

Artisans, Apprenticeship, and Cultures of Craft Guilds in Colonial North India (1850-1950)

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Our understanding of the role of apprenticeship and craft guilds in the process of artisanal commodity production remains limited. We tend to view the Indian apprenticeship-system in terms of binary between the state regulated and legally bounded notion of apprenticeship in the West and caste-kinship regulated artisanal training in Colonial India (Tirthankar Roy, *Apprenticeship and Industrialisation*, 2013). In this picture, the nineteenth and twentieth century Indian landscape are marked by the total absence of state regulated apprenticeship. It was as if no circulation of knowledge and practices on skill training occurred between the two geographies and modern and pre-modern elements never met. India remained insulated only allowing changes to happen in its dominant structure of artisanal training from purely a traditional caste-bound practice to an intra-caste learning system. This system, under pressures of ongoing de-industrialisation of handicrafts and re-industrialisation of certain other crafts in urban centres re-designed itself only to be collapsed on the work floor of Indian mills in the twentieth century.

We also do not know how the systems of craft-guilds in colonial regulated the regimes of labour, production, learning process, and systems of weights and measures. What economic thoughts and practices were developed and elaborated by these institutions such as the systems of fines, standardisation and fixing of measurement and prices, codes and ethics of apprenticeship. In this paper, I propose to explore the implications of trade-guilds on the process of learning skills and commodity production. The paper will specifically also deal with the following two issues:

First, how with regard to process of labour training, certain continuities and discontinuities can be noticed over diverse materialities i.e., thread, stone, wood, metal? It explores how beyond the moral obligatory relationship of *ustād* (master) and *shāgird* (disciple) lay the whole world of cultures, rituals, morals, and ethics that mediated the economic production and constitution of labouring bodies.

Second, it enquires how a parallel regimes of apprenticeship based on western notions of contractual apprentice was built by the colonial state through the Apprentice Act of 1850 to ensure the constant supply of skilled labour for government projects. How legal norms versus customary norms set the economic production in colonial India? What was new that colonial legal regimes introduced in the process of artisanal economic production?

My sources are guild papers, apprenticeship contracts, ethnographic notes of the colonial official, and government reports on industrial trades and industrial schooling.