

# Pashmina Shawls

Pashmina Shawls are a fine variant of shawls spun from cashmere wools. A cashmere wool itself is obtained from the Changthangi goat (*Capra aegagrus hircus*) native to the high plateau of Ladakh.

Known for its soft features, the Pashmina Shawls himself had been a status symbol not just for the wealthy in Indian but even across the world.

In 2019, the Bureau of India Standards (BIS) published an Indian standard for identification, marking and labelling the Pashmina Shawls for its purity.

This article will give more details of the Pashmina Shawls within the context of the IAS Exam.

## History of Pashmina Shawls

Pashmina shawls gained much prominence in the days of the Mughal [Empire](#) as objects of rank and nobility. Babur first established the practice of giving *khilat* - giving 'robes of honour' - in 1526 to members of his court for their devoted service, high achievements or as a mark of royal favour. A *khilat* could be a set of clothes consisting of turban, coat, gown, trousers, shirts etc. all of which could be made of Pashmina wool.

Upon the complete conquest of Kashmir in 1568 by Akbar, a pair of pashmina shawls were an integral part of a *khilat* ceremony. Other emperors of the time, such as the Safavid and Qajars, also wore and gifted pashmina shawls within their political circles

Pashmina shawls and blankets were indicators of wealth and part of a rich woman's dowry in India, Nepal and Pakistan. These shawls acquired the status of heirlooms that would be inherited instead of being purchased as it was considered too expensive to buy. Through extensive trade with India, the shawls made their way to Europe where they became an almost instant hit.

Through the enthusiastic use by Empress Joséphine - the wife of Napoleon Bonaparte - the pashmina shawl gained status as a fashion icon. The shawls suited the French well as they provided the necessary warmth, while adding the visual appeal to white French gowns. It became a class marker in 19th century French society because of its rich look, artistic qualities and was made of expensive material.

The shawl made up of pashmina wool was promoted as an alternative to Shahtoosh shawl. The reason being that Shahtoosh Shawls is made from the Tibetan Antelope. Earlier the demand for Shahtoosh shawl had wiped out 90% of the Tibetan Antelope, thus to preserve what population is left, other alternatives, like the pashmina shawl, are being promoted.

## How is the Pashmina Shawl produced?

Every winter the goats from whom pashmina is acquired shed their coat. About 80-170 grams of wool is shed. In the spring the undercoat is shed, which is collected by combing the goat instead of shearing them as is the case with other wool collection activities. The pashmina wool is produced by the people known as the Changpa, a nomadic people who inhabit the Ladakh region. The Changpa rear sheep in a harsh climate where temperature drops to  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

Raw pashmina is exported to Kashmir where the combing, spinning, weaving and finishing are traditionally carried out by hand by a specialised team of craftsmen and women. The major production centre of pashmina shawls is in the old district of Srinagar. It takes about 180 hours to produce a single piece of pashmina shawl.

In the 1990's there was high demand for pashmina shawls which exceeded supply. As a result few clothing companies began to fraudulently market their products as pashmina shawls.

This resulted in loss of revenue for the traditional makers of the pashmina shawls. Thus the BIS stepped in by granting an Indian Standard certification to discourage such unfair practices and protect the livelihoods of the local artisans and nomads who produce the pashmina shawl.

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