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THE COMMERCIAL LANDSCAPE OF MUGHAL KASHMIR: CRAFT PRODUCTION, MARKET INSTITUTIONS, AND REGIONAL TRADE

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ABSTRACT

The Mughal period marked an important phase in the commercial development of Kashmir. Following its annexation in 1586, the Valley became more closely connected with the political, economic, and transportation networks of the Mughal Empire. Its commercial landscape was characterized by specialized craft production, expanding markets, merchant activity, and connections with neighboring regions including Ladakh, Tibet, and Central Asia. Shawls occupied a particularly significant position because of their exceptional craftsmanship, high demand, and suitability for long-distance exchange. The *Ain-i-Akbari* records Mughal encouragement of shawl manufacture and describes improvements introduced under Akbar. Beyond textiles, Kashmir's handicraft economy involved multiple forms of skilled production that contributed to urban economic activity. This paper examines craft production, market institutions, and regional trade as interconnected components of the commercial landscape. It argues that Mughal Kashmir developed a diversified non-agrarian economy in which state patronage, private merchants, artisans, transport networks, and elite consumption interacted. At the same time, commercial growth remained uneven because access to capital, raw materials, markets, and political authority was unequally distributed.

Keywords: Mughal Kashmir, commercial landscape, craft production, market institutions, regional trade, shawls, merchants, artisans, economic history

I. INTRODUCTION

Kashmir occupied a distinctive position within the early modern economic geography of South Asia. Its mountain environment separated the Valley from the plains while simultaneously placing it near routes connecting South Asia with Central Asia. Before Mughal incorporation, Kashmir had developed commercial contacts with regions including Central Asia and possessed established traditions of craft production. Scholarship on the Sultanate period shows that artisanal expansion and external trade were already significant before 1586. Mughal rule therefore built upon an existing commercial foundation while integrating Kashmir more firmly into a larger imperial economy.

The annexation of Kashmir in 1586 altered the political conditions under which trade operated. Kashmir became part of the Mughal administrative system, and research on the period associates the new political order with improvements in road communication, administrative integration, and economic interaction with other regions. These changes did not eliminate geographical difficulties, but they created stronger institutional links between Kashmir and major centers of the Mughal Empire. Commercial goods could move through established routes, while merchants gained access to broader markets.

Craft production constituted a major component of this commercial landscape. Shawls were particularly prominent, but the wider craft economy included silk weaving, carpets, woodwork, paper products, metalwork, embroidery, and other forms of specialized manufacture. Mughal patronage was especially visible in the organization and improvement of shawl production. Abul Fazl records that Akbar encouraged shawl manufacture in Kashmir and also describes related workshops in Lahore. The evidence suggests that craft production was linked to a wider imperial system rather than being confined to local consumption.

The commercial landscape was shaped by the interaction of producers, merchants, consumers, and institutions. Artisans provided specialized labor; merchants organized procurement and circulation; state officials regulated or facilitated economic activities; and imperial and aristocratic consumers generated demand for luxury products. The resulting system was neither a fully free market nor a purely state-controlled economy. Instead, it combined household production, merchant commerce, royal karkhanas, market exchange, taxation, and gift circulation. This paper therefore examines Mughal Kashmir's commercial economy through craft production, market institutions, and regional trade, emphasizing their

interdependence.

II. CRAFT PRODUCTION AND THE EXPANSION OF URBAN MARKETS

Craft production in Mughal Kashmir depended upon a combination of inherited knowledge and technological adaptation. The Valley possessed established artisanal traditions, but Mughal patronage encouraged modifications in designs, colors, production methods, and product dimensions. The *Ain-i-Akbari* provides particularly valuable evidence concerning shawls and records Akbar's efforts to improve their manufacture. This demonstrates that craft production responded to changing patterns of imperial demand rather than remaining technologically static.

The shawl industry became one of the most commercially important branches of Kashmiri manufacture. Its products were valued for their softness, warmth, lightness, and intricate designs. Research on the Mughal period describes shawl production as reaching a major phase of expansion and commercialization, with the industry becoming closely associated with royal patronage. The industry therefore connected local production with a consumer market that extended well beyond Kashmir.

Srinagar played an important role in this process because urban concentration facilitated the interaction of artisans, merchants, suppliers, and consumers. Historical research describes the city as a major center of shawl manufacture and marketing during the Mughal period. Urban workshops provided spaces where specialized labor could be organized, while merchant networks facilitated the collection and distribution of finished goods. The city consequently functioned as both a production center and a commercial intermediary.

The organization of production also encouraged specialization. The manufacture of high-quality textiles required multiple stages and different categories of skilled labor. Spinning, dyeing, designing, weaving, and finishing demanded different forms of expertise. This division of labor allowed artisans to develop specialized skills but also increased their dependence upon the wider production system. When merchants or workshop authorities controlled raw materials and market access, individual artisans had limited ability to determine prices or final markets.

Other crafts contributed to the diversification of the urban economy. Contemporary descriptions of Kashmir's manufactures mention not only shawls but also various crafted

goods, furniture, boxes, palanquins, and other articles. Historical accounts of Mughal trade identify Kashmir's handicrafts as significant commodities circulating beyond the Valley. This broader range of production suggests that the non-agrarian economy was more diversified than a narrow focus on shawls might indicate.

The growth of craft production also generated associated employment. Raw-material suppliers, transporters, merchants, shopkeepers, workshop supervisors, and other service providers benefited from the circulation of manufactured goods. Craft production therefore created multiplier effects within urban markets. Nevertheless, the distribution of income remained unequal. High-value luxury production could coexist with modest artisan incomes, as historical studies of the shawl industry have emphasized. Commercial expansion consequently needs to be understood in terms of both increased production and unequal economic power.

III. MARKET INSTITUTIONS, MERCHANTS, AND COMMERCIAL ORGANIZATION

Markets in Mughal Kashmir operated through multiple institutional arrangements. Local bazaars provided spaces for everyday exchange, while specialized merchant networks connected craft producers with distant consumers. Royal karkhanas represented another institutional form in which production was organized according to imperial requirements. These arrangements overlapped rather than functioning as completely separate systems. An artisan could work within a household setting, supply a merchant, or become connected to an elite workshop depending on the nature of the product and the market.

The karkhana was particularly significant for luxury production. Within Mughal administrative and courtly culture, workshops provided a means of organizing skilled labor and producing high-quality goods according to specified requirements. The *Ain-i-Akbari* demonstrates the importance of organized textile manufacture and describes imperial efforts to improve shawls and related fabrics. Karkhanas therefore functioned as institutions connecting state power with craft knowledge.

Merchants occupied a different but complementary position. They connected artisans to markets and frequently handled the procurement of raw materials and movement of finished products. The shawl economy illustrates this relationship particularly clearly because pashm had to be obtained from areas beyond Kashmir. Research identifies Ladakh as an important

source of pashm and describes the shawl trade as involving Kashmir, Ladakh, Tibet, and other regions. Merchant networks were therefore essential to maintaining the continuity of production.

The availability of raw materials could affect the entire market structure. When supplies were limited or transportation disrupted, prices and production could be affected. The dependence of shawl manufacture on pashm illustrates how a seemingly local craft was connected to wider ecological and commercial systems. This interdependence demonstrates that Mughal markets were not isolated spaces but components of regional economic networks.

Market institutions also reflected differences in purchasing power. Luxury shawls served imperial and aristocratic consumers, while other textile products were available to broader sections of society. The *Ain-i-Akbari* provides evidence of multiple textile varieties and differences in quality and use. Product differentiation allowed artisans and merchants to respond to diverse forms of demand. At the same time, luxury production could generate particularly high commercial margins for intermediaries.

The commercial system consequently involved negotiation among several economic interests. The state sought revenue and access to luxury products; merchants sought profits and market opportunities; artisans sought payment for skilled labor; and consumers sought quality and prestige. These interests sometimes complemented one another but could also conflict. Historical research on the Mughal shawl industry suggests that the concentration of surplus among merchants and powerful intermediaries could occur alongside difficult conditions for artisans. Market institutions therefore structured economic power as well as exchange.

IV. REGIONAL TRADE NETWORKS AND THE COMMERCIAL INTEGRATION OF KASHMIR

Kashmir's geographical position made regional trade essential to its economic life. Mountain routes connected the Valley with Ladakh and Central Asia, while routes toward Punjab and the Mughal heartlands linked it with the Indian plains. Research on Mughal Kashmir emphasizes the importance of improved communications and renewed interaction with Central Asian regions after Mughal annexation. These connections expanded the geographical reach of Kashmiri products.

The trade in shawls provides one of the clearest examples of this regional integration. Pashm

entered Kashmir from surrounding highland areas, where it was produced from the fine under-fleece of goats. It was then transformed by Kashmiri artisans into highly valued textiles. Finished products moved outward toward markets where elite consumers were willing to pay for their quality and symbolic value. The resulting chain connected pastoral production, merchant activity, urban craftsmanship, and luxury consumption across several regions.

Trade routes also facilitated cultural exchange. The movement of merchants and artisans contributed to the transmission of designs, techniques, materials, and consumer preferences. Research on Kashmir's Central Asian contacts during the Mughal period associates the expansion of communication with the introduction and development of new artistic and industrial influences. Craft production thus became an important medium through which economic and cultural interactions occurred simultaneously.

The Indian market was particularly important. Kashmiri shawls and other handicrafts circulated beyond the Valley into major commercial centers of the Mughal Empire. Historical accounts of inland trade identify Kashmir's shawls, handicrafts, and saffron among products that entered wider commercial circulation. The expansion of this market meant that Kashmir's artisans were increasingly connected to consumer preferences in distant cities.

The export orientation of craft production also influenced the structure of the local economy. When a significant share of production was intended for external markets, artisans and merchants had to respond to distant consumer tastes. This encouraged product differentiation, quality control, stylistic innovation, and standardization. At the same time, dependence on distant markets exposed producers to fluctuations in political conditions and purchasing power. Commercial integration therefore produced both opportunities and vulnerabilities.

The regional trade system ultimately transformed Kashmir into an important node within a larger network. Its economic importance did not depend solely on agricultural production. Specialized crafts gave the Valley a distinctive commercial identity and connected local skills with distant markets. The interaction between mountain routes, imperial roads, merchant networks, and urban production created a commercial landscape in which Kashmir's goods circulated across political and cultural boundaries. The Mughal period therefore represents an important stage in the historical development of Kashmir's regional economic integration.

V. CONCLUSION

The commercial landscape of Mughal Kashmir was shaped by the interaction of craft production, market institutions, merchant networks, and regional trade. The Mughal annexation of 1586 brought Kashmir into a wider imperial framework while building upon pre-existing commercial traditions. The Valley's geographical location enabled connections with both the Indian plains and Central Asian regions, while Mughal administrative integration strengthened some of these connections.

Craft production formed a major component of this economy. Shawl weaving became especially important because imperial patronage stimulated production, technical innovation, and market demand. The *Ain-i-Akbari* records Akbar's active encouragement of shawl manufacture and describes related textile workshops, illustrating the close relationship between craft production and imperial consumption. The resulting commercial expansion made Kashmiri crafts important commodities within regional markets.

Market institutions provided the organizational framework for this growth. Karkhanas linked state demand with skilled labor, while merchants connected producers to raw materials and consumers. The pashm trade demonstrates the regional character of production because Kashmiri textile manufacture depended upon material flows from neighboring highland regions. Artisans therefore operated within economic networks that extended far beyond their immediate workplaces.

Regional trade transformed Kashmir from a primarily local market environment into an important node of interregional commerce. Shawls and other handicrafts circulated through Mughal India and neighboring regions, carrying not only economic value but also cultural and political meanings. Yet commercial integration did not guarantee equal prosperity. The historical evidence indicates that artisans could remain economically vulnerable despite the high value of their products. The commercial history of Mughal Kashmir is therefore best understood as a process of expansion accompanied by institutional hierarchy, specialization, and unequal distribution of economic benefits.

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