

### Shafeeqa- Mends a future, one motif at a time



Shafeeqa is a 50-year-old artisan from Anchar lake in Srinagar who has spent her entire life doing traditional Kashmiri *sozni* embroidery. She shared her life story with quiet dignity and resilience with me. She resides near the revered Muslim shrine, Asar-e-Sharif Jenab Sahib Soura, which houses more than thirteen holy relics. The Anchar lake area has long been marred by violence. Located near the Soura locality in Srinagar, Anchar lake connects to the famous Dal Lake through a channel called "Amir Khan Nallah," which flows via Gilsar and Khushal Sar. Her house in the Anchar lake area is very close to my house. She is part of the group I was coordinating for a livelihood project from 2019-2024. Her story is not only inspiring but a message to the community, policy makers and global sustainable development goals agenda.

When I arrived at Shafeeqa's home, I called her, and she came out of her three-story house dressed in a simple *salwar suit*. At first glance, I thought she must be living a comfortable life, free of problems or tension. But then the old saying struck me—*don't judge a book by its cover*.

She welcomed me warmly, and we began a friendly conversation, asking after each other's well-being. She was in the middle of making bread for her family, and I used that quiet moment to build a comfortable rapport so she would feel free to share her life story without hesitation.

Over a cup of tea, we settled into the front room, where she began to speak about her life.

Born as the third of six siblings, she now lives with her husband, two sons, and a daughter. "Although I was deeply passionate about education, poverty forced me to begin working at the age of eight," she shared. She learned the traditional craft of Sozni embroidery from her forefathers and has passed it on to future generations.

Since childhood, Shafeeqa has known life through the lens of adversity. Born into a world marked by poverty, violence, political unrest, and quiet endurance, she has weathered every season with a rare blend of resilience and faith. "I've always placed my trust in Allah," she told me, her voice calm but resolute. "What else do we have, really, when everything else is uncertain?" Married at 23 to a shawl weaver, and together they worked hard to raise their family.

After marriage, Shafeeqa and her growing family lived in a cramped single-room shed for nearly two decades. Within those four walls, they cooked, ate, studied, argued, and slept day in, day out. There was no privacy, no comfort, and barely enough space to stretch their legs, but there was a dream that kept her going. "All I wanted," she said, "Was for my children to receive the kind of education I never had. Even if it meant suffering, even if it meant I went without comforts."

Poverty shadowed every decision. Choices were never about desire, they were about survival. Still, Shafeeqa carved hope out of hardship. She worked tirelessly, often late into the night, taking on menial jobs, stitching clothes, and even burning mutton trotters-bones and all-not just to prepare a meal but to keep the house warm in the biting Kashmiri winters. “Sometimes we had no firewood,” she recalled. “But I will find a way. The children couldn’t go to school cold and hungry.”

It is seen that in many communities and families, hope is passed down like an heirloom. One generation sacrifices so the next may rise. Education, small savings, a stitched-up roof, a solar lantern-these become symbols of hope. They may not dismantle structural poverty overnight, but they assert that poverty is not destiny. What makes Shafeeqa’s story remarkable is not just the extent of her sacrifice, but the clarity of her purpose. In a world that offered so little, she dared to dream big for her children, if not for herself. Her poverty was real, but so was her ambition. Her belief in education was not abstract; it was radical, almost defiant.

And in that defiance lies the quiet power of hope. Hope that rises not from circumstance, but from conviction. Hope that lights the hearth, even when the firewood runs out. Hope that survives in a single room filled with love, sacrifice, and the will to build a better tomorrow. To support her children’s education, Shafeeqa, who had never stepped out of Srinagar, even traveled to Delhi’s international airport to showcase her embroidery work, a difficult but necessary step for their future. Today, her son works at Jammu and Kashmir Bank, her daughter is a teacher, and she lives in a three-story house she helped build with her own hands.

Kashmir, home to one of the longest unresolved conflicts in the world, has borne the brunt of violence and poverty since the 1990s. There were prolonged periods of shut downs, curfews, street violence, protests and heightened hostilities between militants and security forces followed by removal of Article 370 that saw almost six months of internet closure. Natural disasters like the 2005 earthquake and the COVID-19

pandemic exacerbated the region's struggles. Many, including Shafeeqa's family, lost their sources of income. Determined not to let others suffer as she had, Shafeeqa began training other women in Sozni and Tilla embroidery, motivated by the belief that "*Kasab chu Habibullah*" which means that the skill you learn will never abandon you. And it truly did not. Shafeeqa's goal was to become an "*Ustaad*," a master trainer, and ensure the survival of these traditional crafts.

Despite the centrality of handicrafts in Kashmir's economy, the sector faces numerous challenges: high pricing, lack of innovation, unorganized labor systems, exploitation by middlemen, limited access to authentic materials, absence of government support, and the disruptive impacts of conflict and pandemic. Shafeeqa told me that her *tajurba* -experience tells her that Kashmir's famed handicrafts, like *Sozni* and *Tilla embroidery* have long sustained families in the absence of industrial jobs or agricultural reliability. Yet, despite their cultural significance and economic potential, the crafts sector remains deeply precarious. Artisans are often trapped in unorganized labor systems, exploited by middlemen, priced out of competitive markets, and disconnected from both innovation and institutional support. In this multi-layered dimension context for women in Kashmir, survival is never one-dimensional. Their struggle is intensified by rigid gender roles, unpaid care work, limited mobility, and exclusion from decision making spaces. Shafeeqa bore the brunt of this reality but refused to let it define her. Instead of yielding, she carved out a path of collective upliftment.

Eventually, Shafeeqa earned the title of *Ustaad*. The day she was conferred the title it was a moment of great pride and fulfillment. In 2019, when approached by Yakjah, she was initially skeptical, having been let down by previous initiatives. But the project's promise of eliminating middlemen and directly empowering women artisans resonated with her. After attending a meeting, she felt heard and hopeful. The project gave them the freedom to choose designs and colors, and paid fair wages, a first in her career.

“Despite setbacks like the abrogation of Article 370 and pandemic-related shutdowns, Yakjah maintained contact and support. They never let us feel abandoned”, says Shafeeqa in an appreciative tone. In December 2021, Shafeeqa participated in a design development training in Srinagar. She was excited to reconnect with Kashmiri Pandit women from the Jagti camp in Jammu, rekindling bonds broken since the 1990 exodus.

The training, led by Mr. Piyush from Handmade in Britain, London the UK as part of the ‘Culture and Conflict’ project, was transformative. Initially unsure due to language barriers and her unfamiliarity with drawing tools, she quickly found joy in learning color theory and design innovation. “I had never held a pen in my life but during those five days, I learnt the art with precision for the first time. I created my own designs and mastered printing techniques with guidance from Urzeeba”, she shared.

Through this experience, Shafeeqa and her peers gained more than technical skills. They discovered independence. They now feel empowered to launch their own businesses, free from male dominance and exploitation. "A strong woman knows she can't control everything, but she can control her reactions and choices. An independent woman is not afraid to stand up for herself and speak her mind", she says boldly.

Shafeeqa's journey is a testament to resilience, transformation, and the enduring power of tradition when placed in the hands of empowered women. In spite of the multiple challenges, women like Shafeeqa persist, embodying the deeply feminine form of resilience that keeps Kashmir breathing in spite of its wounds. Her life is not just a story of personal struggle, but a microcosm of Kashmir itself: fractured yet unyielding, beautiful yet burdened, endangered yet quietly revolutionary.

In her hands, the needle does more than stitch, it mends a future, one motif at a time.

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