

The Use of Metal Artwork in the Temples of Chopal Region of Himachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

Metal has held a special significance in Indian art traditions from ancient times to the present. Its importance is both sacred and practical, serving as a medium of decoration and playing a vital role in ritual practices, particularly in Himachal Pradesh. Much of the knowledge regarding these practices has been preserved through oral traditions. Metals are valued for their inherent qualities, such as durability, strength, and purity. These attributes provide resilience and sturdiness while enhancing the aesthetic appeal of architectural elements and ritual objects. Over time, artists have expanded their use of metals, working with materials such as brass, bronze, and copper. This research paper aims to examine the role of metal as a medium for architectural and ritual adornment, as well as to study its evolving applications in contemporary contexts. Different metals also have varied lifespans; idols cast from a single metal may not endure for long, whereas idols made from *ashtadhatu* (an alloy of eight metals) are revered and preserved for generations.¹ Since ancient times, idol worship has fostered the development of metal casting techniques. Metals have been creatively employed for multiple purposes, including the casting of idols and their ornamentation, decorating key elements of temples, and enhancing outdoor accessories such as kalash atop shikharas, as well as doors windows, and walls.

INTRODUCTION

THE SACRED METAL IDOLS:

The regional temples, particularly in the Chopal region, represent a remarkable amalgamation of diverse cultures and philosophical traditions. One of the most significant and sacred areas of a temple is the deity chamber, known as the *Garbhagriha*. This sanctified space is reserved exclusively for the *pujari*, who performs the ritual practices. Most of the idols housed in these temples are made from metals such as gold, brass, silver, and bronze, while some of the older, more ancient idols are crafted from *Ashtadhatu*—an alloy of eight metals.² These *Ashtadhatu* idols not only enhance the opulence of the temple interiors but also embody grace and divine artistry. The shrine contains numerous ancient metal statuettes of varying sizes and forms, which exemplify the finest features of metalwork in its most sacred and pure expressions. These metal idols are primarily used by temple priests during worship and are distinguished by their forms, styles, and ritual significance. Once an idol is created, it undergoes several ceremonial processes. The temple priest conducts purification rituals involving *hawan* (sacred fire offerings) and mantras, and in ancient times, deities were occasionally offered animal sacrifices. Following these consecration

¹ Hingorani, Alka. (2013). *Making Faces: self and image creation in a Himalayan Valley*. University of Hawai 'i Press, Honolulu, New Delhi, India. p-20.

² Bhavana, "Metal art in Himachal Pradesh", Thesis, Himachal University (Shimla). p-303.

ceremonies, the deity is deemed ready for installation within the temple, where it continues to serve as the focal point of devotion and worship.³

“COMMON METAL ADORNMENTS USED IN TEMPLE RITUAL PRACTICES”

1. LATTICED MESH: Although the tradition of decorating temples and deities is ancient, the accessories associated with deities continue to remain significant and in style. Artisans are fully aware that their work is directly connected to the divine (*Deo Karya*), and they strive to make it both memorable and flawless. The *palki* is a vital component in the worship and procession of deities, often serving as a vehicle to transport them from one location to another. These *palkis* are revered almost as much as the deities themselves, prompting artists to focus on enhancing their exterior beauty. People from different villages use precious metals such as silver and gold in the construction of *palkis*, and their style and design are largely influenced by the local traditions and artistic preferences of each region.⁴



Fig.-1) Palki of Baneshwar Devta (Pujarli)⁵

2. CHATTER (PARASOL): The *chatter*, or parasol, is one of the most prominent features of a *palki*. It is an ornamental object, typically shaped like a disk or umbrella, and is affixed above the head of the deity's idol. Symbolically, it represents strength, protection, prestige, and wealth. *Chatters* are crafted from a variety of metals, including brass, silver, and gold. They are often exquisitely decorated with intricate artistic patterns, such as creepers, floral motifs, and geometric designs. These elaborate decorations enhance both the visual appeal of the *chatter* and the divine presence of the deity it adorns.⁶



(Fig.-2) Image of a deity accompanied by a chatter⁷

³ Sharma, Arun. Oracle of Domeshwar Maharaj (Karati Bamnol- Chopal) and Ph.d in Astrology. Interview is conducted on 17-12-2024.

⁴ Sharma, Lekh Raj. Priest in Chohag Temple (Baneshwar Devta), Interview conducted on 2-02-2022.

⁵ Image courtesy taken from Google, <https://images.app.goo.gl/a8s1pS5Sf8dHub289>

⁶ Sharma, Laiq Ram. Priest in Chohag Temple (Baneshwar Devta), Interview is conducted on 27-02-2022.

⁷ Image courtesy taken from Google, <https://images.app.goo.gl/KVy2becZ1RBdgef6>

3. **KALASH:** A *kalash* is traditionally placed atop Hindu temples, serving both devotional and symbolic purposes. It represents new life, growth, prosperity, and wisdom, while also enhancing the exterior beauty of the temple. The *kalash* has been an important architectural feature since ancient times, embodying style, dignity, and sacred significance. The tradition of placing a *kalash* on temples dates back thousands of years and was observed. Over time, both temple architecture and the design of the *kalash* have evolved. In earlier periods, temples were primarily constructed from wood or stone, and *kalash* were often shaped like inverted *lotas* (pots) made from common metals such as copper. In contemporary times, *kalash* are crafted from metals like copper, iron, bronze, and sometimes pure gold or gold-plated materials, reflecting both tradition and artistic refinement. In the Chopal region, several types of *kalash* are found, including the conical-shaped *kalash*, the tri-*kalash* (trident-shaped), the *matka kalash* (lota-shaped), and the *gol kalash* (round or dome-shaped).⁸



(Fig.-3) Image of a temple crowned with a kalash⁹



(Fig-4) Image of a temple adorned with a kalash at its summit.¹⁰

⁸ Bhandari, Suresh. Bhandari of Hamleshwar Devta, Dhabas, interview is conducted on 09-11-22

⁹ Image courtesy taken from Google, <https://images.app.goo.gl/e9W2F51HKMmBmMTdA>

¹⁰ Image courtesy taken from Google, <https://images.app.goo.gl/YEGb5gdSvGLptuXs6>

4. **RITUAL THAAL (DISK or PLATE):** Ritual *thaals* are commonly used in rural temples during daily practices and ceremonial occasions. These large plates are especially important during auspicious events, where they are decorated and used to present offerings to the deities. Considered sacred, their use is generally restricted to temple priests. *Thaals* are typically made from metals such as copper, silver, mixed alloys, or occasionally bronze. They are often adorned with intricate floral motifs, creepers, and sacred symbols, with illustrations of gods and goddesses at the center enhancing their spiritual significance. In contemporary times, these beautifully crafted *thaals* are also appreciated for their aesthetic value and are sometimes used as decorative wall pieces.¹¹



(Fig.5) Image of a ritual thaal¹²

5. **GADHU (WATER STORAGE CONTAINER):** The *Gadhu* is a container traditionally used to store water for ritual purposes. Priests retrieve water from it during daily routines or ceremonial rituals to perform sacred acts, such as sanctifying the deity. The *Gadhu* is typically crafted from metals like silver and other durable materials, and its design varies in form. It generally features an elongated neck and a bulbous base, sometimes equipped with a curved handle for easy handling. The container is covered with a lid at the top. The lower section of the vessel is usually plain and truncated-conical in shape, while the upper section is often decorated with vertical lines or simple relief patterns. This ritual object conveys a sense of sanctity and devotion, serving as the medium for transporting sacred water from the *bawari* to the deity. The engraved floral and geometric designs add subtle elegance to the *Gadhu*, giving it an appearance that balances sobriety with refined simplicity.¹³



(Fig.6) Image of Gadhu¹⁴

¹¹ Bhawana, (2010). 'Metal art in Himachal Pradesh'. Shimla: PhD. Thesis. Himachal Pradesh University.p-284

¹² Image courtesy taken from Google, <https://images.app.goo.gl/euLC5DhU5W3oFt5t5>

¹³ Sharma, Lokinder. Priest/Jagrai of Naag Devta temple (Jaili), Interview is conducted on 22-12-21.

¹⁴ Image courtesy Ram, Khimi, Sculptor from Kullu, Gadu (Water Storage Container), Image received on 14-07-2022.



(Fig.7) Image of Gadu ¹⁵



(Fig.8) View of the bawari from outside ¹⁶



(Fig.9) Interior view of the bawari ¹⁷

6. **KARDA:** A *karda* is a metal-based carriage used primarily to transport a deity's idol from one location to another, similar to a *palki*. Its main function is to carry the gods, although in some regions it is also used to house the idols within the *palkis*. The *karda* is typically made of copper or other pure metals, and occasionally it is crafted from *ashtadhatu* (an alloy of eight metals).

¹⁵ Image courtesy self, Gadu (Water Storage Container), Image clicked on 21-11-2021.

¹⁶ Image courtesy Chauhan, Irina, Bawari, Image received on 04-04-2024.

¹⁷ Image courtesy Chauhan, Irina, Bawari, Image received on 04-04-2024.



(Fig.10) Karda crafted in silver¹⁸



(Fig.11) Karda crafted in gold¹⁹

While the responsibility of carrying the *karda* usually rests with the *pandits* or *bandaris*, it is rare for the deity to travel without a *palki*. The *karda* is often constructed from silver, and sometimes gold, with the exterior featuring intricate designs. In some cases, it is left plain without decoration. The lid of the container, made from the same metal, is securely attached to the top to ensure the safety of the deity inside. The *karda* is carried on the back of a single official, supported by two knots or chains on either side that allow it to be securely fastened. In contrast, a *palki* requires at least two carriers and is frequently exchanged among devotees during ceremonial processions. The *karda*, however, is typically handled only by the chief temple officials, making it easier to manage compared to a *palki*. The size of the *karda* is determined by the dimensions of the deity it is meant to carry. During ritual journeys, the chief deity is preferably transported in the *karda*, which is revered with the same sacredness as a *palki*.²⁰

7. MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS: Musical instruments have long served as powerful facilitators of ritual engagement, as they can evoke responses similar to those elicited by religious practices and share many qualities of sacred stimuli. In general, music is believed to bring harmony and balance to a person's life, and it has historically played a significant role in religious rites throughout the Himalayan region.

¹⁸ Image courtesy Sharma, Bhagat Ram, Chakkar at Sarahan temple (Temple of Devta Bijjat Devta) Karda, Image received on 31-05-23.

¹⁹ Image courtesy Sharma Bhagat Raam, Chakkar at Sarahan temple, (Temple of Devta Bijjat Devta) Karda, Image received on 31-05-23

²⁰ Image courtesy Sharma Bhagat Raam, Chakkar at Sarahan temple, (Temple of Devta Bijjat Devta). Interview is conducted on 25-01-2023



(Fig.12) Image of instruments Dhool-Nagara²¹



(Fig.13) Image of Harnasingha²²

Music is often accompanied by dance, with instruments providing rhythmic guidance and marking the duration of movements. Different ceremonial occasions feature a variety of tunes, performed using traditional instruments such as the harp, *dhol*, *karnaal*, lyre, *shehnai*, *harnasingha*, flute, and lute. These instruments are frequently made of metals like brass (*kansa*), bronze (*peetal*), and copper (*tamba*), reflecting both aesthetic and cultural considerations. During rituals, music accompanies the movement of *palkis* and devotees, with each rhythmic beat enhancing the devotional experience. Its primary purpose is to praise or express devotion to a deity or spiritual concept. Playing music during ceremonial events serves multiple functions: it establishes a connection to the divine, aids concentration, calms the mind, and creates a spiritually conducive atmosphere for participants. In the Pahari tradition, performing music while worshipping the deity is considered obligatory. Ritual music, as a genre, formalizes sound and words to facilitate interaction with the sacred. Since ancient times, each village has maintained its own local musicians who play traditional tunes and instruments to appease the deity. As a result, these musical instruments embody a rich cultural legacy and remain deeply embedded in local spiritual and cultural traditions. The relationship between music and spirituality is reciprocal: music is often inspired by spiritual beliefs, while simultaneously setting the tone for religious ceremonies and enhancing the overall devotional experience.²³

8. CHAMVAR, (FLY WHISK): The majority of small and large religious objects are primarily made of metal. The term *chamvar* is also known by other names such as *chauri* or *chamru*. In Hinduism, chamvars are often associated with gods and goddesses as their divine attributes. The fly whisk is

²¹ Image courtesy taken from Google, <https://images.app.goo.gl/h8WzLszfWihQu59L8>

²² Image courtesy taken from Google, <https://images.app.goo.gl/CpoWPLiZDZrasb8K9>

²³ Bhandari, Pradeep. Bhandari at Sarahan temple-Chopal (Bijjat maharj), Chakkar of Bijjat Maharaj ji, Interview is conducted on 04-04-23

traditionally used to drive away flies and is prominently seen in ritual performances. It is mainly used to fan sacred deities during auspicious religious ceremonies or ritual recitations. Chamvars are typically made from yak hair, though various shapes and styles of *chauri* are also crafted — some even have peacock feathers attached. The handle or lower section is usually made of silver and serves as the grip. The metal-covered stick of the chamvar is often decorated with intricate or floral patterns. It is typically carried by the chief priests or temple attendants during worship.²⁴



(Fig.14) Image of Chamvar (Fly Whisk)²⁵

9. **CHARU:** The *charu* is one of the most revered metal objects, traditionally crafted from bronze, copper, or brass. It is usually taken out from the *Bhandar* (temple treasury) during special religious occasions—a tradition that has been preserved for generations. At the famous Hatkoti Temple, the *charu* is placed at the temple entrance and secured with an iron chain. These *charus* are large in size and beautifully adorned with embossed motifs. During auspicious ceremonies such as *Bharanshi* and *Udyapan*, the *charu* is used to collect *ghee* (locally known as *Ghee ki Garahi*) from the devotees of the surrounding area. At the beginning of the event, the *charu* is carried by two individuals—not by ordinary people, but by special family members who are granted this privilege by the deity (*Devta*) through divine authority (*kara/karaj*). The *charu* is regarded as a sacred (*harsha*) and integral element of these religious rituals.²⁶



(Fig.15) Image of Charu²⁷

²⁴ Bhawana, (2010). 'Metal art in Himachal Pradesh'. Shimla: PhD. Thesis. Himachal Pradesh University.p-293

²⁵ Image courtesy taken from Google, <https://images.app.goo.gl/2zoxg1MP1fVC6233A>

²⁶ Bhandari, Vinay Singh. Native of Bamta village. Bhandari in the temple of Dakrai Devta Bamta. Interview is conducted on 15-05-2022

²⁷ Image courtesy taken from Google, <https://images.app.goo.gl/MVjTxsEv3fY7iY7d6>



(Fig.16) Charu borne by the local inhabitants²⁸

10. BELL OR GHANTI:

One of the most significant percussion instruments used in Hindu temples is the *bell (ghanti)*. Bells are considered an essential element of temple architecture and ritual practice. They are typically rung before the commencement of *pooja* (worship) or as devotees enter the temple premises. This ancient tradition has been followed for centuries as an integral part of devotional practice. The bell's resonant sound is believed to be highly auspicious, as it is said to invite divine presence and dispel negative energies. According to traditional belief, the ringing of a bell helps purify the mind, clear unwanted thoughts, and enhance concentration during prayer. Its powerful vibrations are thought to remove any surrounding negativity and create a sacred atmosphere. Temple bells are generally made of heavy metals such as brass or bronze—both known for their sonorous properties that produce long, clear tones when struck. Bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, is particularly favored for its pleasant resonance and deep, sustained sound.



(Fig.17) Image of bell²⁹

Different Parts of a Bell:

- **Yoke:** The cross-shaped component used to hang and swing the bell.
- **Crown:** The topmost part or head of the bell.
- **Shoulder:** The upper curved portion of the bell, often inscribed or decorated.
- **Waist:** The middle portion between the shoulder and the lip.
- **Lip:** The bottom edge or rim of the bell.
- **Sound Bow:** The thick area where the clapper strikes to produce sound.
- **Clapper:** A metal shaft with a solid sphere at the end that swings inside the bell to create sound.

²⁸ Image courtesy Bhandari Vinay Singh. Image received on 14-05-22.

²⁹ Image courtesy taken from Google, <https://images.app.goo.gl/GUNdkzNkuzV7qdp7>

- **Canons:** Suspension loops connecting the bell to the yoke or support.
- **Mouth:** The open lower end of the bell from which the sound emerges.³⁰



(Fig.18) Different parts of a bell³¹

11. RITUAL INCENSORIES:

Since ancient times, ritual incensories have played a significant role in various ceremonial practices and continue to hold great importance in temples today. The tradition of lighting incense using a specific metal vessel known as a *Dhanera* is widely observed. As in many religions, the burning of incense during *puja* is primarily intended to purify the atmosphere and create a sacred ambience. The priest offers incense to the deities both when they are taken out of the temple and when they are placed back inside. Incensories are used during elaborate religious ceremonies performed to please the local deities. The incense used in *puja* and *hawan* is often categorized as either simple or artistically decorative. The design of incensories varies widely. Typically, they consist of an elongated handle attached to a concave or hollow-shaped dish or bowl at the front to hold the burning incense. Metals such as bronze, brass, or silver are commonly used in their construction, with silver being the most preferred material. Some *Dhaneras* are simple in design, while others are richly embellished with intricate decorative patterns.³²



(Fig.19) Image of Dhanera³³

12. CARVING OF METAL DONE ON THE DOORS: The doors form one of the most significant components of Hindu temple architecture. Traditionally, they were crafted from durable woods such as deodar, teak, and walnut. The metal embellishments attached to their surfaces serve as a magnificent

³⁰ Image courtesy taken from Google, <https://www.bells.org/activity/learn-about-different-parts-bell>

³¹ Image courtesy taken from Google, <https://images.app.goo.gl/qpgYM6xDrzo5U3Qm7>

³² Sharma, Laiq Ram. Priest in Chohag Temple (Baneshwar Devta), Interview is conducted on 27-02-2022

³³ Image courtesy Self, Dhanera, Picture clicked on 22-11-2.

testament to the artisans' skill and aesthetic sensibility. Over time, the architectural style of temples—including elements such as doors, frames, and pillars—has undergone remarkable transformation, reflecting evolving artistic traditions. The temple doors are often adorned with intricate carvings and ornate metalwork, featuring vivid floral patterns and symbolic motifs. A notable example can be seen in the *Temple of Jailli (Chopal)*,³⁴ the surface of the door is intricately woven with a lattice-like design made of metal. In some cases, circular brass or bronze plates or sometime coins in different metal are symmetrically nailed onto the wooden panels at uniform intervals, adding rhythm and harmony to the overall design. The door in the image is a fine example of traditional craftsmanship that combines wood and metalwork in its design. It features a metal-clad surface, where small metal plates or studs—possibly made of brass or bronze—are systematically arranged over the entire wooden structure. These metallic elements not only serve a decorative purpose but also strengthen the door, making it more durable. At the center, there are large circular rings (door handles) made of metal, attached through ornamental rosettes or base plates. These rings were likely used for both functional and ceremonial purposes, symbolizing protection and prosperity. The geometric symmetry created by the metal studs adds rhythm and harmony, while the intricate floral and circular motifs on the upper frame further enhance its aesthetic appeal. The door's design reflects regional architectural traditions, where metal was used to adorn wooden surfaces, blending utility with artistic expression—commonly seen in Himachal Pradesh's temple architecture and other traditional Indian wooden structures. Structurally, temple doors generally consist of two main components—massive wooden shutters fitted within a sturdy frame embedded in the wall. Most doors have double panels, each intricately carved to depict different deities, usually portrayed in seated or standing postures while holding symbolic attributes. The panels are richly decorated with floral designs or angular geometric patterns, all enclosed within finely carved frames. The doors are further embellished with elaborate braid work, enhancing the grandeur and sacred beauty of the temple entrance.³⁵



(Fig.20) Metal carving executed on the door³⁶

³⁴ Image courtesy, Chauhan, Yashwant. Image received on 21-04-23

³⁵ Handa, O.C. (2001). *'Temple Architecture of the Himalayas (Wooden Temples)'*. Published by M.L. Gidwani, Indus Publishing. p-151

³⁶ Image courtesy Chauhan, Irina, Bawari, Image received on 07-05-2022

13. DESIGN ON THE LOCKS AND HANDLES OF THE DOORS: The locks and handles of temple doors are among the most significant metal objects used in traditional architecture. Locks were primarily employed to safeguard valuable temple artifacts, while door handles served both functional and decorative purposes. These objects, some of which date back centuries, continue to be produced even today, reflecting a long-standing artistic tradition. In earlier times, the locks were intricately crafted, showcasing remarkable skill and artistic expression. Their elaborate designs reflect the refined aesthetic sensibilities and craftsmanship of local artisans. Many of these locks were produced in the princely states of Himachal Pradesh, including *Jubbal, Chamba, Mandi, and Palampur*. They were typically made from durable metals such as iron, bronze, and brass. The exterior surfaces of these locks often feature artistic depictions of animals such as lions, tortoises, fish, and scorpions—motifs considered auspicious and symbolic in local belief systems. Similarly, the keys designed for these locks were unique in form and craftsmanship. Door handles also display striking creativity. Some are shaped like animal heads—such as *crocodiles, tigers, or lions*—while others take the forms of snakes, fish, or crocodiles. These handles were commonly produced using the *repoussé* technique, which involves hammering designs into metal from the reverse side to create raised patterns. In certain temples, a central locking mechanism is employed that operates from the inside using long metal keys. To secure the door, the key is inserted through a precisely marked hole in the door frame. When turned two or three times from the outside, it activates a sliding wooden plank attached to the door, which fits securely into a slot, locking the door completely.³⁷



(Fig.21) Ornate Traditional Door Handle with Ring Pull³⁸

CONCLUSION:

The legacy of metal crafts in the Chopal region of Himachal Pradesh is remarkable and deeply rooted in its cultural heritage. The indigenous artisans of this area were true masters of their craft, demonstrating exceptional skill and artistic finesse. Over time, metal craftsmanship has undergone significant transformation—from the highly aesthetic and intricate works of the past to the more simplified forms seen today. The evolution of styles and techniques reflects the region's continuous adaptation to changing cultural and social contexts. The temples of the Chopal region, adorned with diverse examples of metal

³⁷ Bhavana, "Metal art in Himachal Pradesh", Thesis, Himachal University (Shimla). p-275

³⁸ Image courtesy taken from Google <https://c8.alamy.com/comp/2G947WW/carved-doors-at-the-entrance-to-a-temple-in-the-indian-himalayas-2G947WW.jpg>

art, stand as living testimonies to this enduring tradition. The study of these metal crafts not only highlights their artistic and historical significance but also contributes to the broader understanding and appreciation of folk art. A deeper and more empathetic engagement with these traditional forms enables us to recognize the grandeur and continuity that link ancient artistic practices with the present, ensuring their preservation for future generations.

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