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SHAWL – THE UNIQUE TEXTILE FROM KASHMIR

Annotation

Among various arts and crafts of Kashmir, shawls remain the most well-known all over the world. What is a shawl? Which are the various types of shawls? What goes into its making? What are the multiple techniques for weaving the shawls? What are the different attributes that make it popular? Despite several challenges, the craftsmanship of Kashmir Shawl remained known throughout the world. The article will explore the art of the Kashmir shawl.

Key words: *Shawl, techniques, weaving, wool, patterns, design, artisan.*

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ШӘЛІ – КАШМИРДЕН ЖАСАЛҒАН ЕРЕКШЕ ТОҚЫМА

Аннотация

Каширдің түрлі сәндік-қолданбалы өнерінің ішінде шәлі бүкіл әлемде ең танымал болып қала береді. Шәлі дегеніміз не? Шәлінің қандай түрлері бар? Оны қалай тоқиды? Шәлі тоқудың қандай әдістері бар? Қандай әртүрлі атрибуттар оны танымал етеді? Бірнеше қиындықтарға қарамастан, Кашир шәлісінің шеберлігі бүкіл әлемге танымал болды. Мақалада Кашир шәлісінің өнері қарастырылды.

Түйінді сөздер: *шәлі, техника, тоқу, жүн, өрнектер, дизайн, қолөнерші.*

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ШАЛЬ – УНИКАЛЬНЫЙ ТЕКСТИЛЬ ИЗ КАШМИРА

Аннотация

Среди различного декоративно-прикладного искусства Кашира шали остаются самыми известными во всем мире. Что такое шаль? Какие бывают виды шали? Что входит в ее создание? Какие существуют техники плетения шалей? Какие различные атрибуты делают ее популярной? Несмотря на несколько проблем, мастерство кашмирской шали оставалось известным во всем мире. В статье будет рассмотрено искусство кашмирской шали.

Ключевые слова: *шаль, техника, ткачество, шерсть, узоры, дизайн, ремесленник.*

Introduction. Conflicts, wars, famines, Kashmir region survived all and its arts sustained despite facing significant setbacks. Artisans here always displayed the remarkable quality of sustenance even in the face of odds; it seems arts aided them to remain in sync with their inner selves. The most wellknown craft from Kashmir to date is the art of shawl making. During the mediaeval period of India, Sufi saints from Iran arrived in Kashmir to restore a disturbed and conflicting society. Several natives adopted the new religion or ideology to find solace in the existing chaos. Most of them were diverted into learning new skills such as calligraphy, bookbinding, woodwork, weaving etc., by the Sufi saints. They had established several learning institutes like *madrasas* and *khanegahs* (hospices).¹ In the words of Riazuddin Akhtar, “in the Islamic world, there was a tradition among craftsmen of volunteering to build mosques or shrines free of any charge, to earn merit in the next world; hence these institutions became focal centres of several hand skills.”² [1, pg.323]. Several craft centres were opened within the shrine itself.³ This led to the emergence of new artisans who engaged themselves in skilled craftsmanship not only for personal sustenance but also for spiritual pursuit.

The art of Kashmir shawl is one among the many crafts which artisans mastered and is still well-known across the world. The study explores what makes the Kashmir shawl one of the unique textiles from India.

It has been said that the word ‘shawl’ was derived from ‘*shal*’, a word in Persian that denotes a class of woven fabric rather than a particular article of dress.⁴ “Traditionally, Indo-Persian usage of ‘*shal*’ could equally well apply to a scarf, a turban mantle, or even a coverlet. The distinguishing feature is that the material is fine wool or some other kind of animal fleece.”⁵ Though Persians wore it as a girdle and Indians across the shoulders, it is the latter’s manner which became fashionable throughout the world”⁶ [2, pg.1].

Shawls are either purely woven or ornamented with embroidery (needlework) in Kashmir. Therefore, the region has two most significant types of shawls, i.e. *kanikar* and *amlikar*. In the first category, the patterns are formed within the weaving process, whereas in the latter, the artisan creates the designs on the plain-woven shawl. ‘*kanikar*’ has been the traditional method of weaving shawls, either woven in one piece or in small pieces sewn

¹.Riazuddin Akhtar, *History of Handicrafts: Pakistan-India*, (Islamabad: National Hijra Council, 1988), 323

².Ibid.

³.Ibid.

⁴.John Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl*, (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office - Victoria and Albert Museum, 1973), 1

⁵.Ibid.

⁶.Ibid.

together by *rafugar / rafooguru* or *darners*⁷ which makes it one of the unique methods of constructing a textile. Apart from the weaver, there are other specialists like *naqqash* (designer), *tarah-guru* (colour caller), and *taleem guru* (*Talim* writer) involved in the manufacture of *Kani* shawls.⁸ In *taleem*, the design is transcribed into codes or symbols to help the weaver understand the proper placements of motifs and colours. It requires remarkable skills to translate the script into reality.⁹ In the present times, *kani* shawls are woven in one piece.

'*Amlikar*' shawls have plain-woven backgrounds with embroidered patterns. Perhaps with the increasing demands for shawls from Kashmir, an alternative for faster production was discovered by artisans here. Though making *amli* shawls is also time-consuming, the process is quicker than *kanikar*. Also, it is tedious to correct inaccuracies in *kanikar*, whereas, in *amlikar*, it is easier to correct mistakes. Indeed a substitute was necessary, and it was also not as expensive as *kanikar* shawls. In the words of D N. Dhar, "Ali Baba was the man who produced this type of shawl at one-third cost of the *Kani* shawls."¹⁰ [3, pg. 72]

The woven/embroidered shawls are categorised into *jamawar*, *durukha* and *dushalas*. A *jamawar* shawl has all over designs made so intricate that the base colour is hardly visible. Patterns and colours are interlaced, so tracing the beginning and end is difficult. D.N. Saraf states, "incidentally, *kani* shawls have also been known as *jamawars*, for they were used as wraps around the body."¹¹ [4, pg. 62] Earlier, the royals would buy them in yards and prepare gowns or *jama* from them, as seen in miniature paintings during Akbar's era.¹² A *durukha* is a method of making a bifacial shawl with two sides contrasting or the same colours. Figure 1 and 2 depict both the sides of the *durukha* shawl in *kani* embroidery from Mr Bharany's collection. It has not only the same patterns but also the same colours. According to artisans, when the permutation of colours on the front and back sides are different, the shawl is known as *aksi* (it implies the reflection in the mirror)¹³. In a woven *durukha*, the front and rear sides are woven alternatively. In contrast, in an embroidered variety, the underlying weft thread is split, and each then is used separately to form patterns on both sides.¹⁴ *Dushalas*, also called *dushu*, refer to shawls made in pairs; these are branded under different names based on colour,

⁷ .D. N. Dhar, *Artisan of the Paradise, Art & Artisans of Kashmir-From Ancient to Modern Times*,(New Delhi: Himalayan Research & Cultural Foundation & Bhavana Books and Prints, 1999), 72

⁸ .Ibid.

⁹ .Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ .D.N. Saraf, *Arts & Crafts-Jammu & Kashmir*, (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1987), 62

¹² .Ibid.

¹³ .Ibid., 64

¹⁴ .Ibid.

design, and quality.¹⁵ Pairs of exactly matching shawls are joined together in the middle. These kinds of shawls were generally made for males.

The designs on the shawls are distributed at various positions, which have been termed as *pala* (head of the shawl), *hashia* (border on its length), *zanjir* (chain stitch that runs above and below the *pala*), *dhour* (border between the central field and the *pala*), etc¹⁶. Several other classifications can be found based on patterns such as *pandar* or those which have betel leaf motifs, etc.

The textile is prepared from three kinds of natural wool, i.e. *pashmina*, *shah tus*, and *raffle*.¹⁷ Several shawls have been produced from the combinations of *shah tus*, *pashmina* and *ordinary wool (raffle)*, having either plain backgrounds or decorated with embroidery or woven patterns. Presently, several types are being formed by mixing woollen threads with either cotton, silk, nylon or acrylic. Indeed the fragments collected from old & deteriorated antique shawls are stitched and re-used as *palas* or otherwise on new fabrics. Figure 3 depicts antique *Pallas* attached with *matan (field)* prepared from *pashmina* and ornamented with *amli* technique. These are called restoration shawls constructed and joined entirely with needles.¹⁸

Shawl, a woollen garment, undoubtedly necessitated fleece from mountain goats and sheep to produce its fibres. Kashmir has had a long history of using natural materials for making shawls. Due to the geographical locations and political conditions, the wool came to Kashmir from elsewhere. Some of these regions were in Central Asia and China, such as Yarkand, Khotan, Sianking, Lhasa, and Kirgiz steppe-land.¹⁹

Earlier, the wool for shawls was popularly derived from the mountain goat *Capra Hircus* which resided in Central Asia. It was tiny with straight horns and delivered glossy and short hair to be used as wool, also known as *keli-phumb*²⁰. The finest layer was obtained from the innermost layers of hair strands around its physique, i.e. from the underbelly. The fleece protected the animal from winter, and it was found to shed the same during the summer months. This natural product was called the most superior of all wool-producing goats by S. Turner, an English ambassador to Tibet, in 1783.²¹ The goat delivering this kind of wool was considered similar to the Angora, and

¹⁵ .D.N. Dhar, *Artisan of the Paradise, Art & Artisans of Kashmir-From Ancient to Modern Times*, 72

¹⁶ .Ibid.

¹⁷ . Frank Ames, *The Kashmir Shawl and its Indo-French Influence*, (New York: Antique Collector's Club, 1988), 61

¹⁸ .Sushil Wakhlu, in the *Living Traditions of India-Crafts of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh*, ed by Jaya Jaitley, (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 1990), 65

¹⁹ . Frank Ames, *The Kashmir Shawl and its Indo-French Influence*, 59

²⁰ . D.N. Dhar, *Artisan of the Paradise, Art & Artisans of Kashmir-From Ancient to Modern Times*, 68

²¹ . Frank Ames, *The Kashmir Shawl and its Indo-French Influence*, 59

its various species were found at Erzurum, Eastern Turkey, and Northern Persia.²² Kirman was also known for producing goat's wool and thus shawls.²³ Indeed, wool has been the oldest fibre utilised by Persians to craft textiles, which goes back to the neolithic period.²⁴ Even in Persia, there has been the tradition of drawing out the hair of the goat for weaving fine and warm shawls.²⁵ The influx of Persians in Kashmir led to the transfer of traditions, art, and culture. Today we can find several similarities between the two regions, and the craft of shawl making is one of these.

The most popular wool in Kashmir is universally known as *pashmina*, as the name evolved from the Persian word *pashm*²⁶. Also named *cashmere* in the West, The similar fleece began to be obtained from other animals such as wild Himalayan mountain sheep like the Shapo (*Ovis Orientalis vignei*), the Argali (*Ovis ammon*), the Bharal (*Pseudois nayaur*), and the Himalayan Ibex (*Capra Ibex*).²⁷ It has been claimed that Tibetan shepherd dogs could also produce the same fleece at times.²⁸ Studies reveal that extreme weather conditions make the finest qualities of thread on the animal's body. Today *Capra Hircus*'s wool comes from the eastern regions of Ladakh at 4,500 meters (14,750 ft.) above sea level.²⁹ The area is known as Chang-Thang, and half of it falls under the part of Chinese Tibet.³⁰ Many artisans have labelled the goat *Ladhki khat* or *pashmina* goat. Also known as *Changra*, they are domesticated by the shepherds of this region.

Frank Ames has mentioned in his book that the people supplying goat fleece are called *Changpas*, the nomads whose occupation is to herd yak, sheep, horses and goats.³¹ They deliver the central segment of the *pashm* from Chang-Thang to the Kashmir region. The best wool arrives from those goats that grazed the greenest meadows.³² The *Changpa* collects the fleece from various areas and vends it in mass quantity; the buyers connected with the shawl trade thoroughly examine colour gradations of the wool and accordingly determine the final price. The whiter the colour of the fleece, the more acceptable the quality.³³

The most expensive, most delicate, and rarest wool in the world comes from Ibex (*Capra Ibex Siberica*) or Chiru, a wild Tibetan Antelope

²² .Ibid.

²³ .Ibid.

²⁴ . Hans E. Wulff, *The Traditional Crafts of Persia – Their Development, Technology, and Influence on Eastern and Western Civilizations*, 177

²⁵ .Ibid.

²⁶ .Pashm according to the Persian language implied any kind of wool.

²⁷ . John Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office-Victoria and Albert Museum Monograph No. 29, 1973) , 4-5

²⁸ .Ibid. , 5

²⁹ .Frank Ames, *The Kashmir Shawl and its Indo-French Influence*, 59

³⁰ .Ibid.

³¹ .Ibid.

³² .Ibid. , 60

³³ .Ibid.

(*Pantholope hodgsoni*) now one of the protected species. They graze at high altitudes, i.e. almost glacial temperatures. The fleece they deliver is *shah pashm* or *king's wool*, *asli tus* or *shah toosh / tus*. The animal rubs itself against the rocks during warm months and sheds the hair which grows close to its skin.³⁴ Monique Levi Strauss observes stated, “some travellers who witness this fleece assumed that shawl's raw material came from a plant which grew like cotton”.³⁵ [7, pg. 15]

According to some artisans, the hair around the neck and the belly of the animal is of the finest quality. With ageing, the mammal's fur develops a shiny texture. If the species is a few centuries old, it could grow golden layers on its exterior.³⁶ The goat is available at approximately 18,000 feet above sea level, where the temperature falls to minus forty degrees centigrade. The area descends into the Himalayan ranges of Indo-Tibet.

Conventionally the fallen fleece was collected and supplied to the weaving centres by Nepalese merchants, who received it from Tibet.³⁷ It was one of the tedious processes of collecting raw material, and therefore the prices were high.³⁸ Gradually the business began to take the form of the black market.³⁹ This led to the slaughtering of these goats to accomplish the growing and pressing demands of the buyers. Therefore the government of Kashmir imposed a ban on the use of *asli tus* (king's wool) for making shawls. However, these kinds of shawls could never be produced in large quantities due to scarcity of raw material, imposition of heavy duties and highly time-consuming collecting, cleaning, spinning and especially weaving.⁴⁰ In 1821, the entire region of Kashmir had only two looms that specialised in the weaving of the king's wool.⁴¹

According to Frank Ames, the dealers of these shawls never allowed the finished product to be 100% clean so that the leftover hairs could prove the genuineness of the *asli tus*.⁴²

Shawl dealers referred to the *shah tus* as the ring shawl, implying that the entire fabric could be passed through the ring.⁴³ However, in the present times, some artisans/dealers have developed the knack of slithering other shawls through finger rings.

Raffle is another kind of wool commonly utilised in the production of shawls in Kashmir. The raw material initially was perhaps obtained from the

³⁴ Frank Ames, *The Kashmir Shawl and its Indo-French Influence*, 61

³⁵ Monique Levi Strauss, *Romance of the Kashmir Shawl*, (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishers, 2002), 15

³⁶ Frank Ames, *The Kashmir Shawl and its Indo-French Influence*, 62

³⁷ Ibid., 61

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ John Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl*, 5

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Frank Ames, *The Kashmir Shawl and its Indo-French Influence*, 62

⁴³ Ibid.

outer layers of domestic goats like *Changra*. As of today, *raffle* shawls are produced mainly out of lamb's or sheep's wool from Kashmir. The shawls, thus made, have an inferior texture and are far more economical in comparison to the previously mentioned types. Earlier, i.e. before 1800, the raw material came from Ladakh and Tibet.⁴⁴ With the spell of the epidemic in these areas, the supply came from nomadic tribes of Kirghiz, who imported it to Yarkand and Khotan.⁴⁵ Later the chief source of second grade wool in Kashmir came from Siankiang, especially Turfan.⁴⁶ With increasing demands and inadequate supplies, the goat fleece became extremely expensive, leading to the impurity of thread and diminishing standards.⁴⁷ This led to the usage of the fleece available from local animals of Kashmir. The wool also comes from the Merino sheep, known mainly in Australia.

Process of manufacturing

a.) Yarn

As buyers, when we perceive a variety of handicrafts around us, we often fail to realise the artisans' highly elaborate and dreary hard work behind its making. There are several processes which a shawl goes through before appearing in its complete form. The first process involves deriving the wool from the mammal's body. The method of removing hairs is different in all three types of animals. Combs are used for plucking the deepest and the softest layers of the *pashmina* goat. The finest wool, i.e. *shah tus*, can be obtained from the hairs that the wild antelope shed. Herders or shepherds shear sheep to make shawls out of *raffle* wool.

The raw wool is sold to the retailers, further selling these to spinners.⁴⁸ At this stage, the thread is unclean; therefore, the following shawl production process requires cleaning and wool. The women in Kashmir have traditionally handled the activity since the ancient period. They separate the soft and coarse hairs of the raw material while dividing superior and inferior variety through combs.⁴⁹ The former is generally reserved for the warp threads on the looms or making the most delicate shawls. These have either pure white colour or dyed with light hues. On the other hand, the somewhat courser or greyish fleece is dyed and used as weft on looms.⁵⁰ The wool is generally cleaned at four levels, i.e. Coarse hair, Phiri or Seconds, Dust/Foreign substances, and Fine wool.⁵¹ Separating thread from the hair itself has been tiresome and

⁴⁴ . John Irwin, The Kashmir Shawl, 5

⁴⁵ .Ibid.

⁴⁶ .Ibid.

⁴⁷ .Ibid.

⁴⁸ .William Moorcroft de la, George Treback, *Travels in the Himalayan Province of Hindustan & the Punjab from 1819 to 1825*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) , 168

⁴⁹ .Ibid

⁵⁰ .Ibid.

⁵¹ .William Moorcroft de la, George Treback, *Travels in the Himalayan Province of Hindustan & the Punjab from 1819 to 1825*, 168

lengthy. As accounted by William Moorcroft, “to acquire the second level, a quantity of husked rice is steeped in clean cold water, for a day and a night, or longer, until it becomes soft, when it is ground or bruised upon a stone slab to fine flour.”⁵² [8, pg. 168]. The layer is then applied to the wool to harden its texture. After an hour, the flour is shaken and removed to free the wool, usually torn to pieces through nails to form a square, elastic pad called *tumbu* that helps extract the second level or *Phiri*.⁵³ It is most often developed into second-grade shawls. Moorcroft further says, “the next step requires extending *tumbu* into a *mala* which is then folded up to the size of the *tumbu*, and deposited in a deep pot of red earthenware, called a *taksas*, to be out of the way of dust or accident, till required for the spinning wheel.”⁵⁴ [8, pg. 169-170]. The last layer thus achieved is the finest. Such an elaborate procedure may or may not be followed today, but women separate the different layers through combs, and the yarns are hardened by applying layers of starch to them.

b.) Spinning

The process then progresses to the hand-spinning of the yarns by women on the wheel. The spinning wheel (*yender*) is made of wood with an iron spindle attached for rolling the wool’s drawn-out threads.⁵⁵ It could require eight days to spin a considerable quantity of yarn; hundreds to thousands can be taken out even from a small bunch of shawl wool.⁵⁶ These yarns can be about 2,500 yards in length, generating warp threads for the loom. According to Monique Levi Strauss, “the women prepare the warp by doubling the threads, drawing it out while twisting it slightly.”⁵⁷ [7, pg. 15] Two thousand to three thousand warp are fixed for a wide shawl on the loom. The more delicate threads are frequently used for warp, while the slightly coarser ones are for the weft. Thousands of women spinners, both Hindu and Muslim, have tremendously contributed to the shawl industry. As stated by D.N. Dhar, “they sat and sang songs with the buzzing of the wheel, sometimes, till late in the moonlit night.”⁵⁸ [3, pg. 69]. Women have even worked under oil lamps.⁵⁹ Indeed young girls of ten years of age have also been involved in spinning yarns.⁶⁰

⁵². Ibid., 169

⁵³. Ibid.

⁵⁴. Ibid., 169-170

⁵⁵. Ibid., 170

⁵⁶. D.N. Dhar, *Artisan of the Paradise, Art & Artisans of Kashmir-From Ancient to Modern Times*, 70

⁵⁷. Monique Levi Strauss, *The Romance of the Kashmir Shawl*, (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishers, 2002), 15

⁵⁸. D. N. Dhar, *Artisan of the Paradise, Art & Artisans of Kashmir-From Ancient to Modern Times*, 69

⁵⁹. Ibid.

⁶⁰. Ibid.

According to some artisans, the hand-spun yarns are more delicate than the machines' poorer and thicker strings. While the finer qualities are still hand-cleaned and hand-spun, the yarns (*raffle*) are also prepared through machines and softened through chemicals, and artisans buy these from the shops.

c.)Dyeing

These yarns are utilised or dyed with natural colours before setting up on the looms for weaving. Keeping in mind the colours and patterns of the shawl, the weaver gives it to an expert whose task is to divide these yarns into skeins. These are further provided to dyers or *rung-rez* for applying various tints. (Figure 4 and 5). There has been a tradition of using natural dyes in the shawls from Kashmir. In the words of John Irwin, “the process required the extraction of colourants from several sources in nature such as blues and purples from *indigo*; orange and yellow from *carthamus* and *saffron*; reds mainly from *logwood*.⁶¹ [2, pg.6]. The yellow pigment could be prepared from a grass named *woftangil* in Kashmir.⁶² Iron filings and wild pomegranate skins could help produce black and sometimes light brown; reds were even obtained from wood called *line* or a drab from *walnut* skins.; English green baize made available the most delicate greens and light blue.⁶³ Earlier, some dyers claimed to generate sixty-four different shades from the same dyeing process by estimating the time to keep the yarn under a particular dye. The artisans of the Mughal era made diverse shades amounting to three hundred, which were reduced to seventy-four during the Sikh period (Diwan Chand Sharma, Kashmir under Sikhs, 1983, p. 171).⁶⁴

In modern times where textile mills are increasingly using synthetic dyes, the art of preparing dyes through animal excreta and vegetables still exists in Kashmir but only for finer shawls. Yarns of *pashmina* and *shah tus* are dyed by *Kashmiri rung-rez* but not a *raffle*. The shades are now often imported to Kashmir from outside, primarily Switzerland, because of their supreme quality. According to some artisans, the natural dyes retain the original attractiveness of the shawl, and therefore these are still in use. Such pigments act as a shield for microbes and preserve the light fastening of the textile. The presence of tannin (tannic acid) in most raw materials, such as pomegranate, etc., is responsible for maintaining the life of the shawl. Water in Kashmir also is an excellent source for producing fine colourants because it contains salts (i.e. negative ions) that add to their freshness. Even for the preparation of the natural pigments, the chemical is used, but the latter is extracted from biological environs. Therefore these natural dyes are preferred by artisans. Most of the raw materials for making dyes are widely available

⁶¹ .John Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl*, 6

⁶² . D.N. Dhar, *Artisan of the Paradise, Art & Artisans of Kashmir-From Ancient to Modern Times*, 70

⁶³ .Ibid.

⁶⁴ .Ibid.

in Kashmir, making them cost-effective. Also, these are produced in huge quantities.

Natural colourants are prepared from vegetables like capsicums, turmeric, etc.; flowers like saffron, etc., waste like used tea leaves, pomegranate rinds, insect excreta, etc. Regarding the dyes, Moorcroft has stated,

“Each has a separate denomination; for instance, the crimson is termed *gulanar* (pomegranate flower); the best kind is derived from cochineal, inferior tints are from Lacand Kirmis (*chermes*), distinguished as *Kirmisi*, *Kirmadana*, and *Kirmisi lac*, or cochineal and *lac chermes*; or colouring matter extracted by boiling from European broad-cloth.⁶⁵ [8, pg. 175]

The most significant of all is the red dye which is cochineal in nature, i.e. it is produced from the female bodies of the insect *Coccus Cati*.⁶⁶ Northern Persia and Armenia have been famous for breeding these insects; their bodies are crushed and mixed with mordents to produce red dyes.⁶⁷ Kermis, another dyestuff, is obtained from a female insect named *Kermococcus vermilion* also makes hues of red such as crimson and carmine.⁶⁸ The pigment is better known as scarlet in English and is deemed to be pleasant and colour-fast.⁶⁹ It is commonly known as *lac* in India. Vegetables like red capsicum or *paprika* also deliver red tints.

Besides red, yellow dyes are popularly used in the manufacture of shawls from Kashmir. The most crucial paint comes from safflower (*gol-e-rang*).⁷⁰ The colour is taken out from the petals and florets of the plant labelled as *Carthamus tinctorious*. It is grown as a field crop in Persia, where its leaves are collected, dried and pounded.⁷¹ The finest yellow is acquired from saffron's stigmas, widely available in Kashmir state. Biologically it is known as *Crocus sativus* and has been famous in the Middle East, Egypt, Crete, and Phoenicia since the ancient period.⁷² Iran has widely cultivated the floral plant since the Islamic reign, and now it is commonly grown in Kashmir. The dye thus produced is remarked as the world's most expensive.⁷³

A widely used yellow dye is turmeric (*karkum*, *and-cubeh*); it is extracted from roots and shoots of *curcuma Domestica* and *curcuma longa* and has been one of the significant agricultural produces of India, Persia and

⁶⁵ William Moorcroft de la, George Treback, *Travels in the Himalayan Province of Hindustan & the Punjab from 1819 to 1825*, 175

⁶⁶ . Hans E. Wulff, *The Traditional Crafts of Persia – Their Development, Technology, and Influence on Eastern and Western Civilizations*, 189

⁶⁷ .Ibid.

⁶⁸ .Ibid. , 190

⁶⁹ .Ibid.

⁷⁰ .Ibid. , 191

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

Mesopotamia right from the classical era.⁷⁴ Fenugreek seeds (*methi*) and a grass named *woftangil* also help obtain yellow pigment. Besides, pomegranate rinds also deliver mild hues of yellows.

Blues are exclusively obtained from indigo (*nil, rang-e kermani, rang-e vasmeh*) drawn from the leaves of *Indigofera tinctoria*, one of the first dyes prepared in the powdered form.⁷⁵ The leaves are grounded and kept inside water for twelve hours of the fermentation process, which helps produce a colourless liquid called glucisid indoxyl, drained out later.⁷⁶ The yarns are then immersed in the solution and exposed to air so that gradual oxidisation results in the formation of a blue tint.⁷⁷ Though India has been synonymous with indigo, it is believed that the dye existed in the Pre-historic periods of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Palestine.⁷⁸

Greens could be achieved through English green baize. Hues of Browns could be derived from walnut and pomegranate peels. Threads dyed in dark blue indigo help to produce rich black colours.⁷⁹ It does not require to be made in huge quantities as many of the wool delivering animals are black.

Colours extorted from natural substances tend to deliver different shades in the same formation. Specific techniques are adopted to achieve standardisation in dyes to overcome such difficulties. A mordant is added to the tints to prepare and fix dyes to the fabric. It is mainly alum (*zaj*), principally in the form of ammonium alum, aluminium sulphate (*zaj-e safid*), potassium alum (*zaj-e qalieh*), and sometimes chromium alum.⁸⁰ Iron and copper salts are used, sometimes by the dyers combined with astringents (containing high quantities of tannic acid). The dual task of fixers and darker tones are accomplished simultaneously. The astringents are also acquired from various sources of nature.

Traditionally dyers located their workshops near the water resources. The dyeing process was long drawn as they dealt with extraction, preparation & dyeing. Nowadays, various industries produce natural dyes, so the job of the dyer has been restricted to merely dyeing the skeins. In contemporary times, chemical dyes are utilised much more in Kashmir as these can create a wide variety of shades compared to natural dyes. The initial difficulty of understanding artificial dyes' complex techniques has now been overcome.

d.)Warp and Weft Making

Once the yarns are ready to use, seven specialists engage themselves before the beginning of the weaving process, and they are warp-maker, warp-

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 192

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 189

dresser, warp-threader, pattern drawer, colour-caller, *taleem* writer and pattern master⁸¹. As stated by John Irwin, “it is the warp-maker’s job to wind the length of warp to the correct numb of threads (usually 2,000 to 3,000 double-threaded warps being required for a shawl); the warp-dresser is to size the warp with starch, and the warp-threader to pass the yarns through the heddles and reed.”⁸² [2, pg.7]. The first step involves the warp-makers (*nakatoo*) adjusting yarns for warp and weft, i.e. he divides the skeins into warp and weft.⁸³ The warp is always cut longer than the weft, almost double the size, but the latter has more weight and thickness.⁸⁴ The former act as a base for textiles, whereas the latter are meant for creating designs and patterns. Usually, for a shawl loom, a warp-maker organises 2000-3000 yarns on the warp depending on the coarseness and the gaps between the threads. Sometimes a single *nakatoo* is capable of setting two shawl looms in a single day (William Moorcroft, Journey to Kashmir, Vol II, 1970, pg. 176)⁸⁵

The yarns are then passed on to warp-dressers whose task is to apply starch to the warps to produce stiffness. In the words of D.N. Dhar, “He stretched the warp using sticks due to which threads could slightly get separated and then dipped in thick boiled rice.”⁸⁶ [3, pg. 70]. Once dried, the layers of starch are brushed off; the rigidness helps the warp-dresser separate the warp threads.⁸⁷

The function of the warp-threaders (*beere gooroo or burn-gur*) entails setting the yarns on the looms, i.e. passing the threads through the needles.⁸⁸ In a loom, the warp is usually arranged vertically and weft horizontally. In *kani*, looms warp are organised horizontally. Some artisans use silk warp to prepare the shawls’ *hashias* (borders). In the words of Moorcroft, “the operation of drawing, or of passing the yarns of the warp through the heddles, is performed precisely in the same way as in Europe, and the warp is then taken by the *shal-baf*, or weaver, to the loom.”⁸⁹ [8, pg. 178]. Depending on the shawl length, the warps range from twenty-five hundred to three thousand.

e.)Design and pattern making

Even when the actual process of weaving begins, the weaver is not the only one engaged in the manufacture of shawls. The warp-threader arranges the loom according to the shawl’s type, design, and pattern in consultation with the weaver. Many times, the latter himself sets the yarns on the loom.

⁸¹ John Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl*, 7

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ D.N. Dhar, *Artisan of the Paradise, Art & Artisans of Kashmir-From Ancient to Modern Times*, 70

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 71

⁸⁹ William Moorcroft de la George Treback, *Travels in the Himalayan Province of Hindustan & the Punjab from 1819 to 1825*, 178

But the weaver implements the designer's creative ideas known as *naqqash* or pattern drawer. It is the designer's mind that decides the patterns for the shawl. He is paid the highest salary, even more than the weaver.⁹⁰

The design's colour plan is handed over to the *tarah-guru*. In the words of John Irwin, "with a black-and-white drawing before him, the colour-caller beginning at the bottom and working upwards, called out each colour, the number of warps along which it was required to extend, and so on, until the whole pattern or section of the pattern had been covered."⁹¹ [2, pg. 7]. A graph man transfers the designs and colours to the graph paper. Based on the units in graphs, the plan is transcribed into a shorthand code by an expert known as *taleem guru*. The peculiar symbolic language is called *taleem*, understandable only to the weavers & implies the colour of the weft thread and the number of the warp through which it will be passed. It takes around a few months to a year for a *kani* weaver to comprehend the particular language.

f.) Looms and weaving

Before mentioning weaving techniques, I would like to provide brief information on looms. The section will explore the various components of the looms and their types. In the age of mechanical production, it is unlikely to have no machine looms in Kashmir. Indeed *raffle* shawls are today made on power looms. Yet the larger community of weavers is still weaving shawls on handlooms. These looms are made from wood which is available in the region. Their main component consists of heddles, reed, comb, shuttles, needles, peddles, warp, and weft.

The heddles (also called *saaz* in Kashmir) carry the warp, and their number varies in different looms. In Kashmir, a *kani* shawl loom in Kashmir has four alternately moved up and down by the weavers through peddles; the heddles are positioned behind the reed. By pulling alternate heddles, i.e. first and third or second and fourth, half of the threads are lifted, leaving the other half straight, thus forming a space or a shed from which a weft thread is passed. Heddle maker himself constructs this part of the loom.⁹² According to the instructions received by the weavers, the heddle maker arranges the number of heddles and the sequence of entering warp for a required pattern.⁹³ The set-up leads to entering warp threads through the reed (also known as *oat* in Kashmir), usually prepared by the reed maker. He, too, is a specialised craftsman who constructs it from wood.⁹⁴ As stated by Hans E. Wulf, "the reed maker carries properly shaped end battens (*qolfak, badumak*) and large quantities of split bamboo to form the reed blades (*alat, dandaneh, sim, nai*)

⁹⁰ . John Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl*, 7

⁹¹ .Ibid.

⁹² .Hans E. Wulff, *The Traditional Crafts of Persia – Their Development, Technology, and Influence on Eastern and Western Civilizations*,198

⁹³ .Ibid.

⁹⁴ .Ibid.,195

and several grades of cotton thread (*nah*) for winding around the rod halves, thus keeping them together and the reed blades in between, the distance determined by a thread.”⁹⁵ [6, 195]. Its different parts are then fixed together with an adhesive. Cloth strips are glued on top of the end battens.

As already mentioned, the designs and patterns are created through weft threads on shawls. At the same time, the process of weaving weft on warp is on the weaver and, from time to time, compacts the weft threads on a loom with a beater comb (also known as *kangin* in Kashmir). In the present times, reeds are used for the same. The purpose is to keep the designs in straight rows; the warp threads separate and tightens the fabric’s strength by reducing gaps between warp and weft.

Shuttles (*mukh*) and *kani* needles (*tujlis*) are meant to penetrate weft through several warp rows. A shuttle has a single-coloured yarn which is either thrown from left to right or right to left from the sheds, which are formed due to the up and down movement of the heddles. *Kani* needles are seen only on looms constructed for *kani* shawls. These are made out of wood acquired from willow trees in Kashmir because of their smooth surfaces and long lives. Weft yarns of several colours⁹⁶ are winded on these needles without eyes and placed together in front of the weaver so that he can use them for forming patterns as described in *taleem* sheets. (Figure 6).

The other loom parts include peddle (*khraw*) situated at its bottom and attached to the heddles. These act as a control device of the loom as it helps the weaver shift heddles to alternate positions, thus supporting the construction of the textile.

Jack or *taaruch* acts as a support for holding different components such as heddles with the outer frame of the loom.

Beams (*nawared*) are attached to the side of the working weaver to wind up the knitted fragment of the textile. As stated by Hans E. Wulf, “when the weaver has woven several wefts, and the shed gradually moves too far away from the breast beam, the warp is loosened by being slipped off the ground pegs and moved towards the weaver, so that the material already woven disappears under the beam.”⁹⁷ [6, pg. 200]

Kani shawl weaving is one of the oldest handicrafts of Kashmir since the time of the Mughals. The shawls are woven from *pashmina* yarn. The government of Jammu and Kashmir has granted a geographical indication to

⁹⁵. Ibid.

⁹⁶. Around hundreds of *kani* needles are generally placed before the weaver on the loom. These are of several colours which are repeated at different positions to help the weaver coordinate designs within the same row.

⁹⁷. Hans E. Wulff, *The Traditional Crafts of Persia – Their Development, Technology, and Influence on Eastern and Western Civilizations*, 200

the *kani* shawl, making it illegal to sell shawls made outside of the *Kanihama* area as *kani* shawls.⁹⁸ (Figure 7).

Different Kinds of Looms

There are several types of looms in Kashmir that aid in producing different kinds of shawls, but these may not be unique from each other. Generally, the looms for shawls are made of wood.

Pashmina loom or sandal want is a loom used to make plain pashmina shawls woven through shuttles. The loom can also be used for making *Kani* shawls.

Pit loom – One of the oldest looms has four-foot operating heddles hanging inside the pit that helped in twill weaving.⁹⁹ The shuttle is in the shape of the hollow cylinder around which weft yarn is wound, and it works on the ‘throw and catches’ principle.¹⁰⁰

Frame loom – Almost like a pit loom, but its frame is set up at the floor level with a bench for the weaver. Comparatively, its structure is fixed and rigid.

Pedal loom -It is quite like a power loom and is operated with legs. Ordinary wool can be woven on the same as it has good synchronisation.

Tara loom- is a semi-automatic form of frame loom, but the frame is made of iron. Apart from making bed sheets, tweeds, etc., it is also used for making shawls.

Power loom – *Raffle* shawls are woven on power loom

Weaving Techniques

Kani or twill weave – Kashmir is most popularly known for its weaving in the *kani* technique, also known as twill weaving. When the weft is passed over one warp and under two warp, the fabric forms a diagonal or parallel ridge over its surface. The structure moves diagonally in regular succession. It is similar to the tabby weave except for the interlacing of two down and two up warp threads. The method is also used for weaving carpets in Kashmir. Apart from *kani*, there are a few other kinds of weaving techniques utilised by artisans for making shawls. These are:

Pashmina Saada – It is the simplest method of weaving pashmina shawls where warp and weft are usually of the same colours. The cloth is woven on *sandal waan*, as already mentioned.

Chase Bulbul – It is another technique of weaving shawls. The name implies a nightingale’s eye as the pattern has a dot enclosed within a small diamond shape. The design is repeated all over the fabric, visible only when seen with a keen eye. In this weaving method, warp and weft are of the same

⁹⁸ . “Kani Shawl”, the Wikipedia-the free encyclopaedia last modified April 20, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kani_Shawl

⁹⁹ .Janet Rizvi, *Living Traditions of India-Crafts of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh*, ed. Jaya Jaitley, 38

¹⁰⁰ .Ibid.

colour. Four peddles were utilised for this kind of weaving on the loom, depicting the *chasme bulbul* pattern on a *raffle* shawl.

Towel Weave – This technique makes the fabric appear like a towel, i.e. coarse from one side and smooth from another.

The warp threads tend to break on, remaining stretched for too long on looms while the process of weaving is on. Weavers painstakingly repair this through ‘lost mending’ because it remains indiscernible from the right side.¹⁰¹ To reduce the splits, the yarns are moistened with rice flour paste.

Either the shawls are simply woven, or these are further embroidered with patterns. In present times, *amlikers* are the most prevalent. The designs are stitched on the surface of the woven shawl with needles having eyes. The threads drawn through the eyes are either made from cotton or silk.

g.)Embroidery

Romans have described the craft as ‘painting by needle’.¹⁰² *Kashida* is one of the well-known embroideries of India.¹⁰³ Unlike other parts of India, the men from the region are considered specialists in the art of needlework.¹⁰⁴ The art is age-old as bronze needles have been excavated from the sites of Mohenjodaro. Several figurines from Indus valley sites have depicted embroidered draperies.¹⁰⁵ Perhaps the craft was well known at the time of the Mughals, but the concept was popularised in Kashmir due to a *rafugar* named Ali Baba. Also, by the end of the eighteenth century, the shawl industry faced adversities due to heavy taxation. Khwaja Yusuf, an Armenian agent, played an instrumental role in producing the shawl with a hand needle to bring down the prices and save the levy imposed.¹⁰⁶ Gradually the craft became more famous than *kani* weaving. Unlike weaving, the craft began in small manufacturing units under master artisans; it is now done from home.¹⁰⁷ Men and women from villages do embroidery work in Kashmir region.

Embroidery techniques begin with the design plan and tracing the same over the textile by professional experts like *naqqashband* (*naqshaband*) or, in other words, tracers.¹⁰⁸ The fabric is placed on a flat surface with the perforated design sheet above.¹⁰⁹ The charcoal or chalk powder is rubbed on

¹⁰¹ .Monique Levi Strauss, *Romance of the Kashmir Shawl*, 15

¹⁰² . D.N. Saraf, *Arts & Crafts-Jammu & Kashmir*, (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1987), 64

¹⁰³ .Dr. Shailaja D. Naik, *Traditional Embroideries of India*, (New Delhi: APH Publishing Corporation, 1996) , 75

¹⁰⁴ .Embroidery in Zari is certainly an exception where women out-number men

¹⁰⁵ .Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ . Dr. Shailaja D. Naik, *Traditional Embroideries of India*, 75

¹⁰⁷ . Sushil Wakhlu, *Living Traditions of India-Crafts of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh*, ed. Jaya Jaitley, 63

¹⁰⁸ . Dr. Shailaja D. Naik, *Traditional Embroideries of India*, 76

¹⁰⁹ .Ibid.

the sheet to leave an impression on the shawl below.¹¹⁰ Many artisans add gum arabic to make outlines more apparent; the lines are further darkened with a pen or ‘*kalam*’.¹¹¹ In present times, the impressions of designs are also created on fabrics through wooden blocks, which are later stitched with threads.

Earlier, the threads utilised for embroidery on shawls were made from wool. Nowadays, cotton, silk or synthetic fibres are used often, differing based on embroidery, e.g. for *ari* or hook work, threads of yarn, staple or silk are used on shawls. In contrast, silk floss is made the most for *sozni* embroidery. Previously these threads were dyed locally with natural colours; with the evolution of industries and fast production, these began to be chemically tinted in mills.

Originally *kashida* was merely a darn stitch used by *refugees* to add finishing to the shawl.¹¹² The styles of stitching gradually progressed to stem, chain (most common), buttonhole (*vatachikan*), herringbone, *Doria* (openwork), *talaibar* (goldwork), satin (meant to cover large areas), etc.¹¹³

The embroidery on the shawl is done at different parts such as the border, corner, centre or all over.¹¹⁴ There are certain types of embroidery techniques which artisans in Kashmir use:

Sozni or Sozankar – One of the most commonly employed embroidery in shawls, especially *pashmina* and *raffle*, also known as raised needlework.¹¹⁵ The stitches are thin, refined, and delicate and look uniform from both sides. Image 8 is a depiction of *sozni* embroidery on a *pashmina* shawl.

Kani – It is a replica of *kani* weaving seen on the shawls from the region. The stitches are intricately detailed and spread all over the fabric. The coloured patterns follow a rhythm giving a striking glow to the base colour. (Refer to Figure 1 and 2)

Papier Mache – a type of thick embroidery in raised form. It resembles prominent motifs from *papier mache* products. (Figure 9)

Vatachikan – It is a kind of button-hole stitch that gives the appearance of thick fillings on shawls, i.e. raised floral designs made from golden threads—commonly used on *raffle* shawls.¹¹⁶ Perhaps the needles for the embroidery are pretty long.

Zalakdozi – In this embroidery technique, threads are chain stitched using a hook resembling crochet using staple yarn. According to John Irwin,

¹¹⁰ .Ibid.

¹¹¹ .Ibid.

¹¹² . Dr. Shailaja D. Naik, *Traditional Embroideries of India*, 77

¹¹³ .Ibid.

¹¹⁴ .Ibid.

¹¹⁵ .D.N. Saraf, *Arts & Crafts-Jammu & Kashmir*, 64

¹¹⁶ .Ibid.

the method was brought to Kashmir by Damascus's artisans under Sultan Zian-ul-Abidin.¹¹⁷

Chikandozi – It is medium-fine needlework.¹¹⁸

Rezkar – This technique involves multi-coloured threads and broad stitches.¹¹⁹

Ari or Hook-work – It is a chain stitch technique that uses the hooked awl. In the words of Sushil Wakhlu, “the *ari* is inserted through the cloth in the form of a loop and is finally pulled up through the surface of the cloth to form a stitch.”¹²⁰ [5, pg.69]. It is similar to *zalakdozi*, but it is done at home by women in Kashmir.

h.)Finishing

The last stages of shawl production include finishing, trimming, quality checking, washing, calendaring, and packaging. As stated by Moorcroft, “once completed, the shawls are submitted to the *purusgar*, or cleaner, whose business it is to free the shawl from discoloured hairs or yarn, and from ends or knots: he either pulls them out severally with a pair of tweezers or shaves the reverse face of the cloth with a sharp knife: any defects arising from either operation are immediately repaired by the *rafugar*”¹²¹. [8, pg.184]. The shawls are quality-checked, stamped and registered with specific duties imposed on them from this stage.

The shawl then purchased is given for washing which is done with immense care due to the delicacy and expensiveness of the material. The washer-man conducts thorough examinations of holes and imperfections, which, if found, are repaired by darners at the expense of the sellers.¹²² This then leads to the process of washing by *dhobhi*, who uses soap sparingly, only in the plain white areas avoiding the embroidery and the coloured parts. The wool softener is also applied to retain the suppleness of the textile. In the words of G.T. Vigne, “the shawl is placed on the bottom, and while water is poured on to it from above, it is trampled with bare feet for he stands in the water & pulls it to and fro, he then slaps it hard against a flat stone. This last operation is repeated three or four times before the shawl is plunged into the flowing water of river Jhelum or its canal water. Finally, the shawl is set to dry in the shade.” Doing so helps to remove excess colours from the shawls, thus making them colour-fast. It has been claimed that the water from the canal gives the textile its exquisite softness. White shawls are bleached in the

¹¹⁷ . Dr. Shailaja D. Naik, *Traditional Embroideries of India*, 78

¹¹⁸ .D.N. Saraf, *Arts & Crafts-Jammu & Kashmir*, 64

¹¹⁹ .Ibid.

¹²⁰ .Sushil Wakhlu, in the *Living Traditions of India-Crafts of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh*, edited by Jaya Jaitley, 69. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 1990

¹²¹ . William Moorcroft de la, George Treback, *Travels in the Himalayan Province of Hindustan & the Punjab from 1819 to 1825*, 184

¹²² .Ibid.

open air and exposed to sulphur fumes to improve whiteness.¹²³ In the words of William Moorcroft, “on drying the shawls set off for the procedure of calendaring: a wooden cylinder in two parts is employed for this purpose, around which the shawl, folded so as not to be quite as broad as the cylinder is long, is carefully wrapped, being occasionally damped to make it fold tighter; the end is sewn down: two wedges are then gradually driven between the two parts of the cylinder at the open extremities, to force them asunder, and the surrounding folds of the shawl are thus stretched to as great an extent as is consistent with its texture.”¹²⁴ [8, pg. 185]. They are kept in this arrangement for two days. Steam ironing is also one of the frequently used stretching shawls after washing. Finally, these are packed to give them protection and compactness. After passing through the long manufacturing tunnel, the finished shawl passes through the hands of a few brokers before finally reaching the shawl traders, who then make it available for sale at markets and shops.

Note on Weavers/Embroiderers

While discussing the process of shawl making, it is hard to ignore the artisans’ labour which flowers into one of the most delicate objects of art. They are presumed to have come from Iran and categorise themselves as *Shias*. With the heavy influx of art and artisans from Persia during the medieval period, the art of shawl making could undoubtedly have been a reflection of the same region. Gradually, artisans twisted these to their flavour and style, giving it a Kashmiri identity.

Research Methods. The research was based on the historiography of handicrafts, textiles, and Kashmir culture. My focus was on shawls from Kashmir, especially the woven and embroidered shawls from the region. The art of shawl making was examined based on the influences from Iran, Central Asia and neighbourhoods around Kashmir. The research included understanding the materials for making shawls and their biological sources, particularly *pashmina*.

The literary sources included John Irwin, Monique Lévi-Straus, Frank Ames, William Moorcroft, D.N. Saraf and many others. To understand folk art practices in the contemporary period, the writings of Jyotindra Jain were also studied.

The subject required observing numerous ‘visual materials’, which included keeping the antique textile present in different collections and crafts objects from the Kashmir region.

The research combined historiography with anthropological methods. And for this, Raymond Scupin/ Christopher Decourse’s literature on Anthropology: A Global perspective; Clifford Geertz’s essay on ‘Art as a

¹²³ . D.N. Dhar, *Artisan of the Paradise, Art & Artisans of Kashmir-From Ancient to Modern Times*, 71

¹²⁴. William Moorcroft de la, George Treback, *Travels in the Himalayan Province of Hindustan & the Punjab from 1819 to 1825*, 185

Cultural System' in Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology, etc. were consulted. The methodology also included doing fieldwork in Delhi and contacting artisans residing in the Srinagar region through emails. Direct field interviews (the author herself formulated questionnaires) with artisans such as weavers & businesspeople working in shawl making were carried out within Delhi, especially at Dilli Haat, Kashmir Emporium Janpath and National Crafts Museum and Hastkala Academy. Some scholars like Frank Ames were also personally met and consulted to enrich the study.

The article has been derived from the M.Phil dissertation, which I wrote on the Kashmir Shawl at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. It presents an overview of my observations during fieldwork and an analysis of the historical study of textual & visual sources.

Literature review. Few of the comparative views of authors are cited here to understand the craftsmanship of the Kashmir shawl.

a) The fine quality of woollen fibres of the Kashmir shawl is received from animal fleece residing at high altitudes of Himalayan ranges. In her article in *Living Traditions of India-Crafts of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh*, Janet Rizvi stated that the most expensive, finest and rarest wool in the world comes from Ibex (*Capra Ibex Siberica*) or *Chiru*, a wild Tibetan Antelope (*Pantholope hodgsoni*). The animal rubs itself against the rocks during warm months and sheds the hair that grows close to its skin, as Frank Ames in his book, *The Kashmir Shawl and its Indo-French Influence*. Monique Levi Strauss has pointed out the exclusive softness of the yarn in his literary source, *Romance of the Kashmir Shawl*, "some travellers who witness this fleece assumed that shawl's raw material came from a plant which grew like cotton".

b) One of the uniqueness of the Kashmir shawl has been the mixing and joining of different types of yarns/fabrics for producing a single textile. In *The Kashmir Shawl and its Indo-French Influence*, Frank Ames mentioned that many of the shawls had been prepared from three kinds of natural wool, i.e. *pashmina*, *shah tus*, and *raffle*. Nowadays, several varieties are being formed by mixing woollen threads with either cotton, silk, nylon or acrylic. These days fragments collected from old & deteriorated antique shawls are stitched and re-used as *palas* or otherwise on new fabrics. As per the write-up by Sushil Wakhlu in *Living Traditions of India-Crafts of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh*, there are kinds of restoration shawls constructed and joined entirely with needles.

c) Women in Kashmir carried out the craft of shawl weaving to a large extent, which scholars mentioned in their literary works. In the words of Monique Levi Strauss in *Romance of the Kashmir Shawl*, "the women prepare the warp by doubling the threads, drawing it out while twisting it slightly." Another writer, D.N. Dhar, stated his book on *Artisan of the Paradise, Art & Artisans of Kashmir-From Ancient to Modern Times*, "they sat and sang songs

with the buzzing of the wheel, sometimes, till late in the moonlit night” while spinning and readying the fibres.

Results of the study. Today, the whole world cherishes the shawl from Kashmir. Known for their meticulous skills worldwide, inspiration comes easily to the artisans, where nature is bountiful, and enough flowers blossom throughout the year. In the words of Brigid Keenan, “first come the fragile blooms of spring: iris, narcissus, tulip, bluebell, almond blossom, crown imperial, lilac; summer brings the more flamboyant, worldly flowers: peonies, carnations and roses of every colour and size.”¹²⁵ [9, pg. 182]. He further states, “with the onset of Autumn, the leaves of *Chinar* trees turn into red, gold and copper, filling the craftsmen with awe. Then there are water lilies from pale pink to maroon and full bloom lotuses on delicate and thin stems. And nature has inspired geometric designs, too: tendrils and vines have been looped and curled and twisted into a myriad of graceful arabesques; flowers and leaves have been regimented into rows, roses have been massed together to make abstract, spotty backgrounds and even water ripples have been tamed into regularity.”¹²⁶ [9, pg. 182].

On the other hand, rarely can one find shawls with examples of fauna or human figurines from the Kashmir region.

The artisans have been following traditional patterns and designs flowing down from generation to generation with slight alterations in a few places. Weavers and their families never disclosed their methods to retain their specialities, such as *gul hazara*, implying a thousand flowers; *gul andar gul* meaning flower upon the flower; *gul velayet* or foreign flowers, etc.¹²⁷ Undoubtedly, Kashmir became famous for its craftsmanship in shawls, and it was in demand both nationally and internationally.

But life has not been a bed of roses for the shawl weavers as they overcame crises several times. Many weavers and their families perished due to the devastating famine of 1877, and with them could have been vanished the original art of shawls.¹²⁸ The craft almost went into the face of extinction, but artisans’ ability to survive in the worst conditions brought back shawl making in Kashmir.

There was never any shortage of customers for shawls. With time, the lowering of standards was consequential. Francois Bernier once stated in 1663 that Indian customers constantly showed more concern for the cost rather than the craftsmanship of the weaver or artisan. If it were not for the patronage of the Mughals, the art would have been lost a long time back.¹²⁹ This holds even today as buyers still have preferences for cheaper materials.

¹²⁵. Brigid Keenan, *Travels in Kashmir: A Popular History of its People, Places & Crafts* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989),182

¹²⁶. Ibid.

¹²⁷. Ibid.,183

¹²⁸. Ibid.,201

¹²⁹.Ibid.,183

¹³⁰ The apathy does not end here. The weavers were never given due respect or justice by their higher authorities. Most of them slog day and night, living in dilapidated conditions to provide us with beautiful works of art. They have to face acute poverty, i.e. low wages, housing problems, poor health, nutritional deficiencies, mental/physical exertions, eye strains, etc. Sadly, we fail to understand the pathetic state of the artisans hidden behind the gorgeous designs and brilliant colours of the shawls. The whole process of marketing the goods through brokers and agents is also responsible for the poor profits artisans earn from their craft.

Conclusion. The uniqueness of the textile from Kashmir is that it is prepared from the finest raw materials from nature and is intricately ornamented with the patient skills of the artisans who have been carrying forward these legacies for generations. The shawl industry from the region came under threat several times, yet it is remarkable to find traditional art alive even today.

So famous are these that they are imitated in several places, especially *pashmina* varieties. Nowadays, numerous shopkeepers, including non-Kashmiris, claim to have ‘pure *pashmina*’ in their incredibly soft and delicate stock. In the mushrooming web of bogus products, it is not easy for a buyer to find genuine varieties. As told by an artisan, “One needs an experienced eye to identify the pure *pashmina* shawl. According to them, the yarn’s softness, colour, and lustre help determine the original variety. Some even said that the purest *pashmina* might not be so supple. In other cases, the shawl piece can either be tested in the laboratory, where the result should show the presence of 11 to 14 microns within the textile or the yarn drawn out from the shawl can be burnt and tasted, which can establish its identity.

It is significant to mention that Kashmir has been manufacturing shawls for a long and its art has now reached its zenith. Today it has formed a special place for itself in the world of textiles.

¹³⁰. Shawls from Kashmir have been imitated time and again at various places. Amritsar is one such city that manufactures low quality as well as inexpensive stuffs and attracts a huge clientele for its products, perhaps even more than the actual shawl from Kashmir.

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Illustrations



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Sinsht.



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