

The Legend of Himalayan Motherlode- Historical, Cultural and Economic Significance of The Padder Blue Sapphire

*¹Dr. Jyoti Parihar & ²Prof. Haqiqat Chauhan

¹Associate Professor, Government PG College of Education, Canal Road, Jammu, India

²Associate Professor, Government Degree College, Padder, Kishtwar, India

Abstract

One of the purest forms of aluminium oxide, the Padder Sapphire, a blue gem variety of the mineral corundum, is considered to be the hidden wealth of Kishtwar region. Found in the upper reaches of the remote village of Padder, it is supposed to be of the best quality in the world, second to none. At once, unknown and unexploited, found in abundance with the locals, it came to be known as the wealth of Padder from the 19th century onwards, when it was gifted by General Zorawar Singh to Maharaja Ranbir Singh of Jammu and Kashmir. At present, the Padder sapphire is one of the most expensive gemstones in the world. However, it is known for more than its sheer and brilliance. It has, associated with it, deep historical, cultural, astrological and traditional legends and beliefs which lend to its significance. This paper, thus, makes an attempt to study the historical, cultural and economic significance of the Padder sapphire and bring to the fore the many facets of the Padder sapphire.


Keywords: Padder, sapphire, mines, history, cultural significance


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*Author's Correspondence

 Dr. Jyoti Parihar

 Associate Professor, Government PG College of Education, Canal Road, Jammu, India

 drjyotiparihar5[at]gmail.com

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The culturally diverse land of India has for ages, been famous of the various gemstones that it bore. In the past, India exported precious and semi-precious gemstones like pearls, beryl, diamonds and carnelians to other civilizations. While the land of Indian subcontinent bears many a minerals and gemstones, of particular interest is the one gemstone widely considered to be the symbol of royalty, love and fidelity ever since it was gifted to Princess Diana by Prince Charles on their wedding.¹ Worshipped across many civilizations and a prize possession for all, the blue sapphire is not only a treasure to hold, but also has attached to it cultural and historical significance. Also referred to as the Himalayan Motherlode, this rich, pristine and beautiful stone is without any peer.

The treasure trove of this blue variety of the mineral corundum in India is the breathtakingly beautiful valley of Padder in the Kishtwar district of Jammu and Kashmir. The land of Padder is considered to be the most pious and heavenly in the region, replete with natural beauty, herbal medicines, the temple of Machail Mata and the mines of blue sapphire in its womb.² However, one might call it an unfortunate misappropriation, that the blue sapphire located in the Padder valley of Jammu region is known around the world as the Kashmir sapphire and the name doesn't reflect the actual origin of the sapphire, i.e., the beautiful valley of Padder. While Kishtwar is known regionally as the land of Sapphire and saffron, it is bizarre to note that the very same things that the place is known for aren't identified around the world with their actual place of origin.

¹ Stellene Volandes: *The truth about Princess Diana's Sapphire Engagement Ring*, Town and Country, 2020.

² Prof. Haqiqat Singh Chauhan: *In the Land of Sapphire*, Daily Excelsior, 2012.

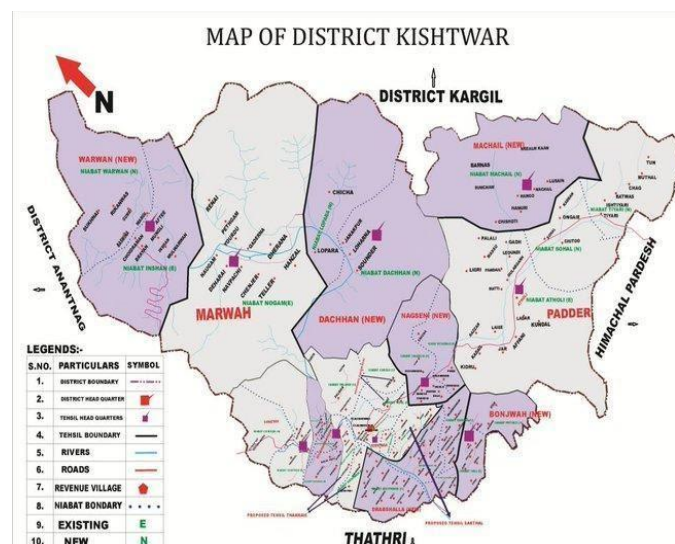


The Padder Blue sapphire

Source: mykishtwar.com

Location

Known as the King of Sapphires, the Padder sapphire is found in the geological mines of the Padder sub-division of Kishtwar district of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, at 33 15' North Latitude and 76 9' East Longitude.³ The entire Padder valley is nestled between the towering North-West Himalayas on the South-east of Kishtwar and the Zaskar range on the north and north-east, Bhalesa on the south-west and Pangi of Himachal Pradesh on the south-east. The last village is Sumcham, around 10 kms below the mines. Padder was elevated to the status of a sub-division in 2014, and at present, is divided into two Tehsils for administrative convenience *viz* Atholi Padder and Machail Padder. The valley of Atholi-Gulabgarh bifurcates into canyons of Sohal-Ishtihari along the river Chenab also known as ChanderBhaga towards Pangi of Himachal Pradesh and the Andhraun Nalla (course of Bodhnalla) leading to Massu, Kundhale, Chisoti and Machail where the famous sapphire mines and temple of goddess Chandi is situated.⁴



Source: kishtwar.nic.in

The mines are located at a height of 4267 meters above sea level on the highly rugged, perpetually snowclad mountain top above Sumcham village about 40 Km. from Atholi (105 Km. from Kishtwar). Associated with the

³ Prof. Haqiqat Singh Chauhan: *In the Land of Sapphire*, Daily Excelsior, 2012

⁴ Prof. Haqiqat Singh Chauhan: *In the Land of Sapphire*, Daily Excelsior, 2012.

sapphire, the red transparent variety of corundum “ruby” has also been reported to occur in the metamorphic rocks and alluvial deposits of Padder. There are also reserves of Quartz –amethyst (Silicon dioxide), mica etc.⁵



The sapphire mines of Padder
Source: Twitter

The Legends of The Padder Sapphire-A Historical Background

Considered to be one of the finest in the world, the Padder sapphire, has been venerated in the country since ancient times. The earliest Sanskrit texts ranked sapphire, along with ruby and diamond in the category of *Maharatni* (great gems). The other category of gems included gems of secondary importance, also known as *Uparatni*.⁶ The blue sapphire, which is referred to in the Sanskrit texts as *Nilamani*, was further classified into *Indranila* and *Mahanila*, the former being rare and more precious and the latter, including within it, stones of darker hues.

The Padder Sapphire, which is known across the world popularly as the Kashmir sapphire, was believed to be covered with glacial sheets for a larger part of the century, before the ice started to melt and the glaciers began to recede due to rising temperatures and the land opened. One such incident may have led to weathering of the mountains and subsequent landslides. The Padder blue sapphire was first discovered in 1879-82, when, according to a legend, one such landslip in a small glacial cirque above the hamlet of Sumjam in the Zaskar range led to the uncovering of the minerals for the first time.⁷ Some traders from Lahaul, travelling to Shimla, saw that a landslide near the mountains of the Zaskar range had bared the rocks and unearthed several gems, which they then brought to Shimla. Another version of the legend includes a local hunter who had lost the flint from his gun while hunting, found a piece of blue sapphire in the mountains and used it to light his pipe, since it was much harder and resilient than the otherwise handy and easily available quartz. After some time, he sold it to a Lahauli trader who then took it to Shimla, as in the previous version. Once the existence and value of the precious sapphire in the mountains of Padder became known to the people far and wide, the local jewelers began exploration in the mines of the mountains to take with them the biggest share of the blue wealth of the mountains. The brisk competition among the jewelers from the local and neighboring areas led the Maharaja of Kashmir, under whose territory the mines were located, to send his sepoys to the region and take control of the mines in 1882.⁸ All of this exploration and mining led to over exploitation of the mines, with the maharaja issuing carte blanches that all the sapphire in the possession of the natives should be given up, or would be taken away from them. So much so

⁵ Richard V. Gaines: *The Sapphire Mines of Kashmir*, Rocks and Minerals, 26, 1951, 464-472.

⁶ Richard V. Gaines: *The Kashmir Sapphire*, The Himalayan Journal 13 The Himalayan Club, 1946.

⁷ Rolf Schwieger, 'Diagnostic features and Heat Treatment' (Gems and Gemology 1990) 267

<<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/e0ba/84e273f4adf064d47aaa7f10cb52a57b6438.pdf>>

⁸ Richard V. Gaines: *The Sapphire Mines of Kashmir*, Rocks and Minerals, 26, 1951, 464-472.

that an advertent fear gripped the people of other areas to remain silent about the existence of these stones in their areas. So valuable were these gems to the treasury of the maharajah, that he ordered that the mine be guarded all year round by one of his Dogra regiments. Private mining was strictly banned and all the exploits were to go to the State treasury specifically. This excerpt from Grahame Young's work is a depiction of the efforts of the Maharaja of Kashmir to explore more mines for the various varieties of corundum in Padder.

*"The Maharajah has recently released from prison and largely rewarded two native hunters, who had been imprisoned for dealing in sapphire, on condition of their showing him two other deposits, one of blue and the other of red corundum. I have no information regarding these deposits. A small fragment of the red corundum has, however, found its way to Kulu; it is true oriental ruby, perfectly clear, and of a beautiful water."*⁹

-A. Grahame Young, Kulu, Aug. 8, 1882

Yet another version of the discovery of the mines is that of Albert Ramsay, narrated to him in first person by Maharaja Hari Singh of Jammu and Kashmir himself in 1934. As it goes, it was a band of traders from Afghanistan on their way to Delhi who first discovered the rough corundum, packed their bags with it and traded it for salt in Delhi. From there they were sold multiple times, having been recognized as rough sapphire in the whilst and eventually reached Calcutta where they were bought for a whopping amount of \$400,000.¹⁰ When this news reached the maharajah of Kashmir somehow, and he realized that such a wealth was lying unexplored in his backyard and was so grossly undervalued, he decided to not only send his men to the mines and take control over them, but also to take back the sapphires from the buyer in Calcutta.

With the overexploitation of the mines, gradually, there was a steady decrease in the corundum reserves and the consequent revenues that the State earned from them. Thus, in 1887, the Maharajah decided to seek help from the British Government of India to develop and explore the mines. The Government, accepted the request and dispatched T.D. La Touche, a British geologist, to the Padder mines to undertake the first ever detailed geographical and geological survey of the area. From his survey and explorations, he found out that the mines from which the mineral was being extracted from till then were a group of shallow pits and contained corundum of lower quality.¹¹ He called this group of mines the Old Mine and observed that this was on the verge of exhaustion by the earlier mining activity and thus, for future mining of the precious stone, new avenues needed to be looked at. Thereafter, he turned his attention to the placers on the valley floor and conducted systematic sampling via pits. On exploration, a new site called the New Mine was discovered, but it had very less corundum reserves, which exhausted soon enough. Subsequent mining activity and explorations yielded mediocre results, with not much sapphire being excavated from them. Subsequently, there was a lull in the official mining activity and this period saw the emergence of mining activity by the poachers.¹² A dwindling State mining activity and a simultaneous digging by illegal poachers made the Maharajah lease the mines to private miners in order to gain some revenue out of these. In furtherance of these efforts, the mining lease was granted to C.M.P. Wright and the Kashmir Mineral Co. in 1906. Wright explored the mines for years and extracted some of the finest stones from the region. In 1907, the Company also discovered another New Mine, some hundred meters southeast of the erstwhile Old Mine, but this again proved to be an uneconomical venture. Eventually, the difficult terrain and the inhospitable environment forced the company out of the exploration business in the area in 1908. Later in 1911, Lala Jyoti Parshad visited the Padder mines and a Mining and Prospecting Officer and was the first person to mine the southwest opening of the New Mines. However, this exploration did not yield any fruitful results and was quite uneconomical. Several subsequent attempts in the later years didn't see any fruitful result either, until 1924 when Pandit Labhu Ram, a Junior Assistant Superintendent of the Mineral Survey mapped the entire area of the Padder mines and collected useful information on the locations where the sapphire could be mined in situ. This led to an instance of a successful attempt at mining the blue sapphires in 1926, when Lal Jagan Nath of

⁹ Richard Hughes, *Ruby and Sapphire-Kashmir Sapphire, Corundum from India*, Ruby and Sapphire White Lotus, 1997.

¹⁰ Richard Hughes, *Ruby and Sapphire-Kashmir Sapphire, Corundum from India*, Ruby and Sapphire White Lotus, 1997.

¹¹ La Touche T. H. D.: *The Sapphire Mines of Kashmir*, Rec. Geol. Survey India. 23, 1890, 59-69.

¹² La Touche T. H. D.: *The Sapphire Mines of Kashmir*, Rec. Geol. Survey India. 23, 1890, 59-69.

Jammu obtained a prospecting license to mine the corundum in the Padder mountains. He restarted the mining activity in the New Mines that had been discovered by Wright Co. and discovered around 60 Kg of corundum from them. However, in the meanwhile the Maharaja's government cancelled his license due to certain irregularities.¹³ Interestingly, subsequent to the revocation of Lal Jagan Nath's license, the Kashmir government itself took over the mines that were dug and explored by him and within two weeks extracted some 450 kg of sapphire, while many reports claimed that not much was left after the cutting and finishing. After around 1938, once again there was a drop in the State mining activity and illegal mining activity resurfaced.

In due course, the government walled up the mine openings and also erected platforms on the ridge overlooking the mines to prevent poaching. Adits were blocked and barred and the entire mining valley protected by police personnel for several years.¹⁴



View of the Kashmir sapphire mines. Taken in 1887–8, this is among the earliest photos of the legendary deposit. (Source: La Touche, 1890)

Mining The Himalayan Motherlode

Firstly private, then both State controlled and illegal poaching, the mining activity of the Padder sapphires had been significantly primitive and manual then, owing to their remote location, difficult terrain and inhospitable climate. Once the existence of the mines was made known to the people, great deposits were unearthed by mere digging. It is said, that the mineral was extracted in monstrous quantities and enormous sizes, and that the finest and the most valuable gems were extracted only in the first few stages of mining. Most of this was stored at the royal treasury. On this, C.S. Middlemiss notes

*"We are aware that one of these outcrops, namely that of the Old Mine, continued yielding gemstone [sic] for an appreciable time, and gave an extremely good output of very large stones from about the year 1881 to about 1887. This is a historical fact and is well known to many living people. A few specimens of sapphire then collected are still preserved, jealously guarded by the State, in the toshakhana [treasury], and have been seen by the writer. Of these there is at least one large piece, bigger than a polo or croquet ball, and others smaller all of a rich blue colour. There are also many cases of cut gems of pendant size which are superficially as large as florins."*¹⁵

¹³ La Touche T. H. D.: *The Sapphire Mines of Kashmir*, Rec. Geol. Survey India. 23, 1890, 59-69.

¹⁴ La Touche T. H. D.: *The Sapphire Mines of Kashmir*, Rec. Geol. Survey India. 23, 1890, 59-69.

¹⁵ India Ruby & Sapphire, Richard Hughes 1997 <https://www.ruby-sapphire.com/index.php/component/content/article/10-articles/845-r-s-bk-india?Itemid=101>

The mining of the precious sapphire corundum, at present, is carried out by the Jammu and Kashmir Minerals Ltd., which is a government enterprise charged with undertaking annual mining activities at the sites where the mineral is naturally found, and has been involved in the mining activity in the region since 1963. Every year, around the summer month of June, when the climate conditions in the upper reaches are favorable, a team from the department visits Padder and undertake exploration and mining activities. It has been observed, that on an average, the company extracts around 5000 grams of the mineral from the mines annually, in an average.¹⁶

Characteristics of Padder Sapphire

The Padder sapphires are pyramidal, truncated by a pinacoid. The Padder sapphires range from colorless to deep blue crystals, with the occasional find of rare pink and purple gems and occur at the contact zone of a pegmatite intruded into marble in association with actinolite-tremolite. The Padder sapphire occurs in pulverulent deposits and in primary feldspathic veins within dolomitic marbles, which form intercalations in garnet-amphibole and biotitic gneisses. Considered to be among the finest and most sought after in the world, the blue sapphire from Padder is also the most expensive.¹⁷

Cultural Significance of The Padder Sapphire

Blue sapphire has a history of cultural significance and has a lore of mythological and cultural lores and legends associated with it. Kalpavriksha, or the celestial tree of heaven, a wish-fulfilling divine tree, that finds its place in the Hindu mythology is described as being made up of precious gems and stones.

Another traditional significance of the blue sapphire in Hinduism is that of its association with Saturn or Lord Shani, the lord of Karma, law and order. Consequently, as per the Vedic astrology wearing blue sapphire is seen to remove hurdles and obstacles from one's life. However, since it is the manifestation of the energy of Lord Shani, who is considered to be hot-tempered, it is widely believed that the sapphire doesn't suit everyone who wears it and thus, should be put on only after careful study and deliberation. Some believe that before putting it on, one should keep it under their bed for seven days and if they see a ominous dream they should avoid wearing it. Other lines of belief also suggest something similar that a seven-day testing period is mandatory, otherwise it ensues loss, misery and failure. Before putting on this stone for the first time, it must be dipped in fresh milk and subsequently washed again in the water from Holy Ganga. The gemstone must be worn for the first time on a Saturday falling close to the full moon, in the first hour after sunrise.¹⁸

In Padder, the sapphire mines are located in the Barnaj valley, in the backside of the renowned Sapphire mountain, locally referred to as Mount Neelkanth. The legend of the valley and the two lakes located herein goes back to the time of Pandavas who are said to have stayed here for some time. It is also said that several precious gems *inter alia* rubies and sapphires are found in the mountains here. The sapphire holds a lot of significance for the locals and it is believed that before it was commercially exploited at a large scale, the natives used to own it in huge quantities, sometimes to the tune of kilograms and would bring it to Kishtwar, Shimla and other nearby towns to trade with other goods. While that is a thing of past, the importance of sapphire in the region cannot be overemphasized. There still exists a village called Jashail located at the foothills of the mines, which in the local language translates into Rainbow of Sapphire.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, we can conclude that the blue sapphire of Padder valley is of enormous economic value and also has attached to it historical and cultural significance. It is hoped that propagation of information about Padder, the treasure trove nestled in the Himalayas will enable people to appreciate the beauty, value and

¹⁶ Prof. Haqiqat Singh Chauhan: *In the Land of Sapphire*, Daily Excelsior, 2012.

¹⁷ India Ruby & Sapphire, Richard Hughes 1997 <https://www.ruby-sapphire.com/index.php/component/content/article/10-articles/845-r-s-bk-india?Itemid=101>

¹⁸ Medical astrology, Healer gems <https://healergems.com/blue-sapphire/>

diversity of the sapphires that lie within it. For a period of more than 100 years the Padder sapphires have been recognized as the rarest and most beautiful gemstones, second in value to none, but these are not just beauties, but also very deeply rooted in the culture and tradition of the region and thus must be valued as such.

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