

Empires are built on battlefields They are sustained on roads

PART:2

The intelligence function of the system deserves particular emphasis. The akhbarat, the news reports compiled by the waqai-nawis, imperial newswriters stationed at every significant administrative centre, were transmitted through the same postal infrastructure that carried government orders. Provincial governors, military commanders, and court nobles all had newswriters attached to their households whose reports flowed regularly to the imperial court.



Watering Horses, Badli ka Sarai.

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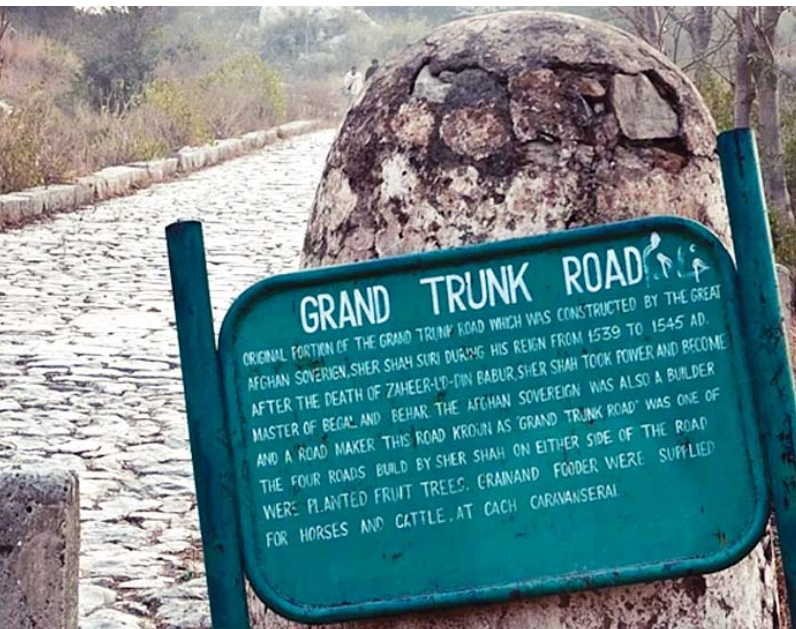
The urban settlements that grew up around sarais, the qasbas that dotted the road network at every significant junction, were themselves products of the commercial concentration the sarais created. The sarais were also instruments of intelligence. The state maintained networks of spies and informers at the sarais, monitoring the movements of travelers, recording conversations between merchants and officials, and relaying reports on local conditions back to provincial headquarters and ultimately to the emperor. The sarai was simultaneously a place of welcome and a node in the empire's information network.

The Dak Chowki

If the road network was the empire's skeletal system, the dak chowki, the postal relay system, was its nervous system: the mechanism through which information, instructions, and intelligence moved between the imperial centre and its far-flung provinces. Babur had established postal stations of six horses every 18 kos,



Mughal Sarai Fort in Ludhiana.



Grand Trunk Road, Ambala.



Mughal era Kos Minar in the Delhi National Zoo.



Grand Trunk Road (GT Road) in year 1880.



Mughal Sarai at Doraha.

#THE INDIAN HIGHWAY



Mughal Era Caravan Sarai.

Professional long-distance trading communities operated in close symbiosis with the Mughal road network. Banjaras moved grain, salt, cloth, and other commodities in enormous caravan columns, sometimes numbering thousands of pack animals, along the imperial highways. Their routes followed the road network; their stops were the sarais; their commercial activities were one of the mechanisms through which the monetised agricultural surplus generated by Akbar's dahsala system was converted into goods and distributed across the empire.



GT Road, Howrah.

watercourses and systematic boat-bridge and ferry infrastructure on the major rivers. Jahangir's highway improvement programme specifically included bridge construction over water bodies along the main road corridors. Where bridges were not feasible, the empire maintained fleets of boats at major river crossing points, manned by state-employed boatmen and managed as part of the imperial road infrastructure.

The logistics of getting the emperor himself across major rivers, along with his retinue of thousands of people, hundreds of elephants, artillery pieces, and camp followers, required weeks of preparation at major crossing points. Temporary boat-bridges, some stretching hundreds of metres, were assembled from fleets of flat-bottomed river craft lashed together and planked over. Contemporary accounts of imperial crossings of the Indus describe structures substantial enough to carry laden elephants.

The river crossing infrastructure was also economically critical. The Mughals taxed river traffic and maintained control over crossing points as revenue sources. The same boat infrastructure that moved armies could, in peacetime,

move commercial cargoes. The management of crossing points was tied to the broader fiscal administration of the regions they served.

The Commercial Dimension

The road and postal network was not conceived primarily as a commercial operating across long distances and replaced the fragmented local toll structures of pre-Mughal governance. This standardisation, like the standardised silver rupee, reduced transaction costs for merchants operating across long distances and made the Mughal economic space more commercially coherent than the patchwork of smaller polities it had replaced.

The standardised, maintained road network dramatically reduced the cost and risk of long-distance trade. Merchants who might previously have needed to negotiate dozens of different local authorities, pay multiple local tolls, and navigate unmaintained routes could now travel the Badshahi Sadak with a degree of security and predictability that had not existed before. The sarais provided reliable stops, the kos minars gave distances, and the presence of state authority along the road reduced, though never eliminated, the threat of banditry.

The Mughals collected *rahdari*, road transit tolls, at checkpoints along major routes, creating a standardised national tariff system that replaced the fragmented local toll structures of pre-Mughal governance.

This standardisation, like the standardised silver rupee, reduced transaction costs for merchants operating across long distances and made the Mughal economic space more commercially coherent than the patchwork of smaller polities it had replaced.

The Banjaras

Professional long-distance trading communities, that moved bulk goods across the subcontinent, operated in close symbiosis with the Mughal road network. Banjaras moved grain, salt, cloth, and other commodities in enormous caravan columns, sometimes numbering thousands of pack animals, along the imperial highways. Their routes followed the road network; their stops were the sarais; their commercial activities were one of the mechanisms through which the monetised agricultural surplus generated by Akbar's *dahsala* system was converted into goods and distributed across the empire.

The road network also facilitated



Sarai Lashkari Khan.

ed the integration of distant provincial economies into the imperial commercial system. Bengal's extraordinary textile production, the muslin, silk, and cotton cloth that clothed much of the world in the seventeenth century, moved overland through a commercial network anchored on the road infrastructure before it reached the ports of Surat or Bengal for export. The road was not just a communications channel. It was a commercial artery through which the empire's most productive regions connected to each other and to global markets.

The Road as Instrument of Imperial Authority

Thomas Roe's description of the Agra-Lahore highway as a wonder of the world was not simply aesthetic appreciation. It was an acknowledgment of what the road communicated about the power of the empire that built it.

The Mughals understood infrastructure as political statement. The placement of imperial monuments, tombs, mosques, garden complexes, at key points along the highway was not coincidental. The Taj Mahal at Agra, the Red Fort at Delhi, the Badshahi Mosque at Lahore: these were not merely buildings. They were markers of imperial presence along the empire's central artery, visible demonstrations of Mughal power and aesthetic ambition to every traveller, trader, soldier, and official who used the road.

The kos minars themselves carried this political meaning. They bore imperial inscriptions. They were markers of standardised space in Mughal terms. They told every traveler in the empire that they were moving through territory that the emperor had measured, named, and claimed. Distance, in the Mughal empire, was not simply a geographical fact. It was an imperial claim.

The Mughals built upon what Sher Shah had introduced and refined the road's use as an instrument of government. The physical characteristics of the road and its surroundings attest to the conscious and ambitious road policy of the Mughals, most notably during the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir.

The emperor travelled with hundreds of elephants, camels, carts, carpet layers, water carriers, carpenters, tent makers, and sweepers, in a retinue that stretched over more than two kilometres on the move. This was not logistical excess. It was deliberate spectacle, a mobile court that brought the physical reality of imperial power to every town and village along its route.

Maintaining the System

The first was maintenance. The road was not paved in the modern sense, it was a compacted earth surface, maintained by regular labour, prone to deterioration in the monsoon season, and dependent on constant human investment to remain usable. Stretches between major cities were better maintained than routes into more remote provinces. The quality of the infrastructure declined with distance from the imperial core.

The second was security. The sarais and road network reduced banditry but did not eliminate it. European travelers routinely noted that certain routes required armed escorts, merchants travelled in large groups for mutual protection, and that despite the state's presence along major routes, violence against travelers was a persistent risk. The harkaras, postal runners,

were themselves noted for sometimes turning to highway banditry as a supplementary income. The third was the dependency of the system on the fiscal and administrative health of the empire. The sarais required continuous state investment in staffing, maintenance, and supplies. The dak chowki required a constant supply of horses, fodder, and trained personnel. The intelligence system required networks of waqai-nawis and their salaries. All of this depended on the same revenue system that funded the military and the administration. When the Jagirdari Crisis of the late seventeenth century eroded the fiscal base, the maintenance of infrastructure suffered proportionally.

The British, when they eventually took administrative control of northern India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, encountered the remnants of a system that had been allowed to deteriorate. Their reconstruction of the Grand Trunk Road, the name they gave it, which has stuck, was not an act of creation from nothing. It was the rehabilitation of an existing imperial infrastructure that had been built, at its core, by Sher Shah Suri and elaborated by the Mughals into one of the most sophisticated road systems in the pre-industrial world.

Empires are built on battlefields. They are sustained on roads. **Concluded.**



Grand Trunk Road, British Era.

#AESTHETICS

Yeola Paithani vs South Paithani

Historically associated with royalty, Paithani sarees were prized for their painstakingly detailed weaving and artistic excellence



Paithani sarees are among India's most exquisite handloom traditions, celebrated for their luxurious silk, intricate zari work, and vibrant motifs. Originating in Paithan, this centuries-old craft has evolved over time while retaining its deep cultural essence. Today, the tradition is most faithfully preserved in Yeola, which has become the primary center for authentic Paithani weaving. Alongside this, Paithani-inspired sarees, commonly referred to as South Paithani, are produced in weaving clusters across Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Although both forms share a similar visual appeal, they differ significantly in technique, loom technology, and craftsmanship.

Historically associated with royalty, Paithani sarees were prized for their painstakingly detailed weaving and artistic excellence. Yeola has carried forward this legacy by preserving the traditional methods that define the authenticity of Paithani. At the heart of a true Yeola Paithani lies the tapestry weaving technique, in which each motif is created by hand through the interlocking of coloured threads. This method is most prominently visible in the palla, or pallu, which serves as the artistic focal point of the saree. The palla in a Yeola Paithani is entirely handwoven, making it labour-intensive and time-consuming, often requiring weeks or even months to complete. One of its most distinctive features is that the design appears identical on

both sides, a clear indicator of true tapestry weaving.

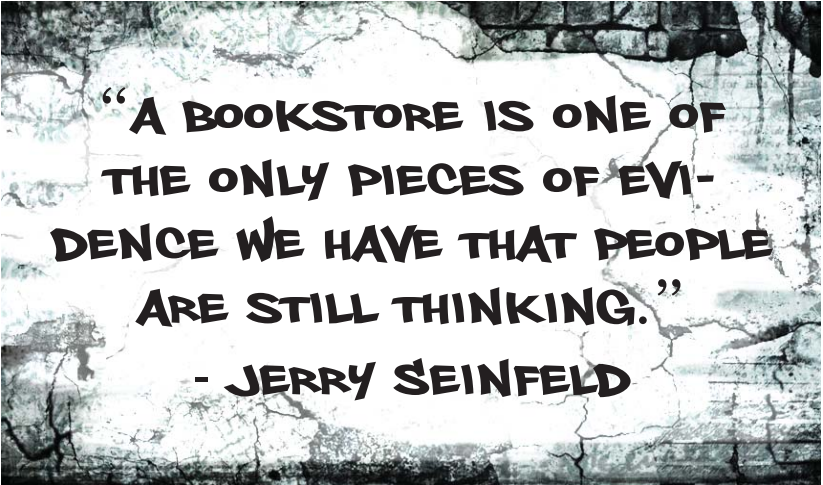
While the palla is crafted using this intricate technique, certain elements such as the *Narrai* (coconut-shaped) border are often woven using a dobby setup. The dobby loom allows for repetitive patterns and enables faster weaving compared to tapestry, making it suitable for structural designs that do not require individual hand interlocking. However, in more elaborate and high-value sarees, tapestry weaving may extend beyond the palla to the borders and even across the entire body of the saree. Such pieces demand immense skill and time, significantly increasing their value and making them some of the most prized examples of the craft.

In contrast, South Paithani sarees represent an adaptation of this traditional aesthetic, produced primarily in regions of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. These sarees borrow the visual language of Paithani, incorporating familiar motifs such as peacocks, lotuses, and parrots. However, the method of execution differs considerably. South Paithanis are typically woven using jacquard looms, which operate through pre-designed punched cards that automate the weaving of patterns. This allows for the creation of intricate-looking designs in a much shorter time frame. The borders, buttas (small motifs), and even the palla are generally produced using jacquard techniques, resulting in uniformity and efficiency.

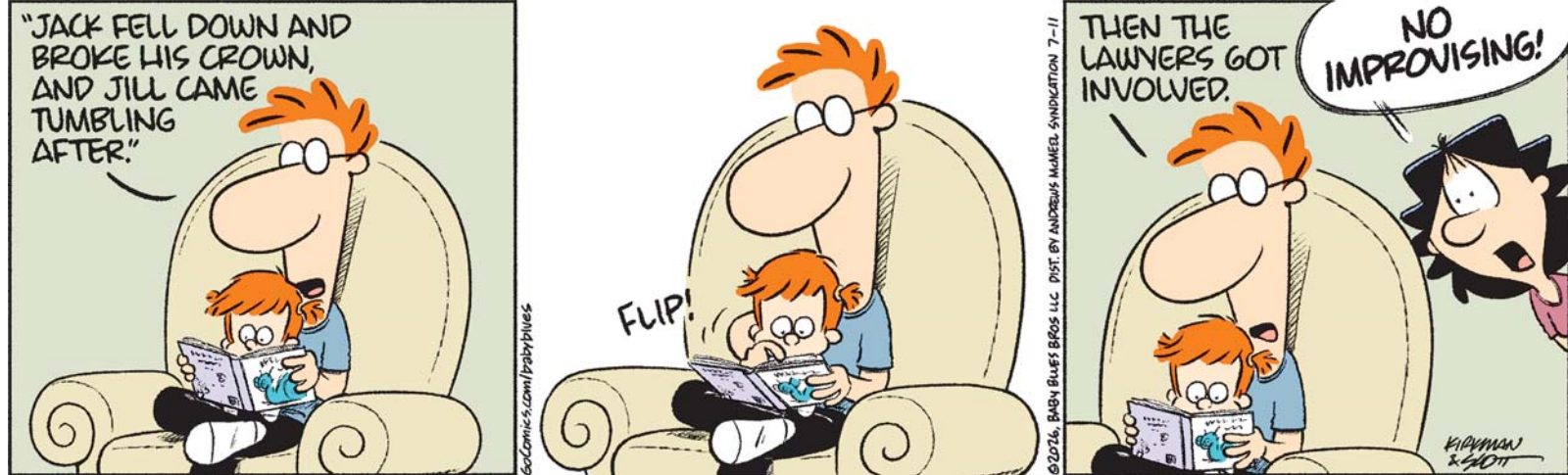
Despite their visual similarity, the difference becomes evident upon closer inspection. Unlike tapestry weaving, jacquard-woven designs do not produce identical patterns on both sides of the fabric. The reverse side often reveals the mechanical nature of the weaving process. While this method makes South Paithani sarees more affordable and widely accessible, it does not replicate the depth of craftsmanship found in traditional Yeola Paithani. In terms of pricing, there can be some overlap at the basic level. A simple Yeola Paithani featuring a dobby-woven *Narrai* border may be comparable in cost to an entry-level South Paithani. However, as the complexity of design increases, the distinction becomes more pronounced. Yeola Paithanis that feature extensively handwoven tapestry work, particularly in the palla and across the saree, command significantly higher prices due to the labour, time, and expertise involved.

Ultimately, the difference between Yeola Paithani and South Paithani lies not just in appearance, but in the philosophy of their creation. Yeola Paithani remains a true custodian of tradition, preserving a labour-intensive art form that emphasizes individuality and craftsmanship. South Paithani, while inspired by the same heritage, offers a more practical and affordable alternative through modern weaving technologies. The choice between the two depends on whether one values the authenticity and depth of traditional artistry or prefers a more accessible interpretation of a timeless design.

THE WALL

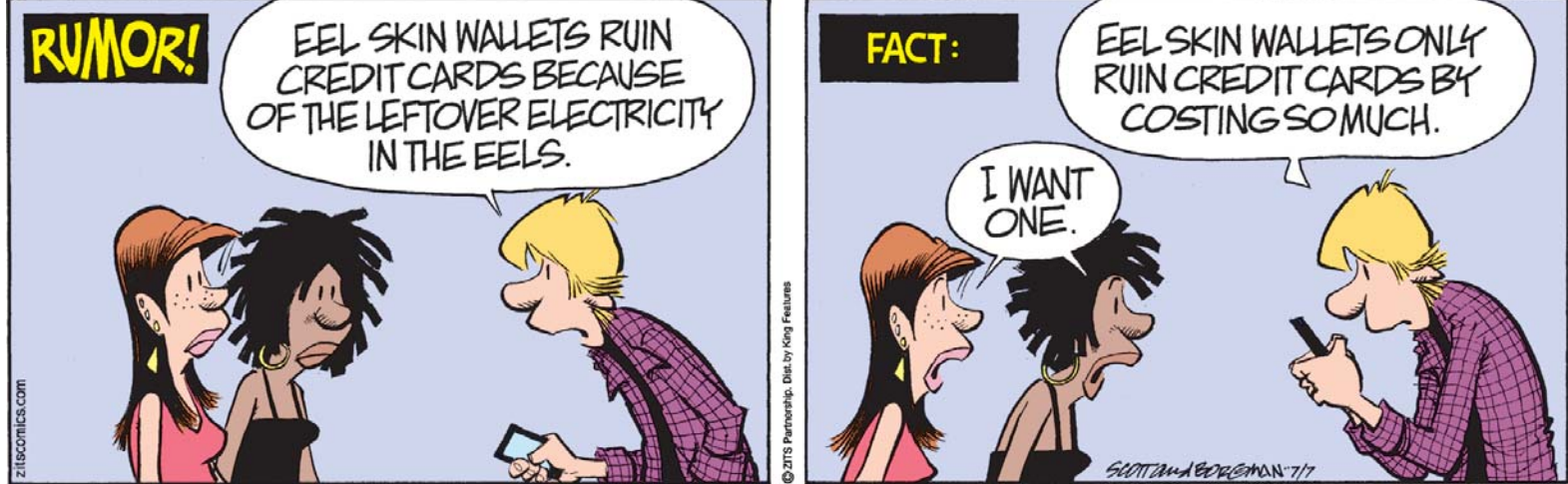


BABY BLUES



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

ZITS



By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman