

Selected Embroideries from Kashmir and Greater Punjab in the Jñāna-Pravāha Museum – Descriptive Note

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*I worship my tool, and I want to give my best...
May God give me good eyes till the end so that I die in harness.
Those who have given such beautiful embroidery, must have loved very deeply.
How many people must have loved like them!
And, are there no more of them?
No one stays forever in this world
But the artist lives on through his good work.*

-Prayer of the shawl-makers' of Kashmir

Specimens of the loom-woven and embroidered woollen shawls, spreads and costumes from Kashmir and Greater Punjab in the Jñāna-Pravāha Museum, Varanasi, represent almost all the major phases of the stylistic evolution of the regional textile tradition. Assembled together, these textiles would complete, in particular, a story of the floral sprig motifs, *būṭā*, and their metamorphosis into a variety of the paisley motif, *saro* or *turanj*. Of particular interest are some of the nineteenth-century embroideries, displaying the skill of the *naqqāśa*, designer, and the exquisite needle-crafting of the master-embroiderers under the guidance of *purzgar*, the specialist in charge of finishing the shawls. Some of these Kashmir embroideries, executed by professional male artisans were either used in the court or served a definite commercial purpose in pan-Indian textile trade. Patterns were made by the *naqqāśa*, who “received the highest pay, far higher even than that of the weaver”. There are four known varieties of Kashmir embroidery namely, *ek-rukhā* (one-sided), *aksi* (lit-mirror reflection; done by splitting the warp threads with the fine needle and allowing no embroidery visible on the reverse side), *do-rukhā* (double-sided) and *do-rukhā – do-raṅgā* (double-sided with two different colour schemes on either sides) were done principally with silken, cotton and finely-twisted woollen threads.

The following introductory notes to a selection of embroideries, aims at interpreting the design alternatives and operative variance emerging over a period of time in a major elitist tradition of Indian needle-craft.

Figs. 1 & 2

A narrow sash or stole, Kashmir, c.1845
Twill-woven wool embroidered with polychrome silk, 422 x 46 cm.

While specific references in literature validate the existence of an independent category of Kashmir woollen textiles with embroidered embellishment in the pre-Islamic era, a portrait by a Mughal miniaturist, dated CE 1615, of Bijapuri musician and envoy Bakhtawar Khan clad in a needle-crafted white shawl with deep orange lining is one of the early visual evidences that further endorse the continuity of the tradition. Production of shawls and sashes in Kashmir under Sikh (1819-46) and Dogra (1846-77) rule took a turn with the steady popularization of *amlīkāri* (over-embroidery on loom-woven ornamental base) and *kaśīdā* or pure embroidery. *Purzgars* and *rafūgars* or darners were employed by *kārkhāndars* (proprietors of shawl-weaving guild) for the perennial task to rectify the woven flaws, attach separately-woven borders (*hāśiyā*) and add all the “final touching up”. Khwaja Yusuf, an Armenian merchant attached to a firm based in Constantinople, an entrepot for the export of Kashmir shawl-goods to Europe, was one among several other traders present in Srinagar in 1803. As documented by William Moorcroft, Yusuf worked with a *rafūgar* named Ali Baba to produce needle-worked imitations that he was selling for one-third the cost of tapestry-woven *kāni* shawls. The vogue for the embroidered wonders intensified over the decades and according to Moorcroft there were almost five thousand embroiderers active in 1823, many of them “drawn from the ranks of former landholders”.

From 1830s onward, *purzgars* working with their retinue of *rafūgars* excelled in piecing together multiple loom-woven segments to create European market shawls and simultaneously, replicated in embroidery the newly-fangled



Fig.1 : A narrow sash or stole,
Kashmir, c.1845



Fig.2 : Detail of Fig.1

exotic design repertoire. This sash with a splendid single-sided work on carmine red (*qirmizī*) plain centre exemplifies embroiderer's immaculate perfection in re-doing a pattern supplied by the *naqqāśa* of *kāni shawls*, following strictly the colour combination spelled out by the *tarah guru* (colour-caller). The *naqqāśa* seems to have been familiar with the French designer, Fleury Chavant's album of tracings, *Album du Cachemirien* (1837), as reflected in the densely composed *pallā* of elongated paisleys with tips swooping down. The swirling floral infill and the flaming waves in alternately repeated hues expand all through the cusped *mīhrāb* arches, divided by sleek inter-fused cypresses with a star medallion finiale. A narrow floral meander runs along the side borders, *hāśiyā*, and transverse margins, *zanzīr*. Undulating scrollwork with jagged contour act as a further flourish to the *hāśiyā* and part of the *zanzīr*. Matching corner-paisleys, *kunja-būṭīs*, and meticulously done fringe decoration enhance the total effect.

The base fabric, un-patterned cashmere (*paśmīnā*) woven by *sadabāfs*, was first placed on a plank and rubbed with agate or carnelian for a smooth surface. Design drawn on paper with needle-pricked outlines was transferred, by rubbing powdered charcoal or coloured powder through the puncturings, on to the cloth. Buttonhole, fly, satin and stem are the main embroidery stitches. "The combination of stitches

using a fine thread on a minute scale”, as analyzed by Anne Morell, “prevents any single stitch standing out. The whole works together, with the subtle use of colours, the stitches appear as little marks of colour making up the lines and shapes”. The controlled stitch movement by carefully nipping up the warp had always been the most essential part of the Kashmiri workmanship.

Figs. 3 & 4

Awning (candowā), Kashmir, c.1845-50

Twill-woven wool embroidered with polychrome silk, 285 x 200 cm.

This elaborately-embroidered awning, an assemblage of two longitudinal panels, display a fine melange of decorative motifs, culled from the repertoire of European market shawls, Kerman embroideries of the Qajar era (1785-1924) and the local



Fig.3 : Candowā, Kashmir, c.1845-50



Fig.4 : Detail of Fig.3

tradition, best expressed in artistic papier-mache or *qalamdānī* work and manuscript illumination.

A set of four cypresses flanked by paisleys complete the central medallion, further extended by pendant paisleys rotating anticlock-wise. Minor variations apart, the *jāldāra* (trellis-designed) field (*matan*) of flowering creepers waft up a springtime redolence. Birds in flight, emanating from the hideouts of this dream garden, encircle the stately medallion, the epicenter of “the light of the canopus”. Corner paisleys with tips sharply bent had *sīkam* (belly) inter-fused with smaller cones and a star, lifted from the Medal of the Order of Ranjit Singh. At the midpoints along the side expanse were placed multi-lobed pendant motifs attached with curled up paisleys, frequently noticeable in the embroidered robes from Kerman. As suggested by Rosemary Crill, weavers and embroiderers fleeing to Kashmir after the destruction of Kerman in 1794 might have been sharing their style and some of the stock motifs with Kashmiri artisans. Of particular interest are the surrounding guard borders and end-panels with close-knit patterning of lithe paisleys, cypress and complex scrollwork, overtly influenced by the European market shawls.

This single-sided work was done with stem, fly and satin stitch. Crisp and distinct, the workmanship accords well with the scale of the textile.

Figs. 5 & 6

A narrow girdle or stole, Kashmir, c.1880
Central field: Plain-weave paśmīnā embroidered with silk and painted; End panels : twill-weave paśmīnā embroidered with silk, details painted with dyes;
213x47 cm.

A rather abbreviated reference to “*chīnt*” shawls appear in *Ain-i-Akbari*, the official history of Emperor Akbar’s administration and, much later, William Moorcroft’s account of shawl-goods produced in Kashmir in 1823 includes “*qalam-kār*” (*kalamkār*) variety, having a limited market in Bokhara, Russia



Fig.5 : A narrow girdle or stole, Kashmir, c.1880



Fig.6 : Detail of Fig.5

and Constantinople. Besides *kalamkār* or painted shawls, Moorcroft also mentioned about *kāyehamoo*, a tie-dyed variety with floral embellishment added by *cikan-doz* or embroiderers. However, these cryptic descriptions do not give any concrete idea about the technique of tinting shawls, whether it was a supplementary step or very much an integral part of the process. Rai Krishnadas (1892-1980), a legendary connoisseur and collector of Indian art, endorsed the presence of shawl-*kalamkār*s, towards the beginning of the past century, even in Banaras, a trade centre for Kashmir shawl-goods since c.1820.

In this example, the two *pallās*, each being a composite whole of five segments, were stitched on to an un-ornamental stretch of *paśmīnā* with *hāśiyā*, side borders, and *kunja-būṭīs*, corner paisleys, embroidered with silk. Cleverly contrived, the embellishment was meant to evoke the visual effect of an *amli* work. Outlined in burnt-sienna silken thread, scrolling vines with small flowers and characteristic *kunja-būṭīs* placed at the four corners were worked out minutely with satin stitch in off-white silk, tinted afterwards by applying the polychrome dyes unit by unit. Arcading loom-woven pseudo-fringes have matching foliate motifs. Non-identical *zanjīrs*, lateral borders, and *daur* (?), a running ornamental meander, were assembled deftly with the central panel. Joints were turned almost invisible with buttonhole and stem stitch. A row of needle-crafted *kingris*, spear-headed miniscule flower-heads, acts as a capping for the *daur*. Chrome yellow, orange, pink, turquoise and leaf green, old rose, bright red and pale lilac, painted within overall outlining in burnt-sienna, encapsulates the beauty of a bower in autumnal shades.

Interestingly, a commentary on *Arthaśāstra* (c.3rd century BCE), a treatise on administration and economics of the first Indian empire, refers to *khaṇḍa-sanghāṭya* shawls, made by assembling multiple woven pieces, and *Ain-i-Akbari* enlists *purzdar* that also denotes the same manufacturing principle. Surely, late examples like this represent a seminal living tradition inherited over the centuries by generations of the master embroiderers of Kashmir.

Figs. 7 & 8

Spread or an Awning, Kashmir or Greater Punjab, c.1860

Plain weave cotton embroidered with polychrome silk, 169 x 164cm.

Relatable to an extremely rare group of loom-woven pictorial shawls there exist numerous examples of pictorial embroidery by the professional needle-workers or darners, *rafūgars*, based in Kashmir or those active in greater Punjab. The assortment includes in particular, spreads or *rumāla* overlaid generously with anthropomorphic and zoomorphic motifs as well as narrative snatches from Persian romances, history and animal fables. Several men's costumes namely, *cogā* and *acakan* with embroidery-enhanced necklines and back-panels, sleeve-edges and frontline, do also belong to this genre. As it happened in the case of Persian narrative brocades and velvets, some of these embroidered pieces and certainly the most ambitiously



Fig.7 : Spread or Candowā, Kashmir or Greater Punjab, c.1860

executed huge “map shawls” with topographical views of Srinagar, were designed by anonymous master painters, *mussavir*, “possessing the vision and intellectual capacity to tackle complex and expensive projects.” Incidentally, a dated *rumāla* of 1852 belonging to Maharaja Gulab Singh with episodes from *Sikandar-Nāmā* (Book of Alexander the Great) was produced, as per the inscription, at “the workshop of *rafūgar* Sayyad Ju” of Jammu, in the kingdom of Kashmir. One of the map shawls, according to the royal inventory details of Jammu state, was made by Said Hussain Shah *Rafūgar* Khanyar and Said Muhammad Mir *Rafūgar* Zenakadal.

This unique ceremonial spread with four identical figure-studded roundels display a combination of Persian characters and Sikh marching soldiers in procession besides an enlivening range of birds and animals crowding almost every vacant space. Central medallion has eight radiating petals, each filled with bent-tip paisleys in reverse direction. Bigger roundels have lobed cartouches with princely figures



Fig.8 : Detail of Fig.7

seated against bolster with legs tucked under. Turbaned page boys wearing red apparel and sniffing flowers were placed in the inverted units. Rows of marching Sikh soldiers encircle each roundel, progressing clock-wise alike the figures in the cartouches. Smaller medallions placed at the corner and in between the principal circular units virtually look like birdcages. Beyond the guard border of flowering creeper, *bel*, run a sequence of niches with tiny flowering sprigs.

While it would have been a tough job to weave a complex pattern like this using twill-tapestry technique, no less easier it was for the *rafūgar* to imagine every single motif in terms of a stitch device. Figural elements were completed with close-set rows of chain-stitch and all the accompanying details were defined with a generous use of stem stitch, back stitch, fly stitch and satin stitch, to mention the most conspicuous ones.

Contextual literature

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