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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.¹ Written by Abu'l Fazl in 1595, the A'in-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.² 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 and 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 scrolls, 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.³ 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.⁴ The chapter begins with a description

of shawls and the organization of the Imperial wardrobe.⁵ There follows a long table of types of textiles and their prices when the A'in-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 1873,⁶ 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 Fazl 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 eighths for commerce and into 25ths, which were an imaginary division used only by accountants.⁷

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, funding the mansab, which was the army-cum-bureaucracy, took 83% of the imperial income, leaving the emperor with an annual surplus of approximately 617,058,392 dams or Rs15,426,460.⁸ 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 307,871,597 dams or Rs7,696,790.⁹

Table 1
Imperial Mughal Income and Expenditure in 1595
In Rounded Mohurs, Rupees, and Dams

	Mohurs	Rupees	Dams
Income	900,000	90,000,000	3,600,000,000
Expenses			
Mansab	747,000	74,700,000	2,988,000,000
Household	163,000	16,300,000	612,000,000
	77,250	7,725,000	309,000,000
Surplus	75,750	7,575,000	303,000,000

Abu'l Fazl lists salaries paid to the Mughal household as well as to the mansabdars. The mansab included all of the male nobility, whose positions were often military as well as administrative. In the army, footsoldiers received 3.3 to 10 dams per day.¹⁰ The lowest ranking officer received 417 dams per day.¹¹ The highest, who was Prince Salim, the heir apparent, received 28,365 dams per day.¹² Among the imperial women, those of least rank received 2.67 dams per day; the women of highest rank were paid 2170 dams per day.¹³ The officers and the women were expected to live on their pay, but loans were available from the general treasury.¹⁴

Table 2
Pay for the household servants¹⁵

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 selvages. 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.

10 gaz 7 girah x 6 lengths = 62.5 gaz
 Rs 45 x 40 = 1800 dams
 62.5 gaz @ 1800 dams = 28.8 dams per gaz

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.

7 gaz 8 girah x 6 lengths = 45 gaz
 Rs 30 x 40 = 1200 dams
 45 gaz @ 1200 dams = 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.¹⁶ 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.

1 maund = 40 seers
 1 seer = .93 kg
 1 pound = ca. .5 seer

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

Item	Maund	Seer	Pound
wheat	12 dam	.30 dam	.15 dam
rice			
best	100	2.50	1.25
worst	20	.50	.25
wheat flour	22	.50	.28
spinach	16	.40	.20
onions	6	.15	.08
turnips	21	.53	.27
cabbage	40	1.00	.50
ginger	100	2.50	1.25
ghi	105	2.62	1.31
milk	25	.62	.31
			[2.48/gal]
yoghurt	18	.46	.23
			[.46/qt]
white sugar	128	3.20	1.60
meat	65	1.61	.82
sheep per head	Rs 1.50 to 6.50	= 60 dams to 260 d	
goat per head	Rs .75 to 1.00	= 30 d to 40 d	

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 A'in-i Akbari is the information that Akbar ordered cloth to be made in pieces long enough to make a garment.¹⁷

Namdaz and Carpets

In a number of Mughal paintings scholars sit on a particular sort of rug that is usually folded in quarters.¹⁸ 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 A'in-i Akbari, these are called takya-namad, indicating that they were a kind of namad used by faqirs and scholars. There are two kinds mentioned: takya-namad vilayati, meaning made Afghanistan or Turkestan, and takya-namad hindi, made in Hindustan. The

former cost between 80 dams and 4000 dams, the latter between 60 and 200. For a price comparison with knotted carpets, the type of shaped, red ground, floral quintessential Mughal carpet, about 3.5 by 2.5 meters, cost 30,360 dams.¹⁹

Plain Silk

The section in the A'in-i Akbari on plain silk cloth, that is, without gold, begins with makhmal, or velvet. One "plain" Mughal velvet that survives is a railing hanging, made to fold over the railing so that the flowers are right side up on both sides.²⁰

In a painting of Shah Jahan Holding Court, the railings to left and right of the emperor are draped with similar, but gold ground, textiles.²¹ Velvets without gold are described by Abu'l Fazl as coming from Europe, Kashi, Yazd, Mashhad, Hervi, Khafi, Lahore, and Gujarat.²² Blochmann's translation of some of these place names raises no questions, but others do. Blochmann called Kashi Kashan, which it may be in Persian Farsi. However, in South Asia, Kashi is Kashi-Banaras, an ancient city long known as a center of sophisticated textile weaving. Blochmann turns هروى Hervi into هراتى Herati or "from Herat," which is quite imaginative, as هرى Heri or هرابوى Heravi is usual Farsi for Herati.²³ Hervi is today a surname in the subcontinent, an indication of coming from a place called Herv.²⁴ Khafi eluded Blochmann, as it eludes us today.

The prices in the A'in-i Akbari for velvet without gold range from 40 to 2800 dams per piece, except for the European velvet which was 400 to 1600 dams per gaz.²⁵ Inscriptions on the back of the velvet railing hanging give its price as Rs 20, or 800 dams, enough to pay a first class bricklayer for 228 days of work or to buy 1739 quarts of yoghurt, or 1600 pounds of cabbage. The inventory notations were made by clerks at Amer, the seat of Mirza Raja Jai Singh. As Shah Jahan's prime minister he was the highest ranking officer in the Mughal administration and was paid slightly less than the crown prince.

The velvet is undoubtedly Mughal, but where it was made cannot be precisely determined. The A'in-i Akbari says that the plain velvets from Kashi-Banaras were 800 to 2800 dams per piece, those from Lahore 800 to 1600 dams per piece, the velvet from Gujarat 40 to 80 dams per gaz, and that from The East 40 to 60 dams per gaz. The Amer railing hanging was 1 gaz 12 girah long when it was acquired. The price of 800 dams, or 460 dams per gaz, rules out Gujarat and "The East". If we were to follow only Blochmann's translation, we would assign the velvet to Lahore where such a velvet could have cost 800 dams. But with Kashi-Banaras known as a weaving center for deluxe silk, and with the price for the Amer velvet falling into the Kashi range as well, Kashi-Banaras must also be considered as a possible place for its production.

The other plain silks, meaning without gold, range in price from 12,000 dams per piece for double cloth to something called sar at 4 dams to 8 dams per yard, which is only 8 to 16 pounds of cabbage, or less than the daily wages of a senior cattle herder. The words for many of these textiles are obscure today, as they were to Blochmann, and so far remain untranslatable. No doubt, they are before our eyes in the paintings, but there is no way to tell which is which. From Europe came satin, figured silk, and something called katan, a very fine cloth said to be torn by moonbeams. From India plain satin for shirts was 20 to 40 dams per yard. Taffeta 10 to 80 dams. Lah, a sort of gauze, was 6 to 13 dams. On the whole, the cheaper plain silks were less expensive than cotton cloths.

Gold Cloth

The fourth category of textiles in the Ain-i Akbari is gold stuffs.²⁶ The last entry in this section is a palangposh, 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 matabaq, which may be a double cloth, at 800 to 28,000 dams or the equivalent of 1600 to 56,000 pounds of cabbage per piece; muqayash, which is cloth with tiny gold stripes, at 400 to 8,000 dams per piece, or 800 to 16,000 pounds of melons, which cost the same as cabbage. Figured gold brocade from Europe was 400 to 1600 dams per gaz.

The next entry is زر بافت zarbaft barsar which Blochmann translated "Barsah?" and since then has been quoted as meaning Bursa.²⁷ Wherever 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 Gujarat 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 مخمل زربافت يزدي makhmal zarbaft 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 velvet in the canopy over an imperial birthing tent pitched in a garden.²⁸ A Safavid gold-ground figured velvet made the lining, forming horizontal bands of male figures alternating with cypress trees.²⁹ Only the emperor and 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 1,000 and 100,000 gallons of milk. Or between 48,000 and 480,000 pounds of cabbage.

1. Abu'l-Fazl 'Allami, The A'in-i Akbari. The three versions used here are a 17th century copy in the Lahore Museum, Acc. No. 61, a copy printed in Lucknow in 1869, and that translated by H. Blochmann edited by S. L. Goomer, republished in Delhi by Naresh C. Jain in 1965.
2. See E. S. Smart and D. S. Walker, Pride of the Princes, Indian art of the Mughal Era in the Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati Art Museum, 1985, no. 65 and E. S. Smart, "A Preliminary Report on a Group of Important Mughal Textiles," The Textile Museum Journal 1986, fig. 1. The other has lately been for sale in New York. A piece of it is published in color in "The Heeramaneck Collection of Indian Sculpture, Paintings and Textiles," Sotheby's, November 2, 1988, lot 151.
3. See T. Falk, ed., Treasures of Islam, Musee d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, 1985, no. 152. B.N. Goswamy and E. Fischer, Wonders of a Golden Age, Museum Rietberg, Zurich, 1987, no. 40. Both in color. Also Sotheby's, London, 3 April 1978, lot 99 and F. Martin, The Miniature

Paintings and Painters of Persia, India, and Turkey, London 1912, pl. 14.

4. Blochmann, pp.97 - 102.

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

6. Blochmann, p. ix.

7. Blochmann, p. 28 - 32.

8. I. Habib, "The Economic and Social Setting," Fatehpur Sikri, ed. O. Grabar, Marg 1987, pp. 74 - 82.

9. Blochmann, p. 12.

10. Blochmann, p. 65.

11. Blochmann, p. 257.

12. Blochmann, p. 251.

13. Blochmann, p. 46.

14. Blochmann, p. 275.

15. Blochmann, infra.

16. Blochmann, p. 65 ff.

17. Blochmann, p. 97.

18. For one example see E. Binney, Indian Miniature Painting from the Collection of Edwin Binney, 3rd, Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon, 1973, no. 10 (color). S.C.Welch, A Flower from Every Meadow, Asia House, New York, 1973, no. 52.

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.

20. See R.W. Skelton et al., The Indian Heritage, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1982, no. 219, color on page 67, and Smart, 1986, fig. 23.

21. Skelton, op.cit., no. 68. T. Falk and M. Archer, Indian miniatures in the India Office Library, London, 1981, no. 80 (color).

22. A'in-i Akbari, Lucknow, 1869, p. 119-120. Blochmann, p. 99.

23. Ibid.

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

25. A'in-i Akbari, 1869, loc. cit., Blochmann, loc. cit.

26. A'in-i Akbari, 1869, p. 117-8, Blochmann p. 98-99.

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

28. T. Grek, ed. L. Gyuzalian, Indian Miniatures of the XVI-XVIII C, Moscow, 1971, pl.3 (color).

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