

Digital Library of Kashmiri Willow Wicker Items: A Small Step towards Preservation of Culture

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Abstract

The handicrafts of Kashmir are famous throughout the world. Kashmiri willow wicker items are losing market due to the negligence from the stakeholders of the state. This craft needs to be revamped in order to preserve our cultural heritage. The present study is a small effort in this regard and attempts to show how the culture can be preserved in this modern age with the help of electronic media. A detailed survey was conducted to find out the products made by willow wicker. All the product-related information to these products was accumulated in the form of a digital library. In this study, Greenstone Digital Library (GSDL) software was used to gather the documents containing information related to each item of willow wicker for easy retrieval using various access points.

Keywords: Greenstone Digital Library (GSDL) software, Kashmiri art, Culture-electronic media, Digital library

1. Introduction

Kashmir is aptly described as a 'Paradise on Earth'. The Kashmiris are naturally endowed with excellent artistic skills and intelligent appreciation of nature. In reproducing the colours and designs of the nature, these artists have attained mastery and perfection. The industries in Kashmir are best suited to its climate and environment. The natural environment provides ample raw materials to the Kashmiri artist.

Srinagar is the centre of the manufacturing activity but other towns, such as Islamabad, Sopore, Bandipura, Shopian, also contribute to the culture of Kashmir. The chief industries include the manufacture of shawls, silks, woollens, paper, and paper mache articles. Besides these, wood carving, stone work, stone polishing, glass blowing, gold beating, and willow-work are also carried out (Singh 2000). The state is well-renowned for its artistic traditions which are manifested in the various handicrafts practised by its inhabitants. Perhaps, the most well-known of these are the embroidered *Pashmina* shawls, Kashmiri carpets, as well as *namdas* and *gabbas* which are made of wool of inferior quality, and old woollen blankets which are embroidered with thread giving them colour, beauty, and strength.

Kashmir has an abundance of mulberry and willow trees. The willow industry is a special feature of the cottage industry. The deft hands of the Kashmiri artists create wonderful things out of the willow sticks; for instance, baskets, boxes, chairs, and the famous *Kangri* (portable brazier) (Singh 2000). '*Kangri*' is a handmade warming equipment, made with an earthen bowl, wrapped in a frame of decoratively woven willow. As Kashmir is known for its wicker willow, wicker is also used for making lampshades, curtain rings, trays, tables, and cycle baskets. The other products include *tokras*, *tokris*, oval-shaped containers with lids and *chhikus*, etc. The cultivation of wicker willow is the monopoly of the state.

The use of straw grass and twigs to make containers and mats dates back to ancient times. The areas of Kashmir which are rich in vegetation around lakes make it ideal for the wicker industry. While this industry has never been considered an important activity, it has been closely linked with the daily lives of people. In Kashmir, wicker which is found in abundance is used by the craftsmen known as *shaksaz* or *kainyal* to make charmingly quaint objects, all generally inexpensive. English willow was grown few decades before in Kashmir which yielded willow with longer twigs than the ones produced in England (Singh 2000).

The human race, which protected its heritage, dominated the world scene. Examples may be drawn from the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Greece, Persia, and India (Ali 2005).

2. Uses of Willow Wicker Items

The perishable raw material, used in willow wicker items, is diverse and so are the finished products. Even shed products are different as they are put to use for a variety of purposes. The basic function of a willow wicker item is similar to that of a receptacle, for holding, storing, and carrying various commodities. Such a use is best-suited not only for agriculture but also for modern-day activities. Even though the primary use of willow wicker items continues, the changing pattern of the societies and more ingenious willow wicker item-makers have invented several other uses for their products. For example, in Kashmir this craft is utilized for making hand fans, as well as soft prayer mats for the mosques. There is surprisingly no substantial change in the techniques of weaving willow wicker items, be it in the West or the East. The willow wicker industry is an asset for Kashmir. The products not only appeal to the tourists but also to the locals as well. *Shaksaz* (the willow wicker professionals) work day and night to make these products. They have been innovative in producing many items that were not available a few decades back, such as the duck-shaped

basket. They are also trying to make items which are similar to plastic items like lampshades. These *Shaksaz* offer and create employment for several other people.

In practice, most of the Kashmiri willow wicker items present a range of diverse shapes, sizes and comprise circular, spherical, or cylindrical artifacts of caskets and containers. They are used for keeping *chapaatis*, storing vegetables, or trinkets, clothes, unspun cotton, etc.

In Kashmir, willow rush grows abundantly in marshes and lakes and are used to make charmingly quaint objects, ranging from shopping baskets and lampshades to tables and chairs, generally inexpensive. To increase their lifespan, unvarnished products should be chiseled and frequently sprayed with water, particularly in hot and dry climates, to prevent them from becoming brittle. Due to the ample growth of bamboos, the bamboo craft is deeply rooted in the local folk tradition. The products includes *tokras*, *tokris*, oval-shaped containers with lids and *chhikus*, etc. In Kashmir, '*Kangri*', the handmade warming equipment, is made with an earthen bowl wrapped in a net of bamboo slips.

3. Digital Libraries

Digital libraries are organizations that provide resources, including the specialized staff, to select, structure, offer intellectual access to, interpret, distribute, preserve the integrity of, and ensure the persistence over time, collections of digital works; they are readily and economically made available for use by a defined community or set of communities. In addition, digital libraries may be seen as new forms of information institutions, multimedia information retrieval systems, or information systems that support the creation, use, and searching of digital content (Arms 2000). According to Koohang and Ondracek (2005), a digital library is "the collection of services and the collection of information objects and their organization, structure, and presentation that

support users in dealing with information objects available directly or indirectly via electronic/digital means."

The fast development and wide application of digital methods, combined with broadened access to the Internet and falling computing costs, have created intense interest in electronic presentation and access to cultural and scientific heritage resources. Information technologies have offered cultural institutions with new opportunities for the presentation of their holdings, which are now made accessible not only to the specialists, but also to the citizens and interested parties worldwide (Dobrevá and Ikononov 2004).

The topic of digital librarianship is subject to rapid change (Pomerantz, Wildemuth, Yang, and Fox 2006), as it is partially defined by the availability and functionality of appropriate software. The ease of building a digital library or an institutional repository has been radically changed over the past decade by the emergence of software, such as Greenstone (Witten and Bainbridge 2003).

4. Greenstone Digital Library Software (GSDL)

Greenstone is a suite of software for building and distributing digital library collections. It provides a new way of organizing information and publishing it on the Internet or on CD-ROM. Greenstone is produced by the New Zealand Digital Library Project at the University of Waikato, and developed and distributed in cooperation with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Human Info NGO. It is an open-source, multilingual software, issued under the terms of the GNU General Public License. The aim of the Greenstone software is to empower users, particularly in universities, libraries, and other public service institutions, to build their own digital libraries.

The liaison with UNESCO and Human Info has been a crucial factor in the development

of Greenstone. Human Info began using Greenstone to produce collections in 1998, and provided extensive feedback on the reader's interface. UNESCO aims to empower developing countries to build their own digital library collections—otherwise they risk becoming read-only societies in the information revolution. UNESCO selected Greenstone in 2000, which arranges user testing, helps with internationalization, and mounts courses.

5. Scope of the Study

The digital library contains craft items of one of the world renowned crafts of Kashmir, the willow wicker.

5.1 Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study was to organize items of willow wicker with the following details:

1. Description of every item organized with photographs
2. Creating various access points to items organized, such as:
 - a) access by title
 - b) access by type of material used
 - c) access by approximate cost
 - d) access by Kashmiri names (like *Kangri*, etc.)
 - e) access by category
 - f) access by utility

The other objective of the study was to access the Kashmiri artifacts via a digital library.

5.2 Methodology

The present study attempted to develop a digital library of Kashmir crafts. The digital library was developed with the help of the Greenstone Digital Library Software (GSDL).

The procedure followed can be categorized into the following two phases:

Phase I:

Necessary data was collected from relevant sources throughout the Kashmir valley. All the

items were photographed and the background of every item was recorded.

Phase II:

Once all necessary data was collected, it was documented in MS Word creating separate files for every item with description, photographs, and all data elements necessary for an item to be described. This was followed by organizing all files/folders in GSDL. Furthermore, the digital library of Kashmiri willow wicker provided necessary access points with the help of suitable metadata elements to the library for easy retrieval.

5.3 Literature Review

Since the launch of the Digital Library Initiative (DLI) projects in 1996, substantial attention has been accorded to the research and development of digital libraries. Similar to this, significant emphasis has been laid on the digital library phenomenon in academic research. Over the past, there has been a tremendous growth in the number of journals dedicated to the discussion of digital libraries (for e.g., *International Journal on Digital Libraries*, *D-Lib Magazine*) and various conferences aimed specifically for both professionals and academics working on digital libraries (e.g., The International Conferences on Digital Libraries [ICDL], the European Conferences on Digital Libraries [ECDL], the International Conferences on Asian Digital Libraries [ICADL], the Joint Association for Computing Machinery/Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineering [ACM/IEEE], conferences on digital libraries) (Liew 2009). Pomerantz and Marchionini (2007) also write that over the past 15 years, there has been a tremendous growth in the number of journals dedicated to the discussion of digital libraries.

According to Witten, Bainbridge, and Stefan (2001), GSDL provides a way of building and distributing digital library collections, opening up new possibilities for organizing information and making it available over the Internet or on CD-ROM. Produced by the New Zealand Digital

Library Project, Greenstone is intended to lower the bar for construction of practical digital libraries, yet at the same time leaves a great deal of flexibility in the hands of the user. It is now developed and distributed in co-operation with UNESCO and the Human Info NGO. The aim is to empower users, particularly in universities, libraries, and other public service institutions, to build their own digital libraries. Bainbridge and Witten (2005) expressed that GSDL produced by the New Zealand Digital Library Project at the University of Waikato, and developed and distributed in co-operation with UNESCO and the Human Info NGO provides a flexible way of organizing information and publishing it on the Internet or removable media such as CD-ROM. Witten and Bainbridge (2003) in a paper describe GSDL as a comprehensive, open-source system for the construction and presentation of information collections. They further add that the collections built with Greenstone offer effective full-text searching. Its metadata-based browsing facilities are attractive, easy to use, and maintain and can be augmented and entirely rebuilt automatically. Witten and Bainbridge (2005) reveal in their paper that Greenstone incorporates an interface that makes it easy for people to create their own library collections. Collections may be built and served locally from the user's own web server, or (given appropriate permissions) remotely on a shared digital library host. End-users can easily build new collections styled after the existing ones from material on the web or from their local files (or both), and collections can be updated and new ones brought online at any time. Globally, the use of Greenstone is growing rapidly, and several websites show collections created by external users. With Greenstone entering its second decade, Biswas and Paul (2010) take a retrospective look at its development addressing the challenges that have been faced, and the lessons that have been learnt in developing and deploying a comprehensive open-source system for the construction of digital libraries

internationally, with particular emphasis on developing countries. According to the authors, DSpace is the most used software in India followed by GSDL. Das (2007) presents and analyses the development of open-source software and the building of digital library with reference to GSDL. It is predicted that GSDL is becoming a popular digital library software due to its flexibility and low cost of ownership. The author concludes that because of its cost effectiveness and flexibility, GSDL can be a powerful tool in bridging the digital divide in India. Manhas (2008) reveals how GSDL has helped in developing a digital library at Baba Farid University of Health Sciences.

Sonkar *et al.* (2005) discuss in detail all the issues related to the development of digital library of newspaper clippings and implementation of GSDL in developing such a collection. The use of Greenstone to produce large newspaper collections for the National Libraries of New Zealand and Singapore has established its reputation for creating huge collections. Seshaiyah and Veeraanjaneyulu (2009) present their views regarding institutional repository as being a new concept for collecting, managing, disseminating, and preserving scholarly works created in the digital form by faculty and students in individual universities and colleges. They also explain how to build an institutional repository using GSDL.

Witten (2003), in an attempt to understand how Greenstone is being used for public digital libraries throughout the world, briefly reviews a selection of Greenstone digital library sites giving examples from different countries. Witten *et al.* (2005) discuss that Greenstone and DSpace are widely used software systems for digital libraries and also identify their similarities and differences. Besides, they presented StoneD as a bridge between the production versions of Greenstone and DSpace that allows users of either system to easily migrate to the other, or continue with a combination of both. Kennedy (2008) conducted a survey to gather feedback

from Greenstone users and developers about the adequacy of current support structures and mechanisms and how support for users might be improved or augmented in the future to guide the collection developers, at the point of considering a metadata schema for their digital collection.

6. Working with Digital Library

Figure 1 shows the interface of the digital library of willow wicker items.

Figures 2–4 show that the collection can be browsed under title, Kashmiri name, and approximate cost.

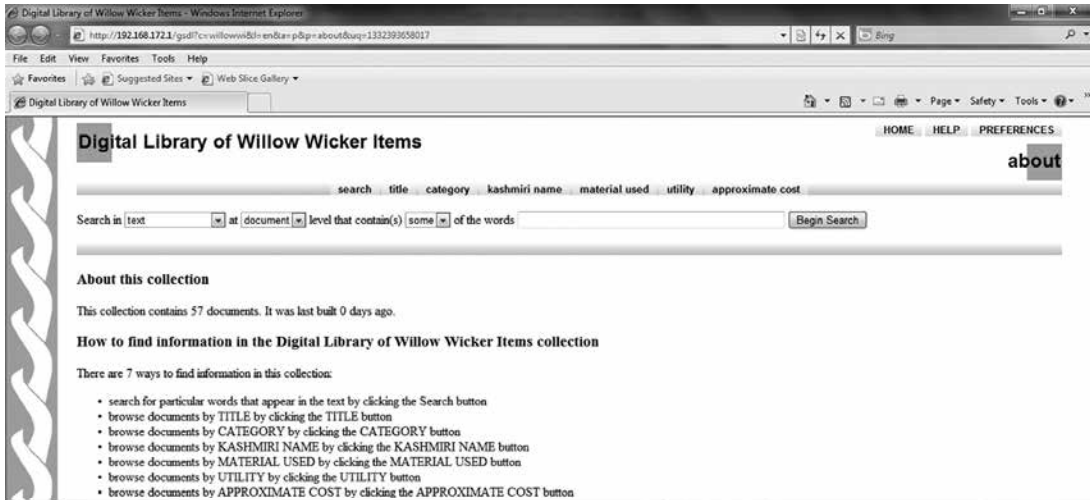


Figure 1: Home page of digital library

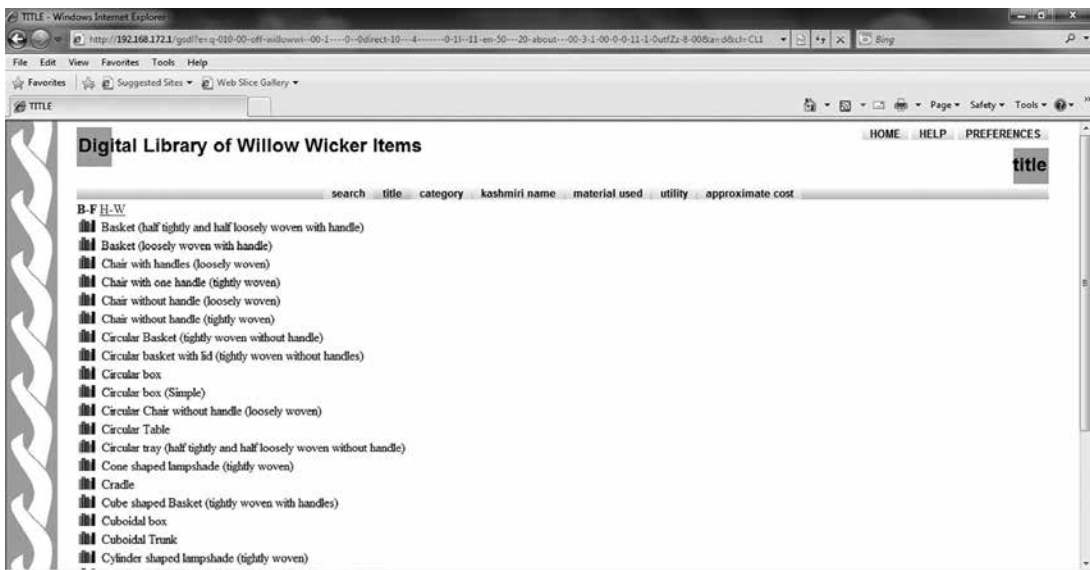


Figure 2: The browsing results under different titles

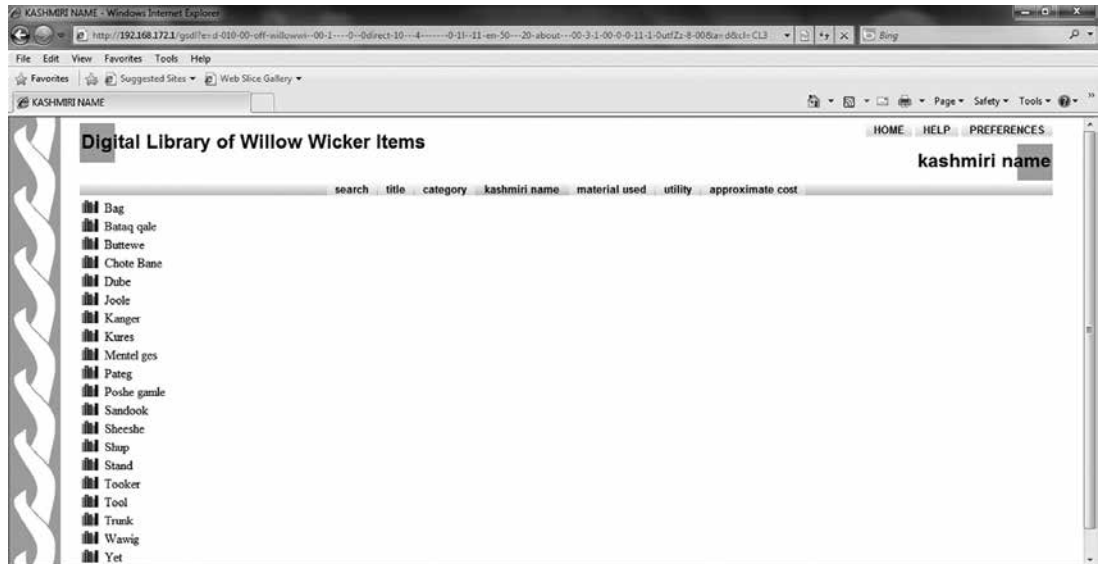


Figure 3: The browsing results under Kashmiri names

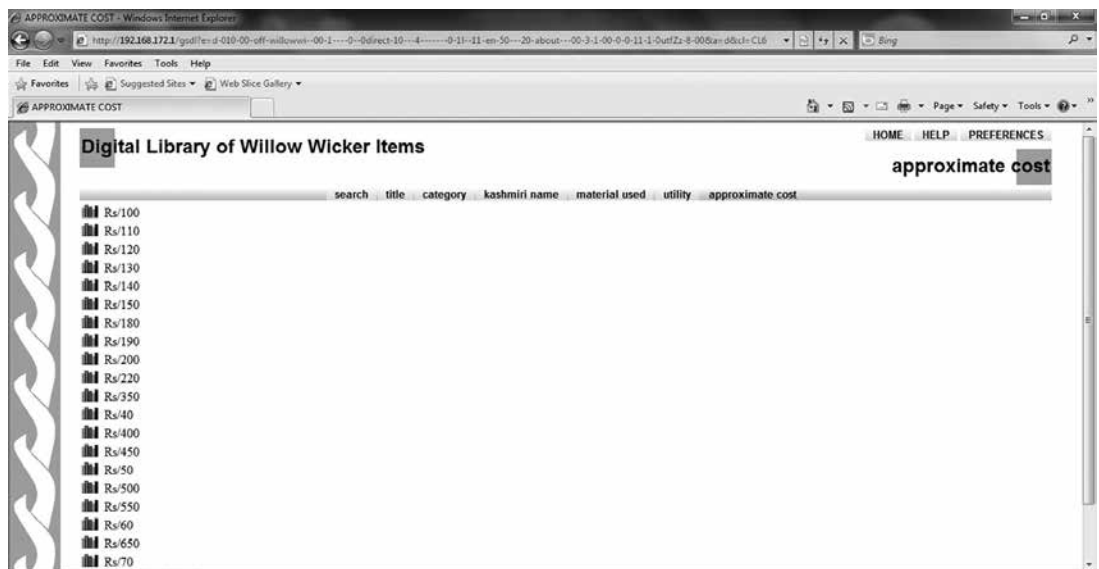


Figure 4: The browsing results under approximate costs

Similarly, all the items can be searched and browsed with different parameters, such as category and utility as shown in Figures 5 and 6.

Out of the 57 items, Figures 7–9 show only

three items whose description can be viewed after opening their separate files.

In this study, 57 different products were photographed and separate files of each item were imported in this digital library.

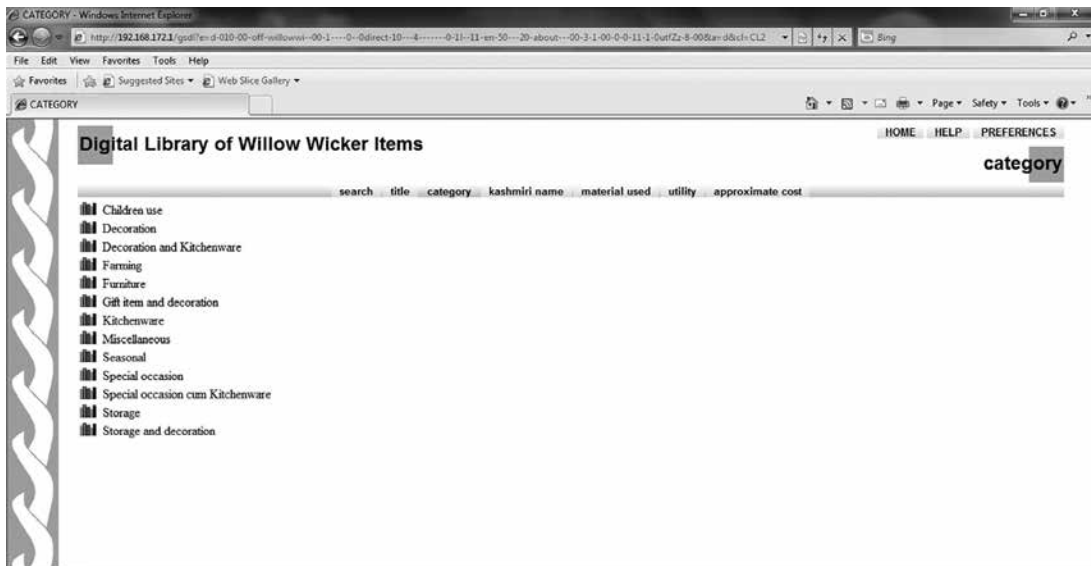


Figure 5: The browsing results under various categories

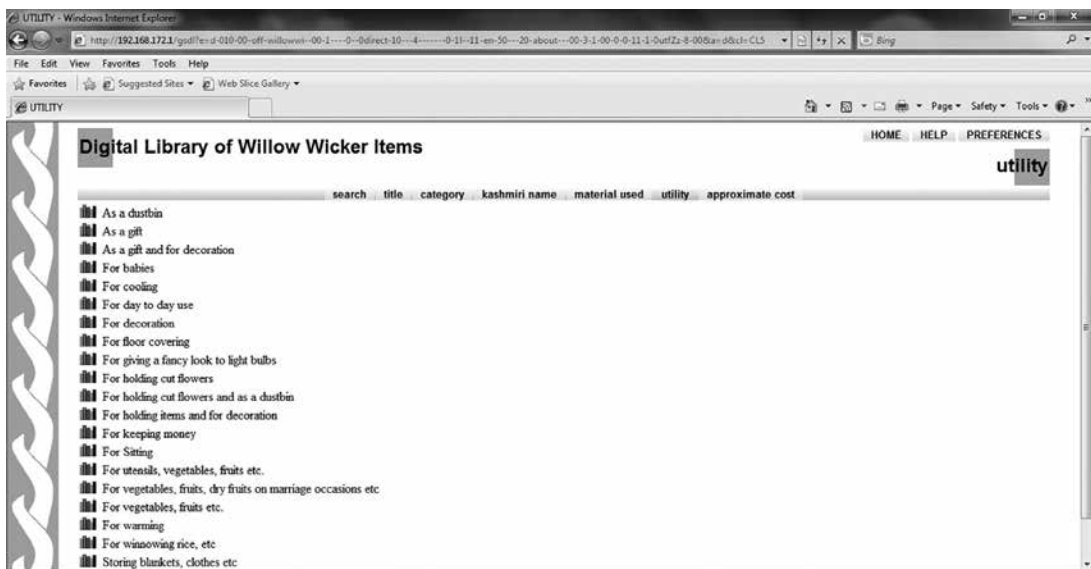


Figure 6: The browsing results under utility of items

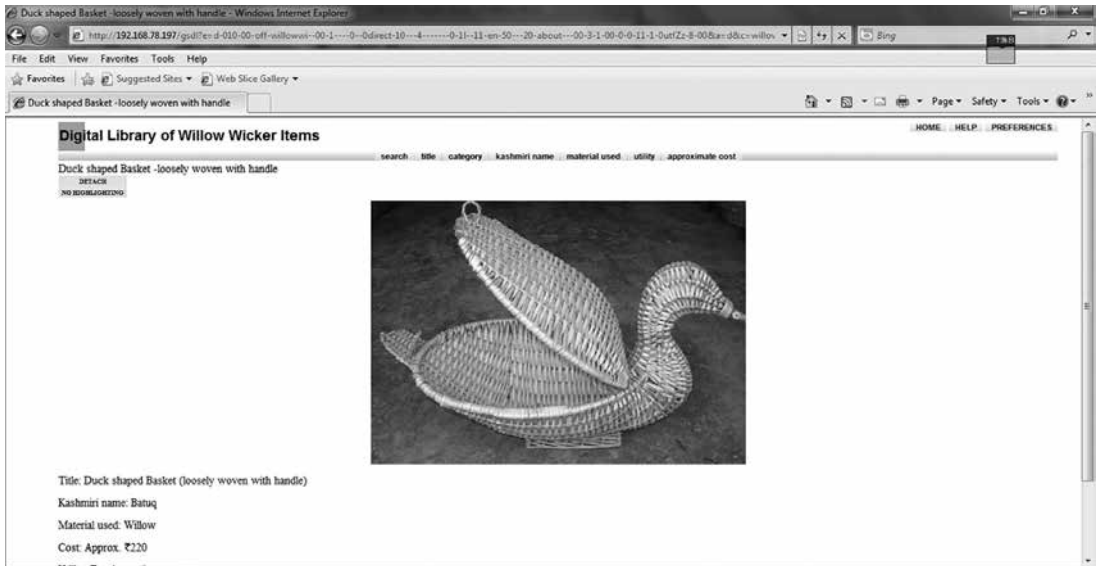


Figure 7: The Duck-shaped basket as viewed in the browser

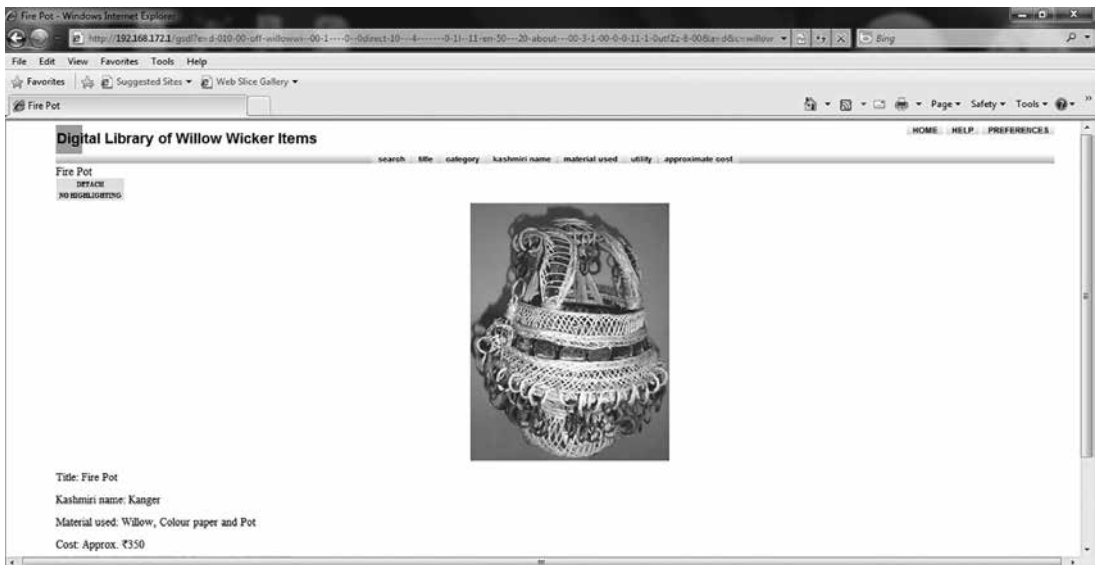


Figure 8: The Fire pot as viewed in the browser

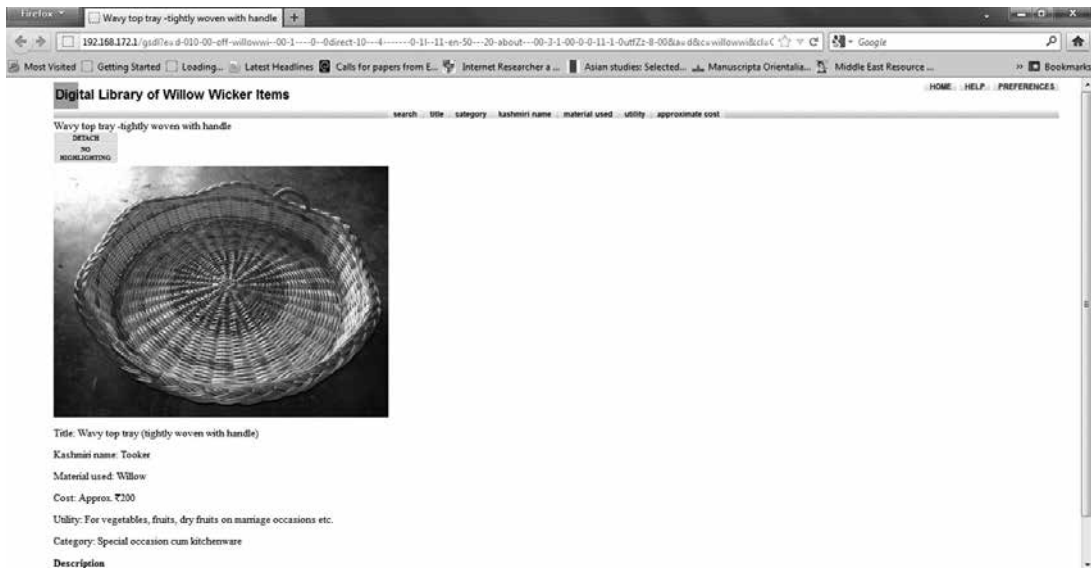


Figure 9: The Wavy top tray as viewed in the browser

7. Conclusion and Suggestions

The willow wicker industry is slowly dying in Kashmir due to the negligence of both the people and the government. People have totally forgotten this industry and are using plastic items instead of willow ones. This is not only bad for the industry but also for the environment. Even though plastic is known for its durability, it is a major pollutant. The willow wicker industry is an asset for Kashmir and offers employment to thousands of people. Damaged items of wicker can be easily repaired by the *Shaksaz*. Further, these items do not pollute the environment as they are biodegradable. The government should work towards saving the cultural heritage of Kashmir. Special schemes should be devised for keeping the willow wicker industry alive in the Kashmir Valley.

An effective way of popularizing the willow wicker items is through the medium of digital

library to showcase such items. Online shopping has become a massive business today. Sites like Homeshop18 (www.homeshop18.com), Snapdeal (www.snapdeal.com), etc. are selling their items to customers around the world. A perfect example has been set by Lane Venture (www.laneventure.com), which sells furnishings, including wicker items around the world and displays their products nicely by distributing their catalogues online. Such efforts, if taken locally, can be helpful for our heritage as well. Similar efforts are required from all those involved in this art and also those who love their culture. This can provide them a worldwide market and thereby the culture can be preserved for a long time to come. There is a dire need to sensitize the minds of a conscious breed to demonstrate our rich culture, heritage, and crafts throughout world with the new medium of cyberspace.

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