

Weekly Publication of



**Cotton  
Association  
of India**

# COTTON STATISTICS & NEWS

Edited & Published by Amar Singh

2017-18 • No. 45 • 6<sup>th</sup> February, 2018 Published every Tuesday

Cotton Exchange Building, 2nd Floor, Cotton Green, Mumbai - 400 033  
Phone: 3006 3400 Fax: 2370 0337 Email: cai@caionline.in  
www.caionline.in

## Cotton Trade in Ancient Times - Part I

*Dr. T.R. Loknathan has a Ph. D. in plant breeding. He is currently working as a Principal Scientist in the Division of Crop Improvement at ICAR-CICR, Nagpur. He is pursuing his research on genetic enhancement of cotton.*

Cotton - the ancient fibre crop and its growing importance as a useful product of trade and commerce is depicted vividly in the second part of the classic book *The Vegetable Lamb of Tartary* written by Henry Lee in 1889. The sequential developments associated with the expansion of cotton trade across the continents have been sketched with brevity, marking important places where cotton manufacture and trade flourished. A brief analysis of these events has been done here. This excludes the interactions and perceptions of famous people who were involved therein during their encounter with cotton. The involvement of kings, admirals and engineers who developed waterways to access the cotton region of the world has been dealt with.



### GUEST COLUMN

**Dr. T.R. Loknathan**

*Principal Scientist, Division of crop improvement,  
ICAR-CICR, Nagpur*

### Historical Importance of Cotton as a Produce

As flax is regarded as the characteristic clothing material for Egypt, silk for China and wool from sheep and goats for Northern Asia, cotton has always been regarded as indigenous to India. The uncertain nature of Hindu chronology does not allow us to state with certainty when cotton was first spun and woven in India, but there is little doubt that it was so used from the earliest ages of Hindu civilization. Dr. Robertson's emphatic remarks on the difficulty of tracing the exact beginning in his book, *Historical Disquisition in British India*, confirms the uncertainty. The earliest mention of cotton, according to Dr. Pope, is recorded in the first book of Rig Veda, Hymn 105, Verse 8, which is supposed to have been written 15 centuries before the Christian era.

In the sacred texts of Manu which date back from 800 B.C., cotton is referred to repeatedly, implying its common use at that time in India. Cotton and cotton cloth are depicted in these

texts by Sanskrit names - *karpasa* and *karpasum* and cotton seeds as *karpas-asthi*. The common Bengali name *kupas* indicated that cotton seed was in general use in India, and occasionally heard in Lancashire in England. These words are derived from Sanskrit from which also comes the Latin word *carbasus*. It is evident that the manufacture of cotton in India dates from very ancient times indeed.

During the period of Herodotus, the process of weaving and dyeing had attained such a degree of excellence, inferring considerable previous development. It is further inferred that a large export trade in white and coloured cotton fabrics had been established even then.

### Flow of the Cotton Trade

From India, the manufactured cotton seems to have reached Persia in very early times, for the word *karpas* occurs in the book of Esther (Chap. IV 6) in the description of decorations of the palace of Shusan during the night royal festivities given by their King Ahasuerus, BC 519. It is written that there were white, green and blue hangings. The word in Hebrew is *carbassinus*- cotton cloth. The hangings in the palace of Ahasuerus were of white and blue striped cotton, which was also seen throughout India. The use of this striped material, stuffed and padded with coarse cotton as a substitute for doors and windows was quite common. They kept away the heat and were referred to as *pardahs*. To repel the scorching heat of Sushiana as reported by Aristobulus, these blue and white *pardahs* were used in the palace of Shusan during the reign of Ahasuerus.

Strabo the historian, mentions the palace of Shusan, Susa, which was in the province of Suis or Susiana. He adds that cotton grew in Susiana and was manufactured into clothes there. It was first introduced by the Macedonians. Alexander the Great had invaded many countries and was quite aware about the importance of commerce. He enlisted the help of academicians, men of science and knowledge who would collect specimen of interesting animals, plants and minerals while on their march. He periodically sent these to his mentor Aristotle. Alexander set sail down the Indus to the ocean, and from its mouth reached the Persian Gulf through the Erythrean Sea (now the Red Sea).

On his arrival in India, he ensured that the commodities of India should be conveyed to other Asiatic countries and by the Arabian Gulf to Alexandria. His intelligent exploration, foresight and political wisdom is well described in the memoirs of his officers, providing Europe, the first authentic information about the climate, soil, inhabitants and production of India, including cotton.

Prior to the invasion of Alexander, no commercial operations were carried out by sea between Persia and India. But with the advent of Alexander and his army, the obstructions located at the river mouths were removed, leading to easier transshipment of goods. The manufactured goods were shipped to various cities from the Northern Provinces. By camels from the banks of the Indus to those of Oxus, down the stream by which they were carried to the Caspian Sea, and distributed partly by land and partly by navigable rivers, through the different countries bounded on the one hand by the Caspian and on the other by Euxine or Black Sea. Indian products intended for the Southern and interior districts were transported by land from the Caspian Gates to some of the great rivers by which they were dispersed through every part of the country.

This was the ancient mode of trade with India, when the Persian Empire was governed by the native princes. Dr. Robertson's *Historical Disquisition in British India*, mentions that when any branch of commerce has got into a certain channel although it may not be the best or most convenient one, it requires a long time and persistent efforts to give it a different direction.

Alexander's successor Seleucus made expeditions to obtain goods from India. Meanwhile Ptolemy Soter, another of Alexander's generals took possession of Egypt and strove to improve trade with India. His son Ptolemy Philadelphus engineered to build a canal that was 175 feet wide and 45 feet deep, between Arsinoe and the eastern branch of the Nile, which would enable him to carry the goods to Alexandria entirely by water. But his work could not be completed as the navigation of the northern extremity of the Arabian Gulf was so difficult and dangerous. Ptolemy built a city, which he called Berenice, further down the west coast of the sea.

This new city became the chief port of communication between Egypt and India. Goods landing there were carried by camels across the desert of Thebais to Coptes and from there down the Nile to Alexandria. From here, the goods were transshipped to various countries in the Mediterranean. Thus, the farsighted policy of Alexander made the Europeans more aware of calicoes, muslins and fine cottons which they had never seen. It's probable that for more than 2,000 years, these fabrics had been woven on the simple looms of India and served as the principal attire for millions of its population.

Egypt undertook voyages to India through the sea, resulting in a remarkable flow of cotton goods from India to their lands. The Egyptian merchants took on board their cargoes of Indian produce at Patala (now Tatta) on the lower Delta of Indus at Barygaza (now Barooch), on Nerbuddah (Narmada) and in the Gulf of Cambay and also at Karrachee (Karachi) and Surat. Though the course was more tedious and the voyage prolonged, the trade prospered for more than three centuries till Egypt was conquered by Julius Caesar. After the battle of Actium, the Roman prince Augustus took the reign.

The Romans having tasted the luxury of Indian cotton goods gave a new impetus to the trade with India. About 400 sailing crafts were involved in the trade. These Romans who established an intercourse by land by way of Palmyra resulting in greater volume of trade even when the government was shifted from Rome to Constantinople in 329 BC.

### **Discovery of Monsoon Winds Enhances Egyptian Trade with India**

About A.D. 50, an important discovery was made which greatly facilitated intercourse between Egypt and the East and reduced the travelling time. Hippalus, the commander of a trading vessel to India, recorded that there were periodical winds called the 'monsoon' and how steadily they blew during one part of the year from the east and during the other from the west. He ventured to use the regularity of the monsoon winds, undertaking the slow and circuitous coastal route, stretching boldly from the mouth of Arabian Gulf across the ocean and was carried by the Western monsoon to Musiris,

on the Malabar coast. This was one of the greatest achievements in navigation in ancient history and opened up the best communication between the East that lasted for 1400 years and more.

Arian wrote in A.D. 131 that at that time, Indian cottons including large width, fine cottons, plain and figured muslins and cotton for stuffing couches and beds; were landed at Aduli and Barygaza was the port from which they were chiefly shipped.

The Indo-Egyptian maritime trade established by Alexander and encouraged by Ptolemy Lagus and his son prospered for nearly 1000 years. It survived the downfall of the Roman Empire in A.D. 476 and lasted till the conquest of Egypt by the Mohammedans under Amni Benalaz, the general of Caliph Omarin A.D. 634. The Saracens captured Alexandria since there was no communication between Christians and Mohammedans. They thus prevented the trade of Indian cotton goods from entering Europe and hence the international communication was abruptly stopped.

### **Cotton, Flax and Silk**

The ancient Egyptians were quite unacquainted with cottons. This is evident from the fact that the ancient mummies were found covered by swathing bandages made of linen. Also it was found that no cotton plant was found near the tombs of Egypt. The importance of cotton at that time is exemplified by this fact mentioned by Herodotus, that the gift sent by King Amasis of Egypt to Sparta, was a corselet padded with cotton and engraved in gold which was considered to be a rare novelty.

In this context, it is mentioned that the first knowledge of cotton in Egypt could have been acquired somewhere in 550. B.C. Linen was the main clothing material of the Egyptian. The manufacture of linen from flax, is probably of a greater antiquity as the growth and wearing of cotton in India. It was also surprising that notwithstanding the comparative proximity of Egypt to India, cotton, which was so extensively manufactured in the latter country, should have remained so long unknown and unappreciated by a people to whom it would have furnished a cheaper article of dress than the flax plant. But



it was clear that linen was preferred and its use prevailed in Egypt till the Christian era.

Similarly, in China, fabrics woven from the web of silkworms were being used from ancient times for the dresses of all classes of people. It is mentioned that Si-Hing, wife of the Emperor Hoang - Tibyan bred silkworm about 2600 years before Christ and that the mulberry tree was cultivated to supply them with food 400 years afterwards. Cotton vestments and robes of honour were occasionally presented to the Chinese Emperors by foreign Ambassadors and were highly appreciated and admired. But it was not till 1500 years later during the reign of Emperor Wu-ti (502 BC), that cotton began to be cultivated in China for manufacturing purposes.

Returning to the dark ages of Europe and the rise of the Mohammedan power, by the seventh century, the cultivation and manufacture of cotton in Arabia and Syria had become an important industry which spread to the Northern coast of Africa. The Saracens and Moors invaded and conquered Spain in A.D.712. The conquerors brought with them the knowledge of cotton and its uses. Looms were built almost in every Spanish town and the growth of the weaving of cotton were carried on with great success until the 15th century. The Spanish looms became famous for good quality sail cloth and heavy cloth like fustian, that they produced in large quantities.

Under the influence of the Moors, cotton was cultivated in Greece, Italy, Sicily and Malta. However, after their exit from Europe, the growth of cotton was transferred to the African shores. The art and sciences first revived in Italy and the Venetians carried on the trade with India for 57 years till in AD. 1261, the Greeks under Paleologus aided by the Genoese, took possession of the city and Genoa acquired the privileges which Venice had enjoyed for a short time. The Venetians made a treaty with the Mohammedans and obtained Indian cotton through Egypt. The progress of the cotton trade now became more rapid in the 14th century, with the fustians and dimities of Venice and Milan being much appreciated, especially in Northern Europe. Half a century later, the manufacture of cotton was established in Saxony. At Bruges

and Ghent in the Netherlands, there was a large trade in fustians which were manufactured in Prussia and Germany and were exported to Flanders and Spain.

### Latin American Cotton

It is believed that the 'New World cottons' were as old as the oriental cottons, as evidence from ancient historical records show. In Mexico and Central America, unmistakable proof of the greatness and culture of the New World dwellers were found. Immense indigenous works of masonry, pyramids of unknown antiquity and grand roads existed even before the Inca Civilization. Successive races differing in their habits, laws, arts, manufactures and religious prevailed.

In Peru too, the army of Spanish conquistador Pizarro, found evidence of vast antiquity everywhere. The remains of the Chimurs of Northern Peru covered not less than 120 square miles. There existed roads, aqueducts, etc. especially the great road built by Peruvians from Quito to Cuzes and through the whole length of Chilla. These are the works of great men who lived thousands of years before the Incas and amongst their manufactures was that of cotton. The Peruvians were one of the first to deploy efficient weaving and pioneers in weaving coloured cotton.

Thus, it can be inferred that the antiquity of cotton existed in both the New and the Old World. Given the scope of the subject, it has not been possible to cover everything, however a gist of the importance of cotton in trade and commerce has been narrated in the global perspective. In the second and concluding part of this article, the medieval period of cotton trade will be covered to get a more holistic picture. Readers can also refer to the book *The Vegetable Lamb of Tartary* by Henry Lee (1889).

*(The views expressed in this column are of the author and not that of Cotton Association of India)*

-----