

Book Reviews

Silk and Religion, An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600-1200 by Xinru Liu, Oxford University Press, 1999, 248 pages, ` 265, ISBN 9780195644524.

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This book is an extensive and adventurous journey of Silk Trade accompanied by Religion during 600-1200 AD. As revealed by the author, it is an encouragement from Professor Romila Thapar. Certain political and cultural events encouraged the intervention between Eurasia and the Mediterranean. We can see the commercial and cultural brilliance of T'ang China, Byzantine Empire as well as of Islamic Empire, through Silk Trade. However, silk played a vital role in the ecclesiastical life of these domains.

T'ang China and the Byzantine Empire effectively monopolized and regularized the production and transaction of silk. In this connection, the role of religious institutions and practices in various parts of Eurasia was of great importance. The author gives an informative description about the evolution and development of sericulture under the influence of various religions. This book gives a historical survey of silk trade through the silk routes.

Buddhism sustained the silk trade in India and central Asia. For instance, the trade developed with the spread of Buddhism from India to China. The emergence of relic transactions both in Buddhism (T'ang China) and Christianity (Europe) fostered the silk trade. For the purpose of acquiring relics, silk became the major product of pilgrimage. Further, the Byzantine Empire was the chief propagator of the Christian religion in the eastern Roman Empire with the development of silk trade.

The Silk industry in these areas used colour purple on silk textiles which became the highest emblem of status. The Byzantine state preserved the prestige of its silk textiles through an elaborate weaving technology and the purple dye. Here, Silk became as a means to strengthen the Imperial Order. Now, in the context of religion, the Byzantine rulers patronized the Christian church with silk textiles. For instance, Constantine gave a robe (figured silks), 'fashioned with golden threads' to Bishop Macarius of Jerusalem for use on the occasion of Baptism (M. Shepherd: 1967: 63). Soon purple silks became sacred vestments for the church.

The author says the association of silk with the relics of saints and religious institutions was a component of the rise of the cult of saints and Christian Expansion in Europe. So, silk became the integral part of relics. The author also reveals the fact

about Buddhist (India and China) and Roman (Christian) influence in pilgrimage and the role of silk in it. It is to be noted that the royal treasure of imperial silks to churches within the Byzantine Empire promoted the image of an ecclesiastical world identical to the imperial order. The connection between saints and silks was established in Christian Europe.

In the old days, even Silk acted as a currency. The major silk exporters to Western Europe were the Islamic countries especially of Byzantine Empire. Similarly the major achievement of the Islamic Empire in the Silk Trade was tiraz system, an institution to implement the Islamic Sumptuary laws on silks in which we can see the technological and artistic development of Islamic textiles. Tiraz, a Persian word for embroidery, denoted (silk) textiles inscribed with the specific political reign and the date of production on the border. The institution of regulating the production of textiles in factories with Arabic inscriptions (Dar al-Tiraz) was established after a series of conquest through the Islamic world. The tiraz system flourished during the thirteenth century and reached its height during the Umayyad and Abbasidian Caliphates, when the power of the Caliphs was at its apex (Sergeant: 1972: 8). The Arabs also inherited the silk industry to Spain and Sicily. It was said that there were 800 tiraz factories that were silk (in Spain). (Serjeant: 1972: 170) Further, under the Caliphate, khusrawani (Persian textile) was ordered by the Caliphs to cover the Kaaba (religious centre for Arabic society in Mecca). Yemen and Egypt remained the keenest contenders to supply the coverings for the Kaaba. So, there was the practice of using silk textiles as status symbol in both the Byzantine and Chinese courts, and the similar religious practices among Buddhist and Christians and even in Muslims. Likewise, the silk trade brought economic and cultural impact in Islamic empire and in Christian Europe.

We get some information about Aniconism (imitation of images of God), probably inspired by Judaism. Even the Arabian empire established diplomatic contact with T'ang China. In Spain, in addition to regular trade the exchange of gifts among Islamic rulers and Christian princes also carried on. Further, the role of sea routes in linking the East and the West gained significance. The monopoly of the Byzantine Empire on its special silk textiles lasted longer than that of T'ang China.

Perhaps, the parallel between the silk cultures of Byzantium and T'ang China could not be purely coincidental. Certain historical conditions pushed the development process of silk cultures. However, there were similarities and links, between the Buddhist domain (East and South Asia), Christian domain (whole of Europe) and in Islamic empire.

To conclude, the author gives his best to reveal the description of Silk Trade with its origin and rise as a status symbol, development of trade through the participation of various religious institutions and communities.