The Rise and Decline of Kashmir's Craft Economy: A 19th-20th Century Perspective

Navendu Shekhar*

Abstract

This article explores the intricate history of Kashmir's craft and textile industry, focusing on its cyclical phases of prosperity and decline. Renowned globally for its exquisite shawls, the industry played a vital economic role for the state, leaving its artisans marginalised. Factors such as natural disasters, shifting governance policies, global market dynamics, and colonial interventions profoundly influenced the trajectory of Kashmir's crafts. While European and American fashion trends significantly impacted the demand for Kashmiri shawls, this narrative often overshadows the critical role of regional political and economic conditions. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, colonialism, rivalry among global powers, and shifting trade networks significantly challenged the well-established commerce and the leading traditional industries. Despite these challenges, efforts in the post-independence era to revive Kashmir's crafts—through government initiatives, GI tagging, and artisan cooperatives—underscore this sector's cultural and economic importance. In this background, the essay highlights the resilience of Kashmir's artisans and crafts, which have survived adverse conditions and remain integral to the region's cultural identity. It adopts a historical approach by drawing on a range of primary sources, including colonial gazetteers, travel accounts, administrative records and census data from the 19th and 20th centuries, alongside existing secondary literature.

Keywords: Kashmiri Shawls, Textile Industry, 19th and 20th Century, Crafts and Commerce, Cultural Heritage

* Assistant Professor, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Centre for Historical Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi-110067. Can be reached at nshekhar@jnu.ac.in

Introduction

India's history is deeply intertwined with its diverse fabrics and crafts, each region showcasing a unique cultural identity shaped by its social, political, and cultural landscape. Among these, Kashmir holds a prominent place, celebrated for its breathtaking natural beauty and the artistic excellence of its people. Inspired by their environment, Kashmiri artisans have mastered replicating nature's colours and patterns, creating unparalleled crafts. The earliest reference to state intervention comes from the Karkota dynasty. King Lalitaditya Muktapida (724–761 CE) is recognised for restoring Kashmir's cultural richness by bringing back skilled artisans and scholars who had been taken to Central Asia.[1] His efforts were focused on reviving the splendour and charm of his homeland.[2]

As noted by Mirza Haider Dughlat[3] and Bernier[4], in Kashmir, one encounters uncommon arts and crafts in most cities. The unique texture of Kashmir fabric is due to the particular properties of the water of the valley. At the same time, the political history of Kashmir, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries, has significantly influenced its craft traditions. The region was under Afghan rule until 1819, after which it became part of the Sikh Empire. Following the Anglo-Sikh War and the Treaty of Amritsar in 1846, Kashmir came under Dogra rule, which lasted until India's partition in 1947. This period saw rapid socio-political transformations under rulers from diverse religious and political backgrounds. The partition brought additional instability, reshaping the region's cultural and commercial landscape.

Despite these challenges, Kashmir's artisans have shown remarkable resilience. Their crafts, rooted in tradition yet adaptable to change, continue to reflect the region's rich heritage and the enduring spirit of its communities. The valley's artistry remains a testament to its people's deep connection to nature and their ability

to preserve beauty and culture through generations of political and social upheaval.

Historical Background

Since ancient times, agriculture has been the backbone of Kashmir's economy, providing livelihoods for most of its population. However, non-agricultural occupations, particularly *dast-kari* (handicrafts), have significantly shaped the region's socio-economic landscape. Kashmiri artisans have earned widespread acclaim for their exceptional craftsmanship, producing shawls, silks, carpets, and other woollen goods that have found their way into homes across India and Europe.

Kashmir's primary textile craftsmanship centres include Srinagar, Ganderbal, and Budgam, while other regions are celebrated for their unique specialities. Anantnag is known for its intricate embroidery, and Moorcroft wrote that there were no less than 300 shawl-weavers' shops found there.[5] Kulgam was known for lacquered woodwork, and Bijbehara for finely detailed wood carving. Zainagir is particularly famous for producing soft woollen cloth. Weaving is an ordinary skill among Kashmiris, and the homespun *pattu* cloth is especially sought after during the winter. Many villagers first used *pattu* blankets before selling them to merchants in Srinagar. The finest wool originates from northern Kashmir, where ideal grazing lands are located, while the most skilled weavers are found in the southern parts of the valley.[6]

Kashmiri crafts are deeply inspired by nature, forming an integral part of the region's cultural identity and serving as a medium for emotional expression.[7] Interestingly, these crafts are mainly secular, with no direct connection to religious themes. The Afghan period (1753–1819) marked a significant phase in the evolution of Kashmiri handicrafts, influencing their designs, patterns, production, and pricing. This era also saw Kashmiri shawls gain prominence in European markets. Ananda Coomaraswamy lauded these shawls as unmatched in beauty, texture, and design among Indian textiles.[8] A notable example of their international appeal occurred in 1796 when Sayyid Yahya received an orange Kashmiri shawl from the Afghan governor Abdullah Khan. This shawl eventually reached Napoleon Bonaparte via the Khedive of Egypt, symbolising the global recognition of Kashmiri craftsmanship.

Napoleon gifted a Kashmiri shawl to his future empress, Josephine, who popularised it as a global fashion statement. These elegant Eastern wraps soon became sought-after accessories in Paris and beyond, gracing the shoulders of Western elites.[9] During this period, Kashmiri shawls were also in high demand across Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, and Russia. George Forster, in 1783, noted that Kashmir attracted merchants and commercial agents from major cities in northern India and Tartary, Persia, and Turkey.[10] The shawl industry flourished, becoming a significant source of income for the state, though the artisans faced harsh conditions due to heavy taxation on raw materials by Afghan governors.

An average shawl woven during the Afghan period cost around eight rupees at the loom and sold for fifteen to twenty rupees, depending on its quality. High-quality shawls fetched up to forty rupees while incorporating intricate floral designs increased their value substantially. Some weavers earned as much as one hundred rupees for a single shawl, with half the amount attributed to decorative work. However, Forster also observed that the number of shawl looms had dwindled to 16,000 under Afghan rule from 40,000 during the Mughal era, indicating limited production despite the global appeal of Kashmiri shawls.[11]

Although some have argued that Kashmir remained a relatively closed economy until the Dogra rule (1846-1947), recent scholarship challenges this view. For instance, following Maharaja Ranjit Singh's annexation of Kashmir and its integration into the Sikh Empire, trade between Kashmir and the plains increased. This period witnessed a growth in Kashmir's shawl industry through the introduction of new techniques.[12] Despite being slow and labour-intensive, the twill-tapestry weaving technique employed by Kashmiri artisans showcased their exceptional skill and contributed to the enduring legacy of Kashmiri shawls. Scholars like Satish Chandra Saxena further suggest the existence of a thriving trade[13] and commerce during the Dogra period. Kashmir's unique topography allowed it to stay insulated from the exploitative reach of the British Empire[14]. Consequently, the traditional handicrafts of Kashmir remained relatively unaffected by British colonial policies. This historical backdrop sets the stage for understanding the cyclical process of rise and decline of Kashmir's craft industry in the 19th and 20th centuries, which we will discuss in the subsequent sections.

Nineteenth Century: Growth and Decline

Sikh Rule: During the Sikh rule (1819-1846), the shawl industry of Kashmir flourished due to sustained state support. However, the policies of the last two Sikh governors, Sheikh Ghulam Mohiuddin (1841–1845) and Sheikh Imamuddin (1845–1846), burdened the industry with excessive taxes, creating significant challenges for its artisans.[15]

In the earlier periods, creating a single Kashmiri shawl with a large pattern traditionally required over 18 months

to complete. However, from the early 19th century, as designs became increasingly intricate, a new method was introduced to streamline production. The work on one shawl was divided among multiple looms, significantly reducing the time required. With two looms, the process could be completed in nine months, and with more looms, even faster. Once the pieces were woven, they were handed to skilled needleworkers (*rafugars*), who meticulously joined them so seamlessly that they were almost invisible to the naked eye.[16] William Moorcroft noted that up to eight looms were sometimes used for a single shawl, and later accounts mention shawls composed of up to 1,500 individual pieces, referred to as "patchwork shawls."[17]

A significant innovation during this period was the *amli* or needlework shawl, featuring elaborate designs embroidered entirely by hand on plain-woven fabric.[18] This type of shawl marked a departure from traditional loom-woven designs and was initially exempt from the heavy government duties, which by 1823 amounted to 26% of a shawl's value. This exemption facilitated rapid industry growth and profitability. While only a few skilled refugees could create *amli* shawls in 1803[19], their numbers swelled to around 5,000 by 1823, many of whom were former landowners displaced after Kashmir was annexed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1819.[20]

Moorcroft estimated the annual value of the shawl industry in the nineteenth century to be 35 lakh rupees (approximately £300,000) during its peak, but this figure declined by half by 1822–23.[21] The sector faced further challenges in 1824 when a series of calamities struck Kashmir, including a devastating earthquake, floods, and a cholera epidemic.[22] These events caused severe disruptions, significantly impacting the shawl and craft industries, which are vital to Kashmir's economy and cultural heritage.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh also tried to establish shawl manufacturing in Lahore but faced similar challenges. According to Baron Hugel, these failures led merchants to debate whether producing shawl wool in Hindustan or England or introducing the sheep breed to their lands would be more profitable. William Moorcroft conducted detailed studies on shawl wool production, sending specimens to Britain and contributing to advancements in the British shawl industry.[23]

In Amritsar, shawls were produced in significant quantities but of lower quality as they were primarily adulterated with "*Wahabshai*", an inferior quality wool produced at Kirman.[24] This decline is attributed to Kashmiri families who fled Afghan oppression and introduced the craft to the plains before the Sikh conquest. Initially, yarn for shawls was imported from Kashmir. However, the Kashmiri governor eventually banned its export, ostensibly at the request of local weavers. The ban aimed to curtail foreign competition and maintain a monopoly on shawl production, as duties on yarn exports were a critical revenue source. This policy highlighted the governor's economic interests, ensuring Kashmir's dominance in the shawl industry despite external pressures.[25]

Shawl manufacturing and its management were a complex process. When a shawl was completed, it could only be cut from the loom once an inspector was notified and present to oversee the process. The shawl was then taken to the customs house, where it was stamped, priced by an official, and charged a 25% duty. Additional taxes and seals were also imposed to permit the shawl's transportation, with further levies at Jammu and Amritsar significantly raising costs.[26]

The value of shawl goods produced in Kashmir decreased significantly over time. It fell from Rs. 64,00,000 in 1821 to Rs. 32,00,000 in 1836, further declining during the Sikh rule. By 1846, the total value of shawl goods had dropped to approximately Rs. 25,00,000. The mid-19th century marked a period of deterioration, especially for shawl weavers, who, like peasants, faced the oppressive policies of the British. Economically, shawl weavers were among the lowest-paid wage earners, with at most 7 to 8 rupees monthly income. Of this income, 5 rupees were allocated to taxes, leaving them only a meagre amount to subsist. In 1847, shawl weavers like Baj and Nazarana initiated a strike demanding tax reductions.[27] The state generated an annual income of Rupees 7 lakhs during this period.

Unlike his predecessors, Governor Mihan Singh (1834–1841) made efforts to revive the industry. He lowered tariffs, provided loans to shawl factory owners, and opened trade routes to Ladakh, Punjab, British India, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Despite his reforms, the industry had diminished, with approximately 500–600 shawl frames remaining in Srinagar during his tenure, a fraction of their former numbers. It required six to seven frames, each operated by two men, to produce a pair of large, ornate shawls over six months. Moreover, famines and Shia-Sunni riots in 1834 caused many Shia weavers and merchants to flee to Amritsar, Ludhiana, and other regions.

Baron Schonberg, visiting Srinagar in the 1840s, observed that weavers earned four annas daily, half of which went to the Sikh Governor as tax.[28] This financial strain often forced families to put their children to work immediately. Baron Charles Hugel also documented the harsh realities faced by weavers, recounting his visit to a shawl factory where 16 men worked in cramped conditions on a *dushala* (long shawl) valued at 3,000 rupees per pair.[29]

Dogra Period: After the Treaty of Amritsar, following the Second Anglo-Sikh War in 1846, Kashmir was ceded to Maharaja Gulab Singh of the Dogra dynasty.[30] This period marked the peak and eventual decline of many Kashmiri arts and crafts. Gulab Singh revitalised the declining shawl industry, severely impacted by the *Dagh-Shawl*[31] policies, by implementing innovative techniques. Still, his lack of empathy and understanding resulted in significant profits for merchants, while the shawl weavers suffered terribly. Creating shawls and other crafts for the weavers was a labour-intensive process that took months, but their compensation was minimal. This was due to the state's monopoly over the shawl market, which left weavers with little control over their earnings.

During Gulab Singh's reign, 7,000 weavers were operating on 11,000 looms.[32] The shawl tax was farmed out to Pandit Raj Kak Dhar, who was responsible for collecting and paying twelve *chilki* rupees to the state, with each weaver paying 48 *chilkies*. The weavers were under the control of *Karkhandars*, who not only kept them in bondage through government mandates but also subjected them to perpetual debt by offering small loans to be deducted from their wages. The forced sale of government grain to weavers at rates higher than market prices added to their hardships.[33]

The Maharaja imposed a heavy annual poll tax of Rs. 48 on each weaver[34] while enforcing a harsh law that prohibited weavers from leaving their looms without finding a replacement—a nearly impossible task; additionally, a 25% duty was placed on every shawl, with the collection process handled by corrupt officials, who often added another 25% to the tax.[35] As a result, a weaver could only earn seven or eight rupees a month, out of which five rupees went to taxes, leaving them with just two or three rupees to support their families.[36] The dire condition of the weavers reflected their low social status, which was highlighted in a local saying, "May you get a shawl-maker for a husband," a curse implying great misfortune.[37]

In 1847, pushed to the brink, around 4,000 shawl weavers went on strike, with many fleeing Kashmir in search of better conditions. They sought refuge in towns across Punjab, such as Lahore, Amritsar, Ludhiana, and others, where the production of "Kashmiri" shawls began to thrive.[38] Despite the Maharaja's attempt to address the workers' grievances by organising a *darbar* that same year, his reforms remained largely ineffective.[39]

Nonetheless, the shawl industry truly flourished during the reign of Maharaja Ranbir Singh, Gulab Singh's son and successor. It is widely believed that between 1865 and 1892 A.D., Kashmir produced its finest shawls, distinguished by intricate patterns, refined designs, and delicate colours.[40] Under Maharaja Ranbir Singh's rule, Kashmir's carpet industry also flourished. One notable event was the presentation of a Kashmir carpet to the Maharaja, who was so delighted with its craftsmanship that he expressed his joy by rolling on it.[41] The industry gained further prominence with European involvement. In 1902, a European firm replicated a magnificent Iranian carpet, a celebrated masterpiece. British efforts to promote Kashmir carpets included showcasing them at the 1890 Chicago World's Fair, significantly bolstering their international reputation.[42]

However, Srinagar faced competition from Amritsar, where a colony of Kashmiri weavers, known as *qal-baf* or *qali-bafi* (short for qalim-baf), had settled. Amritsar became a significant centre for carpet production, with substantial investments leading to exports, particularly to America. Unfortunately, this trade was disrupted by political turmoil in 1947.

When Maharaja Ranbir Singh ascended to the throne, he recognised the challenges faced by shawl weavers, who were suffering due to natural disasters and other factors. In response, he revived the traditional shawl industry and improved the weavers' livelihoods. The Maharaja reduced the annual tax on weavers from Rs. 47-8 annas to just Rs. 11.[43] He also allowed the weavers to change employers, which led to a rise in the number of shawl weavers to around 30,000. To further support the artisans, Maharaja Ranbir Singh waived the four-month tax (estimated at six lakh rupees) that the weavers were required to pay, known as *Baj*, thus easing their financial burdens.[44]

Maharaja Ranbir Singh took significant steps to rejuvenate the shawl industry by abolishing the previous tax system that generated Rs. 12 lakhs at the old rate.[45] Instead, he implemented a permit duty of 20 *chilkis* and a custom duty of 11 *chilkis* based on the value of the shawls sold or exported.[46] This new taxation system helped to stabilise the industry and make it more efficient. Under his rule, Kashmir produced some of the finest shawls ever made, celebrated for their soft textures, delicate hues, and intricate patterns that reflected the traditional Eastern decoration style.[47] However, introducing aniline dyes posed a significant concern for the industry. The French agents, crucial to the European market, played a vital role in eliminating this threat. They refused to buy shawls containing aniline dyes, fearing that these synthetic colours would tarnish the reputation of Kashmiri shawls in Europe. As a result, the use of these dyes was successfully eradicated from the shawl-making process, preserving the shawl's prestige in the global market.[48]

The government tightly regulated the shawl-making process during this period through an office known as the *Dagh-shawl*.[49] At the beginning of production, a small six-inch square sample was submitted to a government officer

for inspection. The officer would evaluate its quality, assign a value, collect the appropriate duties, and affix a government stamp before returning it to the weaver. Once the shawl was completed, it was again submitted for inspection. Until it was sold, the shawl remained unwashed, and the stamp could not be removed.[50] As noted by William Wakefield, failure to produce genuine shawls was punishable by severe penalties.[51]

The export of Kashmiri shawls to Europe soared between 1850 and 1860, doubling the industry's output from earlier years. By the 1860s, annual shawl exports reached Rs. 20 lakhs, growing to Rs. 30 lakhs between 1862 and 1870. This increasing demand from Europe, particularly France, played a significant role in the shawl industry's prosperity during this period. In the following decade, the Kashmir shawl market experienced a significant decline. By this time, while still more expensive, Kashmiri shawls could no longer match the quality of those produced in Lyons, France, and Paisley, Scotland.[52] Kashmir's craft and handloom industry suffered a devastating blow when the war between Germany and France broke out in 1870. [53]Old Kashmiri weavers still recall their emotional response to France's defeat, with many bursting into tears and lamentations upon hearing the news of Germany's victory.[54] The immediate effects of this conflict became apparent by 1871 when the number of shawl weavers dropped from 27,000 to 24,000. In 1872, tensions between the Shia weavers and Sunni factory owners escalated into violence, with the Shias suffering the worst of the conflict.[55] Although the disturbances were eventually quelled, the Maharaja provided relief by offering three lakh rupees to the Shia community, the primary victims of the clash.[56]

Andrew Wilson, who visited Kashmir in the 1870s during the reign of Maharaja Ranbir Singh, has described in detail the Shawl industry. He says that "the famous shawls of Kashmir are now somewhat at a discount in the world, except in France, where they still form a portion of almost every bride's trousseau, and where, at least in novels, every lady of the demimonde is described as wrapped in *un vrai Cachemere*, and wearing a pair of Turkish slippers".[57] He further says that by 1875, shawls remained a significant part of French brides' trousseau, with France importing about 80% of Kashmiri shawls. The United States took 10%, Italy imported 5%, and Russia, the United Kingdom, and Germany accounted for around 1%.[58] He also says that the revenue from this source has diminished to at least half what it was some years ago, but still a superior woven shawl will bring, even in Kashmir, as much as 300 sterling, and about 130,000 sterlings worth of shawls is annually exported, 90,000 worth going to Europe The finest of the goat's wool employed in this manufacture comes from Turfan, in the Yarkand territory, and it is only on the windswept steppes of Central Asia that animals are found to produce so fine a wool The shawl-weavers get miserable wages, and are allowed neither to leave Kashmfr nor change their employment, so that they are nearly in the position of slaves, and their average wage is only about three-halfpence a-day France.[59]

Beginning of the Decline

Internal Factors: In the late 19th century, the traditional handicraft industry started facing three major challenges. The first major challenge emerged in India in 1875, and it spread to Kashmir by 1878. A disease called pebrine devastated the silk industry by harming silkworms and reducing silk production. However, a Kashmiri man travelled to Kabul and secretly brought back silkworm seeds hidden in walnut shells to avoid detection by customs officers.[60] This initiative helped to revive the silkworm industry in Kashmir, continuing the legacy of silk production that had flourished under the Mughals and was supported by the Afghan rulers.[61]

In the early years of Sikh rule, Kashmir's silk industry remained underdeveloped, as noted by Moorcroft, who remarked that the "quantity of silk produced is insufficient for domestic consumption.[62]" However, under the Dogra rulers, the silk industry was revived and reorganised along modern lines.[63] Munshi Ganeshi Lal, in his 1846 work Tuhfa-i-Kashmir, mentions that the government generated about 2000 rupees annually from this industry. This marked the transition from Sikh to Dogra rule. During this time, Maharaja Ranbir Singh entrusted the silk industry to his chief justice, Babu Milambar Mukerjee. Silk played a vital role in producing the valley's luxurious textiles. In 1874, the state began buying all silk cocoons with cash, establishing a government monopoly on silk production. Subsequently, two silk factories were set up: one in Cherapor (Anantnag) and another in Haftachunar (Srinagar), known as Murshidabad factories. A third factory, called the Berhampore factory, was established at Raghunathpor, near Nasim Bagh.[64]

The second major challenge was the devastating famine of 1877-79, which dashed the industry's hopes of recovery.[65] The famine crippled trade, and shawl weavers reportedly "died like flies.[66]" Within a generation of its peak, the shawl industry had collapsed, and the skills of the weavers were lost[67]. Brigid Keenan states that the weavers and their families were decimated by the Kashmir famine of 1877.[68] Maharaja Pratap Singh of the Dogra dynasty also attempted to revive the sector by removing most taxes.[69] However, when Walter Lawrence visited the valley in 1895, he noted a local saying in Srinagar: "*Yeli baj gao, teli barkat gae*," meaning that when the taxes were

removed, the city lost its prosperity.[70] This reflected the harsh reality that the industry could not recover, even with the removal of taxes.

The third major challenge was that the removal of taxes had unintended consequences for Kashmir's artisan industries. Without the state-supported guilds, these industries began to collapse. The absence of regulation allowed outsiders to flood the market, increasing competition and driving down prices. For example, copper work that once sold for seven rupees per seer now fetched only three. This decline in value extended to many other traditional art items.[71] The 1891 city census recorded 5,148 shawl weavers in Kashmir, with approximately 800 to 900 engaged in carpet weaving.[72] However, the scarcity of fine wool from Central Asian goats and a declining demand for shawls significantly diminished the trade. During its peak years, from 1862 to 1870, annual shawl exports were valued at 25 to 28 lakh rupees, supporting 25,000 to 28,000 workers. By 1893-94, however, shawl exports plummeted to just Rs. 22,850.[73] This was also visible in the composition of the caravans in 1885. The route from Ladakh to the rest of India via Kashmir witnessed 39 merchants and 126 attendants.[74] Locals who reached from Jammu Kashmir to Ladakh in 1886 included 369 merchants and 916 attendants.[75]

Facing these economic hardships, many shawl weavers transitioned to other occupations. Some began weaving plain *Pashmina*[76] (*alwand*), while others worked as *jamadars* and *butadaras* for the Persian market. According to Walter Lawrence, survivors of the devastating famine of 1877-79 turned to carpet making. Srinagar faced intense competition from Amritsar, where many Kashmiri weavers had relocated, establishing a thriving carpet manufacturing hub. Additionally, several artisans took up embroidering felts, or *numdahs*. By 1889-90, Kashmiri blankets became a significant export to India, valued at Rs. 7,17,721. There were two types of blankets. The superior "*ak pat*" blanket is made without seams for a smooth finish, while the inferior, as do tin pat, has two or three seams, indicating lower quality.[77] Woollen goods were often transported informally; Kashmiris travelling to Punjab carried blankets for personal use, which were sold before returning home[78]. A large amount of woollen piece goods exported from Kashmir were able to escape registration due to travelling. The Kashmiris carry blankets for their personal use, and these are sold in the Panjab when they set out on their return journey to Kashmir.[79]

Papier-mâché, or lacquered work, once a hallmark of Srinagar's craftsmanship, declined by the late nineteenth century. Though it had been popular for crafting decorative boxes to ship shawls to France, where they sold for high prices, the industry struggled to sustain itself. Lawrence noted that Shia Muslims in Kashmir predominantly practised this art form, highlighting its cultural significance despite its dwindling presence.

External Factors: Apart from the regional political and economic factors, global developments also impacted Kashmir's craft industry in the nineteenth century. Political upheavals significantly disrupted trade routes, reducing commerce with Persia, Turkey, and Punjab. Meanwhile, trade with Hindustan also suffered under British rule, as the declining wealth of native courts diminished demand for the luxurious Kashmiri shawls that had once been integral to royal attire. However, trade with Turkistan expanded, driven by increasing Russian demand.[80]

During Queen Victoria's reign, Kashmiri shawls gained prominence in England, partly due to her tradition of gifting them as wedding presents. Baron Schonberg noted efforts by the English government to relocate Kashmiri weavers to Ludhiana during Sikh rule in Lahore. To ensure a steady supply of shawls for the English market, the British constructed a large bazaar, shops, and homes for these craftsmen.[81] British policies in the 19th century further reshaped the Indo-Iranian market for Kashmiri shawls. Their efforts to consolidate power in the Indian subcontinent diminished the number and wealth of native states, which were historically major consumers of Kashmiri shawls. Economic pressures exerted on the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar Iranian court further reduced their demand for these luxurious goods. Consequently, the market for Kashmiri shawls and other artisanal products substantially declined. Geopolitical tensions, such as the rivalry between Russia and Britain in Iran and Russia's conquest of Central Asia, disrupted the once-thriving trade networks for Kashmiri shawls.[82] Following 1858, colonial officials actively promoted British-made goods over indigenous products, further impacting local crafts.

Additionally, from the mid-nineteenth century, Kashmir began facing competition from Persia. However, the Persians needed more expertise in patterned shawl-weaving than Kashmir had, preventing them from producing shawls of similar quality.[83] Despite this, the mid-1800s was a period of economic prosperity for Kashmiri merchants and traders. However, it also marked a decline in the artistry of Kashmiri shawls as foreign influences increasingly shaped their designs. The French, in particular, played a significant role in this change, arriving in Kashmir around 1850 to "improve" traditional designs and working directly with manufacturers.[84] The French presence in Kashmir was marked by several trading houses, with annual exports of shawls averaging around four lakhs of rupees. They

also established operations in Amritsar, where their trade flourished. Among their popular products were fine goat-hair flannel, known as *Ulwan* and *Pushmena* fabric, both in high demand in India. Despite the multiple French trading houses in the region, no British shawl dealers operated in Kashmir at this time.[85]

The Kashmir shawl industry, once a hallmark of exquisite craftsmanship, faced significant challenges during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While some improvement has been noted, changing preferences among foreign buyers have drastically impacted demand. Despite these shifts, local shops continue to produce finely crafted items, with some pieces rivalling Venetian designs in quality and artistry.

Trade route changes in the late 19th century profoundly affected commerce and its livelihoods. Traditionally, the valley relied on three primary routes. However, the opening of the Baramulla to Kohala road for cart traffic in September 1890 shifted trade away from the Banihal and Pir Panjal routes. Walter Lawrence noted a significant trade boost in 1891-92 with the opening of the Jhelum Valley Road. However, the high costs of maintaining this road led to the decline of older routes and the subsequent decay of towns like Anantnag and Shopian. The lack of capital and entrepreneurial spirit among Kashmiris further impeded large-scale trading operations.[86] The decline of the shawl industry, a centuries-old tradition, reached its nadir between the 1870s and early 1880s. Census data highlights this decline: the number of weavers fell from 5,148 in 1891 to 5,037 in 1901 and drastically to 148 by 1911.

Twentieth-Century Developments

According to the Census of India 1901, some of the prominent industries of Kashmir are shawls, pattus, Ms, leather and paper, silver and woodwork. However, only the shawl industry continued to decline.[87] The data provided by the census also suggests that the total number of workers employed in the weaving industry (Shawl Weavers) was 8602.[88] Further, according to the 1911 Census, the total number of shawl weaving factories in South Kashmir was five.[89] The census of 1921, similarly, noted that the total number of textile industries was 40, of which the number of Shawl weaving factories was 24, and the number of *pattu* weaving and *hashiabafi* (weaving of shawl fringes) were 1 and 4, respectively.[90]

Furthermore, according to the census of 1931, the shawl and the fringe weaving industry afforded employment to thousands of adults and immatures in Kashmir, but due to economic depression, the price of shawls fell considerably, and an era of cheap shawls set in, adversely affecting the quality of produce. Fringe weaving is an accompaniment of the industry, as generally all shawls must have fringes. This industry was, however, bound to decline as various imported machine-made fringes from foreign countries were now in the market and began to attract customers.[91.] The total number of operatives was 8,602, out of which 1,836 were young boys and girls. It was the cotton carpet factories, the silk factories, the lace and embroidery work, the shawl and fringe weaving establishment, and the darning works that were responsible for the employment of a major portion of immature labour[92].

Thus, by the early 20th century, the rise of carpet and silk factories had largely replaced shawl looms in Kashmir, leaving the traditional craft of the *shal baf* (shawl weaver) nearly extinct.[93] The handmade carpet industry emerged as the largest industrial sector in the region, with significant potential for large-scale modernisation. Six major firms operated 715 looms, employing around 3,575 workers, representing approximately 12% of Srinagar's population. The industry generated an annual production value of about 18 lakh rupees, of which six lakh rupees went directly to the workers. However, by 1929, the industry faced a severe downturn, with only a fraction of these looms still operational due to declining demand from European and American markets.[94]

The clarion call for *swadeshi* given by the nationalists also had a profound influence on the domestic industries. Indian nationalists promoted indigenous fabrics and played a critical role in sustaining local textile traditions during British colonial rule. Wealthy consumers and the general public were encouraged to support Indian-made textiles as a form of resistance against the dominance of Western fabrics and styles. The Indian Independence movement briefly witnessed the growth of the Kashmiri craft industry. The Swadeshi movement of 1905-07, which promoted local goods, temporarily revived the shawl industry by increasing domestic demand, particularly in northern India. However, the First World War (1914-19) shifted focus to woollen blankets due to military orders, leading many shawl weavers to transition to blanket production. The abolition of forced labour in Kashmir in 1920, coupled with better opportunities in farming and trade, further diminished the industry, which had once been a significant source of state income. Mahatma Gandhi's arrival in 1921 reinvigorated the Swadeshi movement, substantially boosting shawl production in Kashmir. By 1921, the number of shawl weavers rose to 417, supported by 24 shawl-weaving factories, marking a small yet notable revival of this iconic craft[95]. Many nationalists wore Indian-made fabrics and Kashmiri shawls during the independence movement, later championing efforts to revive traditional handicrafts. This advocacy helped preserve indigenous weaving

and embroidery techniques, keeping them relevant in a changing cultural landscape.[96]

After the Partition of 1947, Kashmir's crafts and textile industry faced severe setbacks due to political unrest and ongoing conflicts between India and Pakistan. Focusing on establishing peace in the region diverted attention and resources away from the crafts sector and the communities dependent on it. Recognising traditional handicrafts' cultural and economic significance, the Indian government launched several initiatives to revitalise the industry. These included establishing the Handicrafts Development Department in 1957, export promotion efforts, trade fairs, introducing Geographical Indication (GI) tags for Pashmina wool, and creating the School of Designs.

Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay was pivotal in preserving and empowering local artisans through cooperatives and skill development programs. Her efforts ensured that traditional techniques were maintained and adapted for contemporary markets. [97]Scholars like Jasleen Dhamija preserved Indian textiles by documenting and showcasing dying crafts, traditional weaving, and embroidery techniques.[98] This scholarly work has opened new avenues for researching and appreciating India's textile heritage.

The late twentieth century further witnessed transformations in Kashmir's craft industry. According to the Digest of Statistics, 1977-78, the value of Kani shawls was worth Rs 2.36 Lakhs, and its share in total production was 0.25 per cent, whereas the value of embroidery shawls was Rs 603.66 Lakhs, which was 62.16 per cent of the total in 1973[99]. In the same year, the total number of persons employed in the manufacturing of embroidery shawls in Srinagar was 22191. A significant number of persons were also engaged in the District of Anantnag and Baramulla[100.]

The Digest of Statistics further recorded that the production value and the number of persons employed in the woollen shawl industry were Rs 6.75 crores and 27000 respectively in 1974-75, which increased to 16.25 crores and 81800 respectively in 1999-2000[101]. The export also increased in that period, i.e., the total value of the export of the woollen shawls was Rs. 1.21 crores in 1977-78, which increased to Rs. 15.70 crores in 11998-99, and it declined to Rs. 8.5 crores in 1999-2000[102.]. Thus, the Kashmiri craft industry was shaped by several factors even in the post-independence period.

Conclusion

In summary, Kashmir's crafts, commerce, and artisans have undergone cycles of both prosperity and decline in the 19th and 20th centuries. While the industry proved lucrative for the state, generating substantial revenue, it brought little benefit to the weavers themselves. European and American textile historians have often framed the history of Kashmiri shawls within a "rise and fall" narrative, attributing their production and popularity primarily to European fashion trends. This perspective, however, overemphasises the role of European consumption and downplays the significant impact of colonialism on the design and production of these shawls.

European fashion trends, while influential, were only one among many factors driving demand and shaping the industry in the 19th and 20th centuries. Other crucial factors included the evolving policies of various rulers from the Sikh dynasty to the Dogra dynasty, global market dynamics, the swadeshi movement aimed at revival and the cultural policies of preservation continued by the Indian government following 1947. The narrative of Kashmiri shawls is thus deeply intertwined with regional and global political, economic, and social changes, making it a story not just of fashion but also of resilience, adaptation, and the challenges artisans face. These dynamics collectively shaped Kashmir's crafts and textiles' commerce, status, and evolution.

Notes

1. Pearce Gervis, *This is Kashmir*, (London: Cassell, 1954), 38
2. *Ibid*., 39.
3. Mirza Haider Dughlat, *Tarikh-i-Rashidi: The History of the Mughals of Central Asia*, edited and translated by N. Elias and Denison Ross (Patna, 1973), 434.
4. François Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, AD 1656–1668*, trans. Archibald Constable, (Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1996), 401–3.
5. Brigid Keenan, *Travels in Kashmir: A Popular History of Its People, Places and Crafts*. (United Kingdom, 1990), 101.
6. Walter R. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir* (London: Oxford University Press, 1895), 375.
7. A. F. Barker, *The Textile Industries of Kashmir* (1932), 311.
8. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon* (1913), 250.
9. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, 376.
10. G. M. D. Sufi, *Kashmir: Being a History of Kashmir* (New Delhi: Light & Life Publishers, 1974), 564.
11. George Foster, *A Journey from Bengal to England, Through the Northern Part of India, Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Persia into Russia (1782–1784)*, 2 vols. (London, 1808), 22.
12. In 1871 464 mules and horses laden, 75 spre horses for sale and 310 men had reached Ladakh from Kashmir. Foreign Department, Political A, June 1871, nos. 560-597.
13. Kashmir exported various goods and commodities during this period like Indian Brocaded, Pattu, coarse woollen dyed green, blue, red chadar, shawl etc. Satish Chandra

Saxena, *Trade in Ladakh (During Dogra Period 1842-1947 AD),* (Leh: CIBS, 2006), 29.
14. *Ibid.*
15. W. Moorcroft and George Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and Punjab; in Ladakh and Kashmir; in Peshawar, Kabul, Kunduz and Bokhara, 1819–1825, vol. 1I, (London, 1841*, 194.
16. J. Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1973), 2.
17. *Ibid*., 3.
18. 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
19. George Birdwood, *The Industrial Arts of India*, vol. 2 (London, 1880), 114.
20. Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl*, 3.
21. William Moorcroft, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Punjab in Ladakh and Kashmir*, vol. 2 (London, 1841), 194.
22. William Wakefield, *The Happy Valley: Sketches of Kashmir and the Kashmiris* (London, 1879), 83.
23. *Ibid*., 88.
24. *Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladakh* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1890), 75.
25. Moorcroft and Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces,* vol. I, 110.
26. G. T. Vigne, *Travels in Kashmir, Ladak, Iskardo*, vol. 2 (London, 1844), 124–29.
27. Khan, Mohammad Ishaq. *History of Srinagar, 1846-1947: A Study in Socio-cultural Change.* (India: Cosmos Publications, 1999), 59; Again in 1853, the workers of the shawl industry expressed their resentment against the Karhhanadars over the question of wages.
28. Baron Enrich von Schönberg, *Travels in India and Kashmir*, Vol. 2 (London, 1879), 103.
29. Baron Charles von Hügel, *Travels in Kashmir and the Punjab* (London, 1845), 120.
30. Showkat Ahmad Naik, "Shawl Manufacture in Kashmir during Early Dogra Period (1846–1885)," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 71 (2010–11): 497.
31. Dag-shawl implied that the finished product, i.e. shawl, was being sold at a higher price than the market prices to ensure the state's share. It was one of the infamous practices introduced by the Afghans.
32. Prithvi Nath Kaul Bamzai, *Culture and Political History of Kashmir*, volume 3, (New Delhi: M D Publications, 1994), 672.
33. Anand Koul. *Geography of the Jammu and Kashmir State*. (India: Thacker, Spink, 1913), 31.
34. C. E. Bates, *A Gazetteer of Kashmir* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1873), 54; Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl*, 9.
35. Bates, *A Gazetteer of Kashmir*, 57.
36. *Ibid*., 54.
37. *Ibid.,* 33.
38. Showkat Ahmad Naik, "Shawl Manufacture," 499.
39. Ibid.
40. D. N. Dhar, *Artisan of the Paradise, Art & Artisans of Kashmir-From Ancient to Modem Times,* (New Delhi:
Himalayan Research & Cultural Foundation & Bhavana Books and Prints, 1999), 43.
41. Sufi, *Kashir: Being a History of Kashmir*, 571.
42. *Ibid*., 571.
43. Ramjoo Dhar, *Intizam-i-Mulki-Kashmir (1766–1886 A.D.)*, in Ahmad P., "Shawl Industry and the Institution of Daghshawl in Kashmir (1846–1947)," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 71 (2010–11): 813.
44. *Ibid*., 813.
45. G. L. Koul, *Kashmir Now and Then* (Kashmir, 1972), 86.
46. Amar Koul, *Geography of Jammu and Kashmir State* (Calcutta, 1913).
47. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, 376.
48. *Ibid.*
49. Wakefield, *The Happy Valley*, 145.
50. "Letter XVII, From Gulmarg to Murree," 205–6.
51. Wakefield, *The Happy Valley*, 145.
52. Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl*, 18.
53. Khan, History of Srinagar, 1846-1947: A Study in Socio-cultural Change, p. 61.
54. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, 375.
55. Bates, *Gazetteer*, 53; Showkat Ahmad Naik, "Shawl Manufacture," 501.
56. Gwasha Lai Kaul, *Kashmir Throughout Ages (5000 B.C. To 1965 A.D.)* (Srinagar, 1963), 109.
57. Andrew Wilson, *The Abode of Snow: Observations on a Tour from Chinese Tibet to the Indian Caucasus, Through the Upper Valleys of the Himalaya*, (United Kingdom, 1886), 365.
58. Ibid.
59. *Ibid*. 366
60. Gervis, *This is Kashmir*, 154.
61. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, 367.
62. Moorcroft and Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces*, vol. 2, 156.
63. Gervis, *This is Kashmir*, 153.
64. Sufi, *Kashir: Being a History of Kashmir*, 575–76.
65. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, 375.
66. Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl*, 18.
67. *Ibid.*
68. Keenan, Travels in Kashmir, 180.
69. Amar Koul, *Geography of Jammu and Kashmir State* (Calcutta, 1913), 55.
70. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, 373.
71. *Ibid.*
72. *Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladakh*, 76.
73. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, 376–77.
74. Foreign Department, Frontier, A, September 1886, nos. 7-22.
75. Foreign Department, Frontier, A, August 1887, nos. 38-47.
76. Traders from the Sham area of Ladakh dominated the Pashmina Trade. Traders, while returning, used to sell their pashmina to Kashmiri traders for silver or money, or to Ladakhis who took it to Srinagar. Recent research on Ladakh, no. 2, 1997, Nicky Grist, Ladakh a Trading State, 47. https://ladakhstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/rrol2b.pdf

77. *Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladakh*, 78.
78. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, 390.
79. *Ibid*., 378.
80. Moorcroft and Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces*, vol. II, 194–95.
81. Sufi, *Kashmir: Being a History of Kashmir*, vol. 2, 567.
82. Michelle Maskiell, "Consuming Kashmir: Shawls and Empires, 1500–2000," *Journal of World History* 13, no. 1 (2002): 52
83. Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl*, 17.
84. *Ibid*., 15.
85. Letter XVII, From Gulmarg to Murree, 205-206.
86. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, 38.
87. Khan Bahadur Munshi Ghulam Ahmed Khan, *Census of India 1901* Vol. XXIII, (Kashmir) Pt. 1 (report), (Lahore, 1902), 11.
88. *Ibid*., 106.
89. Matin Uz Zaman Khan, *Census of India 1911,* Vol 20 Kashmir Part II Tables, (Lucknow, 1912), 205.
90. Khan Bahadur Chaudhuri Khushi Mohammed, *Census of India, 1921*, vol. XXII, Kashmir, Part II, (Lahore, 1923), p. 226.
91. Rai Bahadur PT Anant Ram and PT. Hira Nand Raina, *Census of India 1931*, Vol- XXIV Jammu and Kashmir State Part I Report, (Jammu, 1933), 216
92. *Ibid*., 218
93. Barker, *The Textile Industries of Kashmir*, 316.
94. *Ibid*., 318-19.
95. Ahmad P., "Shawl Industry and the Institution of Daghshawl in Kashmir (1846–1947)," 812; original source Lawrence, *op. cit*., 35; *Census Reports* of 1901, 1911, 1921, 181, 204, 222–23.
96. Maskiell, "Consuming Kashmir: Shawls and Empires, 52.
97. Jamila Brijbhushan, *Kamladevi Chattopadhyay: Portrait of a Rebel*, (New Delhi, 1976), 144.
98. Jasleen Dhamija, ed. Crafts of Gujarat ([Ahmedabad] New York: Mapin, 1985); Jasleen Dhamija and Jyotindra Jain, eds. *Handwoven Fabrics of India* (Ahmedabad: Mapin, 1989); Jasleen Dhamija, ed. *The Woven Silks of India* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1995). See also Jasleen Dhamija, *Gourmet's Journey: Discovering the Exotic & Erotic in Food* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2018).
99. Jammu and Kashmir Government, *Digest of Statistics, 1977-78*, (Planning and Development Department Directorate of Evaluation and Statistics, Jammu Kashmir, 1978), 170.
100. *Ibid*., 171.
101. Government of Jammu Kashmir, *Digest of Statistics, 2021-22*, 47th Edition, (Planning Development and Monitoring Department, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Jammu and Kashmir, 2023), 298.
102. *Ibid*., 299.