



Antiquity of Leather Art: Indian milieu

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Abstract- This Paper is about the oldness of leather and leather goods manufacturing in India. We have ample literary evidence of leather goods since Rigvedic times. Leather and leather goods manufacturing have been an important occupation in the ancient, medieval and modern period. Leather was used not only for manufacturing various types of shoes but also for making various articles like scabbards, mats, water bags, rein of horse etc. With the soaring demand leather manufacturing became a full-fledged industry in British times.

Key Words- Leather, Shoes, Hide, Skin.

In the Indian context, the leather works appear to have been fairly well developed since ancient time. The *Rigvedic* society was tribal in character and a large majority of people were cattle-breeders. They were dependant on pastoral life and there was no dearth of animal skins. So, the craft of leather manufacturing must have existed in those times. One can get many references to support the fact that the industry existed and flourished in the *Rigvedic* period.

The art of tanning hides was well known to the *Rigvedic* Aryans and the worker in leather, too, was a very important craftsman in the Vedic period. The mention of the word *carmana*, tanner, indicates that the art of tanning was known to them.¹ The ox hide was used in the manufacturing of bowstrings, slings, and reins. Pots of leather were made to collect the droppings of *soma* from the *soma* plant. Leather casks were made for holding liquor or water. Skin bags were also made of leather. Shields were prepared by bullocks to hide. Leather guards were made for the hand of the archer, and drums, which were made of wood, were bound with straps of leather. But the most characteristic work was exemplified in the manufacturing of shoes. Besides, leather workers made various articles out of hides, e.g. bow-strings, slings, rein of horses, and lash of the whip, leather armor, and guard of the forearm for the warriors.² Bottles made of leather was also in use.³

Leather seems to have reached a high stage by 2000 B.C. The earliest skins were used like mats to sit on, and highly prized were those of the tiger, but equally valued were those of the deer, particularly of the black variety. *Satapatha Brahman* refers to the stretching out of hides with pegs, *samkumbhah*⁴ and the *Rigveda* mentions the wetting of hides.⁵

The use of leather shoes has its origin from the mythological story of sage Jamdagani and his wife Renuka. In the *Anushasana Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma narrates to Yudhisther that the Sun God presented an umbrella and a pair of leather shoes to protect the feet of Jamdagni's wife Renuka, who was collecting, in the scorching heat of the day, the arrows shot by her husband.⁶ In another reference amongst the five Pandavas, Nakula kept his weapons in a bag made of sheep skin, *panch-nakhe kose*, while Sahadeva sheathed his sword in a scabbard made of cow

hide, *gavye koshe*.⁷

There is a reference in the *Ramayana* where Sita asks Rama for the skin of the deer.⁸ There are further references to specialized hide dresser and leather worker in the *Ramayana*. These skins were used largely by ascetics and thus, came to be closely associated with worship. There is the familiar picture of Shiva with a tiger skin worn across his chest.

In the age of Buddha, (6th century BC) the main industry was, of course, agriculture but there was considerable progress in crafts like wood work, pottery, garland making, weaving, ivory work, leather dressing, etc.⁹ In *Vesvantara Jataka* a king is represented wearing a 'chappal'. It is simple *chappal* of two straps joined at the point between the first and second toe and is similar to the modern *chappal*.¹⁰

During the Mauryan period though agriculture remained one of the main occupations, some small-scale industries, including leather industry, were also quite popular. Kautilya has described skins of different sizes with distinct colors and qualities and has declared that of all the skins, the soft, the smooth, and the hairy ones are the best.¹¹ He further describes that it was the duty of the forest officer to erect factories of forest products including skins, bones, horns etc. of wild animals.¹² Kautilya also mentions, in the *Arthashastra*, the rate of toll on leather was 1/20 or 1/25. This shows that the industry was also controlled by the state.¹³

The industry also produced shoes and other commodities like water-carriers, scabbards, and items needed in chariots, etc.¹⁴ Shoes or *upanaah* was an important article of costume. Shoes of different shape, colors and materials were made. The leather used for the shoes were dyed in different colours like yellow, red, manjeeta, black etc.¹⁵ There were many types of shoes in vogue.¹⁶ Some of the shoe types are as follows:

1. *Putabanddha*- The shoe which covered the foot up to the knee. This type of shoes is shown in the *Sanchi* sculptures. Later, in the *Brihad kalpasutra Bhashya* it is named as *jangha* or *khapusa*.
2. *Pudigunthima*- this type of shoe covered only the foot leaving bare the thigh.
3. *Khallakabaddha*- According to Buddhaghosa, this type of shoes covered the foot from the sole to the ankle.
4. *Vrichchhakalika*- it was decorated with the tail of a scorpion.
5. *Tittirapattika*- this kind of shoe was like the wings of a partridge.

The shoes were made of skins of tiger, lion, leopard, deer, cat, and owl. In the Sunga period, there are only a few depictions of shoes present in the *Bharhut* and *Sanchi stupa* sculpture.

During the Gupta period, the use of leather for different purposes was known. In the *Amarkosa* the shoemaker is mentioned, together with some of his tools and leather products.¹⁷ In this period, the skin of an elephant, '*gajacharma*', was also used as clothing. It is stated in the *Sishupala-vadha* that *Narada* had covered his body with the skin of an elephant.¹⁸ *Rankava* is a variety of cloth mentioned in the *Amarakosa*. It was the skin of an animal called *ranku*. *Narada* states that even in the time of distress a Brahman cannot sell skins.¹⁹ This probably suggests its caste related association and taboos. Perhaps in the Gupta period, leather was the monopoly of the state, for even after donating lands the state reserved the right to collect the hides.²⁰

In the Medieval period, the artisans produced goods sufficient for meeting the demand of the local people and for exporting to foreign countries. The main crafts included the textiles, metalwork, stone and brickwork, leather work, woodwork, coral

work, ivory work, glass, paper, tile, sugar, pottery, perfumery, toys, and shipbuilding. Foreign travelers such as Varthema, Mahuan, Barbosa and Indian writers such as Barni, Afif, and Amir Khusrau throw much light on the flourishing condition of the various industries.²¹

During the medieval times, leather and leather goods manufacturing was of considerable size. Different leather articles, like saddles and bridles, leather bags, scabbards, leather book covers, foot wears and music instruments, etc. were made from leather. In Bengal sugar was exported to other countries in a parcel of untanned and sewn leather bags.²² There are references that stairs of leather were popular in hilly regions. The important leather manufacturing centers during this period were Delhi, Bengal, Assam, Gujarat, and Sindh. Cambay was a prominent center of leather sandals and Gujarat was well known for its red and blue leather embroidered with gold and silver. Indian leather goods were also in demand in foreign countries, especially in Arabian countries.²³ They were also exported to Afghanistan from Peshawar with other commodities.²⁴

In the Sultanate period, Amir Khusrau mentions various organisation of leather trade. He refers to the guilds of leather worker and shoemaker. Shoes were considered luxury items, not the necessary ones.²⁵ Shoes and slippers of different artistic patterns embroidered with gold and silver flowers were used by the high-class ladies.²⁶

During the Mughal period, shoes embroidered with gold and silver threads were called 'paposh' which was a Persian name. People used a different type of shoes in different regions according to the geographical condition of their respective areas. Many travelers' accounts of the contemporary period mention this. According to Twining, "notwithstanding their size and costliness, they were scarcely heavier than a pair of common shoes. They were, however, only fit to be walked on a mat or carpet." The people of Bengal used heavy leather slippers. The poor folk of Bengal usually used wooden slippers as leather was an expensive item and they could not afford it.²⁷ Marco Polo speaks of the red or blue leather mat, inlaid with figures of birds and animals and embroidered with silver and gold, prepared by local manufacturers in Gujarat.²⁸

The *Banias* of Agra, however, used high heeled shoes²⁹ which might have been convenient for them for moving about swiftly from place to place. The wealthier section even used the shoes of Spanish, Moroccan or Turkish leather, embroidered with velvet and brocades.³⁰ The writers also mentioned the type of shoes worn by rich and poor. For instance, the rich merchants wore shoes embroidered with big flowers of silk or made of red leather worked with small flowers.³¹ Akbar called the shoe Payafzar as '*charandharan*'.³² The shoes were normally designed in Turkish pattern, viz. pointed in the front and open above with low and flat heels, so that they could be easily taken off whenever necessary.³³

S.S. Kulshreshtha mentions that there is no reference of leather industry in the prevailing accounts. But *Ain-i-Akbari* gives detail of harnesses used in Akbar's times and it is noteworthy that leather rarely finds a mention in the long list of articles used.³⁴ Saddles were chiefly made of cloth and rope.³⁵ As A.B.Pandey³⁶ also suggests, one can assume that in the agriculturally developed region, there could have been no dearth of hides and leather goods manufacturing must have been in a thriving state.

In 1676 A.D. several Indian merchants were doing trade with Russia, exporting western cloths, leather, fox and sable pelts, iron and needles. An Indian merchant named Ram Chand provided a list of goods to Russian customs authorities

in 1731A.D. These included Dutch and English broadcloth, hides, otter and beaver pelts, tanned leather, vegetable dyes, locks, and scissors.

In the eighteenth century not only India's political destiny took a new turn, but there were also weighty changes in various phases of her economic life. Both politically and economically, India felt the impact of highly potential movements of the west, such as the French Revolution of 1789, and the Industrial Revolution. Though agriculture still remained a key occupation, no less important were the varied and extensive manufactures of the country. Besides the large-scale industries like cotton, silk, sugar, indigo, and salt, there were various subsidiary industries to which the people engaged themselves. Tanning and shoemaking come under subsidiary industries and it sustained throughout the 19th century.³⁷

The leather industry had undergone a dramatic transformation in the British period. Policy initiatives taken by the British Government were instrumental to such a transformation. The industry poised for further growth to achieve a greater share in the global trade after independence. Today Indian leather industry occupies a place of prominence in Indian economy.

Conclusion-

Culture, and traditions are the soul of any country. Culture in itself is a broad term which consists of a political, social, religious, economic behavior, and traditions of native people. It talks about their interest in art and crafts, their social conditions, and traditions etc. India has always been enriched with different forms arts and crafts. In fact several of this facilitated evolution of renowned industries. Industries play a vital role in shaping the economy of the society. Leather industry has been one of the traditional industries operating in India since ancient times. Ancient people not only produced various artifacts of leather but they have mastered the art of leather and leather goods manufacturing. In India, leather craft appears to have been fairly well developed since ancient times and this art persisted during the medieval and modern period.

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