

THE PATH OF PAPER



Noor Mohammad Kagzi's papermaking ancestors came to India during the time of Babur, and in an unbroken chain they continued the craft with other *kagzi* families for hundreds of years.

Opposite page:
Paper scrolls for horoscopes and religious uses were common throughout India. Detail of an extremely fine and rare seventeenth century, Basohli kundalini scroll depicting *chakras* was painted on a tinted paper which had been made on a traditional grass mould in the style of Arabic-influence papers of the hills.

Courtesy: Navin Kumar Gallery, New York

Background paper
caption to come

Conquerors and Craftsmen

In the history of paper, one man's story, together with the chronicle of his origins and ancestors, tells us everything. His roots are the roots of countless papermakers in India. The migration of his family across the subcontinent echoes the footsteps of an unbroken chain of paper artisans who carried the craft to their new homes in the wake of conquest. Resettled, they supplied invader kings and their fabled courts with paper for a magnificent flowering of the book arts, both spiritual and secular, and for the economic and political necessities of accounting and record keeping.

Noor Mohammad, born around 1890, is a prototypical papermaker. His personality exudes the Zen-like calm of a master who, through the life-long repetitive *mantra* of his craft, has been relieved of tension, and who, by virtue of his great age, has known the old ways and history and witnessed decades of change. He is a Kagzi. Identity by this trade affiliation and clan surname was for me a key for tracking the migrations of papermakers and piecing together a record little known outside Kagzi family oral tradition.

Noor, now a white-bearded village patriarch, sports henna-red locks, a feature shared by many elder village Muslims, inspired by the belief that the prophet Mohammad wore a flaming hennaed beard. Dressed in a traditional long white tunic over pants, with a hat and bright cobalt-blue cane, Noor usually smiles with a half laugh on his face. He began by sorting paper when he was just a boy. Every circumstance he describes, emerges without hesitation. His old age is confirmed by the dates of his marriages and the ages of children and relatives. Noor has lived the village life, and his offspring, his extended family, and generations of his predecessors have all made paper.

little pieces with a rude iron chopper; the dust is then shaken out of it; it is next moistened, mixed with a certain quantity of *sajji* (carbonate of soda) and is submitted to the *jhandar* or pounder.

"The pounder consists of a heavy beam of wood, working on a pivot, so as to form the long arm of an unequal lever; the end of the arm is fitted with a cylindrical block of wood, on which is fixed a small iron tooth or central hammer, which strikes upon a stone placed below: this lower end of the lever strikes down into a *pukka* trough, which is partly filled with the fibre to be pounded. A workman stands with one foot on the shorter end of the beam or *jhandar*, and by pressing it down, forces the loaded end up, which in its turn falls by its own weight, crushing the fibre that is beneath it. A man crouches down in one corner of the trough, and keeps throwing the fibrous material on to the stone under the beam each time as it descends with a heavy thump."¹⁰ The fibres were then taken to the Aik stream and washed. More *sajji* was added, and the pulp was left to ferment and break down before being beaten and washed again.

Another record says, "In Sialkot one maund of tappar or old hemp strings, having been cut into small pieces by a *tokya* or cutter, is then soaked and passed ten times under the *jhandar* when the resulting mass is known as *jhab*. A mixture consisting of 30 seers of *sajji* and four seers of lime is then added and the material passed 20 times again under the hammer.

"It is then stacked and bleached in the sun for about a month after which it is known as *kundi* and is again beaten several times, washed and made into flat round cakes known as *chaklis*. These are dried, again soaked, beaten twice, and washed."¹¹ The report indicates that this was also mixed with foot-stomped recycled paper and given one more run under the hammer.

It was slow work, considering the small amount of material placed under the stomper each time and the repeated processes. Once ready for sheet-making, the fibres were mixed in a vat of water into which a grass mould was dipped and given a shake.



Papermaking methods are pictured in a Kashmiri trades manuscript from the mid-1800s. In the upper left a water-powered wooden stomper is depicted. Motion on the grid-wheel end produced by the water acts to force the trip-hammer up and down to pound a pile of cloth into pulp.

Men wash the pulp caught in cloth tied to their waists. Above them the reference to pulp atop a stone, may have to do with sun bleaching and the container for storing and transporting pulp may have also been used for fermenting it. Sometimes the bread shaped forms were dried for easy transportation to another area and the dried cakes may also have been a way to store pulp for use when the season was too cold for pulp preparation.

The pulp is placed in a convenient tub alongside the papermaker who squats before a sunken pitvat into which he dips his grass mould *chapri* to pick up pulp and order it into paper sheets. Fresh papers are stacked with rock weights to remove still more water before being brushed on to the wall with a horsetail brush to sun dry.

A mitt is used to hand apply starch size on the sheets which line dry. The deckle edge is trimmed off the sheet with a knife and sheets are hand polished with a burnisher on a slanted board.

Courtesy: India Office Library and Records, London, OR.1699.

Large cities like Lucknow, Kanpur, Agra, Mathura, and Banares are so built up today that time, coupled with urbanisation, has obscured much of paper's past there. *Kagzi* in these towns have been lured into newer occupations; family links are often broken, and the physical remains are built over.

Kalpi

An exception to this pattern is Kalpi. Today, in this otherwise sleepy town southwest of Kanpur, the voices of paper artisans are still heard along with the clamour and roar of electric beaters pulverising cotton cloth for paper pulp. Their thunder fills the air along narrow paths threading through the houses.



The landscape of Kalpi, continuing a many century tradition, is still blanketed with drying handmade paper sheets.

Equally strong are the voices of a few elderly men who virtually shout out their heartfelt convictions about Kalpi's paper legacy. Chandra Bhanu Bharti, a white-haired, 83-year-old former freedom fighter with peaked, bushy brows, mischievously twinkling eyes, and a cocked grin recites lyric passages from *Alha-Udel-Ki-Ladai*. Sung by minstrels and repeated by storytellers for centuries, the saga chronicles the Rajputs' marriages and wars in Delhi, Kanauj, and Mahoba during the 12th and 13th Centuries. It refers to a letter Prithi takes to Delhi:

Three Kos to the North he pitched his tent,
Took Kalpi paper and pen;
A letter in haste to Delhi he sent,
And summoned his bravest men....¹

Chandra's face was aglow as he recited from memory these lines, which prove to him and many locals the tremendous antiquity of the craft in Kalpi. If this reference to an established paper production there at the close of the 1100s is true, it would be one of the earliest mentions of paper made well inside India. Although it is hard to tell how far back the original song, passed on orally, contained the Kalpi paper reference, surely the craft has deep roots in the town's history.

Kalpi was once far more important than it is today. Before its conquest by the Muslims in 1196, some records refer to its founding in 370 or 400 by the ruler of Kamba; other indications imply an earlier inception. Chandra says that residents believe that the author of the *Mahabharata*, Vyasa, was born in Kalpi. They also say that two parties in the epic took place in Kalpi, indicating its long past. As in many Indian towns, Kalpi was always in flux; Humayan gained it in conquest in 1527 and lost it to Sher Shah 13 years later. Waves of change continued. In modern times, before India's 1857 Mutiny, Kalpi was the business centre of Bundelkhund; its more tempered mood commenced with the British defeat of Kalpi's large rebel force of 12,000 men in 1858.

One of Kalpi's more recent heroes was Ram Sahai, known by some as one of the last of the skilled truly traditional papermakers.