

Pashmina: The Kashmir Shawl and Beyond

Pascale Dollfus

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Pashmina: The Kashmir shawl and beyond

by Janet Rizvi with Monisha Ahmed.

Mumbai: Mārg Publications, 2009, pp. 324, incl. numerous illustrations (chiefly in colour), maps, glossary, bibliography; index; 32 cm
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Reviewed by Pascale Dollfus¹

No handcrafted item has ever been at the centre of such high-power politics, business, romance and fashion as the Kashmir shawl woven from the soft fleece of goats herded on the high altitude plateaus of Inner Asia. While much has been written about its trade in Europe and the role played by Napoleon Bonaparte and Empress Josephine in spreading the fashion of wearing such a shawl, less is known about the textile itself, its history and its place in the lives of people around the world, in both the East and the West.² This lacuna has now been filled with *Pashmina: The Kashmir Shawl and Beyond* written by Janet Rizvi in collaboration with Monisha Ahmed. Both authors have some experience of living in the Himalayan region and have previously contributed essays on textile production to several authoritative reference works.

Indeed, with this book, Janet Rizvi completes her study of trades and traders in Ladakh, which began with *Transhimalayan Caravans: Merchant Princes and Peasant Traders in Ladakh* (2000), a book combining historical documentation with interviews with eighty informants who were themselves active traders. Monisha Ahmed, who spent many months living among a nomadic community in Eastern Ladakh researching their lifestyle with particular reference to their textiles, contributed Chapter 2 ‘Changra and Changpa: The Goats and Their Herders’, as well as several subsections dealing with the situation of pashmina today.

This lavishly illustrated book—appropriate visuals are placed alongside the text on every page—follows the shawl’s journey from the windswept plateaus of Tibet and Ladakh where the fibre is produced to shawl dealers’ establishments in places as far apart as Delhi, New York and Paris, and charts

1 I would like to thank Bernadette Sellers for checking the English.

2 See, among others, Frank Ames, John Irwin and Monique Lévi-Strauss.

its course from the Mughal courts to the global markets of the twenty-first century. The volume is divided into five parts, organized around 14 chapters, and includes maps, photographs, appendices, notes, references, a bibliography, a glossary and an index.

The first part of the book, entitled 'The Fibre', introduces the reader to the raw material of Kashmir shawls: the *pashm*. This originally Farsi but now Urdu word refers to the soft fleece that grows under the hairy coat of animals, especially goats, which helps them to survive freezing temperatures. The most sought after *pashm* belongs to the Tibetan antelope and is known as *toosh* or *shahtoosh* ('royal toosh') because it delivers the warmest and finest textile. However, as Janet Rizvi clearly points out, thus destroying a myth. The wool for this fleece is not harvested from bushes, thorns and rocks, as is often said, but can only be obtained by killing the animal. Only since 2001-2002, when judicial and legislative decisions made all trade in Tibetan antelope derivatives illegal in Jammu and Kashmir, have large-scale commercial hunts ceased, thus helping to save the endangered Tibetan antelope from extinction. After this section, Monisha Ahmed discusses the goats and their herders. Taking as an example the case of the nomadic pastoralists of Rupshu in Eastern Ladakh, where she lived for many months, she provides a brief sketch of the daily life of these people as they follow their herds, and offers an overview of the gathering of the fibre which starts in June as the weather turns warmer. It is interesting to note that while nomads weave sheep wool and yak fleece as well as the hair of goats and yaks, and use these materials to make clothes, blankets, saddlebags and black tents, they have never processed *pashm* but have rather always sold it on as raw material to traders. This trade from nomad encampments to the markets and Kashmiri wholesalers is described in Chapter 3. It was traditionally conducted on the basis of a relationship established over generations, but it changed radically in the 1950s after the complete closure of the border between China and India following the Aksai-Chin conflict in 1962.

Comprising two chapters (4 and 5), the second part of the volume, 'The Textile', is entirely devoted to the transformation of this 'unpromising material' into one of the world's most delicate fabrics. Janet Rizvi shares with the reader her deep admiration for the gifted people of Kashmir who are endowed with 'magic in the fingers.' She argues that the highly refined

technique of making the *kani* shawl, a unique 2:2 twill tapestry,³ is rooted in ancient skills and was most probably invented in Kashmir. She describes in great detail the process of manufacturing shawls that has changed very little since it was first documented by William Moorcroft in 1823. Every step of dehairing, removing grease and other impurities, spinning, dyeing, making the warp, weaving, embroidering and even remodelling and recycling old shawls is duly illustrated with photographs, and with miniature paintings when it concerns Mughal times.

Special attention is devoted to the multifloral *buta* (or *boteh*), the dominant motif known in English as paisley,⁴ and ‘his small cousin’, the *buti*, a single flower, which is sometimes so simplified as to be abstract. The influence of Iran is identified as a factor in the adoption of this classic flower motif and its later development into a floral cypress that flourished on the four main types of shawl: shoulder-mantles, sashes, square shawls and garment-pieces. As in the previous chapter, this particularly long (60 pages) and somewhat technical chapter on designers and designs is accompanied by welcome visuals and illustrations.

In the third part of the book, which is devoted to history, Rizvi examines the various sources available on the Kashmir pashmina industry and points out that only in the late 17th century did pictorial documentation correlate with historical records to prove its existence. Indeed, miniature paintings show that shoulder-mantles had already been in vogue earlier. Yet the drape and the bulk of the material depicted by the artists, as well as the sober colours of the shawls, suggest that the material was pashmina rather than silk or cotton. But, as the author jokes, ‘none of them, unfortunately, [is] labelled “purest pashmina-made in Kashmir”.’ She then gives a thorough and comprehensive account of the Kashmir shawl business in the 19th century, principally drawn from Moorcroft’s notebooks of his six-year journey (preserved in the British Library in London) and

3 The twill-tapestry technique consists of weaving the weft threads, which form the pattern, around the warps only where each particular colour is required by the design. The weft is passed alternately over two and under two warps. It never seems to have been widespread anywhere in the world, with the sole exception of the *termeh* of Iran — described in Chapter 8 — which is the only textile that bears a resemblance to the Kashmir shawl.

4 The name comes from Paisley, a town in southwest Scotland where machine-woven imitations of Kashmir shawls were produced at a very low cost to meet the 19th century demand for such pieces of fabric from women.

Jacquemont's books. This exploitative system, which from the very beginning practically turned workers into serfs, was 'a commercial, export-oriented operation, organized and run by men, women having only a small (though essential) role in the manufacturing process.' The complexity of the process, combined with the great number of specialist workers involved in pashmina production, required a high level of organization, portrayed here in excruciating detail. Indeed, the reader is sometimes overwhelmed, becoming lost in translations between *daroga*, *phukari*, *wafurosh*, *alwan*, *rafugar*, *ustad*, *shal baf* and so on. There are many vernacular terms which, although explained when they first occur in the text and most of which appear in the Index, are unfortunately absent from the Glossary.

The fourth part of the book, 'By Land and Sea', tells of the odyssey of this fabulous textile that was for centuries an indispensable item for the nobility and the rich merchant class in India and abroad. Because of its beauty, and even more because of its high price, the shawl served as a sign of wealth and position. It made its way into every Indian court, as far as South India, through middlemen who conducted their business all over the country and beyond. Kashmir shawl goods reached their apotheosis during the rule of Ranjit Singh (r. 1801-1839), who conquered Kashmir in 1819, during which time they became one of the main sources of income for the Sikh ruler's kingdom. They also made up a major part of Indian exports to Central and Western Asia, to Egypt and as far away as Europe and North America. In France, though a few Kashmir shawls were seen before Napoleon's military expedition to Egypt in 1798, the fashion of wearing a *doshala*—two shawls stitched back to back so that the wrong side is not visible—only took off when a number of French officers presented them to their wives and lady friends. As a sign of its success, the Kashmir shawl was copied, and manufactured Western shawls 'imitating cashmere' were produced at lower prices in France and in Scotland—in particular in the town of Paisley—to meet the insatiable demand. Soon Western manufacturers started looking for regular supplies of goat-fleece at better prices, first for machine-woven shawls and then for knitted outdoor clothes or 'Cashmere', from Russia, Central Asia, Mongolia and China. Meanwhile, back in the Kashmir valley in India, the twill-tapestry technique survived the 19th century recession. While to this day, women spin and weavers weave, the structure of the industry, which now produces mainly embroidered shawls, as well as the working conditions—thankfully for the workers—have radically changed.

To conclude, *Pashmina: The Kashmir Shawl and Beyond* is a major contribution to the study of this amazing aspect of India's material culture that conquered the world. Easy to read, it is an extremely useful compilation of information on the history of the Kashmir shawl spanning four centuries, extending from the Tibetan plateau to the United States. The book has much to offer textile scholars and those interested in the pre-modern economy. Once again, I must emphasise the careful analysis of the pictorial and documentary evidence as well as the high quality of the illustrations and layout. My only regret when closing this book was that this magnificent epic, seen here on paper, has not been made available to a wider audience in the form of an exhibition.