



Tied to the Past  
Traditional Professions of India  
Part II

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In our [previous article](#) on the same topic, we explored some of the common professions that people in rural India take up. These include professions of the cobbler, carpenter, potter, basket weaver, charkha weaver, blacksmith, priest and the roadside animal entertainer. A large population of India is engaged in these professions. In this ending part of the article, we will explore a few more such traditional professions of the rural Indian people. To read the first part of this article, please [click here](#).

## Farmer

India is primarily an agricultural state. Almost 70 percent of the entire population of India lives in the rural sector. Hence, farming is not only an important profession in this country, but it is also a way of life.

The Indian farmers or the Kisans, as they were called, underwent a huge struggle during the rule of the Zamindars and Jagirdars. They were forced to give away all their crop to them and often lived below the poverty line. While the rich Zamindars kept getting richer, the farmers would find it difficult to afford even one square meal a day.

Additionally, the moneylenders would phenomenally raise the levels of interest on loans taken, which made it veritably impossible for them to repay it back. This would force them to go into bonded labour.



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**FARMER**



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**FARMER BRINGING HOME HIS HARVEST**

Social activists then set up various movements in order to protect the Kisans' rights. Some of them were successful, but most others failed. The Kisan Sabha movement started in Bihar under the leadership of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati. In 1929, he had formed the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha in order to give peasants a platform to present their grievances against the zamindari attacks on their occupancy rights. This movement intensified and spread across the rest of India.

Then, the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) at the Lucknow session of the Indian National

Congress in April 1936 with Swami Sahajanand Saraswati elected as its first President. Other successful Kisan movement took place under the able leadership of Sardar Ajit Singh and in 1921 under Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Interestingly, it was Mao's peasant revolution in China which became a catalyst for national liberation movements in many colonies, including India.

## Farmers' movements in the whole of India

### In Punjab

India's prime farmers' movement emerged in Punjab. The Ghadar party, led by Raja Mahendra Pratap, led to the actual political awakening of India. The Sikhs of Punjab, who migrated to the United States and Canada in the 19th century, helped finance the formation of this party. They then asked Indians abroad to return home and fight British imperialism. Over 8000 of these people comprised Punjab's Sikhs. The Ghadar Movement was to have a powerful impact on Punjab politics and especially on the peasants in the near future.

Similar conferences were also held in Lahore, Faislabad, Lyallpur and other places. The most famous was the 1938-39 Long Mocha in Lahore, when farmers from all over Punjab courted arrests for nine months in front of the assembly building. The slogan of Pagri Sambhal O jatta (Hold your head high, O peasant) was first raised at a mass gathering in Lyallpur in 1907. Ten thousand people are said to have attended this meet.

### In Gujarat

Mahatma Gandhi had led two revolts of poor Indian farmers against the harassment of the British government and allied landlords in the Champaran district, Bihar, and Kheda. These movements were a huge success and fired the imagination of the Indian people. The Indian National Congress set up in 1920 under Gandhiji's leadership launched the Non-Cooperation Movement. Millions of Indians undertook Satyagraha and thus peacefully and non-violently revolted against the British, boycotting courts, government services, schools, disavowing titles, pensions and rejecting British clothes and goods. Many people got severely tortured, beaten and arrested during this movement.

The Bardoli Satyagraha of 1925 in the state of Gujarat, deserves special mention as a major episode in the Indian Independence Movement. The farmers were already suffering after a famine and finding it difficult to get by. Gujarati activists Narhari Parikh, Ravi Shankar Vyas and Mohanlal Pandya solicited the help of Gujarat's most prominent freedom fighter, Vallabhbhai Patel, who was already widely respected by common Gujaratis across the state.

Together, they decided not to pay the high taxes to the government. The government began to auction the houses and the lands in Gujarat, but not a single man from Gujarat or anywhere else in India came forward to buy them. Patel had appointed volunteers in every village to keep watch. When the officials would go in search of residents, they would hide in the jungle and the officers would find the entire village empty.

People across the nation recognized Patel's strong leadership and he was known as Sardar for the first time, which in Gujarati means Chief or Leader.



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**MAHATMA GANDHI**

## In Rajasthan

Rajasthan, known for its vast tracts of deserts, was witness to a history in the making. Here, there was yet another successful agitation of farmers and peasants for their right to livelihood. In the twenty-two princely states of the then Rajputana state, there was no unified political milieu and each state had its own territorial area, which was exclusive politically in that it had its separate administration and army. Hence, the freedom movement was segmented, depending upon the degree of unity and cohesiveness among political players in each state.

In most of the Jagirs a Jagirdar would take fifty percent of the produce. Then over and above the share of the produce the Kisan had to pay numerous "lags" or cesses. This meant that the Kisans had to part with more than eighty percent of their produce. Shri Kan Singh Parihar played a great role in drafting and enactment of Marwar Tenancy Act of 1949 and Marwar Land Revenue Act of 1949. Shri Parihar intended to make all the farmers almost the proprietors of all their fields, wells and so on, without paying any premium and also being relieved from paying any cess. This Act became yet another great success.

These and other successful farmers' movements ensured that the rights of the peasants were maintained and they were allowed to carry on with everyday life. Farmers in India, though, still continue to struggle to meet both ends. Social activists are still trying their level best to get them their rightful due.

## Fisherman



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**FISHERMAN AND HIS WIFE**

A fisherman or fisher captures fish and other marine animals from a body of water, in order to make a living. Worldwide, there are about 38 million commercial and subsistence fishermen and fish farmers, as they are also referred to. This profession, which includes both men and women, is very ancient and is said to be a means of obtaining food since the Mesolithic period.

## Commercial fishing

The profession of fishing mostly grew and flourished in Asian countries, where four-fifths of world fishers and fish farmers reside. Most of these fishermen were into offshore and deep-sea fisheries. Women fish in some regions inshore from small boats or collect shellfish and seaweed. In many fishing communities, women are also responsible for making and repairing fish nets, post-harvest processing and also sales and marketing.

## Recreational fishing

Recreational fishing, as the name suggests, is just for pleasure or competition. The commonest materials used here are a rod, reel, line, hooks and baits or lures. Big-game fishing is fishing from boats to catch large species such as tuna, sharks and marlin.

## Fishing communities in India

India, being a peninsula, is filled with coasts and extensive freshwater resources. Naturally, fishing is a major occupation here. Each state has its own fishing community, with colorfully diverse cultures, customs and habits. In such states, fishing actually becomes part of its cultural identity. Fisheries provide employment opportunities to millions of Indians and also contribute to food security of the country.

According to a national survey, the total marine fisherfolk population of 3.57 million is in 3,305 marine fishing villages spread across the coastal States and Union Territories (including islands). Of these, 0.90 million are active fisher people, and another 0.76 million fisher people are involved in other fisheries-related activities.

The Indian coastline can be delineated into 22 zones, based on the ecosystem structure and functions. Indian boat types include catamarans, masula boats, plank-built boats, dug-out canoes, machwas, dhowis and the latest motorized fibre-glass boats, mechanized trawlers and gillnetters as well.

According to the CMFRI 2008, India's marine capture fish production increased from 520,000 tonnes in 1950 to 3.15 million tonnes in 2007. The majority of this comprises oil sardines, penaeid and non-penaeid shrimp, Indian mackerel, Bombay duck, croakers, cephalopods, sardines and threadfin breams.



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**FISHERWOMAN FROM MAHARASHTRA**

## Fishermen's problems

Fisheries in major towns and cities in India have been impacted today due to natural disasters and also pollution and global warming. Some Indian fishermen today are finding it difficult to subsist on their present income. Additionally, there is also the safety issue for the fisherman, while at sea.

The government is trying its best to help out these fisherfolk. There have been important cabinet decisions and recommendations being taken in favour of the fisheries. The National Fish-workers' Forum deals with the day-to-day problems faced by fishers. The Murari Commission seeks to wipe out most of these issues within the next few years.

## Shepherd



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**INDIAN SHEPHERD**

A shepherd is one who cares for, feeds and guards sheep, especially in big flocks. The profession of a shepherd, that is, shepherding is again very ancient, dating back about 6,000 years, in Asia Minor. Sheep were maintained for their milk, meat and most importantly, their wool.

In India, sheep were mostly part and parcel of the family farm along with other animals such as chicken and pigs. The shepherd had to travel from pasture to pasture to find food for his sheep and also protect the flock from wolves

and other predators. The shepherd was also to supervise the migration of the flock and ensured they made it to market areas in time for shearing. In ancient times shepherds also commonly milked their sheep - only some shepherds still do this today.

Shepherds are often wage earners – they are generally paid to watch over others' sheep. They are largely nomadic. Shepherds were mostly the younger sons of farming peasants, who did not inherit any land. Some families, though, would have a family member to shepherd its flock – such shepherds were fully integrated in the society.

Shepherds would normally work in groups either looking after one large flock and live in small cabins. Shepherding developed only in rugged and mountainous areas, where it was easy to find food for the sheep. Hence, during the pre-modern era, shepherding was mainly concentrated in regions such as the Israel, Greece, the Pyrenees, the Carpathian Mountains and Scotland.

## Shepherding at present

Shepherding has changed dramatically at this point of time. Some families in Asia have their entire wealth in sheep, so a young son is sent out to guard them while the rest of the family tend to other chores.

Now, the shepherd's wages are much higher. The eradication of sheep predators in parts of the world have lessened the need for shepherds and more productive breeds of sheep can be left in fields and moved periodically to fresh pasture when necessary. Hardier breeds of sheep can be left on hillsides. The sheep farmer has to attend to the sheep only at times like lambing or shearing.

## In religion

In Christianity, Jesus called himself "The Good Shepherd". The Ancient Israelis were mostly a pastoral people and there were many shepherds among them. Interestingly, many Biblical heroes were shepherds – the most prominent among them were Abraham and Jacob, the twelve tribes, Moses, and King David.

The Roman Catholic and Anglican bishops have the shepherd's crook among their insignia. In both these cases, the implication is that the faithful are the "flock" who have to be tended.

The tendency of humans to put themselves in danger and their vulnerability and inability to take care of themselves, their needing the power of the leading of God is also reinforced with the metaphor of sheep in need of a shepherd.

Mohammed, the Prophet of Islam, prided himself in being part of a rich tradition of prophets who found their means of livelihood as shepherds.

Sikhism also has many mentions of shepherd tales. There are many relevant quotations, such as "We are the cattle, God almighty is our shepherd."



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**JESUS - THE GOOD SHEPHERD**

## Shepherd communities in India

The Tirthap community of shepherds is found in north Maharashtra, in the provinces of Dhule and Jalgaon. The Dhangars are said to have originated from the Ahirs of Northern India. The shepherd community of Kurubas can be found in South India, mainly in the state of Karnataka.

# Hunter

Hunting is the practice of pursuing living animals for food, leisure, or trade. The species which are hunted are referred to as game and are usually mammals and gamebirds. Hunting may also mean the elimination of vermin to prevent diseases caused by overpopulation. This, for example, can be done to help maintain a population of healthy animals within an environment's ecological system, in the absence of natural predators.

## History of hunting



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**THE HUNTRESS**

The history of hunting is as ancient as the Homo sapiens. It is an undisputed fact that early humans were hunters. With the establishment of language, culture and civilization, hunting became a theme of stories and myths, even rituals such as animal sacrifice.

There is fossil evidence for spear use in Asian hunting dating from approximately 16,200 years back. Many species of animals have been hunted and caribou/wild reindeer had probably been the most popular game animals.

Animal domestication became relatively common at one time, but yet, hunting was a significant contributor to food supply, even after the development of agriculture. The supplementary materials from hunting included protein, bone for implements, sinew for cordage, fur, feathers, hide and leather. The earliest hunting tools had been rocks, spears, bow and arrows.

With domestication of dogs, birds of prey and the ferret, several types of animal-aided hunting developed including ventry, coursing, falconry and ferreting. Many dog breeds are selected for very precise tasks during the hunt, reflected in such names as pointer and setter.

Even though agriculture and animal husbandry came into the fore, hunting remained a part of human culture. As hunting moved on to become more of a social activity, hunting became a sport for those of an upper social class – this activity became a luxury. Hunting was considered to be an honourable, if somewhat competitive pastime to help the royalty practice skills of war even during times of peace.

## The Hindu concept of hunting

The ancient Hindu scriptures describe hunting as an acceptable sport of the royalty. Even the godly entities are described to have engaged in hunting. In fact, one of the names of Lord Shiva is "Mrigavyadha", the deer hunter. The great epic Ramayana talks extensively about hunting. Dasharatha, the father of Lord Rama, is said to have the ability to hunt in the dark. During one such expedition he accidentally killed Shrivana, mistaking him for game. When Rama



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**THE NISHAD KING HELPS RAMA, SITA AND LAKSHMANA  
CROSS THE RIVER GANGA BY BOAT**

was exiled to the forest, the hunter (or Nishad) king, Guha, helped Rama, Sita and Lakshmana cross the river Ganga. Also, during Rama's exile, Ravana kidnapped his wife Sita from their hut while Rama was hunting a golden deer, and his brother Lakshmana went after him. According to the Mahabharat, Pandu, the father of the Pandavas, accidentally kills the sage Kindama and his wife with an arrow mistaking them for a deer. Why, even Lord Krishna is said to have died after being accidentally wounded by an arrow of a hunter.

## The concept of Shikaar in India



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**ROYAL HUNTING SCENE**

During the colonial era in India, going on a hunting Safari or expedition was a true 'regal sport' in the numerous princely states, as many Maharajas, Nawabs and British officers maintained corps of shikaris, who were native professional hunters. They would be headed by a master hunter, who was regarded as the Mir-shikar. These people hailed from tribes and had traditional knowledge of environment and hunting techniques. The princes would hunt big game such as Bengal tigers sitting on elephants. One can find many Indian paintings, many of them during the Mughal era, portraying princes and princesses hunting in a dense forest.

Indian social norms are generally against hunting. India's Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 actually bans the killing of all wild animals. But, the Chief Wildlife Warden may permit any person to hunt and kill an animal if he is convinced that the animal poses a grave danger to human life or is disabled or diseased beyond the recovery stage. In this case, the body of that wild animal killed or

wounded becomes government property.

## Vegetable seller

India is a quaint country which still bears a lot of resemblance to its past. Despite a high degree of technological advancements in the urban sector, the rural areas still manage to retain their old-world charm. The sight of a local vegetable seller walking down the street, selling his ware, is no rare sight even in the biggest cities of India. Hence, this is only all too common in the Indian villages.

Vegetable sellers either set up a small roadside stall or travel around the village with their vegetables stacked in a wooden hand cart or in a woven cane basket, perched atop the head of the seller. Vegetable sellers include both men and women. Many of them work almost all day, while some individual sellers open only for certain hours in the morning and evening.

There are many stories of vegetable sellers in the urban areas, who started off with very humble beginnings and went on to become named merchants in their field of activity.



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**VEGETABLE SELLER**

## Sabzi Mandis

Sabzi Mandis are open wholesale markets in many parts of North India. The Mandis or the markets teem with activity all day, filled with the aroma of different vegetables and fruits and the sounds of vendors calling out to potential customers or bargaining rates with them. These are truly a sight to behold for one who is not familiar with the many sights and sounds of India.

## Spice seller



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**VILLAGE WOMAN GRINDING SPICES**

India is the land of spices. In fact, the East India Company had come down to India with an idea of gaining total control over the spice trade, among other things. India is known for its flavourful and spicy foods. Naturally, spices and herbs form the basis of all Indian cooking. Each region in India has its own unique cuisine, each with its unique taste. Even within one community, sects sometimes use different types of spices in their cooking.

The role of spices or "Masalas" in India is not limited to merely adding flavour to the dishes. According to tenets as mentioned in Ayurveda, these spices and herbs actually have curative and therapeutic functions. Many of them also serve to aid digestion, preserve the food, act as a coolant in warm weather and even add body

heat during winters.

While many villagers, especially in North India, Gujarat and Rajasthan, prefer to grind their own spices or Masalas, one can also find many spice sellers in both rural and urban India. These spice sellers travel with their spices, selling them either in the open bazaar or as an individual seller. One can find several such sellers in the tourist areas of India – this is often a craze of foreigners visiting the country.

The most common spices in a spice seller's basket include whole spices, such as red chillies, black pepper, cloves, cardamom, coriander, cumin, asafoetida, bay leaves, fennel seeds, fenugreek, poppy seeds, pomegranate seeds, nigella seeds, caraway seeds, mustard seeds, saffron, whole mixed spices and so on. The powder variety includes turmeric powder, red chilli powder, all-spice powder, coriander and cumin powder, tea and coffee spices and so on.



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**SPICE SELLER**

Many small-scale spice sellers also sell marinades and home-made pickles. Running this on a co-operative basis gives job opportunities to a lot of womenfolk and also generates added profits as well.



# Mask Maker

A mask is worn on the face and is used for protection, concealment, performance, or amusement. The concept of using masks for ceremonial and other purposes is ancient. A mask may also be positioned elsewhere on the wearer's body. For example, Australian totem masks cover the body, whilst Inuit women use finger masks during storytelling and dancing.

## In performances



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**WALL HANGING MASK PAIR**

Masks are used for their powerful expressive ability in various theater traditions the world over. The image of juxtaposed Comedy and Tragedy masks are widely used to represent the Performing Arts, and specifically Drama.

Masks are popularly used in many folk and traditional ceremonies, rituals and festivals. This forms a part of a costume that adorns the whole body. Masks are universally used and maintain their power and mystery both for their wearers and their audience. In countries such as Sri Lanka, certain masks are actually intended to ward off evil and negative forces.

## Ritual masks

Particular ritual masks are worn for specified functions. These masks are said to have magical properties and, according to some cultures, help mediate with spirits and offer protection to the society which uses their powers.

## Mask making in India

Mask-making techniques are the most evolved in Asia, Africa and North America. In India, masked characters are usually treated as aspects of divinity, form the core of several Indian dramatic forms. Many of the stories depict the great epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. In fact, countries that have had strong Indian cultural influences, such as Burma, Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand, have developed these Indian forms, combined with local myths, using their own characteristic styles.

India, being a tremendously diverse land, presents the global audience with a variety of masks and mask-making techniques. Here, masks are made out of different materials, such as clay, paper, wood and now, even plastic.

West Bengal is undoubtedly in the forefront as far as mask-making goes. The season for mask-making in this state is from January to the Chaitra-Baisakh season. The Chorda village is the center for



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**DUHSHASANA MASK FROM MAHABHARATA**

mask-making. The artisans, called the Sutradhars, occupy a formidable position in society and also make clay idols of deities.

## Stages of mask-making



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**MASK MAKER**

The process of mask-making is rigorous and undergoes several stages, such as preparation of clay models, drying of the models, pasting wet paper with glue six to seven times, pasting cloth soaked with clay for parts like eyes, nose and ears, trimming the model, sun-drying again and then detaching the mask from the model, dyeing, painting and then finally finishing it.

## The Chhau Nrithya

The Chhau Nrithya or dance is a type of Indian tribal martial dance, popular in West Bengal, Orissa and Jharkhand. There are three subgenres of this dance, namely, Seraikella Chhau, Mayurbhanj Chhau and Purulia Chhau. The major difference in these three types is the use of the mask. The Mayurbhanj Chhau uses no mask, while the other two insist on the usage of the same.

## Other masks

There are a variety of other masks used in Indian culture for tribal dances, rituals and festivals. Some of them are the cow mask for the cow dance, a simple tribal mask used during temple rituals and festivals, the Hanuman mask, the ten-headed Ravana mask (normally used for Ramleela shows during Dusshera) and so on.



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**CHHAU DANCE MASK OF DURGA**

## Umbrella maker



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**UMBRELLA MAKER**

One of the lesser-known professions is umbrella making. In coastal areas such as Kerala, people use parasols made out of cane or wood. This is also a familiar sight in many Asian countries as well. But ornamental parasols are a thing exclusive to India.

Colourful, decorated umbrellas or parasols are used for a variety of Indian functions both in and out of the country. These delicately-detailed pieces of art add a special look to all major functions and festivals such as wedding processions, carnival parades and temple rituals.

Umbrella makers delicately work with colourful patchwork, embroidery, sequins, beads and pearls to decorate their ware. These are used at wedding processions, held over the groom's head; at marriage receptions and so on.

## The famous Thrissur Pooram at Kerala

One famous temple ritual that pulls crowds from all over the world is the Thrissur Pooram at Kerala. This is the biggest of the Poorams and is celebrated annually during the Medam month, from mid-April to mid-May. The town of Thrissur plays host to one of the largest collection of people and elephants.

The richly decorated elephant is now acknowledged as a symbol of Kerala. On the pooram day, fifty or more elephants pass through the center of Thrissur town, the Vadakkunnathan temple. The main features of the pooram festival are these decorated elephants with their nettipattam (decorative headdress), decorative bells and ornaments and so on. The panchavadyam or rhythmic beating of the drum and the fireworks display add to the general glamour of the festival.

The colourful parasol display is one of the highlights of this festival. Two rival groups display a maximum of fifteen elephants and hold the most artistic and colourful cloth parasols, kept raised on the elephants during the display. They keep changing the parasols, till they finish their stock. One of the teams is then deemed to be the winner of the elephant and parasol show. The makers of these wonderfully crafted parasols start working weeks in advance, so that their team can win the coveted prize.

# Merchant

A merchant is someone who owns a business and trades in commodities that he did not produce himself. This, he does, so as to earn a profit out of the business. A merchant is normally termed as a "Vyavasaayi", taken from the word, "Vyavasaay", which means, "business".

Merchants are of any of the two types mentioned below:

- A wholesale merchant is the direct link between producer and retail merchant. Some wholesale merchants only organize the movement of goods rather than move the goods themselves.
- A retail merchant, also called a retailer, on the other hand, sells commodities or services to consumers. A shop owner is an example of a retail merchant.

Sometimes, though, a wholesaler can also be involved in a retail business. Of course, this case happens quite rarely, as businessmen usually prefer to specialize in their particular field of activity. Pre-modern societies sometimes stipulated a merchant class for each trader. This status could range from high grades like Navab to lower rungs.

In many countries, there is an unwritten rule that whenever a merchant sells a good, he or she has to give an implied warranty of merchantability, guaranteeing that the product is fit to be sold. A merchant who does not conform to this rule invariably fails to win over the trust of his or her customers and experiences a subsequent failure of the business.



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**INDIAN MERCHANT**

## Merchants in ancient India



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**TRADITIONAL MERCHANTS FROM KERALA**

Merchants grew and flourished in India, since the vedic times. Several groups and guilds of Indian merchants used to tour the entire sub-continent even in the early centuries. The guilds, known as srenis or nigamas controlled the entire trade and commerce of various goods and services. The royalty extended great support to these businessmen, since they were moneyed and paid very high taxes to them at the time. In fact, the income from such taxes formed a good chunk of the financial assets in the royal treasury.

India abounded with cloth, silk, oil, diamond, gold and other merchants. Interestingly, the Rig Veda talks about the ancient Indian merchants having been great seafarers, travelling the seas, in order to make good gain. Named historian, R. C. Majumdar states: "The representation of ship on a seal indicates maritime activity, and there is

enough evidence to show that the peoples of the Sindhu valley carried on trade not only with other parts of India but also with Sumer and the centers of culture in Western Asia, and with Egypt and Crete."

Kautilya's Arthashastra too, gives us a clear idea about the business communities in existence then. The guilds additionally arranged for entertainment, such as hosting athletic games, wrestling matches and so on. Each team of players would exhibit their guild's emblem and banner. Even local interests and those of the senior citizens were

taken care of by the guilds.

The guilds further got together artisans and craftsmen from different field and appointed them to educated youngsters in skills such as weaving, spinning, ship-building, oil-crushing and so on. They even acted as courts of law, settling disputes among the members. Representatives of guilds were considered to be extremely knowledgeable and were given due respect even in the royal courts. Besides, they were provided with quarters to stay in, concessions and various other benefits as well.

## **The Indian business community today**

The Indian business community at present is no less dynamic than the days of yore. Thanks to globalization, one can find Indian stores and products in any corner of the world. Indian art and craft is in demand today, like never before. Even the remotest place in the world is bound to have some restaurant serving up delicious Indian cuisine!

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