It has been a while since there has been a post on this blog; six months to be precise. But that does not, automatically mean, we haven’t posted anything. We have been busy with a new blog, slightly more thematic, topical in nature, and massive in purpose; introducing, The Custodians.

As is probably obvious, The Custodians looks to being a primary resource of historical and cultural information and knowledge of the Indian Subcontinent. We will keep up academic rigour, yet, create a simple and engaging material, and be true story-tellers. Apart from creating original work from our contributors, we are also developing a large repository of open source material and links to interesting articles and other sites.

We know that the journey is long and it is hard, and we cannot do justice by ourselves.

So we are inviting like-minded people to join us in this journey, and contribute to this initiative. We welcome different types of contributions, so do have a look, and let us know if you could also become a Custodian.

In the meanwhile, if you have liked His Story Telling, we think you will enjoy this new initiative; please follow, The Custodians.

Here’s the Blog and it’s feed. We are also on Twitter and Facebook.

Thank you, and looking forward to your visits at The Custodians!

PS: The His Story Telling blog will remain live and we may have occasional posts, on themes and topics outside of what we post on The Custodians.
If we look at history before firearms came on the scene, we see much romanticism associated with swords and other blades. They were revered and even worshiped. The weapons themselves had stories and were often as well-known as the bearer. The swords that great men and women wielded, had legends of their own. The sword, now, however, is reduced to a ceremonial adornment, seldom drawn from the scabbard.

There’s more, however, to these swords than their legends. The oldest record of a sword-like weapon, or long-daggers, goes back to 3300 BC, in the Bronze Age. What we would consider a proper sword was not practical in the Bronze Age, due its tensile strength. Some innovations followed in China, but it wasn’t until the Iron Age that swords started getting their due, 12th century BC, onwards, when smiths discovered that by "adding carbon during smelting, they could improve produce an improved alloy", which we now know as steel.

The first proper mention of steel, in India, comes around 326 BC when Alexander defeated Puru (often called Porus, in Western texts) at the Battle of the Hydaspes (modern-day River Jhelum). King Puru, though he lost the battle, did not lose his rival's respect, and continued to rule his kingdom, Paurava. In spite of the battle, there was mutual respect between these two kings. Puru offered to Alexander, as a token of respect, his sword, and a 100 talents of steel. If we assume that contemporary chroniclers used Greek standards, one talent is equal to 26kgs. That’s close to 3 tonnes of steel!

But why steel? Well, at those times, steel was rare, and therefore, more precious than gold. And this was not just any steel, these 100 talents were of Wootz Steel.

The word, Wootz, has its etymology in Urukku, or Ukku. Ukku is a Kannada word, but perhaps has its origins in classical Tamil, with “Ekku.” In the middle ages, in Russia, they were called the “Bulat” steels. In Persia they were known as "Pauhad Janherder". Clear similarities, then, between these words and the common word for steel in India today: Faulad (Faulad).

According to Pliny The Elder, a Roman author, naturalist, and natural philosopher, as well as naval and army commander of the
early Roman Empire, we read of import of iron from the ‘Seres’ kingdom during the first century BC, which would refer to the Ancient Chera kingdom of South India. Another popular Roman travelogue, the Periplus of the Erythrean (Red) Sea, also mentions trade with the Chera kingdom, along the Malabar Coast of Kerala. Various accounts refer to Wootz as *ferrum candidum* (bright iron), *ferrum indicum*, *sericum*. Sericum, no doubt comes from Seres, or the Cheras. Yet, it became popular world over as Damascus Steel, perhaps because the finished product was seen in Damascus, Syria. While Wootz was cast in India, the fine swords made of this material were forged in Persia and Arabia, and probably seen (and sold) in Damascus. This is not to say that swordsmithery was absent in India. In the 12th century AD, the Arab traveller and cartographer Al Idrisi, wrote:

> ‘The Hindus excel in the manufacture of iron, and in the preparations of those ingredients along with which it is fused to obtain that kind of soft iron which is usually styled Indian steel (Hindiah). They also have workshops wherein are forged the most famous sabres in the world. …It is not possible to find anything to surpass the edge that you get from Indian steel (al-hadid al-Hindi)’

Elsewhere, Al-Biruni (973-1048 AD) says:

> “There will never be another nation, which understood separate types of swords and their names, than the inhabitants of India…”

Arab accounts refer to Hindvi, Hindiah, or Hinduwani steel, which later got stylised to the European Ondanique, as well as Teling Steel, which undoubtedly refers to the Telengana region. This points us to the source; “…wootz ingots were produced in Southern and South Central India and Sri Lanka. The area of Hyberabad, formerly Golconda, was perhaps the most reputed area of the production of wootz.”

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**Damascus Steel – characterised by distinctive patterns of banding and mottling reminiscent of flowing water; CSMVS, Mumbai. Click to see larger version.**

Due to the nature of Wootz and the forging method, swords made of Wootz are "characterised by distinctive patterns of banding and mottling reminiscent of flowing water." Further, "Such blades were reputed to be tough, resistant to shattering and capable of being honed to a sharp, resilient edge." [Link] The word, ‘Damas’ in Arabic language means water. Another reason, why, possibly, the swords got their name.

The romanticism of the sword, then, is no mystery. Before becoming a favourite sword, the material travelled many lands, passed through many hands. The steel, the forging, the beauty of the swords must have captured imaginations around the world. This wondrous alloy, of all things, has inspired poetry. The Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin immortalised ‘bulat’ with a poem when he wrote in 1830:

> All is mine, said gold;
> All is mine said bulat;
> All I can buy said gold,
> All I will take, said bulat.

Wootz and swords made of Wootz continued to capture the imagination of the world. It was the subject of many stories, like the one between King Richard the Lion Hearted and Sultan Saladin the Saracen. This story, perhaps best explains what it meant to have a
Wootz sword and what it is capable of.

The trade of Wootz continued in the 17th century, with accounts of Persia and Golconda trading this marvellous alloy, during the Qutb Shahi reign.

In recent history, Wootz finds mention again, during the Revolt of 1857. The swords had such a reputation that the British decided to destroy all Wootz swords. They had to build a special machine for this, because the shearing blades meant to cut the Wootz swords, themselves got cut by the tough Wootz blades.

India, today, is the 4th largest producer of steel, with 86.5 million metric tons of crude steel production. Given that this is the place where the finest steel was invented, there’s a long way to go. Sure, we don’t make swords anymore, but it is unimaginable to imagine a world without steel. Pretty much the same way, as it was, since the first Wootz sword was forged thousands of years ago.

I must make a special mention of the book, "India’s Legendary Wootz Steel—An Advanced Material of the Ancient World", by Sharada Srinivasan and Srinivasa Ranganathan. This book has been the major source of reference for this post.

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ANCIENT KOLHAPUR: A (VERY) SHORT HISTORY

Kolhapur, a major city in the state of Maharashtra is steeped in popular history. It has an important place in Maratha history, primarily after 1707, following the succession dispute between the descendants of Chhatrapati Shivaji. References to Kolhapur in this period are many, and well documented. There’s more to this city than this recent history, however.

It goes way back; more than 2000 years ago.

Excavations in and around Kolhapur reveal that it was first occupied during the Satavahana period (c. 200 BCE to 200 CE). The early Satavahanas ruled, what is now Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. They were the vassals of the Mauryan empire, and established themselves after the decline of the Mauryan kingdom, around 230 BCE.
Around 1st century CE, the western parts of India were ruled by Saka (Indo-Scythians) rulers, who were collectively known as the Western Satraps. The Western Satraps, occupied territories from the early Satavahanas during their reign in this region. By 63 CE, Nahapana, one of the most powerful Satraps, was ruling over Malwa, Southern Gujarat, and Northern Konkan, from Broach (Modern Bharuch, in Gujarat) to Sopara (Modern Nalla Sopara, near Mumbai) and the Nasik and Poona districts. While I haven’t found any specific mention that Nahapana’s domains included Kolhapur, we have other sources to confirm this. Suffice it to say for now, that Kolhapur was under the rule of the Western Satraps.

Come 126 CE, and we have one of the most famous kings of the Andhra Satavahana dynasty — Vilivayakura II, also known as Gautamiputra Sri Satakarni, also known as Shalivahan. (Yes, he is the one who gave us the Shalivahan calendar, which is used in India throughout.) Vilivayakura II recovers the territories lost by the Satavahanas to the Wester Satraps. Vilivayakura II makes Kolhapur his western capital. Kolhapur is mentioned as Hippokoura by Ptolemy and Vilivayakura II is referred to as Baleokouros. Couple of decades later, Vilivayakura II’s son, Pulumayi II moved the capital to Pratishthan (Modern Paithan, in Maharashtra) on the upper waters of the Godavari River.

Safe to say, then that there is enough influence on Kolhapur, of the Yavanas (Ionians, or Asiatic Greeks), the Indo-Scythians, the Parthians (of Persia), and the Andhra Satvahanas.

In other sources, Kolhapur is mentioned as Kollaksetra, from where it derives its current name — Kolhapur, as seen on inscriptions from the Shilaharas (800 CE – 1256 CE).

The site of Brahmnapuri where the excavations were made is now almost within Kolhapur city, and the artefacts are available to view from the Town Hall Museum at Kolhapur.

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THE BASIS OF BIAS

May 9, 2015  Leave a comment

Most history is guessing, and the rest is prejudice. ~ Will Durant, The Story of Civilisation: Our Oriental Heritage

In a recent interview, Thomas Holland said, “The very idea that history should be written without bias is itself a biased one.” How much can we agree with Holland? And does this mean that all of history writing is (or should be) essentially biased?

Perhaps the only way to write about history without bias, and it is possible, is to list facts. And this statement of fact should not have a single adjective. That itself may seem almost impossible. And even if it were done, reading of such history would be dull, to say the least.

The sword of history has two edges, one that cuts open new possibilities in the future, and one that cuts through the noise, contradictions, and lies of the past.”

~ The History Manifesto, by David Armitage, Jo Guldi

All bias is essentially political in nature, when stripped of the stage from which it speaks. It may not necessarily have an inherent propaganda, but the nature of the bias is political. The locus of the writer in relation to the history that she writes, determines the nature and degree of the bias. It may get further aggravated by the discipline of an -ism that she follows. Her personal understanding of the constructs of history-telling also come into play. Uday Kulkarni makes a pithy point here of these constructs:

@otulsobnis @ptksnr Region, religion, caste, language, nationality are other reasons for bias. Separating oneself from these is ‘nirvana’.

— Uday S Kulkarni (@Mulamutha) May 4, 2015

These constructs, and other -isms are essential for a rounded reading of history. (If we are not to read history as a list of dates, places, and name) Equally necessary, is for the reader to be aware of these -isms. For further refining the roundedness of a particular history, it would be a good idea to read the same history by different authors. A writer’s bias of a particular -ism is identified by knowing about the author. Other biases leak through (a) the use of extreme adjectives or (b) the use of extremely vague or extremely specific descriptions of constructs. Superlative adjectives do a disservice to the reading of history. Most of them are prone to visualisation, and almost all of them fuel extreme emotions (and bias) in the reader and propagate the bias.

The writing and reading of history, both, also need to be situated in the era of that history. Our understanding of society, as we live in, should never be the standard by which we decide the good and the bad. The civilised society that we live in is a result of the events that we read of. Standing tall at the end of the refined time-line of evolution, it is irrational, to look back and judge it from where we stand. That is a sure sign of introducing bias.

Holland says:
A concern always to be true to the facts as they can be ascertained; a recognition that people in the past lived by different standards; an obligation to get things right about the dead; a sensitivity to what shapes primary sources. All these are crucial. But I repeat — the greatest virtue of all in a historian is curiosity!

The responsible writer of history therefore will attempt to reduce bias, but need not invest effort at eliminating it altogether. The responsible reader will identify the genesis, nature, and purpose of the bias. Hopefully not introducing his own, but recognise the existing bias, nonetheless.

History has this power to create major theoretical debates, revealing that what was previously accepted as a natural truth is actually no more than unexamined bias. ~ *The History Manifesto*, Jo Guldi & David Armitage (Free download)

The writer and the reader of history, are both historians. And questions need to be asked, constantly.

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**VISUAL ART DURING THE MARATHA PERIOD**

*April 5, 2015   Leave a comment*

One of the primary sources of gleaning the life, styles, and lifestyles of historical figures is through art. Art achieved great heights during the Mughal patronage and continued to flourish under Jaipur and Deccan patronage. After the decline of the *Mughal empire*, artists sought patronage in Rajasthan and in the Deccan. It is generally assumed Aurangzeb is responsible for the decline of the arts in the Mughal dominions. Yet, there is evidence that it was not always so, and he moved away from arts at a later stage in his life.

![Aurangzeb holds court, as painted by (perhaps) Bichitr; Shaistah Khan stands behind Prince Muhammad Azam By Cordanrad](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/6f/Aurangzeb_holds_court.jpg/220px-Aurangzeb_holds_court.jpg)

The migration of artists was not just a result of their quest for favourable patronage, it was also political. An artist was a part of the *loot* of the war and ended up moving to serve a new master, in a new region, in a new culture. This led the blending of various styles,
The decline of the Mughal Empire led to the migration of artists to the Deccan, where they would receive patronage to continue their work. However, we see little development of visual art (specifically, painting), during this period, in Maharashtra and specifically in Western Maharashtra, the seat of the Peshwas. The rule and reign of the Peshwa era, from the mid-1700s, was growing around the same time that the Mughal empire was in decline, so it would seem that the artists would make a beeline to this power centre too. Yet, it seems, that this did not happen. There are paintings of Maratha chieftains and others that were created during this period, but these were primarily created by artists from other dominions and schools of art. It is not until the later decades of the 1700s that we see some development in the painting discipline, by the Marathas. And this development had much to do with the contact of the Marathas with Rajasthan and European influences, than the natural transmigration of artists from the north or from the Deccan. If any significant advances were made (in the art of painting) in this region in the late-17th or the early-18th century, there is a serious lack of evidence, documentation, and research.

Little is known of Maratha painting. A few superb miniatures have come to light, but it is still impossible to reconstruct the extent or the chronology of any school. Probably each centre of Maratha power had its own regional style of portraiture; outside the Deccan the maharajas of Gwalior and Baroda must have also patronised miniature painting which had some links with Deccani styles because of the ruling families’ dynastic ties to Maharashtra. (Architecture and Art of the Deccan Sultanates. New York: Cambridge UP, 1999)

Also, in this post, I refer specifically to Western Maharashtra, because a well-known school of painting was established by the Tanjore branch of the Marathas (1674 – 1855) to promote visual art.

This is not to say that there was no development or evolution of art during the reign of the Marathas. Significant advances were made in performance art and "craft-related art" during this period, which perhaps, will be the subject of another post.

Chh. Shivaji’s preoccupation was primarily with building an empire and his priorities therefore did not include patronage of art. During the establishment of the Maratha supremacy, in the early years, available resources were strategically invested in military affairs and the resurrection and establishment of a people-friendly and functional administrative system. It is no surprise then, that of the available contemporary portraits of Shivaji, not a single one has been painted by a Maratha artist. There is however, another argument that merits discussion. One of the purposes of the paintings in the Mughal Empire was documentation. We see glimpses of the lives, events, and the environment of the Mughal ethos in these paintings. And if documentation be the purpose, the Marathas were definitely not lacking. Visual documentation is cumbersome and time-consuming. The Marathas chose prose over painting, in
The term Bakhar is a metathetical form of the Arabic word Khabar, which means news or report. […] The writers of Bakhars wrote imitating the Tawarikhs of the Muslim potentates. […] Rajwade estimates the total number of Bakhars at more than two-hundred. Actually only half of them are extant and of these about seventy have so far been published. (The History and Culture of the Indian People: The Maratha Supremacy. Ed. R. C. Majumdar and V. G. Dighe. 3rd ed. Vol. VIII. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan)

From the mid-1700s we see increased interaction of the Marathas with powers, north of the Narmada, when campaigns were led into Malwa, Gujarat, Bundelkhand, and other parts of Madhya Pradesh. Baji Rao I was welcomed in the courts of Rajasthan as the leader of the Marathas. Almost instantly we see the inclusion of a certain Bhojraj, a well-known artist from Jaipur, who was brought to Pune for the paintings at Shaniwar Wada. Also,

Some great paintings were produced, especially at provincial Deccan centres where artists often worked with greater originality than those at Hyderabad, and at the courts of Maratha rulers, who, after decades of guerilla warfare against the Mughals, were now settling down in the cities of the western Deccan. (Architecture and Art of the Deccan Sultanates. New York: Cambridge UP, 1999)

The intrigues of the court were not merely political in nature, they were cultural too. Manuscripts in Maharashtra which were devoid of any illustration were now being worked on by artists from Rajasthan. Miniatures in the Rajput and Pahari style were being created with religious motifs and symbolism.

As we approach the late-1700s we see the European influence. Sir Charles Warre Malet was the first British Resident at the Peshwa’s court. He was instrumental in getting James Wales, the Scottish artist to Pune. Wales came to Pune in 1790 and created some of the iconic paintings of Sawai Madhavrao Peshwa, Nana Phadnavis, and Madhav Rao Scindia. It was during this time that Sir Malet suggested the establishment of a school of art, which Wales supervised. This is perhaps for the first time, we hear of any formal discipline for painting, in the history of the Marathas. We are aware of one graduate of this school, Gangaram Chintaman Tambat, whose works are still available to us. Undoubtedly, the work of this “Maratha School” has visible European influence.
This perhaps marks the reappearance of painting in Maharashtra after a very long time. We see emergence of wall art in places like Wai, Menavali, Motibag, and Satara. We further see the record of names of Maratha artists like Ragho, Tanhaji, Anuprao, and Mankoji.

In the early 1800s, it seems that a “Maratha School” was well-established, however, it never reached the popular heights awarded to the Mughal, Deccan, Rajput, or Pahari schools.
While painting as a pursuit and patronage did not find a significant expression in the Maratha context for a long time, it did come to the fore after the late-1700s. Perhaps it was too little, too late. Much later, however, some great artists have emerged from this region to make a significant mark in this space.

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Are two storytellers better than one?

I think so. I am very excited and glad to welcome Samir Pathak, a friend and a history enthusiast. While Samir’s day-hob has very little (amounting to almost nothing) with history, he has a keen interest in history and is constantly curious soul.

We’ve spent time asking questions, discovering answers and overall, exploring history through books, conversations and travel. I am very glad he has decided to contribute here, and I hope you all enjoy his posts, in the days to come.

Throughout history natives have given names to foreign communities. These names are often derogatory, or just corrupt form of the appearance of people or their place of origins. Perhaps, these name offer a stronger sense of identity to the native community.

Over time, in the age of political correctness and civility, many such words have fallen out of favour and have been replaced by technical terms, that nevertheless, often refer to the place of origin.

One such word that has somewhat survived and is still in used, is firangi. A word often used, generally to refer to a foreigner, and specifically used to refer to a person of Caucasian descent. I haven’t heard this pejorative used to refer to a foreigner who is not Caucasian. One of the popular theories of the etymological roots of the firangi is that it is a portmanteau of fika and rang — pale and colour — and therefore applies to Caucasians. Far from the truth.

Firangi derives from the Arabic word al-faranji. This word was used to refer to Franks (Germanic people who conquered Gaul in the
6th century and controlled much of western Europe for several centuries afterward), The Arabics derived the word from the Latin – Franci. The word came into being with the Crusaders, most of whom were Franks.

Around the 16th century, the word had gained a different distinction in India and lent meaning to weapons, rather than to refer to certain people. The Western European sword-blade was finding favour with the Mughals and was called the firangi. However it was made popular by the Marathas, which they bought from the Portuguese. The Portuguese did not manufacture this blade however, they only imported and traded it. Therefore the use of the word firangi was still associated with Western Europe and not with the Portuguese. Interestingly, the origin of the ethnic name [Frank] is uncertain; it traditionally is said to be from the old Germanic word “franken “javelin, lance” (compare Old English franca “lance, javelin”), their preferred weapon, but the reverse may be the case. [Link]

Further, during the 16th century:

Syphilis was known in India as the Portuguese disease, or firanga or firangi roga, terms that identified it with the firangis (‘Franks’), or Europeans. According to historians, the disease was first recognised in India in 1498 after the arrival of Vasco-da-Gama, who had left Portugal in 1497.

It is perhaps due to the trade of the Marathas that the word has been strongly associated with the Portuguese, and it seems they referred to the commodity than the people. However, certain documents describe different names for various European traders in India:

Amongst the merchants the Portuguese (Firangi), the English (Ingraz), the Dutch (Valandaze), the French (Francesce), the Danes (Dingmar) and hat wearing (Topikar) merchants carry on trade, and commerce.

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