

Of breaking and spinning

05.07.2019, Episode 55

Owen in China

Hello, this is Owen and this is my podcast for Friday 5th July, 2019. I hope you're all doing well. I'm still in India and whenever I'm in India I have to visit Kolkata. I just can't seem to avoid coming here. The city fascinates me. I love and loathe [1] Kolkata in equal measure [2]. No doubt it's that contrast that makes the city endlessly fascinating.

Today, I'll tell you about a place I visited on my way to Kolkata and one of the reasons I came to India.

Last month I was in the far west of India, close to the border with Pakistan. Now I'm in the east of India, close to the border with Bangladesh. As I was crossing the country I took a slight detour [3]. I headed south to the coast in Gujarat. I visited a town called Alang. There are ten kilometres of sandy beaches in Alang. But no one goes to Alang to enjoy the beach. It's not like Goa. There are no bars selling cold beers or seaside hotels. There is no fun to be had in Alang. As a matter of fact the only foreigners who visit Alang probably work for the UN or for an environmental organisation. They come to monitor [4] working conditions and water pollution rates. The reason they do so is because Alang is home to the largest ship breaking yard in the world. Ship breaking yards are where old cargo ships and oil tankers come to be recycled. The ships are beached [5] there and then teams of workers start to dismantle [6] the ships. Piece by piece the ships are taken apart. They first take everything from the inside of the ships, all the furniture and kitchen equipment, the electrical fittings and motor, etc. All of that stuff is then sold in Alang. Then they move on to the steel hull, the main body of the ship. Guys hanging from ropes with blowtorches [7] in their hands slowly cut the hull into large pieces which are dropped onto the beach. The pieces are then cut into smaller pieces and pulled up the beach to be recycled. It's pretty dangerous work and the water pollution around Alang is bad. But it's an incredible sight to behold [8]. The ships are absolutely massive as you can imagine. And seeing a whole row of them out of the water on a beach, side by side, sliced in half, with workers hanging off the side of them is impressive. It's not the first ship breaking yard I've been to. A few years ago I was in Bangladesh and I visited the ship breaking yard in Chittagong, which is also one of the world's largest. It was quite difficult to access [9] the beach there. In the end I had to pay some local kids to show me a secret path to get down to the beach. The owners of the ship breaking yards have pretty much closed the beach off from the public because they were sick of journalists showing up and reporting on child labour and unsafe working conditions. In Alang it was a lot easier. You can get down to the beach and actually watch them work, from a safe distance obviously. The future is a little uncertain for Alang though. The EU has introduced legislation preventing European shipping companies from sending ships to Alang. Shipping companies of course like to dump [10] their old ships on the beaches of the Indian subcontinent because it's cheap and convenient. Environmentally though it's a disaster and frankly [11] I feel that dumping your waste on a foreign country's beach is rather dubious [12].



India has a long and beautiful history of growing and weaving [13] cotton. It's an integral [14] part of Indian culture and heritage. The people here have a real appreciation for cotton and cotton weaving. It's an appreciation I'm starting to share. I feel that cotton is one of those products in the world which is so common, it's easy to forget how important and significant it is. So significant that it's played a huge part in world history. It's led to a lot of misery, especially in India. When the British ruled in India, cotton was of great importance and the British made huge changes to the Indian cotton industry. In order to understand why it's important to know about the different types of cotton that are grown commercially. There are four varieties of cotton which are grown commercially. These four varieties can

be split into two groups. Two of the four varieties are New World cotton and two are Old World cotton. New World cotton comes from the West Indies and South America. The Old World cotton comes from the Indian subcontinent. Of all the cotton in the world, 98% is New World and only 2% is Old World. Now, who do you think grows the most New World cotton? That would be India. Why does India grow New World cotton? Why not Old World cotton which is actually from India? This is where the British rule in India comes in. The main difference between Old World and New World cotton is the length of the individual fibres. New World cotton has longer fibres. The machinery, which was developed during the industrial revolution to process cotton, was designed for cotton with longer fibres, so New World cotton. There's the ginning machine, which separates the cotton from the seed, the spinning machine, which spins the cotton into yarn and the power loom, which weaves the yarn into cloth. So when the British ruled in India they forcefully [15] introduced New World cotton because that's what the cotton industry in the West demanded. It took a long time until they found ways to successfully grow New World cotton in India because of the climate and the soil. Although the vast majority of the cotton grown in India now is New World cotton there is more and more interest in growing Old World cotton. One of the reasons for this is water. New World cotton grown in India generally requires a lot more water than Old World cotton. India is feeling the effect of global warming in a serious way and water shortage [16] is becoming a major problem. Kutch, where I was last month, is one of the few places where they still grow Old World cotton. It's called kala cotton and it's been cultivated there for millennia and as you can imagine it grows very well. It requires almost no work. You plant it and then you harvest [17] it. It's an almost carbon-neutral cotton. It requires no insecticides, no fertilisers and no irrigation [18]. On average Kutch gets between three and four centimetres of rain a year. The farmers plant the cotton after the rain and that's it. It doesn't require any more water until it's harvested. It's a hardy [19], organic and sustainable cotton. Let's hope we see a revival [20] of more Old World cotton.

That's all from me for this month. As always, thank you for listening. You can listen to all our episodes by downloading our app or by visiting our website podclub.ch. You can also download our vocabulary trainer and you can find us on Instagram. We're taking a short summer break but I'll be back on 30th August. Until then, take care everyone and goodbye.

Glossar: Owen in China

[1] **to loathe**: to dislike very much, to hate

[2] **in equal measure**: the same amount

[3] **detour**: a longer route that is taken in order to visit somewhere along the way

[4] **to monitor**: to watch and check

[5] **to beach**: to make a boat or ship go out of the water and onto dry land

[6] **to dismantle**: to take apart

[7] **blowtorch**: a piece of equipment that produces a very hot flame (to cut metal, for example)

[8] **to behold**: to see

[9] **to access**: to get to, to enter

[10] **to dump**: to throw away, to get rid of, to dispose of

[11] **frankly**: here: used to emphasise the truth of a statement

[12] **dubious**: questionable and not completely good, safe or honest

[13] **to weave**: to make cloth out of long threads

[14] **integral**: essential

[15] **forcefully**: here: involving the use or threat of violence

[16] **shortage**: a lack of sth. that you need or want

[17] **to harvest**: to collect a crop from the fields

[18] **irrigation:** the supply of water to help things grow

[19] **hardy:** strong and able to survive in extreme conditions

[20] **revival:** the process of sth. becoming popular or important again