



REVIEW ARTICLE

Kashmiri Embroidery: Sustaining Cultural Heritage in a Globalized World

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Abstract

Kashmiri embroidery, locally known as *kashida*, represents one of the most enduring expressions of the artistic and cultural heritage of the Kashmir Valley. Distinguished by its intricate needlework, floral motifs, and use of fine materials, this craft has historically functioned as both an economic resource and a symbol of regional identity. However, in an era defined by globalization, Kashmiri embroidery faces multiple pressures, including competition from machine-made imitations, declining participation among younger generations, and shifting consumer preferences toward fast fashion.

This paper examines the historical background, cultural significance, and contemporary challenges of Kashmiri embroidery, with a particular focus on the effects of globalization. It explores how the craft has simultaneously benefited from global exposure and suffered from commodification and cultural dilution. Through a review of existing literature and case studies, the research identifies critical issues such as unstable artisan livelihoods, lack of intellectual property protection, and the risk of losing traditional knowledge. The study also highlights preservation and adaptation strategies, including intellectual property safeguards, artisan cooperatives, fair trade initiatives, digital marketing, and design innovation. These approaches are evaluated as pathways to strengthen the economic viability of embroidery while maintaining its cultural authenticity.

The findings suggest that sustaining Kashmiri embroidery requires collaborative efforts among artisans, policymakers, designers, and consumers. Preservation should not be seen merely as protecting a relic of the past but as fostering a living tradition capable of evolving with contemporary markets. Ultimately, the survival of Kashmiri embroidery depends on balancing heritage preservation with adaptation, ensuring dignity and sustainability for the communities who continue to practice this centuries-old craft.

Keywords: Kashmiri Embroidery, Cultural Heritage, Globalization, Artisan Livelihoods, Geographical Indication (GI), Fair Trade, Design Innovation.

Introduction

The introduction highlights Kashmiri embroidery, locally known as *kashida*, as a craft deeply embedded in the cultural identity and artistic traditions of the Kashmir Valley. Its defining features fine needlework, intricate floral and natural motifs, and the use of delicate wool or silk threads

have historically set it apart as a symbol of refinement and regional pride. More than a decorative art, *kashida* represents a living heritage that embodies the aesthetic sensibilities and craftsmanship of generations of artisans.

At the same time, the introduction situates this traditional practice within the larger context of globalization. On one hand, global exchange has expanded markets and increased visibility for Kashmiri crafts. On the other hand, it has also accelerated commodification, cultural dilution, and competition from machine-made imitations. These challenges raise pressing questions about the sustainability of embroidery as both an economic livelihood and a cultural tradition.

By framing the research around the tension between preservation and adaptation, the introduction sets the stage for analyzing how Kashmiri embroidery can be sustained in a globalized world. It positions the craft not as a static relic of the past, but as a dynamic, evolving tradition that must navigate modern economic pressures while retaining cultural authenticity.

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Research Objectives & Research Questions

Research Objectives

This study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine the historical development and cultural significance of Kashmiri embroidery.
- To assess the socio-economic challenges faced by artisans in the contemporary era.
- To analyze the impact of globalization on the authenticity, marketability, and sustainability of Kashmiri embroidery.
- To evaluate existing preservation and adaptation strategies, including legal, cooperative, digital, and design-based initiatives.
- To recommend sustainable pathways that balance cultural preservation with economic viability.

Research Questions

The research is guided by the following questions:

- How has globalization influenced the production, perception, and market of Kashmiri embroidery?
- What are the primary socio-economic challenges confronting artisans today?
- In what ways do machine-made imitations and lack of legal protections affect the authenticity and livelihoods associated with the craft?
- Which preservation and adaptation strategies are most effective in sustaining Kashmiri embroidery as both cultural heritage and economic resource?
- How can Kashmiri embroidery be repositioned in global markets while maintaining cultural authenticity?

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to provide a holistic understanding of Kashmiri embroidery.

Qualitative Methods

Literature review

Analysis of academic works, policy documents, and reports on Kashmiri handicrafts and globalization.

Semi-structured interviews

Conducted with artisans, cooperative leaders, NGOs, and policymakers to capture lived experiences.

Participant observation

Field visits to workshops to observe techniques, motifs, and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Quantitative Methods

Surveys

Questionnaires administered to artisans to assess income levels, working hours, and perceptions of globalization.

Market analysis

Comparative evaluation of handmade versus machine-made embroidery prices in local and online markets.

Data Analysis

- Qualitative data analyzed thematically to identify recurring socio-cultural and economic narratives.
- Quantitative data processed using descriptive statistics to reveal livelihood trends and consumer preferences.

This combination allows for a holistic understanding of Kashmiri embroidery as both a cultural artifact and an economic activity, bridging historical context with contemporary challenges and opportunities.

Historical Background of Kashmiri Embroidery

The origins of Kashmiri embroidery can be traced to antiquity, with evidence of its refinement and formalization during the Mughal era in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Under imperial and regional patronage, the craft developed as both a domestic tradition and an export-oriented industry. Over time, Kashmiri embroidery came to embody a synthesis of Persian, Central Asian, and indigenous artistic influences, reflecting the cultural hybridity of the region.

Distinctive styles emerged, including *sozni* (fine needle embroidery on delicate fabrics such as *pashmina*), *ari* (hook embroidery characterized by chain stitches on thicker materials), and *tilla* (metallic thread work, often used for ceremonial and bridal attire). These forms adorn a wide range of products, from shawls and garments to household textiles, and are valued for their technical precision as well as their aesthetic richness.

The motifs of Kashmiri embroidery are deeply inspired by the natural environment of the valley. Designs featuring *chinar* leaves, almond blossoms, lotuses, and *paisleys* echo the flora and cultural symbolism of the region, transforming landscapes into wearable art. As part of the broader Kashmiri textile tradition most notably the internationally renowned *pashmina* shawls embroidery has come to symbolize both regional identity and artisanal excellence. Over centuries, it has remained not only a source of cultural pride but also a vital economic activity sustaining generations of craftspeople.

Cultural and Socio-Economic Significance

Kashmiri embroidery holds importance beyond its artistic and aesthetic value, functioning as a cornerstone of cultural identity and community livelihood in the Kashmir Valley. Historically, the craft was primarily a male-dominated profession, sustained through intergenerational transmission of skills and knowledge. Families often engaged in embroidery as a collective practice, fostering a sense of pride and continuity with regional traditions. Over time, however, the sector has witnessed increasing participation of women, particularly facilitated by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and self-help groups. These initiatives have positioned embroidery not only as a cultural symbol but also as a medium for female empowerment and financial

independence.

Economically, Kashmiri embroidery represents a vital component of the region's handicraft sector, contributing significantly to household incomes and the broader local economy. The intricate nature of *sozni*, *ari*, and *tilla* embroidery allows for high-value products, yet artisans frequently face precarious livelihoods. Irregular demand, long hours of labor-intensive work, and low profit margins undermine the sustainability of the craft. Furthermore, the proliferation of machine-made imitations has intensified market competition, eroding consumer willingness to pay for authentic handmade pieces.

The younger generation increasingly views embroidery as unprofitable, leading to declining participation in artisan communities. This attrition threatens the long-term survival of traditional techniques and motifs, as younger artisans seek alternative occupations with greater financial security. Thus, Kashmiri embroidery stands at a critical juncture: while it continues to embody cultural heritage and provide livelihoods, it also confronts structural challenges that require urgent interventions in policy, market access, and heritage preservation.

Globalization and Its Discontents

The forces of globalization have had ambivalent consequences for Kashmiri embroidery, simultaneously generating new opportunities and posing serious threats to its sustainability. On the positive side, global integration has expanded the reach of Kashmiri handicrafts by connecting artisans and traders to international markets. E-commerce platforms and social media have allowed for direct engagement with consumers worldwide, enabling new forms of branding, storytelling, and niche marketing. These avenues provide opportunities for artisans and cooperatives to highlight the cultural value of embroidery while catering to the growing demand for handcrafted and ethically produced goods.

However, globalization has also intensified challenges. The entry of mass-produced goods into global and domestic markets has created price wars that significantly disadvantage traditional artisans. Machine-made imitations, often manufactured outside Kashmir, are sold under the guise of authentic Kashmiri embroidery, thereby undermining both the economic value and cultural prestige of handmade products. This proliferation of counterfeits erodes consumer trust and diminishes the willingness to pay premium prices for authentic crafts.

A further concern lies in the absence of robust legal protections for traditional designs. Although Geographical Indication (GI) tags exist for some Kashmiri products, embroidery techniques and motifs remain vulnerable to appropriation. Without adequate intellectual property safeguards, artisans are unable to prevent cultural dilution or secure fair recognition for their work. Additionally, global

fashion trends that prioritize fast-changing styles reduce demand for traditionally patterned textiles, pressuring artisans to compromise on quality or adapt designs in ways that risk eroding heritage authenticity.

Thus, while globalization offers exposure and market potential, it simultaneously exacerbates structural vulnerabilities. The future of Kashmiri embroidery depends on how effectively local stakeholders and policymakers navigate these competing pressures to ensure both cultural preservation and economic viability.

Preservation and Adaptation Strategies

Efforts to sustain Kashmiri embroidery must operate at multiple levels cultural, legal, educational, and commercial.

Intellectual Property Protection

The safeguarding of Kashmiri embroidery requires stronger legal frameworks to prevent misappropriation and counterfeiting. A significant precedent was set when "Kashmir Pashmina" was registered under the Geographical Indication (GI) Act in India, ensuring that only genuine products from the region could carry the name. Extending similar protection to specific embroidery traditions such as *sozni*, *ari*, and *tilla* would help preserve authenticity and prevent misuse by machine manufacturers or overseas producers who sell imitations under the Kashmiri label. Intellectual property protection also enhances consumer trust by providing assurances of origin and craftsmanship. Moreover, it has the potential to increase the economic value of embroidered goods by differentiating them in the global marketplace. However, to be effective, such legal measures must be combined with awareness campaigns, enforcement mechanisms, and community participation to ensure that artisans directly benefit from these protections.

Artisan Cooperatives and Fair Trade

Artisan cooperatives and fair trade initiatives play a crucial role in ensuring that the economic benefits of Kashmiri embroidery reach those who sustain the craft. By organizing into cooperatives, artisans can collectively negotiate fairer wages, gain access to credit, and reduce their dependence on exploitative middlemen. Such organizations also facilitate bulk procurement of raw materials, thereby lowering costs, and enable joint marketing strategies that strengthen artisans' visibility in competitive markets. Fair trade certification further enhances consumer trust by assuring buyers that the products are ethically produced, with respect for both labor and tradition. Beyond financial benefits, cooperatives foster social solidarity and community resilience, encouraging artisans to reinvest in their craft rather than abandoning it. In this way, collective organization provides both economic security and cultural continuity, ensuring that Kashmiri embroidery survives as a viable livelihood option in the modern era.

Digital and Global Marketing

Digital platforms have emerged as transformative tools for sustaining traditional crafts such as Kashmiri embroidery. E-commerce marketplaces, artisan-focused websites, and social media networks provide unprecedented opportunities for global exposure, allowing artisans to bypass intermediaries and connect directly with consumers. These platforms are not only sales channels but also spaces for storytelling, where artisans can share their creative processes, cultural heritage, and personal narratives. Such engagement builds consumer appreciation for the time, skill, and symbolism embedded in each embroidered piece. Moreover, digital marketing allows artisans to tap into niche markets that value sustainability, ethical production, and handcrafted goods. While challenges such as digital literacy, logistics, and online competition remain, targeted training programs can empower artisans to harness these tools effectively. By integrating traditional knowledge with digital visibility, Kashmiri embroidery can secure a stable position in global markets while maintaining its cultural authenticity.

Design Innovation and Education

Innovation in design and education is essential to ensure the continued relevance of Kashmiri embroidery in contemporary markets. While traditional motifs such as chinar leaves and paisleys remain significant, adapting these elements into modern apparel, accessories, and home décor can broaden consumer appeal. Collaboration between artisans, fashion designers, and interior decorators fosters creative reinterpretations that respect tradition while embracing modern trends. Design schools and vocational training centers play a pivotal role in this process by equipping artisans with skills in product diversification, color forecasting, and market analysis. Education also encourages young artisans to view embroidery as a viable profession rather than an outdated practice. Importantly, innovation should not dilute authenticity but rather enhance it, ensuring that heritage motifs and stitch techniques remain central. By balancing creativity with cultural preservation, design innovation and education provide a sustainable path forward for Kashmiri embroidery in an evolving globalized world.

Globalization and Its Discontents

Globalization has amplified both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Digital platforms and e-commerce have enhanced international visibility and consumer engagement. Yet, mass production and cheap imports have triggered price wars, undermining the authenticity and prestige of handmade products.

The absence of comprehensive intellectual property protections leaves embroidery designs exposed to appropriation. Additionally, rapidly shifting fashion trends pressure artisans to adapt, often at the expense of traditional

quality and authenticity. These dynamics illustrate globalization's dual role as both an enabler and a disruptor of cultural heritage.

Findings and Analysis

The findings of this research reveal a central paradox in the state of Kashmiri embroidery: while it is celebrated globally as a cultural and artistic heritage, it remains undervalued as an economic resource for the artisans who sustain it. Despite its historical prestige and symbolic importance, many artisans face unstable livelihoods characterized by irregular demand, low wages, and exploitative market structures. Younger generations often view the craft as an unprofitable career path, resulting in declining participation and threatening the continuity of traditional knowledge.

Globalization emerges as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it has provided exposure to international markets, allowing Kashmiri embroidery to gain recognition beyond regional boundaries. Digital platforms and global trade networks have created opportunities for branding, storytelling, and niche marketing. On the other hand, globalization has also accelerated commodification, with cheap machine-made imitations flooding the markets. These counterfeits not only devalue the authenticity of handmade embroidery but also erode consumer trust, making it harder for artisans to compete fairly.

The analysis highlights that sustaining Kashmiri embroidery requires a balance between preserving tradition and embracing innovation. Intellectual property protections, such as Geographical Indication (GI) tags, can safeguard the authenticity of designs and build consumer confidence. Artisan cooperatives and fair trade practices can empower craftspeople by ensuring fair wages and collective bargaining power. Furthermore, digital marketing and storytelling can connect artisans directly with global consumers, helping to bridge cultural appreciation with economic viability.

Ultimately, the findings underscore that no single strategy is sufficient. Preservation demands collaborative efforts between artisans, policymakers, NGOs, designers, and consumers. By combining cultural protection with innovative adaptation, Kashmiri embroidery can remain both a thriving heritage and a sustainable livelihood. Its survival lies in recognizing artisans not as mere producers but as custodians of a living cultural legacy.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that Kashmiri embroidery occupies a paradoxical position in the contemporary globalized economy. While it continues to symbolize cultural identity and artistic excellence, its practitioners face structural vulnerabilities that threaten long-term sustainability. This aligns with earlier scholarship emphasizing the dual role of handicrafts as both heritage and livelihood (Nayak, 2014; Ahmad, 2020).

A key point of convergence between the literature and this research is the destabilizing impact of globalization. Consistent with studies on handicraft industries across South Asia (Srinivas, 2017), artisans in Kashmir encounter declining profit margins and competition from mass-produced imitations. The findings extend these observations by showing how consumer trust erodes when machine-made goods are marketed as authentic Kashmiri embroidery.

The research also contributes to debates on cultural resilience by emphasizing adaptation strategies. Prior work has underscored the role of legal protections, such as Geographical Indication (GI) tags, in safeguarding traditional knowledge (Basu & Das, 2019). This study supports that argument while adding that legal measures must be accompanied by cooperative organization, digital literacy, and design innovation to remain effective. Importantly, the results suggest that interventions must be multidimensional, combining cultural preservation with economic viability.

Another implication is generational. As younger artisans disengage due to financial insecurity, the intergenerational transfer of knowledge weakens, echoing global patterns of artisanal decline (UNESCO, 2018). Addressing this requires not only fair remuneration but also educational reforms that frame embroidery as a viable profession.

Ultimately, the discussion highlights that sustaining Kashmiri embroidery requires balancing authenticity with adaptation. Policymakers, NGOs, and designers must work collaboratively with artisans to build sustainable market ecosystems that preserve heritage while enabling cultural evolution.

Preservation & Adaptation Strategies

Preservation and adaptation strategies are essential for ensuring that Kashmiri embroidery continues to thrive in the modern world without losing its authenticity. Preservation focuses on safeguarding the traditional motifs, stitches, and cultural meanings associated with the craft, while adaptation ensures that the embroidery remains relevant in changing markets and lifestyles. Both are complementary and must work together.

From a cultural perspective, preservation involves documenting traditional patterns, supporting intergenerational transmission of knowledge, and legally protecting embroidery styles through mechanisms such as Geographical Indication (GI) tags. This helps prevent cultural appropriation and safeguards artisans' intellectual property.

From a socio-economic perspective, adaptation strategies are crucial. These include forming artisan cooperatives to strengthen bargaining power, introducing fair trade practices to ensure better wages, and utilizing digital platforms for marketing and global outreach. Additionally, design innovation and educational programs can integrate Kashmiri embroidery into contemporary fashion and home décor, broadening its consumer base.

Ultimately, preservation ensures authenticity, while adaptation secures sustainability. Together, they offer a balanced approach that treats Kashmiri embroidery not as a relic of the past but as a living tradition capable of evolving with global markets while protecting the dignity and livelihood of its artisans.

Conclusion

The conclusion emphasizes Kashmiri embroidery as more than an artistic tradition; it is a symbol of cultural resilience and continuity in the Kashmir Valley. It acknowledges the dual challenge posed by globalization: while it creates new opportunities for exposure, it also threatens the authenticity and survival of traditional practices. The passage argues that safeguarding this heritage requires collective strategies that extend beyond cultural appreciation. Legal protections such as Geographical Indication (GI) tags, community-based empowerment through cooperatives, and innovative marketing via digital platforms are presented as essential tools to ensure sustainability. Importantly, the conclusion frames preservation not as an act of nostalgia but as an investment in the future, where artisans can sustain their livelihoods with dignity while continuing to transmit Kashmiri embroidery as a living and evolving cultural legacy.

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