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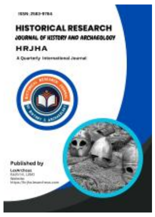

Handicraft-Based Industrial Development in Kashmir: An Economic Analysis of the Namda Industry, in the Pre-and Post- Partition Period

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ABSTRACT

The Namda industry, a traditional felt-based handicraft of Kashmir, represents an important component of the region's cottage industrial economy, particularly in the transition from the pre-Partition to post-Partition period. Emerging in the late 1930s, the industry developed in response to the decline of imports from Central Asia and utilised surplus labour from other crafts. Its labour-intensive structure supported employment and income generation, though production and marketing remained controlled by traders, leading to unequal profit distribution and worker exploitation. The industry reached its peak in the early 1940s but declined sharply due to wartime disruptions, Partition, and the breakdown of trade networks. Post-1947, state-led interventions, including training centres, cooperative initiatives, and marketing support through emporia, facilitated its revival and expansion. Despite these efforts, the industry continued to face structural limitations such as low productivity and competition from mechanised goods, while remaining significant for sustaining artisan livelihoods and cultural continuity.

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INTRODUCTION

The handicraft sector has long occupied a central place in the economic and cultural life of Kashmir, reflecting a close relationship between traditional skills, local resources, and patterns of livelihood. Among these crafts, the Namda industry holds a distinct position as a felt-based textile produced through labour-intensive techniques and characterised by intricate embroidery. Unlike many older crafts of the region, the Namda industry emerged relatively late, gaining prominence in the late 1930s as a response to changing trade conditions and the decline of imports from Central Asia. Its development marked an important shift towards indigenous production and adaptation within the local economy.

The growth of the Namda industry was closely tied to broader socio-economic conditions, including the availability of surplus labour and the organisation of cottage industries under trader control. While it contributed to employment generation and income diversification, the industry also reflected structural inequalities in production and distribution. The impact of major historical events, particularly the Second World War and the Partition of India, further shaped its trajectory by disrupting markets and trade networks. In the post-Partition period, state-led policies aimed at reviving handicrafts brought renewed attention to the industry, situating it within broader strategies of economic development and cultural preservation.

Objectives

The study aims to examine the historical evolution of the Namda industry in Kashmir, particularly in the context of the pre- and post-partition periods, while analysing its structure and organisation in terms of production processes, labour involvement, and traditional techniques. It further seeks to assess the economic contribution of the industry to employment generation and income within the handicraft sector, alongside evaluating the impact of war and partition on its development. Additionally, the study explores the role of government policies and institutions in either promoting or neglecting the Namda industry.

Methodology

The present study adopts a historical-analytical approach to examine the evolution of the Namda industry in Kashmir across the pre- and post-partition periods. It relies heavily on primary sources, especially archival materials, such as government reports, correspondence and administration reports. It is complemented by secondary sources, including books and journal articles, and published research on the handicraft industry in Kashmir. It has used a comparative approach to examine shifts and changes in production, labour organisation and market structures from before and after 1947. Where relevant, the data have been tabulated to highlight trends and inform analysis. The analysis is predominantly qualitative, and set in the wider socio-economic and political framework.

Origin, Structure and Economic Significance

Kashmir's Namda industry is a recent independent handicraft, which began in the late 1930s just before the Second World War.[1] Its development coincided with the closure of the Leh Treaty Road, which allowed the import of namdas from Central Asia into Kashmir. Before this, some 200,000 namdas were imported each year. State Customs Department records show that in 1940-41, not a single namda was imported into Kashmir from Central Asia, signaling a shift from import to local production. Namda production in Kashmir commenced from 1938, with the presence of surplus labour from the carpet industry.[2]

The industry grew rapidly but the quality of namdas manufactured in Kashmir was different from those imported. Namdas from Central Asia were entirely woven out of wool, but the local namdas were usually a combination of wool and cotton.[3] Namdas are made by felting wool and cotton, and are decorated with embroidery, typically done in chain stitch with a tambour needle or hook. Cotton is normally interspaced between two layers of wool. While other areas, like Jodhpur and Jaipur, produced all-white namdas that were considered the very best, Kashmiri namdas crafted a reputation based on floral designs and embroidery.[4]

Figure 1. *A Piece of Namda*

Cost Structure, Profit Distribution, and Market Control

The cost of producing an unembroidered namda involved inputs such as one seer each of wool and cotton, a quarter seer of soap, reed mats, and basic tools, amounting to approximately Re. 1 and 15 annas.[5] Artisans sold these namdas to investors (*khwajas*) at around Rs. 2 and 12 annas per piece.[6] The investors classified the namdas by quality and arranged for embroidery, incurring additional costs for embroidery, washing, printing, establishment charges, and interest on capital. The total cost to the investor amounted to nearly Rs. 4 per embroidered namda.

Table 1 Cost Structure of Namda Production in Jammu and Kashmir

S. No.	Particulars	Particulars Cost
1.	Average cost of namda to the investor	2.80
2.	Cost of embroidery	1.40
3.	Washing and printing charges	0.16
4.	Establishment & other charges (including interest on capital and other expenses)	0.26
	Total	4.62

Source: D. N, Dhar, Artisan of the Paradise, A Study of Kashmir Art and Artisans from Ancient to Modern Times, Bhavana Books, Delhi, 1999, p.151.

The table shows the cost structure of the production of namda and reveals that the average base cost to the investor is the highest component of the total cost. The second largest proportion is constituted by embroidery charges, highlighting the craft-intensive nature of the industry. Washing and printing charges constitute a small component of the total cost, while establishment and other expenses (including interest on capital) contribute a smaller part. Overall, the cost structure shows that a substantial amount of cost is incurred in primary production and in the form of skilled labour, highlighting the role of craftmanship in the namda industry. This cost structure offers a glimpse into the structure of the industry and opportunities for improving efficiency or providing policy support to improve profit.[7]

The industry was controlled by a few traders who dominated marketing and exports. Of the total production of two to three lakh pieces, only a minor percentage was marketed locally, while the rest was exported within the country and to Europe and America. Wholesale prices abroad ranged between Rs. 13 and Rs. 14 per piece and retail prices as high as Rs. 18 and 8 annas, with traders reaping enormous profits.[8]

Employment, Wages, and Labour Relations

In the early 1940s, the Namda industry employed almost 3,500-5,000 workers, such as carders, millers, pressers and embroiderers (jalakduz). Wages were uneven: carders received 8-12 annas a day, millers 6-10 annas and pressers (mostly children) 2-3 annas. While embroiderers supposedly received piece rates, they were required to provide yarn and other supplies, thus eliminating any potential earnings. This practice contributed to quality degradation and a massive strike by the embroiderers in 1941, which secured some wage increases.[9]

War, Partition, and Industrial Decline

The Namda industry flourished in the early 1940s, but suddenly went into a decline due to the transport restrictions imposed by the war that halted exports. Output declined and many workers were left without work. It further deteriorated with Partition and the Kashmir War, which cut off the communication system and tourist traffic. The cutoff of Kashmir from the rest of the country had a profound impact on handicrafts, including namda.

Post-1947 Policy Intervention and Industrial Revival

In 1948, the National Conference government under Sheikh Abdullah introduced a comprehensive policy aimed at reviving artisan industries. The policy emphasized market expansion, establishment of demonstration-cum-production centre's, promotion of cooperatives, training programmes and financial assistance. Government-run arts emporia were opened in major Indian cities, providing marketing platforms for Kashmiri handicrafts, including namdas.[10]

A Namda Model Centre was established near Saida Kadal, Srinagar, [11] in 1954–55, followed by the transfer of the Government Namda Factory to the Government Arts Emporium in 1956–57.[11] By September 1956, the factory had produced 2,400 namdas valued at Rs. 52,479, which were marketed through the emporia network.[12] Training centres were subsequently established across districts from 1976–77 onwards, significantly expanding the artisan base. In addition to establishing model demonstration centres for the guidance of craftsmen, the government set up several training centre's to develop skilled manpower. In 1991-92, the break-up of these centres, district wise along with trainees is given below, [13]

Table 2: District wise Number of Training Centres, and trainees Trained (1991-92)

Training Centres	No of Training Centres	No of Trainees Trained
District Srinagar	4	89
District Anantnag	1	21
District Pulwama	1	25
District Kupwara	1	25

Source: Digest of statistics, J&K Govt. 1991-92, p.145

The above table shows that the highest number of training centres were established in Srinagar with highest number of trainees trained as it was the main hub of handicraft sector in Kashmir.

Production, Employment, and Export Performance

Government support resulted in steady growth in production and employment. Between the Fourth and Sixth Five-Year Plans (1978–89), the value of production increased nearly six-fold, while employment expanded approximately four-fold. Export earnings more than doubled during the same period.[14] The industry spread geographically across the Kashmir Valley, with a concentration of units in Srinagar and adjoining districts.

At the end of the Fourth Plan, the industry demonstrated substantial value addition, converting raw materials worth Rs. 12.12 lakh into finished goods valued at Rs. 34.67 lakh.[15] By the end of the Seventh Plan, the industry had achieved even greater expansion, underscoring its growing contribution to the regional economy.[16]

From a policy perspective, the Namda industry was incorporated into state-led development strategies that emphasized the promotion of cottage and village industries. Government interventions through handicrafts departments, cooperative societies, and training centres aimed at employment generation rather than industrial modernization. While such measures helped sustain the industry, they were insufficient to significantly enhance productivity, technological up-gradation, or global competitiveness. Consequently, the industry remained vulnerable to competition from machine-made substitutes and shifts in consumer demand.[17]

Table 3 Production Value and Employment (1789-79 to 1988-89)

S.No	Year	Employment in Lakhs	Production in Crore
1	End of Fourth Plan (1978-79)	0.01	0.47
2	End of Fifth Plan (1983-84)	0.02	1.27
3	End of Sixth Plan (1988-89)	0.04	2.75

Source: Digest of Statistics, J&K Govt. 1991-92

The above table shows that the employment generation in 1978-79 with a figure of 0.01 increased to 0.04 in 1988-89 and the production rose from 0.47 in 1978-79 to 2.75 in 1988-89.

Table 4 Value of Export of Namdas (1789-79 to 1988-89)

S.No.	Year	Value of Exports (Rs. Crore)
1	End of Fourth Plan (1978-79)	0.80
2	End of Fifth Plan (1983-84)	1.48
3	End of Sixth Plan (1988-89)	1.81

Source: Digest of Statistics, J&K Govt. 1991-92.

The above table indicates an increase in the value of exports from 0.80 in 1978-79 to 1.81 in 1988-89.

CONCLUSION

The Namda industry is emblematic of the course of Kashmir's handicraft economy, which was influenced by changing trade patterns, political upheavals and government policies. The industry's rise in the late 1930s coincided with a shift from imports to domestic production, harnessing labour and skills. Although it created jobs and sustained traditional skills, the industry's structure was hierarchical, with market and profit control in the hands of traders, leaving workers with few gains. War and Partition revealed its susceptibility to shocks and isolation. Government policies after 1947 were crucial in restarting production through institutional, training and marketing supports and allowing slow growth.

But these efforts mainly maintained rather than transformed the industry, given problems of productivity and technological stagnation. The Namda industry, therefore, stands as a testament to cultural survival and economic viability, but also highlights the limits of traditional industries in a rapidly evolving economic landscape.

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