BOOK REVIEWS

FEET & FOOTWEAR IN INDIAN CULTURE


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It was Sonja Thomas Bata’s private collection of footwear from India and the world over which led to the establishment of the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto, which has the largest shoe collection in the world. The Museum sponsored the publication of “Feet and Footwear in Indian Culture”, a superbly brought-out glossy coffee table publication and a collector’s delight as Mapin books usually are. Lavishly illustrated with 131 colour plates and 26 black and white illustrations provided by Bata Shoe Museum Foundation, Toronto, Canada, to back the text a wealth of information unfolds with each page.

In Indian culture, the foot is regarded as an object of veneration. Worship is offered and obeisance paid to elders, religious heads and idols with the ceremonial washing of the feet. Wrong-doers crave forgiveness by falling at the feet of the aggrieved. Removing one’s footwear before entering a home or a temple before worship denotes a sign of respect, humility and submissiveness.

Drama and poetry transforms the foot of the beloved into an object of love. In the Indian perception of romanticism and eroticism, the feet are the most admired, which explains why a young woman decorates the soles of her feet, tattooing them or colouring them with red alta in anticipation of the tryst at night with her lover. She massages them with scented oil first and embellishes them further with anklets and other foot jewelry. Paradoxically intermingling with these gestures are the rooted feelings that the feet are humble, impure and polluting.

This book is the first of its kind where the significance of cultural nuances has been explored with reference to Indian footwear and their ornamentation, tracing the journey through the period of the Rig Veda (4000 BC) through classical Sanskrit literature, medieval poetry, and contemporary living practices in Part I. Part II threads a historical outline of footwear through the ages, from ancient times to the present, though literary and archaeological sources marking social, historical and religious significance and cross-cultural influences through guided research and rare information culled from lesser known Buddhist and Jain sources. Part III deals with traditional Indian footwear in contemporary times.
Stories from mythology and folklore illustrate the prominent role that the feet had to play, elevating the book from a mere document to interesting reading material. Kalidasa’s famous *Shakuntalam* describes Shakuntala as being injured by a blade of grass as she is walking, giving her an excuse to dally so that Dushyant can gaze on her longer. And there is the popular story of Ahalya, who was cursed and turned to stone for her infidelity, and who came to life when Sri Rama placed his foot on the rock that she had been turned into. In a marriage, the man places his wife’s foot on the *ammi kal* or grinding stone as a reaffirmation of her faithfulness in the marriage.

Most women wore anklets even if they did not use footwear and the heavy anklet plays a vital role in the story of Kovalan and Kannagi in the classic epic Shilapaddikaram. The anklets were mostly made of silver or brass, and even today, anklets made of gold are only worn by deities and by women from royal families. Men were not exempt from wearing anklets either. The *Bhagavatha Purana* series has a miniature depicting Vasudeva carrying the baby Krishna, whom he seeks to exchange with Yasoda’s girl baby. The baby sticks out his toe to stem the rising waters, and displays its anklet. What is missing in the book at first glance is the story in the Ramayana, which talks of Lakshmana, his eyes ever averted, being familiar only with the foot jewellery of Sita, which is what he later identifies.

In India, described as a barefoot country, especially rural India, foot hygiene was always considered important. During the Moghul period, Nicolo Conti reports that in Agra alone there were 800 bathing houses, which provided luxurious services to customers, such as body and foot massages, with ornate foot scrubbers in bronze with ribbed surfaces used to clean the soles of the feet.

The practice of worshipping footprints continues to this day in India. Buddhists worship the Bodhi tree under which Buddha got his enlightenment and where his footprints lie. Vishnu, in his avatar as Yamana, took three strides and with the third, placed his foot on Mahabali, thus banishing him to the underworld. To this day, amulets with Vishnu’s footprints are worn to ward off evil. Footprints of rulers, religious heads, Gods and Goddesses were woven into the *angavastras* and used with reverence during worship.

During Diwali, Goddess Lakshmi is invited into homes to bring good fortune; the home is illuminated with oil lamps and the footprints of the goddess leading inside are painted in front of the house. The book, however, does not mention the common practice of little footprints of the baby Krishna painted in every household during Gokulashtami.
The pada mudra or seal of foot is considered to bear the characteristics of the owner. An enemy could be vanquished if the dust from his footprints was tied in a leaf and burnt. Or, more interestingly, rites, performed over a girl’s footprint could win her love. A thorn placed on the footprint of a runaway thief could cause him to grind to a halt.

It is believed that black magic is achieved through footprints and an enemy is victimised by reciting certain charms and by cutting his footprints with the leaf of a certain tree. Infection and pollution may spread through footprints; on the other hand, footprints can communicate to a person who touches them some good quality of their maker.

Part 2 deals with ancient footwear and types of shoes..."Oh hero, remove the sandals from your feet that are encrusted with gold, they will ensure peace and harmony in the entire world!" Then Rama took off his sandals and gave them to Bharata. Though Rama was physically not present, his sandals symbolically represented him as the sovereign of his kingdom".—The Ramayana

How many of us know that the deity of the Tirupati temple appears annually to four persons in different directions, east, west, north and south, with a request for new shoes? These persons spread a fresh layer of rice flour over the floor of a room and lock it for the night. By morning, huge footprints appear, which are the basis for making shoes, which are then placed before the image of the deity and worshipped. Surprisingly, all four pairs turn out to be the same size and form pairs.

The paduka or toe-knob sandals were usually worn by ascetics and mendicants. In its crudest form, it is roughly cut in the shape of a foot, and has a knob that is held between the first and second toe. Later, elaborate designs were carved on precious wood, ivory and metals including silver and brass, and inlaid with gold and silver wire, and they became votive objects of veneration for devotees.

It is believed that one of the earliest examples of footwear worn on the Indian subcontinent is a sandal of wood, datable to circa 200 BC. During the third and fourth centuries in the Buddhist period, it was quite common to wear strapped sandals, and Indian kings wore sandals ornamented with precious jewels. Jaina literature shows that leather was used for making of shoes, which protected the toes from getting injured. Hides of cows, buffaloes, goats, sheep and other wild animals were used, as is written in the Gupta period. It is interesting to note that while most of the Gods from the Hindu Pantheon are depicted barefoot, the Sun God Surya is among the few depicted with footwear, and he wears boots! Iron and stone were used for footwear and some 13th century middle-class citizens wore shoes with insteps inlaid with diamonds and rubies.
The colour plates in the book are gorgeous and some of the illustrations show *mojiris* worn by the Nizams of the 19th century, with heavy *salma sitara* embroidery and inlaid with precious stones, and it gives an idea of the wealth abounding in the country. From the 17th century onwards, during the reign of Jehangir, *mojiris* with upturned toes were introduced.

The shoe, it is believed, has all sorts of esoteric powers, and in a small village in Rajasthan, it is believed to have powers to heal women possessed with spirits. The women are made to drink out of shoes and are supposed to be healed and accepted into society. The book includes a brief description of the leather workers in India. The workers were classified as leather cutters, leather dressers, leather sellers and tanners.

No comprehensive study of footwear is complete without a chapter on contemporary footwear and that is what Part 3 of this beautiful book deals with. Though English designs crept into Indian footwear, each state had its own identity. Maharashtra was famous for double-toed shoes or *mahattis*, Lucknow for its gold-embroidered shoes, ornamented slippers were made in Rajputana, and Molkalmuru in Mysore was famous for a special kind of slipper. Ajmer's 19th century shoemakers could replicate English styles using European imported leather and made them to suit all classes of society.

The Indian leather-maker forms an integral part of the craft structure in the village and like most traditional craft skills, the knowledge is passed on from one generation to another. Bata Shoe research teams travelled to the Kolhapur region of Maharashtra to document the making of the Kolhapuri chappal. Other documentations include those of *jutti*-making in Jodhpur, Indian Tibetan Boots, and Vegetable Fibre Shoemaking in Leh. These shoes of grass and straw are made of indigenous material that grows in the foothills and valleys of the Himalayas.

The three sections cover in a comprehensive manner a study of Indian footwear through the ages and the associated myths and folklore. The book is a must-buy for all craft-lovers who take pride in their library of valuable books.

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