

*Review*

## Shawl industry in Kashmir under the Mughals (1586-1752 A.D)-A critical note

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Kashmir is known throughout the world for its crafts, above all for shawls. The art of weaving was known to the people of Kashmir even during the ancient times. However, it emerged as a flourishing industry under Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, though he cannot be credited as its founding father as is believed in popular Kashmiri tradition. The industry received a great impetus during the rule of Mughals. It became a royal Kharkhana and attained its maximum growth. New designs and colours were introduced and shawls of fine texture were produced for the emperors, their harems and courts. An attempt has been made in this paper to highlight the origin, development and the condition of the weavers in shawl industry of Kashmir under the Mughals.

**Key words:** Kashmir, Mughals, Tus shawl, and weavers.

### INTRODUCTION

The manufacture for which Kashmir is celebrated throughout the world other than that of its heavenly beauty, running streams and enchanting cascades is its light, warm, and delicate woollen fabric made from the fleece of a goat reared exclusively in the Karakorum ranges (Frank, 1986; Warmingington, 1974). The shawl actually denotes a rectangular piece of woollen cloth worn on shoulders. The history of the shawl industry can be traced back to days of the *Kurwas* and the *Pandus*. As per tradition the former presented ten thousand Kashmiri shawls to the latter.<sup>i</sup>

It was a prosperous industry in the days of the Roman Empire, when Kashmiri shawls were worn by the proudest beauties at the court of the Caesars.<sup>ii</sup> According to the Ree's Encyclopaedia "there seems no doubt that Romans were well acquainted with the shawls of Kashmir,

which are fabrics of a brilliant and beautiful texture. The history of their manufacture is proof of a very high degree of perfection to which the fabrication of woollen cloth had been carried on in former times, for shawl is only woollen without a twill and unmilled; but it is spun to so great a degree of fineness, from wool peculiarly soft, that it has been rivalled by European nations". (Abraham Rees's, 1819). In the Emperor Ashoka's time, the Buddhist texts also make mention of Kashmiri Shawls. But thereafter for a long period this art was dead.<sup>iii</sup>

The industry dates its revival by the efforts of great saint Shah Hamdan, who visited valley in 781 of the Hijri era during the rule of Sultan Qutb-ud-din who patronised, nourished and stimulated it.<sup>iv</sup> However, the industry flourished under Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin (1420-1470 A.D) who introduced the twill tapestry technique, the brush and

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**Figure 1.** Master craftsman weaving a Pashmina shawl.

new type of loom in the manufacture of the Shawls. It was also during his glorious reign that exquisite floral, faunal and geometrical designs were woven on the new type of loom.<sup>v</sup> More than half century later, i.e. about the year 950 A.H (1541 A.D) Mirza Haider Kashgari encouraged many of the industries originally introduced by Zain-ul-Abidin. In his book he praised the enthusiasm of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin for the popularization of handicrafts as:

*“In Kashmir one meets with all those arts and crafts which are in most cities uncommon. In the whole Maver-ul-Nahr (the country beyond the river Oxus) except in Samarqand and Bukhara, these are nowhere to be met with, while in Kashmir they are even abundant. This is all due to Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin.”<sup>vi</sup>*

He himself also encouraged the shawl industry as in the words of Hajji Mukhtar, it was under the guidance of the Haider’s faithful adherent and the cook Naghz Beg that a new industry was generated which induced the local people to develop the *Kani shawl* technique.<sup>vii</sup> He also introduced a new feature of red and green spots in regular rows. Following his death, shawl weavers continued developing the spike shuttling method, using the double colour scheme in various ways, generally white putto for men and red for women. Later, saffron yellow and indigo blue were also added.<sup>viii</sup> However, the shawl industry did not gain full currency and many adept craftsmen were not to be found in Kashmir.<sup>ix</sup> Before discussing the shawl industry during the Mughal rule let us introduce the other important aspect.

**Acquisition of Raw Material and the Manufacturing Processes:** - Shawls are prepared from all sort of

material like silk, angora wool, Pashmina etc. But what Kashmir is principally known throughout the world is its Shawl made from the very fine wool known as Pushm or Pashm- stuff not produced in Kashmir proper itself; it is a soft down fiber lying under the long hair of the goat known as *Capra hircus* found in the Karakorum ranges.<sup>x</sup> Especially throughout the medieval times Ladakh regularly supplied Pashm to Kashmir (Moorcroft and Trebeck, 1841). It was so because the Ladakhis were religiously bound to sell it to only Kashmiri merchant’s remarks (Moorcroft and Trebeck, 1841).

The wool received, locally known as *Kyl-phumb* of which the shawls are textured in its raw state was a mixture of dust, grass, thorns, coarse hair and fleece. The shawl wool dealer (Pasham Farosh) supplied the coarse hair to women and children to separate the fleece from the other particles (Moorcroft and Trebeck, 1841). Before Pasham could be spun into thin and delicate yarn it proceeded through processes like Combing, Sorting, Weighing, Seasoning, Spinning, washing, drying, Wrapping and then Weaving of Shawl.

Shawls were principally divided into *Kani-shawl* (Twill Tapestry) and *Amlī-Shawl*. The former was introduced by Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin and the latter by Emperor Akbar. During the period under study mostly the *Kani shawl* (method of weaving was followed in which needle-work was done.<sup>xi</sup> It requires the greatest concentration and master skill workers (Figures 1 and 2).

**The Mughal Rulers and Shawl Industry:-** The manufacture of shawls reached its zenith during the Mughal rule (1586-1752 A.D). The Mughal Emperors immensely encouraged it which ultimately led to the commercialization of the industry and to its reorganisation. The shawls were produced on a large



Figure 2. Kani shawl workers.

scale and were made in high perfection, which were sent as valuable gifts to 'every clime'.<sup>xii</sup> It had become a craze with every noble to have a fine Kashmiri shawl, which was considered a symbol of prestige.<sup>xiii</sup> It became a custom of the Mughal Emperors to reward their allies with robes of honour.<sup>xiv</sup> It was given as presents to the ladies of the imperial harem, governors, and the special officials.<sup>xv</sup> Jahangir in his *Tuzuk* describes the stuff as one of his favourite items of dress.<sup>xvi</sup>

After conquering the valley of Kashmir in A.D 1586, Emperor Akbar took many efforts to improve this old industry. He introduced the fashionable aspect of shawls, including how to wear and embroider them to best advantage for the wardrobe of nobility (Maskiell, 2002). He initiated a shawl cloth production in imperial workshops at Lahore, Patna and Agra, directing changes in how these were to be woven and dyed. In addition to the finest shawls made of white *tus* (wild ibex hair) supposedly reserved for the Emperor and his family, artisans wove shawls from domesticated goat hair, silk, sheep wool, or combinations of fibres. During Akbar's reign, robes of honour were normally given within the emperor's ruling circle, but this practice was greatly expanded under his successors.<sup>xvii</sup> He brought many weavers from the cities of Andizhan and Eastern Turkistan (about 400 miles north of Kashmir) down to Kashmir, these weaves *jugha* design.<sup>xviii</sup> He encouraged in every possible way, the manufacture of shawls in Kashmir.

According to Abul Fazl, "In former times shawls were often brought from Kashmir. People folded them up in four folds, and wore them for a long time. Nowadays, they are generally worn without folds, and merely thrown over the shoulders. His Majesty has commenced to wear them double which looks very well."<sup>xix</sup> He further wrote that how Akbar improved this department in four ways; or to simply put it, following four kinds of shawls were manufactured. First: The improvement is visible in the

*Tus* shawls, which are made up of wool of an animal of that name; people generally wear it without altering its natural colour. His majesty has had it dyed. These excelled in lightness, warmth and softness. Second, in the *Safid Alchus*, also called Tarehdars, in their natural colours, the wool is either white or black. These stuffs may be had in three colours, white, black and mixed. The first or white kind was formerly dyed in three ways; his Majesty has given the order to dye it in three ways. Third principle variety of shawls manufactured were to be seen in stuffs like Zardozi, Kalabatun, Kashida, Qalghai, Bandhnun, Chhint, Alcha, Purzdar and Parmanaram to which his Majesty pay much attention. Fourth, an improvement was made in the width of all stuffs i.e.- *jamah*; his majesty had the pieces made large enough to yield the making of a full dress."<sup>xx</sup> Thus according to Abul Fazl, Akbar increased the size of the Kashmiri Shawl so that it could be made into a complete suit. These measures taken, made the shawl industry more famous and thus boosted trade between Kashmir and the rest of India.<sup>xxi</sup>

Shawls weaving attained to such an excellence that a shawl of one and half square yards could be twisted and passed through the ordinary finger ring. It became very popular and was manufactured in numerous ranges of price to suit the purses of both the middle and upper classes. The price of an ordinary piece of shawl 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> yards long was from two rupees to eight *mohurs*. Shawl *Cheerah* was from two rupees to twenty five *mohurs*, shawl *foteh* from a half to three *mohurs*, and shawl *Jamah* from a half to four *mohurs*.<sup>xxii</sup> Bernier rightly observed that Kashmir derived much of its wealth from this industry.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Following Akbar's death, his son Jahangir succeeded to the throne. Being a lover of nature, Kashmir became his favourite abode. He is often said to have opined that he would, "rather be deprived of other provinces of his mighty empire than lose Kashmir."<sup>xxiv</sup> The reason of the



**Figure 3.** Women at work.

king's special preference for this country was its climate.

In the words of Palscert, "when the heat in India increases, his (Jahangir's) body burns like a furnace, owing to his consumption of excessively strong drink and opium, excesses which are still greater in his youth. He usually leaves Lahore in March or April and reaches Kashmir in May" (Francisco et al., 1972). Jahangir like his father was also a lover of Kashmiri shawls. He remarks in his *Tuzuk-i-Jahangir* "the shawls of Kashmir to which my father gave the name of *parm-narm* are very famous; there is no need to praise them".<sup>xxv</sup> He categorized the shawls on the bases of material used and the way they are fashioned. According to Jahangir other than the *parm-narm* another kind is '*narharma*'; it is thicker than a shawl and is soft. Another is called '*darm*'; it is like a *jul-i-khirsak* and is put over a carpet. With the exception of shawls, they make other woollen material better in Tibet. Though, they bring the wool for the shawls from Tibet; In Kashmir, they weave the *pattu* shawl from wool, and sewing two shawls together they smooth them into a kind of *saqarlat* (broad cloth termed *chadar* in Kashmir) which is not bad for a rain coat."<sup>xxvi</sup>

Shah Jahan, the great architect sent a large number of shawl products to the rulers of south India i.e. Golconda and Bijapur. Aurangzeb and the later Mughals also were extremely fond of shawls and patronised and subsidized the shawl weaving industry. Bernier who had the privilege of visiting while accompanying Aurangzeb found the shawl promoting the trade of the country and filling it with wealth. He described the shawl industry in some detail, 'it is the prodigious quality of shawls which they (Kashmiri's) manufactured which gave employment even to children'. These shawls measured five by two and half feet, were ornamented at both ends with a sort of embroidery made

in loom, a foot in length. The Mughals and Indian men and women wore them in winter around their heads passing them over the shoulders as a mantle. One sort was manufactured with the wool of country and the other with the wool of shawl goat of Tibet. The price of the *tus* shawl ranged from 50 to 150 rupees. Great pains were taken to manufacture similar shawls at Patna, Agra, and Lahore, but they lacked the delicate texture of Kashmiri shawls."<sup>xxvii</sup> Many measures were taken for example in A.D1682-83 on account of the attack on Ladakh by Tibet the supply of the wool was threatened, the imperial Mughals on behalf of the Ladakh freed on the Qalmaq rulers of Tibet. A treaty was signed between Blabran a steward of the Dalai Lama and the king of Ladakh in 1683. The most important provisions of the treaty were that Kashmiri merchants got exclusive monopoly on the purchase of the Pashm."<sup>xxviii</sup>

### **Working condition of the weavers**

The number of looms engaged in shawl manufacture increased from 2000 at the beginning of the Mughal period to 40,000 during the reign of the Jahangir. However, the number decreases during the Afghan reign.<sup>xxix</sup> Each loom gives employment to three men at a time,<sup>xxx</sup> which means 1, 20,000 were directly engaged in this industry. Despite the well established business during the Moghul rule in Kashmir the 'actual workers' i.e. the shawl weavers were mostly poor because of the exploitation by the *kharkhandars*. Maximum number of Women and children were employed and were paid meagrely<sup>xxxi</sup> (Figure 3). It is also important to mention here that they have not been reckoned as a respectable

class. In any case their lot was very far from being enviable.

## Conclusion

The shawl industry is as "old as the hills of Kashmir" progressed with the passing tide of time; rulers supported this industry as to have it, was a symbol of prestige. During the period of the study the manufacture of shawls reached its zenith and a solid base was provided to develop on the lines of simple capitalistic mode of production. The artisans mastered in new techniques and designs but their overall position and the status did not improve.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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<sup>i</sup> Census of India, 1921, XXII, p. 180

<sup>ii</sup> G. M. D Sufi, *Islamic Culture in Kashmir*, p. 283

<sup>iii</sup> G.M.D. Sufi, *Kashir*, pp.562-564

<sup>iv</sup> *Tarikh-i-Rashidi*, Edited by N. Elias, Trans., E. D. Ross, London, p. 434

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid*, p. 151; see also *Baharistan-i-Shahi*, ff. 125-26

<sup>vi</sup> *Tarikh-i-Rashidi*, Edited by N. Elias, Trans., E. D. Ross, London, p. 434

<sup>vii</sup> Hajji Mukhtar Shah, *A tract On the Art of Shawl Weaving in Kashmir*, Eng. Trans. from Persian by Prof. B. A. Dar, Srinagar, 1980, pp.3-6

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6

<sup>ix</sup> For details see Showkat A. Dar, *A study of Changing Economy of the Valley of Kashmir under the Mughals, 1586-1627*, Unpublished M. Phil. Dissertation, G. N. D. University, Amritsar, 2013

<sup>x</sup> Sir Francis Younghusband, *Kashmir*, City Books, p. 103; See also W Von Bergen, *Wool Hand Book*, Vol., I, London, 1963

<sup>xi</sup> Lahori, *Badshahnama* Vol., II, p. 404

<sup>xii</sup> Abul Fazl, *Ain- i- Akbari*, Vol. II, (Eng. Trans.) H. S. Jarrett, p.358.

<sup>xiii</sup> F. Bernier, *Travels*, pp. 402-03

<sup>xiv</sup> See Showkat Ahmad Dar, op.cit, p. 49; It is apt to mention here that the account put by Walter Lawrence in his celebrated work *The Valley of Kashmir* (p. 375) that the shawl weaving technique was introduced by Babur in India and thence made its entry in Kashmir is totally against the facts.

<sup>xv</sup> In 1616 A.D Sir Thomas Roe was presented a Kashmiri shawl which he refused. J. N. Sarkar, *Mughal Administration*, p. 53.

<sup>xvi</sup> Jahangir, *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, Vol. II, Eng., trans., p. 578

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>xviii</sup> The Jiugha was a jewelled ornament in shape like the almond, and was worn on the turbans. G.M.D. Sufi, *Islamic Culture in Kashmir*, p.284-285

<sup>xix</sup> Abul Fazl, *Ain- i- Akbari*, Eng. Trans., Blochman, Vol. I, p.98

<sup>xx</sup> Abul Fazl, *Ain- i- Akbari*, (Eng. Trans.) Blochman, Vol. I, pp.97-98

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>xxii</sup> For details see P.N.K. Bamzai, *Cultural and Political History of Kashmir*, Vol., II, p. 499-500

<sup>xxiii</sup> In the words of Bernier "what may be considered peculiar to Kashmir, and the staple commodity which particularly promotes the trade of the country and fills it with wealth, is the prodigious quantity of shawls which they manufacture and which gives occupation even to little children." Francois Bernier, *Travels in Mughal Empire* (ed. and Trans.) Archibald Constable, pp.403

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid*, pp.400-1

<sup>xxv</sup> Jahangir, *Tazuk-i-Jahangiri*, Eng. Trans., Alexander Rogers, and Henry Beveridge, vol. II, pp.147-148

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid*, p. 148

<sup>xxvii</sup> Francois Bernier, *Travels in Mughal Empire*, (ed. and trans.) Archibald Constable, pp.402-3

<sup>xxviii</sup> For details see Abdul Ahad, *Kashmir to Frankfurt*, Rima Publishers, Delhi, 1987, pp. 18-19; see also *Indian History Congress*, Aligarh, 1975, p. 267-275

<sup>xxix</sup> The main reason for the decrease in the looms was the decline of the Mughal Empire particularly its liquidation in Kashmir as well as the heavy excise duties, George Foster, *Travels*, II, p. 22

<sup>xxx</sup> Elphinstone, *Kingdom of Kabul*, II, p. 240

<sup>xxxi</sup> Nath Pandit, *Gulshan-i-Dastur*, f.. 535b