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San Diego Museum of Art

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Of Cabbages and Kings

Prices of Mughal Furnishing Fabrics
and the Meaning of Mughal Money

Ellen S. Smart

This paper attempts to relate a small number of Mughal furnishing fabrics to their 17th C prices and to the purchasing power of Mughal money. There is no intent to give a comprehensive overview, but rather to see a few 17th C textiles, which today are rare and fabulously expensive, in terms of their original comparative cost. Information about the fabrics comes from the goods themselves and from contemporary Mughal paintings. Although inscriptions on the textiles contain some information about prices, several tables of textiles and prices are found in the Ain-i Akbari, a compendium on the mode of governing Akbar's empire. Written by Abu'l Faizi in 1595, the Ain-i Akbari also informs about revenues, salaries and food prices, making it possible to relate the Mughal economy to ours. The text precedes by 50 years the earliest textile included in this paper. Therefore the cost of living may have increased by the time the fabrics under discussion were traded. However, the comparisons below would be of interest even if salaries and food prices had increased four-fold in that time.

Chintz

Two large, complete, 17th century chintz floorspreads have recently come to light. The Cincinnati chintz is 6.8 by 4.6 meters, and the other a little more than 5 by somewhat less than 5 meters. Both floorspreads have inventory inscriptions giving their original prices (Rs 45 and Rs 30), original sizes (The Cincinnati chintz was end is 10 gaz 7 girah by 6 gaz 14 girah. A gaz, or yard, was divided into 16 girahs; a girah was about 4 centimeters. The Heeramaneck piece was and is 7 gaz 8 girah by 7 gaz 4 girah). Both are inscribed with various dates, including when the summer carpets were first acquired (June 1645).

What is immediately obvious about both floorcoverings is their carpet-like design: cartouches and arabesques in the border, guard stripes, and either a colored ground with repeating floral scollops, or a floral field with a central ojival medallion and finials extending on the longitudinal axis. From the reproductions one may not immediately recognize that these are not carpets. But where, comes the question, are these chintz floorspreads in Mughal paintings? Why do we see so many carpets in the pictures?

The answer of course is that any floorcovering with a carpet design (?) in a painting has been understood to be a carpet. Because of the corrosive nature of dyes, most of the surviving Mughal chintzes have plain grounds. As most of the floorcovering in paintings are colored, they are immediately recognized as carpets. But with the understanding that the over-all designs of chintz floorspreads are very similar to that of carpets, a fresh look at paintings is in order. For instance, a painting dated 1653 shows the Mughal ancestors Babur, Timur and Humayun seated on thrones atop a plinth covered with a green ground chintz carpet? with an ojival medallion and finials extending longitudinally, a border with cartouches. The design of the plinth cover is strikingly similar to that of the Cincinnati chintz.

A reference to chintz occurs in the Ain-i Akbari in the chapter on Shawls and Textiles. The chapter begins with a description of shawls and the organisation of the Imperial wardrobe. There follows a long table of types of textiles and their prices when the Ain-i Akbari was written. The sections in the table are of cottons, woolens, plain silks, and gold stuffs.

Blochmann's translation of the Ain-i Akbari from Persian to English, finished in 1873, continues to be the edition most of us use most of the time to delve into the workings of the Mughal empire. However, it can be rewarding to look at the Persian text occasionally, to see what Abu'l Faizi actually wrote. This table represents one such golden opportunity.

Because prices are involved, a slight detour into the realm of Mughal money is called for. The mohur, rupee and dam were the units of currency. The dam was the unit used for commerce.

1 mohur = 100 rupees
1 rupee = 40 dams

One dam was divided into eightths for commerce and into 25ths, which were an imaginary division used only by accountants.

The imperial income in 1580 was 3,629,755,246 dams or 90,743,881 rupees or 907,439 mohurs. In the 39th regnal year, 1595-6, the mansab, which was the army-cum-bureaucracy, took 63% of the imperial income, leaving the emperor with an annual surplus of approximately 617,058,392 dams or Rs15,426,460.

The expenditure for the entire household that year was only 309,186,795 dams or Rs7,729,670 leaving His Majesty with a surplus of 307,457,127 dams or Rs7,696,790.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Imperial Mughal Income and Expenditure in 1595</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In Rounded Mohurs, Rupees, and Dams</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>Rupees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>900,000</td>
<td>90,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expenses</td>
<td>Mansab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>747,000</td>
<td>74,700,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>163,000</td>
<td>16,300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77,250</td>
<td>7,725,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surplus</td>
<td>75,750</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abu'l Faizi lists salaries paid to the Mughal household as well as to the mansabdar. The mansab included all of the male nobility, whose positions were often hereditary. In the army, footsoldiers received 3.3 to 10 dams per day. The lowest ranking officer received 417 dams per day. The highest, who was Prince Salim, the heir apparent, received 28,365 dams per day. Among the imperial women, those of least rank received 2170 dams per day. The officers and the women were expected to live on their pay, but loans were available from the general treasury.
Table 2
Pay for the household servants
Position Dams per day
Leopard keepers 6.6 to 22.5
Cattle herders, senior 6 to 10
Carpenters, first class 7
Cattle herders, junior 3.3 to 5.3
Elephant keepers 3.5 to 7
Bricklayers, first class 3.5
Thatchers 3.5
Watercarriers 2 to 3

Now back to Abu'l Fazl's textile table, where the items are listed per piece or per gaz. Chintz is 2 dams to 80 dams per gaz. Our bigger floorspread was 10 gaz 7 girah long and made up of 6 lengths of cloth stitched together along the selvedges. It was made, in effect, from a 62.5 gaz length of chintz. Its price was 45 rupees, or 1800 dams, or 28.8 dams per gaz, in the low middle price range.

The green ground floorspread at 7 gaz 8 girah, times 6 lengths, = 45 gaz, at Rs 30 = 1200 dams = Rs 26.7 dams per gaz.

But what does this mean? What else could you buy in Mughal India instead of these chintzes for your 1800 or 1200 dams? Assuming that he worked 24 hours a day for his 28,365 dams, you could hire the crown prince as a consultant for an hour and a half instead of buying the white floorspread, or for an hour instead of the green. Or a you could hire a water carrier for two and a half years or for 18 months. To put this into perspective we again turn to the Ain-i Akbari, to the section on prices of food which are given in dams per maund or seer. I have taken familiar commodities and calculated the prices in dams per pound to make Table 3 below. In terms of food-purchasing power, the dam was very similar to the current American dollar.

Table 3
Prices in Mughal Dams for Various Food Items
In Dams per Maund, Seer and Pound

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Maund</th>
<th>Seer</th>
<th>Pound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wheat</td>
<td>12 dam</td>
<td>.30 dam</td>
<td>.15 dam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>best</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>worst</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wheat flour</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spinach</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>onions</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>turnips</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cabbage</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ginger</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ghi</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>milk</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yoghurt</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white sugar</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meat</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sheep per head</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>goat per head</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So now translating the chintz floorspreads at 1800 and 1200 dams into onions, they become 22,500 pounds of onions for the Cincinnati floorspread, or 15,000 for the smaller one. The white floorspread was equal to 3600 pounds of cabbage, the green one 2400. Chintz was one of the less expensive types of cotton cloth, the most expensive being Khas, a very fine muslin at 120 to 6000 dams per piece. While the length of a piece is not specified, at the beginning of the chapter on cloth in the Ain-i Akbari, is the information that Akbar ordered cloth to be made in pieces long enough to make a garment.

Namdas and Carpets

In a number of Mughal paintings scholars sit on a particular sort of rug that is usually folded in quarters. Known as namad or namda, these are felts, as can be seen from the pointy fringe on two sides, and from the colors and the fuzzy outlines of the design that must have been made from colored fibers being arranged before the felt was compressed. In the Ain-i Akbari, these are called takva-namad, indicating that they were a kind of namad used by faqirs and scholars. There are two kinds mentioned: takva-namad vilayati, meaning made in Afghanistan or Turkestan, and takva-namad hindi, made in Hindustan. The
Gold Cloth

The fourth category of textiles in the Ain-i Akbari is gold stuffs. This section is a palanqposh, or bedcover, for 400 to 8000 dams. In view of the fact that the highest paid woman in the harem received 2170 dams per day, a golden bedspread would have been a luxury item afforded by few.

There are 22 more items in the section on golden stuffs, including matabag, which may be a double cloth, at 600 to 20,000 dams or the equivalent of 3200 to 100,000 pounds of melons, which cost the same as cabbage. Figured gold brocaded velvet from Europe was 52 to 1600 dams per piece.

The next entry is sarbat Zarbaft which Blochmann translated "Barsah?" and since then has been quoted as meaning Bursa. Whatever this textile was from, the text is quite clear that it was gold brocade, not gold brocaded velvet, because makhmal is not written there, and the price was 1200 to 28,000 dams per piece. If there is evidence that velvet from Bursa was used at the Mughal court, it is not given in this section of the Ain-i Akbari. However, gold brocaded velvet was imported from Europe, costing between 4000 and 28,000 dams per piece. Gold brocaded velvet from Gujarast was between 4000 and 20,000 dams per piece. From Kashi-Banaras and from Lahore it cost the same: 4000 to 16,000 dams per piece.

The most expensive item of gold cloth is makhmal sarbat Yazdi or gold brocaded velvet from Yazd, per piece: 15 to 150 mohurs. That is: 24,000 to 240,000 dams per piece. Yazd is the only Persian source for golden velvet mentioned in the Ain-i Akbari. An early 17th C painting records a most lavish use of this type of Safavid gold-ground velvets in the court of Shah Jahan by one of his imตนเอง family who had immediately made his immediate family could have afforded to use this type of ultimate luxury fabric that cost between 24,000 and 240,000 dams per piece. A piece of Yazdi brocaded velvet cost the equivalent of 18 years work of between one and one hundred first class bricklayers, or of between 4,000 and 100,000 gallons of milk. Or between 48,000 and 480,000 pounds of cabbage.


5. Any Textile or Costume curator longing for methods to complicate cataloguing and storing a collection would find interesting ideas in Abu’l Fazl.


7. Blochmann, p. 28 – 32.


15. Blochmann, infra.


19. For an example see, Smart and Walker, no. 62 (color). The price is written on an inventory label of a carpet (No. 2228) of the same size and design in the Central Museum, Jaipur.


23. Ibid.

24. I thank Ihsan H. Nadiem of the Pakistan Institute of Archaeological Training and Research, Lahore, for this information.


27. According to Mr. Nadiem, in Lahore Museum MS 61 the word may be read as Harsa.


29. For a similar velvet, see M. Kahlenberg, “A Mughal Personage Velvet,” The Burlington Magazine, November 1973, fig. 23.