

SOUTH ASIAN HISTORY

History of Crafts, Manufacturing and Trade in the Indian Subcontinent

HISTORIC ASPECTS OF CRAFT AND TRADE IN INDIA

Although the courtly culture of the Mughal rulers of the Indian subcontinent is the most well known, a cosmopolitan outlook was not new to India; several sources point to a thriving system of international trade that linked the ports of Southern India with those of Ancient Rome. The chronicles of the Greek Periplus reveal that Indian exports included a variety of spices, aromatics, quality textiles (muslins and cottons), ivory, high quality iron and gems. Considered items of luxury in those days, these were in high demand. While a good portion of Indo-Roman trade was reciprocal, (Rome supplying exotic items such as cut-gems, coral, wine, perfumes, papyrus, copper, tin and lead ingots), the trade balance was considerably weighted in India's favor. The balance of payments had to be met in precious metals, either gold or silver coinage, or other valuables like red coral (i.e. the hard currency of the ancient world). India was particularly renowned for its ivory work and its fine muslins (known in Roman literature as 'woven air'). However, these items must have been quite expensive since the Roman writer Pliny (AD 23-79) complained of the cost of these and other luxury commodities that were imported from India. "Not a year passed in which India did not take fifty million sesterces away from Rome", wrote Pliny. This trade surplus gave rise to prosperous urban centres that were linked to an extensive network of internal trade. Literary records from that period paint a picture of abundance and splendour. The Silappathikaarum (The Ankle Bracelet), a Tamil romance (roughly dated to the late second century AD), provides a glimpse of the maritime wealth of the cosmopolitan cities of South India. Set in the prosperous port city of Puhar (Kaveripattanam), the story refers to ship owners described as having riches 'the envy of foreign kings'. Puhar is portrayed as a city populated by entrepreneurial merchants and traders, where trade was well regulated: "The city of Puhar possessed a spacious forum for storing bales of merchandise, with markings showing the quantity, weight, and name of the owner." The Silappathikaarum suggests that the markets offered a great variety of precious commodities prized in the ancient world. Special streets were earmarked for merchants that traded in items such as coral, sandalwood, jewellery, faultless pearls, pure gold, and precious gems. Skilled craftspeople brought their finished goods such as fine silks, woven fabrics, and luxurious ivory carvings. Archeological finds of spectacular burial jewellery in southern India appear to corroborate such accounts. Northern India also had its flourishing urban centres. This can be inferred from descriptions of an archeological site in ancient Taxila. Vladimir Zwalf (in *Jewelry, 7000 years* - Hugh Tait, Editor) notes: "The site has yielded magnificent and well-preserved gold jewellery, notably necklaces, ear-pendants and finger-rings, characterised by a mastery of granulation and inlay." While most ornaments from that period have not survived, sculpture from several sites shows heavy adornment. Patliputra (now Patna) during the Mauryan period was described by travellers as one of the grandest cities of that period.

TEXTILES

The antiquity of Indian textile exports can be established from the records of the Greek geographer Strabo (63 BC - AD 20) and from the first century Greek source Periplus, which mentions the Gujarati port of Barygaza, (Broach) as exporting a variety of textiles. Archaeological evidence from Mohenjo-Daro, establishes that the complex technology of mordant dyeing had been known in the subcontinent from at least the second millennium B.C. The use of printing blocks in India may go as far back as 3000 B.C, and some historians are of the view that India may have been the original home of textile printing. "The export of printed fabrics to China can be dated to the fourth century B.C, where they were much used and admired, and later, imitated." - (Stuart Robinson: 'A History of Printed Textiles'). The thirteenth-century Chinese traveller Chau Ju-kua refers to Gujarat as a source of cotton fabrics of every color and mentions that every year these were shipped to the Arab countries for sale. "The discovery at Broach of a hoard of gold and silver coins, mostly fourteenth-century and belonging to the Mamluk kingdom of Egypt and Syria, suggests the maintenance of the advantageous trading system recorded since Roman times whereby Indian

textiles and other renewable resources were traded for precious metals". - (John Guy, 'Arts of India, 1550 - 1900') Also in the thirteenth century, Marco Polo recorded the exports of Indian textiles to China and South East Asia from the Masulipattinam (Andhra) and Coromandel (Tamil) coasts in the "largest ships" then known. It is conjectured that the initial development of this trade accompanied the spread of Indian cultural influence in South-East Asia. John Guy in the "Arts of India, 1550 - 1900", points out that "textile patterns on sculptures of Indian deities in central Java and elsewhere in the region very probably reflect the prestige cloths in circulation in the late first millennium". Chou Ta-kuan, the Chinese observer of life at the Khmer capital of Angkor at the end of the thirteenth century, wrote that "preference was given to the Indian weaving for its skill and delicacy." Robyn Maxwell (in Textiles of Southeast Asia) observes that elaborately decorated Indian textiles were the most highly valued and notes: " Many spectacular Indian trade cloths, most now two or three centuries old, have been treasured as heirlooms throughout Southeast Asia into the twentieth century, making only rare appearances at important ceremonies or at times of crisis". Prestige trade textiles such as Patola (double ikat silk in natural dyes) from Patan and Ahmedabad, and decorative cottons in brilliant color-fast dyes from Gujarat and the Coromandel coast were sought after by the Malaysian royalty and wealthy traders of the Phillipines. The port city of Surat (in Gujarat) emerged as the major distribution point for patola destined for South-East Asia, and was frequented by the ships of the Dutch East India Company. "The right to wear patola was widely claimed as a prerogative of the Indonesian nobility , a practice encouraged by the Dutch East India Company who distributed patola to local rulers as part of the incentives offered to win local trading concessions and co-operation." (- John Guy, 'Arts of India') Textiles also comprised a significant portion of the Portuguese trade with India. These included embroidered bedspreads and wall hangings possibly produced at Satgaon, the old mercantile capital of Bengal, (near modern Calcutta). Quilts of embroidered wild silk (tassar, munga or eri) on a cotton or jute ground, combining European and Indian motifs were commissioned by the Portuguese who had been attracted to Bengal, (as traders had been since the early centuries AD), by the quality of the region's textiles. J.H. van Linschoten, who was based in Goa as secretary to the archbishop in the 1580s, observed that Cambay also produced silk embroidered quilts. Textiles from Golconda and further south also found favor in Europe and South East Asia. In the early 1600s, Dutch and English trading settlements were established in Golconda territory. Produced in the Golconda hinterland, kalamkaris - i.e. finely painted cotton fabrics were bought or commissioned from the port city of Masulipattinam. Buying at source enabled the Dutch and English merchants to procure these textiles at rates thirty per cent lower. 'Palampores' - painted fabrics based on the "tree of life" motif that had become popular in the Mughal and Deccan courts were also highly regarded. The attractiveness of fast dyed, multi-colored Indian prints on cotton (i.e. chintz) in Europe led to the formation of the London East India Company in 1600, followed by Dutch and French counterparts. By the late 1600s, there was such overwhelming demand for Indian chintz (whether from Chittagong in Bengal, or Patna or Surat, that ultimately French and English wool and silk merchants prevailed on their governments to ban the importation of these imported cottons from India. The French ban came in 1686, while the English followed in 1701. (Not all textile producing centres were associated with ports. Several textile producing centres that catered to the internal market, and to the overland international trade were located in Northern and Central India, in the kingdoms of the Rajputs and the Mughals, each with their own unique specialization. While Kashmir was well known for its woollen weaves and embroidery, cities like Benaras, Ujjain, Indore and Paithan (near Aurangabad) were known for their fine silks and brocades. Rajasthan specialized in all manner of patterned prints and dyed cloths. Fine collections of Indian Textiles can be seen in the Calico Museum in Ahmedabad and in the Crafts Museum in Delhi)

CARPETS

According to texts dating from the Buddhist era, woolen carpets were known in India as early as 500 B.C. References to woven mats and floor coverings are not infrequent in ancient and medieval Indian literature. By the 16th century, carpet-weaving centres were established in all the major courts of the sub-continent. However, it is the output of the Mughal period that is now attracting international attention. Dismissed by earlier scholars as mechanical derivatives of Persian carpets, Indian carpets of the Mughal period are slowly gaining recognition as the most technically accomplished classical carpets of all times.

Daniel Walker, curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) has described pile-woven carpets of the Mughal era as "among the most beautiful works of art ever created". He suggests that the large-scale production from the imperial workshops of Akbar "set the tone for subsequent carpet weaving in India and resulted in carpets whose jewel-like beauty is still breathtaking". (Ref. Flowers Underfoot, Indian Carpets of the Mughal Era)

DECORATIVE CRAFTS

Under the patronage of the various royal clans that ruled India, particularly the Mughals, the Rajputs and the Deccani nawabs, the decorative arts and crafts reached unprecedented heights. (These traditions were continued, and even augmented by later regional nawabs in Bengal, Mysore, Central India, Punjab, Awadh and Kashmir). European traders did not fail to notice the relatively high quality of Indian craftsmanship and proceeded to set up their own "*karkhanas*" i.e factories, that rivalled the Mughal and Deccani establishments. Hardwood furniture was a major product of Portuguese patronage, usually richly decorated with inlaid woods and ivory. Catering to the European markets, the items preserved the general forms of European furniture, but were embellished with expensive inlays and carvings that took their inspiration from Indian styles, particularly the Mughal. Several production centres, principally in Sind, Gujarat and the Deccan serviced this trade based in Goa. Mother-of-pearl was one of the materials often used in the decoration of such items, particularly small storage chests. These were produced principally in Ahmedabad and Cambay, and later in Surat. Gujarati furniture with mother-of-pearl inlay is recorded in the Baburnama (early 16th century). The technique of setting mother-of-pearl in a black lac ground, had been employed on wooden tomb-covers of the early seventeenth century in Ahmedabad and Cambay, where a good proportion of such work catered to the Turkish market, as evinced by examples preserved in the Topkapi Saraye Museum of Istanbul. The craft of papier mache, extensively promoted by the Mughals and later the Rajputs, also found favor with 17th century European traders who commissioned Kashmiri artists to produce for the European market.

JEWELRY

Since the Indian sub-continent invariably carried a trade surplus, precious and semi-precious stones, or gold and silver from the international trade complemented internally mined supplies, leading several visitors to India to note the enormous wealth of some of India's most well known kingdoms. They would describe overflowing treasuries, replete with a variety of precious metals and gems. Bazaars exclusively devoted to trade in precious metals and stones were not uncommon. As already mentioned, Tamil texts dating to the 2nd Century AD refer to them, as do the chronicles of the 14th century traveller Ibn Batuta of Tunisia, and Europeans who visited the Vijaynagar, or Golconda kingdoms. Vladimir Zwalf (in Jewelry, 7000 years - Hugh Tait, Editor) observes: "The ostentatious display of jewels at the Mughal court mentioned by all visitors to it is borne out by contemporary miniature paintings and a large quantity of extant pieces. Jewellery was worn by both men and women, and was also used in the ornamentation of arms and armour, furniture and vessels. Gems dominate Mughal jewellery. India was a major source and trading centre for precious stones." Shah Jahan was particularly knowledgeable about gems, and personally supervised some of the works executed in the "*karkhanas*". Several fine examples of jewelry from the courts of the Mughals and Rajputs, and other regional nawabs can be seen in the collection in the National Museum, including selections from Benaras, Bengal and Southern India.

METALLURGY

Two quotes well summarize the development of metallurgical skills prior to modern industrialization. Sir Thomas Holland, (chairman of the Indian Industrial Commission of 1916-18) reported in 1908: "The high quality of the native made iron, the early anticipation of the process now employed in Europe for the manufacture of high-class steels, and the artistic products in copper and bronze gave India a prominent position in the metallurgical world." D.H. Buchanan wrote in 'Development of Capitalist Enterprise in India, 1934': "In India, steel was used for weapons, for decorative purposes and for tools, and remarkably high grade articles were produced. The old weapons are second to none, and it is said that the famous damascus blades were forged from steel imported from Hyderabad in India. The iron column, called the

Kutub pillar at Delhi, weighs over six tons and carries an epitaph composed about 415 A.D. No one yet understands how so large a forging could have been produced at that time." The craft of Bidri-ware which originated in the Deccan, in Bidar and spread northwards to centres like Lucknow, required not insignificant metallurgical skills. The delicate inlay work required discipline and expertise, and additionally, required the knowledge of extraction of zinc (a primary constituent of the Bidri alloy). Unlike copper or iron, zinc was not easily extractable from its ore. Consequently, in Europe, the metal could not be used on an industrial scale until an Englishman patented his zinc distillation process in 1738. However, in India, zinc was first produced in the 1st C BC (The *Rasvatnakar* mentions the distillation of Zinc in Zawar, Rajasthan, and excavations by the M.S. University verify the existence of kilns used in the distillation of the metal). In Rajasthan, it may have subsequently been used in the production of brass. In any case, by the seventeenth century, zinc was being absorbed in considerable quantity for the production of Bidri-ware which had acquired widespread patronage.

Jaigarh (near Jaipur) was home to one of Asia's largest cannon factories. Cannons produced in the Rajput fort of Jaigarh (now on display at the Jaigarh Fort) played a crucial role in the expansion and consolidation of Mughal rule in India.

THE REGIONAL KINGDOMS

While much is known of the Moghuls, less is known of the regional kingdoms who were equally cultured, and also made their mark in manufactures and trade. Susan Stronge - (The Sultanates of the Deccan, Arts of India, 1550 - 1900) writes: " With the exception of architecture, little of the artistic production of the sultanates has survived, and that which has is usually uninscribed and undocumented. Nevertheless, the superb quality of some of the surviving artefacts provides a tantalising glimpse of a world of courtly splendour and cultural refinement, others indicating traditions which, though less elevated, are lively and appealing." Like their Mughal counterparts, the Deccani Nawabs were great patrons of the arts and music, and in portraits are often depicted with fine jewellery and fine silks. What is of particular interest today is the secular administration of these sultanates. In their patronage of Ragamala paintings, the Deccani nawabs shared the tastes of the Rajputs, and later rulers of the Punjab hills and Punjab plains. Based on the romantic folk-lore of popular traditions, the ragamala painting became a highly sophisticated art form - its lyrical and expressive style appealing to Hindhu, Muslim and Sikh patrons alike. Asad Beg, who chronicled the court of Bijapur's Ibrahim Adil Shah II (1586-1627), mentions that Adil Shah spoke Marathi and his *Kitab-i-Nauras*, a collection of songs in Deccani Urdu were set to different ragas, some paying homage to Muslim saints, others recalling the Hindhu deities Saraswati and Ganesh. According to Asad Beg, under Ibrahim Shah, Hindhus had access to positions of political importance and economic power. Like Akbar, one of his most trusted officials was Antu Pandit. Another Hindhu, Ramji, was head of the Bijapuri guild of jewellers and court adviser on matters of jewellery purchase and selection. And like in the 'karkhanas' of Akbar, skilled Hindhu craftsmen, were just as likely to find employment as skilled Muslims. Both courts strived towards perfection in their manufactures, and could not afford religious discrimination.

SHIPPING AND NAVY

Although several nations that traded in the Indian Ocean had merchant ships, India seems to have been the first country of the Indian Ocean to possess real battle-fleets. Reports Auguste Toussaint in 'History of the Indian Ocean', "The Mauryan emperor Chandragupta, who ruled from 321 to 297 B.C had even at that time, an actual Board of Admiralty, with a Superintendent of Ships at its head." References to it can be found in Kautilya's Arthashastra. From their voyages of conquest and trade, we can infer that although much later, the Pallavas, Pandyas and Cholas of South India must also have had an efficient naval organization. Prior to colonial rule, the most significant Navy in the Indian Ocean, was that of the Mughals. At its peak, during the reign of Akbar, it had over 3000 vessels, and was concentrated in the Bay of Bengal, although a good proportion of the fleet was also based in Gujarat. Described in the *Ayeen-i-Akbari* (Chronicle of the Reign of Akbar), the Navy controlled shipbuilding, conducted naval surveys, collected customs duties and ensured adequate crew recruitments. During Aurangzeb's reign, the Mughal fleet functioned only in the Bay of Bengal, and was heavily used against European traders (particularly the Portuguese) who challenged the Mughal authority and tried to avoid customs payments. In the Bay of Bengal, the kingdom of Assam

had its own fleets, while the Marathas had theirs on the West coast. In this period, the trade within Asia was still largely conducted by Asians. The merchants of Surat, who relied upon ships built by the Wadias of Bombay (who had not taken long to copy prevailing European designs) were particularly rich - one of them Virji Vora (who died in the beginning of the 18th century) left a fortune of 22 million gold francs.

"According to certain travellers, Surat was then the most beautiful city of India. One small detail will give an idea of the unparalleled luxury that prevailed there: certain streets were paved with porcelain. Francois Martin in his Memoires calls it 'a real Babylon'." - (Auguste Toussaint in 'History of the Indian Ocean'.)

THE DECLINE IN TRADE REVENUES

However, such prosperity was not to last long. In that same period, as the revenues to the Mughals from the overland trade dwindled due to heightened competition from the East India Company (which undercut prices for Indian exports offered by the Ottomans of Turkey), the Mughal state after Aurangzeb crumbled, and the strength of the Indian Navy diminished as a consequence. (Although the sea route around the African Cape was much longer than the overland route, the indirect profits from the African slave trade that accrued to the East India Company allowed it to out-compete the Ottomans and thus draw away badly needed revenues from the Mughal treasury). Although the kingdoms of Oudh and Bengal thrived for a while, by 1721 the East India Company had been prohibited from importing Indian textiles into Europe. This was a major economic blow for the entire sub-continent; in particular, the Bengal Nawabs, who were unable to invest sufficiently in maintaining an adequate Navy. At the same time, the East India Company had turned its attention to the contraband Opium Trade with China, which required military cover, for which contingents of the British Royal Navy were sent to the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, enhancing British military power in the Bay of Bengal. The rapid depletion of the Mughal treasuries, thus started a chain reaction. Unable to supervise the vast regions under its authority, the Mughal state disintegrated. Craftspeople employed in the Mughal 'karkhanas' sought patronage from the regional courts of Awadh and Bengal, or Rajputana and Punjab, or the Marathas of Central India, all of whom experienced a short-lived, but often brilliant cultural renaissance. Mughal and Hindhu (or Sikh) styles were fused in the regions, producing several unique and syncretic traditions. However, after the textile bans and inability to enforce customs collections, the smaller Indian states simply lacked the economic and military means to resist the onslaught of the now richer and more powerful East India Company. The defeat at Plassey in 1757 was thus a monumental turning point in history. A nation that had long enjoyed a trade surplus from its manufactures was soon to be reduced to penury. R. Mukerji describes this process in 'The Rise and Fall of the East India Company', noting that the defeat of the Moghuls and the political ascendance of the East India Company was accompanied by a decline of the Indian mercantile bourgeoisie. The great merchants of India, who had earlier derived protection from the Mughals, and had benefited from the naval patrols of Akbar and Aurangzeb, were by the end of the eighteenth century, practically extinguished in Bengal and elsewhere. Although it took another century for the conquest of India to be consolidated, and although a third of India escaped direct colonial rule, a long era had come to a close. The crafts of that era were either to be obliterated, or survive precariously. Remunerated at a much lower rate, they were unlikely to gain the prestige and respect they once enjoyed. It is important to note this difference between the British colonizers and earlier conquerors who made India their home. Whereas earlier conquerors had taken full advantage of India's manufacturing skills and either steered them in different directions, or attempted to augment and refine them, for the British, India's manufacturing strengths were unnecessary competition, and were best snuffed out, or left to languish. Those who attempt to treat the British as no different from India's previous Islamic rulers do great injustice to this ineffaceable reality. Several of India's previous rulers came as foreigners - as invaders and conquerors - but they lived and died in India. Consequently, the monuments they built, the artefacts they commissioned, the culture that they sponsored - all of it, is now the legacy of the people of the sub-continent. The riches that they acquired were recycled in the same land, but what the British took away may never be returned. Even in its faded glory, India's Islamic legacy has more authenticity than colonial rule. As Indians look to the future, they may gain from this history a justifiable pride in the dedicated pursuit of excellence that was practised by India's craftspeople. They can take note of the technological discoveries and adaptations that took place in an older era, and become inspired to contribute - even in some small way, towards the betterment of a land that is waiting to find its due place in the world once more.

(For an abstract and thematic outline of this article, click [here](#).)

Notes

Asia's Role in World Trade: The Department of History at the University of Auckland provides an interesting set of links relating to the theme: [Asia as the Hub of World Trade](#)

Particularly interesting are the links to *Asian-based world economy 1400-1800: A horizontally integrative macrohistory*, and 'Asia Comes Full Circles in a Round World' by Andre Gunder Frank (University of Amsterdam)

In a Review Essay of *Asia in Western and World History. A Guide for Teaching* (Edited by Ainslie T. Embree and Carol Gluck), Andre Gunder Frank remarks: *The "Theme of Asia in World History" is really broached only by Lynda Shaffer. She does so mostly by documenting the originating and pivotal role of India and its diffusion of mathematics and science, religion and art, crops and technology both eastward to China and westward to Europe. Thereby she seeks to relate "the rise of the West to ... antecedents in other parts of the world" and to show how artificially Eurocentric it is to "sever the final ocean-crossing episode from its larger global history"*