PRECARIOUS LABOUR AND VALUE NEGOTIATION: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF PASHMINA WORKERS IN INDIAN-ADMINISTERED KASHMIR

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores the intricate world of pashmina cloth production in Srinagar, Kashmir by shedding light on the lives and livelihoods of the people involved in crafting this renowned luxury fabric. Despite the global recognition of Kashmir's pashmina, little is known about the labour-intensive processes and the challenges faced by those working to produce this fabric. In this thesis, I have made an attempt to fill this gap by doing an ethnography of pashmina weavers, spinners and embroiderers in Kashmir.

The study investigates the precarious and marginalised lives of the pashmina weavers, specifically examining the effects of wage stagnation. I demonstrate how these conditions not only hinder upward socio-economic mobility but also contribute to the social exclusion and stigmatization of both the weavers and the craft itself. In addition to this, I also uncover the dynamics surrounding the negotiations of value and labour power between different actors in the pashmina industry.

Drawing on four months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Srinagar, Kashmir, this thesis employs a combination of qualitative research methods. By amplifying the voices of the workers, this research provides insights into the socio-economic challenges, aspirations and value negotiations in the creation of pashmina, one of the world's most expensive fabrics.

For my mother, Masrat, whose *balai lagai, zuv wandai* kept me going.

And for my grandfather, Ghulam Rasool Mir.

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"I've often been accused of making anthropology into literature, but anthropology is also field research. Writing is central to it."

—Clifford Geertz

Chapter 1 — Introduction

1.1 From Buta to Paisley: A Historical Overview of Kashmir's Pashmina Shawls

Kashmir's pashmina has long been celebrated as a symbol of luxury and grandeur. From Emperor Napoleon's wife Josephine to the queens and princesses of the British royal family, pashmina has been worn by some very rich and influential people throughout history. Pashmina fibre is derived from *Capra hircus* goats, native to the mountainous Changthang region of Ladakh near Kashmir. In the present times, 70% of the world's pashmina fibre comes from China, 20% from Mongolia, 9% from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal and Central Asia, and only 1% from Kashmir (Shakyawar, 2013). However, Kashmir's pashmina is considered the finest of all. As Fisher (2014) describes while writing about high-end coffee, it is the interplay of "region and terroir" that bestows a commodity its coveted value. Pashmina products are no exception. The fibre produced by the Kashmir region's women spinners is 12 to 16 micrometres in diameter, whereas the thread from the rest of the world is 17 to 20 microns (US Fish and Wildlife Service, 2002). The entire process of manufacturing pashmina in Kashmir—from dehairing, sorting, spinning and weaving to dying and embroidery—is done manually. As a result, the shawls produced from this thread are exceptionally soft, warm and light, and feel luxurious against the skin.

In the European market, pashmina shawls began to emerge in the latter half of the 18th century and due to the Kashmir region's fame as a "territory of desire" (Kabir 2009), it was embraced with "as much enthusiasm as Americans who discovered polyester fleece at the end of the 20th century," (Maskiell 1992). The region was so renowned for its artistry that its very name,

Kashmir (anglicised as Cashmere) became synonymous with its luxurious shawls in the Western world. Therefore, it was pashmina that sat at the heart of this Western fixation and fascination. At the core of these illustrious shawls lied a distinctive motif called *Buta*, a specific design whose popularity flared up in European fashion circles and took on a life of its own, eventually becoming famous as 'Paisley'. In this introduction, while keeping the centrality of the *Buta* (or Paisley) design in the background of my thesis, I am interested in presenting the historical trajectory of Kashmir's pashmina shawl in terms of its production, trade and global demand.

1.2 Tracing the History of Pashmina

A debate exists among scholars regarding the origin of the Kashmiri shawl, with some attributing it to indigenous Kashmiri roots while others suggesting Central Asian influence. Scholars such as Ahad (1987) and D.N Dhar (1999) contend that the shawl-weaving technique was native to Kashmir and can be traced as far back as the epic ages. On the other hand, Digby (2007) presents an argument that the evolution of shawl production and the shawl industry primarily occurred during Sultan Zayn Al'-Abidin's rule (1420–1472) in Kashmir. This development is linked to Sultan's experiences in Samarkand, Central Asia, where he was held hostage by Timur. Upon returning to Kashmir, the sultan not only brought back artisans from Samarkand but also arranged for his people to receive training in various crafts. Meanwhile, Sufi (1979) presents an argument that the history of Kashmir's pashmina industry is closely associated with the advent of Islam in Kashmir. He writes that the pashmina craft was introduced by the Persian mystic Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani in the year 1378, who along with 700 of his disciples

brought different arts and crafts from Persia to Kashmir which led to the establishment of, what previous scholars have called, “spiritual economy” in Kashmir (Rafiabadi, 2005).

More recently scholars (Kumar 2022; Skarratt 2018) have come to the conclusion that normal wool or pashmina weaving had existed in Kashmir since ancient times. However, the specific technique of *kani* shawl weaving, which is used to design *buta* on shawls, cannot be traced earlier than the 14th century. Therefore a more nuanced understanding should consider the kani shawl “as a product of a convergence of multiple traditions or civilisations” (Kumar 2022).

1.3 The Rise, Imitation and Fall of Kashmir's pashmina shawls in global trade

During the reign of the Mughal Empire, the pashmina shawl industry enjoyed a very high status as the rulers were very generous towards the industry. It became a fashion symbol among the ruling class and enjoyed royal patronage. During the middle of the 18th century, however, the Mughal Empire began to decline and along with that “the political conditions in Tsarist Russia, Safavid Iran, and the Ottoman Empire were also turning turbulent” (Bayly 2004). As a result, markets, where the trade of pashmina shawls had prospered, started to wane. Nevertheless, this period coincided with the emergence of the British presence in India, paving the way for a fresh new demand for pashmina shawls.

In the second half of the 18th century, pashmina entered the European market through different explorers, travellers, employees of the East India Company and British soldiers (Skarratt, 2018). It gained momentum in 1798 when Napoleon Bonaparte conquered Egypt during the reign of Selim III (Maskiell, 1992). The gathered booty in the war included pashmina shawls from

Kashmir. Napoleon in turn gifted the shawls to his wife Josephine, who was enchanted by the present. She went on to collect as many as a hundred pashmina shawls in her wardrobe and would not wear the same shawl twice. Therefore, the pashmina shawl became a fashion staple and a status symbol of the aristocracy in Europe (Savasere, 2011; Rai, 2005).

While the demand for pashmina was at its peak, the supply was not as abundant due to the limited production of handmade shawls. At the onset of 1800, the British made desperate attempts to control the lucrative pashmina shawl market in order to break the monopoly of Kashmir. However, there were a couple of reasons why the exploitation that took place in different textile industries of British India could not be replicated in the case of the pashmina trade. First was that the artisans weaved pashmina, specifically *Kani* design, using hieroglyphics and this knowledge was not shared with outsiders. It usually got transferred from parents to their children and when they faced the danger that it might be exposed, the graphs, along with coded language, were destroyed (Kumar 2022).

The second reason why the pashmina did not see its fate as that of other textile industries for example, Indian cotton, was related to the distinctive nature of the pashmina's geographic location; its qualities or reputation was due to its place of origin. In the year 1820-1822, William Moorcroft, an employee of the East India Company, travelled to Ladakh and Kashmir and acquired 50 Changthangi goats whose fine under-down is used to create the pashmina fibre (Karpinski 1963). While transporting the goats to Britain, however, the officials decided to separate the males and females into two different ships and the vessel carrying the female goats never

reached England. The remaining 25 males, stranded in a foreign land with an altogether different climate, lost their ability to produce quality under-down and the British could not benefit from them in any way. As a result, Kashmir retained its monopoly as the processing centre for one of the finest natural fibres in the world (Skarratt 2018).

Around early 1800, after the British failed to control or transport the pashmina trade from Kashmir into Britain, European textile manufacturers—backed by the state—tapped into the market and began to produce imitative pashmina shawls to meet the demands of the consumers, particularly of the French (Rizvi and Ahmed 2009). The imitation of Kashmiri shawls reached Norwich in 1803, and then moved to Edinburgh; one of the renowned towns which had great success in making the look-alike shawls—by copying the distinct Kashmiri *Buta* design—was the Scottish town, Paisley. It became one of the first weaving centres in Britain to adopt the new Jacquard loom which served as an impetus for the Industrial Revolution and the basis of the modern automatic loom (Geselowitz 2019). However, one of the main distinguishing differences between the two shawls (Kashmir's versus Paisley's) was the raw material used. While the Kashmiri shawl was made of pashmina wool, the Paisley shawl, "to give it the strength necessary for warp, it consisted of a thread of fine silk around which was spun a coating" of a yarn which was produced in the neighbourhoods of Amiens in France (Blair 1904; pg.33).

The Paisley shawl woven on Jacquard loom became so famous that manufacturers began to call it the Cashmere shawl and the *Buta* design was referred to as the Paisley design. Once cheap and imitative shawls were produced, the European market was flooded by Paisley-made shawls.

The jacquard loom was highly superior to earlier European looms, yet it could not replicate the distinctive twill tapestry weave that the Kashmiri *yender*[1] facilitated. It left one side of the shawl with loose threads and therefore failed to match the aesthetic superiority of the Kashmiri shawl. Paisley produced a limited number of high-end reproductions, but it was generally a centre geared towards fulfilling the demands of the mass market with high-volume output (Leavitt 1972). The town itself became successful because it offered a decent and inexpensive alternative to a genuine luxury 'Cashmere' for the less wealthy consumer. In Scotland, many young brides were gifted a 'kirking shawl' — a style derived from Kashmir *doshala* design— as a part of their trousseau, which they would wear to church (kirk) on the first Sunday after their wedding. Thus, by the middle of the 19th century, "warm shawls, plain and checked, had become the preferred outdoor wear for working-class women in Scotland and England" (Rizvi and Ahmed 2009). At this time, the market for Paisley shawls was "estimated to be of the value of one million sterling" (Blair 1904; pg.25).

The market for imitative shawls no longer remained confined to Europe. Around 1840, large imports of Paisley-made shawls were selling for one shilling or sixpence in Iran, Egypt and the Ottoman cities of Edrine and Kayseri (Issawi 1980). The expansion to other countries led to a huge success which was evident by the fact that the term "Paisley" had become "synonymous with not only shawls but even—in a shameless misappropriation of intellectual property—with the

[1] A traditional spinning wheel in Kashmir

quintessential motif of shawl design, the *buta*, developed thousands of miles away in the anteliors of Kashmir region" (Rizvi and Ahmed 2009 pg.228).

As English traders hijacked Kashmiri pashmina, the shawls transformed from a work of art to a marketable commodity for mass consumption that had entered into the middle-class consumer market. The fashion industry had by now gotten linked not just with market production but also with overall capitalist development as "industrialisation rendered the most exclusive garment, once the preserve of the Mughal courtly elite, a commonplace household item in Europe." (Skarratt 2018; pg.73)

By 1865, the demand for Kashmir's shawls had begun to contract and the production of cheap imitations lowered the shawl prices, making it difficult for Kashmir's handmade shawls to compete in the global market. It had neither a strong merchant capital nor the availability of industries for large-scale production. Consequently, the shawls were no longer considered fashionable or status symbols by the rich and elite due to their mass consumption. Between 1860-1870, there was a sudden contraction in the market and then due to the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), considerable disruption was caused in the trade between India and Europe. This contributed to a severe economic downturn in regions of Kashmir which had now grown dependent on the export trade with Europe.

Timothy Scrase (2003) describes crafts like that of pashmina as "high quality, rare, with great artistic beauty, or intricately constructed [and] have a specialised and elite consumer market.". The pashmina shawls made in Kashmir are known for their high quality, fine

craftsmanship, and softness. The other imitations are not able to match these qualities, which helped maintain a niche for authentic pashmina shawls among discerning customers, particularly among the upper class and collectors who sought genuine, high-quality pashmina shawls. Moreover, pashmina shawls hold a strong cultural and traditional value in the Indian subcontinent. As a result, there remains a steady demand for these shawls for ceremonial and special occasions, especially among affluent families. Therefore, the working conditions and everyday lives of people who make these prized shawls are worth studying.

1.3 Thesis overview

This thesis has four chapters. After an introductory chapter, Chapter 2 delves into the lives of pashmina weavers, revealing the struggles they face as marginalized workers. By examining the mechanization of the pashmina craft and its impact on their wages, I demonstrate how their aspirations for a better life are hindered. This phenomenon not only limits their socioeconomic mobility but also leads to their social exclusion and the stigmatization of both the weavers and the pashmina craft In this way, I ask how this marginalized community grapples with their unfulfilled dreams and aspirations on a daily basis. Moving on to Chapter 3, I shed light on women embroiderers and spinners, exploring the complex dynamics of labour power and value. Despite working in exploitative environments and receiving inadequate compensation, these women find ways to derive value and meaning from their work. I investigate the significance of all-women spaces in their lives and present ethnographic stories that highlight the non-economic forms of value and the intricate negotiations of value that occur among the diverse actors involved in the

creation of pashmina. Finally, Chapter 4 is dedicated to the Wostas, the intermediaries who claim to play a crucial role in the production of luxury pashmina shawls. Here, I delve into the negotiations that arise among these firm owners regarding the value they contribute to the production process. I am particularly interested in unravelling how these middlemen assert their value creation and how they perceive their role in the creation of the pashmina.

1.4 Methodology

This thesis is based on participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and unstructured conversations that primarily took place in ME&K's[2] pashmina manufacturing workshop between May and August 2022 in the Khaiwan area of Srinagar city.

The purpose of employing the participant observation method was to document the everyday lives of the weavers and establish a close relationship with them to make them comfortable sharing their experiences. This method allowed me to observe nonverbal expressions, participant interactions, and time spent on various activities. It also provided insights that could not be obtained through interviews alone. I focused on the weavers' interactions with their Wostas, checking how differently they behaved when their Wostas were present in the Kaarkhan. I recorded observations through field notes, which served as raw data for my research. Although the

[2] ME&K is a family-run business owned by Mujtaba Kadri, focusing on the heritage and craftsmanship of the Kashmir pashmina. The centre mentioned in this thesis is the workshop and/or production house of ME&K.

workshop was located in the same locality as my home, I did not know the weavers personally before going there in May 2022, except for Showkat Ahmad Mir, who is my cousin.

Additionally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the weavers, women spinners and embroiderers. In total, I was able to interview 18 people, and the duration ranged from 20 minutes to 130 minutes. This method allowed me to ask predetermined questions while also giving the interviewees the opportunity to share other relevant stories, ideas, and opinions about their lives, the pashmina craft, and their general experiences. I also conducted biographical interviews to gain a deeper understanding of their everyday lives, precarity, marginalization, the nature of labour, their perception of value, their experiences in pashmina weaving, and the challenges they faced as weavers or workers. Additionally, I conducted expert interviews with government officials from the Department of Handicrafts and Handloom and employees of the pashmina quality testing lab in Srinagar. However, the government officials, especially those in high-ranking positions, were not easily accessible and many refused to speak with me.

The major limitation was getting access to Wostas, as they were unwelcoming to speak with me. I conducted an online interview with Mujtaba Kadri and had an "accidental" unstructured conversation with Zahid Ali. Although I proposed interviewing more than two Wostas, they were reluctant to speak with me due to my position as a member of a pashmina weaving family.

For the women spinners and embroiderers, I engaged in "unstructured conversations" during my time with them in the workshop. Although I intended to conduct interviews, these

conversations happened naturally. Since the women knew my mother, they were happy to speak with me in their workshop. They discussed their work and daily affairs with me. Some of them even shared personal stories that were significant to them and later on became significant for my research as well. The informal conversations offered valuable insights into their social dynamics, interpersonal connections, challenges, and tensions that may have remained hidden during structured interview sessions.

It is pertinent to mention that my family's long association with weaving served as an initial inspiration to take up this project and my personal connections and kinship played a significant role in determining my access to the field.

Chapter 2

"It's truly a miracle from Allah that we don't starve": Exploring precarity, failed aspirations and stigma among pashmina weavers.

Outside, the sun was shining brightly. Inside, the weavers were working on their traditional looms, wearing just a thin white undershirt. The warm light from the sun streamed through the open windows, illuminating the skilled hands of the weavers as they meticulously worked on their exquisite pashmina shawls. The atmosphere was lively with the sounds of their laughter and the rhythmic clicking of their looms. However, in the left corner of the workshop, Ghulam Jeelani—affectionately called Jeela—was aloof and uninvolved in the frolic life of the workshop.

(A weaver in ME&K workshop)

"Why are you looking so sullen today?" I asked Jeela as I sat beside him on the edge of his workshop seat.

"What should I tell him now?" Jeela mumbled, turning towards his fellow weaver Hayat as if he was answering his question and not mine.

Hayat looked at me, smiled stealthily and said, "Jeela has done a blunder, and now he has to pay for it."

"What happened?"

"The shawl he is weaving will be short of seven centimeters in length and if Kadri Sir [the Wosta] comes to know about this, Jeela would have to pay the cost of this shawl. In short, this shawl is on his shoulders now. And more than that, no wages for this one. His game is over now." said Hayat, humorously.

"Is there no way out now?" I remarked, "Everyone in the workshop says you are a master craftsman, how is it that you are saying 'his game is over'?"

"Yes, if three of us [weavers] get up and spend evening hours on it, we can fix it. But that means we have to knot together three thousand threads as an extension to his warp. That is solid labour, and we have to keep our own work on standby."

In this chapter, I reflect on how, as precarious labourers, the lives of pashmina weavers are shaped by failed aspirations. I do this by presenting an analysis of the mechanization of the pashmina craft and its consequential impact on wage stagnation among weavers. I argue that this

phenomenon not only impeded their upward socio-economic mobility, but also resulted in their social exclusion and the stigmatization of the weavers as well as the pashmina craft. In doing so, I use the specific stories and life events of different weavers to illustrate how the pashmina weavers as a marginalised community make sense of their lives and livelihoods as they fail to achieve their daily/life aspirations.

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In the workshop, Jeela was the man who invited misfortunes most often. Sometimes he used the wrong colour combination in shawl weaving, different from the one which was prescribed to him; other times he forgot to take the proper measurements of a certain product. As I came to learn, the last time Jeela's fellow weavers helped him out, he had promised them a *tehri,* an oily yellow-coloured rice. However, he had never fulfilled that promise and now that he was in trouble again, he could not gather the courage to ask for help. I tried to mediate and speak on behalf of Jeela. Hayat and a few other weavers signalled to me that they would still help him but wanted to play along and "have a fun rest of the day" by teasing Jeela and asking him about his last promise.

"Jeela, if it was so that you promised them *tehri* last time, then why didn't you fulfil that?" I asked Jeela.

"Look, I told them that my wife was not at home at that time, but after some time they stopped reminding me, I also forgot."

"Okay, let us forget that. Past is past. If we help you this time, will you get a chicken-stuffed-yellow-rice tomorrow?" asked Gulzar Fighter, who was lying on the sofa, waiting for the raw material of his next shawl to arrive.

"Has a crazy stray dog bitten you?" asked Jeela, "What you are asking is unrealistic. The last time I bought chicken was when I got sick, and that too because the doctor told me it will help me regain my health. That was 5 months ago. What makes you think I will buy you a chicken? That's my one day's wage."

Finally, it was settled that Jeela's fellow weavers will help in the evening and that chicken was not possible, but Jeela will get the simple yellow rice for the entire workshop.

(Weavers helping Jeela)

A day later, when I went to the workshop, there was already a discussion going on about yellow rice. To my surprise, Jeela had not brought the yellow rice. He gave the reason that there was not enough cooking oil at home, and he couldn't buy a new one because the prices had

increased by 20 percent. Hayat, Gulzar Fighter and Showkat who had helped Jeela the day before were laughing at him. Jeela's story became a point of discussion in the workshop, and everyone voiced their opinions on what should be done now. Some of them asked him to buy cooking oil from a nearby shopkeeper on monthly instalments, others asked him to borrow from other weavers. However, yellow rice eventually came into the workshop from Hayat, when he finished weaving a set of shawls on his loom. Before starting to work on another one, he brought yellow rice to the workshop in the morning. Similarly, other weavers brought it as well, but the chicken stuffed rice never came in the workshop.

Tehri (Yellow rice)

(Distributing Tehri in the workshop)

What struck me was Jeela's inability to bring yellow rice due to his limited financial resources, while other weavers could easily do that. When I asked him, he said, "I have more responsibilities than other weavers. They don't have four daughters to look after and to marry off. Only I have and because of that, I have to be careful with everything. Moreover, I am around 58 now and because of old age, I am not as productive as I used to be." As was expected, the weavers

never brought the chicken because none of them could afford to buy one just to distribute in the workshop. Chicken was specifically brought when a “special guest” would come to their house, otherwise they would just buy chicken on certain festivals or events. The unattainability of chicken and its perception as a luxury food item for the weavers in the workshop reflects broader socio-economic disparities and limited access to basic resources. It highlights how economic constraints can limit an individual's ability to fulfil certain social expectations or obligations that are generally seen as normal in Kashmir’s society.

This was not the only instance when there were discussions on these exceptional topics. Since the beginning of spring, the weavers had been planning an excursion together and when I was there, entire days were spent discussing in detail where they would go for the excursion, in which bus to go, and who would drive. They would describe the picturesque mountains of Pahalgam or imagine watching a sunset while sitting on the ghats of the famous Dal Lake. It was a sort of imaginary pleasure they would take from discussing these details and how they would have time to relax and enjoy. There were detailed conversations about the different tourist spots they wanted to visit; the amount of money to be contributed; the kind of food they wanted to eat on that day. However, even after three months, the weavers never went to any picnic, because as I later realised, going to a picnic meant a lot of money for them. It meant wasting a day's wage. A weaver could not afford that.

In this uncertain job where they are unsure about how long it will take to get another set of shawls to weave, spending a day on an “excursion” was not considered a wise choice. This

highlights the practical considerations and trade-offs they have to make in the face of economic limitations. However, the inability to realise these aspirations due to financial constraints led to feelings of disappointment, failure, frustration, and unfulfilled desires. These endless discussions and repeated failures to achieve specific goals or aspirations (like, going to a picnic) exemplify a "precarious" livelihood.

Precarity is a concept that refers to the state of insecurity, uncertainty and unpredictability that affects people's ability to plan their lives and make meaningful choices. According to Standing (2011), precarity is characterized by a lack of social rights, such as the right to work, housing, healthcare, and education, which can lead to social exclusion, poverty, and marginalization. Judith Butler, a prominent social theorist, has discussed the concept of precarity in the context of political resistance and social change. In her work, she defines precarity as the "social and economic vulnerability of populations that are exposed to the possibility of injury and violence as a result of their exposure to unjust conditions of life" (Butler 2009, pg.25). Similarly, Anna Tsing defines precarity as "life without the promise of stability" (Tsing 2015, pg.2). The pashmina weavers' low wages, uncertainty about the duration of their work and the unavailability of new sets of shawls to weave reflects the precarious nature of their employment. This precariousness leads to a sense of insecurity and shapes their decision-making processes.

2.1 Marginalisation, mechanisation and meagre wages

Another concept that is closely related to precarity is marginalisation. Precarity can be seen as a consequence of marginalization, as marginalized groups are often more susceptible to

precarious conditions due to their limited resources, opportunities, and social protections (Manolchev, Saundry, & Lewis, 2021). The combination of marginalization and precarity exacerbates individuals' vulnerability and limits their ability to overcome social and economic challenges.

Marginalization refers to the process by which individuals or groups are pushed to the margins or periphery of society. As (Resnick & Thurlow, 2015) write, marginalisation extends beyond mere social exclusion, as it encompasses the denial of individuals' right to fully engage in society, resulting in neglected needs and compromised dignity. Marginalized individuals are individuals who possess limited agency in their lives and lack access to necessary resources. They experience exclusion, discrimination, and oppression, often being overlooked and disregarded by the prevailing social structure, thereby becoming subject to negative public perceptions and attitudes (Acharya 2018). Ultimately, marginalization serves as the underlying catalyst for poverty, inequality, and injustices within society (Young, 1990; Acharya 2018). In the following section, I will show how the marginalisation of the pashmina weavers is a poignant consequence of the industrialisation and mechanisation of the pashmina craft, that has led to the issue of meagre wages. This multifaceted process has relegated this community to the fringes of society, depriving them of their rightful place and subjecting them to various forms of neglect and a life of ignominy.

In the winter of 1999, Mir Showkat Ahmad, aged 17, passed the high school exam. A week later, his father got a heart attack. The incident left Ahmad's father, a pashmina weaver by profession, half-impaired. Being the only son and eldest of the siblings, the responsibility to take

care of the family fell upon Ahmad. He wanted to study computer science at university however due to his father's illness, life at home became financially difficult. As pashmina weaving was already in the family, with his grandfather and two of his uncles both working as weavers, for Ahmad weaving was the most natural occupation to take up in order to earn money. With time, Ahmed adjusted to his life as a weaver and started providing for his family. However, at the beginning of 2006, the spinning and powerloom machines began to arrive in Kashmir and the production of pashmina started to shift from traditional looms at home to powerlooms stationed in industrial factories.

Under the Handloom Protection Act 1985, processing any kind of pashmina thread in industrial factories is prohibited. The pashmina fibre is very delicate and cannot withstand the force of a spinning machine. It has to be individually handspun on a traditional wheel and then meticulously dyed and woven. However, the machine owners, operating illegally, mix nylon, viscose and certain harmful chemicals to make the thread strong enough to spin pashmina yarn on machines. As a result, the weaving community of around 400,000 weavers and 900,000 women spinners[3] associated with the craft are living a life of instability with a large number of them rendered jobless.

The pashmina products made on power looms are not considered authentic pashmina. Yet in the national and international markets, they are branded as 100% handmade. This has damaged

[3] Source: Spokesperson, J&K Handloom and Handicrafts Department. (Interview date: 19.09.2022)

the reputation of the ancient pashmina craft. The demand for handmade pashmina has narrowed as cheap, imitative shawls flood the market. It is because the cost of making a pashmina shawl on a machine is 1/4th of a pashmina made by hand. As a result, the people associated with this craft began leaving in droves. According to the Department of Handloom, in 2002, around 200,000 weavers were officially registered with the department however unofficially the figures were much more than that. As of 2021, there were only 15,360 active weavers registered with the department.

The powerloom community claims it has a licence to manufacture wool cloth, and pashmina is a fibre that comes under the wool category. Yet, according to research by the Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology in Srinagar, wool and pashmina "are completely different fibres altogether, in terms of genetic nature, appearance, morphology, handle [and] processing".[4] The Economic Survey of 2018, published by the Directorate of Economics and Statistics states: "The handloom sector is facing multifaceted challenges primarily due to machine-made fabric and trade liberalisation. Poor productivity of weavers, increased cost of production of handloom cloth, cheaper synthetic substitutes in the textile sector, and changing consumer tastes have put a serious constraint in the development of this [pashmina] sector." (Mehra 2019)

Ahmed told me that the infiltration of machines in the handmade pashmina market has been like a poison for the weavers' community. Not only did it take away their work, but it also slashed their wages and at one point they became stagnant. "Our wages are not increasing because

[4] See Appendix 1

on the machines you get the same thing done very cheaply, but it's not that we are against technological advancement. It's about the fraud and fakery of the machine owners. They sell wool in the name of premium pashmina. And that has done an injury to us."

In the early 2000s, when Ahmed started weaving, the monthly wages of the weavers allowed, at least, to meet the demands of daily life. The weavers could take care of their family's needs. Moreover, a decade earlier, the wages were so good that people used to shun government jobs to become weavers. However, the craft is now on its deathbed as the wages of the weavers have not been adjusted according to the current market prices or inflation. "In the year 2000s, when I weaved the first pashmina shawl, the wage was 1,250 rupees [$15.17] per shawl and at present, the latest wage issued by the government is just 2500 rupees [$30.34]. It's a joke on us. A labourer earns more than we do. We are stripped of our dignity. It takes a week to weave one shawl. Tell me, how can a person survive on 2500 rupees for a week? The market is so expensive that the minimum wage for a shawl should be at least 5000 rupees."

Seeking answers, I interviewed Dr Nargis, Joint Director at the Department of Handloom, about the unlivable wages of the weavers, she said, "Unfortunately, it is not up to the handlooms department to raise wages. Wages are under the purview of the labour department. And, sadly, weavers have not been classified as skilled workers, nor have they been registered under the labour department so that their wages would increase. Apart from that, the middlemen who provide them raw material, it seems, do not have the empathy to pay them more." The interview with Dr. Nargis revealed that there are structural as well as administrative obstacles that contribute to the weavers'

low wages. The lack of classification as skilled workers and their inability to register under the labour department prevents them from accessing higher wages. The increasing market prices have further exacerbated the weavers' financial struggles. The weaver's argument that the minimum wage for a shawl should be at least 5000 rupees indicates the disparity between their earnings and the cost of living, reinforcing the need for fair wages that align with market realities. Ahmed's comparison of a labourer earning more than a weaver underscores the disparity and the erosion of dignity faced by the weavers.

The situation faced by pashmina weavers bears striking similarities to the challenges experienced by Sri Lankan tea plantation workers, as highlighted by Mythri Jegathesan (2019). It is because pashmina weavers also confront a set of problems that include poor working conditions and low wages, leading many of them to fall into a cycle of debt. Despite their craftsmanship and the value associated with pashmina products, the weavers find themselves earning meager incomes. These wages are often insufficient to sustain a decent standard of living, let alone provide for their families' needs. As a result, many weavers are forced to seek financial assistance through loans and credit, leading to a cycle of debt that becomes an integral part of their daily lives.

However, the issue of stagnant wages is not limited to the pashmina weaving industry alone but plagues the informal labour sector in India as a whole. Economist Jean Dreze recently highlighted the lack of substantial growth in real wages nationwide and emphasizes the need to reorient economic policies towards fostering wage growth. with more focus on the "drivers" of wage growth "If real wages are rising, workers are likely to be earning more and living better. A

sustained rise in real wages is a good sign that economic growth is translating into better jobs. Stagnation of real wages, on the other hand, would be a major concern from the point of view of poverty reduction." (Dreze 2023)

Before the advent of industrial pashmina production in Kashmir, the traditional form of pashmina weaving gave the weavers of Kashmir a form of economic independence. It was a source of livelihood in large segments of Srinagar city. However, for the past decade and a half, as industries began to set up in Kashmir, the craft has been diminishing due to the unliveable wages it provided. Now, it can be seen only in the hands of those who are just "stuck" with it and cannot shift to another occupation. Therefore, the people who are stuck with it see pashmina weaving as an alienating experience.

Marx defined alienation as a disorienting sense of exclusion and estrangement from society, a condition in which a man "alienates something from himself and himself from something; that he alienates himself from himself" (Petrovic, 1963). First, let us understand the weaver's situation with the help of Marx's framework for the causes of alienation. I argue that the weavers working under their Wosta (the capitalist middlemen) are suffering from alienation, arising from the capitalist mode of production, where the relationship between a weaver and his Wosta is that of a cash-nexus, stunting the development and fulfilment of the weaver's needs. For example, they get no welfare support or old-age pension from their Wosta. The privately-owned means of production are another reason for their alienation, as the handlooms on which the weavers work do not belong to them but to their Wosta, who controls the production, distribution as well as

overall profit generated by selling the pashmina shawls. The weavers on the other hand, historically, have been pauperized and thus have no resources to produce their own products, as a result, their labour is the only thing they can sell (Lone, 2017, pg. 578). This brings us to the objectification of their labour, meaning that every shawl a weaver creates with his labour-power, particularly with his skilful hands, is converted into an object and in the process, the weaver is deprived of the means of existence. The labour-power of the weaver gets transferred to an object, in our case the pashmina shawl and it is that shawl that will be given importance in the market. And finally comes commodity fetishism, the "mistaken view that the value of a commodity is intrinsic and the corresponding failure to appreciate the investment of labour that went into its production" (Oxford Reference Online). The shawls that weavers produce are ultimately commodities but they take a life of their own among the consumers, as there is an obsession or a fetish to possess the pashmina shawl, while weaver who produced the shawl has always remained unappreciated.

2.2 Failed aspirations in the public: The case of a weaver's union

Having worked in the pashmina workshops for 14 years, Ahmed realised that there was no way he could end the poverty at home. He was in an endless cycle of debt with no hope of any rescue. Therefore, in 2013, in order to raise these grievances of pashmina weavers and chart out ways to revive the heritage craft of pashmina weaving, Ahmed along with his other colleagues established Kashmir Pashmina Karigar Union (KPKU). One of the initial motives of the union was

to pressure the government to demand that the factories processing pashmina be banned and a hefty fine be imposed if they are found manufacturing pashmina.

The demands of the union work changed Ahmed's course of life. He became personally so invested in it that the priorities of life shifted from weaving towards activism. As he was one of the only weavers who had received education, he would spend most of his time doing work related to the union, arranging files, and writing letters and memorandums. The actual work, weaving, got only a share of a few hours of the day. Gradually, as things got more serious, he had to normalise living like this. His normal days started with going to a government office and running from one department to the other and attending meetings with bureaucrats to discuss the plights of pashmina weavers and reach towards their final goal: implementing a ban on pashmina weaving on powerlooms. There was one big question that the weaver's delegation to the government kept asking, "If according to law processing any kind of pashmina thread in industrial factories is banned then how is it possible that machines are currently processing pashmina?"

However, they got no answers to this question, and due to the long bureaucratic process, the outcomes of meetings took years to show results, if at all. Even though legally, the law was there the government did not enforce it. As I was told, during one of the visits to the workshop, "The government is not doing anything about it because rich industrialists would bribe or are friends with the authorities, who in turn support them to the fullest, while they are just doing a sort of lip service to this heritage craft."

During 2013-2019, the KPKU held more than 50 meetings with officials from various government departments including Department of Industries and Commerce, and Department of Handloom and Handicrafts. They wrote multiple letters to the Governor of Jammu and Kashmir and Members of the Parliament. Every time they were only assured that their queries would be considered. However, on the ground, there was no real change. In the spring of 2015, the KPKU decided to go to the industrial complex and ransack and burn down the factories weaving pashmina. However, before they could do it, they were arrested by the police and jailed for a few days. After the intervention of Kashmir's business fraternities, the weavers were released from jail.

Ahmed said that "At one point, we had a meeting with the Divisional Commissioner of Kashmir and we came to the conclusion that it is illegal to manufacture pashmina on machines. Everyone was happy that we had finally won, but the next day in the morning we got to know that the decision to ban was overturned. As we came to know, the DC of Kashmir had come under political pressure to reverse the ban" Ahmed explained that the industrialists had paid money to political parties to fund their election campaigns. Naturally, it was a time to return the favour.

After four years of protests, the fruits of the union's hard work finally bore fruits. In 2019, the district commissioner issued a blanket ban for a probationary period of one year on any pashmina to be processed in industries. However, Ahmed informed me, which Dr Nargis, joint director at the Government Handlooms Department, later confirmed was "The ban was issued but the problem was that there was no enforcing agency . . . It is evident that with the advent of

industries and power looms, the weavers lost their work, and all the traditional acts began to go extinct."

The ban which was initially for one year was never extended. The reasons were never divulged to the weaver's community. Ahmed gradually started focusing more on weaving and less on activism as the government departments had turned hostile towards the weavers. As of June 2023, the weavers are still fighting for their rights and raising their voices the law which restricts powerlooms to manufacture pashmina to be enforced and the craft saved from industrial capitalism.

2.3 Failed aspirations at home

For the past five months, Ahmed had been saving small amounts of money from his monthly wages with the hope of buying a bicycle for his 9-year-old son. He had promised his son that if he secures a position in his class, he would gift him a cycle. On the day of the results, Ahmed was surprised to see that his son had received 98.5%, the first in his class. On the one hand, he was happy for his son but on the other hand, he was worried that he would be unable to fulfil his promise now. "The bicycle costs Rs. 6,000 and my wages for one month do not go beyond Rs. 10,000 with which I have to manage my entire household needs. What I earn is not even sufficient to meet my daily needs. I felt so ashamed of how I would face him. Tell me one thing, who is responsible for this? I am not able to buy a cycle for my son. It's a very basic thing. I am not asking to buy an aeroplane for him, but the cycle is something everyone should be able to get easily. I know I promised my son but I thought that I might be able to get it if I save small amounts of

money, but now I have to admit I failed . . . And the question I ask myself is who is responsible for this? Is it me who is responsible or is it the system out there which denies us these basic rights?"

Ahmed told me that cycle is a far-fetched thing, he even buys groceries and daily household items on credit from a nearby general store located outside his house. At the end of the month, if he owes the storekeeper rupees 6,000, he pays rupees 3,000 and then this circle of debt keeps on going. "I don't know how we survive. It's truly a miracle from Allah that we don't starve. Otherwise, do you think a person can survive on these wages?"

These events made Ahmed experience shame as a provider, his inability to fullfill his promise affected his self-esteem and his financial insecurity penetrated deep into how he behaves with his family, how he responds to the questions his children ask; how he cares and nurtures his family. He often times gets angry at home on petty issues that leads to familian tensions. This highlights the emotional toll of financial insecurity and the impact it can have on individuals and their relationships. It is because, in the back of his mind, he is irritated by his inability to secure not only his hopes and aspirations but of his children's as well. He developed complicated relations with his family, not knowing how to react when the question of money or anything which questioned family's economic insecurity came up. "I am not the man I had to be . . . a proper provider. . . It is because of exploitative labour I don't get my rightful share but I take that up on myself that I failed."

Like Sisyphus, every day he works very hard in the hope of achieving "a good life" (Fisher, 2014). However, as of now, there seems to be no hope that he will be able to achieve the life he wants with the wages he earns by weaving pashmina.

2.4 Stigma and failure: Weavers as stigmatised individuals

Pashmina is pride; weaving, a shame.

"Many people say we are poor and the government should provide them with money. But it's not the money we need. Money is secondary. First, what we want is dignity. I believe, before anything else, we have to bring a standard to this art. Give it the dignity to save it from extinction. When it is a dignified job, our children will proudly do it and won't get embarrassed in front of their friends.." — Ghulam Hassan, 64, a weaver.

As Resnick and Thurlow (2015) describe, marginalised people are also often stigmatised, leading to a vicious circle marked by a lack of supportive relationships and the ability to participate in community life, resulting in further isolation. Just like the tea plantation labour in Sri Lanka, studied by Jegathasan, pashmina weaving lacks "dignity because of its low wages and lower social prestige attributed to the work performed." (Jegathasan 2019; pg. 155). The weavers are "labour shamed" for the work they do and are stigmatised by broader civil society "for being poorly

compensated, intimate, and associated with menial and informal forms of payments and tasks" (pg. 157). All of this amounts to self-blame and a sense of social failure among the pashmina weavers.

With the decline in their economic status, the pashmina weavers have experienced a change in societal attitudes towards their craft. Once highly respected, the community is now often seen as stigmatised and outdated. I am focusing on pashmina weavers as "stigmatised individuals" (Goffman, 1963; pg.173) who are often stereotyped in society. Stigma is a special form of a "discrepancy between virtual and social identity" (pg.3); an attribute that spoils and downgrades the possessor from a full, whole human being to someone who is a deeply and extensively discredited, "tainted, discounted" (pg. 3) person. The weavers are subject to prejudice and discrimination because the jobs they are doing are now considered "odd jobs" due to the "peanut wages" they are given. Therefore they are "disqualified from full social acceptance" (pg.11). Goffman's theory is helpful in understanding how stigma reproduces social inequality and how it becomes a marker of difference, which goes everywhere and infects every aspect of their social being. According to Goffman, a stigmatised person is one who has a marker of difference and the people who have dealings with him "fail to accord him the respect and regard" (pg.19). However, the meaning of that difference is something derived from society. It is a social construction determined by society. The marker of difference for a weaver is his job title "a weaver" and the economic disparity associated with it. Weavers often try to hide it, and in their social settings, they have to manage the burden of uneasy interaction with normal people who are not weavers. Furthermore, their hands which are usually sticky due to the rice water they use while preparing the waft of the shawl are often hidden from other people and they prefer to be not known in

society. Before the 2000s, it was not considered as something negative but now that they earn little as well, weaving is not thought of as dignified job.

Goffman writes that stigmatised people expect support from two groups. The first group is "those who share his stigma and by virtue of this are defined and define themselves as his own kind" (pg.40). The second group is "the persons who are normal but whose special situation has made them intimately privy to the secret life of the stigmatized individual and are sympathetic with it . . ." (pg.41). Therefore, the weavers are at ease only when they are within the shell of their acquaintances, with their family or with other people who are normal but according to societal norms have some "flaws" whether in terms of caste, class or race. In the first part of the book, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) Goffman asks "How does the stigmatized person respond to his situation?" (pg.19) In our case, the answer is that they are trying their best to sanitise themselves from anything which is associated with weaving, per se. That is, they try to find other jobs and leave the craft of pashmina weaving. Therefore, one of the many reasons that pashmina weaving is vanishing is because of the stigma attached to it. For example, a physically deformed person undergoes plastic surgery and gets absorbed among the normal people. However, for a weaver, his only option to run away from this stigma is to shun this job. In their social circle, they tend not to say that they are pashmina weavers and even if they say it, they feel humiliated.

In addition, because of this shame the weavers have no social currency in the marriage market, meaning that parents look down upon the marriage proposal coming from a man who is a

weaver. That is also why the weavers while in a social setting are in constant fear that other people who have a higher class than theirs will disrespect them if they happen to do something subconsciously that highlights their connection with the weaving class. As a result, the weavers are "always insecure in (their) contact with other people; and this insecurity arises, not from mysterious and somewhat disguised sources, as a great deal of our anxiety does, but from something which he knows he cannot fix." (pg.24) Finally, the "discreditable" (pg.47) weavers often try to prevent the leaking of what he calls "stigma symbols" or fugitive signs that one is a possessor of a particular stigma. As a result of that, in public, they are role-playing most of the time.

2.5 Coping mechanisms: How are pashmina weavers dealing with their challanges?

Now, stepping away from the issues plaguing pashmina weavers, I will briefly delve into how they are making sense of their lives despite these adversities.

While it is evident that pashmina weavers face various challenges and experience alienation in their workshops, their responses to these challenges are not that of resignation but rather a collective effort to create a more meaningful environment and foster a close-knit sense of community in order to cope with their alienation and, in a way, compensate for the sorrows, disappointments, or failures they have faced.

The weavers find solace and friendship within the workshop's community. The workshop not only serves as a place of work but also as a space where they can connect with others, forming bonds that extend beyond mere professional interactions. By offering assistance and support to one another, even pausing their own work when needed, they display the significance of social

reciprocity and mutual assistance within their community. The example of Jeela, a weaver who previously faced many hardships in the workshop, was supported by fellow weavers while they teased him about his unfulfilled promises. This combination of support and humor underscores the multifaceted nature of their interactions and the camaraderie in their daily lives. They would even come back to the workshop to meet and spend time together even in the evening, to have tea and gossip, laugh and "lighten their hearts". This kind of relationship and a sense of collective effort allows them to find comfort and resilience in the face of their individual challenges.

In the modern world, driven by individualism, people often feel more lonely and alienated than ever before. Lynne Segal, a feminist academic and activist, in her book *Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy* (2018) suggests an antidote to this; rather than focusing on our own happiness, we should find fulfilment by connecting with and caring for others because "true happiness is produced by cultivating and reaffirming our ties to one another." (pg.10) Pashmina weavers' collaborative efforts and shared understanding of the craft's intricacies create opportunities for weavers to connect, collaborate, and support each other, cultivating a spirit of unity and a shared sense of belonging.

Segal's exploration of social context and structures reinforces the idea that individual experiences of misery are deeply rooted in the larger social fabric. The rise of neoliberal governance and the dismantling of the welfare state have resulted in increasing economic insecurity, precarious work conditions, and a sense of isolation. In response, the pashmina weavers counteract this individualism and isolation by fostering a sense of community and support within their workshop,

allowing them to navigate their hardships by finding solace in companionship and shared experiences.

Chapter 3

"Sharing, caring and helping": Negotiating value and labour power among women embroiderers and spinners

3.1 Raziya's hands

"Do you know my hands appeared on BBC London?" That was how Raziya, 40, introduced herself to me when I first went to the women's embroiderers' room on the second storey of the ME&K building. Razia's words stayed with me and refused to evaporate from my mind, leaving as strong an impression on me as an elephant's footprints. These words were revealing to me through the way she spoke about herself— *It was not HER photograph but a photograph of her HANDS doing the embroidery that appeared on BBC London*. After that encounter, during my visits to the women-embroiderer's room, I would always pay attention to their hands, how they were adorning pashmina scarves or *jamawars* with paisley (a teardrop-shaped motif), butterflies and expansive Mughal court scenes. With thick eyeglasses hanging on their noses, their eyes carefully peered at the scarves, rested on their thighs, while they would copy the pattern from a graph, thread by thread with their needles. Some of them had steel finger protectors on their index fingers and others had skilfully learnt how to work without such protectors. During many of our conversations, I would think about how these pashmina scarves huddled in their laps would take on a life of their own once they leave the centre and surface somewhere in high street shopping areas in the western market. Like the movement of Sapphire gemstones discussed by Nethra Samarawickrema (2018), these hands become a carrying metaphor for how the value of the pashmina scarves gets transformed as it transfers from one hand to

another. First, the pashmina scarves get embroidered by their hands—dry and chapped hands due to the cold, then once complete, the deft hands of the manager take the pashmina scarves away from these women and stores them in the lockers, where the next day the owner of the company would come and with his delicate hands and pristine long fingers check the quality and softness of the scarves and then finally place them to be transported to Western Europe and North America where they will be placed in the supple hands of an affluent buyer, who would probably wear them along with a Loro Piana suit.

I open with this vignette of Raziya's hands because it represents the global connections and the chains of value that the pashmina shawls brings forth. It illustrates the range of power and hierarchical categories between different countries in the world (Wallerstein 2000) and the anonymity of labour in the "global hierarchy of value" (Herzfeld 2004). As Herzfeld writes "The increasingly homogenous language of culture and ethics constitutes a *global hierarchy of value*. This hierarchy, which clearly succeeds to the values promulgated worldwide by the erstwhile colonial powers of Europe [...] represents the most comprehensive and globally ramified form of common sense – the ultimate expression of cultural authority." (2004: 2-3) Herzfeld makes the argument that similar hierarchical indexing of cultural activities occurs worldwide, with Euro-American principles operating across the world. This image of Raziya's hands shows how the value of a commodity gets increased because of its "authenticity" as handmade embroidery which adds market value once it reaches the Western world. (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). This movement of the scarves represents a transformation in their value. The scarves transition from being handmade

objects of artistic expression to becoming commodities in the global market. Their value is not only in their material and craftsmanship but also in their association with luxury and status.

Marx, while writing about the labour theory of value considered labour-power as the most valuable thing. However, in order to have a satisfactory understanding of the nature of work, it is essential that we have a broader understanding of the value (Graeber 2001). In recent times, feminist scholars like Narotzsky and Besnier (2014), Bear (2013) and Rofel and Yanagisako (2019) have argued for multiple forms of value in livelihood and/or non-economic forms of value. They present a point of view that calls for new discussions. For Narotzky, the value indicates a "terrain where people negotiate the boundaries" which defines the worth of a good life and what people do to achieve that life. She challenges us to think about how the value of a concept of labour operates in places where "present-day Western categorizations may not exist or may be embedded in a different reality." Similarly, Bear (2013) builds on the critique of both Marx and Arendt's "secular and naturalist" interpretation of work and labour. She problematizes the complex paradoxes of wage labour by writing that the act of labour in capitalism often involves "polyvalency"—different values which are not always in material form and often surpass thinking in terms of economic value. It can be the value of kinship, desire, social values or familial values, which escape any single definition (Bear 2013).

In this chapter, I focus on women embroiderers and spinners and the negotiation of labour power and value that takes place between them. I try to decipher how these women find value in the work they do, while all the time working in an exploitative environment and how they create

meaning in the work they do while they are not adequately paid for it. What role do these all-women spaces have in their lives? By narrating the ethnographic stories and their accounts of value, I place their stories at the centre of my thesis and provide a close-up view of the non-economic forms of value as well as negotiations of value that take place between different actors in the making of one of the world's most luxurious fabrics.

3.2 Raziya's theory of "sharing, caring and helping"

When Raziya was 14 or maybe 15 and had just finished high school, she started learning to do embroidery on pashmina shawls. Her family was not very well off and could not support Raziya in continuing her education past high school. So, in her part-time, she would do the embroidery in order to pay her university fees. When she was in the second year of her Bachelor's degree, she got a marriage proposal from a man who was involved in the pashmina manufacturing business. The boy's family was known to them and the marriage took place as soon as Raziya graduated from college.

In 2007, Raziya got married and due to her husband's engagement with handcrafted goods, she remained in touch with embroidery so that she would not have to ask for money from her husband for the "small needs of a woman". The money she earned from embroidery was for herself only and neither her husband nor his family ever asked about her earnings. In her husband's home, Raziya was living a "satisfying life where everyone loved" her. A year after her marriage she gave birth to a son. However, things changed in 2010 after Raziya gave birth to her second son. It was a life-changing experience for her. Just a few weeks after the birth, Raziya found herself unable

to care for her baby. “I would kick that baby boy with my foot when he used to cry,” says Raziya as a wave of sadness runs across her face. Doctors diagnosed Raziya with postpartum depression. The condition was serious but not impossible to overcome. With proper care and medication, she would be fine.

“It was my husband who helped me to recover. With his love and support I was able to bring myself back to normal,” says Raziya, “However, Allah had other plans for me. As I was coming out of this depression, my husband, who had been to Pune for a handicrafts exhibition, suffered a major heart attack and died in the hospital.”

The episode shattered Raziya’s life completely and she fell back into depression. This time her depression was more severe than the first time. She began to experience intense mood swings and would frequently lock herself in a room to cry and injure herself. “I used to think that this world does not require me. I don’t serve any purpose here or like I am not of any use to anyone. My condition was such that I used to think that I should not be able to see the next morning’s sun. Darkness fascinated me and I liked evenings when no one would see me.”

After her husband’s death, Raziya stayed with her in-laws, along with their extended family. In order to make her feel better and in an attempt to re-engage her with the world, Raziya’s brother-in-law suggested she take up embroidery work again. As he was running a handicraft firm, he would supply her with pashmina cloth and she would work whenever her heart desired to. However, at home, Raziya was not very productive. After much procrastination, she worked on a cloth for not more than two hours a day and no one asked her any questions. Even if the patterns

she made were distorted, it was appreciated. But in her heart, she knew it was not good artwork and would often feel guilty about that.

On one Sunday, Yasmeena, a next-door neighbour, came to Raziya's home for an afternoon chat. Yasmeena informed her about a new centre opening in Khaiwan, just one mile away from her home. She had heard from her brother that the centre was accepting pashmina spinners, weavers and embroiderers. Two weeks ago, Yasmeena joined the centre as a spinner. ME&K, the pashmina centre, boasted of round-the-year work for all artisans along with timely payments. Yasmeena requested Raziya to come with her so that she gets company while leaving and coming back home.

"But considering the difficult situation you were in, what motivated you to join the centre?" I asked Raziya.

"In Kashmir, only those women come to these pashmina centres who need to support their families with their earnings. But for me, that is not the case. Now you ask me 'Why did I come here?' I will answer that as well. See. when I was working at home, I was lazy, lethargic and depressed. Even if I don't come here, it's not necessary for me. It's not like I HAVE to come here. My in-laws are well off and financially sound and I don't feel like I need to earn more money. But initially, I came here just for one day to accompany Yasmeena and I got a very good vibe here. I felt like I have begun to feel alive. I decided I would join this place as well. It is because there are many women here and I listen to their stories. It's a kind of family. We talk and laugh and discuss things. It makes me feel good. Particularly, for me as a depression patient, it was extremely helpful so

much so that now I only take half of the medication I used to take before. It's because here my colleagues shared with me the stories of other women who had faced much harder times than me. Then I realised that I have a much more comfortable life than others, so why am I feeling so despaired? Since I came here, I am not concerned with just what I earn because what kind of life is that if you are just running after money? The theory of my life is 'sharing, caring and helping', that is the only thing I keep in my mind when I think of the purpose of my life now."

It was 5:45 pm and the clear blue sky began to turn into a tangerine dusk. The manager of the centre had informed me earlier that the centre runs from 7 am to 5 pm. It was already 45 minutes past the usual daily shift, so I asked Raziya why they didn't leave for home.

She laughed and said "When we go back home, we are waiting for the next day to come. It's almost dark now and we don't care about going home. And when we are home, we long for the next day to come so that we can come here."

A week later, I met Raziya again and I wanted to know what she thought of the owner of the company and inquire if she thought the wages that the owner provided were sufficient. To my surprise, Raziya openly spoke about the exploitation by the centre owners, that the 'cream' of the pashmina trade overall is gleaned by the middlemen or *Wosta*—usually, the ones who owns these workshops and sells these products on the international market. Her earnings ranged from Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 12,000 per month depending on the quality and amount of work they do. "An embroiderer never earns as much as she should earn. The company owners sell the products we make to rich and famous people all over the world, and compared to the profits they generate from

this, we get nothing. They sometimes even take awards on our behalf". Although the workers at ME&K, receive their payments on time, when I asked women who were working alongside Raziya, they unanimously agreed that despite their significant contribution to the pashmina shawls/scarves' value, they are being underpaid considering the amount of skill and patience their craft requires. The other bosses they worked under before coming here, were very callous and apathetic as they would make them wait for months to receive payment. Previous bosses used waiting as a mode of exercising power (Auyero 2012) and non-payment of wages as an accumulation strategy (Prasad 2017).

For the women, it was a source of pride that the products they make would reach the big metropolitan cities in different parts of the world which adds value to their products. The idea of their goods travelling made them feel as if it is they who travel not just their products. It also happened when people, particularly tourists, came to the centre and appreciated their work. Through their intricate embroidery, they imbue the scarves with cultural and artistic value. The scarves become more than just utilitarian objects; they represent the skills, traditions, and identity of the embroiderers and the region they come from.

"When we complete a particular shawl and someone comes and sees it, it takes their heart away and they say 'Ah, what a piece this is'. In fact, it gives us much more pleasure when we hear a word of appreciation or when someone recognizes our talent than when we actually get paid for it. We feel dignified and it gives us a sakoon (serenity). What we want is dignity and a sense of pride that we are not just labourers and that we have talent. Our hearts flourish when people from all over the

world come here and recognise our skills. We feel blessed that we are also capable of something that someone places in their heart. Our craft moves around the world, it means we are of some value." The appreciation and recognition of their skills by customers and tourists visiting the centre add to the cultural value of the objects. When people admire the shawls and recognize the artisans' talent, it provides a sense of dignity and pride for the women embroiderers. The scarves become symbols of their skills and creativity, connecting them to a global community.

Graeber (2001) defines value as the importance of social action through which people demonstrate their belief in what constitutes "a good life" and the way they "represent the importance of their own actions to themselves" (2001: 45). It is obvious that people invest their energies into the things that they consider most important. In the case of the embrioderers, work itself becomes an expression of value, and it is the performance of this work that is deemed valuable (Astuti, Parry and Stafford 2007). This does not mean that embroidery women like Raziya have no complaints or put up lightly with the exploitative environment and low wages. However, through their work they find value in their lives and livelihoods and the complaints become a secondary issue. They create a new social world and satisfy and embrace what they think of as a valuable life.

In his book *The Good Life: Aspiration, Dignity, and the Anthropology of Wellbeing* (2014), anthropologist Edward F. Fischer explores the concept of the good life and its different cultural manifestations. Fischer's research focuses on identifying key non-material qualities that define the good life, including aspiration, dignity, and commitment to larger purposes. Fischer presents on-the-ground narratives from various cultural contexts to provide an overview of the different

meanings of a good life, arguing that people are not solely self-interested agents concerned only with material gains, instead, he emphasises the importance of non-material aspects in defining a good life and the various ways individuals can strive to achieve it. The story of Raziya aligns with Fischer's understanding of a good life. Raziya's involvement in her work is not driven by financial need but rather by the sense of belonging and her motto of "sharing, caring, and helping" the community of women at the centre. Despite acknowledging the exploitation and underpayment by the Wostas, Raziya and her colleagues find dignity, pride, and a sense of value in their craft. The appreciation they receive from others (for example, consumers and tourists) for their skills and the recognition of their work gives them a sense of purpose and satisfaction.

Moreover, Raziya's story and her experience with embroidery work for more than twenty years symbolise what Sennett (2009) referred to as "craftsmanship". As Sennett put it, craftsmanship is not focused on just getting by but on getting it right. It is a skill of doing and producing quality work with careful attention to detail. Raziya has a deep inner satisfaction with her craft. Even though it requires her to be highly patient, the very process "the slowness of the craft serves as a source of satisfaction" for her, a satisfaction that comes from work perfected for its own sake (2009: 294). The sense of pride that Raziya feels in her work is a reward for her skill and commitment to craftsmanship.

3.3 Yasmeena's story: "Who is the man of the house, he or me?"

Yasmeena's job, as a spinning woman, is to produce fine delicate threads out of raw pashmina fleece. When she was a child, she used to observe her mother spinning pashmina and as

she grew of age, she picked it up as well. In Kashmir, the craft of spinning is considered a noble job because of the religious value ascribed to it. That was why Yasmeena, 48, introduced spinning as "not just a normal job". She was taught this by her mother because it is believed spinning women receive blessings from God as it was a craft which was practised by Prophet Mohammad's daughter, Fatima Al-Zahra. She used to spin wool during her time in Mecca. Therefore, as Yasmeena said, it was she who gave her peace while she was working. "Even if we earn little, through her blessings, it becomes sufficient for us". For Yasmeena, her job as a spinning woman carried symbolic significance due to its religious value and connection to Prophet Mohammad's daughter. She sees the craft of spinning as noble and associated with blessings from God. Yasmeena's belief in the importance of her work reflects how these symbolic meanings shape her self-perception and sense of purpose.

It was a rainy day when I met her. She was making afternoon tea for the workers at the centre—an "extra job" for which she would get paid separately. When we began the interview, rather than answering my questions, Yasmeena shared her personal life stories with me; stories about her family, her neighbourhood and her friends. It almost felt like a cathartic experience on her part. So, I listened to her patiently. Later I realised how her story made more sense and was way more powerful than my prepared questions. It gave a bigger picture of why Yasmeena and tens of women like her were coming to work at the centre and the values they ascribed to their work.

"You see, we are the pillars of this craft." said Yasmeena in an affirmative tone, "What we do is the first step in the making of any pashmina product. If we stop doing this or don't do it

properly, then what would the weavers do? They weave pashmina only when we supply them with the thread spun on bobbins. So if they don't make pashmina cloth, the embroiderers wouldn't have any material to work on. Therefore, the owner of this centre wouldn't have anything at all to sell in the market. When he has nothing to sell, the world would never know what handmade pashmina is." While Yasmeena was saying this, she asked me to pause my recorder, stood up and left the room. After a few minutes, she came back with a cup of tea and biscuits. I told her that it was not needed and that I just had lunch. But her resounding answer left me mumbled "No, no, my son. We have to respect you because you are the one who will take our history forward. You are the torchbearer of pashmina craft. You will make us visible in the world." I smiled at her as I took a hot cup of tea in my hand, but internally it shook me to the core. Her answer brought forth in me a sense of responsibility; a responsibility of giving value to their stories so as to make them "visible in the world".

"What were your main motivations for joining this centre?" I asked Yasmeena

"Oh, what would I tell you! Even though I have never been to school, there is one thing I have learned in my life, that a woman should work and earn by herself and never be dependent on a man. If my husband gives me ten rupees, he will hold me accountable for that. I have to explain what I did with that money, but if I earn only five rupees by myself, I can spend it wherever I want to."

Yasmeena's husband distributes cigarettes to the local general stores, but she believes that it is not a "real" job. He starts his work day at 10 am and by 12 pm he is at home. The money he earns

in a month is only enough to buy the daily groceries. “He just works for a couple of hours and then remains at home. Who works like that? You see, a man should be passionate and energetic to work, but when he sits around all day, what would a woman do in that case?”

As she spoke, I nodded my head in agreement. I tried to look at her and her face which was cheerful a few minutes before had now turned sullen. I thought of asking something which might make her feel better but decided against it and waited for her to speak.

“Women work much harder than men. I would like to ask you. You are like my son but what do you do when you wake up? Get up and your breakfast is magically ready. You eat it and do whatever you have to during the day. Now, look at your mother. She has to wake up before anyone else and prepare everything for everyone. She has to clean the house, prepare the children for school, and make breakfast, lunch and dinner. In between, if her husband has a mood for tea or snacks, she has to prepare that as well. Men! What do they do? They wake up like a *sahib*–eat, go to work, come back and sleep. A woman’s labour is never visible.”

Yasmeena’s face grew red and the green veins of her hand became visible. I brought her a glass of water. She drank a sip of it and placed it on the table.

“How many hours do you work during the day?” I asked

“I sleep only eight hours.”

I thought Yasmeena misunderstood my questions so I repeated “No, I mean the working hours.”

"Yes, I know. You didn't understand my answer. I sleep only eight hours and for the rest of the sixteen hours I work. Either here at the centre or at home. Starting from cooking, cleaning, washing children's uniforms, polishing their shoes, and caring for husbands. All the time, working, working and working. That's why women grow old early and most unfortunate thing is that their worth is always underacknowledged. It's a husband who devalues a woman. If he would respect her, everyone else around would respect her as well. If he won't no one else would."

A couple of months ago an incident took place at the centre. Yasmeena's childhood friend, Daisy, had asked her if she could join the centre as a spinning woman as well. Daisy would often feel lonely at her home after her husband would leave for work. She did not get along with her husband and her in-laws who always used to taunt and criticize her as she couldn't conceive a child after 3 years of marriage. Yasmeena arranged things for her and she started the job within a week. At the centre, she got breathing space and relief from her quarrels at home. She would confide in Yasmeena her problems and share her day-to-day affairs with her. However, one day Daisy's husband came to the centre and humiliated her in front of everyone. He told all of her colleagues that Daisy comes here even though he has asked her not to go to the centre and stay at home. After shouting insults and allegations, he spat on her face.

"He was such a vulgar person," continued Yasmeena "If I could, I would have slapped him hard so that he would understand what it means to treat a woman like this. After that day, I never met Daisy. I tried to call her but her husband picked up. I think she didn't reach out to me because she was ashamed." This incident left Yasmeena heartbroken but as the days passed, her own

problems masked old memories. As she spoke, she started to reveal her story, about her own family and how, as a woman, she was never understood. All her life, she had throttled her desires, first at her father's home trying to maintain the dignity of a daughter and then at her husband's home.

"Men are selfish. Their essence is to be selfish. Their rule is that if something good happens in a family, it is because of a husband. While as if something bad happens, somehow the wife must have done something wrong. Even if I present my blood and liver to my husband, it's still not enough for him somehow. He tells me that you don't have to go to this place, so I don't go. He says I should do a particular thing, I do it. He says don't do a particular thing this way, I don't do it. All of this makes a pile of sacrifices inside a woman. That's why she always remains under a lot of pressure and under that pressure, she dies. Go and do some research on this."

Yasmeena's story articulates how many women join the centre in order to be free of patriarchal family responsibilities. By choosing to go to work and support her family, Yasmeena, as Ngai (2005) describes in the context of Chinese women marching to work in the cities, "challenged the patriarchal relations and gender imbalance/role" (2005: 70). This also highlights the gendered division of labour and societal expectations placed on women. She emphasizes the hard work women perform compared to men, illustrating the invisible nature of their labour and the undervaluation of their contributions. Yasmeena's belief in women's economic independence stems from the reliance on men for validation and respect and the desire to avoid being held accountable for the money given by her husband. Her critique of her husband's limited work

hours and lack of passion further underscores the gendered dynamics of labour and power within the household.

While women like Yasmeena and her colleague Daisy come to these centres to resist patriarchal control either from their husbands or their family, these all-women spaces went on to become a "second home" for them. This aspect points to the importance of social networks, especially among women facing similar challenges. The centre where Yasmeena works serves as a space where women can find camaraderie, emotional support and relief from domestic conflicts. As a result, they form a new family or kinship bond at this place as well as a temporary refuge from the hardships they experience at home. Yasmeena made me want to understand the wishes and dreams that cause many women in Kashmir to leave their homes and find work in centres like these to work in an exploitative environment where they are underpaid to spin pashmina and negotiate their struggle between work and family.

In this chapter, I have written about how workers like Raziya and Yasmeena determine the value of their labour and their "contestations over labour power" (Yanagisako and Rofel 2019: 14). While Raziya, as an embroiderer, took pride in how her "hands" became famous and the skills she possessed, Yasmeena stressed that her work was a foundation in the creation of any pashmina product and any further processes would not be possible without her work.

As we have seen, there are multiple forms of value in people's lives, for example, family values, religious values, values of community, and the value of the work they put in, even if they are not paid much for it. For Raziya, the pashmina centre was a place where the all-woman

community helped her build a new life, and for Yasmeena it was temporary emancipation from patriarchy. Both of them are "juggling with different regimes of value" and forge their own claims over it which are not only limited to transactions or economic value but also to the "creation and maintenance of social relationships and the emergence of particular social identities that are crucial resources in times of need" (Narotzky and Besnier 2014: S13).

With their respective work, it also brought forth in them a strong sense of nationalism (Rofel and Yanagisako 2019) that something from Kashmir has gone abroad and they are given a chance to represent it. However, while they do that, they also "chafe at the inadequate recognition of the value of their labour" (Rofel and Yanagisako 2019: 42) and that their contributions are not sufficiently valued by the owner of the centre, whom they refer to as "Wosta". Therefore, in order to properly understand the production of value from the centre owner's point of view, I turn my focus on these Wostas in the next chapter.

When I was about to leave, I thanked Yasmeena for her time. She replied "I have given you information which is without any mix, completely unadulterated story of a woman. . . You see, I am out in the rain while my husband is lying in a bed wrapped in a warm blanket. Now tell me, who is the man of the house? He or me?"

Chapter 4

"Who will tell him what fashion is?": The Wosta's Perspective on Understanding Value Creation in Pashmina Production

Mujtaba Kadri is a dynamic young man in his early forties. He owns ME&K, a family-run "design house" that prides itself on superior quality and "meticulous artistry" of crafting authentic Kashmir shawls. He used to come to the workshop occasionally and even there his time was limited. Therefore, I never got the opportunity of having a conversation with him until the end of my fieldwork. When I finally asked him for an interview, I got to know that he was not in Kashmir and had travelled to New York for a business meeting. We spoke over a phone call for some time as he shared the "socially conscious vision" of his business with me.

In my earlier chapter, I described how pashmina workers assert the belief that their Wostas (middlemen) serve only as intermediaries between them and the consumers. My fieldwork revealed a unanimous belief among the workers that Wostas take the lion's share of the profit, which the workers feel is undeserved because the owners leave a paltry sum for those who actually produce the pashmina. As Rofel and Yanagisako (2019) suggest, it is crucial to examine the role of managerial labour in order to comprehend how value is generated and how the identities of both managers and workers are shaped. Therefore, without the perspective of the Wostas' understanding of the labour process in pashmina production, our understanding is incomplete. In this chapter, I am interested in charting out the negotiations or contestations of Wostas over the value of their contributions to the production of luxury pashmina shawls. I am particularly

interested in fleshing out how these middlemen assert their value creation and what they think of their role in giving worth or value to the production of pashmina.

4.1 Mujtaba Kadri and Zahid Ali: The local Wostas who went global

Being the fifth-generation son of a reputed pashmina business family, Mujtaba Kadri was very proud of his glorious past. However, at the same time, he did not want to follow the same "middleman" business model his predecessors were working on—an informal system, he called it. He wanted to do everything professionally. With his family background, Kadri was well placed to take advantage of the explosion in global demand for pashmina products which hit luxury markets across the world in the late 1990s.

In 2008, he breathed life into his family legacy when he established his own label, ME&K. He turned it into a proper registered manufacturing company and a design house. Teaming up with his sister, who had long been established in the United States, the company now enjoys global success "as a highly desirable, independent, luxury fashion brand, pioneering fine-weave cashmere scarves for all seasons" as Kadri put it. Operating out of India, they supply pashmina to hundreds of stores across the world; including Bloomingdales and Henri Bendel in the city of New York, Liberty and Harvey Nicholas in London, Le Bon Marche in Paris, Lane Crawford in Hongkong, and, Takashimaya and United Arrows in Japan.

ME&K's workshop became instantly famous in the local community when he started it because, on the inauguration day, Kadri announced that he would increase wages by 25 per cent more than the then-current market prices. Kadri's philosophy was that the workers should be

earning enough money so that they would have the motivation to come to the workshop every day. I asked him that even after this, the weavers are still not able to live a decent life and increased wages do not stop them from living a life in poverty. His reply seemed as if he had been already anticipating my question, "That is the problem, we need to get it to that level. We are trying to increase the wages slowly, but it also needs dedication and consistency from weavers. We don't want every weaver to become a top-class artist and produce a masterpiece. We just need a weaver who can do the job. But, all of them need to be remunerated in a decent way."

While Kadri strongly praised the skill set, techniques and intuition of his workers, according to him his weavers or spinners or embroiderers alone are not the only ones who create value in the pashmina product. For him, the value creation happened at both ends. He claimed that his innovation in designing and directing the process of the pashmina shawl is what places him at the helm of value creation.

"There is stagnation of design. For the past hundred years, we have been seeing the same designs and there is no newness in them. That is where we, as a design house, create value additions into it. We come up with new designs and patterns, qualities and textures. We also focus on presentation. Because we work with very reputed companies in the world, we have to be very careful about how we present it. The weavers do not know anything about the latest colour schemes, and styles in the fashion industry. They have a very strong skillset but apart from that, there is nothing else. And that's where we come in."

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I was at Arif Dar's home, talking about his day-to-day life, his children's education and the future of pashmina weaving when a tall man with little hair on his head arrived unannounced at his workshop. As he stepped into the room, Arif Dar stopped talking to me and welcomed the newcomer.

"What will Arif tell you about pashmina, huh? Ask *me* about it." said the almost-bald-man, as he sat down and groped the jajeer[5] with one hand and thumped his chest with the other as if to prove his credibility.

"He is my Wosta, Zahid Ali. You might have heard the name of Kashmir Loom Company. He is one of the founders of that firm."

Kashmir Loom Company was founded by Jenny Housego, a British textile historian and designer along with Asaf Ali and his two brothers (Hamid Ali and Zahid Ali) in 1998. The firm employs a large number of weavers and embroiderers and does regular exhibitions of their shawls in reputed museums and art galleries around the world. The shawls are made by weavers but when they are on display in art galleries, they bear the name of Kashmir Loom Company. Zahid Ali had come to Arif Dar's workshop to monitor the quality of the pashmina shawl he was making for the company.

5 Kashmiri hookah or sheesha

When Arif Dar introduced me to Zahid Ali, his behaviour changed a bit towards me and the excitement with which he had entered the room began to wane. Suddenly, he asked me about my father and how I got into a university in Austria. Arif Dar responded on my behalf that I got a scholarship and at present, I am in Kashmir on field research and that how good it was that I am utilizing my ancestral craft into "a university degree". Zahid Ali, however, seemed unimpressed by all this.

"In this business, everyone is busy making money, my dear sweetheart and no one cares about preserving the legacy of pashmina craft". That was how Zahid Ali began. The way he referred to me as sweetheart, it was not in a loving manner, rather I felt it was meant to patronise and condescend me.

He knew our family was also making pashmina so he asked me about my father and soon after he began to attack him and question his credibility. He asked me to prove that my father had done anything worthwhile in pashmina production. I was struck by the way he was speaking to me and was completely caught off-guard and did not know the reason for his behaviour. It was only when he left that Arif Dar told me the background story of his problems with my father. In the late 1990s, my father made a special quality of pashmina called Silk Pashmina, where the weft of the shawl is pashmina and the warp is silk. It gives a glimmering shine and looks very royal. This design was a monopoly of KLC until my father made it and sold it to a rival exporter. That had hurt their business and he had come to my home to threaten my father. But, even after his threats, my father

continued to make those shawls. And because of that feud, our family and the owners of Kashmir Loom Company were not on speaking terms.

"When you go home, ask your father, if he has any family records. Has he created any designs or developed any new techniques? I swear by my mother, he wouldn't know anything. Even your grandfather would not know. All of the family members at your home work informally and have no written history of to whom and where they sold their products. They don't know anything beyond the conventional four gears of the weaving."

I tried to dilute the conversation and informed him that I was only here to get material for my thesis and that I would prefer if we kept it limited to that and not discuss what my family is doing with pashmina or if they are doing anything worthwhile or to whom they sell their products.

"No, I am telling you all this because you are educated and you will understand, you know what I mean? Anyway, four years before, we wrote a book and I swear by the *Holy Quran*, it took us 1.6 million rupees (EUR 17,000) to write that book. It's called Pashmina by Monisha Ahmed and Janet Rizvi . . . Monisha is our family friend, very close and we wrote this book with her. Now we are working on another one"

He made these claims almost to intimidate me; to prove that they were rich enough to fund the scholarship produced about the pashmina and my family was stuck only in producing it. "Janet Rizvi is a lady who wrote almost 40 books on Pashmina. You should go, check them out". However, when I checked, it turned out to be a false information. She had just written four books and only one of them was on pashmina.

While I was engrossed in Zahid Ali's monologues, Arif Dar surreptitiously hinted at me to ask Zahid Ali about weaver's wages. Following Arif Dar's cue, I inquired about it. He took a long breath and said, "Increasing wages is not within our control. It depends on the market. How can I pay extra when the market has set the wage at 1500 rupees per day? How can I give out extra money and sell it more expensive? All these decisions are made on a global scale."

However, I mentioned to Zahid Ali that the weavers I spoke with believe that the middlemen benefit the most from this trade. I looked at Arif Dar for validation and he nodded in agreement.

Instead of me, Zahid Ali replied to Arif Dar, "Arifa, what do you want a company to do? Should we distribute our profits among the workers? A company provides wages, not profit. As a welfare measure, we also offer a 30,000 rupees loan to our workers when they get married. What else can we do?"

Zahid Ali went on to describe his views on the workers his company employs. He emphasized that their relationship with workers was "transparent and purely transactional" and that they not only give wages to them but also represent them at the global level. "For instance, Arif Dar is an artist in Kashmir, but who will represent him in the international world? Who will tell him what fashion is, what market is? We collaborate with designers like Ritu Kumar to design attractive shawls. If they produce any design but don't know what it is and where to sell it, does it have any worth? Therefore, it's all about branding. We establish a brand, a reputation, and that is what adds value. When we become a trusted name, we are accountable to our customers. We are

more than just middlemen, we are a company that operates within the boundaries of company law."

As Marx would have liked to put it, these Wostas' practices exemplify the extraction of surplus value (Bais 2012). They employ a large number of workers, including spinners, weavers, and embroiderers, who make products for the company. A spinner turns the raw material into a fine thread; a weaver turns that thread into cloth, and the embroiderer embellishes it with exquisite designs. After these three steps, a product is ready. However, all the raw materials and necessary equipment are supplied by the capitalist, which in our case is the Wosta. In the end, the Wosta takes the pashmina cloth and sells it for a large sum, while the workers who actually make it, receive meagre wages compared to the price of the product. It is pertinent to mention that the money they receive for their work does not come from the shawl being sold. Even before it reaches the market, they are paid their wages, which means the Wosta did not pay the weaver's wage from the money earned by selling the shawl, but from the money already at their disposal. Therefore, the Wosta uses their wealth to buy the labour-power of the worker. In Marxist theory, labour power refers to human capabilities (Rofel and Yanagisako 2019). Just as the Wosta buys raw materials, including yarn and the loom needed to make the cloth, they also buy the labour-power of the worker. In this regard, the worker is no different from the purchases the Wosta makes and has no more of a share in the product or the price of the pashmina shawl. Hence, wages, as Marx describes, are not a share of the worker in the commodities produced by the worker themselves; instead, wages are part of the already existing commodities with which the capitalist buys a certain amount of labour power

from the worker (Bais 2012). In order to survive, the worker only has the labour power to sell to the capitalist owner.

However, I would now like to shift away from the Marxist understanding and focus on what Marx did not consider while writing about labour and capital. With the help of the theoretical framework developed by Rofel and Yanagisako (2019) on the managerial aspect of labour, I would like to delve into another facet of the story by "reconfiguring the conventional Marxian approach to the relation between labour power and value" (pg.14). As we saw from the narrative of Mujtaba Kadri and Zahid Ali, the Wostas also made their contestations over labour power and value creation. While Zahid Ali acknowledged the weaver's special role in the pashmina production at the same time, he, like Mujtaba Kadri, attributed the lack of any fashion sense to the weavers. "They need to understand what English colours are, their Western sensibilities, and their inclinations. It's we who do that kind of work."

The Wostas identify themselves as important players in ensuring quality control, managing brand reputation, and successfully marketing the products. They believe their labour, whether in design, manufacturing, branding or retailing, holds greater value compared to the labour of the pashmina weavers. They claim their managerial skills ensure "quality" even though the shawls are produced by the weavers.

The dynamic between the weavers and the middlemen involved in the production of pashmina shawls is marked by a significant disparity in perceived value. The weavers believe that their skillset is the primary contribution of these shawls and feel frustrated by the lack of

recognition and appreciation from their Wostas (middlemen). On the other hand, the middlemen emphasize the importance of branding, which they claim the weavers themselves cannot achieve. However, the weavers are confident that without their skills, the middlemen would have no value as they are the ones who weave these highly prized shawls. Both sides argue that their contributions are crucial to the value of the handcrafted pashmina shawls from Kashmir.

From the viewpoint of middlemen/firm owners, the notion of labelling products plays a significant role and is used as a "judgement device" in the perception of quality for pashmina shawls (Brandellero and Velthuis 2018; Karpik 2010). The middlemen consider independently and informally made shawls by the weavers and their families as inferior. However, once these products are labelled and associated with their company, they acquire a superior quality particularly when these "labelled" shawls reach cities in the global north. This reliance on international validation as a judgment device for quality demonstrates the dominance of EuroAmerican centres' hegemony in the global supply chain (Sooudi 2022).

The pashmina shawl, seen as a luxury item, exemplifies the fetishism associated with commodities. The fetishism is heightened when the brand is led by individuals from Western countries. In the case of Kashmir Loom Company, Jenny Housego's—with her connections in London and New York—patronage for it gives them a stronger claim to first-rate design and creativity compared to other local business owners, thus adding to the perceived value of their collaboration. Therefore, as Sooudi (2022) describes, the concept of value in the global context requires examining the influence of neoliberal ideologies and the international arrangement of

power. It also shows us "how movement and encounters across borders and sites create meaning and value in particular places." (pg. 193).

In conclusion, the examination of the pashmina industry and the role of the middlemen, known as Wostas, sheds light on the complex dynamics of labour power and value creation. Drawing from scholars such as Rofel and Yanagisako, I showed the managerial aspect of labour by exploring the perspectives of the Wostas by providing insights into their own assertions of value creation and the significance they attribute to their role in the production of pashmina. While Mujtaba Kadri emphasized the importance of innovation in design, Zahid Ali highlighted his company's role in branding and representing the weavers at the global level. Both of them asserted the value of their "capital, knowledge of branding and presenting the product". Therefore, the middlemen can be viewed as intermediaries between the weavers and the consumers of pashmina shawls. They can also be imagined as "conveyors" or "translators" of material things and of cultural value from one sphere to another. (Ofstehage 2010; pg. 7).

Throughout this, what was interesting to note was that for the weavers as well as other workers in general the pashmina craft is a dying business, while as for Zahid Ali and other Wostas, it is a lucrative business, with a bright and promising future. These contrasting perspectives reveal the complexities of labour relations and value creation in the pashmina industry, involving issues of perceived value, branding, global hierarchies, and the role of intermediaries in connecting producers and consumers.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I embarked on a journey to unravel the dynamics of labour and value creation within the pashmina shawl industry. My focus was not only on the technical aspects of production but on the human stories behind the craft. Through my interactions with pashmina workers and my exploration of the role of Wostas, a multifaceted narrative began to unfold.

Listening to the voices of the pashmina workers, I discovered a prevailing sentiment of discontentment. They believed that the Wostas, who held a position of power and control, unjustly extract the largest share of the profit out of their labour. Meanwhile, these skilled workers, whose hands meticulously crafted the shawls, received meagre wages that barely sustained their basic needs. The workers' stories were the key to understanding the broader themes like precarious living, marginalization, value negotiation and the pursuit of "a good life."

Examining the role of the Wostas added another layer to the complex story. They justified their profits by highlighting their cosmopolitan connections and their ability to market the shawls to high-end fashion houses. They asserted value through branding and design, effectively positioning themselves as the face of the products they sold. However, the truth lay in the labour of the spinners, weavers, and embroiderers, who poured their skill and hard work into creating these prized shawls. The Wostas' success was built upon the invisibility of the weavers, a deliberate erasure that denied them their rightful place in the narrative.

During one of my conversations with the weavers, I was struck by a remark made by one of them. He acknowledged the importance of the Wostas in the process and believed that they should

earn their due share. However, he couldn't help but express his frustration at the stark imbalance. "Whatever they earn, that is fine. It is their right but at the same time they should at least think about the people because of whom they earn all this money". This statement resonated with the broader issue at hand – the inadequacy of wages, which left the weavers unable to meet their families financial needs. Their lives became entangled in a never-ending cycle of debt, stifling their aspirations and preventing them from envisioning a better future.

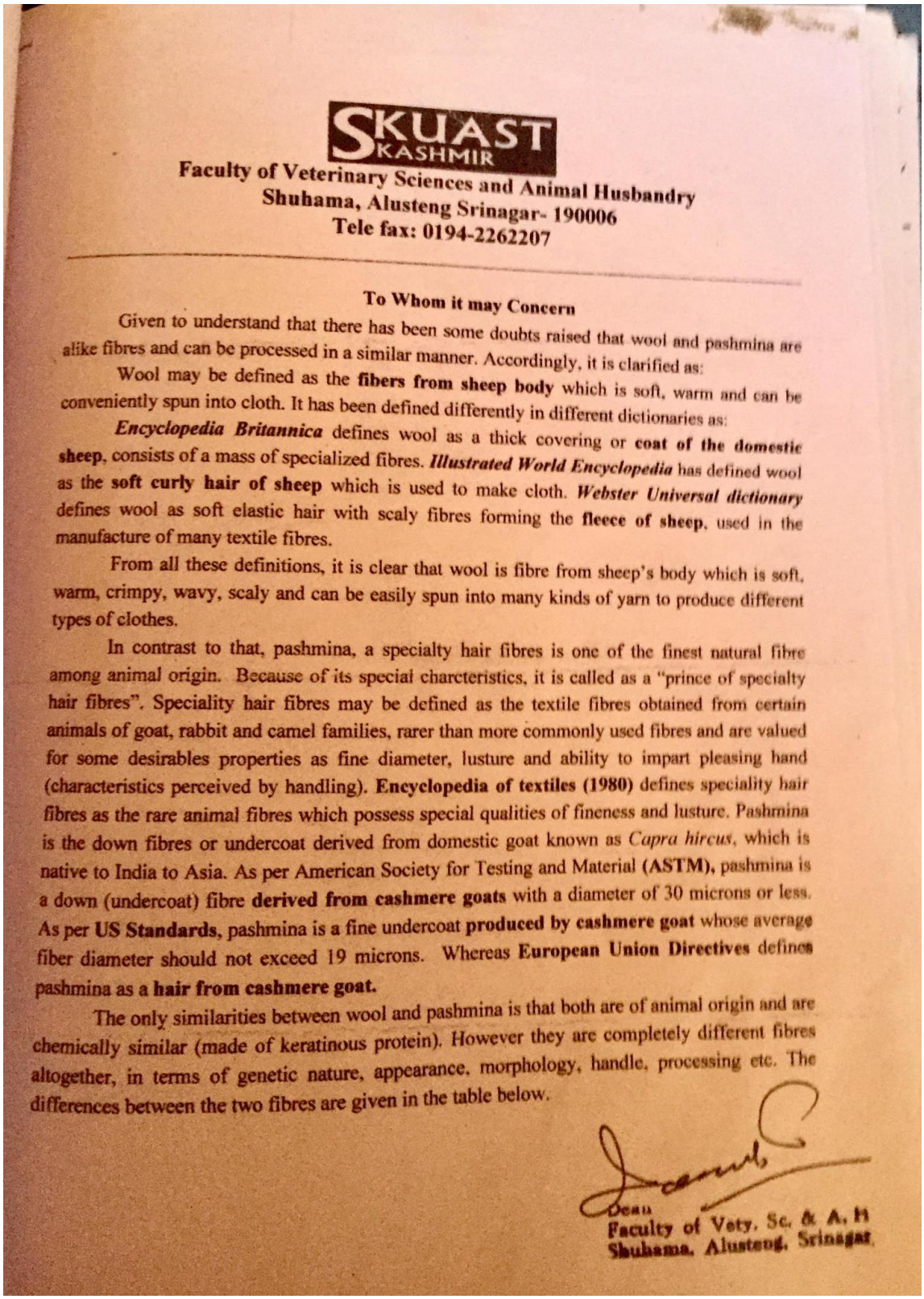
Yet, as I delved deeper into the weavers' stories, a contrasting narrative emerged. For the weavers (who were mostly men) lack of money was the number one problem for them. However, for women spinners, I would not say money held a secondary significance but for them "satisfaction in the workshop" "craft" and "sisterhood" mattered more. A probable answer could be that, in Kashmir's patriarchal society, men traditionally bear the responsibility of household expenses. However, exceptions did exist, as we saw in Yasmeena's case. Nevertheless, it became evident that if pashmina weavers were paid wages commensurate with the value of their craft, it would no longer feel like an alienating job to them. Their passion for weaving would be reignited, and they would embody the essence of "craftsmen" with pride. Therefore, to restore dignity to the craft, the government bodies must ensure that pashmina weavers earn enough that they can provide for their families' basic needs. Only then will their artistic endeavours be elevated from a mere means of survival to a source of true fulfilment.

Reflecting on the broader implications of these narratives, the concept of "a good life" came into focus. For the weavers, the lives they lived seemed far from a good life. However, it

became clear that the stories of these individuals offered valuable lessons on resilience and hope, even in the face of adversity. They taught us that the pursuit of a good life transcends individualism and self-centeredness. Instead, it necessitates the cultivation of collective happiness, community and comradeship.

To conclude, in this thesis, I have made a humble attempt to present the narratives of the workers who needed to be given due recognition. It is my hope that this research serves as a catalyst for meaningful discussions and tangible actions that address the challenges faced by the workers producing pashmina in Kashmir.

Appendix 1



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To Whom it may Concern

Given to understand that there has been some doubts raised that wool and pashmina are alike fibres and can be processed in a similar manner. Accordingly, it is clarified as:

Wool may be defined as the **fibers from sheep body** which is soft, warm and can be conveniently spun into cloth. It has been defined differently in different dictionaries as:

Encyclopedia Britannica defines wool as a thick covering or **coat of the domestic sheep**, consists of a mass of specialized fibres. ***Illustrated World Encyclopedia*** has defined wool as the **soft curly hair of sheep** which is used to make cloth. ***Webster Universal dictionary*** defines wool as soft elastic hair with scaly fibres forming the **fleece of sheep**, used in the manufacture of many textile fibres.

From all these definitions, it is clear that wool is fibre from sheep's body which is soft, warm, crimpy, wavy, scaly and can be easily spun into many kinds of yarn to produce different types of clothes.

In contrast to that, pashmina, a specialty hair fibres is one of the finest natural fibre among animal origin. Because of its special charcteristics, it is called as a "prince of specialty hair fibres". Speciality hair fibres may be defined as the textile fibres obtained from certain animals of goat, rabbit and camel families, rarer than more commonly used fibres and are valued for some desirables properties as fine diameter, lusture and ability to impart pleasing hand (characteristics perceived by handling). **Encyclopedia of textiles (1980)** defines speciality hair fibres as the rare animal fibres which possess special qualities of fineness and lusture. Pashmina is the down fibres or undercoat derived from domestic goat known as *Capra hircus*, which is native to India to Asia. As per American Society for Testing and Material **(ASTM)**, pashmina is a down (undercoat) fibre **derived from cashmere goats** with a diameter of 30 microns or less. As per **US Standards**, pashmina is a fine undercoat **produced by cashmere goat** whose average fiber diameter should not exceed 19 microns. Whereas **European Union Directives** defines pashmina as a **hair from cashmere goat.**

The only similarities between wool and pashmina is that both are of animal origin and are chemically similar (made of keratinous protein). However they are completely different fibres altogether, in terms of genetic nature, appearance, morphology, handle, processing etc. The differences between the two fibres are given in the table below.

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