

Himalayan Folk Narratives and Tibetan Art: A Semiotic Framework for Aligning Den-Carpet Motifs with Contemporary Consumer Appeal

Nikita Nagar¹, Neha Singh²

¹Research Scholar, National Institute of Fashion Technology, New Delhi.

²Associate Professor, National Institute of Fashion Technology, New Delhi.

Abstract

Textiles, beyond their materiality, operate as cultural texts that preserve collective memory, identity, and narratives. The mixed (Kinnaura and Bhotiya) Himalayan tribe of Uttarakhand represents a community where weaving traditions are deeply embedded with symbolic meanings that risk being marginalized under pressures of modernization and globalization. This research addresses the problem of cultural erosion by examining how Himalayan textiles function as semiotic systems and carriers of folk narratives, while also exploring their potential relevance in contemporary cultural and commercial contexts.

The study aims to document and interpret *Den* (word, used by the Himalayan tribe for *carpet*) weaving traditions through the lens of semiotics, with a focus on motifs, colours, and patterns as carriers of cultural meaning. Materials for the study include field documentation, visual analysis of carpet samples, oral histories from Himalayan weavers, and comparative references to Tibetan art influences. Methods combine qualitative ethnography, semiotic analysis, and cultural interpretation to decode symbolic narratives embedded in woven forms.

Primary findings indicate that Himalayan textiles (Bhotiya and Kinnaura tribes) encode themes of spirituality, ecology, migration, and resilience, thereby acting as storytelling media that safeguard intangible heritage. The results also suggest that younger generations and global audiences resonate with these meaning-driven narratives, providing opportunities for positioning *Denn/Dann* carpets as cultural ambassadors rather than commodified artifacts. The discussion highlights how semiotic interpretation not only deepens academic understanding but also supports strategies for cultural preservation and market adaptation, as these motifs are being decontextualized with the contemporizing of motifs in the design industry.

In conclusion, Himalayan weaving traditions exemplify how material culture can sustain living archives that bridge the past with the future, while offering pathways for economic viability through meaning-driven storytelling. Literature on textile semiotics, cultural sustainability, and heritage marketing frames this study within broader discourses of design, identity, and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Himalayan Carpets, Semiotics, Cultural Appropriation, Storytelling, Heritage Preservation, Tibetan Art.

1 Introduction

The trans-Himalayan belt stretching from Tibet through Himachal Pradesh to Uttarakhand is not only a

geographical continuum but a semiotic landscape where visual and material cultures intersect. Among the Bhotiya Tribe (Mongolian origin) and Kinnaura tribe (Tibetan-Burman origin) (Bhutia, 2024), textile motifs serve as a cultural nomenclature, preserving narratives of migration, faith, and adaptation. In 2021, Bhotia Dann has been provided with the Geographical Indication tag by the Government of Uttarakhand. However, in spite the GI tag being provided to this carpet it has almost no market. The craft is very underrated and expensive as it takes months of hard work to complete a single piece. In Dunda village of Uttarakhand, where a section of the Kinnaura tribe has settled, Tibetan carpet motifs such as the **dragon**, **Gyanak Chakra (Wheel of Wisdom)**, **Char Patti Phool (four-petalled flower)**, **six-petalled** and **eight-petalled floral forms**, and other geometric or symbolic designs are not merely decorative; they constitute a semiotic system through which identity, cosmology, and continuity are expressed. The paper examines and elucidates the semiotic significance of motifs incorporated by community artisans within the declining tradition of carpet weaving. These carpets transcend their function as domestic adornments, embodying profound cultural, religious, and symbolic meanings. Within **the Mahayana Buddhist** sect, prayer mats constitute an essential element of sacred spaces such as temples and monasteries, where monastic practitioners perform rituals upon them, considering these carpets as auspicious artefacts that embody spiritual sanctity and cultural continuity. Sacred geometric patterns and spiritual symbols are being stripped of their religious meanings to match living room colour schemes. Instead of being hand-woven by Tibetan artisans using traditional wool-dyeing techniques, these patterns are often copied, digitized, and mass-produced on cheap synthetic fabrics by commercial manufacturers. By addressing this issue, the study advocates for a more ethical and contextually informed engagement with traditional craft practices that respects their cultural origins and symbolic integrity amongst present and future generations.

2 Understanding of the Motifs used in Tibetan carpets

2.1 The Dragon (Druk)

The **Dragon (Druk)** motif '**Figure 1**', deeply rooted in *Tibetan and Chinese iconography*, is among the most dominant symbols in traditional Tibetan carpets. In the Himalayan cultural matrix, it represents *power, wisdom, and protection*. The dragon is often depicted encircling a **flaming pearl**—a metaphor for enlightenment or divine truth.



Figure 1: THE DRAGON (Skt. vritra; Tib. 'brug; Ch./ung) (Beer, 1999)

Within the Himalayan tribal adaptation, the dragon is reinterpreted with stylistic restraint—retaining its serpentine dynamism but rendered through local weaving constraints and wool textures. The symbol

operates semiotically as a **protective signifier**, believed to guard the household against malevolent energies. In semiotic terms, the dragon functions as a **mythic sign (in Ronald Barthes' sense)**—its denotative form is a dragon, but its connotation encompasses a spectrum of ideas including masculine potency, spiritual vigilance, and ecological harmony. Historically, the dragon motif entered the Himalayan visual lexicon through **cross-cultural trade along the Silk Route** (Kawlra Aarti, 2022). Tibetan monks, traders, and artisans disseminated Buddhist art forms that merged with indigenous Himalayan aesthetics. Thus, when Kinnaura weavers employ the dragon in their carpets as shown in 'Figure 2' and 'Figure 3', they unconsciously participate in a long continuum of cultural translation and appropriation.

According to a Mongolian and Chinese, Altai Mountain myth, a compassionate orphaned hunter saves a white snake from a hawk, unaware she is the Dragon King's daughter. As a reward, he chooses a magical stone that grants him the ability to understand animal speech, under the strict condition that revealing these secrets to humans will turn him to stone. When he overhears animals foretelling a catastrophic flood, the "Hunter-Boy" sacrifices himself by warning his village of the impending disaster. The villagers escape to safety, but the hunter is transformed into a blue rock formation that remains standing by a natural spring as a testament to his ultimate sacrifice.

In 2019, a significant archaeological breakthrough captivated history enthusiasts when a joint team from Ulaanbaatar University and the Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural Heritage and Archaeology completed a three-year excavation. Their work in the Altai region uncovered the tombs of Xiongnu (Hun State) aristocrats, revealing two masterfully crafted silver dragon statues. These rare artifacts are considered vital evidence of the deep cultural exchange and historical interaction between ancient Mongolian and Chinese societies. (Jayne, 2022)

Why Dragons Appear in Carpets

Carpets are not just art — they are **ritual ground**.

A dragon woven into a carpet means:

- You are **standing on stabilized energy**
- Chaos has been ordered
- The space is protected, animated, alive

It is a quiet statement: **This ground can hold powerful experiences without collapsing.**



Figure 2: Dragon Stylised in a geometric form (self-clicked; personal collection)

Figure 3: Placement of the dragon motifs on a Tibetan carpet made by a tribal community (Kinnaura tribe) from Himachal Pradesh, Settled in Uttarkashi in Uttarakhand. (Self-clicked; personal collection)

The motifs used on these carpets shown in **Figure 2** and

Figure 3 are interpretations of the icon, Dragon

in the form of a geometric symbol (Manik, 2026). These symbols are repeated and mirrored in different patterns as it pleases the creator of the carpet. Here, in

Figure 3 the two dragons are placed facing each other which resembles a famous YIN- YANG sign, a concept originated in ancient **China** and is one of the foundational ideas of Chinese philosophy, cosmology, medicine, and spirituality.

The earliest references to *yin* and *yang* appear in Chinese texts from at least the **Western Zhou period (1046–771 BCE)**. Originally, the terms described natural phenomena:

- **Yin** referred to the shaded side of a hill, darkness, coolness, and receptivity.
- **Yang** referred to the sunny side of a hill, brightness, warmth, and activity.

These were not seen as opposing forces in conflict, but as complementary aspects of the same reality. Rather than being understood as opposing forces in conflict, Yin and Yang are traditionally perceived as complementary and interdependent aspects of a unified reality. In the present motif, the arrangement of the dragons bears a visual resemblance to the configuration commonly associated with the Yin–Yang symbol. However, unlike the conventional Yin–Yang representation, the dragons are identical in both form and colour, offering no explicit visual distinction between contrasting yet complementary elements. Consequently, any association of this motif with the Yin–Yang philosophy remains interpretative and speculative. It is important to note that this connection has not been confirmed or validated by the artisans themselves and therefore cannot be established as an intended symbolic reference.

2.2 Gyanak Chakra (Wheel of Wisdom)

The **Gyanak Chakra**, or the Wheel of Knowledge, holds central importance in Buddhist semiotics. It symbolizes the **Dharma Chakra**, or the wheel of law that denotes the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (samsara) and the path to liberation. It is often denoted by the corner/edge/boundary motifs made on the carpets or any textile used by Himalayan tribes like in the Dunda Village, Uttarkashi (Kinnaura tribe and Bhotia/Bhutia tribes).



Figure 4: The White Zig-Zag motif denoted as the Gyanak Chakra. (Self-Clicked, Personal collection)

Among Kinnaura weavers, this motif is stylized and often reduced to a **Zig-Zag pattern (Also denoted as the movement/path of the Dragon)** with radiating segments as shown in ‘**Figure 4**’. While its iconographic precision may have diluted through oral transmission and visual reinterpretation, the **semiotic function** remains: it anchors the carpet as a Cosmo gram, a woven universe that harmonizes the

spiritual and material planes. The motif's circular geometry reinforces the idea of cyclic temporality and interconnectedness—concepts deeply embedded in both Tibetan Buddhist and Kinnaura folk cosmologies.

2.3 Char Patti Phool (Four-Petalled Flower): The Mandalic Core

The **Char Patti Phool**, or four-petalled flower, appears frequently in Tibetan rugs, often occupying the central field or corner spaces. This motif, though simple, resonates with Mandalic symbolism. The four petals signify the **cardinal directions**, representing balance and stability.



Figure 5: Char Patti Phool (4 petalled Flower) (Self Clicked, Personal collection)

In the Kinnaura context, the Char Patti Phool often serves as the **narrative nucleus**—a semiotic “centre” around which other motifs orbit as depicted in ‘**Figure 5**’. Its use can also be read as an indigenous reinterpretation of the **Lotus (Padma)**—a symbol of purity and spiritual awakening in Buddhist art. Through localized variation, the motif acquires a **dual identity**: a botanical emblem derived from the Himalayan flora and a cosmological sign embodying harmony between earth and divinity. The unique aspect of the motif is that it starts with a Dot and expands in four directions from the Dot at the centre of the motif. According to the local artisans of the Dunda village, the motif as depicted in **Figure 5**, represents the local flora that is “Aloo ka Phool” (a Potato flower, locally grown by the community members) which supports their entire family through agriculture. Hence, this flower plays an important aspect in their art.

2.4 Six-Petalled and Eight-Petalled Flowers: Cyclicity and Enlightenment:

The **six-petalled flower** found in Tibetan-inspired carpets represents **cyclic balance and fertility**, symbolizing the harmony of the natural and cosmic orders. The **eight-petalled form**, by contrast, directly correlates to the **Ashtadala Padma (Eight-Petalled Lotus)**, a canonical symbol in Buddhist art representing the path to enlightenment.



Figure 6: Ashtadala Padma (Eight-Petalled Lotus), a canonical symbol in Buddhist art representing the path to enlightenment. (ABC Oriental Rug & Carpet Cleaning Co., n.d.)

In the carpets woven by Kinnaura women of Dunda village, these floral motifs are often combined, forming layered mandalas or repeated tessellations. Each petal becomes a **semiotic unit**, representing the unfolding of spiritual insight or the blossoming of consciousness. Through the act of weaving, the artisan metaphorically participates in the process of enlightenment—the loom becoming a sacred space where threads of wool and threads of meaning interlace.

2.5 Geometric and Border Motifs: Thresholds and Containment

Complementing the central motifs, Tibetan and Kinnaura carpets often feature **geometric borders**—zigzags, fret patterns, or continuous waves ‘**Figure 4**’. These serve not only aesthetic functions but semiotic ones: they mark **thresholds**, creating a boundary between the inner sacred field and the outer profane world. In semiotic analysis, these borders act as **metonymic signs of containment and protection**, encapsulating the narrative within a defined spiritual space. The zig-zag interlocking pattern on the boundaries of the carpet denotes the movement of the Dragon that is placed in the centre of the carpet. The boundary shows the dimension of the protective realm made by the dragon and to centre the energy the dragon is placed in the centre of the carpet.

3 Semiotic Framework: From Symbol to Identity

Under a semiotic framework, these motifs can be seen as **codes**—systems of signs that communicate cultural narratives. Following Roland Barthes (Britannica Editors, 2025) and Clifford Geertz (Jeffrey C. Alexander, 2011), motifs function both as **texts and contexts**: they are read not only for their form but for their cultural resonance.

When the Kinnaura tribe of Dunda appropriates Tibetan motifs, this is not mere imitation but **cultural translation**—a dialogic process where signs are recontextualized to fit new geographies and social realities. Through this process, motifs become **hybrid signs**—Tibetan in origin, but localized in meaning. The act of weaving thus becomes a semiotic negotiation, where motifs mediate between *memory and modernity, origin, and reinterpretation*. This framework matches the Philosopher Charles Sanders

Peirce's semiotic framework model where signs are classified into three categories based on how they relate to their objects (Manik, 2026) :

- **Icon:** The actual object (e.g., a Dragon)
- **Index:** Has direct, cause and effect link with the icon (like smoke, clouds, fire-are all related to Dragon)
- **Symbol:** Entirely a cultural convention and agreed-upon meaning (like a geometric form of Dragon made by the community, and is further replicated by generations to signify Dragon).

Table 1. Framework of Symbolic identity of the Tibetan motifs used in the carpets made by the artisans of the Dunda Village in Uttarkashi in Uttarakhand (closely related to Himachali Denn carpets made by Kinnaura tribe).

Motif / Symbol	Visual Description	Cultural / Religious Origin	Symbolism and Semiotic Meaning	Adaptation in Kinnaura (Dunda) Weaving Practice
Dragon (Druk)	Serpentine figure, often coiled or flying, sometimes with a flaming pearl.	Derived from Tibetan and Chinese iconography, later integrated into Buddhist cosmology.	Symbol of power, protection, and divine wisdom; connotes masculinity, vigilance, and ecological balance. Functions as a <i>mythic sign</i> in Barthesian semiotics ¹ —denoting the guardian of space.	Rendered with restrained detailing due to local weaving constraints; used as a protective motif on carpets and shawls. Signifies household protection and continuity of spiritual guardianship.
Gyanak Chakra	Outer geometric design made on the carpets, shawls and apparel.	A Buddhist symbol depicting the dragon's path as it weaves a protective realm.	Signifies the cyclical nature of existence (<i>samsara</i>) and the path to enlightenment. Semiotic reading: a Cosmo gram linking the physical and spiritual realms.	Often stylized as Zig-Zag lines interlocked together; integrated into carpet border motifs. Represents harmony, unity, and the cyclical balance of life in Kinnaura cosmology/spiritual belief.
Char Patti Phool	Floral motif with four equal petals	Possibly derived from	Represents the four cardinal	Used as a central motif in carpets; serves as the

¹ Roland Barthes adapted Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theory to cultural analysis. His semiology decodes everyday phenomena (clothing, food, advertisements) as communication systems

(Four-Petalled Flower)	arranged symmetrically.	the Buddhist lotus (Padma) and mandala iconography.	directions and universal balance. Symbolizes purity, grounding, and spiritual centring.	“nucleus” of the design layout. Reflects indigenous flora and a local interpretation of spiritual balance.
Six-Petalled Flower	Floral motif with six radiating petals forming a symmetrical mandala.	Tibetan and Himalayan folk adaptation of the lotus mandala pattern.	Symbolizes fertility, natural harmony, and cyclical balance between the human and the cosmic.	Used in repeated tessellations or combined with other floral forms; signifies the blossoming of consciousness and connection with nature.
Eight-Petalled Flower (Ashtadala Padma)	Mandala-like lotus form with eight petals, often enclosed within circular frames.	Canonical Buddhist symbol of the Eightfold Path and enlightenment.	Represents the spiritual journey toward awakening and perfection of mind and spirit.	Often woven in the central medallion; symbolizes enlightenment, completion, and devotion. Interpreted locally as a prayerful design for peace and prosperity.
Geometric Borders (Wave, Fret, Zigzag Patterns) Gyanak Chakra	Continuous linear designs enclosing the central field.	Common in Tibetan rugs; rooted in Buddhist architectural ornamentation.	Denotes protection, containment, and the boundary between sacred and profane (by denoting the movement of a dragon) Semiotic function: a metonymic threshold enclosing spiritual space.	Adopted with regional colour variations and simplified lines; maintains symbolic boundary around the woven “cosmos” of the carpet. Serves both structural and symbolic purposes.
Colour Symbolism	Predominantly red, yellow, blue, green, and white hues.	Derived from the <i>Pancha-varna</i> (Five colors of Buddhist philosophy).	Each colour signifies an element and direction—red (fire), yellow (earth), blue (sky), green (air), white (water/purity).	Kinnaura weavers retain the chromatic symbolism using natural dyes from local plants (madder, walnut, turmeric). The colors express both spiritual and ecological associations. There is an

				excessive use of synthetic azo-free dyes in recent time.
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4 Marketing Opportunities for Kinnaura Tribal Wool Carpets

4.1 The Product's Core Strengths

The Kinnaura people have a long tradition of weaving wool, using locally sourced wool from their sheep, processed and woven into beautiful textiles. The wool is often dyed with natural dyes made from plants found in the region (If the season allows the plants to grow in abundance) . Their products feature intricate patterns that carry deep cultural significance (Tribal Study, 2025). Weaving is practiced mainly by the female groups of the community, and their products have demand not only in local markets but across the entire nation. (India NetZone, n.d.)

This gives the product a powerful triad: **authenticity, sustainability, and rarity** -all of which are premium drivers in today's global market.

4.2 Sustainability & Eco-Luxury Positioning

The global market for sustainable luxury goods is booming. Kinnaura carpets tick every box:

- Natural, locally-sourced wool from Himalayan sheep
- Plant-based natural dyes from indigenous flora - zero synthetic chemicals
- Low carbon footprint - handmade by artisans with no industrial machinery
- Biodegradable materials - fully sustainable lifecycle

Opportunity: Marketing these as **certified eco-luxury products** under labels like "*Zero Carbon Craft*" or "*Himalayan Green Weave*." This increases the authenticity and uniqueness for the buyer towards the product.

4.3 Heritage & Provenance Storytelling

Because of its remote geographical location along the borders of Tibet and China, Kinnaur remained inaccessible till very late, and the exchanges were rare — their culture flourished in its own unique way. The community now settled in the Dunda Village of Uttarakhand, roots back to the ancestral areas of Chushul valley(Eastern Ladakh) and above where the Battle of Rezang La took place in 1962. The community travelled all the way through Himachal Pradesh and then slowly migrated towards Uttarakhand and finally settled in the Dunda Village of Uttarakhand in the present date. As Ladakh, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh were major provinces of trading wool, salt and Borax with Tibet, this became the only source of sustaining the lifestyle for the people residing in those areas of India. Until the battle took place where the Chinese troops attacked the region and the residents of these provinces had to migrate to other parts of India.

Kinnaur (Gaatha, 2009) had old trade relations with Western Tibet, which were primarily based on the trade of woollen cloths. (Sharma, 2021)

This millennia-old heritage is a marketing goldmine. Every carpet can be sold with a **provenance story** — the weaver's name, village, the symbolic meaning of the pattern - transforming it from a decorative object into a **cultural heirloom**.

Opportunity: "*Buy a story, not just a carpet*." Platforms like Wolf & Badger, Etsy's artisan section, or a dedicated D2C (Direct to consumer) website can carry QR codes linking to video profiles of the weavers.

4.4 Niche Design Appeal

The woollen products feature intricate patterns that have cultural significance (Tribal Study, 2025) - geometric motifs rooted in Tibet-Buddhist aesthetics and Indo-Aryan heritage. Characterized by unique motifs and rich symbolism, this distinct visual language establishes a highly recognizable design identity. Applying it to apparel not only ensures strong aesthetic appeal through its intricate patterning but also aligns with sustainable practices, such as zero-waste pattern making.

Opportunity: Collaboration with **interior designers, boutique hotels, and luxury home décor brands** seeking exclusive tribal aesthetics. Position as an alternative to Tibetan or Moroccan rugs in the high-end interior decor segment.

4.5 Craft Economy & Fair-Trade Platforms

Opportunity: List on platforms such as:

- **Go Coop** (Indian cooperative marketplace)
- **Craftsvilla / Gaatha** (already feature Kinnaura products)
- **Novica** (National Geographic's artisan platform, highly international)
- **Ten Thousand Villages** (Fair Trade certified, global reach)
- **Amazon Launchpad** (for artisan brands)

Fair Trade certification would unlock international retail chains like Whole Foods and specialty lifestyle stores.

4.6 Government & Institutional Support

Opportunity: Leverage existing schemes:

- **GI (Geographical Indication) Tag** - pursuing this to legally protect "Kinnaura Wool Carpet - Den" as a designation of origin, like Kanchipuram Silk or Pashmina or Bhotiya Daan from the Bhotiya tribe of Uttarakhand.
- **Tribes India (TRIFED)** - the Government of India's tribal cooperative markets online and offline
- **National Handloom Expo** and **India International Trade Fair** for visibility
- **Craft mark certification** from the All-India Artisans and Craftworkers Welfare Association

4.7 Cultural Tourism Tie-in

- The tourism and hospitality sector in Kinnaur has been on the rise. (Sharma, 2021)

Opportunity: Create **weaving tourism experiences** in Harsil Valley or Dunda Village where tourists can watch artisans work, participate in dyeing workshops, and purchase directly - building a premium "*made in front of me*" market. This also feeds into **experiential travel** content on social media.

Table 2. Key Challenges to Address

Challenge	Solution
Limited artisan supply	Cooperative model to scale without diluting quality
Low digital visibility	Partner with craft-focused NGOs for digital onboarding
Quality standardization	Training programs + quality grading system
Price perception	Strong storytelling to justify premium pricing

Kinnaura wool carpets sit at the rare intersection of **endangered craft, ecological purity, cultural depth, and aesthetic originality**. With the right branding — rooted in provenance, sustainability, and artisan dignity — they can compete with Tibetan, Moroccan, and Persian rugs in global premium markets. The greatest untapped opportunity is **digital storytelling combined with Fair Trade certification**, which can open doors to international buyers willing to buy a piece of living Himalayan heritage.

5 Conclusion

The legacy of the Mongolian and ancestors within the Himalayan tribes of Uttarakhand and Tibetan-Burman ancestors from Himachal Pradesh serves as a living bridge between the Far East and the Indian subcontinent. This shared history is most vibrantly expressed through the symbolic and spiritual motifs woven into tribal handicrafts and handlooms—artistry that acts as a visual language for a complex, cross-cultural past.

However, this rich heritage now stands at a critical crossroads. To prevent the dilution of these ancient narratives, there is an urgent need for the systematic preservation and economic upliftment of local craft sectors. The preservation of these singular artisan traditions constitutes far more than the mere custodianship of technique. It is, in the truest sense, an act of homage - a solemn acknowledgment of a profound and enduring historical exchange. It is a collective responsibility to ensure that the spiritual identity of the upper Himalayas is not merely sustained, but permitted to flourish with renewed vitality for the generations that shall inherit it.

Preservation Priorities:

- **Documentation:** Cataloguing the specific meanings behind ancestral motifs to prevent the loss of oral history.
- **Economic Support:** Creating sustainable marketplaces for tribal artisans to ensure the crafts remain a viable livelihood.
- **Cultural Education:** Integrating these "**Far East-Himalayan**" historical links into broader narratives of Indian history.

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