Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, three very diverse geographical regions with their own cultures, religions and histories, combine to form the state of Jammu and Kashmir in northernmost India. Even though its history tells of periods of political turbulence, this is in contrast to its extraordinarily beautiful, sometimes dramatic and sometimes gentle, landscape and people. Wars have been fought, lands conquered, new cultures, languages and religions introduced, creativity nourished, but the land remained undiminished in the romance of its wide expanses, the grandeur of its towering mountain ranges with their eternal snows, its majestic holy rivers and friendly, sparkling little streams.

Most famous of the three regions is Kashmir, which, according to legend was once entirely covered by water and was known as the sea of Sati, or *satisara*, after Lord Shiva’s consort, Parvati. The gods were supposed to have answered the prayers of an ascetic named Kashyapa who prayed for the water in the sea to dry up. The lake of Kashyapa thus came to be known as Kashmir. The climates of the three regions follows a pattern that combines Europe and India, with snowy winters, a blossom-laden spring, a hot summer, and a vividly coloured autumn that follows a monsoon season bringing flooded rivers and humid heat.

Ladakh is mentioned in Pliny’s *Cesi* as an isolated desert area surrounding the Indus River, one of the twenty longest rivers in the world. Ladakh is surrounded by Sinkiang in the north, Tibet in the east and Gilgit in the west and offers the viewer that cosmic experience of being both one with the gods in heaven and simultaneously a mere speck in the vista of existence. The first inhabitants of Ladakh were nomadic shepherds who followed their own animist religion called Bonpo. The extreme height and cold of this region saw these early
inhabitants live in tents made of yak skin with the black hair still intact for added warmth. The culture was essentially tribal even after they took to farming. Buddhist missionaries sent by Emperor Asoka infused some cultural aspects but the true conversion to Buddhism came between the seventh and tenth century when they were conquered by the Tibetans. The entire region was prone to plunder as it was situated at the heart of the Asian continent. Kashmir and Ladakh became trading centres that saw the transfer of pearls, coral and turquoise, spices, salt, tea, tobacco, silks and other treasures. As a gateway to the Indo-Gangetic plain it lay on the famed Silk Route of Central Asia. Traders travelling from the Mediterranean to China passed through here, sharing and trading not just goods but ideas and cultures.

The arts and crafts of Kashmir received its greatest infusion of technology and creativity when Sultan Sikandar’s son, Shahi Khan ascended the throne in 1421 and called himself Zain-ul-Abadin. Prior to this he had been kidnapped by Tamur Lane and confined to Samarkand where he spent his time amongst the finest craftsmen and artists of China. When he became the Emperor he called for craftsmen from Central Asia and Arabia and ensured that the local craftsmen were trained to be amongst the finest in the world. He introduced paper making, papier machie art, calligraphy, embroidery, metal work, and the entire process of silk manufacture through the rearing of mulberry trees and silkworms. Local crafts men were often also farmers and were already adept in the art of pottery, willow basket weaving, mat weaving and stone work. The massive resurgence and flourishing of crafts in Kashmir still owes its greatest debt to this artistic and benign ruler.

Just as the Rajtarangini detailed the rule of Hindu kings, the Ain-i-Akbari describes the social, political and artistic activities of Mughal
rule. Emperor Akbar introduced the fashionable aspect of shawls, including how to wear and embroider them to best advantage for the wardrobe of nobility. These wonderful shawls travelled to the courts of France, Persia and Italy and finally were items of both trade and bribery when the East India Company came to India and gradually converted trading interests into colonial domination.

Muslim artists went from Kashmir to paint murals for Buddhist monasteries in Ladakh, as can be seen at the ancient monastery of Alchi. Designs of the paisley motif on Kashmiri *kani* shawls were influenced by Sikh rule in Jammu. Here, miniature painting introduced by the Moghuls led to the Jammu, Basohli and Kangra schools of painting and the colours were infused with a fresh vitality emerging from folk and martial traditions.

Apart from these three distinct cultural streams there is an interesting fourth small tributary which exists in the form of the nomadic Gujar / Bakarwal tribes who spend their years crossing over seasonally from the hills of Jammu to the hills of Kashmir with their goats, sheep, ponies, blankets, household equipment, wearing flamboyant silver and white metal jewellery, embroidered caps and distinct style of clothing. In short, a moving culture that absorbs from old historical links with Central Asia and adapts it to their immediate surroundings today.

The state is most proud of its woven shawls and finely hand knotted and woven carpets. Local shawls in thick, rough textures are home spun and woven by farmers who become weavers during winter months. Their large-sized blankets and men’s shawls, called *lois* and *chadars* are recognised by their differently patterned strips running along to two ends to distinguish the village in which it was made. Shepherds, nomads, farmers and workmen all stave off the winter cold with these warm wraps in natural coloured wool lovingly made from
the fleece of local sheep. The fine end of shawl making provides the most exquisite craftsmanship remaining anywhere in the world. The kani shawl, with its origins in the small village of Kanihama, carries on a skill practiced since the period of Zain-ul-Abedin. Patterns are codified like verse on paper and sung out as instructions to the weaver. They consist of floral and paisley patterns in infinite layouts forming an entire spread in the manner of a tapestry all over or at both ends. These shawls were most popular in the court of Napoleon and a favourite of Empress Josephine and have been revived today for discerning clientele who wish to feel history in their hands. An interesting footnote here is that the shawl industry began to decline from the beginning of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 and France’s subsequent defeat when, according to history books, the weaving community of Kashmir “burst into tears and loud lamentations when the news of Germany’s victories reached them”. Pashmina fabric, known in the west as “cashmere”, is woven out of the fine fleece from the underbelly of a domestic goat, capra hircus., found in the plains of Tibet and Ladakh. Spinning and weaving skills are much finer in Kashmir than Ladakh, so while the raw material is sourced in high altitudes, the high cost of the shawls comes from the fine weaving that comes naturally to Kashmiri men. Unlike the rest of India, in Kashmir both handloom weaving and embroidery are traditionally done by men while both men and women spin the raw wool into fine yarn. The finest of embroideries are done on shawls with silk threads in patterns which cover the entire cloth or limit themselves to borders and end pieces. Patterns and colours follow the gentle shades of the flora and fauna of Kashmir, which is more European. Paisleys, florals, and trellis designs are done in a variety of stitches and locally called sozni. The skill is generally carried out in workshops where men gather
with their *samovars* and *hukkas* to carry out their day’s work. These workshops demonstrate that shawl production was part of an organized trade and was traditionally a major commercial activity. Floor coverings range from the famed silk and wool hand made carpets to the common man’s *namda* made of beaten and embroidered felt to the chain stitched *gabba*, fashioned by embroidering together separate pieces of felt in geometric appliqué designs. The classic carpets reproducing kilims, Turkman, Persian, antique Kashmir and Jaipur Moghul designs are forever in fashion and do not bend before the stiff competition from Iran and Pakistan. They are woven in silk, wool or artificial silk and retain their sheen for a lifetime.

The crafts of Jammu & Kashmir offer products for both domestic use by the simple peasant as well as finely created objects for the export market.