

## Kani Shawl: A Case Study of a Milestone in the Art of Weaving

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### Abstract

The northernmost state of India Jammu and Kashmir is famous for its shawls, many kinds of shawls are woven in the Kashmir valley. The loom woven Kani shawls are famous for their intricate patterns. Artisans of tremendous patience and skill go to the loom and create the most cherished Kani shawls. The Kani shawls are quite expensive as it takes a lot of time, patience and good quality raw material to produce a Kani shawl. As a symbol of Kashmiri craftsmanship, it is housed in the world's finest museums. In order to protect the Kani Shawl, Jammu and Kashmir government has been able to register it under Geographical Indications Act in order to provide it legal protection all over the world. It has been just three decades ago, Kani weaving was on the verge of disappearing for various reasons, but because of timely intervention of government today, it's on a clear revival track. This paper is an attempt to study the contribution, survival and revival of Kani shawls.

**Keywords:** Kani, Shawl, Craftsmanship, Survival, Global Indication Act.

### Introduction

The story of Kani shawls is wrapped around the snowy valleys of Kashmir. Kanikar shawl is a symbol of craftsmanship for the weavers of Kashmir. Kanihama is a small village located 20 miles away from Srinagar on the Gulmarg Road in the Budgam district of Jammu and Kashmir. Kanihama produced exquisite Kani shawls, since Mughal era. The Kashmiri shawl is the most cherished acquisition of a lady and is believed to be indigenous wear to Kashmiris. Kani shawl technically categorized into two main types --- the loom-woven kani shawl and needle embroidered sozini shawl. They are made by raffal and pashmina fabrics.<sup>1</sup> The foremost written accounts of the Kani shawls can be traced back to the Mughal era. It is believed and widely read that Mughal Emperor Akbar was very fond of this fabric. He admired them to the extent that he owned quite a number of them and also wrote about them in 'Ain-i-Akbari'.<sup>2</sup> However, historians like Janet Rizvi think the craft developed in Kashmir, there are references to outside influences during the time of Shah-e-Hamdan, a Sufi poet and prominent Muslim scholar from Persia who came to Kashmir in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, his followers were shawl weavers, carpet-makers, potters and calligraphers.<sup>3</sup>

### Genesis of Kani Shawl

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<sup>1</sup> Shawl Weaving & Embroidery of Jammu & Kashmir, The Crafts and Artisans (2010) online at <http://www.craftandartisans.com/shawl-weaving-embroidery-of-jammu-kashmir.html>

<sup>2</sup> Mughal Era shawls weave magic at South Asia Expo, Tribune News Service, Jalandhar, February 17, online at <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/mughal-era-shawls-weave-magic-at-south-asia-expo/365877.html>

<sup>3</sup> Shefalee Vasudev, Looms of the valley, 2017, Live Mint, online at <http://www.livemint.com/Leisure/HMFQLT109nEnX1jeFAr1EO/Looms-of-the-valley.html>

The word 'Kani' refers to wooden bobbins or small sticks used as a spoon to weave the famous Kani shawls. Sometimes, as many as 50 Kanis are used with different coloured threads for single weft reflecting the intricacy of design. The fine texture and complex designs mean that artisans can seldom weave more than an inch a day. It is to be noted that shawls are woven into intricate patterns with the weft thrown across before coloured threads are woven in on a meticulous, coded pattern drawn by a master craftsman. It is woven with pure *pashmina* yarn in a natural, almond-coloured base or in cream with multicoloured floral patterns, creating a striking offset. Coloured Kanis are woven too, in hues such as red, blue, green and ochre. Kani is the softer version of Jamawar—the latter are long pieces of cloth woven in the same technique. A plain *pashmina* shawl takes between a fortnight and a month to weave, but one Kani with all-over floral work takes a year if two artisans work on it for an average of 10 hours a day.<sup>4</sup>

Also, it is widely known as a jamawar. The kings and courtiers are supposed to have bought this by the yard (war) and wore it as a gown or robe (jama). Thus, such a shawl is in a class by itself and possesses an extremely fine texture. The pashmina is made from the wool obtained from pashmina goat, known locally as Lena Rama. It is found mostly found in the Changthang area of Ladakh. The Pashmina wool is available in colours like: white, brown, grey and black. The average height of a pashmina goat ranges from 18-224 inches and it yields 250- 300 grams of pashmina per season, comprising 60 per cent fibre and 40 per cent hair. In addition to that, Pashminas are famous for their lustre, texture, softness, and warmth.<sup>5</sup>

### Varieties

Doranga-Dorukhi, Dorukhi, simple single sided and many more varieties are available in the Kanikar shawls. One of the most admired, however, is the 'Aksi. The variety focuses on the theme of reflection. In this, design is created on one side and the other side is either left plain or adorned with some other pattern. It was just three decades ago, Kani weaving was on the verge of disappearing for reasons ranging from a deficit in weaving skills to insufficient demand for authentic, expensive and artisanal items. Today, it's on a clear revival track, though still grappling with issues such as mechanization, low wages, varying quality of yarn, weaving dexterity and fakes. The difference has been made by a multi-pronged effort by private traders passionate about Kashmir crafts, non-governmental organizations, Commitment to Kashmir Trust (CtoK), which has been set up in 2011 to develop Kashmir crafts for modern markets and the CDI, established in 2004 by the Union and state governments.<sup>6</sup>

### Geographical Indication Act (GIA)

Kani Shawl has got the Geographical Indication Act (GIA) status that would legally prohibit people from selling the drapes made at other places under the same name. In order to protect the Kani Shawl, Jammu

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Shawl Weaving & Embroidery of Jammu & Kashmir, The Craft and Artisans,2010, online at <http://www.craftandartisans.com/shawl-weaving-embroidery-of-jammu-kashmir.html>

<sup>6</sup> Shefalee Vasudev, Looms of the valley, 2017, Live Mint, online at <http://www.livemint.com/Leisure/HMFOLT109nEnX1jeFAr1EO/Looms-of-the-valley.html>

and Kashmir government has register it under Geographical Indications Act so as to enact the legal protection all over the world indicated by Minister for Industries and Commerce, Shri. Surjeet Singh Salathia in PTI.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, every piece of Kanikar is 1\*2 meters in size and oblong in shape. As much of time and effort goes into the creation of a single kanikar shawl, the Government of India has decided to get a geographical identity for the fabric so that no other country can produce these shawls.

### Revival Efforts

The handloom development department has registered Kani Shawl Weaving Cooperative Society in Kanihama Village. Also, a project under the Research and Design Development Scheme was sanctioned by Development Commissioner of Handlooms under Union Ministry of Textiles Government and implemented in the village to revive old shawl designs. In order to encourage weavers of Kanihama village, the Society has provided financial assistance of Rs 3.32 lakhs for purchase, renovation and modernization of looms, the other kinds of shawls like: Pashmina and the Kashmiri Sozni, which have been enacted under the GIA. Moreover, shawls worth Rs. 87 crores were exported this financial year while the figure was Rs. 147 crores in previous financial year.<sup>8</sup> The CDI has started a *pashmina* testing laboratory, wherein fibres go through a microscopic examination to detect inauthentic produce. The reason being, even if one fibre is found to be impure, the whole lot gets rejected. But once it clears the test, it is labelled Kashmir Pashmina—a certificate of authenticity like Khadi Mark or Craft Mark. The only registered artisan bodies and weaving communities certified as *pashmina* and Kani weavers under GIA can send samples for testing. There are only 300 or so such certified weavers in Kashmir, according to the CDI, which also houses a *pashmina* bank that is run by J&K Small Industries Development Corporation, with pure fibre purchased directly from Ladakhi traders. The spinners can buy their yarn from it. Even today, most shawl-weavers working with fragile and irregular hand-spun yarn—tougher to weave than smooth machine yarn—earn only around INR 200 per day. Also, in comparison to such “soft crafts” that use of fibre and textile, artisans employed in the “hard crafts”—the architectural *khatamband* using wood and artists making walnut-wood products—earn INR 800-1000 per day. The artisans feel development schemes such as MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) have to garner a large number of skilled shawl weavers and attract them through reasonable wages. The reason being these skilled shawl weavers are often inclined towards higher wage employment such as: building construction, lake-digging, road laying etc.

### Current Scenario

The Kanikar shawls were counted amongst the most exquisite of attires in Western Europe during early and mid 80s. Today, Kanikar shawl industry is one of the largest and most developed in the state of Kashmir. The statistical earnings exhibited by the shawl industry in Kashmir accounts for a revenue of INR 550 crores per year out of which INR 150 crores are through sales contribution of Kani shawls. The

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<sup>7</sup> Kashmir’s Famous Kani Shawls get GI Status, The Hindu ,March 22,2010 online at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/kashmirs-famous-kani-shawls-get-gi-status/article267534.ece>

<sup>8</sup> Kashmir’s Famous Kani Shawls get GI Status, The Hindu ,March 22,2010 online at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/kashmirs-famous-kani-shawls-get-gi-status/article267534.ece>

national market price of one Kani shawl ranges from INR 30000 to INR 200000 and worth \$4000 to \$8000 at international markets.<sup>9</sup>

### **Suggestions**

The rural artisan training pertaining to Kani shawl shall be encouraged by the Government of India in its skill development training programmes. The training of trainers programme shall be frequently conducted with experts in Kani Shawl making through Non-Governmental Organizations and Government Agencies to promote its sales and exports. The free of cost training and seed capital shall be provided to interested individuals or groups to enrich and enhance the Kashmir shawl business. This in turn will upright our cultural heritage and craftsmanship across the globe.

### **Conclusion**

The Kani shawl, which attained GIA status in 2008, is one of the most complex Indian weaves. As a symbol of Kashmiri craftsmanship, it is housed in many of the world's finest museums, such as Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris and department of Islamic art at Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA. The Musée du Louvre in Paris has portraits of 19<sup>th</sup> century French Empress Joséphine draped in a Kani. The historical case review of Kani shawl facilitates to track the lives and lifestyles of weavers. It also exhibited the ups and downs of shawl industry in Kashmir at large. Lastly, the government and non-governmental sectors need to take appropriate steps to curb the extinction of kani shawls and promulgate its craftsmanship in Kashmir.

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<sup>9</sup> Exquisite shawls of Kashmir, The Tribune, February 21,2009 online at <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20090221/saturday/main3.htm>