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The Karkhanah - From Court to Canvas: A Historical Analysis of Couture Textiles and Ornaments in the Mughal Court During the Reigns of Akbar and Jahangir

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Abstract

The Mughal "karkhanah" system, though not as advanced as modern industry, produced textiles of exceptional quality that surpassed those of most contemporary powers. Under strong royal patronage, workshops spread across Mughal India, with major centres at Cambay, Pattan, Kashmir, Gujarat, Ahmedabad, Bengal, Agra, Lahore, and Delhi. The court controlled two systems: independent artisans, who supplied their own capital, materials, and labour, and state-run "karkhanahs", where artisans worked under imperial orders. Textile production expanded from the sixteenth century and flourished under Akbar, who promoted industries and welcomed foreign artisans. Cotton, silk, velvet, wool, and carpets became India's leading industries, while the country earned global fame for silk brocade, pashmina, and fine muslin. Famous products included zardozi, chikankari, kalamkari, Banaras "kim-khwab", Dhaka malmal, Kashmir shawls and carpets, and leather goods.

Indian artisans showed remarkable technical skill in weaving, dyeing, printing, painting, and embroidery. These industries supported allied crafts, met domestic demand, and generated a large export surplus. Dutch, French, Portuguese, and British traders carried Indian textiles to Asia, Africa, and Europe, making textiles central to Mughal trade and prestige.

Keywords: Karkhanah, Akbar, Jahangir, Textiles, Royalty, Artisans, Trade routes.

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Introduction

Mughal textiles and their designs started expanding from the 16th Century onwards. The textile industries flourished with royal patronage, especially during the reign of Emperor Akbar. The largest textile production industry emerged during this period. Textiles, including cotton, silks, carpets, velvets, and wool, were the leading industries in India. The foremost centres for production were Cambay, Pattan, Kashmir, Gujarat, Ahmedabad, Bengal, Agra, Lahore, and Delhi. It also traces the trade in Indian textiles with contemporary kingdoms. The Dutch, French, Portuguese, and the British East India Company exported them in large numbers to the east and the west. The travellers' accounts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are an important source of information about the fabric industries used in India to make textiles and royal costumes.

In terms of climate and custom, the Indian cotton textile industries were the largest market. Along with cotton, the Indian silk industries also flourished during this period. Moreland says that 'the silk weaving industry was still in its primary stage even before Akbar's reign started'. In the Akbarnama, Abul Fazl mentions that Akbar extended his patronage to the silk industry, which later led to its further development. He also encouraged foreign artisans to settle in India. These industries led to the development of major towns for the production of fabrics. Therefore, they played a major role as an economic factor in the Mughal era, especially during Akbar's rule. They directly impacted the economy as clothing was a basic need.

There were primarily two types of industries governed by the court. One type was the artisan system, where independent artisans invested their own capital, provided their own materials, and contributed their own labour to produce goods. 'The other type was the karkhanah system, where artisans worked in karkhanah under the orders of the state'.[1] The state karkhanah are well described by Abul Fazl and Bernier, which were generally located in towns and especially in notable cities. As they were directly under the state, the state was solely responsible for whatever was produced in these karkhanah. 'Roughly, there were twelve toshakhanah and, according to the Ain-i-Akbari, there were twenty-six main karkhanah and ten other karkhanah in the imperial court alone'.[2] 'Fazl has given a record of more than a hundred workshops which were operating under the full attention of Akbar'.[3] They were producing the goods for the khil'at, which consisted of several items distributed by the emperor on several occasions. They were also producing garments for the royal wardrobe, and harem clothes, etc. They were required to meet the emperor's needs and rarely reached the market for sale, making them exclusive to the imperial wardrobe.

1.1 Large-Scale Production of the Mughal Textiles

The production of different textiles, fabrics, and their designs is the product of the skills and contributions of different sections of the textile industry. So many techniques were involved in the process of making a textile and its design. The first generation of Indian court costumes started with textiles made during the rule of Mughal emperors Akbar and Jahangir. Designs from their time show many

1 Verma Tripta, Karkhanas under the Mughals from Akbar to Aurangzeb, a study in economic development, Delhi, 1994, p. 15.

2 Ibid. p. 20.

3 Ain-i-Akbari (tr.) vol. I, op. cit., p. 12.

different patterns. This variety came from the influence of many art forms, including literature and painting, as well as the arrival of Persian poets, calligraphers, and painters at the Mughal and Deccani courts. 'The Mughal courts welcomed and supported talented artists'.[4]

Akbar had a keen interest in art. He became a great patron of the arts and maintained contacts with various kingdoms, especially the Iranian and European courts. He even provided opportunities for his court craftsmen to study foreign artistic forms, ideas, and skills. He invited artists and craftsmen to India, which led to the amalgamation of different art forms. The naturalism of pre-Islamic India and the structure, elegance, and finesse of the Islamic style led to the development of a new art form for paintings and textiles.

Jahangir, on the other hand, was an ambitious observer of the natural world. The finest artist of his era was Mansur, renowned for paintings that embodied the grace of the Iranian style. Robert Skelton noted that "Mansur was instrumental in the development of the Mughal style featuring floral motifs. These motifs became widely used in the courtyards of the Mughal palaces." Skelton identified two key factors that contributed to the rise of floral designs during Jahangir's rule. The first was the impact of Pierre Vallet's French herbal, which Jahangir acquired around 1618. The second was Jahangir's trip to Kashmir, where he instructed Mansur to depict one hundred varieties of spring flowers in the Himalayan foothills, mirroring descriptions found in the Memoirs of Babur from many years earlier.[5]

The craftsmen of the seventeenth century used Persian forms and mixed them with regional designs, such as the crocus of Persia and the iris of Kashmir. The details regarding the operation and performance of the court karkhanah are provided in the travel account of Bernier. He explained these workshops as "large halls" where different types of textile production activities, including embroidery work, were done. These workshops were only for the royal fabric production. 'Bernier mentions that the embroiderers in these workshops were supervised by a master'.[6]

1.1(a) Cotton Industries

Several karkhanas were established under Akbar, which had a separate account in the Ain. The cotton textile industry was located in nearly every part of India. It appears that no city, town, region, or small town was without this workshop. Thirty-two major cotton production centres have been found. They played a major role in the development of the Mughal economy. These cotton goods outputs led to the development of towns such as Daryabad, Khairabad, and Sirihind. Cotton weaving was a large-scale industry in India, and the variety and methods of its production impressed all foreigners. Muslin was the main product of the cotton weaving industries. Abul Fazl gives an exquisite account of extremely fine muslin produced at Banaras, Agra, Malwa, Sonargaon, Deccan, Lahore, Golconda, and Burhanpur. 'The muslin produced in Dacca, known as mulmul-i-khas, was the most famous among all of them. A big portion of this production was consumed by the royalty'.[7] Nur Jahan also patronised the Dacca muslin and promoted its garments at the court. The Mughals introduced the

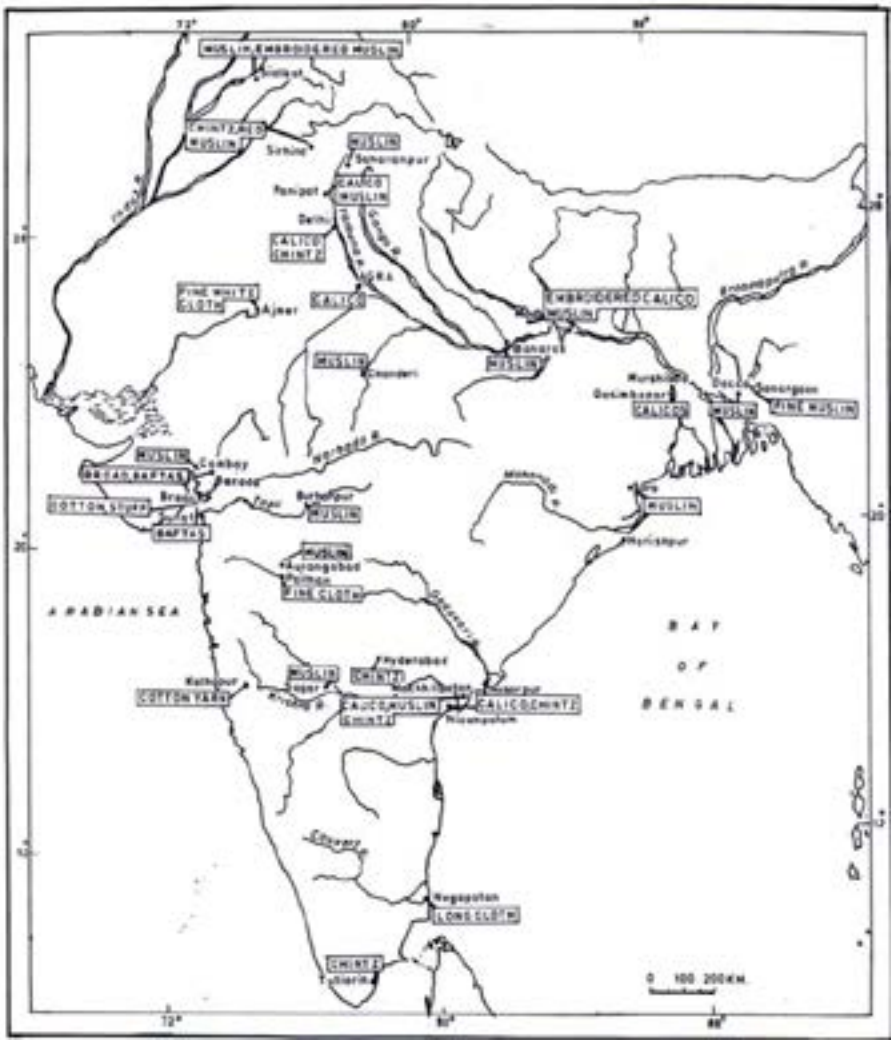
4 Daniel, S. Walker Flowers Underfoot: Indian Carpet of the Mughal Era, New York,1997, p. 29.

5 Skelton, R., A Decorative Motif in Mughal Art, in Pal Pratap Aditya (ed), Aspects of Indian Art, Leiden, 1972, pp. 145-152.

6 Bernier, F., Travels in the Mughal Empire, trans by A. Constable, Oxford, 1934, vol.1, p. 259.

7 Biswas, A., Indian Costumes, New Delhi, 1985, p.110.

Jamdani weaving industry in India and had a monopoly for a very long time. They were produced at the royal Karkhanas. Banaras gained recognition for its muslins, with the highest quality referred to as Kasivastra. 'The Majjhima Nikaya highlights that the remarkable advancement of fine cotton in Banaras was attributable to the cultivation of high-grade cotton, the skill of its spinners, and the softness of the water used for washing and bleaching'.[8]



Map 1. Cotton Production Centres During the Mughal Empire, 16th and 17th Centuries.

Sialkot in Northern India was the main production centre for the embroidered muslin. Chintz and red muslins were manufactured in Sirhind. Saharanpur and Panipat were significant centres for muslin production. Agra and Delhi also contributed to the production of muslin and calico. Mau and Banaras served as production hubs for muslin. In Eastern India, calico was made at Murshidabad and Kasim

8 Jayakar, Pupul: "Cotton Jamdani of Tanda and Banaras", in Dhamija, Jasleen and Jain, Jyotindra, editors. Handwoven fabrics of India. Ahmedabad: Mapin, 1990. p.97.

Bazar. Chanderi was the key centre for muslin production in Central India.

1.1 (b) Silk Industries

The silk manufactured in western India primarily consisted of blends of cotton and silk fabrics. The only genuine silk was the patolas, also referred to as the double Ikat of Gujarat. Patan served as the main hub for weaving Patola. 'These patolas were not only popular within the local market but were also highly sought after in Europe'.[9] Barbosa mentions the colourful fabrics and silks that Indians refer to as 'patolas', especially the silk goods from Cambay, known as 'patolas'. 'Ahmedabad too was a notable centre for silk production, exporting patolas to Southeast Asia'.[10] Bengal served as the primary hub for the manufacture of both raw silk and finished silk goods in the seventeenth century. 'Although Bengal's silk items were not as exquisite as those from Persia and Syria, they were significantly more expensive'.[11] 'The Persian word for Bengal silk is 'Tafta'.[12] There were two branches of the silk industry: sericulture and silk weaving. Dadni merchants handled them. They were providing the weavers with the raw material and capital.

The primary centres for silk production during the Mughal era included Ahmedabad, Surat, Sindh, Delhi, Agra, Kasim Bazar, and Malda. Tavernier noted that Kasim Bazar and several regions in Bengal were the leading silk-producing centres in the seventeenth century.[13] Bernier also supports Tavernier's observation, stating that "Bengal served as the principal silk-producing region from which silk was exported both to other parts of India and to foreign nations".[14] The Taftas were produced in Bengal. Hugli and Kasim Bazar were the main centres of production of Taftas. Some other centres were Agra and Lahore. 'The coloured Taftas were manufactured in Bengal'.[15]

1.1 (c) Velvet Industries

The plain and gold thread velvets were produced in Ahmedabad and Lahore during the second half of the 16th century. During Akbar's rule, velvet production took place in Gujarat, Lahore, Eastern India, and potentially Bengal. In both Gujarat and Lahore, high-quality voided velvets known as Makhmali Zarbaft were crafted. Lahore served as a hub for the creation of extraordinary brocaded velvets. With the disintegration of the Mughal Empire, the velvet weaving industries were highly impacted.

9 The English factories in India, 1934-6, ed. by W. Foster, Oxford, 1906, p. 102.

10 Tavernier, Jean Baptiste, Travels in India, tr. by V. Ball and ed. by W. Crooke, London, 1925, vol. 2, p.2.

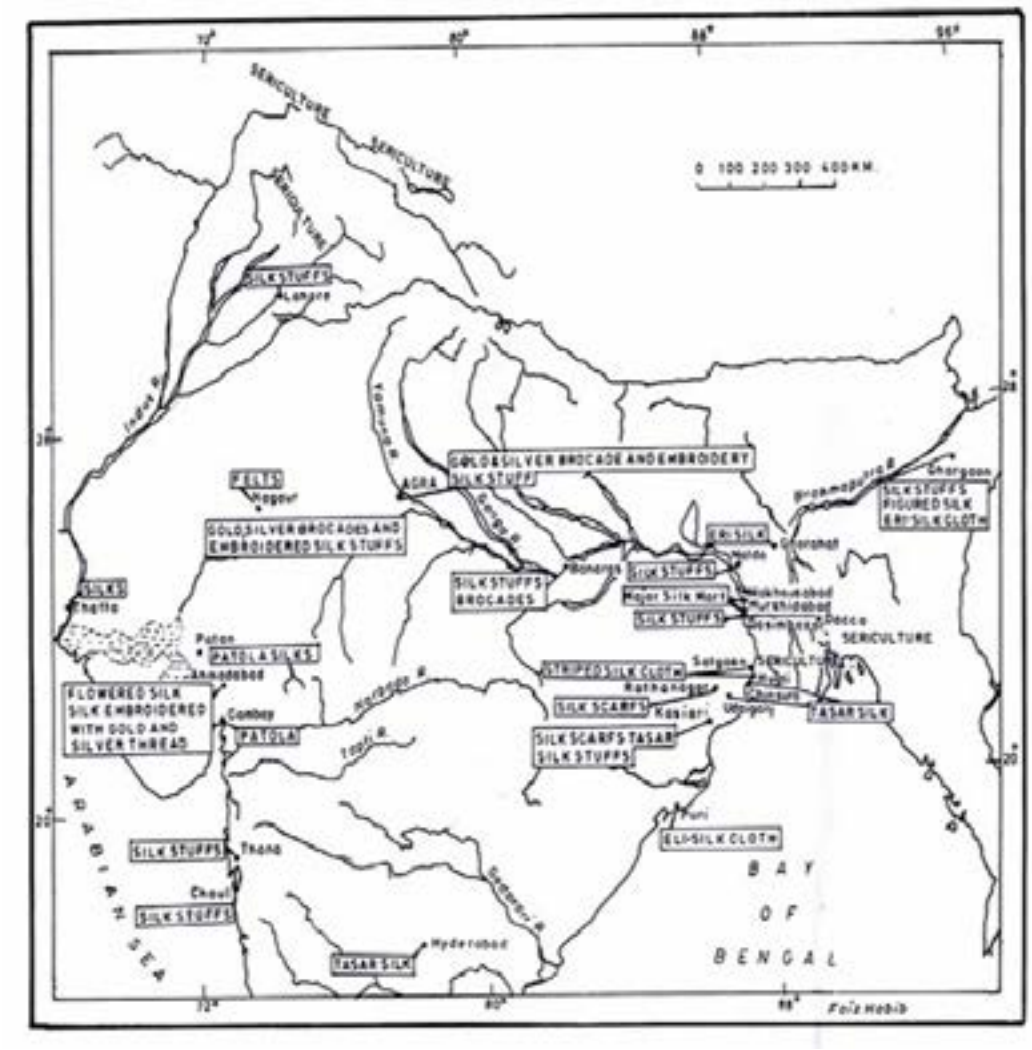
11 Irwin John and Schwartz J P.R., op. cit, p. 46.

12 Bernier. op. cit. p. 439-440.

13 Tavernier, vol. 2, op. cit. p. 2.

14 Bernier, vol.1, op. cit. p. 439.

15 The English Factories, 1664-1667, pp.46-62, 158, 290-291.



Map 2. Silk Production Centres during the Mughal Empire, 16th and 17th centuries.

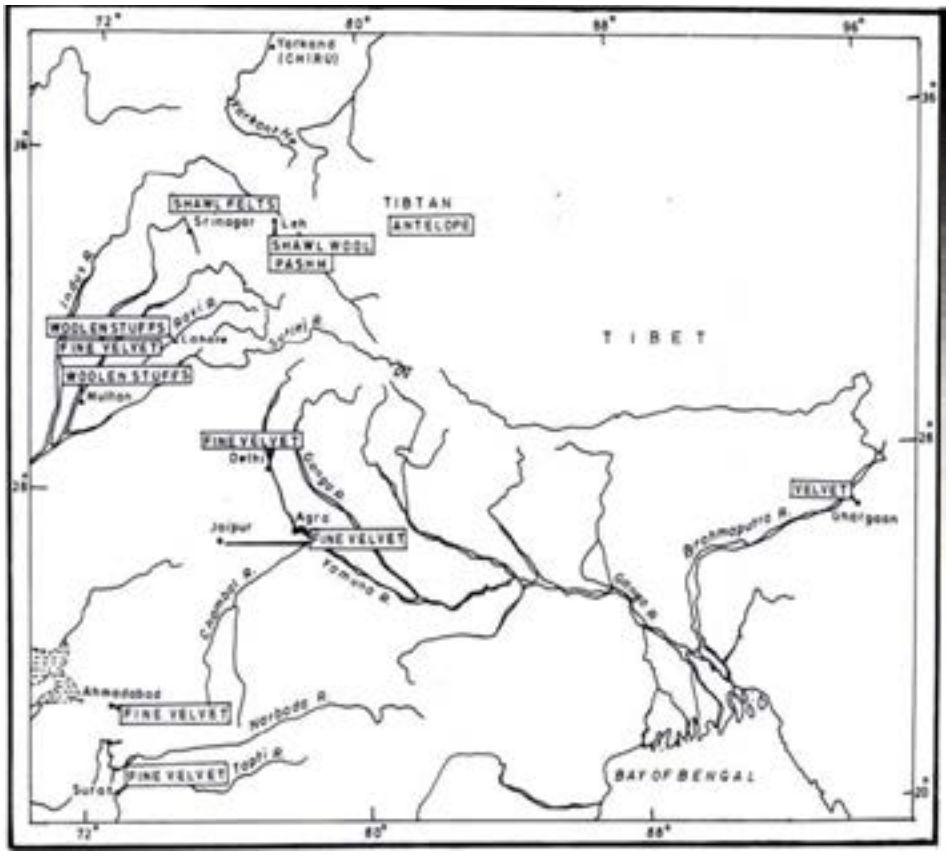
1.1 (d) Wool Industries

The use of wool was confined only to the rich classes. It is shown that Akbar was very fond of wearing different styles of shawls. As a result, major centres for shawl weaving were set up at Agra. The word shawl is derived from the Persian 'shal'. They were used in many forms, like a girdle, a mantle, a scarf, or a turban. The material for making these shawls defines their purpose. The fabric used to create Kashmiri Shawls comes from the fleece of the Central Asian mountain goat species.

In Western regions, it is referred to as either Pashmina or Cashmere, which comes from the historical spelling of Kashmir. The term Cashmere was given as these shawls were made in Kashmir; however, the wool utilised for their creation was sourced from Tibet or Central Asia rather than being produced locally.[16] The Kashmiri artisans had a monopoly on making the varieties of shawls, as they were only

16 Irwin, John, Shawls: A study in Indo-European Influences, London, 1955, p. 3.

capable of hand-spinning the very finest grades of Pashm thread. Therefore, the woven material, especially the Pashminas, has always been associated with Kashmir rather than Ladakh or Tibet. Not all Kashmiri shawls were woven with Pashm. Abul Fazl mentioned the shawls woven in Lahore, from silk and pashm, known as Mayan.



Map 3. Wool and Velvet Production Centres During the Mughal Empire, 16th and 17th Centuries.

1.1 (e) Zari Industries

The Mughals provided royal patronage to the Zari industries, which led to their development and prosperity in India. 'Along with the Mughals, many Maharajas of the provincial courts also patronised these industries'.[17] The foreign travellers have provided a detailed account of its development. The Mughal royalty, especially the empresses, were very fond of wearing garments which had zari work on them. They were very prominent among the royalty. 'The royalty gave priority to the costumes made with gold or silver thread embroidery'.[18] The conventional method of manufacturing for these crafts was the structured setup of a karkhanah. While numerous court crafts declined and disappeared,

17 Hunter W.W.: "Embroidery Gold and Silver thread wire, tinsel etc.", IGI, vol. 6,1886, pp. 602 603.

18 Smith, V.A., 'Treasure of Akbar', JRAS, 1915, pp. 231-242.

the production organisation of the zardozi craft managed to adapt effectively; in response to the evolving circumstances, it formed new production organisations.

They also played a key role in the development of the Karchobi art form of Banaras. The lower garments of royal women were more adorned than the upper garments, like the lehenga, sharara, garara, ghaghra, etc. Such garments provided the embroiderers with the opportunity to show their skills. Their work remained in the Kamdani style. The imperial workshops only preferred highly skilled artisans. The Ain mentions that "if a local artisan were very skilful and impressed the emperor with their skills, they got the opportunity to work in the imperial workshop with better wages."

The techniques of textile manufacturing remained a tradition during the Mughal period. The Indian artisans used advanced dyeing techniques, and their vegetable dyes were so durable that they were exported to England. However, Indian dyers could not produce some colours on silk, so silk dyers from England came to teach them. In 1681, two silk dyers were hired at Fort St. George to dye black and other colours. Similar appointments were made at Kasim Bazar in Bengal. The increase of Muslim influence on Indian costumes led to a growing demand for higher-quality textiles. Raw materials for textile production were sourced both domestically and through imports. The textile industry stimulated the development of allied sectors such as embroidery, dyeing, printing, and painting. Production levels in these industries were sufficient to satisfy domestic demand, with surplus textiles exported to international markets.

Contemporary records from the Mughal era show that the emperors provided opportunities to grow art in the form of embroidery by designating skilled artisans from Persia to higher ranks. Abul Fazl wrote that, "His majesty pays much attention to various things; hence Irani, European and Mongolian articles of wear are in abundance. Skilful masters and workmen have settled in this country to teach the people an improved system of manufacture. The imperial workshops in the towns of Lahore, Agra, Fatehpur, Ahmedabad, turn out many masterpieces of workmanship and the figures and patterns, knots and variety of styles which now prevail, astonish experienced travellers. His Majesty himself acquired in a short time a theoretical and practical knowledge of the whole trade, and on account of the care bestowed upon them, the intelligent workmen of this country soon improved. All kinds of weaving and silk spinning were brought to perfection, and the imperial workshops furnished all those things which are made in other countries".[19]

Even though the clothing production techniques were traditional, Indian textiles were still competing globally. This success was made possible due to the focus that the Mughal Emperors placed on enhancing the Mughal Karkhanah.

1.2 Trading Patterns

The fabrics used at the Mughal court were of such high quality that they could compete with textiles from around the world. Bengal and Gujarat became leading centres for the production and export of textiles because of their favourable locations. Delhi in the north, Deogiri in the Deccan, Cambay in Gujarat, and places like Dacca and Sonargaon in Bengal were especially well-known for cloth pro-

19 Ain, Blochmann. op. cit. p. 93-94.

duction. Barbosa says, "Cambay was the centre of manufacture of all kinds of fine, coarse and printed cotton cloth, besides other cheap varieties of velvet, satins, taffetas, and thick carpet, varieties of printed cloth and silk muslins were also manufactured in other parts of Gujarat". The dyeing industry also grew because people liked bright colours. Calico painting was popular as well.

During Akbar's reign, the brocades and high-quality silks were imported in large quantities from China and other Central Asian countries. Highly stylised textiles started being produced in the sixteenth century, not only for royal use but for trade as well. 'The famous Mughal embroidered clothes were exported to England through Portugal'.[20] Francois Bernier has drawn an implicit parallel between the circumstances in France and those in India, especially in Delhi, during that period. He was fascinated by the embroideries made on the Royal women's paijamas, and gave a detailed account of that. He mentions that 'the goods produced in the royal Karkhanas were of very sophisticated quality, and each one of them was considered an excellent piece of art'.[21]

The growth of the cotton textile industry happened because of its great foreign demand. The silk weaving industry was so large that Cambay and Bengal both supplied to Persia, Tartary, Turkey, Syria, and Barbary. 'The Dutch transported these silks to both Japan and Holland'.[22] They were also brought from Bengal to Ahmedabad and Surat, where they were crafted into textiles. The Portuguese also traded in the brocade silks.

'During Akbar's reign, velvet was imported from Yazd, Europe, Mashhad, Kashan and Herat, which are the Safavid velvet-producing centres'.[23] 'But when Jahangir came to the throne, the velvet import shifted from China, which was of low quality compared to Persia'.[24] Sir Thomas Roe, in his traveller's account, has given information that the Velvets were also exported during Jahangir's period. The Cashmere shawls were so gorgeous that they attracted the European traders. Even though these shawls were produced in India, the raw materials used to make them were not available locally. It was brought in from China, Tibet, Leh Ladakh, and other regions, but it was primarily manufactured in Kashmir. The textile trade between the Mughals and other foreign countries was strong, which maintained the economy of the Mughals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

1.3 Working class

Artisans from different parts of the world received support during the Mughal era, resulting in the blending of diverse weaving techniques. For instance, the cylindrical buta emerged from the fusion of Persian and Indian design styles. Their textile designs were highly influenced by the Persian brocades because of the friendly relationship between the Mughals and Persia. Abul Fazl's Ain-i-Akbari provides perhaps the most detailed description of woven loom textiles created during the Mughal era, highlighting the thoughtful support of Emperor Akbar. The weavers were prohibited from selling muslin pieces. Thus, merchants acquired muslins through government representatives who made

20 Jagdish Mittal and Kamala Mittal: Bhartiya kasida (Indian industry Textile) Hyderabad, 1954, p. 10.

21 Bernier, Francois. op. cit. p.254.

22 Travernier. vol. 2. op. cit. p. 3.

23 Habib Irfan, An Atlas of the Mughal Empire (Delhi, 1982), p. 54.

24 Roe, Sir Thomas; The Embassy of, to the court of Great Mughals (1615-19), London, 1926, p. 285.

annual payments to the government for these rights. In exchange, they were permitted to take a commission.

Artists and designers sketched their designs, called naqsha, on paper using markers and followed the latest market trends. The Naqshaband would then adjust these motifs to meet their clients' needs. After finishing the initial design, the artists gave it to the Naqshband. Markers copied the patterns onto fabric with pencil and black ink, and sometimes added watercolours to show the colour scheme. Embroiderers had a more creative and important role than the markers. The Ain mentions several foreign designers who visited Emperor Akbar's royal workshops in Lahore, Fatehpur Sikri, and Ahmedabad. These designers came to teach local weavers, artisans, and designers.[25] They also visited Banaras along with the royal authority.

Women primarily handled spinning, working from their homes. The raw materials they received were in a very poor state. They earned only one and a half annas daily. Dyers belonged to a separate category. The weaving process involved at least six specialised weavers: warp-maker, warp-dresser, warp threader, pattern-drawer, colour-caller, and pattern-master. The weavers themselves were generally impoverished. In contrast, the pattern-dyers, or naqqash, earned higher wages. All the weavers were male, and the loom's owner was referred to as the ustad. There were two types of agreements between the loom owner and those operating the looms. The first type of agreement was for piecework, where the weavers received a set payment for every hundred spools produced, as many warps. The second type was a partnership arrangement, in which the loom owner supplied the loom and materials while taking one-fifth of the total sales.[26]

The main profit makers were not loom owners but the shawl-brokers, who were the intermediaries between the producers and the English merchants. Therefore, there emerged a class of loom owners known as karkhanadars and their head was known as ustad.[27] The weavers were subjected to exploitation by the karkhanadars. They hired artisans and compensated them with cash, passing the craft down through generations. The primary buyer of these agents was the imperial court, with transactions reaching lakhs of rupees occurring at the Imperial camp. Despite having a well-established industry during the Mughal era, the weavers' circumstances were poor due to the karkhanadars' exploitation. The earnings for women and children were exceptionally low. Bernier also gave a detailed account of the working conditions of these artisans. He wrote that "if the artists and manufacturers were encouraged, the useful and fine arts would flourish; but these unhappy men are condemned, treated with harshness and inadequately remunerated for their labour".[28]

Conclusion

The Mughals not only supported various art forms within the court, but they also had a deep interest in fostering the growth of these arts, which is distinctly evident in their architecture and textiles, including garments, carpets, tents, and wall hangings, among others. Their patronage of it was remark-

25 Abul-Fazl, Ain-i-Akbari, tr. By H. Blochmann and Col. H.S. Jarrett, vol. 1, Calcutta, 1927-49.

26 Irwin John, op. cit., p. 7.

27 Ibid. p. 8.

28 Bernier, Travels, op. cit. p. 228-229.

able. The objective of promoting these karkhanah was to encourage the workers and develop new cultural aspects. When the Mughal Empire started disintegrating in the early 18th century, Persian and Hindu artisans gathered around Delhi and Agra, then dispersed into surrounding textile centres, and their skills were absorbed by the newly emerged regional dynasties and their production centres. With the decentralisation of the Mughal Empire, the regional courts started their own courtly trends where angrakha, chogha, and kurta became the standard wear. With the lack of a unifying influence, the styles of the regional courts started to develop independently, leading to the gradual vanishing of the uniformity that the Mughals, especially under Akbar and Jahangir, had established.

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