

Lahore and its indigo history

Lahore Down

26/2/05

WHEN you enter Lahore's walled city through Lahori Gate, probably the oldest 'darwaza' after the now demolished Taxali Gate, the road runs for about 400 yards and enters an opening known once as Chowk Chakla, the original red-light district of the city. Taxali was then a culturally upper class area. To the left, or north west, it heads and joins the edge of Tehsil Bazaar. To the right, heading north-east, it meanders along the Sootar Mandi, the yarn market of old.

As we move along we notice two lanes off this 'mandi' that are called 'Nilli Gali' and 'Rangwali Gali'. These two lanes interest us. Let us start our story from the year 1633. The Moghal Emperor Shah Jehan imposed a Royal 'farman' making indigo a State monopoly. In the indigo market of Lahore, just off Lohari Gate, the crier announced the emperor's decision. Little did he know that decision laid the foundations of European colonialism in the sub-continent.

The royal edict also confirmed the sale of indigo throughout the Moghal empire for three years to a Hindu merchant called Manohar Das, who had a huge shop in Lahori Gate, but who also operated his business in Agra and Surat. He was to be assisted by a loan from the royal coffers which would share the profit that might accrue. Official estimates mentioned that it would be the largest money-earning scheme in the empire.

Agra and Lahore were then the two major indigo markets of the sub-continent, with other important markets being Multan, Allahabad, Gujarat and Delhi. But Lahore was by far the largest, and Agra, in terms of quality, held sway. The Indian sub-continent was the oldest centre of indigo dyeing in the Old World. It was a primary supplier

of indigo to Europe as early as the Greco-Roman era. The association of the western portion of the sub-continent with indigo is reflected in the Greek word for the dye, which was *indikon*. The Romans used the term *indicum*, which passed into Italian dialect and eventually into English as the word *indigo*.

The Greek sage Periplus, writing in 80-90 A.D., mentions indigo and its connection with the River Ravi. He writes: "This river (Sinthus, i.e. Indus) has 7 mouths ... and it has none of them navigable except the middle one only, on which there is a coast mart called Barbaricon (Lehar, or Lahore) an articles imported into this mart are. ... On the other hand there are exported Costus, Bdellium ... and Indian Black (Indigo)."

The increasing interest of the strong Dutch and English merchant community in indigo had made the emperor act to increase his revenues. It was, 400 years ago, the biggest export sector of the sub-continent in terms of value. This 'royal farman' hit the world indigo trade hard, and the Dutch and the English merchant companies, who operated their ships along the coasts of the sub-continent, entered into a solemn agreement on Nov 19, 1633, to break this monopoly. They decided that no European would purchase indigo for one year, except at their own very low price, and that the purchase of indigo was to be a joint venture. The Dutch and the English solemnly pledged not to accept indigo as freight. The Portuguese also abided by this agreement. The indigo embargo was tightly in place.

The very first Europeans to import indigo were the Portuguese, those agents worked all over the sub-continent, especially in Lahore, Agra,

Ahmedabad and Multan. They moved their product to Surat, from where it was carried to Lisbon by the Portuguese and further sold to dyers in Holland. But, with the formation of the Dutch and the English East India companies, there began a rivalry for the monopoly of its trade.

This 'European' combination compelled Emperor Shah Jahan to dissolve his partnership with Manohar Das on April 14, 1635. The Moghal empire had wilted to European pressure for the very first time. From then onwards the pressure would never cease. With indigo came cotton from the Punjab. In the south they had managed to wrest the spice trade, with the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, and finally the English playing out their roles. But indigo had a very special role to play in the Lahore of the Moghal era.

Marco Polo, writing in the 13th century, mentions: "that at colium they make an abundant quantity of very fine indigo. This is made of a certain herb which is gathered and (after the roots have been removed) is put into great vessels upon which they pour water and then leave it till the whole of the plant is decomposed".

An English trader called William Finch, writing in his diary on August 30, 1609, mentioned three varieties of indigo produced during that time, with the main and best variety being Biana, a village near Agra, and it sold 400 years ago for Rs.25 per maund.

William Finch has again described the three varieties of indigo prepared in Biana. The first year's crop was known as *note* (*naudha*, young plant), the second year's crop was *jari*, sprouting from the roots and was considered the best. The third year's crop was *khunti* and was the worst of the three.

Another indigo merchant writing about the trade in India says: "I have indeed on more than one occasion observed that if an egg is placed in the morning near one of these indigo sifters, in the evening, when one of them breaks the egg, it is altogether blue inside, so penetrating is the dust of indigo".

One characteristics of indigo trade was a keen sense of competition between the Dutch and the English for its monopoly. In 1637, the Dutch were found paying more for indigo at Ahmedabad in order to frustrate the attempts of the English.

Another letter written by the English factors on May 29, 1619, to the company ran as follows "the high price of indigo is entirely due to the competition between the English and the Dutch and to their allowing the ships to be used by and native merchants for its transportation, for although it was not very useful to send Biana over land to Persia via Lahore, no one would dream of.

It would come as a surprise to many, that Arab, especially Egyptian, traders were transporting indigo to the Middle East for over 2,000 years before the Europeans completely took over this business. Even the mummies preserved in the pyramids of Egypt have indigo dyed cotton fabrics used in them.

It would also come as a surprise to many that the sails of the ships of Christopher Columbus had indigo dyed canvas. So the indigo of Lahore and Agra could be said to be witness to the discovery of the so-called New World. In Scotland the nearest thing to indigo is the 'woad' plant, which is even today used in traditional Scottish checks and tweeds.

The use of indigo in woven fabrics was also taking place well

history

merchant writ-
trade in India
deed on more
sion observed
placed in the
e of these indi-
evening, when
aks the egg, it
ue inside, so
e dust of indi-

stics of indigo
ense of compe-
Dutch and the
nopoly. In 1637,
found paying
Ahmedabad in
the attempts of

written by the
May 29, 1619,
can as follows
of indigo is
e competition
glish and the
r allowing the
by and native
ransportation,
not very use-
over land to
no one would

s a surprise to
, especially
were trans-
the Middle
years before
npletely took
s. Even the
ed in the pyr-
have indigo
ics used in

me as a sur-
he sails of the
er Columbus
nvas. So the
d Agra could
ss to the dis-
called New
the nearest
the 'woad'
today used in
checks and

in woven fab-
g place well

over 600 years ago. For example
the pants worn by Indian sailors
were canvas dyed in indigo. It
was manufactured in the city of
Dhunga near Ahmedabad. From
there came the world 'dungaree'.
The French, who were always
master weavers, were producing
special waves like serge. The city
of Nimes is even today known as
the textile centre of France. The
Serge of Nimes, or 'serge de
nimes' went on to be called
denim.

The French soldiers fighting
the British in the Americas used
denim. This denim was also worn
by Italian sailors and working
men, especially in Genoa, their
main port. From Genoa the
denim trousers worn were called
jeans. It is amazing how a prod-
uct produced mainly in western
India, or Lahore, Agra,
Ahmedabad and Multan, trav-
elled all over the world and
evolved into the world's most
worn garment.

Once synthetic indigo was for-
mulated by a German scientist
called Bayer in the 19th century,
the demand for natural indigo
dye fell. By the time the British
took over the indigo business
began to die down, especially
after the plant was being grown
in other parts of the world. The
only place now where natural
indigo is produced and used in
Pakistan is in Sindh and Multan,
where the traditional 'ajrak' is
indigo-dyed.

In Lahore, it has ceased as a
business. The names of streets in
the walled city are now merely
remembered by the older people.
Street names are being changed.
Chowk Chakla is now called
Chowk Bukhari. But as Pakistan
has the world's best medium sta-
ple cotton, indigo-dyeing is
returning as more denim plants
are set up. The sad thing is that
the dye is now imported. A sad
twist in the land and city that
gave the world so much indigo
dye.—MAJID SHEIKH