

Constructing the Growth of Leather Industry through the Ancient Literature

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ABSTRACT:

The leather and leather industry is one of the oldest manufacturing industries in India to have been on the international market since the middle of the nineteenth century, with demand for its goods both domestic and international from the outset. The industry is also one with strong ties to the social structure through caste and culture. Therefore, a large number of people engaged in the industry (entrepreneurs as well as workers) even today come from traditional leather-working castes (belonging to lower castes in the caste hierarchy) and the Muslim community. In this paper, an attempt is made to trace the growth of the leather craft from a study of this literature. The study concluded that, despite the strong taboos of both the Hindus and the Buddhists for leather and leather work, this industry not only expanded and gained in popularity but also in due course came to attain a high proficiency because of the economic policies introduced by the muslim rules. Having strengthened itself in the Muslim period the industry made strides under British and went on to become the gross earner of foreign exchange for the country.

Key words: Leather, Vedic literature, Buddhist texts, Leather craft, structured growth

1. INTRODUCTION: The leather industry holds a very prominent place in the Indian economy because of its great potential for employment generation, growth and exports. Being among the top ten foreign exchange earners, there has been an increasing emphasis on its planned development, which aims at optimum utilization of available raw materials for maximizing the returns, particularly from exports. The leather industrial sector comprises of the tanneries where raw skins and hides are converted into leather and factories for transforming leather into a variety of consumer products such as footwear, garments and assorted leather items such as wallets, key chains, handbags, passport cases and brief cases. The Leather craft was one of the earliest crafts to be evolved by mankind all over the world. Even in India. In the remote

antiquity, Leather was a flourishing craft. Tanning of skins was done by certain class of people in every town and village of the country. Rampant mention is made of this craft in our ancient texts and folklores. In this paper, an attempt is made to trace the growth of the leather craft from a study of this literature.

1.1 Early References in Vedic Literature: In the Vedic India the leather yielding cattle heads comprising of cattle, camel, goat, ram, sheep and buffaloes were the basis to estimate the wealth of its owner. The Vedic and post Vedic literature have references where the village shepherd leads them to pastures. The hides and Leather obtained from these animals after death are referred to as Charman ^[1] in both the earlier and the later portion of the Rigveda, Arthveda; in the books of the Yajurvedic Schools, the Brahmanas and in the later literature ^[2]. There is a mention of stretching and wetting of hides in the Rig veda which perhaps could hint at the tanning process referred to as Carmanala, by a group of people called the Charmamna (probably the tanners). The Charman (skins/hides) were tanned, processed and converted into usable goods^[3]. It was because of the easy availability of raw materials, that the leather work was a flourishing craft in the vedic period. The Arthveda refers to trade in, hides and skins which were drawn from the regions around Kashmir. Manu incidentally refers to leather workers and objects such as shoes, tattered garments, utensils, etc. made by of leather. The mention of three categories of leather workers, namely the Carmokara, the Dhigavna and the Karavara in the texts indicate the importance of leather craft during this period ^[1] Another important text where the leather craft finds mention is the Arthasastra, according to which, the hides were considered important enough to be constantly stored in the city and replaced with fresh supplies. The workers in hides were asked to settle along with workers in wool, yarn, bamboo, armours, weapons, shields and sudras in the western quarter.

1.2 Mention in Buddhist Texts: Though both the Hindus and the Buddhists had strong objection to taking life, this objection never seriously opposed the growth of trade in leather and leather manufactures,¹ which at that time depended on the skins of cattle which had died a natural death, usually of starvation ^[2] The Jatakas-stories of the former births of the Buddha,

refer of jerkins, big sacks, ropes, straps etc. made of leather. According of these stories the leather was also used in making musical instruments. A cobbler is also referred to in one of these stories as making shoes ^[2] The following extract from the Chaddanta Jataka, gives an idea of the various uses to which leather was put at that time - 'sending for workers in leather she charged them saying, "Sirs, you must make us leather sack, holding a hogshead's weight; we have need of leather parachute." And both smiths and workers in leather quickly make everything.

1.3 References of Leather Goods: According to Crooke, in the primitive times the uses of hides for clothing prevailed among all the Indo Aryan races. The Maruts wore deer skins, even the wild ascetics seem to have been cloth in skins ^[2-3]

It is difficult ascertain as to when Indians started using footwear. Some references in the Taittiriya, Samhita, Gobhila, Grhyasutra, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vishnu Purana, Brahamanas, Manu and older Law books, indicate their common use in Ancient India. Referring to the origin of leather shoes, the Mahabharata states that they were first of all presented to Saga Jamadagni by the Sun God, and since then, their offering in charity to Brahamans had been regarded as an act of virtue. Crooke in his book, "Tribes and Castes" writes, "the Vishnu Purana enjoins all who wish to protect their persons never to be without leather shoes; and Manu warns the Brahamans never to use shoes that have been worn by another. In the Ramayana, Bharata places on the vacant throne of Ajudhya a pair of Rama's slippers". Some sculptural representation from Bengal, Bihar, and other places depict Surya as wearing boots or shoes, throwing significant light on the above references. ^[4]

1.4 Mention of Leather Workers: Another indication to the presence of the leather craft in the ancient period is the repeated references to the leather workers in the literature of that period. In the Rigveda they are called the Charmamna, the Jain Jambudvipa Prajnapti refers to the shoemakers as the Cammayaru. Mention of the leather workers is also made in. The Vinaya Pitaka includes the craft of leather workers in the list of five low occupations, mention of leather workers is also made in the Laksamidhara and Sukraniti, the leather workers. Leather workers

find mention in various other works too by the names Karavera, Dhigvana, Carmavakrtin and Carmakara. Parasara places the Carmakara midway between Sudra and the Candala. He is included in the seven antyajjas (untouchables) in the list of Arti and Yama. A mention of the Carmakara is also made in the Vedaya samrti and Apastambasmrti. [5-9]

1.5 The Status of Leather Craft: An idea of the state of the leather craft in the ancient period can be made, from the wide range of articles made from leather which are mentioned in the ancient literature. The long list, included, the Bow-string called Jya which was made of ox Hide; thongs called dhmata for holding liquids; leather bottles called Bhastra; and thongs used for coaches called Vardha; thongs for door fastenings called Paricarmanya; and for bridles called syurman. In the Mahabharata we find references to the use of leather for the hand guard for the bow, which was used for the protection of hands and fingers, shield made of ox-hide or bearskin, a cuirass and a breast plate of leather, a body armour made of iron and leather, leather sheaths for swords, leather straps, leather robes for horses which served as armours for them, shields of leather for protection of war chariot and for drums. Manu also refers to tattered garments and utensils made of leather. The Jatakas refer to leather jerkins, big sacks, ropes, straps, shoes and leather parachute. While Stein describes in great detail about the ancient records and correspondence written on leather and wood, some bearing the date of the third century A.D., which were discovered by him during the exploration of the Niya site. The finish of these documents indicates the extensive practice in the preparation of the material. Many of the stucco statuary and Fresco painting of the ancient Khotan show Personages riding on Horse and Camels, the saddles and trappings of these are very similar to those used in modern times. These rides are depicted wearing high boots of black leather, which were richly embroidered in gold and silk. Book binding was another use to which leather was put in the ancient times. [10-13]

1.6 Export of Leather Goods: These articles were made not only for the local consumption but were also exported to other countries. The earlier works both written locally and of foreign origin, mention the export of tanned leather and also of leather goods to the middle East and China, a trade which had assumed fair proportions even during that period. According to Macro Polo by A.D.1290 curing of the hides and manufacture of leather were two of the most important

industries of Gujarat. Every year of number of ships went to Arabia Laden with the skins of Goats, oxen, Unicorns and other animals. Cambay during this period became one of the established Centre for the manufactures of sandals and Thana the Centre from which the leather manufactures were exported. The leather used for the sandals was worked into red and blue sleeping mats exquisitely inlaid with figures of birds and beasts, and skillfully embroidered with gold and silver wire. Besides the sandals; driti and masaks, the leather bags for carrying water and domestic vessels; Jars of all sizes as containers of liquids, like leather bottle for storing oils, leather straps; drums and leather bellows for the use of blacksmiths were also manufactured here.² By the tenth and the eleventh centuries, Mansura in Sind and Cambay in Gujarat were exporting considerable consignments of leather shoes and sandals. The leather industry was in a flourishing condition during the Gupta Period. There are many references indicating this, the vilavatti inscription refers to the different craftsmen like metal workers and leather workers who are referred to as Loha-Charma-Kara and the Charter of Visnusena which refers to the Shoemakers as Padakara. During this period, leather was the monopoly of the state. The records of land gifts state that the king reserved the rights to the hides called Charma ^[14-16].

1.7 An Organised Craft (Guild System): Even during this period, the leather industry existed in an organized manner. A lot of literary and epigraphic evidence exists which refers to the industrial or traditional guilds. Most of the crafts and industries formed their own guilds which were usually local in character. The Trisasthisalaka-Purusacaritam refers to eighteen guilds which included the Cammayaras or the guild of leather workers.

Even Rhys Davids in his book, 'Buddhist India' includes the leather workers, who made numerous types of foot coverings and sandals, in his list of eighteen guilds. Alberuni includes the shoemakers in his list of eight guilds, besides the guilds of flowers, jugglers, basket and shield makers, sailors, fisherman, hunters and weavers. Even Mitaksara refers to the guild of Shoemakers. These functional corporations (guilds) formed in the different parts of the country made a great contribution to the economic development of the country during the period^[17-19].

1.8 Transformations under the Muslim Rule: Though the leather industry was well established in the ancient India, but for all practical purposes the rise of the native leather industry is coincide with the establishment of Muhammadan Rule in India. One of the reasons for this was, the muslims whether immigrant or Indian converts, considered shoes an integral part of their routine dress. It was because of this, the aggregate domestic requirement of shoes grew manifold during the Muslim rule in India, as compared to the earlier Period. Along with the increase in demand of leather work, there was a corresponding increase in the supply of the hides and skins. A very significant change took place during this period, while earlier the *chamars* had to depend on the hides of animals which had died a natural death, now there was an abundance of the hides and skins, a large part coming from the animals which were slaughtered for meat. In contrast to the earlier Hindus and Buddhists meat formed an important part of diet for the Muslims. Meat was consumed in bulk on festive occasions in the mass-feeding *khangahs* of the sultanate and in kitchens of the aristocrats. An idea of the magnitude of this increased consumption can be made from the fact that, every morning the chef of Muhammad Bin Tughlaq was provided with 2,000 sheep and 2,5000 oxen for his routine menu. In the bazaars of Delhi, dressed meat of all descriptions was very commonly sold. It was during this time that the *Qasabs* or butchers appeared along with the other professionals of the period. These Qasabs providing for an affluent segment had quite a profitable business. Even Abu'l-Fazl in his, *Aini-Akbari*, mentions the slaughter houses for sheep, goats, berberies, fowls and ducks outside the city.

Along with the increased demand of dietary purposes, with the establishment of the Sultans regime in Delhi in 1206, there was an increase in demand for cattle, buffaloes, camels, sheep and goats for ploughing the extended land under crop; for transportation and for drawing water from the wells. The growing pressure of the market led to multiplied incidences of breeding and rearing of cattle and livestock, which in turn, yielded a correspondingly higher volume of leather. This provided the impulse for advance in the craft, in regard to its diversification, quality and volume turn out. A variety of articles were added to an already wide range being manufactured viz., Book covers ornamented with gold and silk thread, Cushions, Prayer mats, Bed covers, Dining spreads, Saddles, Shields. Water bags, Boots and Shoes, Saddles and Bridles of horses,

Scabbards of swords, Covers of manuscripts, Packing of Bengal sugar parcels for export, Red and Blue leather mats with inlay of figures of birds and beasts^[20-27].

1.9 Structured Growth-The Karkhanas: During this period the Sultan exercised a control over the production of industries, which came to be concentrated inside the palace grounds, in the form of the royal workshops, known as the *Karkhanas*. These *Karkhanas* provided the articles of luxury and war auxiliaries for the house hold and the army of the Sultan. Thus the court controlled its own looms, its own tailoring, shoemaking, fur and leather industry. The Urban leather industry flourished in these *Karkhanas* during these period. The importance of this industry was realized, for there was a separate department known as the *Rikabhkhana*, which looked after the manufacture of saddlery and harness.

The leather craft till 1330, remained by and large a rural industry, as the production of leather till this time did not require any sophisticated technology. But the tanned and treated leather ware which needed skilful handling got rooted in the urban locale. As a result places like Multan, Cambay and Nagor emerged as noted centres for the production of attractive and quality leather ware. Lahore came to be known for saddles, boots and shoes. Though the industry flourished in all the western parts of the Empire, Sind came to be known as the home of the leather industry and became famous for its table covers; pieces for wall decorations, soft and cool mattresses with multi coloured silk motifs of flowers and even personages^[28-29].

From the wide range of products made of leather during the Sultanate period, it was the shoes which commanded a ready and stable market. A part of these utility pairs turned out in considerable volume were exported from the ports of Gujarat. These shoes usually made of goat skins fetched good prices, particularly the richly ornamented shoes, on one occasions their luxurious decoration fetched a price a high as 60,000 tankas. The leather workers used hides of different animals for different purposes. Hides of buffaloes were best suited for making shields and water bags, while those of goat called morocco were best suited for shoes and book binding and those of camels were best suited for making jars and containers for liquids.

The leather workers had by now become an integral part of the rural as well as the urban society. In Daultabad (Deogir) where the capital was shifted under Muhammad Bin Tuglaq, there were separate colonies for the king and his troops. To make them self-sufficient, each colony had along with mosques, minarets, bazaars, hamams, flour Mills, Shops of craftsmen like goldsmith, black smiths, dyers; a place for the dressers of tanned leather. Leather was put to various uses, even the impregnable fort of Deogir could only be reached by a leather ladder. But inspite of their importance the leather workers were forced to take quarters outside the proper settlements, which were in some cases outside the city wall. This was because of the exuding stinking smell from the tanning process and the aversion of the Hindus to craft because of its association with flesh and Muslim aversion to the *chamars* for keeping the foul beast – the pig. For instance the thirteenth century, the leather workers in Delhi occupied a ward outside the city wall, and in the sixteenth century in Kabul, their quarter adjoined the Delhi gate^[30-31].

We see how despite the strong taboos of both the Hindus and the Budhhists for leather and leather work, this industry not only expanded and gained in popularity but also in due course came to attain a high proficiency because of the economic policies introduced by the muslim rules. Having strengthened itself in the Muslim period the industry made strides under British and went on to become the gross earner of foreign exchange for the country.

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