

Threads of Swat: Rediscovering the Beauty of Islampuri Shawls



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**Abstract:** *The craft industry has thrived for centuries in the picturesque Swat Valley. Among the various artisanal endeavours, the shawl industry has garnered worldwide renown, thanks to its innovative techniques in craftsmanship. Weaving shawls in Swat is a time-honoured tradition, a craft that artisans have honed across generations. Woollen shawls hold universal appeal, transcending age, gender, and nationality boundaries. The primary aim of this research was to uncover the fundamental methodologies employed by local artisans in Swat Valley for crafting shawls. Within this paper, we delve into the intricate process of wool transformation, spanning from the initial fibre processing to the ultimate creation of the shawl, meticulously detailing each stage from spinning to finishing.*

**Keywords:** Handicraft, Embroidery, Shawl, Spinning, Weaving.

**Introduction**

Swat, often referred to as the "Pakistani Switzerland," is renowned worldwide not just for its natural splendour in the form of lakes, springs, mountains, and grasslands but also for the exquisite handicrafts painstakingly crafted by Swati artisans. Among these crafts, shawls have captivated both domestic and international buyers for centuries. Shawls are donned by people of all genders as a part of their attire, serving as protection from the harsh winter weather and sometimes as a fashion statement. The term "shawl" signifies a delicate, woollen fabric cherished for its warmth and style (Sheikh, 2014).

For some scholars, the word "shawl" is believed to have been borrowed from Persian, where "Shal" denotes a soft woven wool fabric referred to as "Al-shawl" in Arabic, "shawl" in English, and "Do Shala" in Hindi (Ahad, 1987).

Additionally, it is thought that the term may have originated from the language of the Dard tribe,



Artisan of Islampur Swat and Traditional Handloom

residing beyond the northern mountain ranges of Kashmir, where "Sha" signifies the woollen goat's shawl. Historical records and travelogues indicate that woollen shoulder mantles were crafted and used in India and Kashmir (Ahad, 1987). Travellers' accounts hint at the longstanding tradition of producing traditional

woollen items in India, dating back to the Indus civilization.

Handcrafted shawls adorned with intricate embroidery are consistently in high demand. Shawls are typically fashioned from wool and have been employed for warmth during the cold seasons since ancient times. The art of shawl-making has persisted in various regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, offering both practical warmth and a touch of elegance. Charsadda, Dir, Swat, and Chitral are some of the areas known for their shawl production. Swat Valley, steeped in rich traditional culture within the Islamic world, stands out as one of the oldest and culturally significant valleys in the Malakand Division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

Islampur stands as a preeminent hub for woollen shawls and handmade products, elevating their value and quality. Situated 13 kilometres south of Mingora city, Islampur boasts a population of around 17,000 (Ali, 2017). Shawls produced here are celebrated across the country and even find their way to international markets. Shawls and other textile products are meticulously crafted to cater to consumers' comfort and convenience. The quality of material, structure, and design determines the comfort and appeal of these handcrafted items. With the advent of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a significant step toward global trade and commerce, the demand for top-tier products in global markets has risen (Chatterjee & Kavita, October 2011).

A significant number of local residents in Islampur own most of the local handloom units, numbering around 3,000 (Yousafzai, 2018). Hand weaving has been a generational practice, and the village houses small and medium-sized shawl units (Ali, 2017). Islampur, also known as Salampur, is a village where shawl weaving has endured for generations. However, the village's trade and business suffered due to the intrusion of terrorism and extremism in Swat Valley in 2007 (Yousafzai, 2018). Shawl-making serves as a vital source of income in Islampur, engaging approximately five thousand artisans, including a substantial number of women. These women work within their homes, employing locally crafted looms known as "Khadai" in Pashto

(Ahmad, 2012).

The products of Islampur are not only popular domestically but also exported to Afghanistan and Central Asian countries. These finely-crafted shawls, with various designs, are frequently exhibited at cultural festivals and exhibitions throughout Pakistan. Islampuri woollen handcrafted warm attire gains heightened demand during the winter months, intensifying the labour of the workers involved. The primary material used in shawl-making is wool from sheep, available in two forms: raw wool found in certain regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including Kalam, Bahrain, Madyan, Bisham, Pattan, and Abbottabad; and ready-made imported wool that is easier to use (Khaliq, 2011).

Creating a standard quality shawl can take a few hours, while crafting a high-quality shawl may require weeks of intricate weaving. Pashmina shawls, highly regarded for urban wear throughout Pakistan, can be purchased in Islampur at premium prices. The quality and cost of these shawls vary according to the wool's source, obtained from different sheep breeds (Ali, 2017). Islampur's legacy in shawl-making, rooted in quality and uniqueness, is celebrated throughout the country. During a visit to Islampur, I had the opportunity to witness local citizens skilfully weaving shawls using handcrafted looms, a skill passed down through generations.

The village houses around 250 handcrafted looms, employing approximately 2,000 workers dedicated to weaving shawls and scarves known for their superior quality and value. Producing these hand-crafted shawls demands significant labour and skill, which was evident during my visit. While some units use power looms for shawl production, Islampur prides itself on preserving the tradition of hand-made looms, resulting in unique products and artisans that surpass those of power looms. These products are predominantly sold in local markets and exported abroad, contributing to our imports and bolstering the Pakistani economy. This information is drawn from a report by "Pakistan Forward" (Yousafzai, 2018). However, some larger manufacturers have started utilizing power looms to produce shawls, especially those incorporating blended yarns,

aiming to accelerate production and reduce costs. In some instances, power looms with jacquard techniques are employed to create shawls with intricate woven designs using blended yarns. Recently, computer programs have been developed to automate design translation into shawls, replacing manual graph paper preparation.

According to most manufacturers, exporters, and retailers, the demand for Salampuri shawls has surged in both national and international markets. This popularity and resulting demand can be attributed to the unmatched brilliance, superior quality, softness, warmth, and intricate patterns of these shawls. Designing a theme into a shawl requires creativity and a deep understanding of the material and its potential. However, the use of power looms in shawl-making outside Islampur is impacting the authenticity of shawls. On the contrary, some argue that the lack of mechanization hinders business.

The weaving and textile industry has evolved over time, undergoing various phases of change, innovation, and development. This research aims to assess the techniques, combinations, and aesthetic appeal employed in crafting handmade woollen shawls at Salampur. The study highlights the exceptional quality of these shawls and their potential contribution to the economy, especially in light of CPEC projects. Furthermore, it underscores the evolving trend of woollen shawls, incorporating modern designs, colours, and combinations. Traditional products can find relevance in contemporary fashion and design. This study serves a dual purpose: it showcases Swat's traditional art while preserving the heritage of Swat.

**Research Methodology**

**Study Areas:** The fieldwork for this research was exclusively conducted in Islampur, the primary hub for shawl manufacturing. Extensive review of reports, historical accounts, and interviews revealed that the shawl trade is concentrated in the Islampur district. Visits were made to all shawl units, and interviews were conducted with various stakeholders, including weavers, dyers, cleaners, washers, government officials, historians, teachers, and shawl merchants.

**Data Collection:** Artisans, including both spinners and weavers, were selected for field studies. These field studies involved random selection of artisans. A semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions was utilized to gather information on the traditional methods employed in the production of Islampuri shawls.

**The Process of Woollen Shawl Making**



A) Pre-spinning B) Spinning C) Weaving D) Finishing

In the data collected for this research, it was observed that individuals from various social classes and tribes are engaged in the production of woollen Islampuri Shawls. Woollen shawl-making differs significantly in terms of material, technique, and craftsmanship. Crafting a single shawl typically takes one to two days and involves around thirteen distinct steps. Skilled artisans are responsible for each step, and they are often consulted during the weaving process. The traditional method of shawl making/processing in Islampur can be categorized into four broad stages:

**Step 1: Collection of Raw Material**

The raw material (wool) for shawls is sourced from brokers, merchants, and retailers in Lahore



Weaving Unit in Islampur Swat



*Bobbins of Wool Yarns*

### Step 2: Distribution of Wool

After collecting wool yarns from various sources, they are distributed to weaving units, commonly known as "Karkhana."



Creel known as Punjala Holding

### Steps 3 and 4: Cleaning and Spinning

This is a time-consuming process involving the cleaning and spinning of wool. Women traditionally handle the removal of coarse hair from the wool yarn, and certain innovations have been introduced in this stage as well. Yarns, whether colored or not as per the design, are wound over reels or bobbins using a spinning wheel known as "Charkhas." This straightens the yarn and determines its length for weaving.

### Step 5: Warping (Tanasta)

Warping involves the process of warping, wafting, dressing, and reeling of wool. Each of these steps is carried out by specialized artisans. A wrap-maker, skilled in joining colored yarn for warp and weft, plays a crucial role in this phase. Warping is done through a drum known as "Arrhat," rolled over the warp beam, and the process is called "Tanasta."



Figure 6: Warp Beam



Figure 7: Arhat (Wheel) used for Warping Threads on a Warp Beam

### Step 6: Weaving

Weaving follows the design prepared beforehand. It encompasses weaving, hurling, and washing before shawls are sent for pressing and packing.



Figure 8 : Warp Threads in Loom



Figure 19 : Weaver is Busy in Setting Warps Yarns in Order to Carry the Process of Weaving



Figure 10: Weaving of Woollen Fabric for Stole is in Process

### Step 7: Embroidery

Embroidery is traditionally done by women, using acrylic threads. In simple and male shawls, embroidery is often done during the weaving process.



An Artesian Creating Floral Pattern on Shawl

### Step 8: Dyeing

Dyeing involves coloring the manufactured shawls in various shades and colors. A specialized community known as "Rangsaz" is responsible for dyeing woollen shawls, initially using natural dyes from vegetables, which have

now been replaced with chemical dyes.



Natural Dyes used for Dyeing of Shawls



Dying of Shawl in Process

### Steps 9 and 10: Washing & Drying

All types of shawls are washed after completion to remove dust and maintain their softness. Shawls are immersed in cold water and then dried using hydro methods. The washing process varies based on the type of wool, with Australian wool shawls taking less time than those made from local wool.



Hydro Machine Used for Washing.



Shawls Collected for Washing.



Preparation of the Washing and Dye Bath Using Common Resources



Washing Process of Swati Kapra (cloth) used for Coat, Waist Coat and Pakol (Traditional cap)



Washing of Shawls are Pressed in order to Maintain its Original Length



Shawls Soaked in the washing bath, while some are spread for Drying



Shawls are Dried in the Sun after Dryer bath, while some are spread for Drying



Press used for the Ironing of Shawls



Shawls are Hanged for Drying bath, while some are spread for Drying



Figure 23. Swati Kapra (cloth) Drying in the



Shawls set for Ironing in Press



Shawls Pressed and Folded

### Step 11: Ironing

After washing, shawls are pressed using either double-press steam or single-press gas machines.

### Step 12: Packing

The shawls are packed in plastic bags to protect them from dust and are then prepared for market distribution.



Shawls are Ready for Market after Packaging

### Discussion

Swat Valley has a rich tradition of customs and craftsmanship, with the natural beauty of the region fostering talent and dedication. The skills required for traditional handicrafts, such as Islampuri shawls, have been passed down through generations, contributing to the economic prosperity and renown of the craft. While extensive research and documentation exist regarding Swat Valley's social, political,

geographical, and ethnic characteristics, household crafts have often been neglected or overlooked. The study suggests the need for proper infrastructure, including electric lighting, to support this industry.

Furthermore, the region could be promoted as a cultural destination, offering visitors a glimpse into the art of shawl-making, similar to the Khewra Mines. Shawl-making skills could be a source of income and cultural preservation. This research aims to identify factors in textile design and technique to keep Swati shawls aligned with modern design trends. Islampuri shawls feature various decorative techniques, including weaving, embroidery, beadwork, and block printing, all executed with excellence.

It's essential to recognize the value of these traditional technologies and their cultural significance. As society progressed from craftsmanship to machine-oriented technology, both the quality of fabric and consumer demand changed. The data collected for this research focused on artisans involved in Islampuri shawl-making in Swat, observing and interviewing them to gain insights into the craft's traditional methods and techniques.

### Findings

This section presents some of the key findings that emerged from the research:

**Traditional Significance of Shawls:** The study recognizes the cultural and traditional significance of shawls, which play a crucial role in covering and emphasizing different parts of the body. Islampuri shawls, in particular, are renowned for their vibrancy, symbolism, and representation of rural life.

**Craftsmanship and Skilled Artisans:** Islampuri shawl weaving is an art form passed down through generations of skilled artisans. The combination of craft and inherited skill is evident in every aspect of these shawls.

**Home-Made Manufacturing:** The research emphasizes the role of home-made manufacturing in creating new products and designs, opening up new markets without corporate or government intervention. It highlights the ability of craftsmen to innovate and

experiment in the textile industry, thereby preserving centuries-old traditions and customs.

**Economic Stability through Informal Sector:** The study reveals that the informal sector, which includes the manufacturing of these home-made products, serves as a robust system for economic stability in the region. It also explores the potential for integrating this sector into the mainstream textile industry to contribute to national economic growth, especially through initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

**Role of Community Innovation:** Community innovation plays a significant role in shaping the craft of Islampuri shawl making. Innovations have been introduced at different levels and by different communities, ranging from new combs to techniques for removing dirt from fleece and applying dyes.

**Involvement of Women:** While women are actively involved in cleaning and spinning wool, they typically do not participate in other steps of the manufacturing process. Islampuri craftsmen share various steps with skilled family members, except for daughters who often manage households and later marry.

**Employment and Economic Prosperity:** Islampur is known for its cottage weaving industry, primarily focused on making shawls from sheep wool. The village has a high employment rate, and all its residents are engaged in productive activities, leading to economic stability and improved living standards for families.

**Exhibition of Shawls:** Many Islampuri shawls, with various designs, are exhibited at cultural festivals and exhibitions across Pakistan. However, experts suggest that government support and concrete steps are needed to facilitate the export of these shawls.

## Conclusion

In this research paper, the intricate process of making Islampuri shawls has been thoroughly investigated. The study sheds light on the structure and production of these woollen shawls, emphasizing the direct involvement of different communities in the craft. The findings provide valuable insights into the rich cultural heritage of

Swat Valley and its textile industry.

The research has successfully answered the questions posed and offers a promising foundation for further exploration. The study's focus on woollen shawls is just one facet of the broader landscape, and there is potential for more exciting findings in similar areas. Additionally, many questions related to community innovations within the informal sector remain to be addressed.

Overall, the research underscores the significance of preserving and promoting traditional crafts and highlights the vital role they play in local economies and cultural heritage.

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