

Pashmina shawl - A traditional way of making in Kashmir

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Since centuries, the handicraft industry is running successfully in beautiful valley of Kashmir. Among handicrafts, *shawl* industry has gained popularity all over the world for the way these *shawls* are being prepared. *Shawl* making in Kashmir is an age old practice over which the artisans have expertise themselves over generations. The *shawls* prepared from *Pashmina* fibre are liked by all irrespective of their age, sex and nation. From ages, *Pashmina shawls* are being prepared in the valley by traditional methods. The objective of the study was to ascertain the processing methodology adapted by local artisans in Kashmir Valley for shawl preparation. In this paper, the processing of *Pashmina* from fibre to the final product (*shawl*) right from harvesting up to finishing is presented in detail.

Keywords: Handicrafts, Kashmir, *Pashmina*, *Shawls*, Traditional

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Kashmir, the paradise on earth is known all over the world not only for its natural beauty in the form of lakes, springs, mountains, meadows, etc. but also for the handicrafts prepared by the *Kashmiri* artisans. Among the handicraft items, the *shawls* have maintained the state of popularity among customers, both domestic and foreigners from centuries. The word *Shawl* has been derived from a Persian word *Shal*. It originally denoted a class of woven fabric rather than a particular article of dress. In Persia, *Shawl* was being worn on a girdle, but in India it is usually carried across the shoulder¹. Although, *Shawl* prepared from any material, anywhere in the world have got their own identity but those prepared in Kashmir are different from all. These *Shawls* are known all over the world for the way they are being prepared right from sorting of raw material to finishing of final product². This *shawl* making is a skill over which *Kashmiri* artisans have expertise themselves over the generation³.

The founder of the *Shawl* industry in Kashmir is king Zain-ul-Abidin who actually taught this art of *Shawl* making to the people of Kashmir by getting experts from Turkistan to Kashmir over hundreds of

years ago. Since then, this art is being transferred from generation over generation⁴.

Shawl is being prepared from almost all sorts of material like wool, silk, angora wool, *Pashmina*, etc. Among all these materials, *Shawl* prepared from *pashmina* is most attractive, soft and elegant. The raw material used for *Pashmina shawls* is a kind of fibers known as *Pashmina*. It has derived its name from Persian word *Pashm* meaning as soft gold⁵. It is known for its fineness, warmth, softness, desirable aesthetic value, and timelessness in fashion. It is the most luxurious fiber and command higher price among all natural fiber⁶. It has occupied a unique position among all the fiber of animal origin, because of its warmth, lightness, handle and its ability to absorb dyes and moisture⁷.

Pashmina is a down fiber or under coat derived from domestic goat known as *Capra hircus* which is native to India⁸. The habitat of these *Pashmina* goats is spread throughout the mountainous region of Central Asia. The area of distribution ranges from China proper through Xinjing into Tibet, Mongolia, Russia, Afghanistan and Iran⁷. The traditional methods of processing, involving dusting, dehairing, combing, spinning, finishing, etc. have given these *Kashmiri Shawls* a special importance all over the world.

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Methodology

Three districts of Kashmir valley, viz. Srinagar, Budgam and Ganderbal where *Pashmina shawl* making is more prevalent were selected for the study. Artisans including both spinners and weavers were selected for the study. Field studies were conducted and selection of the artisans was done on random basis. Semi-structured questionnaire containing open ended questions was used for gathering information about the methodology being adapted for the manufacture of *Pashmina shawls* by traditional methods.

As per the information gathered from the artisans, the traditional method of *shawl* making/processing in Kashmir is divided into four broad heads (Fig.1):

- A) Pre-spinning
- B) Spinning
- C) Weaving
- D) Finishing

A) Pre-spinning processing

1. **Harvesting:** The *Pashmina* is harvested during spring season, when animal naturally shed their under coat. On the basis of weather conditions and season, the goat starts moulting over a period from mid March to late May. It is done manually by combing (Fig. 2). As *pashmina* fibers (Fig. 3) are intermingled with coarse outer coat called guard hairs, so the process of combing is followed by manual dehairing.
2. **Sorting/De-hairing (Puch-Nawun):** Sorting/dehairing means separation of undercoat/*pashmina* from guard hair. The sorting of *pashmina* is done manually, mostly by women folk (Fig. 4). Now-a-days, at some places the process of manual dehairing is being replaced by machine dehairing.
3. **Combing:** Raw *pashmina* is having lot of impurities like vegetable matter, sloughed epithelial cells, dust, etc. with it, which needs to be removed for efficient processing. The objective of combing is to remove these impurities and parallelize the fibres. Traditionally, combing is done by impaling dehaired raw *pashmina* repeatedly on an upright comb (10 cm wide, set on a wooden stand). The small lumps of fibers are straightened on the teeth of the comb by drawing each tuft through it by hand (Fig. 6). The process is repeated 3 or 4 times until the tuft seen is in a clean enough state to be spun

The step of combing is eliminated when machine dehaired *pashmina* is used for processing.

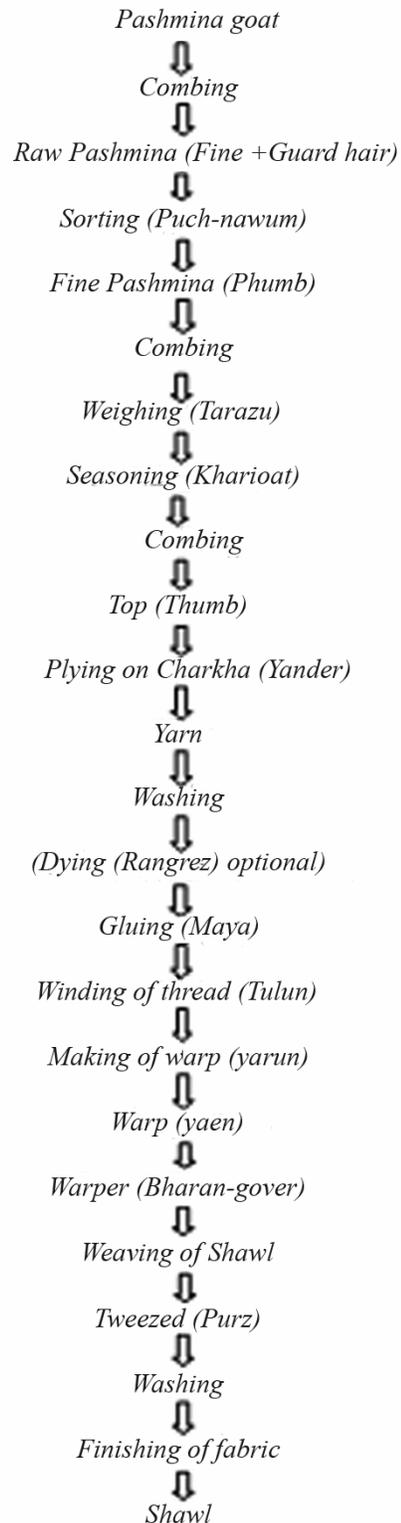


Fig. 1—A flow chart showing the steps of processing of *Pashmina shawl*

4. **Glueing:** Glueing means application of glueing material to *pashmina*. This is done by applying pounded rice. The *pashmina* is placed in a container over which pounded powdered rice (*kharioat*) is sprinkled and left on *pashmina* for a night or two (Fig. 5). The purpose of glueing is to provide extra strength, moisture and softness to the fiber. *Pashmina* is again combed to get rid of all traces of the crushed rice powder. The *pashmina* so cleaned is now given a shape of a patty, locally called *thumb* (Fig. 7).

B) Spinning

Spinning converts continuous untwisted strand of fibers into required yarn count and twist suitable for further processing. Traditionally, spinning is being carried out on a spinning wheel termed *yander or charkha* (Fig. 8). In this method, a small tuft/thumb of *pashmina* is held between the second and third finger of the left hand supported by the thumb. As the spinner turns the wheel with her right hand, she raises and lowers the hand holding the fiber in a perfect harmony to the rhythm of turning wheel. This is a skillful operation. The yarn produced by spinning wheel is spun on a grass straw or any light holder locally called *phumblet*. The spun yarn on these holders is doubled on hand reeler. The double yarn is subjected to twisting/pilling on the same *charkha* with the direction of twist reversed. These yarns are then made into hanks on the wooden reeler locally called *Yarandul* (Fig. 9) for marketing.

C) Weaving

Weaving is started with opening of the hanks (Fig. 10) on the large wooden stand locally called *thanjoor* (Fig. 11) and is mounted on a wooden spindle termed as *prech* (Fig. 12). The yarn is separated for use as wrap and weft and is weighed before weaving. If the yarn needs to be dyed at this stage, it is sent to the dyer (*rangrez*). The yarn is washed with *reetha* soap in luke warm water and sun dried. After drying, yarn is reeled back on racks. The next stage is to make the warp. It is the warp-maker's job to twist the yarn into the required thickness and strength for wrap. The spun yarn is now placed in a copper bowl, where it is steeped in a rice water starch called *maya*. This is taken out after two days and spread out in the sun to dry. The dried yarn is wound now on wooden spool called *prech*, whereas the process is called *tulun*. Four to six rods are being erected into the ground. Two persons work together

and transfer yarn from *prech* onto the iron rods by using sticks. This process is called *yarun* (Fig. 13). About 1200 threads are stretched in this manner to form warp locally called *yaen* which is enough for 4 to 6 shawls.

The warp (*yaen*) is now given to wrap-dresser (*Bharan-gour*) to stretch the wrap. He spends a week or so to fix each wrap thread in the *saaz* (heddles of the loom). The loom is constructed of wood with a bench on which two people can sit comfortably (Fig. 14). During the course of weaving, if a thread breaks, as it frequently does, the weaver picks another skein from the bunch that hangs in front of him on the loom. Approximately 10% wastage is considered acceptable during the weaving process. The finished length of woven material is known as *thaan*. This is washed in cold water with powdered soap nut, *reetha* or of special soap made from similar herbal ingredients.

D) Finishing

1. **Purzgar with wouch:** The washed fabric is now sent to the *purzgar*. Here the fabric is tweezed, clipped or brushed out to rid it of any superficial flaw on the surface. The frame on which this process is carried out consists of two heavy beams of approximately 2/3 m in diameter and 1.25 m long that are set at an angle of 45° and at a distance of a meter from each other. The fabric is mounted on these rollers named mound and held taut between the two where it is worked on to remove uneven thread by long handled tweezers called *wouch*.
2. **Kasher:** In this, the cloth is rubbed with a dried wiry core of gourd, bitter gourd, or a maize cob known as *kasher*.
3. **Washing:** The fabric is now washed by washer man or *dhobi* who washes the fabric in running water, by repeatedly striking it against a hard smooth surface or stone.
4. **Dyeing:** If the fabric needs to be dyed, it is sent to the dyer who dyes it as per the demand and requirement.
5. **Stretching:** The fabric is rolled and left stretched for several days. It is then ironed packed in plastic bags and finally handed over to the broker (*dral*) who sells it. The plain shawl (Fig. 15) is then sold @ Rs 5000–6000/ piece while the cost of embroidered shawl (Fig. 16) varies, depending upon the quality and quantity of embroidery work (hand made embroidery work), and starts from Rs 10000/piece.



Fig. 2—Harvesting of *Pashmina* by combing; Fig. 3—Raw *Pashmina*; Fig. 4—Manual Dehairing of Raw *Pashmina*; Fig. 5—Gluing of Dehaired *Pashmina*; Fig. 6—Combing of Dehaired *Pashmina*; Fig. 7—Thumb formed after combing; Fig. 8—Spinning of *Pashmina*; Fig. 9—Plying of *Pashmina* yarn to make Hank; Fig. 10—Hank of *Pashmina* Yarn; Fig. 11—Opening of Yarn from Hank; Fig. 12—Mounting of yarn on wooden; Fig. 13—Warp formation spindle *Prech*; Fig. 14—weaving of *Pashmina* Shawl on Handloom; Fig. 15—Plain *Pashmina* shawls Fig. 16—Embroidered *Pashmina* Shawls

Discussion

From the findings regarding methodologies being adapted for the preparation of *Pashmina shawls*, it was observed that the *Pashmina shawls* are prepared in Kashmir valley by adapting mostly traditional practices. The *shawls* prepared in this way are designated as Hand spun Handmade *shawls* having long life with no pile formation⁹ and fetches higher price in the market. Our observation was in agreement with the earlier findings⁹, wherein it has reported that the overall quality of *Kashmiri* hand spun handmade *shawl* is significantly better than machine spun *shawls*. The Total Hand Value of Handmade *pashmina* shawls has been found highly significant than machine made *shawls*¹⁰ which further shows the importance of *Kashmiri Pashmina shawls* for its quality, hence liked by consumers including tourists both domestic and foreigners. The long life of these *shawls* is attributed to the less damage caused to the delicate fibres during traditional practices of processing which does not involve the harsh chemical and mechanical treatments as is observed in machine spun products⁹. Keeping the popularity, better quality and prevention against imitation of *kashmiri Pashmina shawls* in to consideration, the Geographical Indication Registry, Govt of India, awarded patent to *Kashmiri* Hand spun handmade *Pashmina Shawls* on 23th September 2008 under the name *Kashmiri Pashmina*¹¹.

Conclusion

From the study, it is concluded that the *Pashmina shawls* in Kashmir valley are prepared/manufactured by adapting the traditional practices during processing right from harvesting up to the finishing stage of the final product. The adaption of traditional practices makes the product durable with long life because of absence of harsh chemical and mechanical damages. Although, the traditional practices leads to a durable quality products but is full of physical stress in the

form of backache, numbness in legs etc during processing steps viz; spinning and weaving, besides being less remunerative. Hence the need of a time is to develop/improve the processing technique/tools which will reduce the stress and improve efficiency during processing.

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