

# *The Rebirth of Himroo*



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### Abstract

From about 600 years ago, when the Indian city of Delhi was being governed by emperors from the Tuglak dynasty, a noticeable amount of interchanges were taking place between Indian and Persian weavers. During an ebullient time in Indian history, when emperor Mohammed Bin Tuglak and his loyal herd of elephants tried to relocate their headquarters to Daulatabad in Maharashtra, some precious trade secrets of Persian shawl weaving techniques clandestinely found their way into the narrow alleys of Aurangabad. At a later period in history, and in the Mogul period, weavers who enjoyed imperial patronage began challenging the supremacy of the Persian weavers. The Himroo shawls produced in India evoked intense curiosity in neighboring foreign lands. This not only guaranteed a lucrative export market, but also uplifted the image of the Mogul dynasty. However, the disintegration of the empire of Aurangzeb resulted in the Maratha and British incursions. These unwarranted political upheavals not only inflicted deep injuries upon civil society, but also disrupted everyday life and stifled the artistic spirit central to Indian culture.

This short piece of literature, we wish to awaken a new spurt of interest in the ancient fabric weaving art of Himroo. While doing so, we have tried to employ a style of narration that was once the hallmark of British historians digging into India's rich past. We have collected relevant bits and pieces of information from Indian history and woven it into a story about Himroo.

**Key words:** Himroo weaving, Persian weaving

### Introduction

Culturally, weavers in Turkey and Persia had been burning the midnight oil to conserve a vibrant fabric weaving tradition that often gave a purpose to one's life. While some aging historians hold the view that Himroo weaving originated from Persia, others wish to remain uncommitted to this controversial view.



**Fig.1.2: Boy climbing tree**  
(Ajanta inspired)



**Fig.1.1: Authentic Himroo shawl**

Nevertheless, Himroo weaves radiated a stately character that readily appealed to the discerning tastes of the nobility from many countries. It is no secret that Kings, Queens, Emperors, and Sultans of that era had a collection of Himroo clothing quietly stashed away in their wardrobes. During the rule of the Tuglak dynasty, weavers in India had discovered the ingenious Persian technique of weaving shawls by blending threads of silk, cotton, and gold. In Persia, shawls were being woven in the northeast regions. Later however, while the Persian weavers were pouring attention on carpet weaving, Indian weavers stealthily began perfecting the art of weaving Himroo shawls. In other words, the epicenter of Himroo shawl weaving shifted from Persia to India.

The founding generation of Mogul emperors of India had never severed their deep cultural and religious ties with Persian civilizations. Mogul emperor Babur, who was the sagacious grandfather of *Akbar The Great*, was outstandingly Persian in social demeanor, lineage, and philosophical thought. Incidentally, a renowned Persian architect named Ustad Ahmed Lahauri was invited by emperor Shah Jahan to conceive, design and build the Taj Mahal at Agra. During the Tuglak and Mogul periods, Himroo weaving, with its distinctive Persian parentage, had become a favorite creative occupation for those who desired a break from everyday monotony.

## 2. Objectives

Principally, we wish to identify major social, political, and historical factors, which collectively altered India's national fabric and crippled the Himroo weaving industry. Additionally, from a new vantage point of prudent modernity, we also wish to point out inadequacies in archaic Himroo weaving practices that need to be rectified for revival of this craft in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In our discussion, we shall also examine the fitness of Himroo fabric creations for induction into contemporary fashion wear, while also making an attempt to add a strong cultural angle to the idea of *Globalization*. Our intent is to generate a rush of consumer curiosity in new age Himroo products by unraveling the fascinating history behind Himroo weaving. Perhaps, a new sense of awareness about India's glorious past could help enkindle a new wave of demand for Himroo merchandise in India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq.

## 3. Materials, Methods, and Products

One of the greatest secrets unknown to the Western world is that expensive looking Himroo fabrics can be produced on a simple pit loom. Pit looms are often used by tribal weavers in Assam and Orissa. However, Himroo fabrics can be successfully mass produced on modern day Jacquard looms also. These Jacquard looms utilize punched cards arranged to compose figured weaves. The punched cards systematically activate leashes to raise or drop warp strands, while permitting the admission of weft yarns inside a shuttle. This way, Himroo weavers aspire to create a composite fabric with cotton in the warp and weft, and additionally brocaded by weft silk. Short warps are made possible by winding yarn on iron shafts from the bobbin creel. Long warps require drum winding. In modern times, rayon is being substituted for weft silk. Typically, 2-ply staple yarns of either 40 or 60 count are utilized for the warp, while 2-ply 20 cotton yarns are utilized for producing the main weft. Nowadays, 150 denier rayon or 2-ply 40 count hand spun varieties of silk are being used for brocading. Synthetic dyes are currently favored over vegetable dyes.



Fig 1.3: Silk yarns on paratia (stick cage)

Silk yarns tend to break easily. Therefore, weaving with silk yarn requires exceptional dexterity, skill, patience, concentration, and composure. It is said that only craftsmen gifted with the passion of a spider for weaving, and the keen eyesight of a hawk can make headway in this profession. The typical production cycle for a Himroo shawl is 2 to 3 weeks. In modern machine driven societies, the wages that Himroo weavers presently earn do not justify the quantum of labour, soulful artistic passion, and dedication that goes into the making of a product. Moreover, in a mechanized world devoid of character, unskilled workers shackled to an assembly line and entrusted with a repetitive job are able to earn better wages than a highly skilled craftsman with aesthetic intelligence. Such logic defying systems of economic reward conceived by Western business tycoons have collided directly with the philosophy of nurturing and rewarding artistic talent in the Eastern civilizations.



Himroo fabrics tend to be too heavy for contemporary tastes. With their characteristic heaviness, they are not ideally suitable for modern day garments. However, elegant Himroo creations in the form of trims, collars, and patches can be used as embellishment supplements on modern apparel styles. In interesting feats of ingenuity, Himroo fabrics can be used to create a new line of modern day fashion accessories such as neck ties, stoles, belts, buttons, and handbags. As India is a vast country with a variety of climates, clothing in India can be evolved to serve in recent decades, and in a humiliating act of surrender to the mass production ideologies of the West, Himroo shawls are being produced on power looms. In the city of Aurangabad, power looms engaging in cost effective Himroo production are using rayon as a substitute for silk. This has brought Himroo shawls within the mass market envelope, while unintentionally and unwittingly snatching away its exclusivity factor. At present, the most significant clientele for Himroo shawls in India comprise of foreign tourists from the West, who find the unusually colorful Indian artistry compellingly captivating and unusual.

#### 4. Historical Background and Analysis

Though the Chinese civilization was the first to produce silk, they had not been vigilant enough to guard their priceless discovery. While the Chinese were absorbed in the business of brewing aromatic concoctions from tea leaves, silk worms were secretly smuggled out of China into other parts of the world. China. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when Arabs conquered Persia and went on a rampage, silk was brought into Italy and other parts of Europe. When women in European aristocracy discovered five distinct ways of wearing a shawl to enhance their sensual appeal, shawls became high fashion garments in European culture. Thereafter, Kashmiri shawls became an important fashion accessory in the Western world. This put the Indian shawl on the world map.

In some cultures, as those in Persia, artisans and weavers enjoyed the same status as artists, scholars, and intellectuals. In many medieval societies where wine was strictly forbidden, common people generally engaged in benevolent pursuits such as sharpening one's scholarly intellect by reading the scriptures, or perfecting one's skills in artistry. In Persian tradition, a woven carpet or an embroidered shawl was perceived as an exquisite piece of art that portrayed the ethnic sophistication of an entire civilization. In fact, Persian carpets that symbolized sophistry were so incorrigibly expensive that they eventually became absolute symbols of luxury, opulence, wealth and political power all over the world. To the Persian psyche, woven carpets and shawls were delicate works of art that would eventually become family heirloom. On the other hand, Westerners

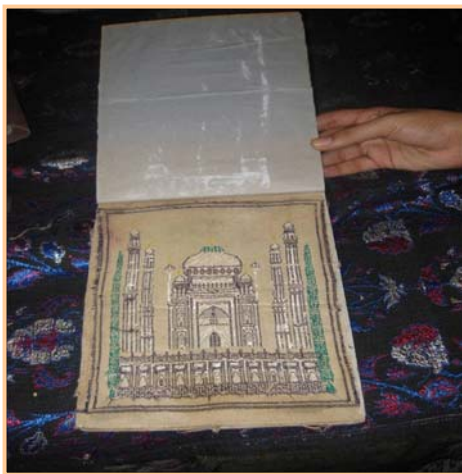


Fig.1.4: Taj Mahal woven on Himroo

regarded Persian carpets as objects that the affluent classes could acquire to flaunt wealth. This bitter difference in perception is worth noting. The Persian aristocracy would place small carpets in the middle of a room to admire their intrinsic beauty, and tread cautiously around them. In contrast, the less cultivated Western aristocracy would clumsily trample all over the carpets. To the Western psyche, while a painting on a piece of canvas represented a piece of art, an artistically woven fabric or carpet failed to evoke such a response.

During the tumultuous reign of Mohammed Bin Tuglak in Delhi, artisans and weavers in India had managed to strike a chord with the temperamental emperor who had a taste for fine living.

Governance under the Tuglak dynasty had a rare degree of economic sophistication where taxes were levied from affluent farmers and generous loans were given to deserving artisans, craftsmen,

and weavers. Later, the Mogul dynasty is also known to have exhibited even a greater degree of sophistication, and a stronger cultural compassion towards art, architecture, literature, and music. Therefore, the first signs of extinction of Himroo weaving might have surfaced during the onset of the decay of the Mogul Empire. Incidentally, there had come a time when Himroo weaving communities wished to distance themselves politically and geographically from the younger breed of whimsical sultans of Delhi. They established new weaving havens in Aurangabad and Hyderabad. While this strategy allowed Himroo weaving activities to flourish for a short while, the weavers must have begun losing royal patronage. After the death of Aurangazeb, patronage from Delhi must have reduced to a trickle.

For an unbroken period of nearly 150 years, the Moghul dynasty protected northern India from foreign invaders. In doing so, they brought stability to the region, united the people of India under one emperor, and provided uninterrupted continuity of civic tradition in society. However, during Aurangazeb's time the Mogul Empire became too lofty and unwieldy for efficient governance. It soon began cracking at the seams. The British saw this as a window of opportunity to raid India. Under British governance, labour intensive cottage industries in most parts of India began shutting down. The most basic equipment for Himroo production was the unpretentious hand operated pit loom for which the Englishmen with mechanical prowess had utter scorn. It is during this time that vibrant self sustaining village economies that had been carefully established in India



**Fig.1.5: Himroo on Jacard loom**

over hundreds of years were systematically destroyed. In fact, during the British presence in India for about 200 years, fabrics produced cheaply on power looms with English ingenuity flooded the Indian markets. These events took a toll on all forms of weaving. More strikingly, British cultural influence dramatically altered consumer tastes in India. In clothing accessories, emphasis began shifting to pure functionality. Incidentally, Mohandas Gandhi intentionally spun yarn on his charka as a symbolic act of revolt against mindless mechanization of the textile industry.

At a memorable time in history when artistry was seriously admired, the Himroo shawls had provided a canvas for the artistically inclined weaving communities in Aurangabad and Hyderabad. Himroo weavers could brazenly flaunt their weaving mastery, geometric perceptions, and visual imagination. The adornment work on the shawls usually consisted of a sequence of mind boggling patterns that yearned to invite attention. The bright geometric patterns and floral artistry in fabric artwork spontaneously appealed to Middle Eastern and European sensibilities.

The lively artistic component in ethnic men's clothing that had for centuries been a critical part of native fashion statements was somewhat under threat. In the age of machines, intricate artistry was no longer fashionable. Faced with the alternative of cheaply produced power loom fabrics, Indian consumers were not willing to pay the price that would make elaborate and labour intensive weaving artwork commercially viable.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Like most other labour intensive crafts originating from medieval India, Himroo was also one that needed the cardinal trade secrets of the art be quietly passed on from one financially deprived generation to the next. Often, great financial sacrifices needed to be made within Indian households intent on retaining a household tradition of Himroo weaving. Perhaps, only the power of passion for the art could keep Indian craftsmen still interested in an occupation that guaranteed financial ruin

over a lifetime. In recent years, many well qualified Himroo handloom weavers have abandoned their profession and moved to greener pastures in the mechanized world.

For a delicate craft like Himroo to flourish, a certain type of cultural ambience becomes essential. Himroo can thrive in an Indian civilization that can connect emotionally with its rich heritage.

To bring Himroo closer to one's heart, the young Indian consumer would have to connect emotionally with India's 600 year old historical past. The Indian civilization must be gently reminded that Himroo was once endorsed by the Mogul nobility. Perhaps, every Himroo shawl, with its characteristic motifs, carries with it some historical baggage. Therefore, from a consumer standpoint, owning a Himroo shawl would be culturally synonymous to owing a piece of India's Mogul heritage. For breathing new life into an ancient art, craftsmen of the current century might have to collectively come together and seek assistance from the government to help refine and reform consumer tastes to be able to build a demand for Himroo masterpieces. By simply borrowing adornment ideas from India's Mogul heritage, Himroo creations have the potential to add a touch of genealogical sophistication to contemporary fashion that were popular during the medieval Mogul era are not readily suitable for incorporation into contemporary fashion apparel in India. But consumers in Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan may find the Mogul era motifs fascinating.

It would be comforting for the social elites in India to know that a Himroo revival movement is currently in the works. Government organizations, cooperative weaving societies, and people from academia have now woken up culturally to give a new lease of life to Himroo. The Himroo Weaver's Industrial Cooperative Society in Aurangabad is an institution actively engaged in



keeping Himroo weaving alive. The cities of Nagpur and Sholapur are now boasting of a readily available pool of master weavers who can be quickly trained in the Himroo school of weaving. Himroo fabrics are now being displayed at the India International Trade Fair held every year in New Delhi. Meanwhile, efforts to educate Himroo weavers about urban markets, overseas markets, consumer preferences, marketing channels, and micro credit financing ought to be able to make significant impact.

### 5.1. Following are the fashion products developed from Himroo

**Fig.1.6: Women's kurta designed with Himroo yoke, women's western wear with Himroo, tie made from Himroo and souvenir pouch designed from Himroo**

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