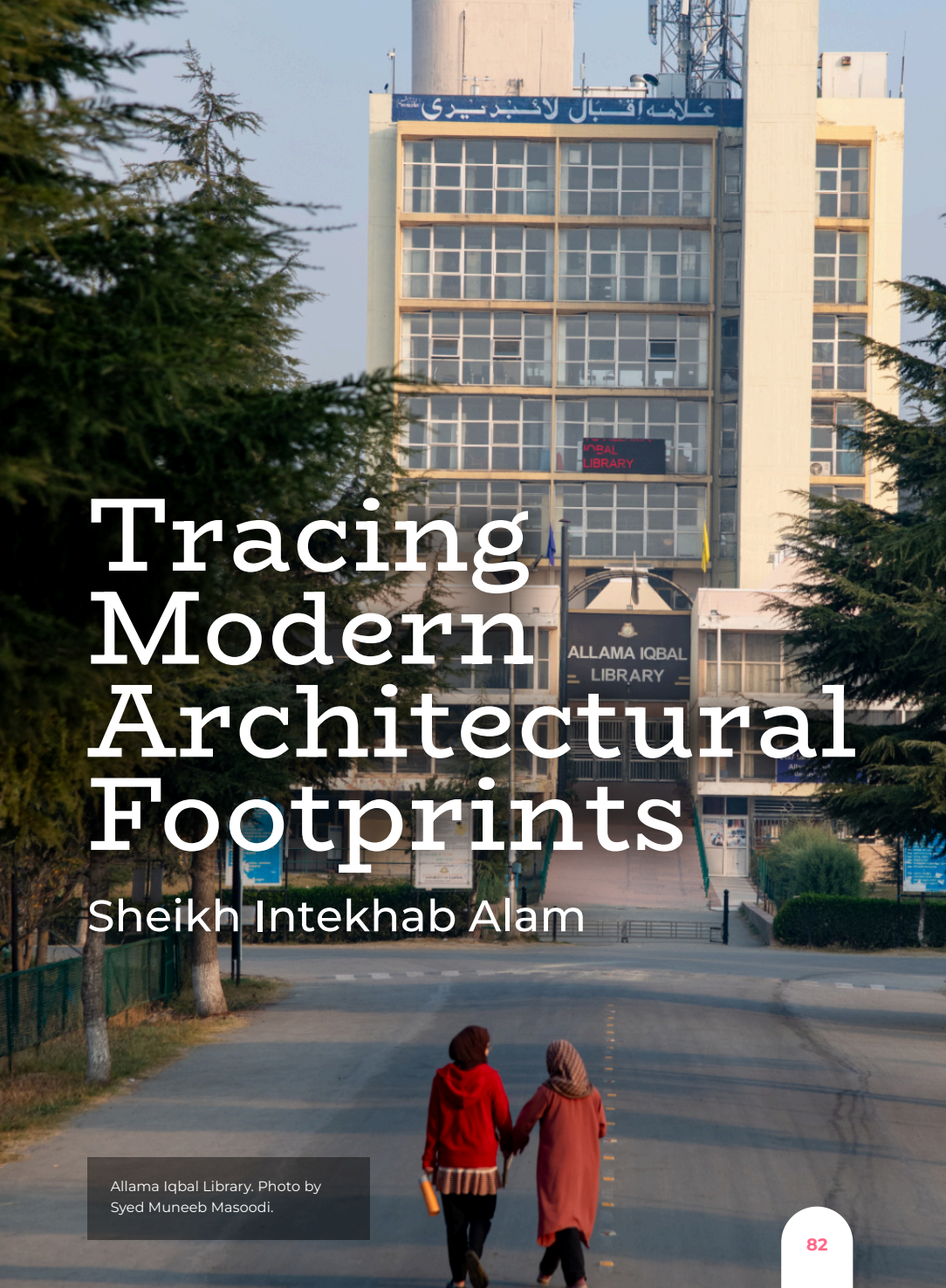
The famous Zero Bridge, a wooden bridge constructed in the 1950s during the reign of Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, has become a hotspot for both locals and tourists. While the Dal Lake has long held the fascination of visitors, Zero Bridge now provides a compelling alternative, with its wooden structure, serene Jhelum River views, and photogenic setting featuring snow-capped mountains and lush landscape in the distance.

Young entrepreneurs have energised Srinagar's nightlife with open-air cafes and restaurants adorned with fairy lights, alongside roadside stalls selling sweet corn and fruit *chaat*. A few kilometres away, the Dal Lake stretch transforms into a vibrant barbecue hub, famous for its romantic ambiance. Vendors offer a variety of grilled delights, from chicken and trout tikka to paneer, mushrooms and pineapple *tikka* for vegetarians. Another hotspot, Makai Park near the Zabarwan mountain range, known as Barbecue Point, draws locals and tourists alike, making it a must-visit for an authentic taste of Srinagar's night scene.

Zero Bridge, now a social hub with cafes, food vans, and evening strolls, with the Smart City facelift. Picture Credits: Wikimedia Commons.

Tracing Modern Architectural Footprints

Sheikh Intekhab Alam



Allama Iqbal Library. Photo by Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir, boasts a rich architectural tapestry woven from indigenous building traditions and external influences. The city's historical landscape, dominated by Mughal gardens, *dhajji dewari* (traditional Kashmiri houses) and religious structures evolved significantly with the advent of modern architectural practices, subtly altering the urban fabric. While Srinagar's historical vernacular structures have always attracted admiration, its modern architectural heritage remains an often-overlooked treasure.

> The introduction of modern architecture to Srinagar coincided with a period of significant social and political change in India. Post-independence, as the nation sought to define its identity, architecture played a crucial role in this process.

Modern architecture—with its emphasis on functionality, efficiency and the use of new materials like reinforced concrete—offered a departure from traditional design aesthetics. In Srinagar, architects confronted the unique challenge of reconciling these modern ideals with the city's rich architectural heritage and the challenging Himalayan climate. The city's distinctive geography, climate and sociopolitical conditions provided a canvas for some of the country's most celebrated architects to create innovative designs.

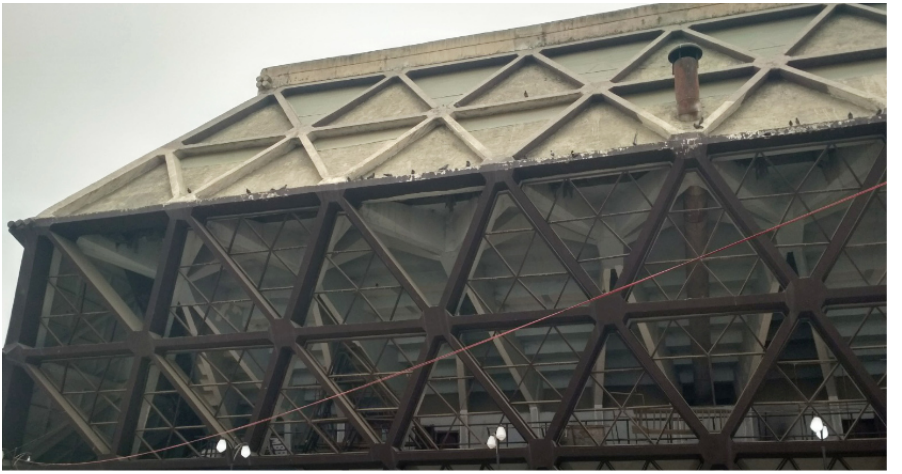
The work of pioneering architects such as Achyut Kanvinde, Joseph Allen Stein and Shivnath Prasad exemplifies the fusion of the modernist architectural idiom with Srinagar's cultural and environmental ethos. Their designs skilfully integrate natural light, climate-responsive forms and traditional Kashmiri craftsmanship. Exploring Srinagar's lesser-known modernist structures offers valuable insight into their enduring impact on the city's evolution.

Achyut Kanvinde (1916-2002)

Functionality and Rationalism

Achyut Kanvinde at CSIR, 1948. Picture Credits: Wikimedia Commons.

Achyut Kanvinde, one of India's foremost modern architects, was deeply influenced by the Bauhaus Movement and the teachings of his mentor Walter Gropius at Harvard University. His approach to design emphasised functionality, clean lines and the use of concrete as a defining material. In Srinagar, Kanvinde left a significant mark with several institutional and public buildings, including the iconic Broadway



Designed with care, the Sher-e-Kashmir Stadium uses natural ventilation and lighting to adapt to Srinagar's changing climate. Photo by Sheikh Intekhab Alam.

Cinema in the Badami Bagh Cantonment area. The theatre features a distinctive long-span concrete structure with wooden exterior cladding, a sloping roof and multiple small windows.

> Completed between 1979 and 1982, the Sher-e-Kashmir Indoor Stadium stands as a testament to Kanvinde's mastery in designing large-scale public venues.

Commissioned by the Government of Jammu and Kashmir, the stadium features a space truss structure, utilising both steel and prestressed concrete, materials emblematic of modernist architecture. The stadium's thoughtful design incorporates natural ventilation and lighting, essential for maintaining comfort in Srinagar's variable climate. Strategically located near Iqbal Park in Wazir Bagh and seamlessly integrated into the surrounding landscape, the stadium has become a vibrant hub for sports and community events.

The stadium's cruciform-shaped plan evolved out of the need for a stable structural form spanning the large playing arena to accommodate approximately 5,000 spectator seats in a column-free space. Through close collaboration with the structural designer and careful evaluation of alternatives, Kanvinde developed a single-layered space structure. A public concourse on the perimeter at the ground level provides for ticket booths and refreshment counters. Practice halls and warm-up areas are provided in the basement, beneath the seating areas, while supporting facilities like changing rooms and toilets are housed in pyramidal modules located outside, adjacent to the main structure. The use of locally sourced materials and construction techniques not only optimised costs

but also resonated with the region.

Beyond these projects, Kanvinde contributed to several other notable projects in Srinagar, including the Sher-e-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences (1975; which remained unrealised) and the Dairy Development Board (1986) on Gupkar Road. His designs for engineering headquarters (1966) and high-altitude research laboratories (1969) further highlight his versatility in adapting modernist principles to diverse institutional needs.

Joseph Allen Stein (1912-2001)

Crafting Contextual Modernism

American architect Joseph Allen Stein pioneered a regional modernist approach to Indian architecture, particularly through his work in New Delhi and West Bengal. His renowned designs include the India International Centre (IIC) and India Habitat Centre (IHC) in New Delhi. Stein's practice is distinguished by its exceptional sensitivity to local contexts, climates, nature and cultural nuances.

> Stein's most notable contribution to Srinagar is the Sher-e-Kashmir International Convention Centre (SKICC), designed with remarkable sensitivity to the landscape (Dal Lake and precinct) and local materials.

He is also credited for the selection of the site; reportedly specifically recommending a lakefront location. His meticulous planning ensured harmonious integration with the Zabarwan mountain range and Dal Lake. Completed in 1977, the complex comprises a conference centre and a hotel. The conference facilities are grouped in a structurally symmetrical configuration, the block supported by eight massive piers and interlocked beams. The exterior is a precisely articulated concrete frame, expressive of the structural scheme. While the walls are clad with

SKICC features clean lines and open forms. Photo by Sheikh Intekhab Alam.

concrete blocks of exposed green aggregate, crushed from local stone, the roof is clad with blue-grey local slate.

Stein's engagement with the region extended beyond this landmark project. He was commissioned to prepare the Masterplan for Gulmarg's orderly development (1965) as well.

Shivnath Prasad (1922-2002)

Bridging Tradition and Modernity

Architect Shivnath Prasad's designs often showcased a sophisticated interplay between geometric precision and vernacular influences.

In Jammu and Kashmir, Prasad's notable work includes the Allama Iqbal Library, built between 1969 and 1973 on a 1.5-hectare site inside the Kashmir University campus. The building features a square plan, with 9,375 square metres of built-up area. Pyramid-shaped skylights incorporated in each structural grid provide uniform illumination throughout the library interior. The design also includes drainage spouts to channel rainwater from the terrace, while brise-soleil elements protect the windows from exposure to the sun and rain.

> To capture the scenic splendours of the mountain ranges and maximise natural light, Prasad deliberately enlarged the glazed openings. The staircase and lift towers add verticality to the structure, creating a dramatic contrast to the rugged profile of the mountains.

The reinforced concrete-frame structure of the building with exposed shuttering patterns adds much-needed textural interest to the facade.

Way Forward

Recognising Srinagar's modern architectural heritage is essential, as these structures mark the city's transition into modernity while showcasing their creator's innovative design approaches. However, decades of political instability and neglect have rendered many public buildings inaccessible or obsolete. The absence of legal protection and heritage status has further endangered these structures, making them vulnerable to demolition in favour of high-rise developments. Despite these challenges, efforts such as heritage walks, academic research and media campaigns can revive public interest in Srinagar's modernist buildings. As Srinagar marches toward rapid urban transformation, it is imperative to recognise, protect and celebrate this heritage.

Allama Iqbal Library, Shivnath Prasad's modernist vision in concrete and light. Photo by Sheikh Intekhab Alam.

CITY IN CINEMA

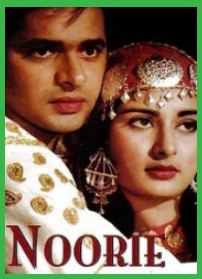
Contemporary movies that depict Srinagar—its people, places and history.

Kashmir Ki Kali (1964)

A classic love story that captures Srinagar's charm with houseboats, *shikara* rides, and bustling bazaars. Traditional pherans, Kashmiri handicrafts and the iconic 'Taarif Karoon Kya Uski' song immortalised this film as a timeless ode to Dal Lake.

Noorie (1979)

Set in Srinagar's quaint wooden homes with *dhajji dewari* walls and *khatamband* ceilings, *Noorie* beautifully showcases Kashmiri embroidery, serene villages, wedding customs and local festivals, offering a glimpse into the region's rich traditions.



Valley of Saints (2012)

Set on Dal Lake, Musa Syeed's film follows a young boatman navigating life amid Kashmir's houseboats, floating gardens and breathtaking waters, highlighting the deep connection between people and nature.

Haider (2014)

Vishal Bhardwaj's *Hamlet* adaptation brings Kashmir's heritage to life with intricately carved wooden homes, warm *kangri*s, and *kahwa* served in ornate *samovars*. Snow-clad alleys and elegant *pherans* add to the film's visual splendour.

Laila Majnu (2018)

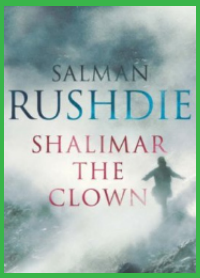
Rooted in Srinagar's culture, this adaptation features bustling markets, serene lakes, and grand weddings with Kashmiri music and attire. Local poetry, folk tunes and embroidered costumes enrich its storytelling.

CITY READS

Books that capture the essence of Srinagar's culture, tradition and timeless charm.

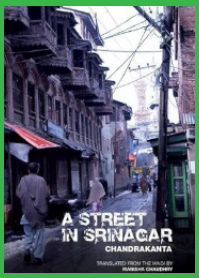
Shalimar the Clown (2005)

SALMAN RUSHDIE



Set in the fictional village of Pachigam near Srinagar, this novel intertwines personal and political narratives, capturing the beauty of Kashmir and the complexities arising from its conflicts. Rushdie's storytelling brings to life the region's rich cultural tapestry and the challenges faced by its people.

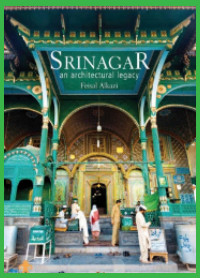
A Street in Srinagar (2012)



CHANDRAKANTA

This evocative novel, translated from Hindi, portrays a Kashmir untouched by violence, yet with shadows looming at its edges. It offers a poignant glimpse into the lives of Srinagar's residents, capturing the city's essence before the onset of conflict.

Srinagar: An Architectural Legacy (2012)



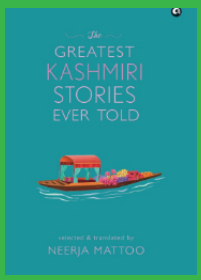
FEISAL ALKAZI

This book explores the history and architectural heritage of Srinagar, highlighting its 500-year-old legacy. It brings to life the city's rich past, showcasing the diverse influences that have shaped its unique architectural landscape.

The Greatest Kashmiri Stories Ever Told (2022)

NEERJA MATTOO (EDITOR & TRANSLATOR)

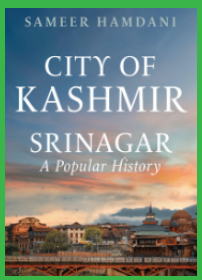
This anthology brings together classic and contemporary short stories that reflect the shared histories of Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims. From the bustling lanes of Zaina Kadal to the Chinars of Rainawari, the collection offers a glimpse into Srinagar's changing yet enduring culture.



City of Kashmir (2023)

SAMEER HAMDANI

This comprehensive work delves into Srinagar's 2,000-year history, exploring its legends, oral traditions and material culture. It provides readers with an in-depth understanding of the city's geography, daily rituals and renowned crafts, painting a vivid picture of Srinagar's evolution over millennia.



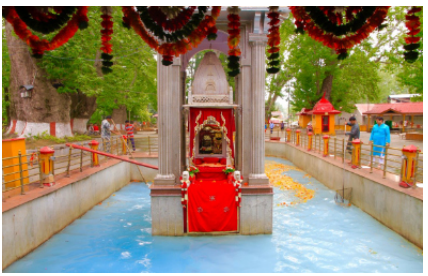
FESTIVAL FOOTPRINTS

A range of diverse festivals that reflect Srinagar's cultural landscape.

Tulip Festival

Held annually in March-April at the Indira Gandhi Memorial Tulip Garden, the festival marks the blooming of over a million tulips, making it Asia's largest tulip display. Organised by the Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Department, it features floral exhibitions, cultural programmes and local handicraft stalls.

Kheer Bhawani Festival



Celebrated by Kashmiri Pandits in May–June, the festival takes place at the Kheer Bhawani Temple in Tulmulla, near Srinagar. Devotees offer *kheer* (rice pudding) to Goddess Ragnya Devi and gather at the sacred spring, believed to change colours as a divine omen.

Shikara Festival

Held in July on Dal Lake, the festival is organised by the Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Department to showcase Srinagar's floating heritage. Events include *shikara* races, cultural performances and illuminated boat displays.

Urs Celebrations

Observed in June at the Dastgeer Sahib shrine and in December at Hazratbal shrine, these Sufi festivals mark the death anniversaries of revered saints. Devotees gather for prayers, Sufi discourses and community feasts, with the Holy Relic of Prophet Muhammad displayed at

Hazratbal.

Chinar Book Festival

Inaugurated in August 2024, the festival is planned as an annual event at the Sher-e-Kashmir International Conference Centre (SKICC) in Srinagar. Organised by the National Book Trust, India, in collaboration with the District Administration Srinagar, it features book stalls, cultural performances and literary discussions.

MUSEUMS & MEMORIES

Cultural spaces in the city that celebrate Srinagar's rich heritage and artistic diversity.

Sri Pratap Singh Museum

Established in 1898 within the premises of the Maharaja' of Kashmir's summer guest house, the museum houses a large collection drawn from the State Toshkhana. Now a State-run museum, it houses over 80,000 artefacts.

- Location: Lal Mandi, Srinagar
- Days: Tuesday - Sunday
- Timings: 10 am - 5 pm
- Entry: INR 10 (Indian), INR 50 (Foreigners)

Crafts Museum, School of Designs

Housed at the School of Designs and run by the Handicrafts Department, the Crafts Museum showcases Kashmir's rich artistry, featuring *sozni* embroidery, papier-mâché items, and *kani* weaving, with interactive workshops led by master artisans.

- Location: Kashmir Haat, Exhibition Grounds, Srinagar
- Days: Monday - Saturday
- Timings: 10:30 am - 3:30 pm

Kashmir Government Arts Emporium

Established in 1948 and housed in a heritage building that once served as the British Residency, the state-run Kashmir Government Arts Emporium showcases a diverse collection of authentic Kashmiri handicrafts.

- Location: Residency Road, Srinagar
- Days: Monday - Saturday
- Timings: 10 am - 7:30 pm

Heritage Museum, Kashmir University

Managed by the Department of History, the museum preserves rare manuscripts, historical artefacts and ancient coins.

- Location: Hazratbal, Kashmir University, Srinagar
- Days: Monday - Friday
- Timings: 10 am - 4 pm

Lal Ded Cultural Centre & Gallery

Established in 2012 by J&K Tourism and INTACH, the Lal Ded Memorial Cultural Centre, housed in a restored colonial-era building, preserves Srinagar's heritage through exhibitions and events. Originally a school founded by poet Deena Nath Nadim (c. 1947), it now serves as a cultural hub.

- Location: Rajbagh, Srinagar
- Days: Monday - Sunday
- Timings: 11 am - 7 pm

Trails

Picture Credits: ImadClicks/Unsplash.

Photos by Taha Mughal and Syed Muneeb Masoodi.

Srinagar's Craft Tour

8.5 KMS

KHANQAH-E-MOULA SHRINE

1. Wanpoo Copper Shop
2. Maharaj Gunj Historic Market
3. Qadeem Khatamband Ceiling and Panelling Karkhana
4. Maizbaan Art and Craft
5. SS Carpets
6. Me & K
7. Shah Handicrafts
8. Kashmiri Sozni Atelier

MAPS

The traditional crafts of Kashmir have flourished for centuries, dating back to the fourteenth century or even earlier. These crafts, from intricate woodwork to fine papier-mâché, showcase the artistry passed down through generations.

Highlighting eight *karkhana*s led by master artisans, the tour aims to showcase artisans of *khatamband*, *sozni*, carpet weaving, *pashmina*, copperware, and other crafts. It brings visitors directly to these artisans in their home *karkhana*s, challenging the usual top-down approach to heritage interpretation. By trying the craft under their guidance, visitors can discover firsthand the meticulous processes behind each creation, from intricate wood carvings to delicate *sozni* embroidery.

Winding through Srinagar's historic Shehr-e-Khaas, the tour offers a unique experience of the city's centuries-old built heritage. The tour celebrates Kashmir's artistic legacy and empowers local craftsmen to narrate their tales and share their skills in authentic local spaces.

1 Copperware: Wanpoo Copper Shop

Kashmiri copperware is known for its intricate designs and functional elegance. Artisans create *samovars*, *tasht-naari*, *trami*, and decorative pieces, adorned with motifs like chinar leaves, paisleys, and geometric patterns—echoing Kashmir's rich heritage. The craft dates to the eighth century under King Lalitaditya, evolving in the fourteenth century with Persian influences with repoussé and inlay work in silver and gold. The process involves shaping copper sheets, engraving patterns, gilding, and polishing.

Wanpoo Copper Shop in Srinagar's old city is run by the renowned Mohammad Aslam. With over thirty-five years of experience, Aslam blends copper with wicker, wood, and papier-mâché to create innovative designs. He has earned a State Award and mentors students from institutions like NIFT Srinagar and the Craft Development Institute.

Located near the Khanqah-e-Maula shrine in Srinagar's historic KK Mohalla Shamswari, the shop offers a firsthand glimpse into the making of Kashmiri copperware. Visitors can also explore the area's architectural heritage along the Jhelum riverbank.

2 Maharaj Gunj Historic Market

Maharaj Gunj, in the heart of Srinagar, is a historic market established in the nineteenth century under Maharaja Ranbir Singh. Once a bustling trade hub along the Silk Road, it connected merchants from Amritsar, Lahore, Karachi, Rawalpindi, and Central Asia.

Known for its exquisite copperware, *pashmina* shawls, and intricate embroidery, it also showcases *tilla* work in gold and silver threads, along with crewel and chain stitch embroidery on textiles. The market offers papier-mâché items, often used in weddings, as well as willow wicker products like *kangri*s (fire pots) and decorative baskets for dry fruits and nuts.

The market's architecture blends vernacular and colonial styles, with taq and *dhajji dewari* buildings—shops below and residences above. Maharaj Gunj offers a glimpse into Kashmir's evolving commerce and craftsmanship while nearby, the fifteenth century Budshah Tomb and the iconic Vakil House are illustrative of the region's architectural and cultural heritage.

3 Khatamband: Qadeem Khatamband Ceiling and Panelling Karkhana

Khatamband is a traditional Kashmiri craft of intricate wooden ceilings made from pine, walnut, or deodar wood, assembled without nails or glue. Introduced by artisans accompanying Mir Syed Ali Hamdani in the fourteenth century and popularized by Mirza Hyder Tughlat mid-sixteenth century, its geometric patterns offer both aesthetic appeal and insulation.

The *karkhana* Qadeem *Khatamband* Ceiling and Panelling, in Haftayarbal, Safa Kadal, Srinagar, is run by master craftsmen Ali Mohammad Najar and his son

Mohammad Iqbal Najar of the Geeru family, who have trained over three hundred artisans. Specializing in Persian *Khatamband* designs like Dawaz Dah Gird, Chaar Baksh, Panch Baksh, and Moaj, their work is featured in shrines, houseboats, and mosques across Kashmir and internationally, including in Qatar.

Located in a traditional three-story Kashmiri home, the *karkhana* offers visitors insight into this historic craft, with nearby attractions such as the Malik Sahib shrine, Yarkand Sarai, historic mosques, and the Shri Ram temple.

4 Walnut Wood Carving: Maizbaan Art and Craft

The walnut wood carving of the region is a renowned craft that transforms durable walnut trees into intricate art. Artisans (*naqqash*) carve delicate motifs like chinar leaves, lotus flowers, and vine patterns. Introduced during Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin's fifteenth-century reign, the craft relies on high-quality walnut wood, seasoned for up to four years. Using handmade chisels and mallets, artisans meticulously carve designs, with some pieces taking years to complete.

Maizbaan Art and Craft, near Abu Seena School, Safa Kadal, Srinagar, is a leading workshop run by Ghulam Nabi Dar, a master craftsman. Despite early rejections, he developed a unique style inspired by Kashmir's landscapes. His work includes decorative panels, furniture, and window surrounds, some valued between INR 8 to 10 lakhs.

Honoured with the Padma Shri in 2024, Dar has exhibited his work globally and welcomes visitors to his workshop a glimpse into this exquisite craft.

5 Kashmiri Carpets: SS Carpets

Kashmiri carpets are exquisite hand-knotted textiles made from silk, wool, or a blend of both. Known for intricate floral motifs, hunting scenes, and medallions, they blend Persian influences with Kashmiri elements. Their vibrant jewel-like colours and high knot density—up to 900 knots per square inch. Sizes vary, with custom-made carpets available, including Asia's longest 72x40 square foot carpet with over three crore knots.

The craft dates to the fifteenth century when Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin invited Persian artisans, merging their techniques with local artistry. Designs by *naqqash* are translated into *talim* (coded blueprints) before

artisans meticulously hand-tie each knot. Natural dyes like indigo and madder root enhance longevity.

SS Carpets in Rethpora Muhalla, Srinagar, led by designer Shahnawaz Ahmad Sofi, integrates technology into traditional craft, using AI and blockchain for authenticity. His carpets, including one featuring the FIFA World Cup logo, were showcased at the Qatar World Cup 2022.

6 Pashmina: Me & K

Pashmina, Kashmir's luxurious fabric, has a history spanning over 3,000 years, cherished by royalty from King Caesar to Queen Marie Antoinette. The weaving tradition flourished under Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin's reign, who invited Central Asian weavers to Kashmir. Made from the fine undercoat of the Changthangi goat, *pashmina* is prized for its softness, warmth, and lightweight feel. The craft begins with hand-combing delicate fibres,

which are spun and woven on traditional looms. Each intricately designed piece requires immense skill and can be expensive.

A key centre of this craft is Me & K, a three-story *karkhana* established in 2008 by cousins Mujtaba Kadri and Rauf Shaw in Srinagar. The workshop focuses on preserving and advancing traditional *pashmina* craft. The artisans use both traditional wooden spinning wheels and innovative pedal-powered winders, which help increase productivity and improve wages for the artisans. Me & K also operates a Centre for Excellence in Pashmina Weaving. Visitors can explore the process and shop in its showroom.

7 Papier-mâché: Shah Handicrafts

Kashmiri papier-mâché, introduced by Persian mystic Mir Syed Ali Hamadani in the fourteenth century, is known as *kar-e-kalamdan*. This craft involves shaping decorative items like vases,

trays, and boxes from paper pulp. Distinct from other paper crafts, it features intricate motifs such as *gul-e-ander-gul* (flower inside a flower) and *hazara* (a thousand flowers), reflecting Persian and Central Asian influences.

The process begins with soaking waste paper for twenty days, mixing it with rice water to form pulp, which is then layered onto moulds. Once dry, the objects are polished, painted with natural dyes, and finished with gold or silver foil and varnish for durability.

Shah Handicrafts in Zadibal, Srinagar, founded by Syed Amjad Ali, has been preserving this art for over forty years. Artisans, from *sakhtasaz* (framework makers) to *naqqash* (painters), create exquisite pieces displayed in the showroom. Many designers here have earned National and State Awards, showcasing Kashmir's rich artistic heritage.

8 Kashmiri Sozni Atelier

Sozni embroidery is known for its intricate hand-stitching on fine *pashmina* and silk. Introduced during the Mughal era, it flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, incorporating Persian techniques like shading and layered stitching.

Delicate paisleys, florals, and geometric designs define *Sozni*, often featuring up to 18 colours and stitch densities ranging from 5 to 500 stitches per centimetre.

The process begins with a *naqqash* (designer) sketching patterns, later transferred onto fabric using wooden blocks. Skilled artisans then embroider these patterns with fine silk threads. The Beigh family of Srinagar has been crafting shawls for over 250 years, tracing their legacy back to the artisans brought by Mir Syed Ali Hamadani. Each shawl takes 1.5 to 5 years to craft by a single artisan. The family's craft has earned them numerous awards, including

the prestigious Shilp Guru Award and the Best of the Best award in the Art in Action festival in Oxford, London. Their work is displayed at their *karkhana*. Nearby, the Jalali heritage house offers a glimpse into Kashmiri architectural splendour.

Please note:

- Given the distance, availing a vehicle is recommended to explore the trail.
- There is no entry fee; artisans welcome visitors out of love for their craft. If offering a token of appreciation, use an envelope and express your intent beforehand.
- Photography is allowed for exteriors; interiors upon request.
- Wear comfortable footwear, and carry a hat/umbrella along with a bottle of water. Some *karkhana*s may have a series of two staircases to climb.
- Start early as the roads tend to get busy, and the weather becomes less enjoyable later in the day.
- Kindly respect the cultural and religious significance/sentiments of the spaces. Expect to remove your shoes before entering the *karkhana*s.
- As many of the *karkhana*s are located inside the homes, loose full body clothing is advised for all.
- Contact the master craftsmen/ artisans/manager before planning your visit and for more details:
  - Wanpoo Copper Shop: Mohammad Aslam (+91-6005779191)
  - Qadeem Khatamband Ceiling & Panelling *Karkhana*: Mohammad Iqbal Najar (+91-9906716314, +91-9906503961, kadeemkhatamband786@gmail.com)
  - Maizbaan Art & Craft: +91-7006966309
  - SS Carpets: Shahnawaz Sofi (+91-9906528085)
  - Me & K: +91-98100 50819
  - Shah Handicrafts: Amjad Ali (+91-7006717026, +91-9419016398)
  - Kashmiri Sozni Atelier: Beigh family (0194-2421831, +91-9906646394, +91-9797163315)

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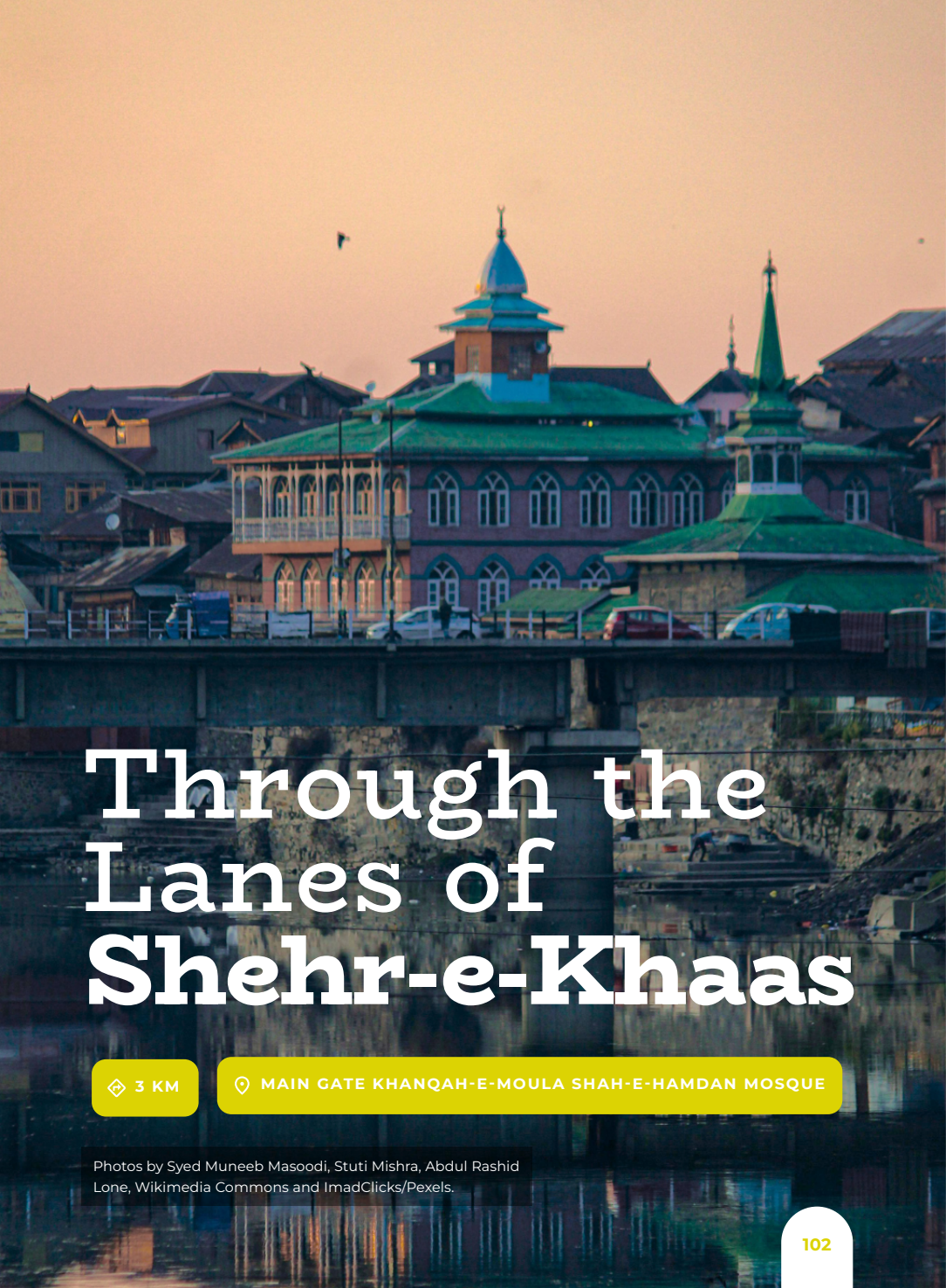


Through the Lanes of **Shehr-e-Khaas**

3 KM

MAIN GATE KHANQAH-E-MOULA SHAH-E-HAMDAN MOSQUE

Photos by Syed Muneeb Masoodi, Stuti Mishra, Abdul Rashid Lone, Wikimedia Commons and ImadClicks/Pexels.


MAPS
Rajouri Kadal-Gojwara
Rang Hamam Ln
Nowhatta-G
Ganj Baksh
Nalahmar Rd
Wazpora Rd
Jamia Masjid Rd
Srinagar - Leh Hwy
Wahab Sahib Ln
Bhori Kadal Rd
Syed Moha
Malarata - Bh
Jhelum River
Ali Kadal - Zaina Kadal Rd
Gaad Kocha
Zaina Kadal - Khan Kah Rd
Dalal Mohallah Rd
1. Khanqah-e-Moula Mosque
2. Pathar Masjid
3. Gade Kocha
4. Zaina Kadal
5. Copper Market
6. Mazar-e-Salateen
7. Gurdwara Maharaj Ganj
8. Jamia Masjid

The old city of Srinagar, called Downtown, or locally the Shehr-e-Khaas is a labyrinth of alleys and bylanes along the Eastern and Western banks of the river Jhelum. A timeless urbanscape, the Shehr-e-Khaas, in its historic religious structures, heritage houses, bustling bazaars, and desolated ghats, embodies the many narratives of the changing tides of Kashmir's history.

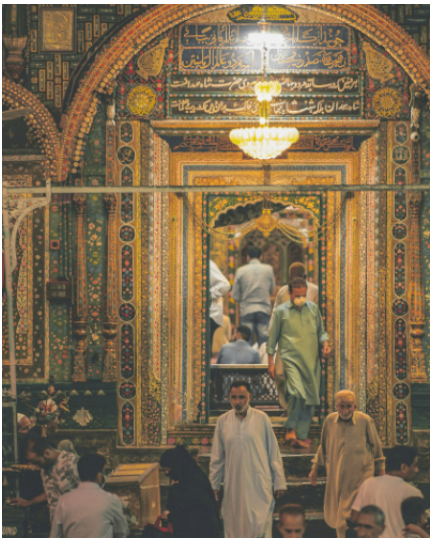
The walk takes us through the narrow, interconnected passageways of the old city; a historic, quintessential hub of Kashmir's political, economic, and cultural activity. We see the past and the present coming together, with remnants of more than 600 years of Kashmiri heritage co-existing with modern life.

1 Khanqah-e-Moula Mosque

The Khanqah-e-Moula, also known as Shah-e-Hamdan mosque, as the shrine of Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, is one of the most revered spiritual and architectural landmarks in Srinagar. Located on the banks of the river Jhelum in the old city, this fourteenth-century *khanqah* (Sufi hospice) marks the site where the revered Persian Sufi saint is believed to have meditated and disseminated his teachings. Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, also known as Shah-e-Hamadan, played a crucial role in the spread of Islam in Kashmir and introduced Persianate cultural, artistic, and craft traditions to the region.

Originally built in 1395 CE by Sultan Sikandar, the *khanqah* was reconstructed in the eighteenth century after a fire.

The wooden structure exemplifies Kashmiri vernacular architecture, with intricate papier-mâché, *khatamband* ceilings, and finely carved deodar wood panels. Every year, on the saint's *urs* (death anniversary), devotees gather in large numbers to pay their respects. The khanqah continues to serve as a center for spiritual learning, communal prayers, and Sufi traditions, making it the ideal spot to start the heritage trail.



2 Pathar Masjid

Built in 1623 during the reign of Mughal Emperor Jahangir, Pathar Masjid, locally known as Naev Masheed, stands as an architectural anomaly in Srinagar's predominantly wooden and brick-built religious landscape. Commissioned by Empress Nur Jahan, this mosque is constructed entirely of locally sourced limestone, earning it the name Pathar Masjid (Stone Mosque). Unlike traditional Kashmiri mosques, it lacks a pagoda-style roof and minarets, featuring instead grand arches and an austere symmetrical façade.

Its unconventional design and imperial patronage led to debates, with legends suggesting it was never used for prayer. Despite this, the mosque remains a significant example of Mughal influence in Kashmir. Located on the banks of the river Jhelum in Shehr-e-Khaas, it offers insight into the syncretic architectural history of the region. This beautiful mosque is recognized as a Monument of National Importance.

3 Gade Kocha

In the heart of Shehr-e-Khaas, Gade Kocha or Gade Bazaar is a labyrinthine alleyway that mirrors the charm of a jigsaw puzzle, winding along the river Jhelum. Once a bustling fish market—its name derived from the word *gade* meaning fish in Kashmiri—this historic passageway has transformed into a vibrant marketplace, reflecting the evolving commercial fabric of Srinagar.

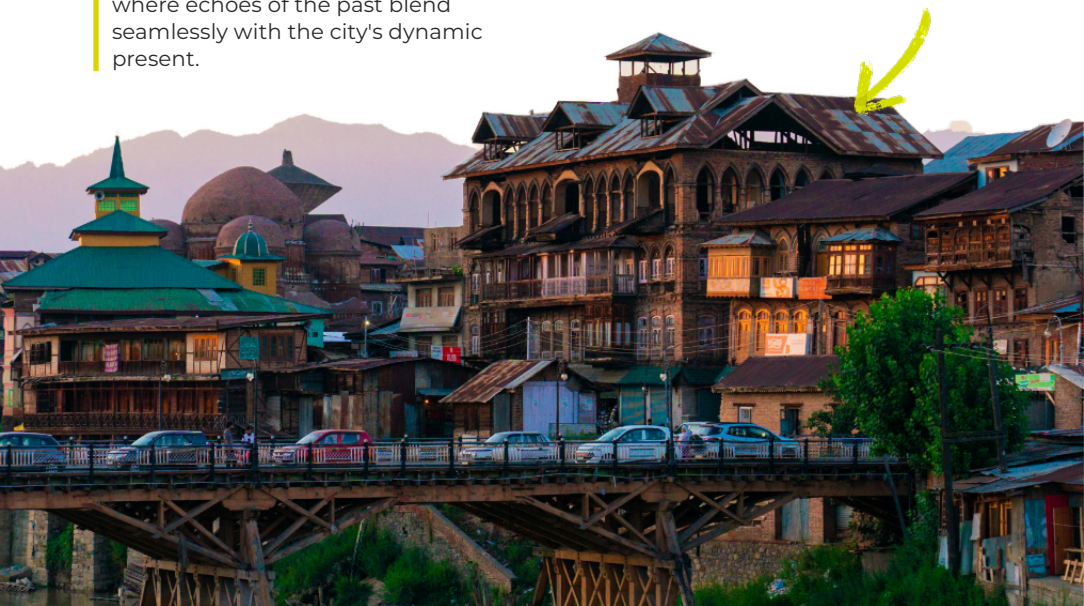
Today, the air in Gade Kocha carries the rich aromas of spices, herbs, and dried goods, with shopkeepers proudly displaying Hand, Wopal Haak, turmeric rhizomes, and Abuj

leaves. The alley is also home to shops selling exquisite fabrics, intricate handicrafts, and daily essentials, making it a fascinating stop for visitors seeking an authentic slice of Kashmiri heritage. Walking through these narrow lanes offers a sensory experience—a journey through Srinagar's living history, where echoes of the past blend seamlessly with the city's dynamic present.

4 Zaina Kadal

Zaina Kadal, one of Srinagar's oldest and most historically significant bridges, was built by Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin (r. 1420–1470 CE) around 1425–1426 CE. Situated on the river Jhelum, it served as a crucial link between the two halves of the city, facilitating trade and movement. While some debate whether it was the second bridge constructed over the Jhelum, its sturdy design has made it a vital crossing point for centuries.

The area around Zaina Kadal was a thriving commercial hub, once home to the renowned Gade Bazaar, where locals purchased meat, fish, cheese, and vegetables. The nearby Ranbir Gunj and Maharaj Ganj remain bustling wholesale markets for tea, spices, textiles, and essential goods. Although business activity has since shifted towards Lal Chowk, Zaina Kadal continues to be a historic landmark, reflecting the rich mercantile legacy of Shehr-e-Khaas.



5 Copper Market

The Copper Market in Shehr-e-Khaas is a vibrant hub of Kashmir's centuries-old metalworking tradition. Introduced by artisans from Iran and Iraq over 700 years ago, copperware gained prominence under the influence of Mir Sayyid Ali Hamdani, who brought skilled craftsmen from Central Asia to train local artisans. The craft flourished during the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abideen and later adapted to Mughal demands for weaponry. By the 19th century, as Mughal rule declined, Kashmiri metalworkers refocused on crafting ornamental vessels, often decorated with *meenakari* (enameling).

Today, the market is renowned for its finely engraved copper utensils, integral to Kashmiri households and ceremonial gatherings. Signature pieces include the *samovar* (tea urn), *trami* (large serving plate for feasts), and *taesh naer* (portable handwash vessel). A walk through this bustling marketplace offers an immersive experience of Srinagar's rich artisanal heritage, where age-old craftsmanship continues to thrive.

6 Mazar-e-Salateen

Overlooking the river Jhelum, Mazar-e-Salateen is the final resting place of the mother of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, one of Kashmir's most celebrated rulers. Unlike the mosques and shrines that characterize Shehr-e-Khaas, this fifteenth-century royal tomb stands out with its distinctive five-domed brick structure, often compared to Byzantine architecture.

Serene and historically significant, the tomb offers panoramic views of the old city's skyline, especially from Zaina Kadal, Srinagar's oldest bridge, named after the Sultan himself. Zain-ul-Abidin's own tomb is nearby,

reflecting his enduring legacy as a patron of art, culture, and religious harmony. Mazar-e-Salateen remains an integral part of Srinagar's medieval heritage, a site that silently narrates the city's royal past.

7 Gurdwara Maharaj Ganj

This inconspicuous gem, nestled in a narrow alley, showcases a blend of historical importance and architectural subtlety. Gurdwara Maharaj Ganj is a marker of Kashmir's Sikh heritage. Dating back to the seventeenth-century, it was originally established as a Dharamshala, serving as a place for Sikh congregational gatherings before evolving into a formal Gurdwara. Recognized as the oldest Sikh shrine in Kashmir, it has silently witnessed the region's changing cultural and historical landscape.

The Gurdwara's architectural features subtly echo influences from the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, particularly in its floral embellishments and decorative elements. Some of its motifs draw inspiration from historic Sikh shrines, including the Golden Temple, forming a rich artistic and spiritual connection. Despite its modest appearance, Gurdwara Maharaj Ganj remains a vital center for the Sikh faith and heritage in Srinagar, offering visitors a glimpse into the syncretic traditions that have shaped the city's religious and cultural fabric.

8 Jamia Masjid

Located at Nowhatta, Jamia Masjid is one of Srinagar's most significant architectural and spiritual landmarks. Built in 1400 CE by Sultan Sikandar, the mosque reflects Indo-Saracenic and traditional Kashmiri wooden architecture, featuring 378 intricately carved deodar pillars and a vast central courtyard.

The mosque was later expanded by Zain-ul-Abidin, allowing it to accommodate up to 33,333 worshippers. Despite being surrounded by bustling markets, Jamia Masjid remains an oasis of peace and reflection, drawing both devotees and visitors. Its striking wooden construction, inspired by Persian and Central Asian influences, sets it apart from other mosques in the region.

Please note:

- There is no entry fee.
- Photography is allowed (in the interior and exterior of buildings).
- It will be a leisure stroll in Shehr-e-Khaas with several stops to sit, talk, and discuss.
- Wear comfortable footwear, and carry a hat/umbrella along with a bottle of water.
- Please start early, as the weather becomes less enjoyable later in the day.
- Kindly respect the cultural and religious significance/sentiments of the spaces.

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About Us

InterGlobe Foundation

InterGlobe Foundation (IGF) is the CSR arm of the InterGlobe Group of companies. The key focus areas of IGF include Heritage Conservation, Promotion of Livelihoods and Environment Conservation including Waste Management. The Heritage projects cover both the tangible and intangible aspects of heritage. The environment projects support development and protection of Natural Resources thereby increasing the green cover and ground water recharge. It also includes work on Waste Management. The livelihood projects support income enhancement of marginalized groups, especially women through environment friendly projects. By partnering with leading NGOs of the country, IGF has been able to impact more than 600,000 lives.

Sahapedia

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