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## **Weaving From the Womb: Textiles, Gender, and Kinship in Rupshu (Eastern Ladakh)**

Monisha Ahmed

This paper examines traditional weaving systems among the nomadic pastoralists of Rupshu in Eastern Ladakh, North India. Local narrative states that the craft of weaving was bestowed upon Rupshu by the gods. In this region both women and men weave, each on a different loom. During my fieldwork here I interacted with female and male weavers and found that the discourse on women's identification with weaving is stronger in Rupshu than a man's. While it is mandatory that all women, including nuns, weave, it is not essential for a man to weave. In this paper I focus on the significance of a woman's weaving, and the importance of her being a competent and skillful weaver. The metaphors associated with the backstrap loom she uses are symbolic of the birth of a child, and the weaving process expresses a woman's role as a procreator and nurturer of life. Further, her woven cloth, as well as the manner in which she distributes it, demonstrates her ability to create and sustain social structures within Rupshu. In this paper then I have looked beyond the design and making of textiles in Rupshu to reveal the role and properties of the loom and weaving as symbols with a multitude of referents. Today, there is external pressure on women to change the structure of their loom so that they can weave faster as well as increase the width of their fabric. So far they have resisted these changes because of the symbolic representations of the craft of weaving and its associations with the sublime.

Monisha Ahmed received her D.Phil in Cultural Anthropology from Oxford University in 1996. The subject of her dissertation was the weaving traditions amongst the nomadic pastoralists of Rupshu in Eastern Ladakh (North India). This work is being published as *Living Fabric: Weaving in Ladakh Himalaya*, and should be out by December 2000. At present she is working on a project to document the textile arts of Ladakh, which is funded by a fellowship from the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. She is also co-founder of the Ladakh Arts and Multi-cultural outreach trust that works with local performance artists and women's weaving organisations in Ladakh.