

A cloth of memory, defiance and celebration

How Pashmina has maintained its much merited allure

The idea of opulence has often found itself crystallised in an island of the material. Even in contemporary times, where ‘show and tell’ is the civil mantra of the lavish and wealthy, a certain textile glints through with its simplicity and sterling quality. Pashmina (or in anglicised terms, cashmere), is the art of weaving the fine goat fleece or *Pashm*, into wearable apparel as explained in *The Changpa and Ladakh Pashmina* journaled by Abhilasha Bahaguna. This fibre is only found in the meadows of Kashmir in Northern India, and the goods produced from it are colloquially known as Pashmina goods. According to a research paper titled *Pashmina authentication* by Assif Assad, the wool itself is acquired from the Changtrangi goat in Ladakh, after which it is woven at the hands of artisans with a skillset finessed over generations of their families committing to the craft. A pashmina shawl can take months, and even years to weave and embroider— a big reason why a single commodity made using these techniques is perceived as a concretisation of the finest novelty that culture has to offer. It’s worth mentioning, however, that the story told by this fabric surpasses its own interwork in terms of complexity,

Today, pashmina shawls and scarves are a desirable commodity indicative of class and status owing to its costly nature. Somewhere in the appeasement of global patrons and culture vultures, however, the damage to Kashmiri artisans is overlooked— especially in the face of mechanisation and militarisation, as explored in *Textile* by Takseen Bhat and Shoba Mathews.

On that note, we're faced with a question— how does a coveted handicraft survive in the age of industrialisation and mass production? The answer is: barely. New age patrons want a myriad of things, and they want it now. The jeopardy in which this attitude puts the art practice as well as its practitioners is irrelevant for the consumer class. As corroborated in the *Journal of Natural Fibre*, the authenticity of the handicraft finds itself sinking in a bog of power looms, electronic spinners and other textile technologies. In correspondence with these production tactics is the adulteration of the yarn and sale of inauthentic pashmina at the hands of corporate giants, who are only a notch below the wealthy elite class of Kashmir responsible for exploiting its local artisans. Being widely illiterate, geographically isolated and inept in interacting with urban markets, the artisan class is subjected to intense exploitation from capitalists and their intermediaries, who pay them about a fourth of what Pashmina shawls are retailed at. Ironically, the surging demand and popularity of the textile has caused more pain than prosperity for the workers, with the wealthy keen on tumefying the monetary gap between themselves and the craftsmen. In light of the poverty then created, the craftsmen find themselves endangered occupationally, with their children refusing to stay in the industry to look for higher paying jobs. However, this handicraft oriented industry is pivotal to the economy and culture of the Kashmir valley, so how is the artisan class standing strong against mistreatment, especially in the wake of political instability and military occupation?

Their revolt is heard in their social restructuring. In *South Asian History and Culture*, Souzeina Mushtaq explores gendered power dynamics in traditional pashmina weaving families, where women painstakingly prepare the raw material by cleaning the goat hair and hand spinning the wool before men take over the weaving. It's common for their labour to be unpaid since it is

perceived as a part of their family duty. In recent times, however, many such women find themselves widowed owing to unjust killings by the Indian military. In search of financial independence and resilience, they take to the handloom, dismantling a conservative societal structure thread by thread. The Pashmina is then spun into a cloth of independence; of resistance; reminding us that a taste for the fancy comes at a bloody price of the humane, quite literally.