

KAGZI (*kagzi derived from hagit, the Persian word for paper*)

INDIAN HANDMADE PAPER

In all cultures papermaking is reflecting the history of that particular country.

After studying different cultures way of making paper for more than 25 years and visiting India frequently the past 10 years, collaborating with a few papermills, painting and printing on their different handmade papers, without really finding, what I wanted, I decided to begin updating the situation of handmade paper in India in April 2009.

We – my daughter Emilie and I - sat out from Udaipur, Rajasthan and our first stop was Gosunda. I had read that Mirza Munir Beg's family left Tashkent for Narol to Haryana 400 years ago to Udaipur to make paper for the royal family, ending up in Gosunda in 1632. At one time 300 people were making paper here, mostly blotting paper. In 1995 Mirza Munir Beg had told, he was the only one left making paper. We arrived by dirt roads to a tiny square in the village, where in few second we found ourselves surrounded by all the children from town – so it seemed! We asked about the Beg family and walked a small path, where the house was situated. Lukman Beg, Mirza Beg's son, was resting upstairs on his Indian bed among garlic and onion on the floor. He quickly organized himself, smiled and welcomed us. His father died January 12th, 2009, 90 years old! No – Lukman did not made paper anymore, but he was fishing! Together with his wife, he opened a locker and from a small room filled with handmade paper, he pulled out several sheets and gave them to us – old account book paper. His wife took us by the hand, leading us to the place, down the pathway, where they used to work. She opened the big gate and in the small overgrown courtyard, we saw, what once had been a paper mill without a roof. Ruins of the big Hollaender beater, big concrete vats, half parts of the moulds – the chapris (grass mats) missing, were hanging on the wall in a tiny shed. A sad view, but the family had not received help from the government to continue and couldn't make their living from paper anymore. The fait of most part of old kagzi families all over India.



Next paper stop was Sawai Madhopur, near the tiger-populated ruins of Ranthambhor, in order to find Abdul Haleem, once unable to survive by making paper, he had instead sold Lipton tea and glucose biscuits for years, saving every rupee possible for building a hand papermaking "factory".

His ancestors were all kagzi and on his father's deathbed, Haleem promised to return to the family's way of work. After some research we found Abdul Haleem, 72 years old, with a long white beard, and a very good spirit, smiling eyes and a quick mind. We had chai, seated around a huge table, surrounded by all the family members, studying us curiously. As many other kagzi families, Abdul's family also came to India 400 years ago to make paper for the emperors. Originally they came from Tashkent, but finally settled in Sawai Madhopur

after having moved around. Abdul has been fighting to get support from KVIC (Khadi and Village Industries Commissions), but has never received anything and is very angry. He won't give up. Also in the bureaucratic India, you have to have your connections to receive goodwill.

Abdul Haleem showed us his papermill and took us to the kagzi place, where each and every house used to make paper. Now there is only Haleem's paper place left. Finished cotton paper sheets were drying on line outside the mill. Inside women were sorting out the cotton rags, and a young man was standing at the paper machine, dividing the continuous roll of paper into sheets with his fingers. The papermaking machine was like a Fourdrinier, one of the first machines to produce paper on cylinders. So Abdul's paper is not always made by hand. He uses mainly cotton rags and recycled paper today. One by one the sheets were piled on top of each other, hung to dry and later pressed in a calender. Before the sheets were dried on lime walls, which gave the sheet marks from the drying brushes and a smooth feeling with a sound. We saw the old moulds, which he told, they use for orders – the Hollaender was running – and it functioned. Outside the paper mill we looked down into a deep big well with good water. We saw the pits, where they used to foot stamp the plants to pulp and visited the small houses around, where beds now were placed on top of the former stone vats. We visited Abduls home, in which he had been born and still live in with all his brothers – 8! A very interesting meeting, full of life. Abdul's 3 sons are all working in the paper mill. I look forward to see them again.



Next stop was Sanganer, south of Jaipur, which today is the main centre for handmade paper in Rajasthan with around 50 paper mills operating. Sanganer is also known for textile printing. We visited Salim's Paper, Handmade Paper & Board Industries – a 40 year old paper factory, where they produce handmade and machine made cotton paper. The owner was not there. He is involved with KVIC and in politics. They had a big showroom with all kinds of bags, envelopes etc. The biggest sheets they can produce are 70 x 200 cm.

We also visited the A.L Paper House, where the youngest son of 5, Imran Khan, is taking care of marketing and sales. He is travelling all over the world. Among many other products, they sell paper boxes to Ikea! They had a very beautiful showroom and a fine variety of many different paper sheets and products – all produced of cotton and recycled paper. They do not make paper from plant pulp, but they add small plant bits and pieces as effect to the cotton pulp, so the sheet of paper gets a more rough look! We saw a video about this paper family, where all family members are participating. They are also descendants of kagzi, but have survived in a splendid way.

After visiting several smaller paper units, I had a meeting with the director, Mr. Sharma, of Kumarappa National Handmade Paper Institute. Here they experiment with many different fibres, and this is the place for formal training, but to make industrial paper and export is their focus, not to make paper in the old traditional way: of plants. Mr. Sharma explained me about AIVIA and KVIC: AIVIA (All India dSpinner's Association and All India Village Industries) founded in 1934, was taken over by the Khadi and Village Industries Commissions in 1956 (supporters of the Craft) = KVIC – who does not support the old way of making paper. AIVIA has evolved into a research centre. The question of what might be required to save the traditional kagzi must be explored in detail. (KVIC is not taking care of that, which is more than too bad!=my remark!) KVIC provides formal training in a Poona paper school and at this above mentioned centre inaugurated in Sanganer in 1994, in Ahmedabad and Hariana. KVIC has been instrument to the creation of uniformity and modernisation – Westernisation in the majority of paper ventures. Now almost all of India's paper, other than recycled is made from KVIC-recommended cotton cuttings from garment industry – with the occasional use of hemp or jute fibres.

I told Mr. Sharma that I belong to the ones lamenting the passing of the craft's traditional methods. He gave me an address, and I went there:

Zakir Hussain, Hussain Hand Made Paper Udhog, House nr.175, Maszid ke Pass, Kagazi Mohalla. Through a narrow lane, where numerous paper factories were making grey cardboard paper, we finally found the place, where they still make paper as before: of good strong quality – of plants – paper that has a sound and marks from the drying brushes. On the roof of the house, a long white lime wall is used as drying wall. Papers dried this way become flat and smooth and are peeled free, when the water has evaporated. Brushes used to feather stroke sheets onto drying walls are called kunchi or bowara. Sometimes they are made from a soft date palm. Hussain's wife is still making chapris (grass mat for making paper – is made by either chade grass, ravari grass or amaranth and andropogan micranthus), and he is still sitting down, making paper in the vat enforced in the floor. His family originally came from Bukhara to make paper for the emperors.

I purchased paper from Hussain and I will continue to do so. Among others the Indian artist Nilima Sheikh is buying paper from him, and he works for many others on orders.

South west of Sangar is Kishangar, founded in 1611 and recognized for its distinctive school of miniature painting. It was a refuge for artists escaping from Aurangzeb's restrictive court. We were shown ruins of papermaking buildings along the shore of the lake by the grandfather Krishna Lal of my friend Mukesh from Udaipur! Mr. Lal also showed us his fine miniature paintings.

AFTER THOUGHTS:

I think – historically – India had very fine papers, that we simply have not seen much of.

The Muslim invaders brought their culture, religion, art and the art of papermaking to northern India with Mahmud of Ghazni (997-1030 C.E.).

The Muslim religion relied on paper to record the Prophet's teachings, just as Buddhism in China, Korea and Japan fostered papermaking to preserve the Buddha's words. India's indigenous Hindu religion, valuing oral and written transmission, had not created the same need. This is why it took almost 1000 years before paper was produced in India

Today the traditional kagzi struggles in a questionable battle to continue. While some lament the passing of the craft's strictly traditional method, the Indian paper maker has escaped the fate of artisans in other countries, where traditional papermaking rests as museum exhibitions. India, with the undefeatable resilience of centuries of effort, truly possesses a "living craft." Change and defeat are constantly recycled. The craft adjusts and readjusts and the process of dipping a mould to make a sheet by hand repeats itself for the billionth time by hundreds of artisans.

Accountants and bookkeepers are almost single-handedly responsible for the endurance of the craft during the first part of the 20th century. They provided a market so a few kagzi around the country could limp along doing what they knew best. It was generally thought that handmade paper lasted longer than commercial paper and therefore that accounts, ledgers, deeds, religious texts and important records were more secure on handmades. Numerous horizontal, red cloth or



leather bound account books are the paper legacy from those days, which one can still find in the darkness of several shops in India.

Over many centuries Indian art and craft has set standards for the world. Before we loose the last of the traditional papermakers, I hope a few mills will make paper again comparable to the old kagzi paper. Like fine paper in Japan, this paper would find a market among conservators, painters of miniatures, and people deeply interested in Indian culture within India and outside, even if it were more expensive that the new cotton paper.

What is life like for the new Hindu papermakers who do not come from the kagzi tradition? Is papermaking becoming a cultural identity for them as it has been for the kagzi, or is it merely a job.

Why have papermaking and the scribal arts been less able to rise from their own roots that the traditional textile tradition? Might the Khadi and Village Industries Commission change its approach as it sees the growing market for export paper? Might they spearhead the revival of more traditional paper for use by conservators and artists??

How did paper function in past Indian society? With the changes that have occurred in this century – what is its place in the future?

These are some of the questions, I would like to be able to answer!

Anne Vilsbøll

Litterature:

Neeta Premchand: *Off the Deckle Edge, a papermaking journey through India, 1995*

Alexandra Soteriou: *Gift of Conquerors, Hand Papermaking in India, 1999*

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