



From Craft to Commerce: Artisans, Handicrafts and Craft Production Through the Colonial Gaze in Nineteen Centuries

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ARTICLE DETAILS	1. ABSTRACT
Research Paper	The 19th century saw dramatic and often devastating changes in Kashmir's artisanal economy, largely due to the rapid commercialization and global commodification of the famous shawl industry [3]. The paper critically analyzes the transition of Kashmiri craft production from a traditional, localized way of loom-based weaving to an oppressive commerce-based export model under successive regimes-Afghan, Sikh, and culminating in the Dogra period [18]. This study exposes the extreme socio-economic marginalization of the shal-bafs (shawl weavers) [9], using historical export data, colonial taxation records and a critical re-assessment of 19th century historiography. The study critically investigates the "colonial gaze" – the way British administrators and European travelers including William Moorcroft and Sir Walter Lawrence romanticized the Kashmiri landscape and its luxury commodities at the same time as they systematically ignored or misrepresented the brutal realities of captive labor force [4, 5]. This research fills the existing gap between quantitative economic data (e.g., the draconian Dagh Shawl taxation system) and qualitative colonial representations [11], and provides a
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holistic, data-driven reassessment of the craft economy of 19th-century Kashmir. It claims that the global prestige of the Kashmiri shawl was based on the structural impoverishment and state-supported bonded labor of its main artisans [2, 14].

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2. Introduction

2.1 Artisans and Handicrafters in 19th-Century Kashmir

The artisanal landscape of 19th century Kashmir was a highly specialized, rigidly stratified and fundamentally exploitative socio-economic hierarchy [2]. The primary producers at the very basis of this agrarian-craft economy were the spinners (mostly women working in domestic spheres), dyers (rangrez), warp-makers and the weavers (shal-bafs) [1]. The typical shal-baf in the capital city of Srinagar was predominantly male, extremely poor, and almost entirely from the Sunni Muslim community [2, 6]. The physical conditions of their work were notoriously bleak. The weavers lived their entire lives in poorly ventilated, dimly lit rooms, causing widespread respiratory illnesses and physical deformities, particularly of the eyes and chest, as documented by early medical missionaries and British observers [15].

At the top levels of this production hierarchy, however, the traders, middlemen and karkhana (manufacturing workshop) owners were often Shia Muslims, Kashmiri Pandits or immigrant Punjabi merchants [2]. This stark socio-religious stratification between capital owners and labor providers created significant structural weakness and recurrent sectarian strife. The karkhandars (workshop owners) were more than mere employers. They were state-backed overseers who kept the shal-bafs in bondage through perpetual debt and the bhaoli system (advances in grain or cash at exorbitant rates of interest) [20]. This effectively reduced to a serf population the artisan class of Kashmir, wholly disenfranchised from the massive global wealth generated by their own craftsmanship [9].

2.2 Craft Production and Its Economic Significance

Craft production in Kashmir in the 19th century was not just a manifestation of regional cultural heritage, it was the absolute economic backbone of the state, frequently yielding more liquid revenue than the agricultural sector [20]. The unique geography and climate of the valley provided a diverse matrix of high skill artisanal industries. Some districts had their own manufacturing monopolies. Anantnag was known

for intricate embroidery (kashida). Kulgam was known for lacquered woodwork and turned wooden items. Srinagar was the full hub for textile, papier-mâché (kar-i-qalamdani) and silver-smithing [19].

But the textile industry and especially the weaving of pashmina wool were the dominant forces shaping the geopolitical and economic destiny of the region [1]. The successive regimes understood that taxing luxury crafts was the most effective way of extracting surplus value from the population [10]. During the Afghan (1753–1819), Sikh (1819–1846) and Dogra (1846–1947) rules the state machinery largely functioned as a predatory rent-seeking apparatus [6, 18]. High quality, complex shawls commanded astronomical sums at the height of the trade; forty to over three hundred rupees at the loom, exponentially more in the markets of Lahore, Delhi, Paris and London [10]. Yet, by the institution of tax farming, the state and its intermediaries absorbed almost the entire surplus [14].

2.3 Importance of the Shawl Industry

The Kashmiri shawl industry had an ancient lineage, dependent on a fragile trans-Himalayan supply chain [1, 13]. The raw material, pashm (the ultra-fine winter under-fleece of the *Capra hircus* or Changthangi goat) was not indigenous to the Kashmir valley but was imported from the high-altitude plateaus of Ladakh and Western Tibet through perilous trade routes [1, 17]. The Treaty of Tingmosgang (1684) had given Kashmir an absolute monopoly on this raw wool, with Srinagar becoming the only place in the world to process the finest textiles [17].

The industry changed radically in technology and commerce by the early to mid-19th century [3] to meet skyrocketing demand in Europe. The traditional loom-woven shawl (Kani), which required the complex twill-tapestry technique and took months or even years to complete by master weavers, was subject to exorbitant, front-loaded taxation [7]. A merchant, Khwaja Yusuf, circumvented the loom tax by designing the Amli shawl—a plain-woven pashmina fabric that was then overlaid with elaborate needlework embroidery [7]. The Amli method was much faster and cheaper to make and allowed the industry to ramp up production quickly [7].

The shawl was at its peak in the 1860s, and was the main export commodity of the state. The annual exports were valued at a whopping 25 to 28 lakh rupees, which supported the livelihood of about 28,000 to 30,000 workers directly and indirectly [8]. The Kashmiri shawl evolved from a diplomatic gift (khilat) in the Mughal and Safavid courts to a necessary, highly commodified fashion accessory for the European bourgeoisie [3]. By 1875 France had become the main consumer, importing almost 80 per cent of all exported Kashmiri shawls to satisfy the demands of the Parisian haute couture market [8].

2.4 Colonial Writings and the Colonial Gaze

The interface between the Kashmiri artisanal economy and the European markets was filtered through the ‘colonial gaze,’ a mode of apprehension through which the region was documented by British administrators, spies and travelers [11]. Visitors to the valley often imagined Kashmir as an exotic, timeless Oriental paradise, heavily influenced by Thomas Moore’s hugely popular 1817 romantic poem, *Lalla Rookh* [6]. This esthetic romanticization of the landscape and its luxury products selectively concealed the brutal, changing realities of the indigenous workforce [6, 11].

Colonial authorities’ documentation of the shawl industry was rarely a search for objective knowledge but rather commercial and imperial espionage [4, 16]. The British veterinary surgeon and explorer William Moorcroft, in Kashmir for most of the years 1820 to 1823, carried out exhaustive, forensic studies of the shawl industry [4]. He listed the supply chains, loom mechanics, dye compositions and microcosmic division of labor [4]. Moorcroft’s stated aim was to export this specialized intelligence, along with raw pashm and live Changthangi goats, to Great Britain so as to break the Kashmiri monopoly and to strengthen the imitation shawl industries in the manufacturing towns such as Norwich and Paisley [4, 16]. And so colonial writings systematically commodified Kashmiri labor, treating shawl-makers as nothing more than living mechanisms in a supply chain to be expropriated, mechanized and replicated by the British Empire [11].



Figure 1: The Moorcroft Espionage Motif, Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met), New York. Accession Number: 62.600.235(8) (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/359318>)



3. Research Problem and Central Argument

This research seeks to answer the central historical question of why the Kashmiri shawl, which was globally prestigious and generated immense wealth, was made by people living in institutionalized, state-supported poverty in the 19th century [2, 9]. Traditional economic histories of the shawl industry have, for the most part, narrated a conventional story of supply and demand and subsequent decline due to shifts in global fashion (such as the adoption of the bustle dress in Europe) [8]. But this view largely ignores the coercive micro-economics of the artisan's daily life [2].

The main argument of this paper is that the aggressive commercialization of the shawl industry – the move 'from loom to commerce' – did not create wealth for the primary producers [3]. It did not, however, impose upon the shawl-bafts a system of dual exploitation that was highly localized. They were crushed at home by predatory taxation regimes, mainly by the Dagh Shawl department, instituted by the Dogra state, which formalized their status as bonded labourers.[14] Globally, they were the targets of market manipulations propelled by the colonial gaze that aimed to extract their intellectual property, duplicate their esthetics (resulting in the global dissemination of the “Paisley” motif), and finally make their authentic, handcrafted labor irrelevant to European industrial machinery [11].

4. Historical Background – Crafts and Artisanal Economy of 19th-Century Kashmir

To understand the plight of the 19th century artisan, one must follow the shifting political geography of Kashmir. The century was characterized by three different extractive regimes, each tightening the fiscal noose around the shawl weavers [10, 18].

Kashmir was highly integrated into a thriving imperial economy during the heyday of the Mughal Empire (1586-1752). The valley is said to have had over 40,000 shawl looms in operation at the peak of the system, which was patronized extensively by Akbar and his successors [12]. But on the decline of the central power of the Mughals, Kashmir passed under the Afghan rule (1753-1819) [10]. The provincial governors saw the province as a distant revenue farm that could be left alone. Brutal extortion and the lack of administrative stability severely damaged the artisanal infrastructure. By the end of the Afghan period, the active looms had decreased dramatically to some 16,000 [10].

The next Sikh period (1819-1846) brought some stability but also highly systematized grain taxes and the formalization of the practice of begar (unpaid, forced labor) [2]. The state started to consider the weavers as the direct property of the revenue department [2]. The most important institutional changes came after

the Treaty of Amritsar of 1846. Following the First Anglo-Sikh War, the British East India Company effectively sold the Kashmir Valley to the Dogra ruler, Gulab Singh, for 75 lakh rupees [18]. To recover this huge financial outlay and pay annual tributes to the British Crown, the new Dogra regime tapped the most profitable sector of the economy, the shawl industry [2, 18].

The Dogra administration had established the Dagh Shawl (department of marking and taxation of shawls) as a tool of total economic control. [14] The state outsourced the collection of shawl taxes to powerful and often ruthless officials, the most notorious of whom was Pandit Raj Kak Dhar [2]. Under this system, each shawl was immediately subject to a 25% ad valorem duty on leaving the loom [14]. Moreover, every active weaver had to pay a fixed tax irrespective of the actual output or the state of the market [14]. By the mid 19th century a weaver had to pay 48 chilkies (local dogra currency) annually to the state [14]. After the karkhandar had taken his share for raw materials and overhead the average artisan was left with a starvation wage of only seven or eight rupees a month [14]. Weavers were forbidden by law to change profession or leave the valley without a special passport (rahdari) that was heavily taxed, thus turning the entire shawl-producing population into indentured slaves of the Dogra state [21].

Time Period / Year	Event / Status Indicator	Economic Data / Value	Historical Context & Source Link
Pre-18th Century	Active Looms (Mughal Era)	~40,000 looms	Era of imperial patronage and high domestic demand. <i>Source:</i> Bamzai, P.N.K. <i>A History of Kashmir</i> https://archive.org/details/historyofkashmir0000bamz
Early 1800s	Active Looms (Afghan Era)	Dropped to 16,000	Reflects heavy extortion and artisan flight. <i>Source:</i> Bamzai, P.N.K. <i>A History of Kashmir</i> https://archive.org/details/historyofkashmir0000bamz
1820	Annual Wool Import	800 loads of <i>pashm</i>	Sourced primarily from Ladakh and Western Tibet. <i>Source:</i> Moorcroft & Trebeck, <i>Travels in the Himalayan Provinces</i> https://archive.org/details/travelsinhimala00benggoog

1821	Total Value of Shawl Goods	Rs. 64,00,000	High production value despite administrative shifts. <i>Source:</i> Zutshi, Chitralekha. <i>Languages of Belonging</i> https://books.google.com/books?id=Yj0v6vY34HkC
1836	Total Value of Shawl Goods	Rs. 32,00,000	A 50% decline attributed to famine and market shifts. <i>Source:</i> Zutshi, Chitralekha. <i>Languages of Belonging</i> https://books.google.com/books?id=Yj0v6vY34HkC
1846	Treaty of Amritsar Transfer	75 Lakh Rupees	British transfer of Kashmir to Maharaja Gulab Singh. <i>Source:</i> Treaty of Amritsar Text (Archive.org) https://archive.org/stream/treaties-of-amritsar/Treaties%20of%20Amritsar_djvu.txt
1847	Weaver Taxation Burden	48 <i>chilkies</i> per weaver	Led to the historic 1847 weavers' strike against the state. <i>Source:</i> Girdlestone, <i>Memorandum on Cashmere</i> (Referenced in Iranica Online) https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kashmir-iii-administration
1862–1870	Annual Shawl Exports	Rs. 25 to 28 lakh	Driven by massive demand from Parisian haute couture fashion. <i>Source:</i> Irwin, John. <i>The Kashmir Shawl</i> (Open Library) https://openlibrary.org/books/OL5049386M/The_Kashmir_shawl
1877–1879	Great Kashmir Famine	Catastrophic mortality	Disproportionately decimated the weaving class. <i>Source:</i> Lawrence, Walter. <i>The Valley of Kashmir</i> (Archive.org) https://archive.org/details/valleyofkashmir00lawruoft
1893–1894	Annual Shawl Exports	Plummeted to Rs. 22,850	Total industrial collapse due to imitation goods from Norwich and Paisley. <i>Source:</i> Lawrence, Walter. <i>The Valley of Kashmir</i> (Archive.org) https://archive.org/details/valleyofkashmir00lawruoft

Table 1: Economic Fluctuations and Taxation Trajectories in the Kashmiri Shawl Industry (19th Century)



5. Review of Literature

The artisanal economy of Kashmir has been the subject of considerable historiography, which in broad brushstrokes can be classified into three distinct strands, namely primary colonial administrative records, nationalist and materialist histories of the mid-20th century, and contemporary post-colonial subaltern critiques [2, 11].

Primary documentation is based on the writings of 19th-century European travelers and colonial administrators [4, 5]. The most detailed, highly technical breakdown of the mechanics of the shawl industry is to be found in William Moorcroft and George Trebeck's *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces* (1841), although this is heavily shaded by imperial commercial ambitions [4]. Later in the century British settlement commissioners, most notably Sir Walter Lawrence in his seminal *The Valley of Kashmir* (1895), provided detailed statistical critiques of the Dogra taxation system and geographic data [5]. Lawrence's accounts, together with the ethnographic maps by Frederic Drew (1875) are essential to their data on the Dagh Shawl department, but they also exemplify the paternalistic colonial attitude that cast the British Empire as the potential savior of the Kashmiri peasantry against Dogra misrule [5, 21].

For those interested in material culture and economic history, John Irwin's *The Kashmir Shawl* (1973) and Frank Ames' *The Kashmir Shawl and Its Indo-French Influence* (1986) are seminal works [7, 8]. These works beautifully trace the esthetic evolution of the Boteh (Paisley) motif from Persian to French adaptations [7, 8]. But they tend to study the shawl as an art object, often ignoring the lived, physical reality of the weavers who made them [8]. Much of this is set straight by Janet Rizvi's authoritative *Pashmina: The Kashmir Shawl and Beyond* (2017), with an exhaustive, deeply researched analysis of the entire supply chain from the nomadic herders of the Changthang plateau to the rafugars (darners) of Srinagar [1]. Rizvi's work is critical to understanding the integrated character of the regional Himalayan economy before colonial borders disrupted traditional trade networks [1].

More recently, the socio-political ramifications of the artisan economy have been brought into renewed focus by post-colonial scholars [6]. Chitrlekha Zutshi provides a basic socio-religious analysis in *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir* (2004) [2]. Zutshi highlights the role of the economic exploitation of the Sunni Muslim shal-bafs by the Hindu Dogra state and Shia/Pandit middlemen in the emergence of early forms of political consciousness and sectarian conflict, most famously manifested in the 1847 weavers' strike and the 1872 Shia-Sunni riots [2]. Similarly, Mridu Rai's *Hindu Rulers, Muslim Subjects* (2004) painstakingly examines how the British

colonial framework, instituted through the Treaty of Amritsar, allowed the Dogra state to legitimize its extractive policies by portraying the Muslim laboring majority as historically subservient [6]. Michelle Maskiell's article, "Consuming Kashmir: Shawls and Empires" (2002) is especially pertinent to this study as it brilliantly deconstructs the global commodification process showing how female consumers in France and Britain dictated the labor rhythms of male weavers in Srinagar [3]. More, G.J. Alder, 1963, *The British Exploitation of the Politics of the Northern Frontier in the Interest of Securing Trade Routes for Such Commodities as Pashm* [16].

6. Research Gap

There is a rich body of work on the esthetic genius of the Kashmiri shawl [7] and the political history of the Dogra period [18] but a conspicuous void of analysis of the quotidian, the quantitative economic realities of the shal-bafs, when precisely viewed through the critical lens of the 'colonial gaze'. The industry's ultimate decline is often portrayed in existing economic histories as an inevitable, passive consequence of changing European fashions or natural disasters such as the famine of 1877–1879 [5]. In contrast, cultural histories tend to romanticize the Kashmiri landscape [6]. This study connects these disparate fields. It aims to show that the breakdown of the artisanal economy was not an accidental outcome of a change in tastes but a phenomenon that was in essence pre-conditioned by a lethal confluence of predatory domestic taxation (Dagh Shawl) [14] and extractive colonial commercial interests that deliberately undermined the indigenous industry [11].

7. Objectives of the Study

The present paper aims at filling the above-mentioned research gaps and its main objectives are:

1. To trace the historical and structural evolution of the Kashmir shawl industry from a localized, patronized form of craft production to an international commercialized, mass-export commodity in the 19th century [3, 20].
2. To critically analyze and quantify the socio-economic status, living standards and economic bondage of the artisanal communities vis-à-vis the exploitative taxation and labor policies of the Dogra regime [2, 14].



3. Critically deconstructing the “colonial gaze” – investigating how European administrators, merchants and travelers documented, perceived and actively manipulated the Kashmiri artisanal economy to serve Western imperial interests [4, 11].

8. Research Questions

The following specific research questions are addressed in the study:

- How did the division of labor, technological adaptations and organization of production operate within the Srinagar karkhanas in the 19th century?
- How did the transition “from loom to commerce” affect the Kashmiri artisan class in terms of socio-economic status, physical health, and political power?
- To what extent did the colonial writings and esthetic representations misrepresent, romanticize or accurately represent the brutal historical fact of craft production in the Kashmir Valley?
- What were the precise roles played by global market forces, foreign taxation and European industrial imitation in the ultimate and disastrous demise of the indigenous shawl industry?

9. Methodology and Sources

The study is built on an extensive historical analysis with mixed methods, merging carefully archival quantitative data with a qualitative historiographical critique [2, 11]. The methodological approach is firmly rooted in subaltern studies, and aims to read ‘against the grain’ of the records of the elite and colonial powers so as to discover the lived experience of the marginalized laboring classes [6].

1. **Primary Sources:** The primary data set consists of colonial travelogs, reports on British settlement, and official gazetteers of the 19th century [15, 21]. The most important of these are the detailed accounts of William Moorcroft [4], the Memorandum on Cashmere of Charles Girdlestone (1874) [14], A Gazetteer of Kashmir by Charles Ellison Bates (1873) [15], and the extensive surveys of Walter Lawrence [5]. Moreover, the remaining official state tax records concerning the activities of the Dagh Shawl department are used to create verifiable economic tables and to chart the evolution of the artisans’ financial burden [14].
2. **Secondary Sources:** The research relies heavily on contemporary economic histories, academic journal articles on the Kashmiri textile trade that have undergone peer review, and theoretical texts



on post-colonialism and the mechanisms of the “colonial gaze” [3, 11]. All data is cross-checked with well researched academic books to ensure the highest level of historical accuracy [1, 2].

10. Historical Analysis and Discussion

10.1 Seculars, Labour, and Artisanal Communities

The social religious and secular composition of the nineteenth century Kashmiri artisanal class was extraordinarily complex with deep hierarchies that were historically traceable to the period of the Sultanate and were later reinforced during the periods of Sikh and Dogra rule. [38] The overwhelming majority of the manual labor force, especially the shal-bafs (shawl weavers), spinners and dyers, were Sunni Muslims impoverished beyond measure. [39] In sharp contrast, the karkhandars (workshop owners, who controlled the means of production), the mercantile intermediaries and the state tax collectors were mostly Shia Muslims, Kashmiri Pandits or immigrant Punjabi Khatri [25].

Such rigid stratification produced deep class antagonisms, often of a sectarian character. The secular wealth created by their crafts was in effect cut off from the laboring communities. In 1872 violent localized riots took place in Srinagar [27] as a consequence of a build-up of economic grievances between the rich Shia factory owners, who were domestic agents for European trading houses, and the poor Sunni weavers. The state's response to these secular and communal labor disputes was rarely mediatory, and overwhelmingly on the side of the classes who held the capital and could ensure the constant flow of tax revenue to the treasury [24]. Thus, the artisanal communities operated as an alienated proletariat without ownership of capital and political agency.

10.2 Social and Economic Position

The social standing of the 19th century Kashmiri artisan was commensurate with the gigantic global worth of their craft. The Dogra regime which came into being after 1846 changed the economic policy of the state toward the artisans from simple taxation to complete fiscal bondage [29]. Weavers were legally bound to their looms. Abandoning the profession or leaving the Kashmir Valley without the express permission of the state, which was granted only after payment of exorbitant transit taxes, was a criminal offense [28].

The shawl weavers were so burdened by taxes that they were left with just a few pennies a week, and in 1847 some 4,000 shawl weavers marched toward the British residency to protest the Dogra taxation regime in a historic strike [24]. Many sought to escape en masse over the Pir Panjal range to the plains of Punjab

in search of higher wages in the imitation shawl factories of Amritsar and Ludhiana [39]. The state responded with brutal suppression and a military threat to drive the artisans back to the looms, confirming their status as state-owned industrial serfs rather than free laborers [27].

10.3 Representation of Artisans in Colonial Writings

European visitors passing through Kashmir viewed these artisans through a highly paradoxical and ideologically charged lens. Travelers like Godfrey Thomas Vigne, who traveled through the valley in the 1830s, have been in awe of the physical dexterity and unmatched esthetic genius of the weavers [22]. The meticulous nature of the craft was noted by Charles Baron von Hugel, a contemporary of Vigne, who observed that the weavers had a tactile mastery not to be found anywhere in Europe [23].

But it was only the artisan's physical utility that was the object of admiration. Instead of recognizing the debilitating, extractive state policies [32], the colonial gaze often pathologized their crushing poverty, blaming alleged “Oriental indolence,” moral fatalism, or the inherent “backwardness” of their religion. Colonial writers defended British economic interventions by representing the artisan as inherently passive. They systematically overlooked the fact that the British Empire itself was indirectly supporting this exploitation through the Treaty of Amritsar, which guarantyd the sovereignty of the Dogra state in exchange for its tributes to the Crown, implicitly endorsing the brutal taxation of the weavers [36].

11. Handicrafts and Craft Production

11.1 Major Handicrafts of Kashmir

While the pashmina shawl was the principal commodity without challenge, the artisanal economy of Kashmir in the 19th century was a much wider, highly specialized matrix of crafts [28]. The valley's geography led to some monopolies in regional manufacturing. Kulgam was celebrated in the subcontinent for its lacquered woodwork (khatamband), Bijbehara for the meticulous carving of walnut wood, and Anantnag for the manufacture of the elaborate domestic embroidery and namda (felted rugs) [27]. Moreover, the carpet industry (kal baffi), which had declined sharply after the Mughal period, got a major revival in the late 19th century with state patronage under Maharaja Ranbir Singh [29]. The revival was a conscious economic change to absorb the vast pool of displaced labor as the major shawl industry entered terminal decline in the 1870s [28]. Papier-mâché and silver-smithing also flourished, catering mainly to the tourist market created by British officers summering in the valley [31].

11.2 Organization of Production

The Kashmiri handicrafts sector was carefully organized around the karkhana (workshop) system [38]. A single high-value luxury object, a shawl in particular, was rarely the product of a single artisan, but the result of a highly fragmented and intensely collaborative industrial process. The karkhandar, who supplied the raw material and the physical space, paid for the operation [25]. The workshops were very hierarchical, with the Ustad (master craftsman) in charge of the daily work of many shagirds (apprentices), many of whom were children shackled to the loom by their fathers' debts [39].

11.3 Labour, Skills, and Techniques

Kashmiri craft production was a matter of deep generational technical skills that were passed down orally and through rigorous physical repetition. In the textile sector the Rafugar (darker) had a central very specialized skill [23]. The complicated twill-tapestry (Kani) technique was painfully slow, so large shawls were broken up into several smaller panels, woven simultaneously on a number of different looms. The Rafugar was charged with sewing the individual fragments together when they were finished [22]. The technique was so sophisticated that European observers often remarked that the joints were completely invisible to the naked eye, so much so that a multi-panel shawl could be seen as a seamless, unified textile [32].

11.4 Tools and Looms

The technological infrastructure of the 19th century Kashmiri artisan was remarkably rudimentary, despite the extraordinary quality of the finished products. The traditional shawl loom was a heavy wooden, horizontal structure, almost unchanged since the Sultanate period [38]. It lacked the mechanized advances of the Jacquard looms being used in Europe [22]. Another ancient specialized art was dyeing (rangrezi). Master craftsmen used only natural elements: cochineal and madder roots for bright reds, imported indigo for dark blues, boiled English broadcloth for greens, and walnut husks or iron filings for a rich, colorfast black [34].

11.5 Colonial Descriptions of Craft Production

British accounts of this mode of production were deeply utilitarian, heavily marked by the industrial revolution. The workshops were described by visitors to Kashmir in the latter half of the 19th century, such as E.F. Knight and W. Wakefield, as dingy, overcrowded and hellish environments where the creation took place in squalor, contrasted to the brilliant esthetics of the textiles [30, 32]. Their writings deliberately took the craft out of its local cultural context, and treated the Kashmiri loom only as a primitive proto-



industrial machine. The descriptive framework served a direct imperial purpose: to justify the appropriation of Kashmiri designs and raw materials for reverse engineering in the vastly "superior" mechanized mills of Great Britain, effectively framing the indigenous artisan as obsolete [30].

12. The Shawl Industry: From Loom to Commerce

12.1 Shawl Production and Loom-Based Craftsmanship

The whole economy of Kashmir in the 19th century was based on the pashm, the very fine under-fleece of the Changthangi goat, which was obtained in the high altitudes of Western Tibet and Ladakh [34]. After arriving at Srinagar by perilous caravan roads, the wool in its raw state was thoroughly cleansed and spun. This foundational labor was performed almost exclusively by Kashmiri women in the domestic sphere [23]. This female labor was nevertheless structurally invisible and severely undervalued in state taxation records and subsequent colonial economic assessments [22], although it was the vital first step in determining the quality of the final shawl. Once spun into fine yarn it was handed over to the male-dominated karkhanas.

12.2 Specialized Artisans and the Division of Labour

In the karkhana the division of labor was absolute and microscopic. One shawl is the result of a sequence of contributions by highly skilled craftspeople: the Naqash (pattern drawer) who draws the initial design; the Tarah Guru (color caller) who translates the drawn pattern into a shorthand code; the Talim Guru (pattern master) who writes down the shorthand in the talim (a written weaving script); and finally, the Shal-baf (weaver) who executes the script on the loom [27]. This extreme division of labor meant that no one artisan ever owned or conceived of the final product, completely alienating the laborer from the capital value of the finished commodity [25].

12.3 From Loom to Commerce

The transition from loom to commerce changed the character of the Kashmiri shawl, essentially. With the exponential growth of the European bourgeoisie's demand in the middle of the 19th century, the emphasis shifted rapidly from careful quality to sheer speed of production [28]. In an effort to avoid the crushing, front-loaded taxes on traditional loom-woven shawls levied by the Dogra state, the industry shifted heavily toward the Amli (embroidered) shawl [29]. An Amli was plain woven, and thus avoided the expensive loom tax, and elaborate designs were embroidered in by needleworkers [27]. This was a massive

commercialization of the craft, where the focus was on fast, scalable production instead of traditional structural integrity.

12.4 Transformation of Artisanal Production into a Commodity

The Kashmiri shawl was historically employed as a khilat-a royal diplomatic gift exchanged between the Mughal, Afghan and Safavid courts, signifying political favor and elite status [38]. But it was vigorously monetized into a mass bourgeois commodity through the 19th century trade networks [26]. In Second Empire France, it became a highly standardized, indispensable item in the bourgeois bridal trousseau, completely divorced from its original Himalayan cultural context. [35].



Figure 2: The 19th-Century Export Commodity, Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met), New York. Accession Number: 1975.348.3. (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/84275>)

12.5 Economic and Cultural Significance of Shawls

Culturally, the shawl became synonymous with the Boteh motif the world over. In its original form it was a Persian symbol of a stylized cypress or a date palm shoot from Babylon, which in the Kashmir Valley over the centuries developed into the iconic, sweeping cone pattern [38]. Economically the shawl trade supported the entire Dogra state apparatus, with the revenues generated from the Dagh Shawl department alone meeting the overwhelming majority of the administrative and military costs of the Kingdom of Jammu and Kashmir [29].

12.6 Colonial Representations of the Shawl Industry

The colonial agents of the late 19th century, including Francis Younghusband and Arthur Neve, did not write about the shawl industry as an indigenous success story, but as an industry in desperate need of British capital, management and rationalization [31, 33]. They would often see the British market as the ‘savior’ of the Kashmiri weaver from the Dogra tyranny, even as they implemented trade policies in



British India that aggressively favored cheap, machine-made Scottish and English imitations [36]. Colonial representations of the industry were fundamentally framed in terms of coming, inevitable obsolescence, the handloom as a relic during the time of the Empire [33].

13. From Craft to Commerce

13.1 Markets, Merchants and Intermediaries

A large and highly complex network of transnational intermediaries bridged the physical and financial distance between the Kashmiri loom and the European consumer [25]. The valley's geographic isolation made it reliant on diasporic merchant networks. For the pashm monopoly, the arduous routes to Leh were undertaken by caravans of Kashmiri and Punjabi Khatri merchants [34]. At the same time, permanent trading agencies of foreign merchants from Russia, Qajar Iran and Yarkand were established in the serais of Srinagar for the purchase of finished goods [26]. These middlemen, as the chief agents of commerce, took the lion's share of the profit margins, protecting themselves from the risks of production borne by the weavers [25].

13.2 Demand and Trade

International demand reached an unprecedented high in the mid nineteenth century. The doubling of Kashmiri shawl exports between 1850 and 1860 [39], was due to the increase in global shipping lanes and the British pacification of the Punjab. French fashion houses were the very epicenter of this demand, taking as much as 80% of the total output of Kashmir at its height [24]. The American market, especially in the post-civil war economic boom, also became an important secondary market for lower-tier shawls [28].

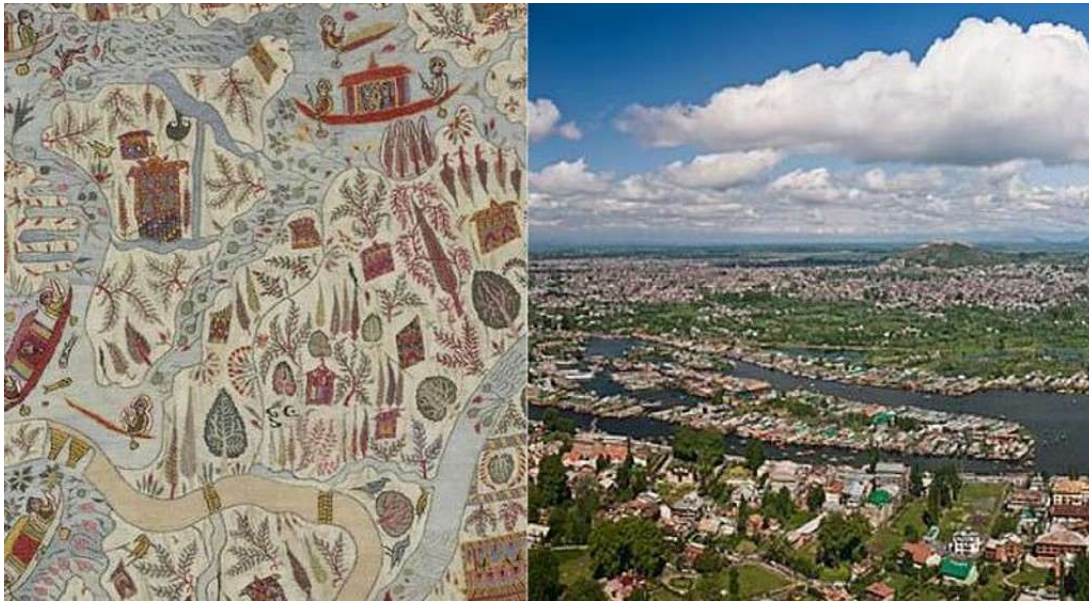


*Figure 3: The Map Shawl of Srinagar, Source: The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London.
Museum Number: IS.31-1870 / Historic reference via Homegrown cultural archives
(<https://homegrown.co.in/homegrown-explore/what-the-map-shawl-of-kashmir-reveals-about-the-history-of-its-shawl-makers>)*

13.3 Commercialization of Handicrafts

This intense commercialization led to a strict standardization of the craft. The complex, spontaneous and highly localized floral patterns of the 18th century gave way to extremely dense, elongated and highly complex designs that were explicitly dictated by the changing tastes of Parisian designers and French trading agents based in Srinagar [35]. The Kashmiri artisan was no longer an independent creator, but a sub-contractor, serving foreign esthetic demands [31].

13.4 Transformation from craft – commodity – commerce

The last phase of this transformation from craft into pure commodity was the total collapse of its structure. The industry was dependent on a single, volatile foreign market, so it was very susceptible to external geopolitical shocks [27]. The outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 destroyed the French luxury market overnight. [37] There were no French buyers and the vast commercial machinery in Srinagar stopped. Adding to the economic disaster was the terrible Kashmir famine of 1877-1879 which ravaged the population of the valley [32]. The weaving class, already existing on the margins of subsistence, died disproportionately [30]. The shift to global commerce, which had generated millions of revenue for the



state and the merchants, ended up leaving the primary producers with zero economic resilience, and the artisanal community was absolutely devastated [28].

14. The Colonial Gaze across Craft and Commerce

14.1 Colonial Representation of Artisans

The 19th Century colonial gaze systematically abstracted the Kashmiri artisan from her brutal economic reality. Colonial travel writings, art and early photography endlessly depicted Kashmir as a “timeless land of splendour”, an idyllic Oriental garden insulated from the ravages of industrial modernity [31, 33]. These artistic and literary representations deliberately ignored the crippling poverty, disease, and industrial changes affecting the laboring classes and presented an image of the “mysterious, beautiful, and unchanging” East for European consumption [30].

14.2 Colonial Description of Handicrafts and Production

British administrators and ethnographers cataloged Kashmiri handicrafts as static, ancient antiquities and not dynamic, evolving industrial arts [33]. The colonial narrative froze the crafts in a conceptual past, suggesting that indigenous production had reached its evolutionary terminus. Thus, the only way out for these commodities was their salvation, modernization and mechanization by the European commercial intervention, justifying the intellectual property theft going on in the British textile mills [36].

14.3 Representation of the Shawl Industry

The Kashmiri shawl was heavily represented as an exotic luxury object in the social sphere of Europe. In Victorian literature and portraiture, it was a semiotic signifier of bourgeois wealth and imperial reach [24]. This representation was completely dissociated from the blood, sweat and systemic bondage of Kashmiri Muslim weaver [37]. "The object was exalted; the maker was made invisible".

14.3 Colonial Perceptions of Labour, Value, Luxury and Commerce

In the political economy of the British Empire, Kashmiri labor had no intrinsic human value; it was simply a variable in the calculus of global commerce [25]. The British Residents stationed at Srinagar were well aware of the oppressive and extortionate taxation imposed by the Dogra state upon the shal-bafs [29]. But this exploitation was ignored by tacit consent, and effectively sanctioned, because the Dogra state's ability to extract this revenue guaranteed its political stability and continued loyalty to the British paramountcy along a highly sensitive geopolitical frontier facing the Russian Empire. [24, 35].



14.4 Representation versus Historical Reality

The romanticized colonial gaze was the precise opposite of the historical reality. The romantic image of Kashmir as a peaceful paradise, as depicted in "Lalla Rookh," concealed a valley which, economically speaking, was essentially a large, state-backed labor camp for textile weavers [37]. The commercialization of the craft did not bring prosperity to the loom; it brought the rigid demands of the world capital enforced by the military apparatus of a tributary state [29]. Colonial representations sanitized this reality, making the consumption of the shawl palatable to the Western bourgeois conscience.

15. Findings

Based on a full review of 19th-century historiography and economic data, this study arrives at three major findings:

1. **SYSTEMIC ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION:** The transformation of the Kashmiri shawl industry from a local craft to global commerce was largely beneficial to transnational middlemen, the Dogra state treasury, and European retailers. In contrast, it systematically impoverished the main producers, turning high skilled artisans into bonded laborers receiving sub-subsistence wages [27, 28].
2. **European Destruction:** The Colonial Gaze The interaction between Kashmir and Europe was twofold, extremely predatory. The colonial gaze created a huge export market for a while but also opened the way for widespread industrial espionage, the appropriation of indigenous esthetics (the Paisley motif) and the legitimization of British trade policies which eventually strangled the Kashmiri handloom sector in an effort to protect British mechanized industries [36].
3. **Multi-causal industrial collapse:** The demise of the shawl industry in the late 19th century was not a mere shift of fashion. A catastrophic confluence of the Franco-Prussian War [37], the predatory Dagh Shawl tax system [29], the rise of British machine-made imitations [24], and the devastating demographic impact of the 1877-79 famine [32], which completely wiped out the generational labor pool.

16. Conclusion

The story of the 19th century Kashmiri shawl industry is not just a record of a thriving, world famous craft; it is a profound economic tragedy played out under the weight of the colonial gaze. The transition



“from loom to commerce” turned a highly localized artisanal tradition into one of the first examples of a globally commodified luxury good. But the vast fortunes produced by this trade were systematically passing the shal-bafis by. Colonial administrators, travelers and foreign merchants romanticized the end product, while deeply undermining the physical and economic autonomy of the producers. The story of Kashmiri handicrafts in the 19th century is one of the sheer resilience of an artisanal class that wove unparalleled masterpieces amidst famine, crushing state taxation, and the indifferent, extractive machinery of both a tributary state and the wider British Empire. Finally, the loom was the silent devastation on which the global legacy of the Kashmiri shawl was built.

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