



LAHAULI PULLAH- A CREATION OF TRADITIONAL STRAW FOOTWEAR OF LAHAULA TRIBE OF HIMACHAL PRADESH

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Abstract: Primitive people learned the use of animal hair and fibres of certain plants and trees to cover their body. The animal hair and the vegetal fibers not only gave them better protection against the elements but these offered better mobility to them as well. The present exploratory study was carried out on the sustainable approach of making sturdy, warm and riveting *pullahs* (traditional footwear) with local plantation by Lahaula tribe of Lahaul & Spiti district of Himachal Pradesh. Craft of straw weaving started among these communities due to living in diverse climates and harsh terrains that have creatively responded to the challenges of their environment by transforming locally available natural fibers to create viable footwear to be worn as their prerequisite. This work aims to explore the techniques, and cultural importance of *pullah* among the Lahaula tribe. By delving into the materials, techniques, traditional uses, as well as the challenges and opportunities faced by the craft, this study offers insights into the rich cultural heritage of the Lahaula tribe and their dedication to preserving this ancient art form.

Index Terms- Lahauli *pullah*, traditional handicraft, straw weaving, Lahaula tribe, Himachal Pradesh

1. Introduction

Himachal takes its name from the Himalayas. Himachal literally means 'Land of Snowy Mountains'. The word '*Hima*' means snow in Sanskrit terminology. It is also referred as '*Dev Bhumi*' meaning 'Abode of Gods'. Himachal Pradesh is a small world in itself, which is entered from the plains of Punjab or Shivalik hills or through hills of Shimla, through beautiful 'meandering valleys', covered with pine and typical temperate mountain flora. Lahaul-Spiti district of the state is a unique sociological unit, spreads in the great Himalayas zone of Himachal Pradesh. It is a barren, desolate and wind-swept region and lies at an average elevation of over 3,500 meters. The district is renowned for snow fields, ice caves, glaciers and snow-clad mountains and passes. Lahaula tribe is an indigenous community residing in the Lahaul and Spiti district of

Himachal Pradesh, India. They have a rich heritage that includes various traditional handicrafts and practices.

Straw weaving is one of the traditional handicrafts of Lahaul and Spiti that has been practiced among the Lahaula tribe for centuries. After weaving and knitting, only straw weaving is alive in the form of making *pullahs*, *mandri* (grass mat) and *tokri* (basket) for the local use. Other traditional handicrafts such as woodcarving, stonework and metalwork of the district are now verging on extinction.

In this study, the researcher explored the Lahauli *pullah* in detail among the two other produce. These traditional footwear of Lahaula tribe are essential part of their traditional costumes. This research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the techniques, patterns, and cultural significance associated with this unique form of clothing.

2. Traditional Straw *Pullah*

Design, weaving technique and habitude of traditional footwear of Lahaula tribe made it exclusive than the *pullahs* worn in other regions of Himachal Pradesh. It involves the interlacing of straw using some flexible herbaceous plants as raw materials, which are then braided in artistic manner to make useful pair of traditional footwear. The pair of straw *pullah* is so sturdy that in a family it passes through generation to generation without affecting its durability and serviceability. This craft has deep cultural and historical roots within the tribe, and it holds great significance in their daily lives. The art of straw weaving continues to be an important part of the tribe's heritage.



Fig 1. Lahaula man and woman in their traditional attire wearing Lahauli *pullahs*

2.1 Material used for Weaving *Pullah*

- **Barley stalk:** Stalks of a local crop *jau* (barley) is mainly used to make *pullah*'s base, and is locally called *gyangbi*.
- **Hemp stalk:** It is locally called *banga ke dandhal ka chhilka*, and is used for weaving design in *pullah*. Also, for tying the upper and lower parts of *pullah* hemp stalk is used as its yarn is strong enough to tie firmly.

- **Maize sheath:** It is called *makki ka chhilka* locally, and is also used to weave design in *pullah*.
- **Bali ka ghas:** It is a local grass found in forests, and similarly used for weaving design in *pullah*. *Bali* has a good tendency of absorbing colour, consequently it could be used for making colourful braided designs without using cashmilon yarns along with to add colours.
- **Cashmilon yarn:** Bright colours of cashmilon yarns like red, blue, green, orange etc. are used to braid along with these undyed herbaceous materials to create colourful design effects on upper part of *pullah*.
- **Sheep skin:** It is applied on the base of *pullah* as a sole to give it sturdiness.

It is one's choice and matter of availability, whether to use hemp stalk, maize sheath or *bali* for braiding designs on *pullahs*. These stalks are either dyed or used as in their natural colours using bright coloured cashmilon yarns along with to get bright coloured sequel.



Fig 2. Hemp stalk and yarn twisted from it

2.2 Dyeing of Herbaceous Straws

The process followed to obtain dyed straws for braiding is:



To obtain colourful braids on upper side of *pullahs*, stalks of hemp, maize sheath and *bali* grass are dyed in bright colours with commercial dye at home. Water is boiled in a brass pot and dye is added into the boiling water along with salt. Salt helps in fixing the colour properly to the dyed material. Stalks are then put into the boiling dye bath and the flame is turned off. Stalks are kept soaked into it for 15 to 20 minutes and then removed and kept for drying. After drying, stalks are stripped in narrow widths to form like a yarn and the required number of strips are twisted together to form a strong plied yarn. Whereas, *bali* grass only undergoes dyeing and twisting process, forbidding the step of stripping due to its own narrow width.

2.3 Pullah Weaving Technique

The *pullah* making is constituted of the following sequence of weaving its parts:



Firstly, the foreign particles are removed from the harvested crop of *gyangbi* and the straws are combed properly and weak ends are trimmed. Then straws are dipped in water and thrashed on a thick wooden round surface. While thrashing, water is continuously added in intervals making them easy to beat and this process is continued till they get soft. 4 to 5 beaten strands are twisted together to form a thick strong yarn (cord) and are kept in sunlight for 2 or 3 days for drying. After drying twisted straws, their ends are flapped for weaving. 5 to 8 long twisted straws are taken as warps as per the width of foot, and then weft straws are made to cross over the warps for weaving base and sides of *pullah*. For making shape of the toe, only central warp straws of base are kept extended to weave and tie in front, side ones are trimmed and finished after completing the required length of foot. For making heel on another edge, a bend is given to the both sides warp straws to make a place for heel. *Bange ka chhilka* is used to join the woven base of the *pullah* to the upper side. For weaving upper side, braided designs are made out of the straw yarns using one of the either *bange ka chhilka* or *makki ka chhilka* or *bali ka ghas* (depending upon the availability and one's choice) along with cashmilon yarn. Both edges of *pullah* are then stitched with cloth to give finishing effect to toe and heel. Another pair of *pullahs* is made in similar shape. There is no selective right or left foot among the pair of *pullahs*, it takes the shape of foot consequently while constant wearing.

Skin of dead sheep is applied to the base of *pullah* as sole and its sides are also covered with the skin, which makes the pair more warm and even ideal to walk on snow. For making the pair ready to wear, it is soaked into the warm water for 2 to 3 hours to make it soft and then dried. *Pullahs* are also kept without applying sheep skin to the sole to wear during prayers and such pairs are also called *kyapullahs*.



Fig 3. Front side of soled *pullahs*



Fig 4. Sheep skin applied to the base of *pullahs* as sole



Fig 5. Cashmilon yarn braided with maize sheath on top



Fig 6. Braids of bali grass (undyed) and furred skin sole

3. Significance of *Pullah* in Lahaula Culture

Straw weaving held immense importance in Lahaula culture due to its deep-rooted connection to their identity and heritage. For the Lahaula tribe, straw weaving was not just a craft but a way of life. It served as a means of preserving their traditional knowledge, skills, and cultural practices, beyond its practical applications. Through this art form, they used to express their creativity and celebrate their cultural heritage. Moreover, straw weaving played a vital role in strengthening community bonds as it often involved collective work by Lahaula women, creating a sense of solidarity and camaraderie. Thus, the significance of *pullah* weaving extended beyond a mere craft, was making it an integral part of Lahaula culture. It is profoundly banded with their cultural traditions and religious practices, often associated with rituals and ceremonies. Additionally, straw weaving acts as a symbol of identity and pride among the tribe, contributing to a sense of belonging and preserving their cultural heritage.

3.1 Rituals and Customs Associated

The researcher through discussions with respondents also found that *Pullahs* were considered to be of utmost importance in religious rituals as well in death rituals in Lahaul, as the pair of *pullahs* was presented to the *pandits/lamas* who perform the rituals for the family. A sackful of *pullahs* used to be an essential part of a baggage for a journey in earlier times in Lahaul. For worshipping, wearing *pullahs* with sheep skin sole are prohibited. Therefore, while offering prayers *kyapullahs* are worn which remain without sheep sole. Due to the strong religious belief of the older generation, they are still practicing wearing them in festivals and religious ceremonies.



Fig 7. A pair of *kyapullah*

4. Threats to Survival of Weaving *Pullah*

Nevertheless, the trend of making *pullahs* is now almost into the extinction as among very few households in a village, only females of older generations are practicing making *pullahs*. Those females make *pullahs*, they even gift them to their known families who are not into this practice for their use. Similarly, other families in the village ask the skilled women to fulfill their requirement and invite them to their homes for making *pullahs* for them. Fewest of the young generation females have learnt this handicraft.

5. Conclusion

In primitive time, *pullahs* were the essential part of traditional clothing of Lahaula tribe as these were sturdy, warm and convenient to grip during journeys on the slippery snow-covered paths. *Pullah* base is made up of barley straw and the hemp stalk, maize sheath and local grass *bali* are used for weaving designs in *pullah*. Sheep skin is applied to the base as sole.

The researcher rooted that market is flooded with variety of readymade shoes now, which is resulting into the replacement of the use of *pullahs* among the Lahaulas. Also, people found market shoes more convenient to wear in terms of saving of labour of making *pullahs*, design variety of readymade shoes, latest trends, easy to carry and handle. Along with these factors, more important is their adaption to advanced lifestyles as tribes are also moving towards employment in different sectors other than agriculture and for this they are also moving to different places, states and so on. This way traditional *pullahs* making practice has been reduced to the extend due to its redundant approach in present generation. Wearing these traditional straw footwears are now only limited to festivals, ceremonies and folk dances that too not compulsory to wear if somebody not possesses the pair. Due to the sustainability of these traditional *pullahs*, these are passed on from generation to generation.

6. References

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