Creative Economies of Culture in South Asia

Craftspeople and Performers

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Much has been written about Kashmiri crafts: their history and provenance, their value to the community that makes and sells them, and about those who buy into the notion of handcrafted. What is seldom examined, however, is the changing nature of these crafts and how they remain at the centre of Kashmiri culture, identity and economy even in times as turbulent as the present. Due to an intractable conflict, fed by ethnic and religious differences, along the Line of Control, which is the de factor border of Indian Kashmir with Pakistan, many generations of Kashmiris have grown up with a ringside view of violence. The conflict in Kashmir has resulted in limited investment and development, and the region risks falling into a spiral of poverty, unemployment and turmoil. Reconstruction is a long and arduous road. According to the World Bank, there are two main objectives: to facilitate transition from war to sustainable peace and to support the resumption of economic and social development, where post-conflict reconstruction entails rebuilding institutions and jump-starting the economy (Kreimer 1998). In this chapter, I argue that culturally embedded practices playing a key role in identity creation should also have a role in the reconstruction. Crafts in Kashmir are rich in social significance and cultural value, employ many people and generate significant revenue, which can potentially contribute to economic reconstruction.

In this chapter, I discuss the history of the famous Kashmiri shawl and examine the changes it has undergone over the last few decades, focusing on gendered conflict-driven shifts in the practices of making. I draw on empirical data from two decades of engagement in Indian Kashmir, district Srinagar; all names have been changed to protect identities of Kashmiri women (Raina 2009). Unless stated, all interviews and observations are from my own fieldwork since 2001. I attempt to tell the story of changing craft traditions and to capture the dynamic culture of making in the context of conflict in Kashmir.

There is a vast body of historical work about the Kashmiri shawl (Ames 1997; Lévi-Strauss 1986; Rehman & Jafri 2006) and a significant body of work on the politics of Kashmir (Bose 2021; Schofield 2021). However, these works rarely examine the cultural practices of the region or consider them as key to its future. This chapter will reveal deeper insights into how conflict, craft, and gender overlap, and what it means to make a Kashmiri shawl in 2023.

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A Brief History of the Shawls of Kashmir

The Kashmiri shawl can be traced as far back as the era of the great Hindu epics. In the *Ramayana*, King Janaka gifted shawls to Lord Rama (Mathur 2004). In the *Mahabharat*, the people of Kamboj are said to have presented King Yudhishtir with costly shawls embroidered with gold thread. Also, Lord Krishna is known to have been an emissary to the court of the Kauravas, and the gifts of the blind king, Dhritrashtra, included 10,000 shawls of Kashmir (Mathur 2004). In addition to the Hindu epics, shawls are a part of the long history of giving in South Asia. Kashmiri shawls were also among the several items given by the Sassanian King Bahram I (r. 273–276) to his contemporary ruler the Roman Emperor Aurelian (r. 270–275) after the fall of Palmyra. These references indicate that 'high quality Indian textiles were in vogue with the Sassanian elite and were valued highly' (Pathak 2003, p. 10).

The story of the Kashmiri shawl we know today starts with the fifteenth century ruler of Kashmir, Zain-ul-Abdin, who first introduced the weaving of twill tapestry shawls (the Kaanhi shawl) from Turkestan (Gillow & Barnard 1993). Zain-ul-Abdin, also known as *Badshah* ('great King'), is credited with developing shawl production in the Kashmir valley. He became ruler of Kashmir after spending seven years in Samarkand. Zain-ul-Abdin is said to have sent Kashmiri artisans to Iran and Central Asia to learn how to produce the artworks of Islamic culture (Sharrad 2004). The techniques, the designs and the processes of today remain very similar in Srinagar and surrounding districts to when these skills were brought to Kashmir in the fifteenth century.[1] Also, we know how shawls were made from lengthy details in all manner of court documents and accounts of travellers who visited Kashmir.

Shawl Making in Contemporary Kashmir

Today's context of violence and fragility is markedly different from the Mughal times of relative peace, and the financial support that the rulers of Kashmir provided for the creative work of artisans has long since faded away, ceasing since Indian independence. Craft production now takes place in individual businesses. Shawls are sold through retail outlets, by word of mouth, and through the old shawl *walla* I remember from my childhood in Delhi who visits festivals and home celebrations (Hardy 2001; Koul 2003). Recent work in Kashmir (Dec 2022) also notes the start of the shawl being marketed and sold through social media platforms, with young and upcoming businesses requesting the need for training in this specific sector.[2] The shawl, however, retains its reputation, with the name 'Pashmina' evoking images of luxury and conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899), like carpets from Iran or blown glass from Murano.

Crafts are made for domestic and export markets, where they face competition from machine made goods, as well as other hand-made craft goods. This situation is not unusual for crafts, especially textile-based products with a spectacular reputation and an equivalent price tag. An unembroidered pure pashmina shawl

costs over £2000 in 2022, and a lot more if it features intricate hand embroidery. Shawl-making is labour intensive and often accomplished piecemeal, with each component of the process being done by a separate group of people who specialise in that component of the manufacturing process (Raina 2009). Whilst new methods have been adopted, the supply chain of each shawl consists of multiple specialists contributing to the final product. There are no examples of a complete vertically integrated unit of production in Kashmir.[3] Thus, the shawl is a product of a long line of interdependent relationships, which remain intact despite the politics of identity that drive the conflict.

The biggest investment is the yarn and the weaving. The Pashmina shawl begins its life as fibre from the goats. This fibre is collected and spun, sometimes in Ladakh (the North-Eastern region of Jammu and Kashmir).[4] Pure Pashmina fibre is so fine and delicate that it has not been possible to mechanise the spinning or weaving. The fibre length is short and fine, allowing for a very slight twist to be given to it during the spinning process, making it soft to handle. Hand spun yarn is made into large hanks by women, who make their first appearance in the informal sector of Kashmiri crafts at this stage. Continuing historical tradition, Kashmiri women are also currently involved in the spinning of yarn, which is an ancillary activity, often not noted or valued as highly as it should be. Spinning yarn is a role the women of Kashmir share with many other mountain communities of Central Asia and beyond.[5]

After spinning, the shawl-making process is taken over by men. Hand spun yarn is gently coated with rice paste and loaded onto a loom for weaving to keep the yarn stiff and slightly more robust. Often the weave is decided based on whether or not the shawl will be embroidered. This is not a design decision for the weavers, as most work on commission and are directed about what to make. There is little experimentation with weaving, with most weavers and designers preferring to conform to traditional designs like the *chashme bulbul* or lozenge design. When I questioned them about the lack of variety in the type of weaves found in Kashmir, most weavers attributed it to the lack of time and raw material for experimentation as well as the possibility of not being able to sell the 'new' product. I noted repeatedly during my work in Kashmir that experimentation here carries the invisible presence of privilege. There is also a causational relationship between the high value of the raw material, its ownership, and the space for weavers who never see themselves as the designer of the shawls to explore or experiment. Here, we see the juxtaposition of notions of identity, ownership, production, employment, and socio-economic status within creative labour.

Once woven, the fabric is taken for the first round of finishing. Here, the fabric is stretched taut across a wooden frame, and knots, stray yarns, and fine hairs that the loom did not catch are plucked off using a wide pair of tweezers. For shawls that are left a natural shade and are not dyed, this process is even more important, as dyeing can hide imperfections on the surface. The shawl is then dyed, a practice which has changed from its historic roots in many ways. Traditionally, dyeing used to be done using the fresh waters in the canals of Kashmir, with the water quality known to contribute to the dyeing process. Environmental damage caused by

climate change and the mismanagement of water, as well as sewage links to the Dal Lake where shawls were washed and dyed, has made it imperative for Kashmiri dyers to seek other options. Historically used natural dyes are expensive and rarely used. Kashmiri shawl manufacturers also started sending shawls outside of the valley to be dyed as more careful methods of logging colours and shades in a batch and safer dyeing techniques were developed in Delhi as well as Amritsar. However, a vast amount of dyeing continues to be done in Kashmir by hand using hazardous chemicals. In Srinagar, men use their bare hands, boiling hot water and chemicals with little attention paid to the 'Danger' signs on the boxes of the chemicals. This is often laughed off and observers like me are told to not over think.

Once dyed, shawls are washed and pressed by passing them gently through mechanised heated rollers. This deviates from traditional methods in which shawls were left in the meadows after dyeing to be dried by the sun. Currently, with time and money short, and outdoors not always safe or warm, a domestic iron is used to iron out creases created by the dyeing process. After this, the shawl is ready to be sold as a plain shawl. If it needs embroidery, it travels to the *naqaash's* place straight after dyeing. *Naqaash*, or imprinting, is the process in which hand-carved wooden blocks are dipped in water-based blue ink or chalk and weak glue (depending on the base colour of shawl) and printed on the shawls. The blocks are made by a group of carpenters who have been trained to carve wooden blocks into fine designs, faint enough to be embroidered by a single line of thread. These ink marks provide guidance for the designs to be embroidered on the shawl. It is also important that the right amount of pressure is used for imprinting, as faded or blurred lines would confuse the embroiderer. Yet, this is not a design decision point, as each shawl usually comes with a design indication from the person who has commissioned or invested in the piece. Different types of embroidery require varying degrees of skill. The finer the embroidery, the more care needs to be taken in imprinting.

It is interesting to note that each process is led by individuals who are typically heavily critical of the process that precedes their engagement and see themselves as the upholders of high quality. When I first observed this in 2003, it was amusing to note each man who rolled his eyes at the amount of work needed to fix things. Over the years, it became clear to me that this innate Kashmiri self-deprecating humour, informed by sarcasm, masks the deep pride they feel in each object they finish, as well as the role they play in keeping their tradition and identity intact through their craft.

These traditional methods and processes of making shawls have been followed for many years now. However, due to the conflict, there are significant changes to this craft in terms of gendered labour. As the majority of actors producing a finished shawl are men, there is a gendered aspect of shawl production that is uncommon in other textile crafts across the world, which are mostly made by women in domestic settings or workshops. However, in recent years, there are increasing numbers of women working in this sector. In addition, data from Kashmir indicates that during the peak of the conflict, there was a rapid increase in the number of people working in the craft sector. The scale of this informal sector is astounding.

The production value of just woollen shawls in 2020–2021 was over £25 million, with 85 million people employed in the woollen shawls category alone. This data, contained in the statistics digest published by the Jammu and Kashmir government in 2020–2021, also reports the export value of woollen shawls in 2020–2021 to be over £17 million.

The Current Political Context

The politics of Kashmir occupies many a bookshelf, song and film, yet creative cultures and the way they are impacted by politics, or the role they may play in peacebuilding, are largely ignored in the writing on international development. In the early 1990s, the situation in the Kashmir valley shifted from moments of relative peace to sharp escalations of frequent violence. Hence, whilst it does not classify as an 'active conflict', there exists an uneasy silence in the region which I experienced last in December 2022. The absence of war or active conflict due to a peace agreement or military victory is not necessarily peace (Licklider 1995); it can, for example, be called negative peace (Galtung 1969). According to Rothstein (1999), the ending of violence or a so-called post-conflict situation provides 'new set of opportunities that can be grasped or thrown away' (p. 224). This grey area is where Kashmir rests now in a post-conflict region where violence is sporadic, yet persistent. Military presence is reduced in comparison to the peak years of turmoil through the 1990s and into the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century but is still there.

The violence and its socio-economic impact are plainly visible in Kashmir. While tourists return in larger numbers each summer, suggesting normality, the scars of long-term fragility that is uncertain, unpredictable, and unresolved remain. Quraishi (2004), for example, mentions the possibility of hiring men for killing as an alternative means of earning money. These scars also manifest themselves in poverty, with people living below the poverty line and social inequalities within the health and education sector, as well as little investment in industry and employment, all of which are well known as the impact of conflict.

However, there has been noticeable growth in the scale of handicrafts produced and sold, with steady increases in revenues and numbers of people employed. Income generation through dignified work in the sector of crafts promotes the development of Kashmir's economy and contributes to poverty alleviation, which, in turn, may lead to a decrease in violence. It also rekindles community relationships and, in many ways, harkens back to previous, more peaceful times when the joy of making overrode everyday challenges of poverty and violence. In the long term, crafts could thus be a source of economic reconstruction of this post-conflict area. In Kashmir in particular, we see this potential play out in gendered ways.

Shifting Gender Relations in Kashmir

Kashmir has always been a Muslim majority state, with a specific cultural identity distinct to the region, accompanied and defined by cultural expressions that are visible

through the arts. Being Kashmiri was always a primary identity and was actually a feature of many hilarious informal discussions about identity I have had over the years regarding how to define identity and in which order. Kashmiri, male, Muslim, Indian, district of parental origin, city- or rural-born, grandparental profession – multiple gendered, regional, religious, national, residential, historical, and professional layers all mixed together into a melting pot that created a uniqueness of being. A primary fissure resulting from the conflict is evident along religious lines, changing religious make-up of the population, as the Kashmiri Pandits (Hindus) left in 1992 to the neighbouring region of Jammu in what is often called an exodus. They remain a large internally displaced group, who never returned to Kashmir in large numbers.

As is common, the conflict also resulted in the skewing of the gender ratio, with the deaths and disappearances of many men. This has left behind many women-headed households, with Kashmiri Muslim women now the main bread winners for their families. This is a big shift from the traditional role women have played in caring within the home settings, which has brought about changes in the gender power balance and altered the perception of women in society. Women in a Kashmir-based NGO with whom I worked observed this shift away from a solely domestic role that promoted virtues of silence, obedience, chastity, domesticity, and motherhood. Men were traditionally considered protectors and income earners and those who left the home to provide financially for their families.

Kashmiri women in the early 2000s spoke about themselves as *bechaari* ('poor thing'), which denotes pity. Aziza, a woman from North of Srinagar wondered, 'In goliyon ne humari zindagai tabaah kar di hai. Hum bechaari kya karein?' ('These bullets have destroyed our lives, what should we women do?'). Bullets claimed many lives and have had a devastating impact on many homes in the region. In the city of Kashmir, there are numerous graveyards, increasing in size and numbers each year. This region also saw the use of pellet guns that did not kill, but blinded people, in most cases boys and young men (UNOCHR 2019). The UNOCHR report also discusses forced disappearances and arbitrary detentions, mainly of Kashmiri men.

Many Kashmiri women have been in direct or indirect contact with violence. I interviewed women who spoke about the physical insecurity they feel living in Kashmir. They hear news about sexual crimes in the valley and fear for their safety. The presence of security forces, who the women believed had limitless authority to interrogate and question them, made them nervous. Kashmiri women, like women across the world, are constantly watched and judged when present in public. They are expected to be religiously inclined and more pious than men and even to rectify religious shortcomings in husbands (Personal interviews, Kashmir University 2003). Kashmiri women are not only responsible for being good practicing Muslims but must also uphold the moral reputation of their families based on how they dress, as well as where they appear, at what time of the day, and with whom. This patriarchal structure is familiar in South Asia and, when combined with an intractable conflict, highlights the exacerbated burden women bear.

According to the teachings of Islam, in the Holy Quran, a woman has the 'noble task entrusted to her by Allah of childbearing and motherhood' (Surat Al Nisa':4, Ayah 34). She has duties towards her husband and children and these

responsibilities should take precedence over other responsibilities. In Kashmir, women face a dilemma as the need to generate income conflicts with the expected traditional care-giving role. This often means children are left in the care of their grandparents and siblings (Kaul-Batra 2004). This has a knock-on effect as children are often not sent to school as they are required at home for caring and running the house (Kaul-Batra 2004). This clash of religious ethics with the reality of living in a post-conflict situation was observed as a cause of immense pressure, dilemma, and trauma for the women of Kashmir. The responsibility to earn is also hindered by low levels of literacy and skills necessary for gaining formal employment.

Due to the conflict and the loss of male relatives, domestic duties for women have also increased. Many women have relatives and older, sick, or disabled family members living with them. In poorer areas, there is also little access to childcare, which prevents women from leaving their homes. Farida told me in 2006 that she always felt ridden with guilt as she needed to work to keep her children and her in-laws fed and safe. She carries the grief of being the 'half widow' of a man who disappeared in 2002, now a status of numerous Kashmiri women (Zia 2013).

The Role of Crafts the Politically Fragile Spaces of Kashmir

In this context, craft working from home, away from the harsh winters, and within sight and reach of those who need looking after, is appealing to most women. The duty of care, in all its dimensions, can be delivered through home-based practices of making. This work provides financial, social, and personal reassurance to the women who make crafts. The appeal of this work, engaging with arts and beautiful objects, is also therapeutic in many ways. There are bodies of research that speak about art as therapy, and in contemporary Kashmir, craft working functions as therapy. Here, the embodied knowledge of the maker, the landscape of work, the links between her cultural identity and the work she produces, the repetitive movement of hands, and the creation of objects that others will value and appreciate are all connected in positive ways. Sabah (2007) spoke about feeling disconnected from reality when she works on her embroidery. She expressed feeling distanced from her anxieties and her grief from the loss of her father and brothers. She found the textiles comforting and sustaining, and her anxieties of needing to be outside the house were laid to rest with this work. She was very young and faced loss at an early stage in her life, and craftworking felt safe and non-threatening.

I met Fahima, who had taken up this work, in Kashmir in December 2022. I remember her smiling at me, and saying, with the shawl draped over her legs and the needle in her hand as she embroidered delicate patterns onto the fabric, how it allowed her to zone out of the burdens of care and poverty that she carries each day. There is no need to travel, find childcare, or be in the company of strangers, she said. This is practical for women in remote locations with little access to public transport, or the money required for using it.

In a recent training workshop in Srinagar, Fareeda, one of the new craftswomen to join my group of makers, was surprised that craft-based income generation for women makers was being explored. She lives in downtown Srinagar and lost her

son in 2010 to a 'brutal death' in police custody. Fareeda is part of a focus group for research on the Culture and Conflict project at the UKRI Gender, Justice and Security hub and had come for design and colour training. This research brings craft-made textiles from conflict-affected areas in South Asia to the British craft retail sector.[6] This traditional textile making is an avenue for the inclusion of women in the economy and their futures are linked to income generation, which changes many aspects of their lives in positive ways.

Tacit knowledge embodied within Kashmiri women has been key to their understanding of craft making and has also provided an incentive for them to select this area for earning an income. They have, in the past, received hand-made textiles as wedding presents, ancestral heirlooms passed from mother to daughter, and as matriarchs within their families they invested money in craft-made goods. These women have observed shawls being bought, used, gifted, made, saved, stored, washed, worn, and recycled. They have seen good quality fabrics; they have sold pieces of shawls when times were tough and cash was needed in the home; they have wrapped new-borns and older loved ones tightly for warmth through the arctic winters; and they have been closely attached to the unstitched cloth that is the Kashmiri shawl. They know, and now as they work in craft making, they recognise this tacit knowledge. Sharifa, one of the older women I have worked with for now over two decades, mentioned that working in this sector makes her realise how much she knows, and that this work helps her feel confident and she speaks about it, and the income she earns, with pride. She feels confident enough to want to help other women work on craft making too.

Craft making is also popular in Kashmir due to the ready availability of raw material, which makes it environmentally and financially sustainable. Local beauty inspires the design and making of crafts and severe winters confine people indoors, when income from agricultural labour reduces to nothing. The crafts sector evidences the presence of expertise and skills, systems of trading, supply chains for raw material, and the presence of local businesses that continue to trade. For women, this pre-existing structure enables them to enter the sector without prior financial or educational investment of any kind. The fluidity of employment in this sector is yet another reason why women choose to work in crafts. As freelance makers who can work on commission, they can earn without being formally employed by any business.

Individual memory of watching, buying, touching, and seeing crafts being made and used in their everyday spaces and places has embodied this tacit uncoded knowledge within Kashmiri women. Their craft speaks a language that is echoed and transmitted across generations as they live through fragilities. Numerous inequalities that women face on account of their intersectional identity are levelled to some degree by their work in this sector. Associated benefits also include achieving dignified livelihoods through engaging in locally valued and culturally relevant work. The conflict has destroyed much that shall need to be rebuilt. And yet, through crafts, what survives brutal geopolitics across generations is the identity of people, and their material cultures, embodied, tacit, resilient, and sustaining (Figures 12.1 and 12.2).

Figure 12.1 Wooden *naqashkari* blocks, Srinagar, India. 2002. Photograph by author.

Figure 12.2 Embroidery on Pashmina, Srinagar, India. March 2004. Photograph by author.

Notes

1 This is an observation based on longitudinal research in the region by the author 2002–2023.
2 My research is built around training in the cultural and creative industries; hence, these were direct requests for bespoke training to be delivered in mid-2023.

3 Vertically integrated here means that one business would be able to complete a shawl without outsourcing any labour processes, in that they would be able to spin, weave, dye, embroider, and finish fabric, as well as retailing or wholesaling it.
4 This trade of fibre from Ladakh has a long history. This history and the politics of trade in Pashmina have a vast amount of literature written about them. See Ahmed (2004) and Maskiell (2002).
5 See works of Olcott (1991), Harris (1996), Ainley and Rainbird (2014), and larger bodies of work on women who spin, in Northern America, Mesoamerica, and Britain.
6 https://thegenderhub.com/projects/culture-and-conflict/.

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