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Handicraft Trade of Kashmir during the Mughal Period

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Abstract

With the establishment of Mughal rule, Kashmir became the famous centre of handicraft production. The Mughal rulers maintained trade routes, constructed bridges and *serais* and thus promoted to a great extent, the export of handicrafts in the Mughal suba of Kashmir. The handicrafts were exported to every part of India and its neighbouring countries. South India also emerged as the great marketing centre of Kashmir handicrafts and thus in return Kashmir earned huge profits. The present paper deals with the ways how Kashmir handicrafts were exported. For instance, what were the routes through which these handicrafts were exported, why the people from different parts of India and its neighbouring countries had the craze of the handicrafts of Kashmir and finally to what extent their export benefited the economy and culture of Kashmir.

Key Words:- Kashmir, Mughal, Trade, Handicrafts, routes, market

Article

Kashmir is celebrated in the medieval literary sources for its natural beauty and the people for their intelligence and artistic excellence. Nature provided him with abundance of raw materials which his genius manufactured into articles of luxury, displaying a highly refined artistic taste most delicately in harmony with sceneries with which he was surrounded. Artistic skills had been present in Kashmir since ancient times. Kashmiris are celebrated for their wit and are considered intelligent then the Indians.¹

With the establishment of Mughal rule, Kashmir became the centre of handicraft production. The Mughal annexation made the Kashmiri craftsmen famous all over the world. The Mughal rulers maintained the trade routes, constructed bridges and *serais* to provide shelter to the travellers and this promoted to a great extent, the export of handicrafts in the Mughal suba of Kashmir.² The handicrafts of Kashmir, through these trade routes went throughout India and beyond. According to Abul Fazl, there were 26 trade routes in Kashmir which link it with the world outside.³ The important among these routes were:-

Muzaffarabad Pakhli Route:-This rout connected Kashmir with Rawalpindi and thence with Peshawar. This route was situated on a low altitude and hence remained traversable throughout the year.⁴

Mughal Route:-This route connected Kashmir with Punjab. It runs over Pir Panjal Pass via Hastivanj.⁵ This route remains closed during the winter months because it runs through a very high altitude.⁶

Punch Route:-This route connects Kashmir with Punch through Haji Pir pass and Punch was linked with Jammu via Rajouri, Thana, Dharamsala and Akhnoor.⁷

Kishtawar route:- There are two routes that lead Kashmir to Kishtawar. One goes through Islamabad (modern Anantnag) by way of Singhpora⁸ and another via Dasu⁹. It connects Kishtawar with Badarwah and Jammu through Ramban.

Central Asian Trade Route:-This route passes nearly through the whole of Ladakh from East to West. This route was passable only during the summer months, but on account of its commercial importance, the merchants often used it during the summer months as well.¹⁰ It connected Kashmir with Central Tibet, Kashgarh, Yarkand

and China. The trade of Kashmir with Bhutan, Nepal and Bengal was also carried on by this route.¹¹ Abul Fazl says among all the routes, Bhimber and Pakhli were the best and were generally traversable on horseback.¹²

It was through these routes the handicrafts of Kashmir were exported to Central Asia, Russia, Bhutan, Nepal, Bengal and Patna.¹³ In course of time, trade relations were extended as far as Bijapur and Golconda.¹⁴

The important handicrafts of Kashmir which were manufactured for commercialization includes the Kashmiri shawl, carpet, silk, paper and paper-machie and carved wooden articles. Among all these, shawl was the most important and was exported to every part of India and its neighbouring countries. The industry though flourished long before, but it got perfection during the Mughal period, due to implication of new techniques and Kashmir came to be known throughout the world for soft, warm and delicate textured shawls. During the Mughal period there operated more than 24,000 looms in the city of Srinagar for the production of Shawls.¹⁵ The shawls after manufacture, were handed over to *wafarosh* (a person who had advanced money to them) and to the *mokhim* or broker. These two settle the prices and effect the sale to the merchant.¹⁶ According to Bernier, What may be considered peculiar to Kashmir is its shawl industry. Kashmir acquires a lot of wealth out of it.¹⁷

The Kashmiri shawls were heavily consumed by the nobility and aristocracy in India and beyond. The Kashmiri shawls were used as a luxury.¹⁸ It had become a craze with every noble to have a shawl and was considered as a symbol of prestige.¹⁹

The Mughal period led to a greater commercialisation of the shawl industry.²⁰ The loom was improved, new tints were introduced and shawls of various measurements were manufactured.²¹ The Mughal emperors purchased shawls in large quantities and apart from that they were often offered the shawl as presents by the Subedars of Kashmir.²² The shawls were also sent to foreign rulers as a token of respect.²³ During the period of Shahjahan, a large number of shawls were sent to the rulers of Bijapur, Golconda, Rome, Egypt and Iran.²⁴ The Mughal rulers, Especially emperor Akbar, apart from maintaining large wardrobes and stores for the preservation of various stuffs, made it compulsory for the courtiers and other officials to wear certain articles, such as , *Takauchiya* (coat), *peshwaz* (coat open in front), and *parm-narm* (the Kashmiri shawl). Abul fazl says, this was done to regulate and intensify the demand of various stuffs to which Akbar paid much attention²⁵

The Kashmir shawl was also consumed heavily during the time of Jahangir and Shahjahan. We have at least twenty references in *Tuzuk* for the presentation of Kashmir shawl to nobles, courtiers, fakirs, foreign envoys and others as a mark of favour.²⁶ Consequently, Shahjahan also consumed a large number of shawls and sent a large number of them to the rulers of Bijapur, Golconda, Rome, Egypt an Iran.²⁷ Besides, Shahjahan needed a large number of shawls and carpets for the new palaces he was constructing.²⁸ Under Aurangzeb the shawl production in Kashmir was on peak and was exported to every corner of the world.²⁹ The commercial interest of the East India Company for Kashmiri shawls also grew from 1665 and soon it captured the European market.³⁰

Apart from Lahore,³¹ Agra,³² Ahmedabad³³ and Gujarat,³⁴ South India also emerged as one of the great marketing centre of Kashmiri shawl.³⁵ Nepal, Lhasa and Kathmandu also imported huge quantities of Kashmiri shawls.³⁶

Similarly like shawls, the carpets of Kashmir also formed an important exportable item during the Mughal period. The carpets of Kashmir were considered superior to those imported from Persia.³⁷ Kashmir produced rugs, namdas and pile carpets throughout the Mughal period and exported these to South India were the Deccan rulers provided eager markets. The woollen carpets preserved in the shrine of Asar Mahal at Bijapur

is believed to have been received by Muhammad Adil Shah from Kashmir in 1657.³⁸ These carpets are probably among those that have been preserved in the museum of the Gol Gumbaz at Bijapur. On the basis of technical examinations there is very much possibility that they were the products manufactured in Kashmiri handicraft Karkhanas.³⁹ During the seventeenth century, the hair of holy prophet in Hazratbal Srinagar was brought from the shrine of Bijapur. This suggests that The Hamdani/Kubarwiya order had connections with the carpet and textile trade and with the cult of the sacred hairs of prophet in the Asar Mahal at Bijapur and in Hazratbal Srinagar.⁴⁰

Kashmir is also known for its silk industry. Mirza Haider Daughlat, Abul Fazl and Jahangir have immensely praised the silk industry of Kashmir.⁴¹ Mirza Haider Daughlat regarded it as one of the wonders of Kashmir.⁴² Bernier in his *Travels* informs us that some of its stuffs were exported to Lahore.⁴³

The paper manufactured in Kashmir was also in great demand in India for writing purposes. It was of silky texture and had glossy appearances.⁴⁴ It was so prepared that if one could wash it away, no traces of ink will remain on the paper and the paper can be reused for writing purposes.⁴⁵ The paper was much in request in India for manuscripts and was used by all who wished to impart dignity to their correspondence.⁴⁶ George Forster in his *Travels* says that Kashmirians fabricated the best writing paper of the East which was formerly an article of extensive traffic. From Ahmedabad large quantities of paper was exported to Persia which was presumably brought from Kashmir.

Besides, Kashmir produced beautiful wooden articles which were exported throughout India. Bernier in his *Travels* noted that “Kashmiri people are active and industrious. The workmanship and beauty of their palekys, bedsteads, trunks, inkstands, boxes, spoons and various other things are quite remarkable and articles of their manufacture are in use in every part of the Indies. They perfectly understand the art of varnishing and are eminently skilful in closely imitating the beautiful veins of a certain wood, by inlaying with gold threads so delicately wrought that I never saw anything more elegant or perfect.”⁴⁷

For the trade of handicrafts, the merchants played a vital role as they constituted the wealthiest, influential and the most powerful class of the Kashmir society.⁴⁸ They had developed political connections with the far off territories through trade and commerce and played a vital role in the socio-economic and political life of Kashmir.⁴⁹ These merchants created new markets in far off regions and thus strengthened India’s commercial ties with foreign countries like, Rome, Persia, Egypt, Central-Asia and Nepal.⁵⁰ The merchants due to huge profits, travelled throughout the year from mountain to mountain to purchase *pashm* and other raw materials and selling out the manufactured crafts.⁵¹

Conclusion

During the Mughal rule in Kashmir, The handicraft industry was so richly organised that handicrafts used to be manufactured on a large scale, not only for local consumption but for export to every clime in India and its neighbouring countries. Bernier says that even the children were employed in craft manufacture and says that huge wealth was achieved out of it. The handicraft merchants had their marketing centres all over India, Central Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan and payments from these places were mostly made by the Hundis. The customers often suggested the shawl patterns and designs of their choice. Considering the number of local and foreign dignitaries, who received Kashmiri handicrafts as presents and the consumption from the great marketing

centres, the demands appear to have been enormous. A special officer called *Khan-i-Saman* took care of purchasing the handicraft items and getting the new ones manufactured well in advance.⁵²

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