

NEW INITIATIVE IN J&K TO RESTORE LOST GLORY OF PASHMINA SHAWLS

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Weaving a tradition: Women's participation has dropped from one lakh to just around 10,000 in the Valley. File Photo

Over a period, the number of women associated with hand-spinning of yarns for Pashmina shawls has dwindled significantly in Kashmir, but a rare initiative to double the wages and ensure round-the-year orders is likely to see the re-engagement of women artisans in a critical production process of the world-famous hand-made shawls.

The Centre For Excellence (CFE) has been set up by shawl trader Mujtaba Kadri, who owns the 'Me&K' brand and Aadhyam-Aditya Birla Group at the old city's Narwara area to restore the lost hand-driven processes involved in the intricate shawl weaving industry here. It will start enrolling women weavers from September 1.

Reviving lost sheen

"Old techniques of weaving are fading fast in Kashmir. Poor wages and machines have played a role in driving away women who used to spin the finest yarns in the world. This initiative is aimed at reviving the lost sheen of the hand-made shawls," Mr. Kadri told *The Hindu*.

The CFE has decided to double the wages for women from Rs. 1 per knot, of 10 threads with 10-inch-long yarn, to Rs. 2.

"Unlike the past, the first bulk of Pashmina wool tufts will be given to women spinners without any charge. This will not force them for any investment," Mr. Kadri said.

"We are hopeful that it will attract women to the old style of spinning rather than mill spinning," he added.

Spinning on a traditional Kashmiri *charkha* allows longer threads of Pashmina wool with fine hair-like size, unlike machines, and adds to the softness and warmth of the product.

A Kashmiri woman can spin up to five grams of wool a day.

"We have the potential to engage around 1,000 spinners," Mr. Kadri said.

According to one estimate, women's participation in shawl weaving has come down significantly from one lakh to just around 10,000 in the Kashmir Valley.

It has impacted the processes involved in hand-made shawls such as sorting, dusting, de-hairing, combing, spinning and finishing; all these were dominated by the female workforce.

In the backdrop of this trend, the Directorate of Handicrafts and Handloom, Kashmir, has announced a Minimum Support Price (MSP) for geographical indication (GI)-certified hand-made Pashmina shawls "to sustain the old techniques".

Incentivising the 'old'

“The minimum wage for a spinner has been fixed at Rs. 1.25 now. We have proposed Minimum Support Price of Rs. 12,000 for GI-certified plain Pashmina hand-spun and hand-woven shawls,” Mahmood Shah, Director of the Directorate of Handicrafts and Handloom, Kashmir, said.

He said the government was making all necessary interventions to ensure that those who employ old techniques and processes are “incentivised and promoted”.

“The fixing of wages for the first time will help in reviving hand-spinning and hand-weaving, which make Kashmiri shawls famous,” Mr. Shah said.

The move is likely to generate employment and improve the economic prospects of women weavers, who have for generations sustained the intricate and fancied Kashmiri shawls.

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