

# *HISTORY*

---

VERMAN, Sanghamitra Rai

## Women and Their Role in Ancient Indian Textile Craft

### *Abstract*

Textiles constitute a unique chapter in the history of human endeavor. In the historical perspective, Indian textiles cover a period of about five thousand years with rich and almost unbroken continuity. The Indian textile industry has been more or less prosperous, and it had also contributed substantially to the country's economy. Textile craft mainly existed as cottage industry where weavers weaved clothes and women assisted them in various capacities, mainly spinning. It would therefore be interesting to study as to what extent ancient Indian women contributed to the prosperity of this craft.

In order to trace the role of women in ancient Indian textile craft, a thorough study of the primary literary sources, mainly Vedic and later Vedic literature, the *Brahmanas*, the *Sutra* literatures, the Epics, the Buddhist literature, *Arthashastra* and other miscellaneous literature has been made. Ajanta paintings have been also studied for this purpose.

In this paper, the role of women in ancient Indian textile craft has been traced from the Indus valley civilization up to the Gupta period. I have also tried to analyze the social position of the weavers as a community as well. The socio-economic condition of women participating in the weaving craft and their overall implications in the ancient Indian society has been also looked upon.

**Key Words:** Women, Textiles, Weaving, Spinning, Cotton.

~~~~~

Five thousand years ago the people of the Indus Valley knew how to grow cotton and how to spin and weave. The Indus Valley people made the garments of dyed and patterned cotton as it is evident from the discovery of a microscopic fragment of a madder dyed fabric sticking to a silver vase at Mohenjo-Daro. It is considered to be the earliest datable evidence of a true cotton fabric with ornamentation. The chemical test revealed that the particular cotton stuff bears affinity to the variety of coarse cotton still grown in the Sind region. The handicraft was followed in the form of cottage industry and hence it is presumed that women assisted in various capacities in preparing the textile goods. The fact that the volume of textile production was not insignificant suggests that the textile goods were not only meant for home consumption, but were also produced with a commercial purpose. It can be also conjectured that it was export-oriented as the Indus civilization was commercially connected with other civilizations. The tri-foiled and indigo coloured cotton coverings of the Egyptian mummies resembling the Indian stuff strengthened the above view. It therefore suggests that the trade of textile goods may be

certainly carried out in large scale. Thus it would not be surprising if the volume of production necessitated the employment of outside labour which may be consisted of women workers, wage earners or slaves.

### Role of Women during the Vedic Period

The portrait of the women weavers in the Vedic age is encouragingly clear and expressively informative. Women during the Vedic period were such a predominating figure in the textile handicraft that the female class could not be conceived without the trait of weaving. *Rig Veda* (6.9.3) refers to Lord Vishnu as *Tantuvardhan* or weaver because he has said to have woven the rays of the Sun into a garment for himself. *Rig Veda* refers to weaving and probably the task of spinning was entrusted to the special care of the women.<sup>1</sup> Weaving of cloth for family members appears to be a duty primarily entrusted to the women of the house. Mothers prepared clothes for their children,<sup>2</sup> girls wove bridal wears for their marriage,<sup>3</sup> and the housewives, even if there were interruptions, managed to complete the work which had been left incomplete on the loom.<sup>4</sup> Spinning was mainly done at home and preferably by women; the mother, housewives or by servant women.<sup>5</sup> Vedic women were efficient in weaving and spinning the yarn and they used to do these works during their spare times.<sup>6</sup> A garment woven at home was considered purer than the one woven somewhere else. *Satapatha Brahmana* mentions that maidens were trained in various vocational works along with dancing and singing, among them spinning of threads was mention worthy. It suggests that weaving was an art to be learnt by women compulsorily. The women participated in weaving were called *vayitri*.

|| *tad va etat strinam karma yad urnasutram karma* || .....*Satapatha Brahmana* 12.7.2.11.

The weavers were known as *vasovaya*.

|| *vasovayo vinam a* || .... *Rig Veda* 10.26.6.

The *Atharva Veda* personifies night and day as two sisters weaving the web, the nights as serving the warp and the days as woof.<sup>7</sup> *Atharva Veda* also refers to weaving as an important occupation where women helped in various processes of weaving along with the men.<sup>8</sup> A close scrutiny of the Vedic literature shows that there were female weavers who were known as *vayanti*,<sup>9</sup> *vayitris*<sup>10</sup> and *siris*.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Rig Veda* (RV) 2.3.6, 2.38.4; A V 10.7.42, 14.2.51; *Taittiriya Samhita* 2.5.5.3.

<sup>2</sup> R V . V. 47.6.

<sup>3</sup> *Atharva Veda* (AV), I. 51.

<sup>4</sup> R V, II, 38, 4.

<sup>5</sup> R V 5, 47 (401), 60; A V , 14, 2, 51.

<sup>6</sup> Bhargava P. L, *India in the Vedic Times*, Lucknow, 1971, p. 253.

<sup>7</sup> AV. X.7, 42.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, XIX. 1.

<sup>9</sup> RV 2.3.6; 2.38.4; *Vajasaneyi Samhita* 20.41; R V 2, 38 (229). Vide Wilhelm Rau, Weaving in Vedic India, in Jasleen Dhamija & Jyotindra Jain ed., *Handwoven Fabrics of India*, Ahmedabad, 1989, p.23.

<sup>10</sup> *Pancavimsa Brahmana*. 7, 8, 9; *Satapatha . Brahmana*. III. 1, 2. 13.

*Atharva Veda* also refers to various activities related to weaving, like weaving competition among women,<sup>12</sup> weaving of the ornamental border of the bridal attire by the bride herself,<sup>13</sup> etc. We also find mention of female embroiderer known as *pesakari*,<sup>14</sup> female dyer or *rajayitri* and *vasahpalpuli* or female washer of clothes and yarn, suggesting specialization in various branches of the industry perhaps to cope up with the increasing demand for such goods. The *pesakari* class of women embroiderers appears to have been in such a large number that *Yayurveda* includes them in the list of victims at the time of *Purushamedha yagna* or human sacrifice.

*Rig Veda* refers to term *Pesas*<sup>15</sup> which means gold embroidered cloth with intricate designs. *Pesamsi*<sup>16</sup> means gold ornamented pleated skirt. Female embroiderer or *pesakari* were generally entrusted with the duty of manufacturing those skirts. *Pesakari* were mentioned in the list of victims in the *Yajurveda*.<sup>17</sup>

Dr. Subimal Chandra Sarkar in his book, '*Some Aspects of the Earliest Social History of India*' has wonderfully showed the etymology of the eastern Indian vernacular words, like *siri*, *sili*, *silai* and that of the Tamil word, *silai*, denoting woven materials from the original Vedic term *siris*.<sup>18</sup> The Tamil *sarighai* meaning embroidered fringe is probably connected with the vernacular *sari*, an essential female attire.

Panini mentioned that weavers were known as *tantuwaya*.<sup>19</sup> *Maitrayani Samhita* I, 9, 4 (78, 14)<sup>20</sup> states that a priest, who has received a garment as recompense, takes it with the following words: Women have spun you, industrious ones have stretched you (on the loom) and weaving women have woven you. Women participated in different activities related to weaving during the Vedic period, like, they separated the seed (*karpasthi*) from cotton, ginned it and then spun yarn (*sutra-tantu*) and wove it into cloth of cotton, silk, linen and wool.<sup>21</sup>

Weaving continued to be the chief occupation of women in the *Sutra* period. The *paraskara Grhyasutra*<sup>22</sup> mentions that divine ladies were engaged in weaving of clothes for the bride. It further mentions that 'the goddesses who spun and wove, who stretched the warp, and who crossed the woof, may clothe you for old age. Blessed with long life, you, put on this garment.' The mention of goddesses of weavers suggests that the women of higher classes may have pursued the profession or rather extolled the women experts in the field to the position of divine spirits. *Katyana Srauta Sutra*<sup>23</sup> even

<sup>11</sup> RV. 10. 71, 9. *Ibid.* 2.3.6.

<sup>12</sup> AV. 10. 7. 42. Also see, B. P Roy, *The Later Vedic Economy*, Delhi, 1984, p. 288.

<sup>13</sup> AV. 14.1.45. Also see, P. C Jain, *Labour in Ancient India*, Delhi, 1971, p.273.

<sup>14</sup> *Vajasaneyi Samhita*, XXX. 9; *Taittiriya Brahmana*, III, 4.5.1.

<sup>15</sup> RV. IV.36.7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* I.92, 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> *Vajasaneya Samhita* XXX.9; *Taittiriya Brahmana*, III.4, 5.1.

<sup>18</sup> S. C Sarkar, *Some Aspects of the earliest Social History of India*, London, 1928, p.61, fn. 9.

<sup>19</sup> V. S Agarvala: *India as Known to Panini*. Varanasi, 1963, P. 232.

<sup>20</sup> *Maitrayani Samhita* I, 9, 4 (78, 14)

<sup>21</sup> Vide Wilhelm Rau, Weaving in Vedic India, in Jasleen Dhamija & Jyotindra Jain, *Handwoven Fabrics of India*, Ahmedabad, 1989.

<sup>22</sup> *Vajasaneya Samhita*, 23, 19.1.

<sup>23</sup> *Katyana Srauta Sutra*, XV. 5. 6-9.

mentions that women weavers were clever enough to invent a process to prepare a special and costly kind of cloth by soaking yarns thrice in water or rubbing them in ghee. With deftness, they could prepare dresses of different kinds, upper and lower garments, turbans, etc. and also weave light and heavy clothes.<sup>24</sup>

In the epic, the *Ramayana*, we find mention of *Sutra karma visarada*,<sup>25</sup> probably applied to female weavers. In *Mahabharata*, it is stated that Yudhisthira was presented with slave girls clad with cotton garments and other fine clothes. The girls belonged to Broach, they appear to have been experts in the knowledge of preparing cloth of mixed cotton and wool, as well as silk as the word *akarapasama*<sup>26</sup> would suggest.

### Role of Women during the Post Vedic Period

Buddhist literature suggests that spinning was exclusively the work of women. The commentator of *Majjhima Nikaya* praises the efficiency of women spinners who were intelligent enough to spin the finest quality of threads. The women in a *Jataka* story, spun (*kantitva*) fine thread (*sukhumasuttani*) and made a ball (*gulam*) of it.<sup>27</sup> *Tundila Jataka* mentions the cotton fields near Kashi.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, *Mahajananka Jataka* mentions that women looked after these fields and they were known as *kappasarakkhika*.<sup>29</sup>

We also find references of women participation in weaving and spinning in the *Jatakas*.<sup>30</sup> In *Suttavibhanga Jataka*, the profession of weaving was considered low in social hierarchy. In the *Bhimasena Jataka*, the *brahmana* archer mentions that the weaving work of the weavers or *tantuvaya* was a miserably low work (*lamakamma*). In some of the *Jatakas*, the weaving craft begun to be looked down as a low craft or *hina-sippa*. Probably this had an adverse effect on the participation of women from the higher castes in the weaving work. This notion grew stronger in later times and later on we find references where weavers and dyers had to settle in colonies away from the habitation of higher castes.<sup>31</sup>

However, the centralized government of the Mauryas opened up workshops and made arrangements for providing jobs even to the women from respectable families. But later on, the Kushanas and the imperial Guptas did not take any interest in such enterprises. They preferred to allow the guilds or local agencies a free hand in dealing with these problems. *Dhammapada's* commentary refers to a story where a maiden efficiently re-wove a new robe for her monk brother out of his shabby, coarse cloth.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 11-12.

<sup>25</sup> *Ramayana*, 11, 80.1.

<sup>26</sup> *Mahabharata*, II, 27.

<sup>27</sup> *Jatakas*, VI, p.336

<sup>28</sup> *Kappasakhetta Jataka*, III, 286.

<sup>29</sup> *Jatakas*, VI, p. 336.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* VI. No.106.

<sup>31</sup> Al Beruni while enumerating eight classes of low occupations, mentions weaving as one of them.

<sup>32</sup> Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends*, Vol. 30. Part, 3, p. 120. Also see P. C Jain, *op.cit.* p. 95.

*Milindapanho*<sup>33</sup> refers to spinners (cotton spinners) as *sutrakara*. In *Milindapanho*, we find vivid description of the efficiency of women in textile manufacturing: ‘*sakaya matucchaya sayampinjitam sayamluncitam sayampothitam sayamkantitam sayamvayitam vassikasatikam*’.<sup>34</sup>

Nagasena’s aunt, Mahapajapati, gave him a cloth for his use during the rainy season; it states that the women on their own could do carding (*pinjitam*), pressing (*kanchitam*), beating (*pattitam*), cutting (*kantitam*) and weaving (*vayitam*) of a wrapper.<sup>35</sup>

The *Divyavadana*<sup>36</sup> tells us an interesting story of a Brahmin woman who wanted to earn money by spinning yarn. This story gives us a clear indication that spinning of cotton threads was quite common among those women folk who wanted to earn money from home.

In the *Bhikshuni Vinaya*<sup>37</sup> of the Buddhist *Mahasamghika* School, we find that nuns were allowed to prepare and spin cotton: ‘*tayo dani talakam abhiruhitva karpasam grhitva anyahi cikitsitam, anyahi vilopitam, anyahi pinjitam, anyahi vihatam, anyahi kartitam, tao sutrapindakam grhniya upasikam upasamkrantah: upasike upakarah krtah. aha: naisa mama upakaro yam mamaryamisrika pinjeyur va lodheyur va vikaddheyur va karteyur va*’. This particular passage refers to some of the root words: *cit* (to investigate); *pij* (to bat); *ludh* (to gin); *vikr* (to pluck asunder); *sphut* (to strike) ... all these words refer to the first step in cotton spinning, i.e. investigation and cleaning of the cotton seeds by picking out dirty and immature cotton.

The reference in the *Bhikshuni Vinaya* of the *Mahasamghika - Lokottarayadins* is as follows: “These (nuns) went up to the terrace (of the house) and took up cotton: by one it was cleaned, by another, batted; by another one loosened, by another one carded, by the other one it was spun. (Then) they took up a ball of yarn and went to the householder lady: ‘Householder sister, (we have done you) a favour!, (she) said: This is not an obligation to me that you venerable ones have loosened or carded or spun the cotton.’”

Thus it seems that during the time of Buddha, clothes were prepared in the house of the weavers with the assistance of their womenfolk. They took orders from their customers and prepared the goods in their homes or on their looms. Replenishing the shuttle and spinning appears to have been the work mostly performed by the womenfolk of the community. One of the Buddhist legends states that a weaver’s daughter, in spite of her eagerness to attend the discourse of the Master, could not find time as she was instructed by her father to replenish the shuttle to complete an unwoven garment on the loom.<sup>38</sup> *Anguttara Nikaya* mentions that a considerable number of women must have been engaged in spinning and weaving. It mentions a story wherein a woman is assuring her dying husband to rest in peace as she could support the family by spinning and weaving.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Sacred Books of the East, Max Müller, Vol. 36, 201; *Milindapanho*, 331.

<sup>34</sup> *Milindapanho*, ed. V. Trenckner, London, 1880, p. 240.

<sup>35</sup> Max Müller, Sacred Books of the East, Vol. 35, Pt. II.

<sup>36</sup> *Divyavadana*, ed. Cowell-Neil, Cambridge, 1886, p.276.

<sup>37</sup> *Bhikshuni Vinaya*, ed. G. Roth, Patna, 1970, p. 222.

<sup>38</sup> Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends*, Vol. XXIX, pt., 3, p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> *Anguttara Nikaya*, Vol. III, p. 293.

### Role of Women during the Mauryan Period

Economic activities of women pertaining to textile manufacturing during the Mauryan period have been well articulated in the *Arthashastra*. It is important to note that the textile manufacturing was a decentralized industry, like today. Weaving was an artisanal work engaging specialized weavers. Interestingly, in the Mauryan period weavers were generally male and women were helping the male weavers in various ancillary works, like spinning, ginning, carding, etc. (Spinning is part of the textile manufacturing process, which involves twisting together of drawn out strands of fibres to form a yarn). Women were mainly engaged in spinning activities and it was one of the few openings for women. There is ample number of references in *Arthashastra* to women who could earn their livelihood by spinning. These references also reveal the social relationship between men and women in the Mauryan society.

Weaving, whether carried out privately or by the state, was considered as taxable income. The *Arthashastra* states that clothing, cotton yarns and fibers were taxed at the rate of one-twentieth or one-twenty-fifth of their toll dues. One-tenth or one-fifteenth part of toll dues were extracted from the textiles like linen, cotton, silk, curtains, carpets and woolen goods.<sup>40</sup> The Superintendent of weaving or *sutradhayaksa* used to employ efficient weavers for manufacturing of threads (*sutra*), coats (*varna*), clothes (*vastra*) and ropes.<sup>41</sup>

*Arthashastra* even refers to textiles as valuable enough to be stored in national treasury and has put textiles in the category along with precious stones and gems in sections of Book II. Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, (Book II, Section 80 and 81) under chapter XI, 'Examination of Gems that are to be Entered into the Treasury,' gives vivid description of different types of textiles. Spinning was a de-centralized cottage industry in which women participated actively. The duties of government Superintendent (*adhyaksa*) include distributing of raw materials to efficient weavers and others he thought suitable and supervising the work in government weaving house. *Arthashastra* states that women in certain condition were allowed to take part in textile manufacturing activities. Female workers mainly consisted of those women who were not respectably married, who were regarded with some kind of suspicion, had no other opening except for employment in the palace as servants of the King, old servants, prostitutes, women in flower and perfume trade or women performers in theatrical troupes.<sup>42</sup>

These categories of women also included widows, women whose husbands had died, as well as whose husbands were living in or traveling to some distant location. In fact, women weavers also constituted of wives of traders who were away from their home periodically. It also comes out from the study that owing to uncertainty involved in economic activities of that period, it was necessary to have an additional source of income such as weaving for livelihood of these women. Crippled women could also join weaving. Women ascetics (*parivrajika*) and nuns were also allowed to carry out weaving because it was difficult, if not impossible, for a woman ascetic to wander through the country, begging for alms. Women who had committed offence (*dandapratikarini*) and had to pay fines, could earn the money for fine by working as a weaver. Mothers of the prostitutes, retired women servants of the King, retired

---

<sup>40</sup> *Arthashastra* (trans. R. Shamasastry, Mysore), Book II, p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, Book II, Chapter XXIII. Mysore, 1909.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, Book II, 23.

temple prostitutes (*devadasi*) were also permitted to perform this profession. But women who had decided to remain unmarried were not permitted in the weaving industry.

The Superintendent of weaving used to employ these women in various weaving activities like processing and spinning wool, fiber, cotton, hemp and flax. Women were given only that type of work which could be carried out from home. Required equipments which were not available to the women in their homes were prepared by men in the state weaving house, under the supervision of the Superintendent of weaving.<sup>43</sup> Those women who used to work from their home were called *anishkasinyah*. They were mainly engaged in spinning of threads. Maid servants of the weaving establishments were sent to provide them with threads. Those women who could be present at the weaving house would come at dawn for exchange of their spinning for wages (*dhandavetanavinimayam*). The author adds that the light of the room should be subdued and only sufficient for the Superintendent to examine the threads. Presumably, the subdued lighting prevented the Superintendent from recognizing the face of the women concerned. On no account, the Superintendent can look at the face or talk about other work with such women. Otherwise, he shall be severely punished. This implies rigid segregation between the two sexes, which is in contrast with the social life as described in other parts of the same work.<sup>44</sup>

During the Mauryan period the wages of the weavers and spinners were paid according to the quality and quantity of the yarns weaved and spun by them. Spinning work was entrusted to only those spinners who could complete the specific task within a stipulated period. The Superintendent was punished for delay in making payments of the spinners and weavers. At the same time, payments were made only after completion of the work. Wages were fixed according to the quality of the threads spun, like fine, coarse (*sthula*) or middle quality. Wages were also given on the basis of greater or less quantity manufactured. Natural loss of weight or length through processing was also noted. It was also mentioned that in woolen threads, there is a loss of one-twentieth of the total weight because of the hair fall in the process of threshing.<sup>45</sup> Those who produced more used to get oil and dried cakes of myrobalan or cherry plum fruits (*tailamalakod-vartanaih*) as incentive. There was also provision for extra wages. Special rewards (*prativapadanamanaih*) were paid if the weavers worked on holidays (*tithishu*).<sup>46</sup> According to Battaswami's commentary, the poor weavers were also sometimes given *uchchhishta-danena* i.e., giving them leftover food. Sometimes, their wages were also cut short if they failed to give back the required amount of threads or they manufactured poor quality threads. Weaving was also entrusted on those artisans who were capable of producing threads in a given time and for fixed amounts of wages. Weaving was carried out with great care and the Superintendent used to keep a close watch on activities.

According to Battaswami's commentary, the Superintendent used to employ several means to detect stealing of cloth and material. It is also mentioned that those who manufactured fibrous clothes, silk clothes, woolen clothes and cotton fabrics were rewarded by presenting scents, garlands of flower,

---

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* Book III, 2, 3, 4, 5, 5, 6. For example, the rights and duties of a married woman, laws of inheritance, etc.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, Book II, 23.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, Book IV, 1.

<sup>46</sup> The calendar of a working year (from the month of *Asadha* to *Asadha*) omitting the intercalary months, was 354 days.

edibles or by giving any other prizes for encouragement. *Arthashastra* also mentions a balm to keep the head and eyes cool and as an inducement to others to work in their earnest.<sup>47</sup>

At the same time, if somebody misappropriated, stole or run away with raw materials supplied to him or her, it was punished according to his or her degree of offence. Fraudulent practices of various kinds were well known to the Mauryan society and weavers were listed as among the most unreliable folk.<sup>48</sup> Various methods of cheating existed, which were tactfully applied by the weavers. For example, by soaking yarn in rice-gruel, a weaver could increase the weight of the threads by ten percent.<sup>49</sup> In this way, the weight of finished linen or silk cloth would be increased by fifty percent and woolen garments by hundred percent. Such practices were punishable by a fine equivalent to twice the total value of the yarn provided in addition to forfeiture of any advance payment.

The *Kamasutra* of Vatsayana<sup>50</sup> refers to the sixty-four arts in which a woman could specialize for getting employment in order to support herself, and the list includes spinning, textile designing, printing, dyeing and tailoring. It further mentions that peasant women had to perform several kinds of unpaid work for village headman, which included spinning of yarn, cotton, wool, flax or hemp.<sup>51</sup>

In weaving linen or silk clothes (*kshaumakauseyanam*), the increase in weight was usually 1 to 1.5 times. In weaving fibrous or woolen garments (*Patrorna kambala dukulanam*)<sup>52</sup> the increase in weight was 1 or 2 times. In case of loss in length, the value of loss was deducted from the wages and a fine equal to twice the loss was imposed.<sup>53</sup> Loss in weight (*tulahine*) was punished with a fine equal to four times the loss. Substitution of other kind of yarn was punished with a fine equal to twice the value of the original. The same rule was applied to the weaving of broad clothes, known as *dvipatavanam*. The loss in weight in woolen threads of 100 *palas* due to threshing or falling of hair was usually 5 *palas*, according to the *Arthashastra*. *Arthashastra* mentions that the highest degree of punishment was the cutting off the thumb of the weavers.

*Arthashastra* also mentions the guild of weavers and points out how the artisans' rights can be protected and how they can deliver their work efficiently. The Guild system or *sreni* of that period became a regular feature of urban life. The Guild system started with large scale development of commerce during the Buddhist period (circa 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.). *Arthashastra* states that skilled workers generally preferred to work in guilds, since this system had commercial advantages. In certain other trades, however, it was equally lucrative to work as a private individual.<sup>54</sup> Kautilya advises that wherever possible, work should be commissioned through a guild, as the responsibility then lay with a recognized group and not with a single person.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, Book II, 23.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, Book IV, 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Kamasutra of Vatsayana*, Pt I, Ch. 2.

<sup>51</sup> *Arthashastra.*, V. 55.

<sup>52</sup> The Munich Manuscript reads *kambala tulanam* for blankets and cotton clothes.

<sup>53</sup> *Manu* 8, 397; *Yagnavalkya* 2, 179, 180

<sup>54</sup> *Arthashastra.*, Book II, 23; Book IV,1.

But, as attested by *Jambudvipakathakosa* and *Prabandhacintamani*, though the weavers' guilds existed but they were totally at the mercy of the king's whims.<sup>55</sup> The King of Bhoja is said to have ordered the removal of a whole colony of weavers in order to make the place available for the settlement of *brahmana* scholars. Several inscriptions of the time of the Satavahanas and Western Ksatrapas allude to the weavers' guilds functioning in a very flourishing condition. A Mandasore inscription at the time of Kumaragupta I furnishes an interesting account of the accomplishments of the various members of the silk weaver's guilds, which migrated from the Latadesa to Mandasore.<sup>56</sup>

Bana's *Harsacarita* also mentions textile designing, dyeing and printing being done by women. Women specialized in the above fields were invited to the palace on the occasion of the marriage of King Harsha's sister, Rajyasri. Woven fabrics, however, appear to have been supplied by the weavers. Dyeing was a ceremony to be performed by women on such occasions.

In ancient times, women played an important role in the preparation of cotton, like carding, ginning and spinning and these activities are clearly illustrated in an Ajanta painting. On the left wall of the main hall of cave I, to the left of the second cell door, a small genre-picture is painted which is described by Yazdani.<sup>57</sup> Yazdani notices that below the royal pavilion, there is a shed supported on four wooden posts. The roof of this shed is of small rectangle wooden plank, which resembles brick work in the painting. Three women with exquisite features are depicted in the painting who appear to be busy in 'domestic works'.



fig. 3. Cotton-preparation in an Ajanta-painting

Ajanta Mural Depicting Active Participation of Women in Cotton Preparation  
(Picture Courtesy: G. Yazdani: *Ajanta, The Colour and Monochrome Reproductions of the Ajanta Frescoes based on Photography*, part I, p. 17.)

<sup>55</sup> Vide, D. C Sarkar (ed.), *Early Indian Trade and Industry*, University of Calcutta, 1972. P. 20.

<sup>56</sup> *Epigraphy Indica*, Vol. VIII.

<sup>57</sup> G. Yazdani: *Ajanta, The Colour and Monochrome Reproductions of the Ajanta Frescoes based on Photography*, part I, p. 17.

However, according to D. Schlingloff,<sup>58</sup> the domestic work depicted in the painting is actually representing the preparation of cotton. Schlingloff has studied the picture minutely and according to him the lady to the left is engaged in ginning. The gin consists of a cylindrical roller worked on a rectangular board. The lady depicted to the right of the picture is working with the bow. This bow consists of a rectangular frame, the upper part of which is formed by a double string.

The base and the two uprights resting in the base are rather thin; they probably were made of iron. A tray containing heaps of cotton is placed on the lap of the lady. With her left thumb she is twanging the two strings, whereas with her right hand she puts a flock of cotton in connection with the vibrating strings. The third working woman, sitting in the centre, is clapping with her right hand the lump of cotton in her left hand, thus 'smoothing the *ruta* or cotton with both hands with frequent repetition', as mentioned in the *Jaina* texts. Thus, we can say that this particular painting in the Ajanta cave represents some of the major steps of cotton preparation, in accordance with the description found in the Buddhist and *Jaina* texts and in all probability in conformity with the everyday's life in ancient India.

### Social Position of the Weavers

Ancient Indians were fascinated by the variety of textiles and had luxurious taste as far as good dressing was concerned. Textile manufacturing was considered as highly profitable industry in those days. It reaped huge profit and was considered a lucrative article of trade. It was a rare industry which employed both men and women. But from the study of literary sources, it is quite evident that the weavers did not enjoy a considerable position in the society. Spinning and weaving were considered to be low and impure work.<sup>59</sup>

*Jatakas* mentions that weavers along with woodworkers, painters, smiths and others craftsmen were organized under eighteen guilds or *srenis*. *Jatakas* further mentions that the work of weavers, embroiderers or *pesakarasippa* and that of basket makers or *nalakara*<sup>60</sup> were considered low because these works were carried out by the people from despised castes. In the *Bhimasena Jataka*<sup>61</sup> the *brahmana* archer calls the work of a weaver or *tantuwaya* as a miserably low work (*lamakakamma*). In the *Suttavibhanga Jataka* the profession of basket maker, potter, weaver, and cobbler are considered low. On the other hand *Kautilya* prescribes that those who injured royal craftsmen were to be given capital punishment. Patronage and protection was given to craftsmen, as they held hereditary position.

An analysis of the Buddhist literature shows that *Silpa* (craft) or *sippa* were of two types: low craft and high craft. *Diggha Nikaya* (I.51) included weaving in the list of low craft. According to *Shilpasastra*, 'that any other than a *silpin* should build temples, town, seaports, tanks or well is comparable to the sin of murder'. We are told that honest and skillful craftsmen will be born in noble families while those works amiss will fall in to hell and shall return to future lives of poverty and hardship.

<sup>58</sup> D. Schlingloff: Cotton-Manufacture in Ancient India. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. XVII, Part 1, p. 88.

<sup>59</sup> *Taittiriya Samhita*, II, 5, 1, 7; *Satapatha Brahmana* III, 1,2,19.

<sup>60</sup> *Taittiriya Jatakas*, IV, 251.

<sup>61</sup> *Jatakas*, I. 356.

---

Later when the society started to be organized under caste lines, craftsmen, artisans were placed in the *Sudra* caste. The *Amarakosa* and the *Smritis* testifies to this fact. Manu in chapter 10, does not permit the higher two castes, *brahmins* and *kshatriyas*, even under strained circumstances, to deal with cloth dyeing, they were even forbidden to touch lac and indigo, which were widely used in dyeing of cloth. Weaving operation was regarded unclean which required the use of starch, lac, indigo, etc. Some sort of putrefaction or fermentation was needed for the extraction of these materials. Thus the *brahmins* were allowed to wear only white.

The profession of the needle or *suchika* worker was of sufficient importance to necessitate the establishment of a separate tribe and a mixed caste. According to the ancient law book of *us'anas*, *sauchika* or *suchika* or needle men bore the distinctive name and they were destined to live by it and other menial arts. By the time the laws of Manu were codified, however, the profession of weaving had fallen so much into disrepute that the *brahmins* were forbidden from this.

Analyzing the change in the economic rights of ancient Indian women we find several reasons. According to one of the most probable theories<sup>62</sup> after the Aryan had conquered the major portions of northern Indian land tracts, they had a large supply of inexpensive slaves. Before, women of the family used to assist their menfolk in outdoor economic activities and were thus a recognized part of the productive system. They enjoyed the modicum of human dignity as breadwinner's assistants. But gradually with the influx of large number of slaves at the Aryan's beck and call, women did not have to participate in the strenuous outdoor work.



---

<sup>62</sup> Sukumari Bhattacharji: 'Economic Rights of Ancient Indian Women', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, (Vol. 26 no. 9 / 10, March, 1991).