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‘Rafoogari’ of Najibabad

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On my visit to Sutra conference in Kolkata in October 2003, I had an opportunity to be with Yoshiko Wada and Lotus Stack on a train journey to Santiniketan, an art school where I studied.

The conversation was about my interest in textiles and drifted to the shawl I was wearing, an old *Pashmina* with very fine needlework embroidery. As it was old it had innumerable areas of *rafoo* (darning) - almost invisible to the naked eye. The darning was done by the *rafoogars* (darners) of my ancestral hometown Najibabad. It was the topic of conversation for the rest of our journey, and this eventually culminated in this paper, which brought me to the TSA symposium in Oakland.

So, this is a story about the still continuous skill of darning of *pashmina shawls* (Kani shawls) by the *rafoogars* (darners) of Najibabad, a town in Western Uttar Pradesh in District Bijnor about 200 kilometers northeast of Delhi.

Najibabad is the home of several Darners and their families and is the hub of the Kani shawl trade. Having spent long years of my childhood there, old Kani shawls and robes were very much part of our life, and held the center stage amidst other crafts/textiles from various regions of the country.

The yearly ritual of airing out the warm woolens after monsoon had always been a thrilling event for us as children. Every winter we saw these exquisite shawls being pulled out of the storage with other warm clothes. They had a very special place and would be of great concern. Any faulty or careless storage was out of question lest mites and bugs cause damage to these priceless items, otherwise one had to inspect the destruction they had caused. However, the sheer impact of age would often make the shawls fragile. Being old and worn the previous years, they would inevitably require some mending or else invariably some repairs in the subsequent season. No one lost the beat in the heart and one just called in the specialists – the shawl repairmen.

So when these rafoogars visited our homes to repair the shawls they brought with them old shawls wrapped in cotton cloth bundles, acquired cheap as ‘rejects’, unfit for further use. With their skill and ability to mend and restore these priceless, tattered, discarded rags, the rafoogars would restore, transform and renew these pieces for further sale to new patrons and collectors having this expensive taste.

Even if one could not afford to buy, it was always a treat going through the whole ‘lot’, mesmerized by their beauty, the intricacy and complexity of weaves and design, and of course the fine skill of the rafoogars in mending them. For us as children these shawls were wonderful objects and these men were like magicians showing one exquisite piece after another.

Some of them never seemed to mind or feel offended if the pieces were not always bought, but liked the involvement and respected one's love, value, interest and appreciation for these beautiful pieces and were happy to share what they had for an offer. This relationship and interaction of generations with the family continues to date.

One always did appreciate the skill of these rafoogars, to repair the shawls, and repair them so well that it was almost invisible to the naked eye; but along with the invisible repair, they too have remained invisible to the world at large. Possibly, 'sheer invisibility' being the hallmark of good darning.

While the pashmina shawls of Kashmir have been elaborately and well researched, their weaving and needlework celebrated, an important role and major contribution of these traditional darners in the maintenance of these priceless shawls by highly intricate, and laborious work of restoration and renewal has yet to be recognized.

This restoration could be in form of a shawl (rectangle), *rumal* (square), *patka* (scarf), or a *jama* (robe) belonging to various distinct styles and periods, once produced in Kashmir.

The old pashmina shawls are either *kani* (loom woven) or *amli* (needlework) or sometimes a combination of both, as in the reversible (*do-rukha*) shawls where there is a well defined outline with needlework to give strength to the single interlocking of the discontinuous weft.

In India, Kani shawls are generally referred as "*jamevars*"; the pashmina figured shawls in twill weave with the discontinuous colored weft interlocked in tapestry technique. The tradition of these intricately designed exclusive tapestry shawls in twill weave came to India along with Islam and got further refined by local cultural influence, pushing the technique to its creative limit; in a certain process of appropriation and acculturation of more than five centuries.

This thriving shawl industry gradually declined by the end of 19th century, becoming almost extinct.¹ There have been and still are some brave attempts for revival but the fact is the socio-cultural conditions that made such a practice possible have changed. Normal production of such exquisite pieces of such high quality is not possible anymore.²

The continuing tradition of darning itself becomes extremely significant in this context. The special darning skills has been responsible in keeping these exquisite pieces alive and rescuing a substantial number of these priceless shawls from destruction. Darning has kept them in circulation and continuous use till date in different circumstances in an interesting simultaneous transformation of the product and the market.

Thanks to these darners who mend and repair these shawls and robes. These darners are known as *shawl wale* (the shawl people) as they have been in the shawl trade for many generations now, having mastered this particular darning skill of Kani shawls of Kashmir for which they are well known.

¹ John Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl* (London: V&A Museum, 1973), 28.

² Frank Ames, *The Kashmir Shawl and its Indo-French Influence*, 3rd ed. (New Delhi: Timeless Books, 1997), 52.

Najibabad was built in mid 18th century by Najibuddaulah, a Rohilla chief from Afganistan.

Foster gives us interesting details as regards the situation of Najibabad and the climate of the surrounding country.³ “Najibuddaulah, who built this town, saw that its situation would facilitate the commerce of Kashmir, which having been diverted from its former channel of Lahore and Delhi, by the inroads of Sicques, Maharattas and Afgans, took course through the mountains at the head of the Punjab, and was introduced into the *Rohilla* (country) through the Lall Dong Pass. This inducement, with the desire of establishing a mart for the Hindoos of the adjacent mountains, probably influenced the choice of this spot, which otherwise is not favourable for the site of a capital town being low, and surrounded by swampy grounds.... since the death of its founder, Najibabad had fallen from its former importance and seems now chiefly upheld by the languishing trade of Kashmir.”

Along with the traders / agriculturalists or farmers and also people engaged in vocations which involved crafts like metal casting, knife making, pottery, bamboo basket making, printing of quilts: a few families of rafoogars settled here in Najibabad during the reign of Najibuddaulah. Some of the darners claim to have migrated here from Kashmir via Punjab and the others have showed family records of their ancestors which claim that they were originally from Bukhara. These rafoogar are Sunni Muslims who have been residing in Najibabad for the last two hundred and fifty years. A few families arrived here later from the neighboring villages of Bijnor and also got involved in this occupation of darning. Some of the rafoogars who migrated to Pakistan during the 1947 partition still practice-darning skills there.

During the 19th Century many of these shawls, both woven and embroidered were separately woven in pieces and then joined together by rafoogars⁴ to save the labour and time by this distribution of work and also to avoid the tax laws.⁵ Also, probably it would have been technically difficult to handle such heavy and elaborate designs on such a large scale on a single loom. These shawls / robes / rumals of this period were mostly collage-constructed of woven panels, various borders, and embroidered fringes carefully sewn together. The original joints were so perfect that it was almost invisible and had to be flipped over and seen against the light to locate the joinery.

Are these darners descendants of the same rafoogars / seamsters or embroiders of Kashmir who played the significant role in assembling the pieces together during the original production of these shawls or did they master the needlework skills of darning much later when these shawls needed repair?

With the end of the production of these shawls, did the role of the darners shifted from mainly production/construction to the maintenance and repair of old shawls?

Entirely a male occupation, the darners have migrated, spread and survived. To fulfill the present demand people from other communities are joining the trade, and many of the

³ George Forster, “A Journey from Bengal to England,” 1793: 190, quoted in Shaikh Abdur Rashid, *Najibuddaulah: His Life and Times* (Aligarh: The Cosmopolitan Publishers, 1952), 138.

⁴ Irwin, 3.

⁵ Ames, 25.

new generation of young men from the darners' families are opting for other professions now. After the initial training of few years, the skilled darners are paid according to the nature and quality of the mending work they do. The darners employed by the shawl traders are mostly paid hourly labor charges, some are paid an amount arrived with negotiation on the item in question depending on the extent of damage and the days and months required to repair and some experienced darners are paid a monthly salary.

There were three kinds of darning stitches practiced in northern India: *Bajaji*, *Taar-Tor* and *Patchi*. In Bajaji and Taar-tor work, the threads are pulled out from that very fabric itself to create the warp with the help of a needle which is then filled with the weft threads in plain weave. The surface appears even on the right side whereas the threads are left loose and visible on the reverse. Contrary to this, Kani shawls having the figured twill weave, it is impossible to pull the yarns from a discontinuous interlocked weft so the darners of Najibabad used the Patchi method where the threads are pulled out from some other old plain pashmina fabric and used for shawls. Having, multicolored weft faced twill weave: these Kani shawls need extra care. First a warp is laid with the help of a fine needle followed by creating a twill weft to fill up the damaged area and simultaneously incorporating the patterned element in the weft to match with rest of the surface design. Similarly, they also handle and mend the needlework done on these old embroidered Pashmina shawls.

This darning work seems to have evolved with the time and experience of many generations that has been responsible to cultivate and nurture these sensibilities. The training starts at a young age by preparing samples on a plain cloth, learning various darning techniques for a few years and then graduating to work on the actual pieces to be repaired. An entirely male dominant occupation it is now not rare to find needlework given to the womenfolk within the families who can replicate the missing components in the areas where the design needs to be completed or to redefine the disintegrated black outlines (*mannawar*) or by filling up the faded areas with embroidery stitches.

There are no general rules, but a system and process followed according to the design and condition of the piece. There is a sense of community and coordination carried out throughout the process, with various subtasks assigned to several craftsmen to save time and labor, similar to the kind of distribution of work which was carried out during the original production of these shawls. For a pieced shawl, the darners open up the original seam and divide the work among many people, making mending easier to handle. If it is in one piece, then two or three rafoogars sit together and work in different areas of the shawl at the same time. If there are small fragments, individuals handle the job, and later join them together to complete the whole piece. If a shawl or fragments are badly damaged or disintegrated, a new life takes place by first repairing the holes, then joining several pieces together, replacing the missing components with fragments from other shawls and recomposing the design, like solving a jigsaw puzzle. Among the common job in the repair are the silk warps in the borders and shawls getting disintegrated with the time. These are being replaced with new cotton yarn by almost creating a new warp with the needle to give support to these weft-faced textiles.

The best darners are the ones who can master all the tasks in the darning process, and also have, an understanding of the texture, color spectrum, continuity of lines, stitches

and materials required to handle the re-composing and reconstructing of these shawls.

The original full-length shawl (*doshalla*) was one and a half yards in width and three and a quarter yards in length. The pieces still in good state and condition are sold in their original format or else cut to make three smaller shawls (1 yard x 2 yards) prevalent and fashionable only for the last six or seven decades in the country - two shawls with full ornamentation created from the original end pieces (*pallas*) and one shawl with a border attached to a plain pashmina. Thus the width of the original shawl becomes the length of this new format. Similarly, the original square *rumals* are divided in halves to create the rectangle shawls, recomposing the design with various permutations and combinations to give it the best possible look. If the components are missing they are replaced with matching fragments from some other piece. The lengths of these ladies shawls are adjusted by adding plain pashmina cloth on both ends. The rest of the material from the original piece is used as a patch, or as a border for another shawl. Sometimes, the field (*fardi*) of the old shawls has disintegrated. In this case, the patterned corner motif (*kunj/konias*) if in good conditions are appliquéd to an entirely new Pashmina and blended well with the border and the ground.

The yarn used for darning is pulled out from old pashmina pieces collected for this purpose for generations. Most of the time the darners are able to find a matching thread but if it is required, these old fabrics are sometimes dyed before the yarn is pulled to match the color needed for repair work. If the yarn is too weak and fragile, it is plied to give it the needed strength for darning. The outlines of the patterns are redefined with new needlework using very fine cotton yarn instead of the original pashmina yarn.

The mending needle is finer than the sewing needles. The eye of the needle is egg shaped (no. 11 for general darning and no. 12 for finer work). For stitching the joints (*takai*) the no. 10 and no. 11 needles are used.

Color is retouched with a bamboo reed used like a brush to cover up the faded areas to match with the rest of the piece, or at times just to give it a fresh look. This again is an art, mastered by only a few. The direction of the brush follows the diagonal of the twill weave. The earlier natural dyes have been replaced with chemical colors easily available in the local market. It is a water-soluble dye, which dries fast during the coloring process itself. The mono-colors and subdued tones of yesteryears in some gent's shawls are now being replaced and filled with vibrant multicolored (*panchranga*) floral motifs fancied by the female clientele of today.

Cotton lining is sometimes attached for strength and support to the fragile pieces.

The seams re-opened, the rafoo made, the areas retouched, the borders (*babban*), panels and selvedge (*kanni*) attached, the lining added for better support is all part of the recreation and renewal of these textiles. "A new life to otherwise dead cloth," as the rafoogars claim. Now it is ready for sale.

These shawl men travel all over the country especially the north where it is cold in the winters with woolens and shawls in demand, town-to-town, home-to-home, one family to another, building chain of clientele, for repair as well as selling shawls. These annual visits builds up a relationships of buying and selling and thus any Kani shawl for repair, inevitably reaches them from any corner of the country.

The work is carried on throughout the year. Winters to various big towns and cities, summer in the hills and the rest of the year back home busy darning and assembling the pieces together. The coming of winter brings back the activities. This is the time for them to sell whatever they have collected for repair throughout the year. At the end of the winter season, they are back home with more pieces to be restored acquired cheap from princely states or families who cannot afford to maintain them any longer. The gradual disappearance and lack of visibility of these old shawls from the family collections within the country has now been replaced by the Jacquard woven Paisley Shawls of the West for the past few decades and the recent appearance of shawls from Central Asia and Iran, easily passed on to the new rich patrons of today, fetching a good price in India.

The maintenance of these shawls needs special attention especially in the monsoon months when it rains and the woolens are attacked by insects. The shawls and fragments are folded and stored with spices and neem leaves in tin trunks by the darners/rafoogars and exposed to air time to time. Fresh air and sun keeps these pieces away from destruction.

With every generation, tradition evolves in order to survive. It is a challenge to preserve and continue with our inherited skills, creativity and knowledge of the past. The circulation and the recycling of these shawls makes one recognizes their contribution in the survival of what remains of the kani shawls, today. There is value addition to these restored priceless textiles, giving it a new life to these wonderful weaves of the past, restored once again.

The repair, trade and recycling of these textiles has kept this community base traditional occupation and skill still alive and continuing a key factor in rescuing number of these priceless pieces from further destruction. Continuation of a living tradition maintaining its economic viability and the need for repair has helped to preserve this practice.

Though, there is an urgent need to understand the complexities of this skill and practice. The continuous demand in the market has been responsible for the cutting of many of these magnificent long shawls/square pieces to create smaller shawls/stoles and scarves easily marketed to the present clientele (as they are preferred in price and size).

Being acknowledged for their fine work would help the darners to have pride in their own work and help us to recognize them as artist craftsmen and 'darning' as an independent practice.

I suppose this paper, when read in your continent, would be called 'acculturation' whereas for us it is simply a way of continuing to have live and practical links with an inherited living tradition. I hope my paper frontally addresses the theme of Use, Mend and Re-Use. *See photographs below.*



Selecting the fragments. Photo credit: Ravish Mehra.



Fragment to be restored. Photo credit: Ravish Mehra.



Rafoogars at work. Photo credit: Ravish Mehra.



Baithak at a Rafoogar's home in Najibabad. Photo credit: Ravish Mehra.

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