

BONE CARVING IN LUCKNOW, A LIVING TRADITION OF ART

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ABSTRACT

India's artistic legacy is as diverse and layered as its civilization, encompassing centuries of refined craftsmanship. Among the lesser-known but deeply intricate art forms is the tradition of bone carving—a practice that blends resourcefulness with aesthetics and has been kept alive in the historic city of Lucknow, particularly in the modest lanes of Daultaganj. This paper seeks to explore the journey of bone carving as a craft, its deep-rooted cultural and historical significance, the legacy of master artisans like Mr. Jallauddin and Mr. Sallauddin, and how this heritage art is being preserved through contemporary efforts involving public-private partnerships, e-governance, and grassroots innovations. Emerging from a confluence of Mughal aesthetics and indigenous techniques, the craft involves labour-intensive processes—peeling, engraving, and shaping bone into intricate patterns often drawing from Islamic geometry and architectural motifs.

This paper seeks to explore the evolution of bone carving in Lucknow, focusing on its historical continuity, aesthetic value, and the lives of master artisans like Mr. Jallauddin and Mr. Sallauddin, whose personal and professional journeys mirror the fate of the craft itself. As economic pressures and modernization threaten traditional knowledge systems, the study also examines how new models of preservation ranging from public-private collaborations and institutional support to digital outreach and skill-based training are being employed to safeguard and revitalize this endangered yet invaluable heritage.



Fig 1: A lamp made up of bones

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The artistic expression of human civilizations has often found its medium in the materials immediately available to them. In the Indian subcontinent, one such material has been bone. A humble, organic remnant of life that, in the hands of skilled artisans, has transcended its mundane origins to become a medium of beauty, intricacy, and cultural legacy. The practice of bone carving in India is an age-old tradition, whose earliest traces can be found in the relics of the Indus Valley Civilization (circa 2600–1900 BCE). Archaeological discoveries from prominent sites such as Mohenjo-daro and Harappa have revealed a range of carved bone artifacts including combs, pins, needles, beads, buttons, and figurines, reflecting not only utilitarian application but also an early aesthetic impulse within society. These objects, often crafted with remarkable precision, offer evidence that the inhabitants of the Indus Valley possessed advanced skills in working with organic materials. According to the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and findings documented by scholars like Jonathan Mark Kenoyer and R.S. Bisht, these artifacts underscore a thriving craft culture that valued sustainability and local resource utilization (*Kenoyer, 1998; Bisht, 2006*).

While bone carving existed in ancient India for both functional and decorative purposes, it was during the medieval period—specifically under Mughal rule (1526–1857) that the craft truly flourished and reached an elevated status as an art form. The Mughal emperors, particularly Jahangir (r. 1605–1627) and Shah Jahan (r. 1628–1658), were avid patrons of architecture and decorative arts. Their courts became cosmopolitan centres of creativity where Persian, Timurid, Central Asian, and indigenous Indian motifs converged to produce a unique Indo-Islamic aesthetic. These styles influenced a variety of crafts, from miniature painting

and Pietra dura (stone inlay) to textiles and carving. It was in this environment that ivory and bone carving were recognized as elite art forms. While ivory, due to its elegance and workability. It was preferred for imperial commissions such as inlaid furniture, chess sets, dagger hilts, and mirror frames, a gradual transition to camel and buffalo bones occurred over time. This shift was due in part to ethical concerns surrounding the ivory trade, as well as restrictions implemented during later colonial periods (*Rizvi, 2002; Asher, 1992*).

The craftsmanship of Mughal artisans was informed by a refined sense of geometry and symbolism. The development of jali (latticework) in bone, an extension of the architectural jali seen in monuments like Humayun's Tomb and Fatehpur Sikri, involved the translation of large-scale structural patterns into miniature, hand-held forms. Artisans would carefully carve out floral arabesques and symmetrical grids using rudimentary tools like burins, chisels, and knives, many of which remained unchanged for centuries. The influence of Persian aesthetics can be seen in the use of vegetal motifs, calligraphy, and balance in negative and positive space—hallmarks of Mughal-era artistic philosophy. This approach made bone carving not merely a decorative pursuit but also a symbolic one, often used to signify wealth, piety, and power within Mughal nobility (*Welch, 1996*).

The decline of the Mughal Empire in the 18th century did not result in the disappearance of bone carving. Instead, the craft found a new patronage under the Nawabs of Awadh, who established Lucknow as their cultural capital. The Nawabi court was renowned for its syncretic culture, refined etiquette (*tehzeeb*), and deep engagement with poetry, music, dance, and visual arts. During the reigns of Asaf-ud-Daula (r. 1775–1797) and his successors, artisans from Delhi, Kashmir, and Central India were invited to settle in Lucknow, enriching the local crafts landscape. Bone carving evolved during this period with the infusion of Nawabi sensibilities, a unique blend of opulence, grace, and delicacy. While Mughal bone carving was often robust and architectural, the Awadhi style leaned toward delicately carved jali screens, ornamented jewelry boxes, pen holders, decorative motifs, and religious figurines, all echoing the architectural grandeur of Lucknow's Bara Imambara, Chota Imambara, and Rumi Darwaza.

It was in this setting that neighborhoods such as Daultaganj in Lucknow emerged as artisanal hubs, where families involved in ivory, horn, and eventually bone work passed on their skills through generations. The artists innovated with local resources, using the bones of camels, buffaloes, and cows that were byproducts of meat processing industries. Thus, enabling the craft to thrive even among economically constrained

populations. The choice of bone over ivory not only democratized the craft by making it more accessible but also prefigured the contemporary discourse on sustainable material use. The community-based nature of production in Daultaganj meant that it wasn't just the carvers who were involved, but also polishers, dye experts, finishers, and retailers. Creating a self-sustaining ecosystem of craft rooted in both tradition and economy (*Mehrotra, 2011*).

In this regard, bone carving stands out as a tradition of resilience and adaptation. Despite political changes, material challenges, and shifts in patronage from imperial courts to bazaar economies, the artisans of Lucknow have continued to preserve the integrity and detail of their work. In recent decades, especially post-independence, these artisans have further adapted to socio-economic transformations by catering to export markets, participating in handicraft fairs, and aligning with urban demands for traditional-yet-sustainable décor. This evolution rooted in ancient practice, enriched by Mughal finesse, and solidified under Nawabi elegance, forms the historical backbone of bone carving in Lucknow. It is not merely a craft, but a cultural inheritance, a livelihood, and a testament to India's living traditions that continue to defy obsolescence.

THE STORY OF MR. JALLAUDDIN: MASTER OF JALI WORK

In the heart of Daultaganj, one of the oldest artisan quarters in Lucknow, lives Jallauddin, an eminent and respected figure in the diminishing yet resilient community of bone carvers. Now in his late sixties, Jallauddin represents a living archive of a centuries-old art form that once graced the halls of emperors and nawabs. Over the past five decades, he has witnessed the fluctuating fortunes of his craft from its days of state patronage and artistic dignity to the disheartening decline during economic liberalization (*Singh, 2018*), and more recently, its tentative revival due to renewed appreciation for handcrafted heritage items (UNESCO, 2003). Yet, even as commercial tides shift, for Jallauddin, bone carving is not just a means of livelihood but a sacred expression of geometry, history, and devotion (*Mehrotra, 2011*).

Born into a lineage of bone artisans, Jallauddin's childhood was framed by the rhythmic tapping of tools against bone. His earliest memories are those of sitting beside his father, watching him carve out miniature floral motifs on a thin, sun-bleached piece of camel bone, while narrating stories of Mughal patronage and Nawabi elegance (*Asher, 1992*). Jallauddin fondly recalls how his father used to say, "Haddi mein bhi rooh hoti hai, agar uss mein kala bhar di jaye" translates as "Even bone has a soul, if infused with art." These formative years instilled in him both a reverence for the material and a precise understanding of its behaviour;

how to soften it, how to gauge its density, and how to avoid fracturing under pressure (*Kenoyer, 1998*). Over the years, he developed a unique artistic style that combines floral vines, arabesques, and latticework (jali), closely mirroring the intricate stone jaalis found in iconic Mughal architecture (*Nath, 1982*).

One of Jallauddin's most iconic achievements is the creation of bone jali panels that recreate the Bara Imambara and Rumi Darwaza. The two monumental structures that embody the architectural and cultural heritage of Lucknow (*Rizvi, 2002*). These panels, carved entirely by hand, are built on a minute scale and feature delicate tracery that can rival even the sandstone latticework of their inspirations. His artworks are not just showpieces but architectural homages, capturing the city's soul through its symbols.

What makes Jallauddin's work stand apart is his deep knowledge of traditional tools. Each of which serves a specific function in the meticulous, multi-staged process of bone carving. The entire journey begins with the *Basauli*, a curved knife used for peeling and cleaning the outer layers of the bone. This step is crucial, as any retained impurities can weaken the structural integrity of the final product (*Ahmad, 2016*). The cleaned bone is then dried, cut into slabs, and polished. For this, Jallauddin uses the *Aare*, a coarse handsaw designed to cut the bone into manageable sizes. The saw must be operated with finesse, too much pressure and the bone cracks; too little and the blade slips, ruining the symmetry.



Fig 2: Bones



Fig 3: Refined bones after processing

Next comes the *Reti*, a file tool used to begin the shaping and smoothing process. *Reti* comes in different grades, from coarse to fine, allowing the artisan to round out edges and create the initial outlines of floral or geometric designs. Once the basic structure is ready, the *Teherka*—a thin, flat chisel is employed to begin the actual jali cutting. This is where the artisan's mastery is most visible. With hands trained through decades of repetition, Jallauddin slices through bone with the *Teherka* to produce lattice screens so fine that

they allow light to pass through but are strong enough to hold their *form* (Hasan, 2020).

To maintain precision during the carving process, the bone piece is mounted on a **Chakki Patthar**, a grinding-stone base that anchors the work and provides a stable surface. This base is integral to the execution of symmetrical patterns, as it minimizes tremors and ensures control. For piercing intricate holes in the lattice, especially in symmetrical floral or star motifs. Jallauddin uses a **drill needle**, a manual rotary tool that allows him to bore micro-holes without splitting the fragile material. Unlike electric drills, this traditional hand drill grants the artisan tactile control over pressure and angle, a necessity when working with delicate bone slabs often only a few millimetres thick.

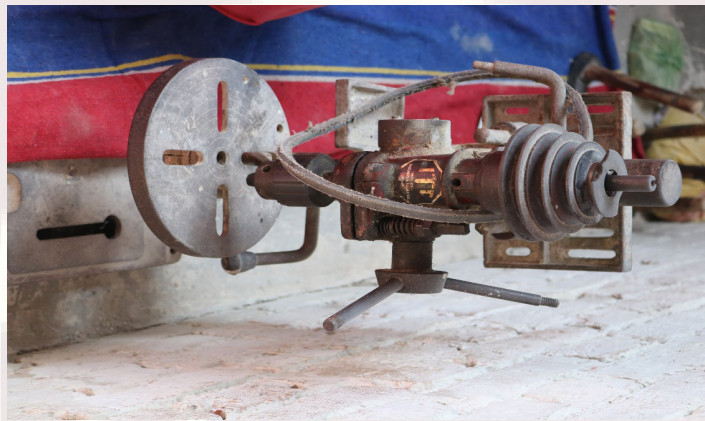


Fig 4: Needle drill machine



Fig 5: Students are learning, how to use Chakki Patthar.and manual needle drill

These tools, while humble and largely unchanged over centuries, are extensions of the artisan's hands and spirit. Each of them, in the hands of a skilled craftsman like Jallauddin, contributes to an artistic process

that requires unwavering focus, meditative patience, and intimate material knowledge. In his own words, “Yeh kaam sirf haath ka nahi, dil aur dimaag ka bhi hai” translates as “This work isn’t just of the hand, it is of the heart and the mind.”

In addition to traditional hand tools, contemporary bone artisans have gradually incorporated mechanized equipment to reduce manual labour and enhance precision. Among the commonly adopted tools are the drill motor machine, used for creating fine perforations, and mechanized chiselling devices that assist in shaping and engraving with greater efficiency. However, the use of laser cutting machines remains limited and often discouraged within the bone carving community. This is primarily due to the adverse effects of laser technology on bone material. The high-intensity heat generated by lasers tends to compromise the structural integrity of bone, leading to surface burns, discoloration, and carbonization. The thermal sensitivity of bone causes it to turn black or brittle under such exposure, thereby diminishing both its aesthetic appeal and functional durability. As a result, the artists avoid laser machinery in favour of more controlled manual or semi-mechanical methods that preserve the quality and traditional character of the craft.



Fig 7: Mr. Jallauddin and his son Mr. Akeel, cutting and chiselling to shape the bones

The final stage in the bone carving process involves treating the carved pieces with a hydrogen peroxide solution. These bone fragments are immersed in the solution for approximately 8 to 10 hours, which serves a dual purpose: it effectively removes any residual oils from the surface and imparts a lustrous, polished appearance to the material. Once the bones have dried and attained the desired smoothness and sheen, the individual pieces are meticulously assembled and arranged to form the complete artistic composition.

Jallauddin's workshop in Daultaganj is an austere, dimly lit room with stacks of camel and buffalo bones arranged neatly beside jars of tools, powders, and dyes. The air is filled with a distinctive scent; bone dust, aged wood, and a faint trail of sandal polish. Hanging from the walls are not awards or accolades, but sketches of architectural monuments, geometrical patterns, and old photographs of his father and grandfather with their tools. For visitors, this space feels less like a workshop and more like a living museum, where history, skill, and tradition converge. Here, the act of bone carving transcends manual labour. It becomes a ceremony of continuity, of cultural inheritance passed from one generation to the next (*UNESCO, 2003; Shankar, 2019*).

Despite his age, Jallauddin has taken it upon himself to train the next generation of bone artisans, a task he sees as both a responsibility and a resistance against cultural amnesia. Most of his apprentices are local youth, some from economically marginalized backgrounds, who receive hands-on training along with philosophical lessons on the value of patience, dedication, and artistry. "If the hands forget," he says, "the city forgets itself."

MR. SALLAUDDIN: MASTER OF NAKKASHI WORK

Another key figure contributing to the continuity of bone carving in Daultaganj is Sallauddin, the younger brother of Jallauddin and the only remaining artisan in the locality who specialises in nakkashi—a form of intricate engraving that elevates bone carving from functional utility to fine artistry. Like his elder brother, Sallauddin too was introduced to bone carving at a young age. Initially, he pursued the traditional craft alongside his family, engaging in detailed carving and ornamentation work. However, the sharp decline in market demand and lack of institutional support during the late 1980s and 1990s led to considerable economic instability for artisans involved in such heritage practices. Faced with the urgent need to sustain his family, Sallauddin sought alternative employment beyond national boundaries.

He migrated to Saudi Arabia in search of stable income, where he lived and worked for nearly two decades as a goldsmith (sonar). His nephew, Akeel Akhtar—Jallauddin's son—recalls that Sallauddin's skills as a carver transitioned smoothly into goldwork due to his precision and attention to intricate detailing. The years spent working with precious metals helped refine his design sensibilities and introduced him to new tools and techniques, many of which would later inform his practice in bone carving upon his return.

After retiring from his work abroad, Sallauddin returned to Lucknow and rejoined his family's traditional craft, collaborating with his elder brother Jallauddin and nephew Akeel in their efforts to revive bone artistry in the region. Their workshop became not just a space of production but also one of instruction, where several young apprentices from nearby neighbourhoods began to learn the art of jali work. While the jali technique is taught collectively and executed by a small group of trained workers under the guidance of Jallauddin and Akeel, the more intricate and expressive Nakkashi work remains the sole domain of Sallauddin.

Unlike the geometric and often repetitive patterns of jali, Sallauddin's Nakkashi includes complex, one-of-a-kind motifs ranging from stylized floral patterns to birds, animals, and even narrative imagery. The process begins with the artisan sketching directly onto the bone's surface using a soft graphite pencil, carefully marking out the contours and depths of the design. Once satisfied with the form, he uses a handheld electric drill needle to engrave the lines into the surface, working slowly to ensure precision without compromising the bone's integrity. This technique allows for both flexibility and control, enabling highly expressive results on a medium as fragile as bone.

Sallauddin, despite his years of experience, insists that the ability to execute Nakkashi cannot be merely taught through instruction. He often says, "This is not a skill you can learn entirely from a teacher; it is something God bestows upon you." Emphasising the spiritual and intuitive dimensions of his craft, he added, *"Agar Allah Miyan ne thodi aur umr bakshi to mere sabse chhota nawasa, use sikhaunga. Use bada accha lagta hai ye kaam. Poore din mere paas mujhe kaam karte huye dekhta rehta hai,"* which translates as, "If God grants me a few more years, I will teach this to my youngest grandson. He truly enjoys this work—he spends the entire day beside me, watching me carve." This deeply personal statement reflects not only the familial legacy embedded within the practice but also the emotional continuity that binds generations through the shared act of creation.

Sallauddin's story is emblematic of the challenges faced by traditional artisans in a globalised economy, and yet also of the resilience and adaptability that keeps their heritage alive. His journey from a bone carver in Lucknow to a goldsmith in Saudi Arabia and back again, and adds a layered richness to the narrative of bone carving as a living tradition. It also highlights the interplay between necessity, migration, and artistic identity in shaping the trajectories of India's artisanal communities.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE EFFORTS AND THE PATH TO PRESERVATION

The preservation of bone carving in Lucknow has seen a significant revival through the combined efforts of government schemes and public-private collaborations. Recognising the threat of extinction looming over this intricate art form, various governmental bodies-initiated programs aimed at both sustaining the livelihoods of artisans and reviving traditional craftsmanship among the younger generation. One of the most impactful methods has been the organisation of workshops and training sessions conducted by master artisans. These workshops are not only funded by the state but also provide stipends to trainees, thereby encouraging participation among economically disadvantaged youth.

The government remunerates the artisans conducting these sessions with an amount ranging from ₹20,000 to ₹30,000, depending on the duration and scale of the workshop. This financial support has allowed artists like Jallauddin, Sallauddin, and Akeel Akhtar to reach wider audiences and cultivate a new generation of bone carvers. The stipend provision has proven particularly effective in attracting a significant number of participants, thereby ensuring that this traditional knowledge is passed down and preserved within the community.

In parallel, several public-private bodies and non-governmental organisations have actively participated in the movement to protect and promote bone carving. Institutions such as ***Uttar Pradesh Vigyan Manch***, ***Mahila Kalyan Nigam***, ***Kama Nehru Seva Sadan***, and the **NGO HELP** have contributed by organising awareness campaigns, public exhibitions, live demonstrations, and educational seminars. Their role has been instrumental in rekindling interest in this dying art form and connecting it with broader platforms.

Despite their mastery and accolades, artisans like Jallauddin and Sallauddin faced years of economic hardship. Notably, Jallauddin has been the recipient of prestigious awards including the *Akhil Bhartiya Award* in 1989, the *National Award* in 2009, and a *State Award* in 2022. Sallauddin was honoured with a *State Award*

in 2024, and Akeel Akhtar received a national-level recognition in 2009. However, these honours often did not translate into financial security or consistent patronage. The family's struggle was so profound that, at one point, Sallauddin left the country in search of employment abroad, while Jallauddin and Akeel lived a precarious, often nomadic life, exhibiting their work at trade fairs and festivals across India.

They showcased their creations at renowned venues such as the *Surajkund Mela*, *Connaught Place*, *Red Fort* in Delhi, as well as in cities like Mumbai, Kanpur, and beyond. Reflecting on those years, Akeel recalls, "*Bade shehro mein rehna aasaan nahi. Din kaatne aasaan nahi. Itni to kamai nahi thi jitna kharcha ho jata tha*"—"It's not easy to live in big cities. The days were hard. Our earnings couldn't match the expenses." These words underline the financial instability that persisted despite their dedication to craftsmanship and repeated accolades.

A significant turning point emerged between 2016 and 2017 when the National Institute of Technology (NIT) invited the family to conduct an educational workshop for students. Not only were the artisans able to share their knowledge, but they also participated in a professional development initiative. In collaboration with renowned designers from the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), they were introduced to contemporary tools, design sensibilities, and marketing strategies. The training covered topics such as increased efficiency, reduced manual labour, and scalability—all while preserving traditional methods. This exposure proved invaluable, enabling the artisans to elevate their work from local craftsmanship to market-ready artisanal design.

The renewed interest from such institutions catalysed wider recognition of their work. Subsequently, Jallauddin was invited to represent India's artistic heritage on international platforms, showcasing bone carving at global exhibitions in Brazil (2011) and Qatar (2024). These international visits not only honoured his craftsmanship but also symbolised the global potential of Indian traditional arts when appropriately supported.

Another transformative moment came during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the family faced an unprecedented crisis. Having created a large inventory of bone artefacts in 2020 and 2021, they were unable to sell them due to the restrictions and lack of demand during the lockdown. At this critical juncture, Business Insider reached out with a proposal to create a documentary on the bone carvers of Lucknow. The documentary, once released, gained wide traction online and marked a turning point in their visibility.

Encouraged by this momentum, Akeel launched dedicated social media pages to promote and sell their creations. The response was overwhelming—the entire unsold stock, accumulated over a period of nearly one and a half years, was sold within just fifteen days. This event demonstrated the immense power of digital platforms in connecting traditional artisans to broader markets and audiences.

Today, the pricing of their artefacts ranges from ₹100 for small jewellery items to as much as ₹30,000 for large carved pieces like lamps and wall clocks. However, despite this success, Akeel expresses concern over the way the art is perceived in commercial spaces. He notes that while the products are selling, much of the marketing focuses solely on the final object, neglecting the artistry, history, and cultural significance embedded in its creation. Without continued attention to the craft's deeper meaning and heritage, there remains a risk that bone carving could fade away quietly. *“just like something carried off by a gust of wind.”*

CONCLUSION

The bone carving tradition of Daultaganj, as exemplified through the lives and work of master artisans like Jallauddin and Sallauddin, stands as a testament to resilience, heritage, and intergenerational craftsmanship. Rooted in the shared memory of Mughal and Nawabi aesthetics, the craft reflects a unique fusion of artistic devotion and historical continuity. Despite facing decades of marginalization, economic shifts, and cultural neglect, the craft has found new life through strategic government support, private partnerships, and institutional interventions that helped artisans adapt to evolving markets without compromising authenticity. Artisans like Akeel Akhtar represent a bridging generation—anchored in tradition yet open to digital outreach and contemporary platforms. The practice itself is a meticulous discipline, requiring years of training, precision tools, and a reverent understanding of material. From peeling with the basauli to engraving with the drill needle, every step embodies both skill and spirit. Importantly, the craft's recent revival is not simply an economic endeavor but a cultural reclamation, ensuring that the knowledge, identity, and legacy of bone carving endure beyond nostalgia. If sustained through meaningful recognition and inclusive support, this art form will continue to inspire not only for its beauty but for its deep-rooted connection to history, identity, and community resilience.

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