

## **Artisans and Craft during British Period in South-East Punjab**

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**Abstract:** In the traditional Socio economic set up the artisans was an integral part of the village society. Their manufacturing activity and agricultural production were complimentary to each other. They manufactured agricultural implements cloths and provided services and in return received a certain share of crops under the arrangement synonymous to the traditional system Jajmani, called sepidari in the Punjab.

**Keywords:** Socio-Economics, Agricultural Production, Crops, Jajmani System.

**Introduction-** The manufacturing activity of the artisans was important for the sustenance of the urban economy as well. The artisans were identified by their castes corresponding to their inherited skills. Important among them were the black smiths or the Lohars carpenters or the Tarknans, Weavers or the Julahas, potters or the Kumhars, Leather workers or the Chamars and Mochis and goldsmiths or the Sunars. In the changed socio- economic conditions under the British complimentary between the manufacturing activity in villages and processes of agricultural production was disrupted. This was followed by occupational mobility and changes in the social and economic conditions among the artisan castes which led to the emergence of new pattern of social relations among the artisan castes themselves and with others which eventually got articulated in socio political organizations.

The land revenue settlement reports of various districts of the Punjab also take notice of the artisans and menials.<sup>1</sup>

The census of 1881 showed that of the 7% were artisans population in Haryana such as weaver and the like, who income was always small but not directly dependent upon the season though distress and high prices did always affect soonest the poor classes.<sup>2</sup>

In Haryana region the sandy tract were largely inhabited at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Almost the whole of Sirsa, was an uncultivated prairie with few permanent villages.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Settlement Reports of Panipat Karnal etc are particular useful

<sup>2</sup> Census of Punjab, 1881, Vol. I, PP. 390-91

<sup>3</sup> Settlement Report of Sirsa District, 1879 – 83, P. 311

Sirsa district had 35 villages in 1800, 94 in 1820, 331 in 1840 and 628 in 1868.<sup>4</sup> When Karnal Paraganah was annexed in 1803. 52 out of 158 villages were reported to have been inhabited and four fifth of the Paraganah was estimated to be over run by forests.<sup>5</sup>

The society in the Punjab did not entirely confirm to the traditional hierarchical pattern, the land holding Jats and Rajputs in rural areas and the trading khatri in Urban areas claimed the status of the kshtriya. The Banias had the vaisya status in the Verna system. But the Brahmans did not enjoy the favoured position assigned to them by tradition or enjoyed by the Brahmans elsewhere in the country.<sup>6</sup> Every community had grades of position and distinctions of rank governed by the considerations of descent and calling.<sup>7</sup> Social status was based on the evaluation of a caste or an occupational group in terms of 'high and low' which broadly corresponded to control over resources and skills and the economic benefits ensuing from it.<sup>8</sup> The persons working in an occupation generally belonged to the same caste which made the division of labour in the countryside relatively ascriptive and the economic system to a certain extent non competitive.<sup>9</sup> In this situation the general attitudes towards the menials and outcastes who constituted nearly one fifth of the total population in the Punjab<sup>10</sup> were perhaps relatively more tolerant.<sup>11</sup> The artisans in the Punjab were nevertheless, universally considered socially low. Among them the Sunars, Tarkhans Lohars, Kumhars and the Julahas were regarded as 'clean' and the Chamars and Mochis as 'unclean artisans'.<sup>12</sup>

On account of relatively 'clean' nature of their work, the castes of goldsmiths carpenters, blacksmiths and potters were considered superior among the artisans. The weavers were regarded as lowest among the clean caste.<sup>13</sup> Chamars and Mochis who worked in leather were considered the lowest in fact untouchable.<sup>14</sup>

However, the chamars constituted the single largest social group among the artisans constituting 24 percent of their total population. They were followed by the Julaha, Kumhar,

<sup>4</sup> Census of Punjab 1881, Vol. I, PP. 50, 97- 99

<sup>5</sup> No. 30, 14 February 1878, Ibbeston, Denzil, Settlement Officer Karnal to W.G. Davies, Commissioner and Superintendent, Delhi Division, Delhi Division Records Basta 118, Series I, P. 85

<sup>6</sup> Srinivas M.N. (ed) India's Villages, Asia Publishing House, New York, 1960, PP. 4-10

<sup>7</sup> Ibbeston, Denzil, Punjab Caste, Languages Deptt. Punjab Patiala, 1916, P. 3

<sup>8</sup> Thomas E., Lasswell, Class and Stratum; An Introduction to Concepts and Research, Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, 1965, P. 143

<sup>9</sup> Sharma, K.N., Institutions and Social Change Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla, P. 30

<sup>10</sup> Census Punjab, 1881, Table VIII A, P. 11

<sup>11</sup> Douie, J.M. Punjab Settlement Manual Civil and Military Gazette Press Lahore, 1916, P. 106.

<sup>12</sup> Bhattacharya, J.N. Hindu Caste and Sects, Calcutta, 1937, PP. 179 – 215

<sup>13</sup> Ibbeston, Denzil, Punjab Caste, PP. 302 – 03

<sup>14</sup> In Western part of the Punjab the Muslim Workers in Leather were called Mochis and in Eastern and Central District They were called Chamars; Denzil Ibbeston, Ibid., P. 297

Lohar Mochi, Sunar and the Tarkhan Castes. Considering the requirements of the agrarian society, it may be reasonable to assume that the proportion of artisans living in rural areas was much higher than those living in urban areas.

The artisans served the village society with their skills. They manufactured the articles of wood metal, leather and clay. They were involved in practically all work requiring their labour and professional skills like sowing, reaping oil milling, preparation of Gur etc. They were indispensable for agricultural operations.

The artisans worked for the village landowners under the *Sepi* arrangements known also as the '*Jajmani system*'. This system of interdependence in which each caste in a village performed a form of service for the others mutual involved obligations for work and payment. It signified relationship between food producing families and those who provided services and goods and were collectively labelled as '*Kamins*'.<sup>15</sup> This system ensured regularity in the labour supply for the dominant agricultural castes and livelihood for the '*Kamins*'.<sup>16</sup> Each family of artisans was attached to certain agriculturist families. Under these arrangements the artisans were called '*sepis*'. They had fixed duties and remuneration.

The artisans family's right to their clients was treated as a sort of property right.<sup>17</sup> Even if a client or clients were dissatisfied with their '*Kamins*'. It was difficult to find a substitute because none from the same caste would work as a replacement and even if one volunteered to do so he was ostracized from the caste.

The carpenters with the raw materials supplied by the Jajaman were required to make and repair all wooden agricultural implements and articles for domestic use. They manufactured and repaired ploughs and furnished handles to sickles and spades once in a year, besides one pitch fork. They manufactured also household furniture and articles for day to day use.<sup>18</sup>

The Blacksmiths furnished and repaired iron implements and metal mares used for agricultures. The cost of raw materials for new implements was borne by the owners but the blacksmiths had to furnish iron for repair work.<sup>19</sup>

The potters supplied earthen pots called, tind used for drawing water from wells for irrigation purposes. These vessels were tied round the Persion wheel in a row. A well for

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<sup>15</sup> Mandelbaum David G, Society in India, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1970, P. 164

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, Oscar, Village Life in Northern India, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1958, P. 57

<sup>17</sup> Mandelbnaum, Ibid., PP. 167-68

<sup>18</sup> District Gazetteer, Gujarat, 1883 – 84, PP. 63, Settlement Reports, Jullandher, 1880-86

<sup>19</sup> For the function of the Lohars see District Gazetteer, Gujarat, 1883-84, P. 63

irrigation purposes required about one thousand to two thousand tinds in a year and Kumhar family could serve only three to four wells. As regards the supply of earthen vessels for domestic use one family of Kumhar usually met the requirement of 14 or 15 houses and supplied about twenty large and twenty five small vessels per house. The potters also helped in carrying the agricultural produce to the market on their donkeys. (The position of Kumhars as sepider was recognized in every district.)<sup>20</sup>

The Chamars and Mochis supplied shoes, leather things, blinders for bullocks and harnesses and whips. For making these articles they removed, dressed and dyed the hides and skin of the dead cattle. They had however, no right over the hides of animals killed for food. When not engaged in their traditional profession they were required to do several other tasks like whitewashing the guest house of the village or plastering of the houses of the 'Jajmans' with mud.<sup>21</sup>

The 'specialization' of the village artisans under the 'sepi' system did not involve fine work which was beyond their skills, particularly because of their immobility and the relative lack of contact with the out side world. Moreover the local requirements did not demand much refinement in manufactures. The village lohar for example was mainly concerned with turning out ordinary articles such as plough shares axes and pots and pans. These articles were 'crude' but fairly strong which was enough to serve the local needs. The furnace was generally made of mud and charcoal was used as fuel.<sup>22</sup> The work of the village Tarkhan too was not much refined because of the limited requirements of the agriculturists. Even the well to do people in villages did not require more than a few cots and stools besides some metal utensils and earthen wares, remarks that Indian dwelling in rural areas deserve the title of huts rather than of houses.<sup>23</sup>

The remuneration of the 'sepidadars' varied from places to place and was determined by local customs. They were paid in kind by a fixed share of the produce form of land. The dues of the artisans under the 'sep' system were deducted from the produce of the village before making any other payment. The deduction generally allowed was 10 to 16 percent of the total produce. Generally the remuneration of blacksmiths, carpenters and the potters was at almost the same rates. The cultivators were supposed to provide meals during the days the carpenter

<sup>20</sup> District Gazetteer, Sialkot, 1883-84, PP. 57- 58, Settlement Report, Lahore, 1865-69, PP. 61-62

<sup>21</sup> Settlement Report of Panipat and Karnal, 1872- 80, P. 116, Census Punjab, 1881, Part 1, P. 384, District Gazetteer, Gurgaon, 1883-84, P. 65

<sup>22</sup> Monograph on Iron and Steel Industries, Punjab, 1906-07, Civil and Military Gazetteer Press, Lahore, 1908, PP. 1, 92

<sup>23</sup> Vera, Antsy, The Economic Development of India, Longman Green and Company, London, 1949, P. 30

was at work. The carpenters also made well pulleys and the upright bodies of the ploughs for which they were entitled to special fees.

The Chamars and Mochis, however paid at half the rates of the Tarkhan Lohar and the Kumhars. Their dues also varied from place to place. On the social ceremonies like marriages and births the 'sepidars' particularly the Lohars, Tarkhans and Kumhars made rituals accessories such as the bridal seats and tables for worship, and vessels for dowry for their patrons. For these services they were entitled to a fee known as the 'lag' and were called 'lagis'.<sup>24</sup>

On the other occasions and for miscellaneous purposes, the Chamars were expected to render unpaid labour or 'begar' and were called beggars.<sup>25</sup> The begar included carrying the fodder for cattle of the land owners from the fields, white washing the village guest house, carrying the luggage of the visiting officials from one place to another, and attending to their comforts during their stay in the village.<sup>26</sup> For these services they were given small tips.

The village artisans were subjected to cess a hearth's realized by proprietors from other residents in the village called '*Kudhi Kamini*' in eastern Punjab it was known as 'haqbuha' or door cess in western district.<sup>27</sup> It was known also as '*chulha tax*'. However kudhi Kamini remained the most commonly used term for this cess.

The rate of collection of '*Kudhi- Kamini*' in the Punjab generally was two rupees per annum, payable half yearly by each adult male engaged in his calling.<sup>28</sup> In Paraganah Mehim, Bhiwani the Zamindars collected a Kameenee tax on non-agriculturist (artisans) at the rate of two rupees per hearth per annum, but in same paraganah it was charged to an exorbitant rate. Mr S. S. Brown, found that in some village rupees nine per head per being charged.<sup>29</sup>

This cess was a part of the income of the state in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Under the British however the land owners were allowed to collect it for the 'malba' or the common fund of the village. At some places '*Kudhi Kamini*' was counted as a source of income of the state by the early British administration as well. In Sampla tahsil of Rohtak distt for instance

<sup>24</sup> A lagi generally is a manial or a functionary at marriage entitled to fixed fees, J. Wilson, The Punjabi Dictionary, Punjab Government Press, 1898, Lahore, P. 650

<sup>25</sup> Census Punjab, 1881, Part 1, P. 384

<sup>26</sup> Settlement Report, Panipat and Karnal, 1872-79, PP. 115-16

<sup>27</sup> Settlement Report, Panipat and Karnal, 1872-80, P. 108

<sup>28</sup> Sharma, H.C., Artisans in the Punjab, 1849-1947, Journal of Regional History, Vol. I, 1980, PP. 177-86

<sup>29</sup> Indian History Congress Proceeding 29<sup>th</sup> Session, Part II, Patiala, 1967, PP. 98-106

8358 rupees were collected as Kudhi Kamini.<sup>30</sup> In Jhajjar tehsil about 5600 rupees were assessed as income from Kudhi Kamini.<sup>31</sup>

The object of '*Kudhi Kamini*' was perhaps to transfer a share of the burden of hospitality and maintenance of the village on to the non agriculturist as well.<sup>32</sup> The Scavengers (Chuhras – Balmiki) and Barbers (Nai) were exempted from the payment of this cess.

'Beggar' has is also a exploitative custom in this region. The agricultural labours and lower castes were compelled to do all kinds of jobs including supplying water to the rulers family, constructing buildings roads dams etc; carrying, dead, and wounded soldiers to their destination during and after war etc. The persons doing beggar were very often beaten, they were not given adequate food women doing the 'begar' were insulted and molested. There was no consideration of rough weather and no time limit was fixed for it. Carts and animals were demanded to carry loads from one place to other. Terrific atrocities such as there were attached to the system. So much so that a few persons died in the process.<sup>33</sup>

The artisans were the first victim of any failure in crops owing to their being extremely poor and living a hand to mouth existence. Famines, floods, droughts and epidemics hit them the hardest as they did not have the means to tide over difficult phases.<sup>34</sup>

The artisans in fact had to face all sorts of hardships and humiliation. They could be beaten over trivial issues, and they were not allowed to share the same platform on social and religious gatherings. The artisans could not enter even the shrines of 'pirs' and 'babas' on particular festivals let alone other religious establishments because the dominant agriculturist castes would not allow that The available evidence suggest that in towns and cities also the lower evaluated castes like the Chamars, Julahas, Lohars and the Tarkhans and other artisan castes experienced discrimination in religious places.<sup>35</sup>

In large villages the artisans of different castes were expected to live within their separate residential enclosures or '*galis*'. The chamars however, were supposed to live away from the main residential site. The situation was not much different in urban areas.

<sup>30</sup> Assessment Report, Sampla, 1876

<sup>31</sup> Assessment Report, Jhajjar, 1868, Table XV

<sup>32</sup> Settlement Report, Panipat and Karnal, 1872-80, PP. 108-09

<sup>33</sup> Surana, Pushpendra, Peasant Movement Studies, A Sociological Analysis Emerging Society, January 1979, P. 291

<sup>34</sup> Famine Commission Report, 1878-79, Vol. III, PP. 10, 11, 358

<sup>35</sup> Kenneth N., Jones, Arya Dharm; Hindu Consciousness in the 19th Century Punjab, Manohar, Delhi, 1974, PP. 130 – 35

The artisans in towns and cities were apparently free from some of the constraints felt by their counterparts in rural areas. The Urban artisans were broadly of two descriptions. One the specialist who manufactured goods and articles in their specialized trade according to the requirement of their clients. They used their own implements and raw materials and were paid by the Job. The other worked in shops and factories on daily wage bases or on contract.

The products of the urban artisans were more varied and generally more sophisticated.<sup>36</sup>

The traditional set-up guaranteed the artisans a living. The artisans understood that their low economic level and social status was due to the nature of their work, they continued to work in it also because the dominants sections controlling interests in both rural and urban areas would not easily allow them to move out side the existing system. At the same time the ‘biradari’ of hereditary artisans discouraged them from entering in to any new trade. Those who dared were the object of ridicule in the ‘biradari’ and could even be ostracized. Due to the rapidly changing social economic environment in the British Punjab the frame work of traditional relationship between the artisans and land owners was significantly altered.

The Punjab as well as Haryana was the home of Indian village republics, celebrated by C.T. Metcaff. “The village communities are little Republics having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down, revolution succeeds to revolution, Hindu, Pathan, Mughals, Sikh, Maratha, English are masters in turn, but the village communities remain the same. In times of trouble they arm and fortify themselves; a hostile army passes through the country, the village community, collect their cattle within their walls and, let the army pass unprovoked; if plunder and devastation be direct against themselves and the force employed be irresistible, they flee to friendly village at a distance, but when the storm has passed over they return and resume their occupation. If a country remains for a series of years the scene of continual pillage and massacre, so that the village cannot be inhabited, the villages nevertheless return when ever the power of peaceable possession revives. A generation may pass away but the succeeding generation will return. The sons will take the place of their fathers the same site for the village, the same position for the houses, the same lands will be reoccupied by the descendents of those who were driven out when the village was depopulated, and it is not a trifling matter that will drive the out for

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<sup>36</sup> The technical skills and abilities of urban carpenters prompted Baden Powell to comment on their work that it was careful in execution and to the minutest, Powell, Baden; Hand Book of the Manufactures and Arts of the Punjab, Punjab Printing Company, Lahore, 1972, PP. 272, 282

they will often maintain their post through times of disturbances and convulsion and acquire strength sufficient to resist pillage and oppression with success.<sup>37</sup>

But after British rule this system was to only destroyed. Artisans and the peasants were the main stream of the village communities. But often 1803 they were not self-dependent but the very exploited class of the society.

Under the old social system of Haryana region every tract and to a certain extent every village, was a self contained economic unit, in which were produced the simple manufactures required by the community. All needs of the great mass of the people except a few like salt etc. being thus fulfilled within the Border of their respective locality or village, their had never arisen in this province any great industries. Foreign trade necessarily confined to the few towns and such industries as existed were necessarily on a small scale.

System of cash payment in the towns gave lesser inducement to the industrial development. The artisan and manilas of the villages were all more or less servile and subject to the land holdings tribes and were paid a share of the produce of the soil, cash payment being probably a very late innovation in the 19th century. If the dominant tribe migrated its dependent castes went with it. Thus in the village, if the crops was short, everyone from the land lord to the Chuhra (Balmiki) received diminished share, but smaller as the share might be it was always forthcoming where as in the town the artisans was the first to suffer in times of scarcity, and if the scarcity was prolonged the urban industries were extinguished.

Moreover, in every large scale industry and especially in the big towns the system of advances which appeared to be as old as the industries themselves, precluded any attempt on the part of the operatives to improve their skill, for increased earning would merely go to liquidate the 'bagi'. It was small wonder if under this system several minor industries had decayed. 'Bagi' was a debt, which an artisan owed to his master and which, when an artisan left one employer for another the latter had to by the custom of the trade, refund to the former and thus himself become the artisans creditor.<sup>38</sup>

Cotton industries was the important domestic industry of the Haryan region, coarse cotton clothe being woven by hand in almost every village. Cotton spinning was the domestic employment during the greater part of their leisure time, of woven of all classes.<sup>39</sup> Not with standing the great revolution effected by steam in the cotton industry hand weaving held its

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<sup>37</sup> Metcalf, C.T., Revenue Minute, 17 November 1830, Spear, Pereival, The Oxford History of Modern India 1740-1947, Oxford Uni. Press, Vol. III, 1965, New Delhi, PP. 189-90

<sup>38</sup> Census of Punjab, 1901, PP. 367-69

<sup>39</sup> Monograph on cotton Manufacture in the Punjab, 1884, P. 3



place as the premier handicraft of the region even in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as of the rest of India, and Provided on less than five percent of the population with their daily bread.<sup>40</sup>

The weaver class included a small proportion of recruits from the lower orders of the population such as Mochis, Chamars, Dhanaks, Kolis and others in Haryana region.<sup>41</sup>

In most of the Haryana region, much home spun material was woven for the cultivators own wear. The hand spin yard was used for wrap as well as woof. The price of 1 to 1¼ seer hand spun yard was one rupee.<sup>42</sup>

Rewari was the important center for cotton-weaving. The chief Rewari manufacture was narrow 'pagris' about six inches wide by 16 yard long which were export to Jodhapur, Jaipur and other neighboring states for wear as under pagris. Pagris of a limited quantity of very good specimens was produced in Rohtak district.<sup>43</sup>

'Khes' was a coarse stuff, plain or checked with a double wrap and double weft, was generally used for wrappers in winter and for bedspread, made on a good scale in the region.<sup>44</sup> There were 360 looms in Rewari in which about 200 belonged to 'Multani Julaha', descendants of immigrants from western Punjab and the rest were the inhabitants of this region.<sup>45</sup> Muslim was made in small quantities at Rohtak.<sup>46</sup> Gurgaon district had 18704 workers<sup>47</sup> Rohtak district had 7184 workers<sup>48</sup> and Karnal had 4629 worker's in cotton industries.<sup>49</sup>

The condition of the weaver as in all places was even where there was a flourishing trade in his goods, miserable. He was every where ignorant and impoverished, and earned a bare subsistence for himself and his family by a handicraft which was becoming less and less profitable every day.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Latifi, A., The Industrial Punjab, Longmans Green & Co., Calcutta, 1911, P. 1

<sup>41</sup> District Gazetteer, Gurgaon, 1911

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Monograph on Cotton Manufacturers in the Punjab, 1884, P. 8

<sup>44</sup> Latifi, Ibid., P. 2

<sup>45</sup> Latifi, Ibid., P. 5

<sup>46</sup> Imperial Gazetteer of India, Punjab, Series, Vol. I, P. 314

<sup>47</sup> Latifi, A., Ibid., P. 5

<sup>48</sup> District Gazetteer, Rohtak, 1883 – 84, P. XIII

<sup>49</sup> District Gazetteer, Karnal, 1892, P. X V III

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