

Trade, Textile and other Industrial Activities: A Study of Banaras region in Medieval India

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ABSTRACT

Trade and industrial activities have been the mainstay of historical studies across various periods of Indian history. This can be traced from ancient periods to colonial times. As Banaras is one of the veritable cities of Indian culture, its society and development continues to attract a great deal of attention from historians cutting across its timeframes since it enjoys a mythological and cosmic popularity for religious and pilgrimage purposes. The history of the city can be traced from as early as the beginning of the Janapada time till today as it has the vibrant culture, society and living tradition. The Islamic religion had reached Banaras as early as the 11th century as per the existing historical sources. In due course of time, this city became a nodal centre for trade and economic activities between eastern and western parts of India paving the way for major activities cutting across culture and society.

Many works have been done on Banaras such as ‘Kashi Ka Itihasa’ (1962) by Moti Chandra, a special chapter on Varanasi Silk in ‘Silk Brocades’ (2003) by Yashodhara Agrawal, ‘Textiles of Banaras: yesterday and today’ (2010) by Tarannum Fatma Lari, ‘Banaras in Transition’ (2012) by K. P. Mishra, and ‘Woven textiles of Varanasi’ (2014) by Jaya Jaitly. These works only focus on political history, textile technique and the process of fabric making of present day and trading activities in the eighteenth century; but trading position, textiles and other industrial activities of Banaras during the sultanate and the great Mughal are not placed. So, the present study tries to make an attempt to trace its development from the extension of trade and economic activities to the emergence of Banaras as a major city of culture and social activities. The focus will be mainly on the period between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries which have not yet been adequately covered, and this is an initial attempt through which try to unfold some of the major historical transformation which occurred in medieval Banaras by using various historical evidences. The development of textile activities with its embroidery and production of copper pots, dishes, basins and the exchange of various agrarian goods will invariably become part of the present research. It also sees how Banaras became a central and major entrepot in India. Besides, the emergence of business activities and social networks, the region witnessed a range of multifarious activities covering all walks of life.

Key words: Trade routes, entrepot, weaving, silk and cotton textiles and small industries.

Introduction

From the ancient time, Banaras had been an attractive centre of trade and industry. It was known especially for its cotton and silk textiles not only in India but also in other countries. Because of being situated between Delhi and Bengal, it developed as an *entrepot*. It would be interesting to find out the causes of it becoming an

entrepot and a flourishing centre of textiles and other small industries. After analysing the sources, some very important points come into light. First, Banaras is located on the bank of the Ganges and due to this the soil of this region has been very alluvial and fertile. Bernier has recorded, “the area around Banaras is extremely rich and fine.”(Bernier 1916: 334). As a result, many types of crops were cultivated in the *parganas* of Banaras that played a significant role for the flourishing of industries in the region. Agricultural production of Banaras was considerable during the period under review. The study of the harvest wise agricultural efficiency of *dasturs* of Allahabad Subah done by S. N. Sinha shows that the average production of the *rabi* crops of Banaras was better (5.5 – position of fertility) than Jaunpur (5.4) and Allahabad (4.3); while Ghazipur (5.6) and Manikpur (5.6) were better than Banaras in this respect. In the session of *Kharif* crops Banaras was better (4.5) than Allahabad (2.9); while Jaunpur (4.5) was equal to Banaras. Only Chunar was better (4.6) than Banaras. (S. N. Sinha 1974: 146). In the Banaras region, the production of wheat, barley, kur-rice, dark-rice, linseed, mustard, potherbs, cotton, singharah, jawari, sesame seed, mung and pan (betel) were in good proportion than the other *Sarkars* of Allahabad during the great Mughals. (Ibid. 141-145) Manucci says, “That many kinds of vegetables and cereals were grown near Banaras which was rich in fruits.” (Manucci 1907: 428). The production of onion, safflower, poppy, Persian muskmelon, sugarcane and indigo were less. (Sinha 1974: 142, 143, 145). If we accept the view of H. K. Naqvi who says, “Large cultivation of sugarcane and poppy at Banaras had been a source of great attraction to the English factors during the later period.” (H. K. Naqvi 1963: 94); it can be said that the production of sugarcane and poppy increased very much by the end of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Secondly, since time immemorial Banaras has been linked with many famous cities of India both by road and river. The most famous imperial highway was ‘*Sadak-i-A'zam*’ (popularly known as Grand Trunk Road) that was constructed by Sher Shah Suri (1540-1545). It runs from its origin in Chittagong (Bangladesh) passing through Banaras up to Kabul (Afghanistan). Besides this road, there were four important roads also: Banaras to Patna via Ghazipur (J. N. Sarkar 1901: CIX), Banaras to Patna via Mughal Sarai (Ibid. CX, CXI), Allahabad to Banaras via Jagdish Serai (Tavernier 1889: 118) and Allahabad to Banaras via Handia. (Tiffenthaler 1786-88: 240). There were three main river routes that connected Banaras to Calcutta, Delhi and Allahabad: Calcutta to Allahabad via Banaras (Sinha 1974: 162), Delhi to Murshidabad via Banaras. (Ibid.), and Delhi to Patna via Banaras. (Ibid.). These were the routes through which Banaras goods reached to east and north-west and then onward.

Thirdly, Banaras was also a very important centre for the minting of coins in medieval India. According to Abul Fazl, only copper coins were struck in the mint of Banaras. (Abul Fazl 2011: 32). So, dealings were very easy for merchants and traders. Fourthly, Banaras was the most popular religious place where people gathered from all parts of India including the far south. Fifthly, with the advent of the Muslims some new technology such as *Charkha* (spinning wheel), horizontal

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loom of throw-shuttle type, and stamp-printing introduced in India; which accelerated the average production of textiles. Use of iron nails and clamps to join planks helped in the making of bigger and stronger ships. Lastly, the constancy of the Muslim rule gave an umbrella under which people from all over India came and gave new life to the cities. These were the key factors which were the responsible for the extension of trade, big and small industries at Banaras.

The weaving industry of Banaras is very old. Sanskrit, Buddhist and Jain literatures mention Kashi as a prominent centre of weaving and trading. Many types of fabrics such as *Varanaseyyaka*, *Kasikuttam*, *Kasikamsu* and *Kasika* can be connected to Kashi. Writing in the late 8th century, Damodar Gupta writes in his book, *Kuttanimattam* about a lower garment decorated with gold thread of Banaras that was known as *Kanakagarbhita*. It may have been *Kashika*. (Yashodhara Agrawal 2003: 121). It is mentioned in *Tarikh-i-Subuktigin* that in 1033 Ahmad Nialtigin attacked on Banaras and looted many things such as perfumes, jewellers but the most noticeable thing was textiles. (Eliot and Dowson, 1869: 123, 124). It indicates the popularity of Banaras fabrics. Here it would be pertinent to know the first entry of the Muslim group of weavers in Banaras. According to '*Akhbarul Mokhadim*', the first caravan of Muslims arrived at Banaras in the eleventh century. (Agrawal 2003: 125). It can be assumed that this caravan came with the army of Mahmud Ghaznavi or Ahmad Nialtigin. (It is recorded in the *Ain-i-Akbari* that Mahmud Ghaznavi invaded Banaras in 1019 and 1022 A.D. Abul Fazl 1800: 28). As their religion, appearance and dress were all different from that of the Hindus, they were asked to stay outside the main city. So, they had to settle in Madanpura. (There are two theories of related its name. First, it was named after Madanpal, Gahadwal king, who ruled over Banaras from 1100 to 1114. Second, it was named after Madan Verma, King of Chandel dynasty. Agrawal 2003: 125). In fact, this caravan was comprised of weavers and was a group of seven families who later known as '*sat gharua*'. They became popular by the name of *Julaha* (male weaver). They came here from central Asia or western Iranian plateau and might have belonged to a group of *Kazaz* weavers. (Ibid.). Eventually, this area became a popular weaving site in Banaras. The fine material of cotton turban and *Patkas* with plain *Zari* (gold or silver thread) borders was the speciality of Banaras weavers. For these excellent works, they were awarded with the titles of *chira-i baff* (weavers of turbans). (Ibid. : 141. *Chira* was the fabric used for turbans in Mughal India. *Chira* was also referred to as female '*Odhni*'), and *Noor-i baff* (weavers of gold and silver thread). Such *Patkas* called *Damani* and turban called *Safa* were woven during the period under the review. (Ibid. 125, 126).

When the first caravan of Muslim weavers known as '*sat gharua*' entered Banaras, there was monopoly of *Khatri* Hindus over the weaving industry in Banaras. The *Khatri* Hindus known as *Pattikas* or *Pattakars* assisted to these immigrant Muslim weavers in founding their craft both by cash and raw material. Since these Muslims were not allowed to have any direct connection with high-caste Hindus, the finished products of Muslims were marketed by the *Khatris*. The Muslim weavers were good in weaving and their labour was cheap for they had to

take whatever they were paid to establish themselves. Now the *Khattris* started focusing more on marketing. By this way, weaving from the *Khattris* passed into the hands of the Muslims. Gradually, the *Khattris* became traders. (Ibid. :126) In the seventeenth century finds *Srimals* Jains as traders. (Banarasidas 1981: 64). Later Marwaris, Gujaratis and Agrawals adopted the same profession in the late 18th century.

Here the question arises from where raw materials would have been supplied and what type of loom was in practice and engagement of the people? As mentioned above, cotton was cultivated in a good proportion in Banaras and adjacent areas, which the weavers easily could get. As far as raw silk material is concerned, at first it was imported from China; but, when sericulture started in Bengal and the neighbouring regions in the fourteenth century, the supply of raw silk became easier for Banaras weavers. Bengal became the main supplier of raw silk for the internal and external markets in the 16th century. (Eugenia Vanina 2003: 2) H. K. Naqvi wrote, "One of the main factors in the development of Banaras silk industry was the easy availability of raw silk from Bengal." (H. K. Naqvi 1963: 136). However, we have not found adequate evidences to explain the technical know-how of weaving and interrelated activities. In the ancient times, the weavers used vertical loom but in medieval period horizontal loom was brought into use that proved most comfortable for weavers. We find some information of the 12th century loom in the Sanskrit dictionaries; they refer to cloth rollers or beams (*thuri*), shuttle (*trasara*) and reed (*klapana*). A Persian glossary *Miftah'-i fuzala* (1469) mentions the treadles of loom. In spite of this, the poems of Kabir Das, a saint poet and professional weaver of 14th-15th century, presents the treadles and reed.

See a vivid picture of horizontal hand loom in his following poem:

'Lambi Puriya Pae Chhin, Sut Purana Khunta Teen

Upar Nachaniyan Karai Kor, Karigah Main Duee Chalai Gor.' (Kabir Das 2011: 480).

Means, Long *puriya* (that *nari* on which weft is spread by weaver before weaving), thin *pae* (an instrument of weavers on which warp yarn is spread), old thread, three pole; on up designs are making; two legs are running in the pit.

Another following poem depicts the fabric-making process by loom:

'Mahi Akas Dou Gar Khandaya, Chand Suraj Dou Nari Banaya

Sahas Tar Lai Purin Puri, Ajahun Binab Kathin Hai duri

Kahahin Kabir Karam so Jori, Sut Kusut Binai Bhal Kori' (Ibid. 2011, Ramaini Poem No. 28: 51).

Means, first of all weavers prepare warp for fabric making; to dig two holes and fix loom in it, prepare weft through *nari* (inside tube of *daraki* on which weft are folded) that is kept in *daraki* (an instrument of weavers through which the yarn of weft is applied in warp); they fill the warp with thousands of weft and then by the help of warp-weft they mix all types of weft prepare the cloths.

It is believed that the '*sat gharua*' weavers brought with them a unique silk weaving technique from Khujistan (western plateau of Iran) for Kazzazi and

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Nassaji. The technique was called *Urtu*. It was woven with the *Gathwa* (heddle or thread-frame) loom in Banaras. (Agrawal 2003: 126). The *Gathwa* system was introduced by Khwaja Abdul Samad Kakhmiri who came to Banaras during the reign of Akbar. This enabled Banaras weavers to initiate various artistic and floral patterns. (Ibid. : 124).

During the Mughal period, the areas – Madhorao Minar, Dhai Kangura ki Masjid, Khalispura, Madanmpura and Alaipura – were inhabited by weavers; most of them were Muslims. (Agrawal 2003: 123). The Muslim women played a significant role in the flourishing of weaving industry. They had to do initial work on the *Charkhas* (spinning wheel) before the starting of fabric making. Usually spinning work on *Charkha* was done by women. They prepared threads and weft for the warp. Kabir Das says in his poem:

‘Khur Khur Khur Khur Chalai Nari

Baithi Jolahin Palthi Mari’ (Kabir Das, Sabad 2011: 480).

Means, *Julahin* (female weaver) sitting on the ground continually prepare *nari*.

According to medieval tradition, merchants, craftsmen, professionals and labourers lived in separate wards. Like this, there was a ward at Banaras for the weavers called *Katra-i resham* (Silk bazaar). (Khairuddin Muhammad 1875: 136). It seems that a large number of people were involved in this profession because the demand of Banaras fabrics was high and profitable for weavers. Writing in 1640, Manrique mentions 7000 weavers who were associated with this profession in Banaras and its vicinity. (Manrique 1927: 147). It is not clear who were involved in this; but on the basis of the present day it can be assumed that most of them would have been Muslims. There was also a group of dyers who were called *Rangrez*. They used *Manjitha* for dyeing the fabrics. *Manjitha* was a kind of bine; the red colour was made from boiling its roots and twigs and was used by *Rangrez* for dyeing the cloths.

The Mughal era has a bright and great position in the sphere of trading and flourishing industry in Indian history. From time to time, many foreign travellers visited the several parts of India and have left their own travelogues which can focus on some of the glimpses of Banaras weaving industry. Ralph Fitch, who visited Banaras city between 1583 and 1593, has mentioned Banaras as a flourishing weaving centre. According to him turbans and other cloths made from many types of fabrics silk which woven with silver and gold yarns. Banaras was the major centre which supplied costly and superior quality of turbans to the Mughal court. (W. Foster 1921: 20, 21). In Akbar's time, *Jholi* or *Jhul* which was used to cover the elephant's back during a procession and *Mihirkul* is a kind of muslin was prepared at Banaras. (Agrawal 2003: 122). Abul Fazl has mentioned in *Ain* about Banaras having a good deal of cotton production and an important centre of cotton textile industry. (Abul Fazl 2011: 99). Writing about Jahangir's time Francisco Pelsaert refers to Banaras girdles, turbans, and fabrics for Hindu women such as *t'soekhamber* and *gangazil*. (Pelsaert 1925: 7). *T'soekhamber* represents *Chaukhamba*, it indicates a four-line pattern. At present Chaukhamba area is in

Banaras. It can be assumed that in those days this area was populated by weavers; that is why the finished products made here were known after it. *Gangazil* shows *Gangajali* (The Ganges water) a fanciful description.

During the reign of Shahjahan Banaras continued to be a well-known centre for the production of girdles, turbans and fabrics especially for women. Ladies' cloth can be identified as *Odhanis* or *Dupattas* i.e. veils or long scarves which were the speciality of Banaras. (Agrawal 2003: 122). According to Peter Mundy, "The native merchants came here for turbans of which Banaras was the best source of supply, and for the short silk clothes known as *Alachali*." (Peter Mundy 1914: 366).

Manrique also says about the silk industry and superior quality of embroidery work. (Manrique 1927: 146, 147). Seventeenth century is the witness of fast growing trading relationship between India and European countries. The demand of Indian fabrics increased eventually. Silk production of Banaras was exported to many countries such as Turkey, Persia, Khurasan, Northern Africa and the Great Britain. (Peter Mundy 1914: 366; W. Foster 1906: 206).

In various sources find that Banaras silk fabrics were using as gifts also. In 1633-34, Shahjahan sent presents to Shah Safi of Iran by the hand of Safdar Khan, in spite of other articles, the gifts contained best quality fabrics of Banaras. (Riazul Islam 1970: 100). During Aurangzeb's time also Banaras maintained its previous image in fabric making. Manucci says,

"In this city is made much cloth worked in gold and silver, which is distributed hence all over the Mogul realm and is exported to many parts of the world. It is the fashion in Hindustan to use this proverb: '*Toracana Banarismo Rana*' (*Thora khana, Banaras mon rahna*) that is, 'Little to eat, but live in Banaras.'" (Manucci 1907: 83).

If we take the observation of Tavernier, there were market places where masters and independent weavers directly could sell their fabrics. According to him,

"Banaras has several *Caravanasarais*, among them one is large and well built and in the court of it they sell cotton, silken, stuffs and other kinds of merchandise. Most of them were workers who have made the pieces. By this way foreigners obtain them at first hand." (Tavernier 1889: 118)

Having a good image in the textile field, Banaras was also known for unique embroidery and engraving work. Manrique has mentioned the superior quality of embroidery work. (Manrique 1927: 146, 147). On the finished products of both low and high prices many designs were embroidered. *Quranic* verses were also embroidered on high costly fabric and velvet. There were also a group of people whose profession was to engrave the different kinds of pattern and *Quranic* verses on swords and *Katars* (knives). (Sinha 1974: 158). This occupation was the means

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of living for a good number of people. In medieval India a very strange feature was that every occupation passed from one generation to other. Bernier says,

“The embroiderer brings up his son as an embroiderer, the son of a goldsmith becomes a goldsmith and physician of the city educates his son for a physician.” (Bernier 1916 : 259).

So, the art of embroidery and weaving too passed on from father to son. A well skilled artisan greatly supported the industrial production. Embroidering and engraving of verses of the *Quran* on the above mentioned things was continued but this act was not liked by Aurangzeb who ordered Abdul Qadir on 2 June 1697 to find out and at once stopped such type of productions in *Karkhanas* of Banaras. (Sinha 1974: 158).

Besides, Banaras also had many small industries which manufactured domestic articles such as copper pots, dishes, basins. (Pelsaert 1925: 7). These were supplied to other parts of India. Demand of saltpetre, shellac, lime, cotton, iron and indigo were much more by the European traders. We know some of these things were not produced at Banaras. So, all these things were collected here from the neighbouring areas - Allahabad, Chunar, Jaunpur and Ghazipur. The best quality of perfume was prepared at Jaunpur. To supply the eastern part of India it was brought to Banaras. In fact, Banaras was commercially a significant centre where goods collected from the above mentioned places and then sent to Patna and further eastward. (Naqvi 1963: 119). According to John Marshall, “Brassware, *Aftaba chilamchi* (ewer, pitcher), turban, cloth and girdles were exported to Murshidabad from Banaras.” (Marshall 1927: 114).

The business of rubies, pearls, emeralds and stone-dust (*chunni*) were too running here with great success especially by the Jain merchants. Banarasi Das says in his autobiography ‘*Ardhakathanak*’ that he along with his friend Narottam in the hope of a successful business came here from Jaunpur in 1614 and involved in the dealing of rubies, pearls, emeralds and stone-dust. He further says that in short time our business slowly but steadily increased. Then the governor of Jaunpur and Banaras called him and bestowed on him a *Siropao* (a complete set of attire from head to foot) as a sign of his grace. (Banarasidas 1981: 64, 65). This act shows two points. First, that time Banaras was supposed to be a good place for trading that attracted the people from India and abroad. Second, the local government provided all facilities and security to business men.

To sum up, it can be said that the importance of Banaras rapidly grew up during the medieval period. Revolutionary changes occurred in silk and cotton fabric weaving. To some extent small industries also developed. So, the average production of goods increased much more that needed new market places. Banaras solved this problem easily. Banaras worked as a link to join east to north-west of India. Whatever was produced at Banaras and its vicinity were collected here for sending to the other parts of India from where they were exported to foreign countries.

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