

## Winged Perīs in a Pastoral Retreat

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Surface ornamentation interspersed with figural imagery on some of the rather deceptively simplistic Banaras brocades, datable to the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

unfold an enchanting world of fantasy, sensuous if not partially sur-real. One such example (Fig.1), a gift of Mrs. Krishna Neotia, is currently on display at the Textile Section of the Jñāna-Pravāha Museum, Varanasi. This silk-brocade



Fig.1. *Oḍhanī* – a Women's headshawl, Banaras, c.1920, silk brocade  
Jñāna-Pravāha Museum, Acc. no. 2010.17.

headshawl,<sup>1</sup> *oḍhanī* or *cādar*, must have originally been part of a bridal trousseau. As per the age-old custom, the bride was draped with this kind of luxury textile during the ceremonial send off to the in-laws from her parental house. In Banaras as also in other cities of the north Indian region, the routine practice of covering the head and body with an oversize headshawl, unadorned or elaborately decorated, was prevalent till 1960s among the womenfolk of a certain social group, comparatively less exposed to and relatively reluctant to succumb to newer sartorial trends.



The ornamental layout of the Jñāna-Pravāha *oḍhanī* or *cādar* follows the classic format that consisted of two identical end-panels (*āñcal*, *pallū*), warp-wise twin meandering borders (*bel*, *kinārī*) and a central field (*jamīna*, *pot*) with exuberant interlacing (*jāla*) of flowering creepers, expanding diagonally. In the middle zone of the end-panels (Figs. 2 & 3) do we locate a landscaped composition conjuring out of several pattern repeats, each with synoptic depiction of a pleasure garden. Billowing foliate arabesque studded with voluminous blossoms surround a decorative fountain of the prevalent Indo-European style, set in play within a pond-enclosure. Peacocks dance to the music of cuckoos and blackbucks stagger around. On each playing fountain hover a winged *perī* wearing a tight-fitting *peśawāz* and *caugosiā* cap, secured with a beaded turban band. Loose ends of the scarf thrown across the upper torso and covering the left shoulder flutter behind, suggestive of the motion of a sweeping flight. The attenuated feather pinned on to the cap further emphasizes the poetry of motion. Her hand gestures are subtle, evoking a certain *gat-bhāva* of *Kathak*. Sleek *khajurī* guard-borders run weft-wise, punctuating the expanse of this central unit that finally spill over into two



Fig.2. End-panel (*āñcal*, *pallū*) of the *oḍhanī*, same as Fig.1.



Fig.3. Detail of the end-panel (*pallū*), same as Fig.1.



*paṭbelas*, unfolding horizontally on either sides. *Paṭbelas* depict in a series of repeats a rather inexplicable hunting episode (Fig.2); an Englishman in breeches and hunting coat and well-camouflaged amidst massive leafy vegetation, aiming his flint-lock at a rampant lion.

The lengthwise borders (*bel*) belong to the *khulī-bel* type (Fig.1), a variety with flourishes springing forth unrestricted in the absence of any guard border for the upper end, unlike the common iconography of the meandering creepers set within the *hauz*. Each repeat unit has a tiger chasing a frightened blackbuck, a parrot perched on the undulating leafy stalk and a winged *perī* in flight, gazing at the back. The central field (Fig.4) enmeshed with flowering creepers has apparent correlation with the meanders mapping the entire length of the *oḍhanī* and indeed justify a thematic relevance. In addition to the zoomorphic motifs used in the meanders there is a peacock with a graceful slender neck settling down on a blossom and pecking on a half-open bud. Similar looking



Fig.4. Central-field (*Jamīna*) of the *oḍhanī*, same as Fig.1.



Fig.5. Winged *Perī* in dialogue with a Peacock, detail of Fig.4.

airborne winged *perīs* reappear in each involution, engaged in a dialogue with the peacock while beaded garlands dangle in their raised hands (Fig.5). However, contrary to the Iranian *naqḍah* there is nothing as a salvaging

narrative baseline for a concrete interpretation of the brocaded figural imagery on numerous Banaras specimens that form an interesting group and to which this *oḍhanī* belongs. When in canons and classical literature does one fail to get the clues it is in the realm of secular lores and music of the region that one would look for possible fount of the leitmotif. Winged *perīs* are the principal characters of this particular composition; they are in fact the *nāyikās*, the idealized heroines meant to represent a certain music-inspired poetic mood. Possibly, a *bandīśa* (musical composition) of a *ṭhumrī* set in *miśra telaṅga* inspired the pattern-drawer:

स्थायी : सूरत मोरी काँहे बिसराई राम ।

अंतरा : चित लिए तुम्हरी छब, फिरु जंगल में मन मार ।

माला मोरी राजा दवाई, (मोहें) काँहे बिसराई श्याम ॥

*Sthāyī: O my Rāma (My lord) what led you erase from your mind my countenance?*

*Antarā: Carrying in my heart your image,  
Dejected, do I wander in the woods.*

*(and now) My rosary is serving as a medicine my lord.*

*Śyāma - My lord! What made you weed me out of your memory?*

Into the making of a multi-ethnic popular culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Banaras, poetry and music served as veritable catalysts, conditioning a distinctive aesthetic approach. This particular textile is about the joy of sharing a musical refrain at multiple levels, by a pattern-drawer with a master-weaver who in turn understands the emotive depths of the prospective owner of the *oḍhanī*.

The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century figural brocades from Banaras had their lineage in their counterparts from Gujarat. Undoubtedly, the migrant weavers from Gujarat were responsible for introducing such a figure-centric pictorial genre to a class of connoisseurs well-versed in poetry and music. Figural patterns for brocades very often included mythological designs, *śikāragāh* and even portraits. Interestingly, in a *kajārī* from Banaras-Mirzapur belt composed by one Sāhabāna and consequently expanded upon by Shakur Khan and Hiralal, his twin-disciples, could I get the clues for the contextual dynamics of the synoptic vignettes chosen out of sacred myths for portrayal in textiles. An ode to a master-dyer is delightful and, simultaneously, vivid:



धुन रंगरेजवा: खद्दर की चुनरी  
खद्दर के चुनरी रंग दे छापेदार रे रंगरेजवा,  
बहुत दिना से लागल मन हमार रे रंगरेजवा॥ टेक॥

कहीं पै छापो राधा ललिता बेचन जाय रही दधिया,  
कहीं पै छापो सखियन के मिललन बलदाऊ के भैया,  
कहीं पै छापो नाच रहे सखियन के संग ताता थइया,  
कहीं पै छापो बजा के वंशी चरा रहे वन में गइया,  
कहीं पै छापो कंश-संहार रे रंगरेजवा॥ 1॥

कहीं पै छापो झूल रहे झूला मोहन राधा प्यारी,  
कहीं पै छापो बजा के वंशी नाच रहे गिरिवरधारी,  
कहीं पै छापो नाच रहे हरि, नाच रहीं सखियन सारी,  
कहीं पै छापो कुंवर कन्हइया करे रास की तैयारी,  
कहीं पै छापो सावन के बहार रे रंगरेजवा॥ 2॥

कहीं पै छापो चीर चुराये सखियन की गिरिवरधारी,  
कहीं पै छापो टांग रहे रचि-रचि चीर कदम डारी,  
कहीं पै छापो बैठ कदम पर बजावैं वंशी बनवारी,  
कहीं पै छापो हरा लाल चौतरफ बना रहे फुलवारी,  
कहीं पै छापो दुनिया का विस्तार रे रंगरेजवा॥ 3॥

कहीं पै छापो गइया लिहले खड़ी राधका नार हो,  
कहीं पै छापो दूह रहे गइयन के कृष्ण मुरार हो,

‘मुर्सिद’ मेरे सहवान कहे अब खतम किया विस्तार हो,  
‘शकूर खां’ का मिसरा सुन दुश्मन को चढ़ा बुखार हो,  
‘हीरालाल’ कहे चुनरी के विस्तार रे रंगरेजवा॥

### ***Dhun Raṅgarejvā : Khaddara Kī Cunarī***

*O my master-dyer! Beautify my coarsely-woven cotton cunarī (wrap) with printed embellishments.*

*O my master-dyer! Since long time back I had a desire (to own such a piece).*

*O my master-dyer! Do print on a certain part (of the cunarī) Rādhā and Lalitā on their way to sell curd.*

*Do print on another part (of the cunarī) the encounter of Baldāu's brother (Kṛṣṇa) and the sakhīs.*

*Do print on yet another part (of the cunarī), (Kṛṣṇa) dancing with sakhīs keeping to the tā tā thaiyā beat.*

*Do print on some section (of the cunarī), (Kṛṣṇa) fluting while he takes cows out to graze in the forest wilds.*

*O my master-dyer! Do print on a certain part (of the cunarī) the slaying of Kāṁsa – 1.*

*Do print on a certain part (of the cunarī) Kṛṣṇa and beloved Rādhā enjoying the swing.*

*Do print on another part (of the cunarī) Kṛṣṇa dancing while playing on the flute.*

*Do print on yet another (of the cunarī) Hari and sakhīs, all dancing enraptured.*

*Adorn a certain section (of the cunarī) by printing the young Kṛṣṇa getting ready for the rāsa dance.*

*O my master-dyer! Do print on a certain portion (of the cunarī) the charms of (the month of) Sāvana (July-August) – 2.*

*Do print on a certain portion (of the cunarī) Kṛṣṇa stealing the garments of the sakhīs.*

*And, on another part (of the cunarī) do print (Kṛṣṇa) arranging artfully the garments (of the sakhīs) on the branches of kadamba tree.*

*Do print on yet another part (of the cunarī) Banavārī (Kṛṣṇa) seated on the kadamba tree and playing upon his flute.*

*Adorn a certain section (of the cunarī) by printing a garden planned out in four segments, with flower beds of red and green hues.*

*O my master-dyer! Do beautify a certain part (of the cunarī) by printing the expanse of the mortal world – 3.*

*Do print on a certain spot (of the cunarī) Rādhikā standing along with the cow.*

*And, adorn one segment (of the cunarī) with Kṛṣṇamurārī milking the cows.*

*O my 'Murśīda'! says Sāhabāna, now I am putting an end to this description.*

*Listening to the couplet of 'Śākura Khān', the rival is down with fever.*

*O my master-dyer! Hīrālāl (thus) elaborates upon the (narrative) of cunarī.*

*This kajarī further testifies that there was a parallel tradition in the region for the figure-centric block-printed textiles, particularly in the form of cotton*

headshwls. In this case, as it used to be in Deccan, the brocades possibly acted as prototypes for the master-dyers.

The lively designing of the *oḍhanī* with idiosyncratic pictorial ambience of a contemporary pleasure garden, virtually a pastoral retreat for the *raīsa* of Banaras, can be safely attributed to the family guild of Bisesar Prasad (c.1835 to 1935). A potter and wall-decorator by profession, he excelled in figural designs for brocades. Having received intensive training under the city-based miniature painters who were once groomed by the masters once engaged at the Mughal court atelier of Delhi, he succeeded in infusing an engaging contemporary nuance to the prevalent mannerized figurative depiction borrowed from the late-18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century design repertoire of the *kimkhāb* weavers settling down in Banaras from Gujarat. It is by sheer chance that some hundred odd brush-drawn (*syāha-kaīam*) and pencil-drawn paper designs (*kāgaz kā khākā* or *likhāī*) by Bisesar Prasad, by his son Mahadeva Prasad (c.1880-1965) as also those by his grandson Baijnath Prasad (c.1900-1964) still exist in the collection of several hereditary *naqṣabands*, *girastās* and *koṭhīdāras*. In the Jñāna-Pravāha *oḍhanī*, one would detect the familiar diction of Bisesar Prasad as also the collaborative inputs of his son and grandson. This was happening in almost all the family workshops of hereditary artisans and in this particular case do we notice how thoughtfully Bisesar assigned different segments of the parent layout to his son and grandson. A master of *putalīs* (stylized lady figures), he drew the winged *perīs* with faces in profile and perfect in all the convincing sartorial details. Mahadeva added the flamboyant interlacing of flowering meanders with enormous blossoms to round off an ambience of a pleasure garden of the mind. Baijnath visualized the twin guard borders for the end-panel with European hunters in addition to the birds and zoomorphic motifs, appended sparingly. The *oḍhanī* was designed and woven towards the end of the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; by that time Bisesar was sixty, Mahadeva was in his late forties and Baijnath was barely twenty.

### Endnote

1. Headshawl, Banaras  
c.1920

Structural details:

Ground fabric: silk; colour: simone pink or *gul e abbasi*, *abiri*

Warp (L) 251 cms; multiple strands; twist: loose Z twist

Weft (W) 179 cms; multiple strands; twist: loose Z twist

Construction: tabby; embellishments woven in *kandhua* technique with the help of thread jacquard (*naqsha*).

Design weft: golden metallic thread; twist: Z twist; yellow silk core; silver *badlā* (flattened metallic strips).

Collection: Jñāna-Pravāha Museum, Varanasi, Acc. no. 2010.17.

### Contextual Literature

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