

TEXTILES IN VEDIC ERA

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Abstract

Although "Indus Valley Civilization" gives us the earliest evidences of textile production in India, the detailed information of Textile techniques, processes and designs are give in the oldest Indian sacred opus, 'The Vedas'. Vedas are rich in texts, related with the names and descriptions of fibre/fabrics and garments.

The present paper deals with the different technical terms used in textile business in Vedic Age, with the contemporary terms used today. The paper also talks about the major textile fibers of that age and their relation to the human civilization. Keywords : Indus Valley, Weaving Needle, Cotton, Clothing.

Introduction

Evidence are available to prove that India has a diverse and rich background of textile tradition. The origin of Indian textile can be traced to the Indus valley civilization. The people of that civilizaion used homespun cotton for weaving their garments. Excavations at Harappa and Mohenjo Daro, have unearthed household items like needles made of bone and wooden spindles, signifiyig the art of spinning, to make yarn and finally garments. Fragments of woven cotton have also been found at these sites.¹ The first literary information about textiles in India is available in the RigVeda, which refers to weaving. The ancient Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* mention a variety of fabrics in vogue during those times.

Major Eras and their influence on Clothing

Most historians organize the ancient India into three basic eras. In terms of fashion and clothing, vedic era has a great importance.

Early Indus Valley Civilization (3000-1500BC)

Men and women in ancient India appear to have dressed similarly. The principal garment or the basic costume of ancient sociey was a length of cloth which surrounds the lower body. A loose fitting garment was used for the upper body, often another length of fabric. Headwear was common, especially for men.²

Aryan and Vedic Era (1500-500 BC)

Clothing becomes more varied during the Vedic era. Fashions during this era keep their importance even today, as many are still worn.

There were a variety of garments, especially for women. One outfit for women was a "*dhoti*", a skirt type garment worn with a blouse (*choli*) and scarf. Another important garment was the "*sari*", perhaps the most well known Indian garment even today. A sari is a length of fabric wrapped around the body. The loose end or "*pallu*" is worn over the shoulder. A *choli* might be worn with a sari. Clothing in the Vedic era was often extensively embroidered and embellished with precious metals and jewels.³

Post Vedic Era (500BC-Mauryan Empire)

An insight into the clothing culture of Ancient India is deepened further by the literature of the post-Vedic period. A study of the texts of the time suggests that a level of refinement in textile, clothing and ornamental techniques had been achieved by this time.

With the evolution of the state by the end of the Vedic period and the establishment of the Mauryan Empire by 321 BCE, towns and villages became thriving centers of trade. Under Ashoka, 'the noblest emperor of India' the empire flourished both culturally and economically. The increase in trade of luxury goods and the establishment of artisan's guilds was a

key stage in the development of India's textile repertoire. A lot about the clothing of this period is learnt by the sculpture and other forms of art prevalent in this period.⁴

Cotton, Wool, Silk, Linen : The fibres of Human Civilizations

The word cotton is derived from the Arabic "Al-qattan". The Sanskrit word for cotton is Karpasa. The Greek word *Karpasos* and the Latin term *Carbasus* have evidently been derived from Sanskrit.

Cotton was grown as far back as the time of the Peruvian Incas and Mexican-Indians, the Indus valley civilizations in South Asia along the banks of the river Indus, the Egyptian civilization along the Nile River and Mesopotamian along the Tigris & Euphrates rivers in present day Iraq. Cotton has an ancient history. Fibres from circa 2250 B.C. have been discovered in the Indus Valley, and some from circa 2250 B.C. have turned up in Nubia, Egypt, Cottonseeds have also been discovered at Mehrgarh towards Quetta city in Pakistan, west of the Indus River.⁵

Wool was already known in the Rigvedic period, as evidenced by the RV, produced from goats and sheep (RV 1.126.7: *gandhāra* wool; RV 4.22.2: wool or *paruṣṇi*; and RV 10.26.6: *vāso vāyo* 'vināmāvāsāṃsi marmrjata). Woollen goods were also in use as reflected in VS (19.80), MS (3.11.9), KS (38.3) and in Br. Up. (2.3.6) (*pāṇḍvavikam*). The AV refers to *kambala* (AV 14.2.66) and *s'amulya* (AV 14.1.25; cf. RV 10.85.29), i.e. blankets and woollen shirts.

"Cloth, made of linen or silk was also known in the Vedic period. "Tārpya" is mentioned in AV (18.4.31), TS (2.4.11.6), TB (1.3.7.1), S'B (5.3.5.20), Kātyā.S'S. (15.5.7) and S'āṅkha. S'S. (16.12.9), but the scholars differ to its meaning. The commentators on KātyāS'. S. and S'B suggest that a linen garment or one thrice soaked in ghee or one made of *trpā* plant is meant. Goldstucker (Dictionary, SV Abhis. *echaniya*) takes it as a 'silken garment', accepted by Eggeling, (SBE, 41.85, n.1). By

Trpā plant we may mean mulberry leaves, suitable for silk-cocoons. Prof. S.C. Sarkar (Some aspects of the earliest social history of India, London, 1928) takes the term '*uttuda*' of the AV in the sense of mulberry sprung from '*tuda*'. (AV 3.25.1).⁶

Art of Weaving/Garmenting : References in Vedas

In one of the passages found in "*Atharva Veda*" personifies 'Day and Night' as two sisters weaving. The warp symbolized darkness, and the woof symbolized light. The sacred place that thread and weaving held is illustrated in many hymns of the Vedas. The Hindi-Urdu words for warp & weft are *Tana* and *Bana*. (Warp: The lengthwise thread wound on a Roller, Woof : Weft: The widthwise thread at right angles to the Warp/Horizontal Thread)

The earliest documentation of woven fabric in the Indian subcontinent is found on the sculpted bust of King-Priest of Mohenjo Daro-Indus Valley Civilization-2200-1800 B.C. The 3 sun shaped discs "Trefoil" show the unity of sun, Earth & Water Gods. This shawl pattern is still reproduced today in Sindh, Pakistan. The same trefoil was found on the Hathor cow and on the bodies of Sumerian bulls in Mesopotamia.⁷

Not only men or women but also horses were clothed with the upper garment (*adhivāsam*) and with golden trappings (*hiranyāni*), as noted in the RV. (1.162.16)

"From the Vedic literature we learn that words like *adhivāsa*, *vāsa*, *sic.sāmulya*, *drāpi* and *pes'as* were used to denote garments of both the sexes. *Adhivāsa* means the upper garments (RV 1.140.9; S'B5.3.5.22). The S'B mentions that king in a ritual puts on garments, one undergarment (*vāsaḥ antaram* and *nivi*, in AV : 8.2.16) and an upper garment (*adhivāsa*) were used by both the sexes. *Paridhāna* is also noted in AV (8.2.16) and Br Upa. (6.1.10) probably to mean an undergarment. *Tārpya* means, according to Kātyāyana and Sāyan. a, a linen cloth or one soaked in ghee or one made of *triparna* plants. The AV (5.7.10: *tasyai hiran.ya drāpaya'rāt-yāakaram namah*) shows that a woman also used to wear a '*drāpi*'. The

RV shows that the use of drāpi even by the important God Varun.a and Sāyana explains the term as 'kavacha', a mantle. (RV 1.25.13)... Vāsa might have denoted an upper garment like adhivāsa, at least in the case of Mugalāni whose vāsa was being blown up in the air by the wind. (utsma vāto vahati vāso. . .RV 10.102.2)... The wedding dress was called vādhūya, as noted in RV. (10.85.34). The RV (mātāputram yathāsichābhyenam bhūma ūrn.uhi) refers to 'sich' the border of the upper garment with which the mother is said to have covered the child in her lap. (RV 1.95.7).⁸

'S'amulya, as referred to in the marriage hymn of the RV (10.85.29) means a 'woollen garment', worn at night, according to the learned authors of the *Vedic Index* (Vol. II, p.372; cf. s'amulya in Jaim. Up. Brah. 1.38.4).

Fig. 1. Tarkan, first dynasty, Ancient Egypt (3000-2500BC), This pleated dress is supposed to be the oldest garment in the world.



Fig. 2. Mohenjodaro, Indus Valley culture (2200-1800BC), The shawl worn by this bearded figure is ornamented with a trefoil pattern which bears traces of colour.



Scenario of Textile Industry in Vedic Age

Tantum, *Otum* and *Vayanti* are used in Vedic Sanskrit for warp, woof and web respectively. Sanskrit words 'tan' and 'tanti' (string) have corresponding terms 'tan' in Zend, 'tan teion' in Creek and 'tendo'

in Latin, all meaning, 'stretching'. The root 'pre' for plaiting in Sanskrit is akin to Greek 'plekō' and Latin 'plico'. Similarly Sanskrit root 've' for weaving is similar to Latin 'vico' and Teutonic 'wehan'. Some more words were also found in Vedic Sanskrit eg. 'vāya' (weaver) (RV 10.26.6), *tasara* (shuttle) (RV 10.130.2; VS 19.83; MS 3.11.9), *veman* (loom) (VS 19.83) and mayūkha-s (wooden pegs) (VS 19.80) used for stretching the web.⁹

Weaving was entrusted women, as reflected in RV (uṣāsānaktāvayyeva ran. vite tantum tatam sam. vayanti RV 2.3.6; cf. AV 10.7.42) which compares night and dawn to two young women engaged in weaving. Elsewhere there are references of mothers, weaving garments for their sons (vastrāputrāya mātaro vayanti: RV 5.47.6). The r.c: nāham tantum na vi jānāmyotum na yam vayanti samare' tamānāh: RV 6.9.2; cf. 6.9.3) states 'I know not other warp or woof, I know not web they weave'. Moving towards the context shows to eulogize the greatness of Vais'vānara, the threads of the warp are the metres of the Vedas, those of the woof prayers and ceremonies and their combinations results in the weaving of a cloth, meaning the performance of a sacrifice.

Terms like *vāsas*, *vastra* and *vasana* come frequently to mean cloth in the RV. (1.34.1; 1.11.5; 8.3.24; 3.39.2; 1.95.7). Similarly, terms like *otu*, *tantu*, *anuchāda* and *prāchīnatāna*, *veman* and *mayūkha* meaning woof, yarn, forward stretched web, loom and wooden pegs or shuttle respectively are found in later Vedic literature, in connection with textile industry, (AV 14.2.51; KS 23.1; VS 19.80 and 83; S'B 3.1.2.13; TS 6.1.1.3). *Vastra*, *vasana* and *vāsas* are also mentioned to mean cloth in later Vedic literature. (AV 5.1.3 and 10.5.25; Ch. Up. 8.5.5; Kaus. Up. 2.15; VS 2.32; TS 6.1.7; AB 1.3).¹⁰

'Needles' referred to in RV indicates the use of stitched garments. (RV 7.18.17). Pes'as, embroidered garments were used by female dancers. (RV 2.3.6).

"Textile industry was highly developed in the sūtra period, as reflected in Pāraskara Gr.hyasūtra (athottariyam yākr.ntan-na vayam yāatanvata yās'cha devi-s-tanūn abhito tatantha tāstvayādevī-r-jarase sam.vyayasva yus.matīdam paridhatsva vāsa iti: Pāra. Gr.S 1.4.13) which states 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.

Conclusion

India has one of the finest textile traditions in the world. The evidences mentioned in the article unveil, some of the wrapped knowledge about the 'Textile Industry of Vedic Age'. A minute observation finds the extent of sensitivity of the weaver, rooted in custom and ritual, had a relationship between him and the cloth that he weaved.¹¹

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