



TRADITION AND TECHNIQUE: A CASE STUDY OF HISTORY OF SHAWL MAKING IN MEDIEVAL KASHMIR

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Abstract: The history of clothes in India is very ancient. In historical perspective Indian textile covers a period of about five thousand years with rich and almost unbroken continuity. It is generally accepted that there was hardly any technique of art in fabric making that was not known to Indian craftsmen in the past¹. In this regard the natural forces played an important role in the development of textile industry in India. Environmental conditions and cultural influence also affected the weavers' techniques, their colours and textile designs and patterns throughout India. From very ancient times, region of the *Hindustan* has its special type of cloths. From Kashmir, Lahore to the Deccan plateau and the eastern part each and every geographical unit played a vital role in making of special type of cloth. All cotton, silk and mixed (cotton- silk), woolen textile was exported by the Indian merchants throughout the globe. No doubt cotton and silk industries were the largest and well-organized industries of India, but the woolen industry also has its own charm and attraction.

Key words: Textile, Kashmir, Shawl, Wool, Silk, Trade,

India has been producing crafts since ancient times. The climate here and the skill of the artisans together contributed significantly to India's economy. All the cultures coming from outside were welcomed here. Their meeting led to the formation of a different kind of society in India, which influenced the country's society, politics and economy also. Indian economy thrived on craft production from very historic times. Of the entire craft production, textile was a basic activity of rural as well as urban society. Indian textile productions constitute a unique chapter in the history of human endeavor. In historical perspective, Indian textile covers a period of about five thousand years with rich and almost unbroken continuity. It is generally accepted that there was hardly any technique of art in fabric making that was not known to Indian craftsmen in the past². In this regard the natural forces played an important role in the development of textile industry in India. Environmental conditions and cultural influence also affected the weavers' techniques, their colours and textile designs and patterns throughout India. From very ancient times, region of the *Hindustan* has its special type of cloths. From Kashmir, Lahore to the Deccan plateau and the eastern part, each and every geographical unit

¹Shanti Swarup., *5000 years of the art and crafts in India and Pakistan*, Bombay, 1968, p. 213.

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played a vital role in making of special type of cloth. All cotton, silk and mixed (cotton-silk), woolen textiles were exported by the Indian merchants throughout the globe. No doubt cotton and silk industries were the largest and well-organized industries of India, but on other hand, the woolen industry also has its charm and attraction. Mostly it was produced from the hill slopes of the upper parts of India from Kashmir, Leh and Tibet region. In this industry the Kashmiri shawl was well-known to all over the world for its super fine quality of wool, designs and remarkable craftsmanship. For making the best kind of shawl, the best type of wool or fleece is required. Sheep and goats are major source for obtaining wool, animal fleece or hair. If we look in the history of this craft, we will find that the art has its own glorious heritage. Indian woolen textile was so popular that it was traded since A.D. 300 and 400 to the rest of the world. Three most important specimens of fragmentary Indian woolen textile were found from different sites: two from Palmyra, Syria and one from Antinre Egypt. Palmyra was a major Roman outpost on the Silk Road and Antinre was close to the great urban center of Alexandria. All these fragments were identified as made from Kashmir wool.³ Meanwhile between AD 78 to 3rd century AD the handicraft production of Kashmir is listed as the major chunk among the various items of Indo-Central Asian Trade.⁴ The 7th century Sanskrit document *Nilamata Puran* records several glowing gold and garment items which were produced by Kashmiri craftsmen.⁵ Another ancient text *Arthshastra* also refers to a type of cloth as *khacita* which seems a type of woolen and embroidered cloth and closely simulates a Kashmiri shawl⁶. Almost around the same century, a Chinese traveler Huian Tsang recorded two varieties of Kashmir woolen fabric, *kien-po-low* woven from fine hair of a wild animal which was comparatively more precious.⁷ The woolen fabrics of Kashmir have been also specifically mentioned by I-Tsing⁸. Along with the literary sources and evidence, the woolen garments and the prosperity for wool is also describe in the folk songs in Kashmir as " for the grass that you have been eating, OH! goat give us some good pashm(wool). For the water that you have been drinking, oh goat give us some pashm, sit down on the grass, bestill. Oh goat, so that we can take out your pashm"⁹

³ Anamika Pathak; *Pashmina*, Delhi, 2008, pp.10-11.

⁴ Rattan Lal Hangloo, 'Glimpses of craft technology in Kashmir,' Ed. *History of Science and Technology exploring new themes*, Delhi, 2011., p. 103

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Kautilya; *Arthshastra*. Eng tr. R Shamasastri, Mysore, 1929, p. 81.

⁷ T. Watters; *On youn chwang's travels in india*, London, 1904. P.148

⁸ J.A. Takakusu; *Records of the Buddhist religion as practiced in india and malay archipelago*, by, I.-Tsing, Oxford, 1896, p.68

⁹ Monish Ahmad; Changara and Ghangka Pashmina goats and their herders'; *Marg* vol no. 16. Mumbai, 2009, p.12.



During medieval period when Sha Mir founded the sultanate of Kashmir around 1339 it led introduced a new pattern of administration for the development of the state which continued till the death of sultan Zain-Ul-Abidin¹⁰ His enlightened rule, encouraged promotion of art and industry, provided the impetus for its development as an organized trade and the Kashmir shawl, that we know today, is a legacy of that period. He invited to Kashmir weavers from Turkistan in order to boost the industry by introduction of new weaving techniques¹¹ In medieval times some clear references made by the scholars can also be traced here to prove the historicity of the shawl industry in Kashmir. As French traveler Bernier also provided some important information regarding this industry. He claims that it was a major textile production of Kashmir during medieval times.¹² It seems that this particular variety of cloth was becoming popular during this age. However, the English word shawl is derived from the Persian *shu* originally meaning a class of woven fabric rather than a particular article for dress. Indo-Persian usage of shawl could equally be applied to a scarf, turban a mantle or even a coverlet, the distinguished feature being that its material was fine wool or some kind of animal fleece¹³. During Mughal age it was a major expensive article of textile industry. Emperor Akbar was a patron of this industry and it was through his initiative that Andijon weavers of central Asia were inducted into Kashmir to further consolidate and rejuvenate the shawl industry.¹⁴ The Mughal emperor made some serious efforts to have shawls manufactured down in the plains. Akbar's reign witnessed migration of 10000 weaver to Lahore but, the climate was hostile to shawl weaving.¹⁵ Jahangir and Shahjahan also made some efforts to introduce shawl industry at Agra and Patna but it met the same fate¹⁶. The late 18th century Afghan rulers of Kashmir actively patronized this industry and took particular care to promote export and attracted commerce, but recently an interesting work from Afghanistan, Persia, Turkey and Russia¹⁷ on shawl weaving has come to light. It gives us the story of the origin of the shawl, which perhaps is not to be found in any other work. The title of the work is *Rishaleh-dar-fann-i-shwal bafi*¹⁸ by Mukhtar Shah Ashi a descendent of the house of Ashais in Srinagar, Kashmir. It was published for the first time in 1887 at Lahore

¹⁰ R.L.Hanglo, *The Sultanate of Kashmir*, ed, J S Grewal, 'the state and society in medieval India', oxford, 2005, pp. 54-63.'

¹¹ Moti Chandra and V. S. Agrawal. 'A note on some cultural references in Srivaran's Rajatragani, *Bulletin of prince of Wales Museum*, Bombay, no. 7, 1959-60, pp.34-40

¹² Francios Bernier; *Travels in the Mughal empire*; AD1656-58. Eng tr. By A. Constable, Delhi, 2005, pp.402-410

¹³ John Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawls*, London, 1973, p.1

¹⁴ G.M.D.Sufi, *kashir, A History of Kashmir* vol 2 Lucknow, 1947, p. 561.

¹⁵ P.N.K. Bamazai; *A History of Kashmir*., Delhi, 1962 p.449-50

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 50.

¹⁷ G.M.D. Sufi, *op. cit.* p. 564.

¹⁸ K.N.Pandita, 'The beginning of the Kashmiri shawls', *Lalit Kala*, no. 24, Delhi, 1990., p.57.



but has now become almost rare. It will be of great interest to historians of art to know in brief what the author of this little known but excellent tract says about the origin of the Kashmir shawl and evolution of various embroidery designs on it. Here he also mentions that Mirza Haider Duglat (a noble of Kashgar) was the main originator of Kashmir shawls. He mentioned that a few rolls of *putoo* or coarse woolen cloth were brought to him as a present from the ruler of Tibet which in those days included the area of Ladakh also. When compared with *putoo* produced in Kashmir, he found that the former was a softer and warmer stuff than the later. This was the key which helped in introducing better methods of cleaning the raw wool obtained from a special kind of Tibetan goat and weaving it fine. It was reported to him that the goat had two layers of fleece, the upper one was coarse but the lower one was soft and warm. Complying with wishes of Mirza Haidar, a noble of his court, Naghz Beg by name, procured a few mounds of wool (pashm) from the special Tibetan goat. He got it cleaned by removing the tufts of coarse hair, and the cleaned product was given to Kashmiri women to spin. These women were adept in the art of spinning fine. Then Naghz Beg got rolls made of this superior stuff. These were presented by him to Mirza Haider Duglat who, after examining the excellent fabric, asked in Kashghari language which means a roll or sheet just as *shal a kagaz* (a roll of paper), or *shal-ahan* (a sheet of iron).¹⁹This was how the fabric got the name *shal* (shawl). Soon the fabric found favour with the courtiers, nobles and the rich, and began to be produced in larger quantities. Early 19th century descriptions also give almost the same information regarding this industry.²⁰

Tools and Techniques:

There is no doubt the shawl industry constitutes a good economic part of Kashmiri artisans. This industry was based on simple tools and techniques. The traditional methods were used to prepare the shawl and the traditional craft continued from one generation to the next. Soft, attractive and elegant Kashmiri shawls are the result of the weavers' skills in colouring, designing, and embellishing the fine fabric. The geographical position of the Kashmir valley, the northwest region of India is also vital in providing the finest and softest fleece. The harvesting of the fibers starts around the beginning of June. Pashm is the first to be readied and so harvested first, followed by yak hair and then sheep's wool. The removal of the fiber is mostly done by men. Pashmina is the yarn spun and the material woven from pashm²¹. This material is traditionally used for Kashmir shawl weaving. The finest pashm is

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰ Walters Hamilton, *East India, Gazetteer*, 1823, Reprint, 1993, Delhi, pp.366-69.

²¹ Monisha Ahmad, *op. cit.* p. 13



derived from the under belly of the animal²² In early 19th century, William Moorcroft also mentioned in his account the same type of reference about the different quality of fleece of goat²³. Most of the fleece belonged to one of two distinct grades. The best and most renowned for its soft silkiness and warmth was known as *asli tus* which was derived only from wild animals, collected from rocks and shrubs against which the animals rubbed themselves on the approach of warm weather. The finest of this grade was probably due to the greater heights at which the animals wintered, and it was the material which gave rise to well-known stories of shawls being so fine that they could pass through a thumb ring, the so-called ring shawl of Mughal fame²⁴.

The preparation of yarn from fleece had three major processes. A) Collecting the fleece on time, B) Softening and cleaning the fleece and C) Spinning the yarn from fleece. Each of these processes involved specialized skills and tools. Spinning was mostly done by women who were working in their own homes. The raw material was given to them in very dirty condition. It would be a hard job to separate fine fleece from dirt. The fine fleece of the total weight and this had to be further derived into two grades of fineness, the second being known as *phri* which was reserved for the inferior shawls for local markets.²⁵ The yarn were spun into lengths of about 25,000 yards then doubled and twisted, and for this work the spinner earned a maximum of about one and a half annas or three half pence a day.²⁶ Mostly spinning was done by spindle and *charkha* which is thought to be invented in India by 13th-14th century²⁷. *Charkha* as a wooden wheel rotated by handle is also discussed by medieval Indian poet Amir Khushru.²⁸ So spinning was a preliminary process followed by weaving. Some other major instruments were also used by the medieval artisans in making the finest thread.

After the spinning, the next process was the collection of the spun yarn on the cage spool. It was an important stage for intermediary processes prior to weaving. With the help of this spool, artisan collected the yarn on the weft spool which was used in shuttle. For weaving, the yarn was wound from the skein on a reed. The reed was passed over the spindle head and the yarn

²² John Irwin, *op.cit.* p. 5.

²³ Willam Moorcroft, *Travels in India 1819-1825*, rep, Delhi, 2000, 346-48

²⁴ John Irwin, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p.6.

²⁶ Willam Moorcroft, *op. cit.*, p. 350.

²⁷ Gouri Lad, 'From spindle to charkha in Indian textile craft', *Indica*, vol-18, no.2 Bombay, 1981 p.122.

²⁸ Amir Khusuru, *Ezaz-a-Khusrvi*, cf. from Hamida Khatoon Naqvi, *Agricultural industrial and urban dynamism under sultans of Delhi 1206-1555*. Delhi, 1986. P.46.



was wound from skein on to the reed which served as the weft spool²⁹. Before weaving, the dyeing of yarn was compulsory. The dyers constituted separate groups, buying and selling yarn independently. Before weaving could begin, at least six other major specialists were involved in shawl making. These were warp maker, warp dresser, warp threader, pattern drawer, dexter and pattern master. As in his account Moorcroft had given some details regarding the shawl making techniques. He mentioned that it was the warp maker's job to wind the length of warp to correct number of threads. The warp dresser sized the warp with starch and the warp threader passed the yarn through the heddles and reed. The importance of the pattern drawer is indicated by the fact that he received the highest pay - far higher even than that of the weaver³⁰. The pattern drawers were few in number, and in second half of the century, even when the industry expanded, the art was still said to be confined to only five or six families.

The pattern-drawer sometimes prepared his own drawing, but usually the choice and disposition of colour-caller with a black and white drawing was done before that. Before him, the colour-caller would begin at the bottom and work upward the number of warps along which it was required to extend until the whole pattern had been covered. This was then taken down by the pattern master and transcribed into kind of shorthand, intelligible to the weaver³¹. Weaving was essentially the interlacing of a series of threads called the warp, with another series called the weft. The warp threads were starched for weaving in a loom, the weft thread was then passed over and under them. The instrument by which this was done was the loom. The *kani* pashmina were woven in the double interlock twill tapestry technique (here double interlock refers to the two weft-ends interlocking on each row; twill tapestry refers to the manipulation of selected heddles, vertical cords with a center loop that guides the warp threads at selected frequencies. This leads to the development of the twill wave where the weft is then turned back to form area of edges. The Kashmiri loom has four treadles yet the preferred weave is twill.³² Sometimes dyeing was done after weaving. It may be a plain cloth which should be designed by block printing or dyed in simple colours, but it needs a special technique. Mostly it was done by a skilled labour class who were known as *Rangrez*. Usually, woolen fabric was woven with dyed yarns of natural shades, but designs with various colorful threads were required. Dyeing work was a vital and specialized occupation, invariably being hereditary.³³ *Nuskha Khulassatul*

²⁹ Ishrat Alam, 'Textile tools as depicted in Ajanta and Mughal Paintings'. Ed. A. Ray and A. K. Bagchi, *Technology in Ancient and Medieval India*, Delhi, 1986. P.134.

³⁰ William Moorcroft, *op. cit.*, pp. 164-204.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Anamika Pathak, *op. cit.*, p 13.

³³ *Ibid.*



Mujarreat (Medieval Indian tract in Persian) had given some major details of natural dyes which were used in Mughal Hindustan.³⁴

Along with the techniques, Kashmir shawls are known for their pattern and designs. As different Mughal paintings depict the style and pattern of the shawls, most of shawls consist of part of an end border with a repeat of delicate freely spaced flowering plates, rendered in semi naturalistic style of the late 17th century. During Mughal age the characteristic motives of Kashmir shawl design was a slender flowering plant with roots. It combined the grace and delicacy of Persian floral ornament with natural feature of Mughal art. In early 18th century this simple floral motive was traced more formally and number of flowers increased. At about the same time it ceased to be depicted as floral with roots and merged with another well-known Indo-Persian decorative motive- the convertible vase of flowers. Many of the 18th century forms betray their dual origin by retaining both the vase and the appearance of root growth. The name given to this floral motive was *buta* meaning literary flower and it was not until the middle of the 18th century that the outline of the motives began to harden into the rigid formal shape which later came to be known in the west as pine.³⁵ In later period these patterns were influenced by the European, too. The French, who were pioneers in the introduction of Kashmiri shawls in western Europe were dissatisfied with current motifs which they considered bizarre and confusing³⁶ Hence they sent missions to Kashmir in mid nineteenth century to alter and improve designs catering to their tastes.³⁷ The later half of the nineteenth century witnessed a new trend in design, and human figures were brought by the artisans themselves in an attempt to depict the event in Indo-Persian anecdotes. Human figures also found their place within the *kalka* motifs and the ornamented facades. This indicates the dominance of Persian language and literature in Kashmir. Persian, which had been elevated to the status of court language of sultan Jain-ul-Abidin, continued to dominate the cultural life of both the Hindus and Muslims of Kashmir for centuries³⁸.

Thus, we find that the shawl making in Kashmir witnessed a series of improvements from time to time. The specific tools and techniques applied in shawl making were simple and traditional. Medieval rulers, nobles and merchants took keen interest in pashmina. But on the other hand, the artisans were not paid well. The economic status of the artisans was too low. But there is no doubt that in medieval and even later medieval period, the existence of Kashmir shawl can be correlated

³⁴ Nuskha khulassatul Mujarreat, eng tr. H K. Naqvi, "Dyeing of Cotton Good in Mughal Hindustan 1555-1803.", in *Journal of Indian Textile History*. No 7, 1967, Ahmadabad. Pp. 49-55.

³⁵ John Irwin, *op. cit.*, p. 11-12

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ B H Badan Powell. *Handbook of the Manufacturing of the Punjab*, London 1982. P 41.

³⁸ G M D Sufi, *op. cit.*, pp 1-16.s



with existing examples which featured in both the pictorial and the documentary records from dusk of the speculation into the light of the sday.