

FIGURE 7
Silver foot ornament covering the entire foot from ankle to toes, worn by a bride at the Coorgi virgin-bride marriage ceremony, *kanni mangala*. Madikeri (Mercara), Kodagu (Coorg), Karnataka.

FIGURE 6
Pair of fish-shaped wooden *padukas* with inlaid brass wire featuring stylised scales and tail fins. As creatures of boundless liberty, fish appear as saviours in Indian myth, and as *avatars*, incarnations, of the deities Vishnu and Varuna. South Bengal.

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ornaments, have been traced right from the period of the *Rig Veda* (c. 4000 B.C.) through the classical Sanskrit literature, mediaeval poetry, and contemporary living practices, and are discussed in the context of their deeper cultural meanings and usages in Part I.

Part II provides a historical outline of footwear in India. Rare information has been culled from lesser-known Buddhist and Jaina sources relating to the rules and regulations governing the life of monks. These canons forbade the use of certain impure materials or certain provocative types of footwear, implying thereby that these were fashionable in then contemporary society. Other important sources that have been consulted are the accounts of Chinese, Arabic, and European travellers who often described vividly and in great detail the manners and customs of the Indian people in given periods, including their clothing and footwear. Sculpture and paintings too serve as clear mirrors reflecting the social and cultural practices of the respective periods and shed much light on feet and footwear. Lastly, the collections of traditional Indian footwear, foremost among these from the Bata Shoe Museum, put together over the past few decades, are of great significance for reconstruction of what the picture of richness and variety of ancient Indian footwear that might have been and the customs relating to them.

It deals with the preparation of hide and leather as raw material for making shoes and other accessories and examines the complex structure of caste composition in India where leather workers, such as flayers, tanners, furriers, and shoemakers, were considered outcastes and untouchables. Part III elaborates the contemporary customs of shoemaking in India.

It was a common practice in most of rural India, until half a century ago, to walk barefoot, and therefore it would not be an exaggeration to generally describe India as a “bare-foot country”. However, shoes were worn for protection of feet against severe climatic or topographic conditions in certain northern mountainous regions of the country. In all likelihood, the Indian aristocracy may have developed already a taste for footwear in the early centuries of the Christian era, as is evident from the sculpture of the period. The possibility of origin of several styles and genres of footwear having been rooted in the fusion of indigenous traditions and Graeco-Roman and Kushana influences of the time cannot be overlooked. Apparently, under Mughal influence, the use of a



FIGURE 14
A maid servant attempts to rub the redness off her lady's soles, mistaking their natural pinkish tint for faded lac dye. A beautiful motif described by poet Bihari Lal in his love-poetry *Satsai*. Miniature, Pahari, circa 1790-1800.

Private collection

stupas of Bharhut and Sanchi. These *shalabhanjikas*, displaying their feminine charms, are usually exquisitely bejewelled with rich and heavy anklets, armlets, necklaces, and earrings.

ROMANTIC CONNOTATIONS OF THE FOOT

The Foot and Female Beauty

The foot is one of the most admired parts of the female body in the Indian perception of romanticism and eroticism. This may be one of the reasons why young girls and women decorate the soles of their feet in very special ways, for example by colouring them with red *alta* or *kumkum* paste, by using these to paint intricate designs on them, or by tattooing them.

While describing the modes of female beautification, ancient Indian writers invariably describe the dyeing of the feet with lac-dye as an important aspect of body decoration. Lac, the dark red resinous incrustation secreted as a protective covering by some female parasitic insects, such as *Laccifer lacca* or *Kerria lacca*, has commonly been used all over India from very ancient times, to make shellac, dyes, and pigments. For women, lac has always been a very important means of colouring their lips, palms, and the soles of their feet. The word used in classical Sanskrit literature for this is *alakta-rasa*, meaning the 'juice of lac'. In the well-known Indian epic, the *Ramayana*, which is ascribed to the poet Valmiki, and probably existed in its present form towards the close of the second century A.D., there is a reference to Princess Sita's tender feet being as brilliant as vermillion and as beautiful as lotus buds even after traversing rough roads to the forest exile with her husband.

*It is said: 'Her feet, brilliant as vermillion, though no longer tinted, are today as beautiful as lotus buds, and, with her tinkling anklets, she trips along, for even now Vaidehi is always adorned to please her lord.'*²

The famous Indian poet Kalidasa, who probably lived during the Gupta period in the fourth-fifth centuries A.D., calls the lac-dye (*lakshârasa*) "so excellent to stain her feet".³ In miniature painting, this colouring and "staining" of the soles is depicted as a delicate red outline of the sole of the female foot. There are innumerable miniatures that depict a *nayika*, a heroine of love, preparing herself for the anticipated tryst with her lover at night by beautifying her body, including



FIGURE 15
A barber's wife preparing a *nayika*, a heroine, for a tryst with her lover. She is mixing a paste of red lac dye with which to paint her lady's feet. Miniature, Kangra, circa 1780.

Collection: Dr. and Mrs. William K. Ehrenfeld, San Francisco Bay Area

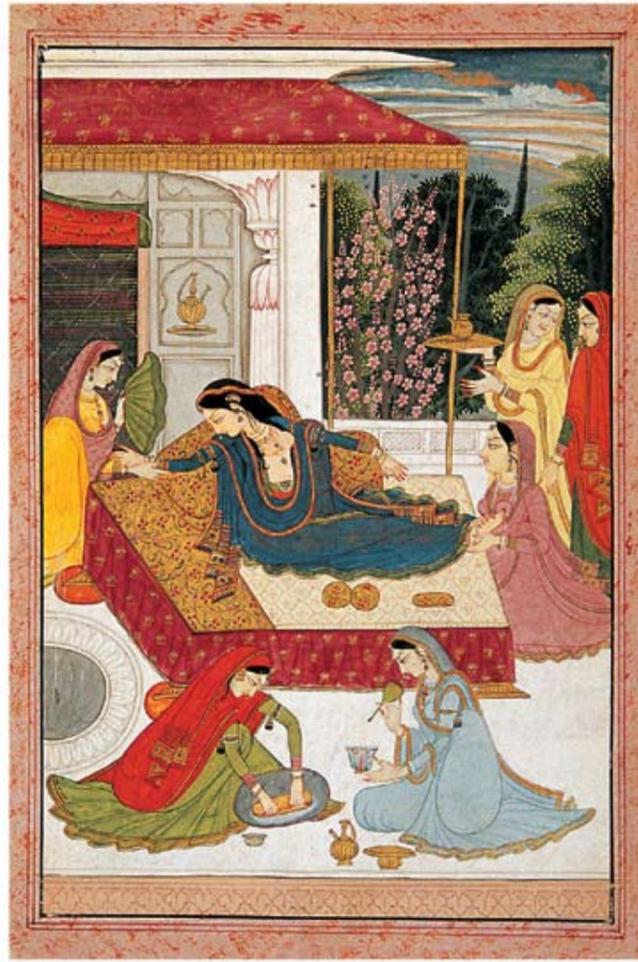


FIGURE 16
Scene based on the eighth chapter of Keshavadasa's *Rasikapriya* poetry. Here a love-lorn *nayika*, is comforted by her *sakhis* or "friends". They fan her, massage her feet and prepare cooling sandal paste. Miniature, Kangra, circa 1800. Collection: National Museum, New Delhi, 60.1664

colouring her feet (Fig. 15). A beautiful poem in Bihari Lal's *Satsai* describes a lady trying in vain to rub off the redness of her soles with a scrubber, mistaking their natural pink flower-like tint as the residue of red lac-dye (Fig. 14).⁴

Fig. 16 depicts a lovelorn elegantly-dressed lady wearing lovely jewellery; her soles, toes and fingernails coloured, in despair because she has been separated from her beloved, being comforted by her confidantes who fan her, massage her feet, and prepare cooling sandal paste to apply to her body. Mediaeval Indian love poetry, such as the *Rasamanjari* by Bhanudatta, *Rasikapriya* by Keshavadasa (1555-1617) who lived at the court of Orchha, or *Satsai* by Bihari Lal (born 1603), all describe the careful preparations a lady makes for an evening's tryst with her lover. These descriptions include the consummate care she devotes to her feet, not only washing them but also getting them massaged with scented oils, or getting her soles dyed with henna or with red lac-dye. North Indian women usually used *mehndi* (henna) to redden their hands and feet, whereas in the south the use of *alattakam* lent a reddish charm to the soles of their feet. *Kadambari* by poet Bana, who lived in the court of King Harsha (606-47), refers to the following adornments of a girl or young woman: *kauseyakosa*, which may have been some kind of stockings made of silk and *alaktaka-rasa*, dyeing of the soles of the feet with lac-dye. The colouring of the soles with red lac-dye was also observed and described by Niccolao V. Manucci, the celebrated Italian traveller born in Venice in 1639. He reached India in 1656, and spent the rest of his life in Mughal India as an artilleryman in the army of Dara Shikoh and died in Chennai in 1717. In his travelogue, *Storia do Mogor*,⁵ he observed that Indian girls and women commonly went bare-foot, and only on rare and special occasions would they wear slippers or some other form of footwear.

The female foot was such an important part of the body that girls and women put in great effort in decorating it, not only by colouring the soles of the feet red or adorning them with intricate red designs or by tattooing them, but also by bedecking the upper foot, the ankles, and the toes with a variety of ornaments such as anklets, chains, and toe-rings. This practice is still widely prevalent throughout India, and only a small strata of urban women exposed to Western fashion are now taking to wearing shoes.



FIGURE 17
A Bagheli Thakur bride wearing her gold and silver wedding jewellery, including extraordinary feet and ankle ornaments. Since males control most land and agricultural income, a woman's ornaments are often her most valuable possessions. Nimkhera, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.