INDIA'S LEGENDARY 'WOOTZ' STEEL:

AN ADVANCED MATERIAL OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

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Foreword

The Tenth edition of ' The Making, Shaping and Treating of Steel' is an authoritative source of reference in the field published by the United States Steel Corporation. It stated " Some authorities ascribe the original discovery of practical ferrous -metal manufacture to peoples in India at a very early date". This statement rests on three indisputable and enduring symbols of Indian mastery over iron: the traditional iron making by the adivasis or tribes of India continuing as a living tradition to this day in Madhya Pradesh, the impressive rustless Iron Pillar at Mehrauli in Delhi and the invention of crucible steel making as early as 300 BC and continuing up to 1800 AD in Southern India and the forging of these steels into mighty swords, to become famous as the Damascus sword. While this high level of attainment dimmed under British colonial rule, it was left to the courageous vision of J. N. Tata to give a new impetus to indigenous steel towards the closing years of the nineteenth century. The first decade of the twentieth century saw the fruition of this dream. Nearly a hundred years later, Indian steel industry continues to grow and shows once again signs of reaching out to distant lands, as did the ancient wootz.

The year 2004 is being observed as the twin centenaries of J. N Tata and J. R. D. Tata, the two major architects of steel in twentieth century India. Tata Steel commissioned a book on the legendary wootz by Sharada Srinivasan and Srinivasa Ranganathan. It is seen as a sequel to an earlier book on Iron and Steel Heritage of India published by Tata Steel in association with the Indian Institute of Metals in 1998..

The book is before us. In telling the fascinating story of wootz steel the authors have woven a rich tapestry where threads of science and technology, geography and history, war and peace, religion and traditions, prose and poetry are intertwined in a bewitching and colourful fashion. A grand perspective of human civilisation over the past two millennia is provided to demonstrate that no other material has played such a decisive role in shaping our society as wootz has done.

It is our earnest hope that the readers of the book, young and old alike, will not only be enchanted by this account but also resolve to restore Indian primacy in this field of ferrous-metal manufacture.

B Muthuraman

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