



JOURNAL OF THE ROYAL LAUREATES ACADEMY

www.rlaindia.org

ARTISANS, MERCHANTS, AND IMPERIAL MARKETS: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CRAFTS IN MUGHAL KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

The incorporation of Kashmir into the Mughal Empire in 1586 transformed the institutional and commercial environment of its non-agrarian economy. Craft production, particularly shawl weaving, silk manufacture, woodwork, carpet making, papier-mâché, and other specialized activities, became increasingly connected with imperial consumption and wider regional markets. This paper examines the political economy of crafts in Mughal Kashmir by focusing on the relationships among artisans, merchants, state officials, imperial karkhanas, and consumers. Mughal patronage stimulated production, introduced new designs and techniques, and strengthened the position of Kashmiri manufactures in interregional commerce. The *Ain-i-Akbari* specifically records imperial efforts to improve shawl production in Kashmir and indicates the existence of related workshops in Lahore. At the same time, commercialization did not necessarily translate into improved conditions for artisans. The expansion of markets could coexist with unequal control over raw materials, production, prices, and surplus. The paper therefore interprets Mughal craft development as a complex interaction between patronage, commercialization, labor, and imperial power.

Keywords: Mughal Kashmir, artisans, merchants, karkhanas, shawl industry, imperial markets, craftsmanship, commerce, political economy

I. INTRODUCTION

The Mughal annexation of Kashmir in 1586 created a new political and economic framework for the Valley. Kashmir had already possessed established traditions of craft production and long-distance commercial contacts before Mughal rule. The transformation under the Mughals therefore did not represent the sudden creation of a craft economy, but rather the incorporation and reorganization of existing productive capabilities within a larger imperial system. Studies of pre-Mughal Kashmir indicate the importance of handicraft production and external trade, while research on the Mughal period emphasizes the expansion of commercial connections with Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The Mughal state brought Kashmir into closer administrative and commercial interaction with other imperial centers, creating new opportunities for producers and merchants.

Craftsmanship became particularly important because Kashmir possessed highly specialized skills in textile production and other luxury manufactures. Among these, shawl weaving occupied a central position. The Mughal period witnessed substantial imperial interest in Kashmiri shawls, and Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari* records that Akbar encouraged their manufacture and introduced improvements in production, coloration, and dimensions. It also records shawl workshops in Lahore, demonstrating that Kashmir's textile traditions were connected to a wider imperial manufacturing system. Later historical studies similarly describe the Mughal period as one of major commercial expansion and organizational development in the shawl industry.

The economic significance of crafts cannot, however, be measured only through imperial patronage or the volume of goods produced. Craft economies were based upon relationships among several groups, including raw-material suppliers, spinners, dyers, designers, weavers, merchants, workshop supervisors, state officials, and consumers. Their interests were not always identical. Merchants sought access to profitable markets, imperial officials sought revenue and supplies, elite consumers demanded increasingly refined products, and artisans depended upon wages or payments for their specialized labor. Historical scholarship has consequently emphasized that commercialization could increase production while leaving many artisans in economically vulnerable positions.

This paper examines the political economy of Mughal Kashmir's crafts through three interconnected dimensions: imperial patronage and institutional organization, the role of

artisans and merchants in production and circulation, and the relationship between craft commercialization and regional markets. The central argument is that Mughal intervention simultaneously stimulated craftsmanship and integrated Kashmir into broader commercial networks while creating hierarchical structures of production. The resulting economy was neither purely state-controlled nor entirely market-driven. Instead, it combined imperial demand, private commercial activity, specialized artisanal labor, and interregional trade.

II. IMPERIAL PATRONAGE AND THE ORGANIZATION OF CRAFT PRODUCTION

The Mughal state's interest in Kashmiri crafts was closely connected with the culture of the imperial court. Luxury textiles and other finely produced objects had symbolic as well as economic value. They could be worn by emperors and nobles, exchanged as gifts, presented to officials, or used to communicate status. The Kashmiri shawl was particularly suitable for this system because its fine texture, intricate designs, and association with Kashmir made it both a useful textile and a prestigious object. Abul Fazl's account explicitly states that Akbar encouraged shawl production in Kashmir and describes several improvements associated with imperial patronage.

The institution of the *karkhana* provided an important mechanism through which imperial demand could influence production. Karkhanas were workshops associated with the state and elite households where skilled workers produced specialized goods. Research on Mughal Kashmir describes the shawl industry as increasingly connected with royal workshops and identifies the Mughal period as one of organizational expansion. Such workshops enabled the state to exercise influence over designs, quality, production schedules, and the procurement of selected luxury goods. They also provided a mechanism for bringing skilled labor into closer proximity with courtly consumption.

Imperial patronage also contributed to technological and stylistic change. The *Ain-i-Akbari* records improvements in shawls, including experimentation with colors and varieties of textile production. Historical scholarship likewise associates the Mughal period with the development of new designs, colors, dimensions, and production practices. These developments demonstrate that craft production was responsive to changing patterns of elite consumption. Artisans were not simply preserving inherited techniques; they were adapting their skills to new aesthetic and commercial requirements.

The relationship between the state and craftsmen was nevertheless more complicated than simple patronage. Imperial demand could create employment and markets, but it could also increase pressure on production. Where the state or elite consumer exercised substantial purchasing power, artisans could become dependent upon intermediaries or workshop authorities. Historical discussions of the Mughal shawl industry emphasize that commercial expansion and high-value production did not necessarily improve the socioeconomic position of weavers. Thus, the expansion of a luxury industry needs to be distinguished from the distribution of its profits.

The Mughal court also functioned as an important consumer and redistributor of Kashmiri crafts. Shawls could serve as gifts to nobles, officials, and diplomatic representatives, extending their circulation beyond the original place of production. The political value of such objects enhanced their commercial significance because demand was generated not merely by practical consumption but also by prestige and political relationships. Research on the Mughal state and Kashmiri shawl has consequently emphasized the connection between representation, consumption, and exchange.

Imperial patronage therefore had contradictory effects. On one hand, it provided artisans with access to wealthy consumers and encouraged technical specialization. On the other, it strengthened hierarchical forms of production and gave powerful consumers and intermediaries considerable influence over the organization of labor. The Mughal craft economy should consequently be understood as an institutional system in which the state, market, and household consumption interacted. Rather than replacing existing commercial practices, Mughal rule redirected them toward a more integrated imperial economy.

III. ARTISANS, MERCHANTS, AND THE STRUCTURE OF CRAFT COMMERCE

The artisan represented the productive foundation of the non-agrarian economy. The making of a fine Kashmiri shawl involved several stages, including the preparation of fiber, spinning, dyeing, design, weaving, and finishing. Each stage required specialized knowledge and labor. Historical accounts emphasize the complexity of shawl manufacture and the high degree of skill required from different categories of workers. This division of labor demonstrates that the craft economy was not based simply on individual artisans producing finished goods independently.

Merchants played a crucial role in connecting production with markets. Raw materials had to be acquired, processed materials circulated, finished products collected, and goods transported across difficult geographical terrain. Pashm, the fine fiber associated with Kashmiri shawls, was particularly important because its supply was linked to regions beyond the Valley, including Ladakh. Research on the shawl industry identifies pashm procurement as an important component of the wider economic system involving Kashmir, Ladakh, Tibet, and Central Asian regions. Merchants therefore participated in a chain extending from pastoral production to urban manufacture and distant consumption.

The relationship between artisans and merchants was not necessarily equal. Merchants possessed greater access to capital, markets, information, and transportation networks. Artisans, by contrast, primarily controlled specialized labor and technical knowledge. Where merchants financed raw materials or advanced payments, artisans could become economically dependent on them. Historical scholarship on the Mughal shawl industry has specifically drawn attention to the concentration of commercial surplus and the difficult position of many weavers. This suggests that the growth of commerce should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of widespread prosperity.

Urban centers played a major role in mediating this relationship. Srinagar emerged as an important center of craft production and marketing, while connections with Lahore and other imperial cities expanded the potential consumer base. Research describes Srinagar as a major center of shawl production and notes the importance of urban workshops in the Mughal period. Urban concentration facilitated the availability of skilled labor, merchant networks, workshop supervision, and access to elite consumers.

The expansion of commerce also encouraged differentiation among craft products. The market could accommodate goods of different qualities, sizes, designs, and prices. This allowed producers and merchants to address multiple segments of demand while maintaining highly specialized luxury production for imperial and aristocratic consumers. The *Ain-i-Akbari* provides evidence of different textile varieties and records detailed attention to the characteristics of shawls and related fabrics. Such differentiation suggests that craft production was increasingly sensitive to market preferences.

Yet artisans remained vulnerable to fluctuations in demand, taxation, raw-material availability, and commercial control. A disruption in the supply of pashm, for example, could

affect the entire production chain. Similarly, changes in imperial consumption or regional political conditions could influence the movement of goods. The craft economy was therefore embedded in a wider network of economic and political relationships. The artisan's productivity alone could not determine economic outcomes; access to raw materials, merchants, markets, and institutional support was equally important.

IV. IMPERIAL MARKETS, COMMERCIALIZATION, AND REGIONAL ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

The Mughal incorporation of Kashmir connected the Valley more closely with the economic geography of the empire. Kashmir's craft products could move toward Lahore, Delhi, Agra, and other major centers, while merchants also maintained connections with regions beyond the Mughal political boundary. Research on Kashmir's Central Asian contacts during the Mughal period identifies roads and commercial connections as important factors in the expansion of economic interaction. The Valley's position between South Asian and Central Asian commercial worlds gave its craft products a wider market potential.

The shawl was especially important within this process because it combined high value with relatively manageable transport. A finely produced textile could embody substantial labor and artistic skill without requiring the transportation of bulky raw materials. This made luxury textiles suitable for long-distance trade and diplomatic exchange. Contemporary and near-contemporary descriptions emphasized the importance of Kashmiri shawls in the commerce of the region. The commodity therefore linked local labor to distant elite consumption.

Imperial markets were not simply commercial spaces; they were also political institutions. Goods circulating through the court acquired additional value through association with imperial authority. A shawl presented as a robe of honor or diplomatic gift operated simultaneously as a commodity, a symbol of status, and an instrument of political communication. Research on Mughal shawls highlights precisely this relationship between material culture and imperial representation. The economic history of craft production must therefore account for symbolic value as well as monetary exchange.

The integration of Kashmir into imperial networks also influenced the movement of people and skills. Skilled workers could be recruited, relocated, or employed in different production centers. Abul Fazl's description of shawl production in both Kashmir and Lahore illustrates the geographical distribution of related manufacturing activity. Such circulation of techniques

and artisans contributed to technological exchange and stylistic development. At the same time, Kashmir maintained distinctive production capabilities that differentiated its manufactures from those produced elsewhere.

Commercialization also affected urban development. The concentration of workshops, merchants, suppliers, and consumers encouraged the growth of economic activities beyond agriculture. Kashmir's non-agrarian economy thus included a broad chain of occupations: artisans, traders, transporters, shopkeepers, raw-material dealers, supervisors, and service providers. The craft economy was consequently important not merely because of the value of finished products but because it supported an extensive network of associated employment.

However, regional integration also increased dependence on external markets. When demand was concentrated among imperial elites or wealthy consumers, producers became vulnerable to political and economic changes beyond their immediate control. This is one reason why the political economy of Mughal crafts should not be understood simply as a story of uninterrupted growth. Expansion was accompanied by dependence, hierarchy, and vulnerability. The same commercial networks that created opportunities could transmit economic disruptions.

The Mughal craft economy ultimately represented a hybrid system. Imperial patronage stimulated production and enhanced the prestige of Kashmiri goods, merchants connected artisans to distant consumers, and regional trade expanded the circulation of crafts. At the same time, the benefits of commercialization were unevenly distributed. The history of Mughal Kashmir's crafts therefore reveals how state power, commercial capital, specialized labor, and consumer culture interacted in the development of a pre-modern non-agrarian economy.

V. CONCLUSION

The political economy of crafts in Mughal Kashmir developed through the interaction of artisans, merchants, imperial institutions, and markets. The Mughal annexation of Kashmir did not create its craft traditions but placed established skills within a larger imperial framework. Shawl weaving became especially important because it attracted sustained elite demand and received direct imperial encouragement. The *Ain-i-Akbari* provides explicit evidence of Akbar's efforts to improve shawl manufacture and demonstrates the connection between Kashmiri production and wider Mughal workshop networks.

Imperial patronage encouraged technical experimentation, stylistic innovation, and commercialization. The development of karkhanas strengthened institutional organization and connected skilled workers with elite consumption. Yet patronage did not necessarily improve the socioeconomic position of artisans. Historical evidence indicates that the highly profitable and prestigious shawl industry could coexist with poor working conditions and unequal distribution of commercial surplus. This distinction between industrial expansion and artisan welfare is central to understanding the period.

Merchants were equally important because they connected production to raw-material sources and distant markets. The pashm trade demonstrates the interdependence of Kashmir with Ladakh and neighboring regions, while routes toward Lahore and other imperial centers integrated Kashmiri manufactures into broader commercial networks. Thus, the non-agrarian economy of Mughal Kashmir cannot be studied in isolation from regional trade.

The history of artisans, merchants, and imperial markets ultimately demonstrates the complexity of Mughal economic integration. Kashmir became an important center of specialized craft production whose products circulated through commercial, political, and cultural networks. The Mughal state provided patronage and institutional structures, merchants facilitated circulation, and artisans supplied the technical expertise upon which the system depended. The resulting economy combined opportunity with hierarchy and commercialization with unequal control. Studying this political economy therefore provides a broader understanding of how craft, commerce, labor, and imperial power interacted in early modern South Asia.

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