



Plate 3 : Rose-bush and blossoming meanders, yardage, Hyderabad, Suraiya Hasan's Workshop, c. 1984; twill-weave foundation, warp: cotton, weft: silk, pattern wefts: lightly twisted silk dyed in deep green, maroon and pink, length 367 cm, width 78 cm, Jāna-Pravāha Museum, Acc. No. 2003.44.

Himru: Revisiting History

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Hand-crafted on throw-shuttle pit looms, the distinctive appeal of *Himru/himroo* fabrics rests largely on the ruggedness of the 3/1 twill-woven ground texture, commonly of silk and cotton, patterned with loosely-twisted silken extra-wefts travelling across the selvages. A generalized description of the stuff by George Watt in the Official Catalogue of the landmark exhibition, Indian Art at Delhi, coinciding with the Durbar of 1902-3, may serve as a befitting opening note:

The word *Himru* literally means a textile intended for use in cold season. It is woven of cotton but peculiarly spun so as to form a thick soft fabric that feels as if made of wool. It is also brocaded in silk, the major portion of which is somewhat clumsily carried behind from one point to the other in the design and thus forms loose masses that constitute an extra and very warm layer. In consequence of these accumulations of more or less loose silk, the *himrus* have as a rule to be lined and thus when made up into coats for men or bodices and trousers for women, become literally warm clothing for the cold season.¹

For a partial re-construction of the historical context and design styles one delves repeatedly into the curatorial notes, often intersecting and overlapping, of the Exhibition Catalogues of the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Such solitary base-reference covering a mere century or so, enable us to spell out only a handful of *himru*-forms woven with varying permutation of mulberry silk, tasar/tussar (*Antheracamylytta*), cotton and rarely, wool.

In the overarching group of "mixed fabrics"², consisting of *mashru* ("cleverly woven", "permitted"), *ghatta* (satinettes) and *sangi*, *garbhasuti* and *gulbadan*, *himru* (Persian : *hum ruh*, similar) occupied a special position, justly for the "artistic

treatment" involved in the weaving. While *garbhasuti* (woven with a combination of cotton and tasar or silk in Bengal and Maharashtra) and *alcha* (a major type of *mashru*) had been included in the listing of stuffs in Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari*,³ the omission of *himru* would lead one to presume an absolute Deccan-bound popularity of this textile at this stage. Scholars have unequivocally ascribed the evolution of this fabric to the exalted patronage of Deccani sultans. It is important to note that unlike other textile forms, the production of *himru* was also hampered periodically during the phases of political instability in the region.

Evidently, the artistic milieu of the Deccani kingdoms emerged out of an impressive blending of several artistic traditions; medieval Indian ornamental mannerisms of the southern region, Safavid-Abbasid abstract imagery and the Mughal floral style, continued as major strands. Cumulatively, all such norms of decorative designing shaped the repertoire of the dye-painted and resist-dyed cottons or *kalamkari*, courtly embroideries and, lastly, *himru* brocades.⁴ Very often, it was trade, both domestic as also inter-continental, that served as a determining factor towards the osmosis of design concepts and manufacturing devices in *kalamkari* and embroidery. *Himru*, surprisingly, retained the ethnic character with lesser openness to trade-born hybrid repertoire of patterning schema or even fabric-structuring alternatives.

Undoubtedly, Aurangabad continued to be one of the pre-eminent centres of *himru* weaving till mid-20th century as has been mentioned in the volume compiled for the Glasgow International Exhibition (1888):

Aurangabad has long been noted for its flowered silks, of which one variety known as the *Himru* is largely used by noblemen for coats and by women for bodices.⁵

A city named Khirki, urbanized as early as 1610, became Fatehnagar in 1626 and, finally, in 1653 was rechristened as Aurangabad by Prince Aurangzeb. Returning as Emperor Alamgir in 1681, he established here the *de facto* capital of the Mughal empire. During his second term (1653-1658) as viceroy of Aurangabad, he created a painting atelier at his palace and, eventually, the city emerged as "a major centre of patronage, in keeping with other places in the Mughal Deccan."⁶ Seemingly, the diaspora of weaver-*naqshabands* from Gujarat or Bijapur(?), known for their expertise in draw-loom and *naqsha/jala* mechanism, struck roots at this "burgeoning imperial outpost" and energized the prevalent textile tradition of

Daulatabad origin. The loom-produce of Aurangabad prior to the Mughal sovereignty, one may guess, was influenced by the fabled cottons and silks of Daulatabad⁷, 22 kms away towards north-west. One cannot proceed beyond this assumption any further, especially in the absence of historical documents, to describe the 17th and 18th century *himru* of Aurangabad. However, of the 19th century manifestations of this fascinating textile we do get a clearer picture.⁸

The descriptive passage by Watt on the *himru* specimens exhibited in Indian Art at Delhi (1902-3) comprises the details of several oft-repeated decorative schemes and colour combinations in vogue.⁹ Undoubtedly, the *butidar himrus* formed an "extensive series". In this particular variety, fields of

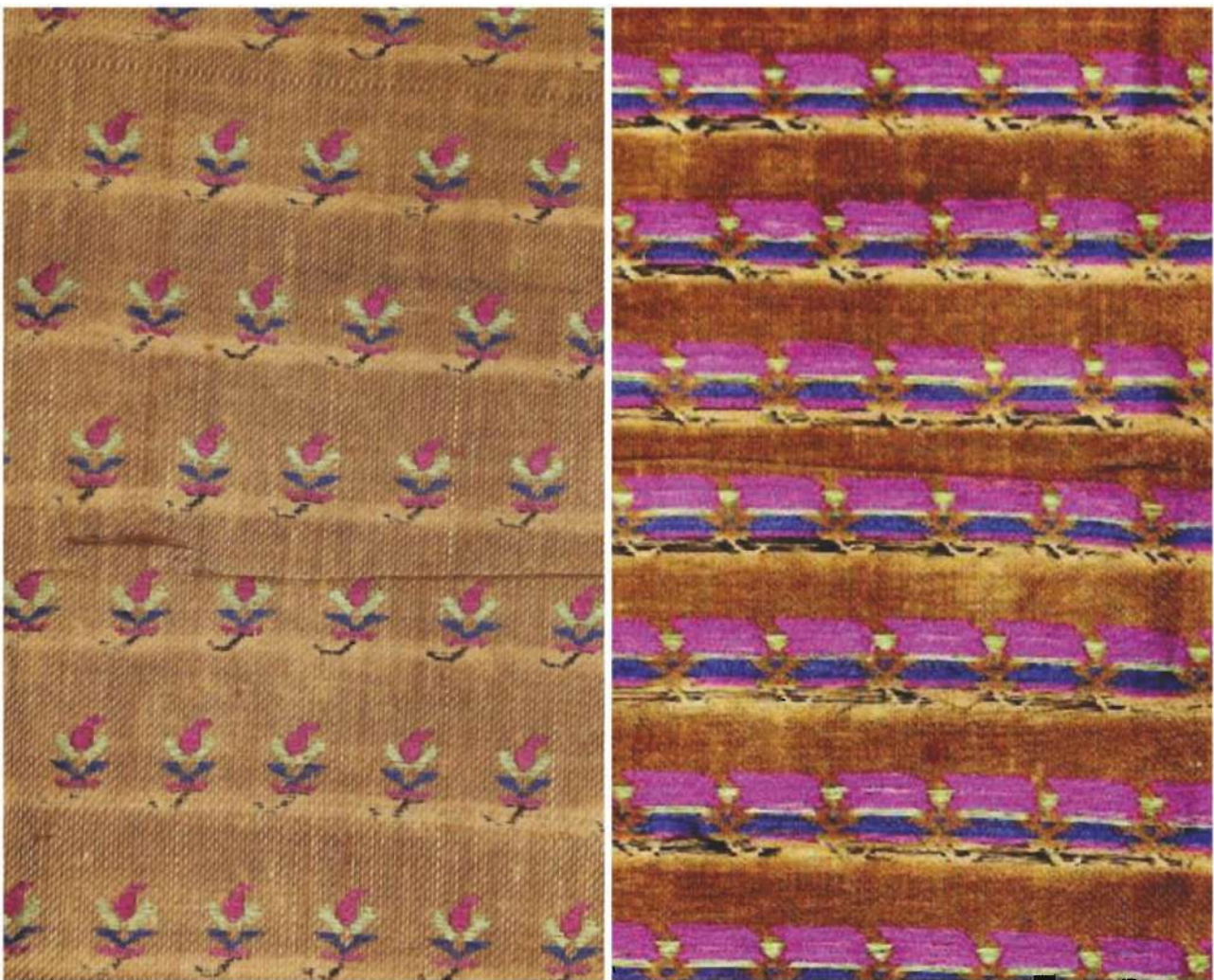


Plate 1 : *Butidar himru*, fragment of a costume length, Aurangabad, mid-19th century; twill-weave foundation, foundation warps: cotton, foundation wefts: tasar pattern wefts of twistless silk dyed in faded crimson and pale green, deep blue and black, length 44 cm, width 80 cm, Jñāna-Pravāha Museum, Acc. No. 2013.39 🌸 Plate 2 : Back detail, supplementary weft floats



Plate 4 : Back detail of Plate 3, continuous pattern weft floats.

black and molten olive, dark blue or maroon were generously embellished with flowering sprigs or flower-heads.¹⁰ A related ornamental device was *jali*, mesh pattern or an allover swirling lattice of leafy meanders set with blossoms or paisleys. Muhammad Habib, Fazal Hussain and Abdul Aziz, reputed merchants cum guild-owners of 19th century Aurangabad, excelled in the production of such patterns.¹¹ Ameruddin, another contemporary manufacturer of *himru*, specialized in *babari-jal*, "a complex design in purple edged with white worked on a dark green background".¹² Incidentally, striped patterning of the loom-woven *khatrast* or *khatt-*

dar shawls¹³ as also costume-pieces from Kashmir had also been replicated in *himru*. More than often, lengthwise woven bands were embellished with "floral scrolls or geometric designs worked along the surface of the stripes".¹⁴ Watt made a special mention of the *jamavars* or woollen piece goods produced by Muhamed Latif of Aurangabad for the great exhibition of 1902-3.¹⁵ European woollen yarns of brilliant hues were used in such *jamavar himrus*, impressive in terms of allover ornamental layout. Nawabpura, Kadim Mondha, Moti Karana, Jinsipura and Buohi Lane were important localities in Aurangabad associated with the production of *himru*.¹⁶ Technical analysis and documentation of the design motifs of *himru* samples of 1975, presently in Calico Museum of Textiles,¹⁷ lay bare the late versions of several oft-repeated patterns. These had been actualized with the help of old *naqshas/jalas* preserved in the family-guilds of hereditary weavers.

Yeola (106 kms north-west of Aurangabad), famed for *paithani*, *pagadi* (turban cloth) and double faced *pitambara*,¹⁸ used to be another locale for *himru*, as

has been noted during the survey conducted as late as 1976-77 by B.C. Mohanty.¹⁹ "Between Aurangabad and Yeola", claimed Mohanty, "about 300 weavers once wove *himru*". Formation of the *Himru* Weavers' Industrial Cooperative Society Ltd. was the only Government initiative taken to resurrect the tradition as the number of the skilled weavers alarmingly "dwindled to as low as 20".²⁰

Asaf Jahi Nizams (r.1724-1948), initially administered their territory from Aurangabad. The capital was subsequently shifted to Hyderabad (509 kms south-east of Aurangabad) in 1763. To the last quarter of the 18th century, may be ascribed the gravitation of *himru*-weaving guilds at this "seat of the hybrid Indo-Islamic civilization of the Deccan". Inevitably, the fabrics (suitable for waist-coats, *achkans* and *shervanis*) customized according to the requirement of the royal household of Nizams were the most intricately woven pieces, densely structured with approximately 280 ends per inch. Examples of court garments of the early phase did not survive whereas the recorded specimens tailored out of *himru* have yet not been fully discussed by the experts. One of the rooms in Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi, stated Rustam J. Mehta, "has been decorated entirely with the *Himrus* of Hyderabad".²¹ Sadly, within a gap of three decades around 1976-77, *himru* production was "practically non-existent in the city", with only a few looms in operation.²²

Ahmedabad and Surat were two other important centres known for the "flowered satinettes", resembling closely the *himru* of Aurangabad. To a great extent, the following brief information in *Bombay Gazetteer* by Mr. B.A. Gupte is useful towards identifying the 19th-century *himrus* from Surat:

They are much worn by rich Arabs, who import them from Surat. The colourings are of great delicacy, and the designs very characteristic. Much taste is shown in the use of the various colours, not only in their dispositions in the designs, but in their respective tones, in which there is thorough harmony. They are all studies and are exquisite stuffs. With regard to the designs, they may be described as of Arab or Muhammadan forms, chiefly geometrical, for even in those of the more floriated treatment there is more or less of geometrical spacing.²³

One exclusive variety of flowered satinette (*mashru*) with purple ground, manufactured at Ahmedabad was known as *Nawabi himru*, used exclusively for "the dresses of the Nawabs of Surat".²⁴

The "line of separation between the *himrus* of Deccan and the *amrus* of Benares", opined Watt, "is an extremely narrow one".²⁵ An adaptation of the classic *himrus* from Aurangabad, Gujarat and Hyderabad by the master *naqshabands* of Banaras (Varanasi) was greatly conditioned by the city-based pan-Indian trade of loom-products. Interestingly, *amrus* featuring *butis* and flowered stripes, *jangla-jamewar* and "rambling creeper pattern", were commonly referred to as *reshmi-kamkhwab* (silk brocade) by the local traders.²⁶ Unlike vintage *himrus* of Aurangabad and Hyderabad, an assortment of weaves, namely, twill, tabby and, to a limited degree, satin weave had been used for the ground. Watt's precise comparison of *himru* and *amru* in terms of the nature of yarns put to use is as follows:

The warp and weft in *himrus* are usually specially prepared cottons or they may be one or both in wool with the special flower wefts in silk mainly, but occasionally also in cotton. Many of the *amrus* produced in Benares have cotton or *tasar* silk warp and the special flower weft in a fine quality (mostly imported) of cotton yarn.²⁷



Plate 5 : Arabesque studded with flower heads, fragment of a *himru*-inspired furnishing yardage, Weavers Service Centre, Varanasi, developed for Visvakarma Exhibition (1982) by Suraiya Hasan, c. 1979; double cloth structure foundation warps and wefts of cotton, pattern wefts of untwisted silk dyed in golden yellow, red, leaf green and deep grey, length 15.5 cm, width 16.2 cm, Private Collection 🌸 Plate 6 : Back detail, continuous pattern weft floats secured to the ground with binding warps

Occasionally, ambidextrous designer cum *naqshabands* added to the weft-faced embellishments an array of surface effects or *urtu/uttu* that included fancy twills, diamonds and, very rarely, diapers. In comparison to the compactly woven selvedges, invariably in warp-controlled herringbone structure of the *himrus* from Aurangabad and Hyderabad, those in Banaras *amru* are double-end tabby. While fashioning a garment out of *amru* yardage a lining was considered to be essential, as has been pointed out by Yusuf Ali, in order to mask the underside cluttered with the loose floats of untwisted design-wefts.²⁸ In Banaras, *amru* became extinct beyond the first-quarter of the 20th century due to the steadily decreasing demand for this fabric form as a lucrative trade item.

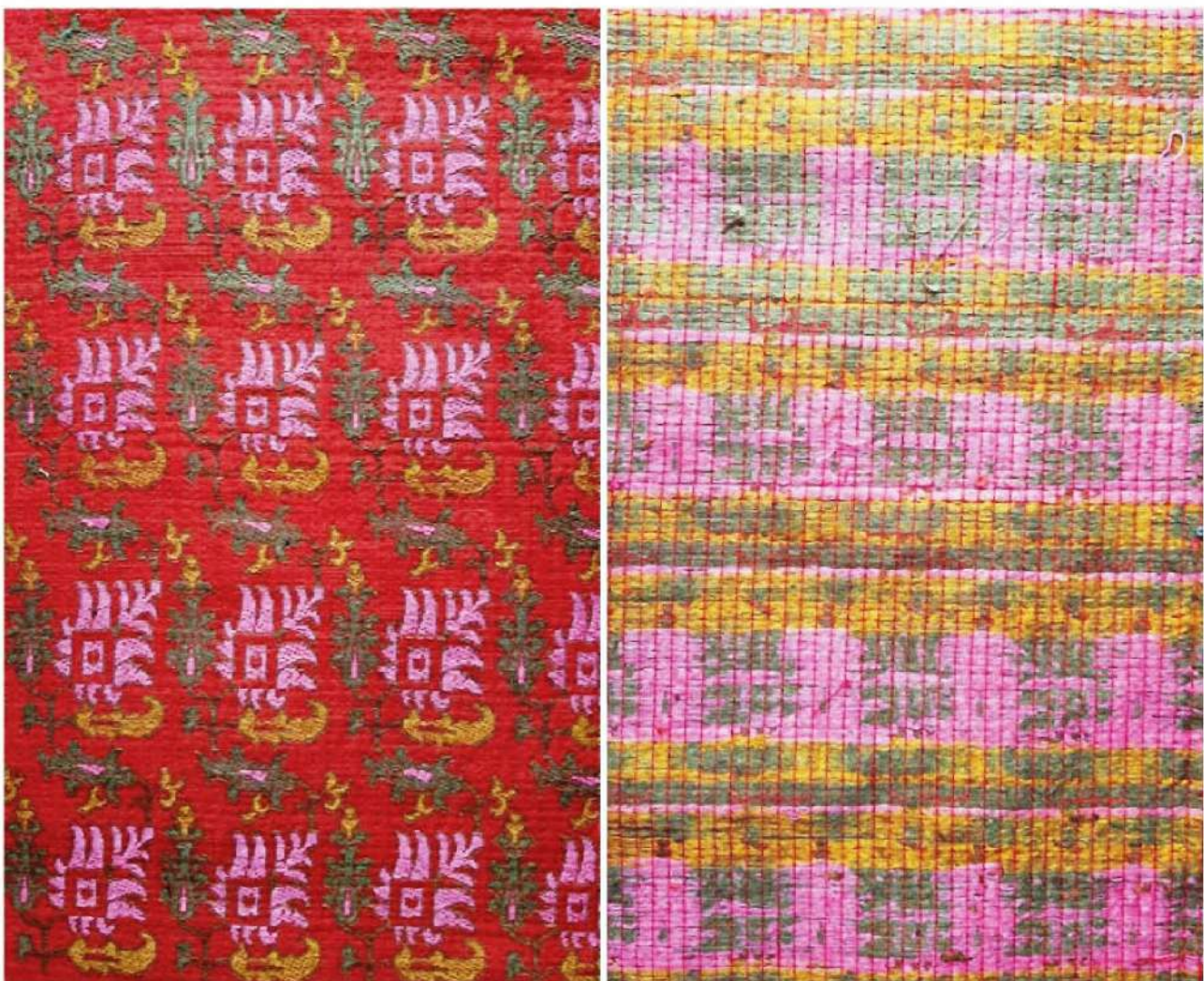


Plate 7 : Rows of flowering meanders, master sample of a *himru*-inspired furnishing yardage, Weavers Service Centre, Varanasi, developed for Visvakarma Exhibition (1982) by Suraiya Hasan, c. 1979; tabby weave, foundation warps and wefts of cotton, pattern wefts of untwisted silk dyed in pink, muted yellow and deep green, length 38.5 cm, width 48 cm, Private Collection 📷 Plate 8 : Back detail, continuous pattern wefts secured to the ground with a sequence of binding warps

Revival of *Himru* at the workshop of Suraiya Hasan Bose (b.1928)

Suraiya started her Hyderabad-based workshop of hand-crafted textiles in mid 1970s, making best out of her most enriching past experience of working in close association with Pupul Jayakar and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, John Bissell, Laxmi Jain and Martand Singh. A decade later, she pin-pointedly focused on the revitalization of *himru* brocades and *mashru* and in order to give concrete shape to her renewed interest in the genre, she started making a collection of *himru* samples from princely families and old graphs (the design blueprints on paper) from the guilds of master weavers for reference. It was also a happy coincidence to have the master *naqshaband*-weaver Abdul Qadir to supervise the production of *himru* at her workshop.²⁹ Qadir once belonged to Varanasi (Banaras) where he learned the complex art of *naqshabandi* and could spontaneously address to design issues. Sayed Omar, a disciple of Abdul Qadir, also joined the unit during the succeeding years. Both these multi-faceted artisans drew the decorative motifs on the paper and developed thread-jacquards (*naqsha-jala*) for such patterns. They also decided the colour combination and oversaw the dyeing of the yarns. From 1986 onwards, as a result of the consolidated effort, Suraiya's workshop products became synonymous with the "finest *himru* textiles in the contemporary world."³⁰

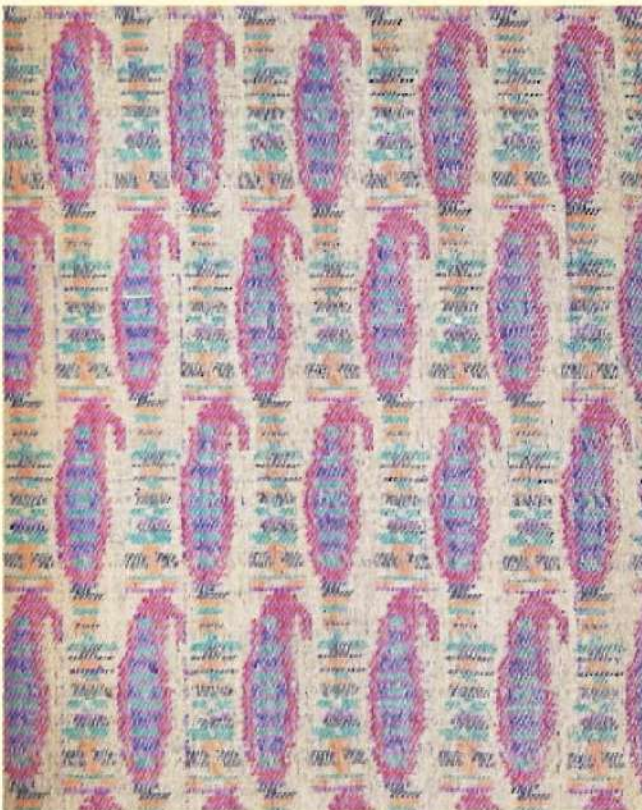


Plate 9 : A field of paisleys, fragment of a *himru*-inspired furnishing yardage, Weavers Service Centre, Panipat c. 1985, compound weave with twill-structure on the front twisted cotton warps dyed in ochre yellow and violet twisted cotton wefts for foundation dyed in yellow ochre twisted cotton wefts for patterning dyed in red and orange, emerald green, violet and black, length 53 cm, width 25 cm, Private Collection

Notes & References

1. George Watt, *Indian Art at Delhi 1903*, Calcutta, 1903, p.363.
2. *Ibid.*, pp.360-63.
3. Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, tr. H. Blochmann, Calcutta, 1927-49, Vol.I, pp.100-101.
4. Steven Cohen, "Textiles", in *Islamic Heritage of the Deccan*, ed. George Michell, Marg Pub., Bombay, 1986, pp.118-128; George Michell and Mark Zebrowski, "Textiles, Metalwork and Stone Objects", *The New Cambridge History of India, I : 7, Architecture and Art of the Deccan Sultanates*, Cambridge, 1999, pp.226-230.
5. T.N. Mukharji, *Art Manufacturers of India*, Calcutta, 1988, p.338.
6. Terence McNerney, "The Mughals in the Deccan", *Sultans of Deccan India, 1500-1700 : Opulence and Fantasy*, Navina N. Haidar and M. Sardar, eds., New York, 2015, pp.283 and 288.
7. As has been suggested by historians, the venturesome relocation of capital from Delhi to Daultabad (Devagiri, Deogiri) by Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq (r.1325-51) in 1326 entailed a substantial migration of elites, Sufi teachers and artisans including weavers and papermakers. Muslins, superfine silks and silk *patola* from Deogiri, were the highly-valued luxury textiles of the pre-Tughluq era. Amir Khusrau (1253-1325) eulogized at length the Deogiri *abrasam* in his historical poem, *Nuh Siphir (The Nine Skies)* that celebrates the glories of Mubarak Shah Khalji's reign. Cf. Moti Chandra, "Costumes and Textiles in the Sultanate Period", *Journal of Indian Textile History*, No.VI, Ahmedabad, 1961, pp.8-11.
8. The District Gazetteer (1884) has a list of several other forms of courtly textiles produced at Aurangabad. These include *pataos*, *mashru*, *kinkhab*, *pitambara* and borders. Cf. *Handicrafts in Maharashtra: 'Himroo' works of Aurangabad*, Census of India 1961, Vol.X, Maharashtra, 1966, Delhi, p.2.
9. Watt, *op.cit.*, pp.364-65, Pl.46-A.
10. *Ibid.*; 18th/19th - century specimens of *buti-dar* or *bhant-darhimru* have also survived in Jaipur's royal textile treasury. Cf. Chandramani Singh, *Textiles and Costumes from the Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum*, Jaipur, 1979, p.XIX; Cf. B.N. Goswamy & K. Krishna, *Indian Costumes in the Collection of the Calico Museum of Textiles*, Ahmedabad, 2000, Cat. No.113, p.146.
11. Watt, *Ibid.*, p.365.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Steven Cohen, Rosemary Crill, Monique Levi-Strauss et.al., *Kashmir Shawls : The Tapi Collection*, Mumbai, 2012, pp.164-69, 174-77.
14. Watt, *op.cit.*, p.364.

15. *Ibid.*, p.360; The "himru shawls" from Yeola, executed on the *jala* loom, seem to have been modelled after the Aurangabad archetypes. Cf. Lotika Varadrajan and Krishna Amin-Patel, *Of Fibre and Loom - The Indian Tradition*, Ahmedabad, 2008, pp.157-58.
16. B.C. Mohanty, *Brocaded Fabrics of India*, Vol.I, Ahmedabad, 1984, p.116; Cf. Census of India 1961, Vol.X, *op.cit.*, pp.6-40.
17. *Ibid.*, pp.119-134; For a discussion of *himru* loom, fabric construction and technical aspects of *jala* operation, see Mayank Mansingh Kaul, "Suraiya in Context to the History of Textiles in India", in Singh, Radhika, *Suraiya Hasan Bose: Weaving a Legacy*, New Delhi, 2019, pp.167-175.
18. Varadrajan and Krishna Amin-Patel, *op.cit.*, pp.164-66.
19. Mohanty, *op.cit.*, p.116.
20. *Ibid.*, p.118.
21. Rustam J. Mehta, *Masterpieces of Indian Textiles*, Bombay, 1970, p.10.
22. Mohanty, *op.cit.*, p.178.
23. Mukharji, *op.cit.*, p.365.
24. *Ibid.*, p.347; Watt, *op.cit.*, p.364.
25. Watt, *op.cit.*, p.297.
26. A. Yusuf Ali, *A Monograph on Silk Fabrics Produced in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, Allahabad, 1900, pp.87-89; Anand Krishna, *Banaras Brocades*, New Delhi, 1966, p.37; Goswamy & Krishna, *op.cit.*, Cat. No.12, p.48; No.73, p.111; No.96, p.129; No.158, p.177.
27. Watt, *op.cit.*
28. Ali, *op.cit.*, p.88.
29. Kaul, 2019, *op.cit.*, pp.38-40.
30. *Ibid.*, p.39.