

PASHMINA SHAWLS HAVE SHAHTOOSH GUARD HAIR, SAY CUSTOMS OFFICIALS; ALL FLUFF, COUNTER TRADERS AND ARTISANS

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Heavy price: Many Pashmina traders quit the trade, given the problems that come with such inquiry. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Traders of universally prized Pashmina shawls are complaining that “obsolete testing methods” have resulted in many of their export consignments being flagged by Customs authorities for presence of Shahtoosh guard hair, which is obtained from endangered Tibetan antelopes. The traders claim the use of obsolete techniques such as “light microscopy” by the authorities has resulted in several cases of “false positives”, leading to their wrongful prosecution.

Pashmina is obtained from a breed of mountain goats (*C apra hircus*) found on the Changthang Plateau in Tibet and parts of Ladakh. Manufacture of Pashmina is a largely unorganised cottage and handicraft industry, providing employment and livelihood to approximately six lakh people, most notably to local skilled villagers and artisans in Kashmir.

Shahtoosh, on the other hand, is the fine undercoat fibre obtained from the Tibetan antelope, known locally as *chiru*, a species living mainly in the northern parts of the Changthang Plateau in Tibet. As they offer high levels of smoothness and warmth, Shahtoosh shawls became a highly expensive commodity.

However, when their population declined dramatically from commercial poaching, CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna & Flora) listed the Tibetan antelope in 1979, leading to a ban on sale and trade of Shahtoosh shawls and scarves.

Difficult to differentiate

As the two materials have similar physical properties and tangibility, differentiation is hard without advanced scientific forensic methods.

Naqeed Qazi, a Pashmina trader, has first-hand experience of one of his export consignments of Pashmina shawls getting flagged by Customs authorities for presence of Shahtoosh. “I had sought DNA testing of the consignment but my appeal was rejected,” Mr. Naqeed said. The sample from his consignment was instead sent to the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, which employs light microscopy technique to look for the presence of Shahtoosh. The light microscopy method, Mr. Naqeed said, “is subjective and depended to a large extent on the expertise of the examiner.”

“My case then involved the CBI. The agency came to my office in Kashmir and went to the artisans. Now, Enforcement Directorate (ED) has got involved in the case and they are looking into the money laundering angle. This is all being done on the basis of one wrong test,” Mr. Naqeed rued.

Another Pashmina trader, Imran Rashid, said due to the “prevailing system”, a lot of export orders get cancelled as it takes months — in some cases years — for the shipment to eventually be released by the officials. “As a result, the value of Pashmina exports has dropped from over Rs. 750 crore six or seven years ago to about Rs. 100 crore today,” Mr. Rashid said. As many of

the exporters do not want to get into this kind of trouble, many have quit the export-end of business and are focussing on retail, he said, adding, "That's why there is such a huge dip in exports."

HC moved

Left with no other option, the Pashmina Exporters and Manufacturers Association has moved a petition before the Delhi High Court, for a direction to improve the existing testing infrastructure by incorporating the modern "scanning electron microscopic" technique and DNA tests.

Advocates Tanveer Ahmed Mir and Kartik Venu, who represented the association, said the ambiguity in the forensic results adversely affected the reputation and finances of the Pashmina industry.

Mr. Mir said that the traders were subjected to both Customs prosecutions — on suspicion of presence of Shahtoosh guard hair — as well as criminal prosecutions by the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB), CBI, and ED, possibly leading to incarceration up to seven years, even when it is not clearly proved if the material used is in fact a contraband.

India contributes only about 1% of the world's Pashmina, but the Pashmina produced in India is considered the best of the lot.

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