



Handicrafts and Cottage Industries in the Lights of Ancient India, Prior to British Invasion: An Epitome

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Abstract

The Indian handicraft has evolved through the test of time. The advent of a mere tool made of stone or the craftsmanship to build a wheel was nothing less than the ignition in order to create the superior quality of craft, both technically and tactically, to be manufactured in the distant future. The simple technology of artisanship has been evolved into the complex ones, to generate not only better but also diverse produces, over the centuries. From the Prehistoric Ages till the time of Last Mughal Ruler Bahadur Shah II, Indian handicrafts and cottage industries have been developed into precision. Notably, the heritage of Indian social and cultural lifestyle has been depicted through all forms of contemporary arts and crafts. From the days of Indus Valley Civilisation to the Age of Mauryan Emperors, from the Sultanate Period to the Mughal dynasty the History and lifestyle of India has been reflected through the various items that were used for consumption of the citizens. And thus, these items, produced by the then craftsmen and artisan, literally play an instrumental role in reviving the History of India. This article actually is an attempt to look into the chronological perspective of handicrafts and cottage Industries of this Incredible Civilisation.

Keywords: Cottage Industries, Handicrafts, Ancient India, Sultanate Era, Mughal Period

Introduction: India resides in its villages. So it had been for centuries. It was actually the rural people of this country that determine the true character of this nation. Undoubtedly India, over the period, has been known for the resourceful villages and for the derivatives produced out of those resources. Such an ancient civilisation, with more than 5000 years of documented and established heritage, has been in continuous touch with numerous civilisations around the world by dint of trade links because of the goods and produces made by the rural artisans. These craftsmen not only satisfied the inland consumption need of the country but also portrayed the picture of their motherland India in various corners of the globe as the manufacturing hub of miraculous handicrafts.

Indus Valley Civilization (5000 to 1300 BC): Indus Valley Civilization, the first major civilization in South Asia¹, was truly remarkable in its architectural point of view. Harappa & Mohenjo-Daro Civilizations produced a considerable number of crafts. Among them stone-cutting and statue-making was particular that needs mention. The marvelous statue of “Priest King” is a great example of this.

Mohenjo-Daro was a great Industrial centre and a number of Industries were practiced there². One of the most important industries was weaving. This is proved by the discovery of a number of spindles and spinning wheels in the various houses of Indus valley. This suggests that spinning of cotton and wool was quite common.

In addition the people of Indus valley also knew the practice of dyeing. There was existence of smiths. The solvent citizens had the tendency of preserving the valuables in

safes. Hence, the Indian Copper Hoard Culture is attributed to this time³. People knew the art of using metals like gold, silver, bronze, copper, tin, lead etc. and they produced various articles with these metals. But probably the most important industry of the Indus valley was pottery. The earthen pots of those days which have been discovered now can be broadly classified into two categories—hand made and wheel made. The discovery of a number of pottery kilns shows that the pots were burnt in kilns. People produced variety of pots, certain pots were meant for daily use and were plain while other pots were meant for the preservation of valuables and were painted⁴. The Ochre Coloured Pottery⁵ flourished in the Doab region tremendous way. Some examples of the splendid works of the potters can be witnessed even today in museums of Pakistan.

Vedic period (1750 BC – 500 BC): During the Early Vedic age “the chief items of commerce were cloths and goods made of leather” apart from that “Carpentry, black smithy, gold smithy and weaving were other professions of people. These professions were not only the monopoly of the men but the ladies also contributed their labour into them. Generally, women were engaged in weaving, dyeing and embroidery.

The carpenters made chariots, wagons, boats, ploughs, domestic utensils and furniture. The metal workers made implements and utensils of copper and bronze. The ornaments were made by goldsmith.

During the later Vedic period, a variety of occupations came into existence. Some of the most prominent occupations of the period included those of potters, carpenters, smiths, smelters, weavers, washermen, barbers, butchers, makers of baskets, ropes, jewels, merchants, magicians and so forth. The women generally engaged in dyeing, embroidery and basket making⁶.

And during this period, moneylenders came to existence, however the definite interest rate that was charged is unknown as yet (Jayapalan, 2008). Hence it can be deduced that the requirement for raw materials could be met from these moneylenders as and when required to run a cottage industry.

Epic Age: During the Epic age (when *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were written i.e. from 1500 to 600 B.C. as deduced by Historian Dr. Radha kumud Mukherjee) cotton manufactures occupied the first place in industry. Silk and woollen clothes were also manufactured. People also knew about the manufacture of mixed cloth and the art of interlacing. The allied arts like dyeing also made considerable progress. Fast colours were produced by the people⁷.

The Ages of Buddha and Jaina (650 to 321 BC): By now the village continued to be the basis of the economic organisation in India, a considerable specialisation and localisation of industries had taken place. The Jatakas speak of 18 crafts which existed at that time. However they name only four of these crafts, viz. Leather dressing, smithy, painting and carpentry.

The important handicrafts were organised in the guilds (Srenies). At the head of Each guild was President or Alderman (Jethaka). Usually the President was an influential person who had an access to the King. The authority of the President has not been clearly defined anywhere but probably he supervised and inspected the goods produced. The Guild also worked as endowment trusts and banks⁸. This information actually strikes us that the concept of Federation of Artisans existed in India even two and a half millennia ago.

Mayryan Era (322–185 BC): During Mayryan Era, cotton was produced in great quantity. The cloth was prepared out of the leaves and bark of the trees and the fibre of many kinds. Woollen clothes and blankets as well as muslin clothes were produced during this period⁹.

In the words of Patrick Olivelle, “Associated with mines are factories for refining the metals and for turning out consumer and luxury goods. The state took a great deal of interest in these workplaces, especially those connected with gold and silver..... the state appears to not have a direct hand in other areas of manufacture; there is, for example, no mention of pottery, wood craftsmanship and the building trade..... The exception was clothes. The

Superintendent of yarn (*sutradhyaksa*) was responsible for producing yarn from raw cotton, wool, and silk and for the manufacture of finished products. Poor women and widows were generally recruited for this work, which was a cottage industry and could be carried out in their own homes. However, it is likely that private industry worked side by side with state enterprises in producing local cloth, which was supplemented by luxury imports, such as silk from China¹⁰.

According to early Greek chronicles it was Megasthenes, Ambassador of Seleucus Nicator, who told the Indian king Chandra Gupta about the coconut palms he found in Ceylon in 300 B.C.; lately, hand spinning of coir from coir palm was prevalent in India as a cottage industry even before 11th century¹¹.

Sangam Empire (3rd century BC to 4th century AC): The Sangam Dynasty in Southern Part of India witnessed a far reaching development in the field of industries and crafts. Spinning and weaving were the most important and widely practiced crafts. Rope making, manufacture of leather sheaths, dealing in conches and ivory and especially manufacture of bangles are some industries mentioned in contemporary literature. Moreover, baskets made of wicker were manufactured by the artisans. Jaggery cakes were made out of sugar cane in the villages¹².

Gupta Dynasty (320-650 AC): The Gupta period is in the annals of classical India almost what the Periclean age is in the history of Greece¹³. One of the best handicrafts that the Gupta Dynasty gifted was painting¹⁴. The metallurgy of this era reached the limits of sky-high. The smiths became renowned for their crafts. This scientific advancement during the period of Gupta Dynasty (as it is called the Golden Age of Indian History) actually boosted the technical efficiency of the artisans. Weaving was another craft that needs special mention in this period.

Chola Dynasty (11th century AC): During Chola Dynasty, Cottage industries flourished a lot. The metal workers had expert knowledge on metallurgy and produced images over the utensils made of gold, silver, bronze, copper, brass etc. the jewellery art reached heights under the Cholas. Kanchi was an important place of textile industry. Carpentry found to be an important trade also. And Beautiful images of various gods and goddesses were made by coppersmiths and goldsmiths.

Sultanate Period (1206–1526 AC): In the Sultanate Period, pottery making was an industry that carried on simultaneously with textile crafts¹⁵. Stone-quarrying was an ancient and extensive industry in India. Historian Irfan Habib also pointed out about the craft of construction of horse shoes as during the reign of Iltutmish horses were shod with *na'16*. The shawl manufacturing was introduced to Kashmir in fourteenth to fifteenth century, as widely believed. Amir Khusru spoke about *kapras* was the meanest of cloths and silk *hariri* the most expensive of cloths¹⁷.

Muslims introduced a number of fine varieties of textiles, most of which had Persian or Arabic origin. Bengal was the main center of this industry, but Gujarat rivalled it as a supplier of the export trade during the sultanate perioda number of industries connected with metal work: the manufacture of swords, guns, and knives, as well as household needs such as trays and basins Paper-making was a minor industry, of which little is known except that Delhi was the center of a considerable market. These industries were mainly privately owned, but the government equipped and managed large-scale *karkhanas*, or factories, for supplying its requirements. The royal factories at Delhi sometimes employed as many as four thousand weavers for silk alone. The example of the sultan of Delhi was followed by the rulers of the regional kingdoms, and the contribution of the state to the development of the industry was not a minor one¹⁸.

Mughal Empire (1526–1707 AC): In this period, several specialized products were produced in different parts of the country and the skill for producing that specialized products

had been confined to that region only. Craftsmen of Kashmir had specialization in producing woolen products and Bengal became famous for cotton textile industries. Among agricultural based industries of Mughal Age, the most important had been the production of various types of sugar products (*gur*, *sugar* etc.) from the sugarcane. Similarly mastered oils were produced from mustard seeds and coconut oils from the coconuts..... The dyeing industry flourished. The coarser cotton cloths were either dyed or printed with a variety of well-shaped and well-coloured flowers. Locally produced wines had large market. Silk weaving was an important industry in Lahore, Agra and Gujarat. All kinds of experts and specialists such as embroiderers, goldsmiths, silk or brocade manufacturers, painters, tailors, muslin and turban makers worked there. The manufacture of cotton cloth was the principal industry. Abul Fazl, in his *Ain-i-Akbari* refers to the cotton fabrics of *Khandesh*. Abul Fazl admires the excellent *Chautar* and *Khasa* of Saharanpur.

There were important centers of cotton manufacture in Gujarat, Orissa, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Bengal. Silk weaving, through less important than cotton manufacture was a prosperous industry, particularly in Bengal. It was an important industry in Lahore, Agra and Gujarat. But Bengal was the common store house for the silk. In the south there was an important silk producing centre near Coimbatore. The shawls on Kashmir, a woolen product, were best known for its softness and warmth. Akbar called the finest shawl by the name of *Parus nurm*. Iron was produced in Golkonda while Saltpeter was manufactured in different parts of the country, especially Bihar. Gold and silver industry reached its excellence in the time of Akbar and Shahajahan. The craftsmen of Banaras, Delhi, Gujarat and Agra specialized themselves in the manufacture of gold ornaments and silver vessels. The articles such as jewellery used in temples, particularly in the south were many and varied. The accounts of the foreign travelers and other contemporary literature throw light on the great volume of inland trade in Mughal India. Each village had a tiny market. Besides annual and seasonal fairs attracted a large number of people from the neighboring villages and towns and a brisk trade was carried on¹⁹.

Some of Mughal emperors, especially Akbar, issued orders abolishing most of the imports. This was a remarkable decision simply because it not only widened the Indian market for the rural artisans but also boosted the policy of making this country a self-sufficient one that can meet all the needs of the citizens by its own goods and produces. Besides, the Mughal emperors did make efforts to keep the roads safe for the merchants and traders²⁰. Indeed the rural handicrafts reached greater heights during the period when Akbar ruled India. He was instrumental in facilitating the art and artisans of India. In the words of R.S. Chaurasia, cottage industries emerged during the reign of Akbar. He was a great patron of art, literature, education and architecture²¹.

Conclusion: All these beautiful craftsmanship that enriched the Indian Villages and the residents of this country got harmed to a great extent after the invasion by the British. Historically India has been attacked by foreign rulers time and again for its massive quantity of resources and treasure. But simultaneous 190 years of induced poisoning to the roots India's own cottage industry and relentless torture to the craftsmen and artisans literally collapsed the skeleton rural industries in India. And to add to the pain, huge imports of cheap European factory produces eventually took the artisans off their job. Almost all the states and their craftsmen got affected by the cruel state policy adopted. In the words of L. Shanthakumari Sunder, Bengal was recorded as one of the richest, most populous, and best cultivated kingdoms of the world. In Bengal flourished the silk industry, cotton textiles, sugar manufacture which were exported to England as late as 1756 and it was only after the Battle of Plassey that Bengal's economy declined²².

And the Painful truth in front of us remains that our search for self sufficiency of industrialisation is still on in today's India. But it actually existed in this country, at times,

thanks to the rural artisans that this country had produced, and eventually perished by brutal mutilation by foreign forces. And so did the legacy and heritage of rural industrialisation of more than 5000 years.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_India

² Jayapalan, N. (2008) *Economic History of India: Ancient to present Day*, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (P) Ltd.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_India

⁴ Jayapalan, N. (2008) *Economic History of India: Ancient to present Day*, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (P) Ltd.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_India

⁶ Jayapalan, N. (2008) *Economic History of India: Ancient to present Day*, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (P) Ltd.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Olivelle, Patrick (2013) *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kautilya's Arthashastra* (translated), Oxford University Press, page 44

¹¹ Ramchandran, M.K. (2009) *Economics of Agro Based Industries: a study of Kerala*, Mittal Publications, page 66

¹² Jayapalan, N. (2008) *Economic History of India: Ancient to present Day*, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (P) Ltd.

¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_India

¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_India

¹⁵ Chattopadhyaya, D.P. [General Editor] (2011) *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization Volume VIII Part I*, Article - Economic History of Medieval India 1200-1500 by Irfan Habib, Centre for Studies in Civilization (CSC), page 97.

¹⁶ Ibid, page 87.

¹⁷ Ibid, page 90.

¹⁸ http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00islamlinks/ikram/part1_08.html

¹⁹ <http://www.importantindia.com/3025/mughal-industries/>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Chaurasia, R.S. (2002) *History of Medieval India: From 1000 A.D. to 1707 A.D.*, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.

²² Sunder, L. Shanthakumari (2011) *Values and Influence of Religion in public Administration*, Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd., Page 50