



Fig.8.1 : Altar cover, late-19th century, velvet, satin-cotton, zari wire, kalabatoon 85 x 83 cm. This cover has a purple velvet centre embroidered with a lotus motif in the centre and sprawling creepers all around with jasmine *buti*. The border all around in yellow satin has repeats of same creeper designs. The corner units are again embroidered purple velvet. *Kinari* is attached all round on the edge and four corners have multicoloured pompoms in silk Jnana Pravaha Museum, Acc. no. 2013.24

As one walks through the main street of Chandni Chowk today in 2024, one notices an array of shops displaying dresses adorned with *zardozi* work, dresses for both men and women. This was not so about 50 to 60 years back. *Zardozi* work on costumes, saris and accessories was on decline. This downfall was mainly because of the decline in quality of the raw material used in the *zardozi* embroidery. Today *zardozi* wear is a fashion statement not only for the rich and elite but also for the commoners. I am briefly presenting here the treading of *zardozi* embroidery on an arduous path to reach this glory of cutting through the boundaries of elite and poor. A transient flow of fashion, how did it happen and where did it start is what I intend to relate in this paper.

Zardozi : Persian, *zar* (gold) + *dozi* (embroidery) : The Indian Context

There are several words, *hiranyan-atkan*, *hiranyanvoyutarn*, *atka* and *drapi* in Vedic literature that reflect the use of gold in embroidering garments. *Swarntantu-nirmita*, the word appearing in Valmiki *Ramayana*, means "adorned with fibre made of gold". Another word in same reference, *maharajat-vasas*, clearly means clothes embroidered with gold and silver. These and many more textual references to the opulent tradition of gold and silver embroidery testify to its prevalence in the Ancient and Classical period. There is, however, a lull period, as far as the literary references are concerned, pertaining to gold-silver embroidery. Several contextual evidences of the later periods may be viewed against contemporary sculptures and paintings. *Zardozi* craft flourished under the substantial patronage of the Turkic and Afghan sultans, and, eventually, of the Mughal emperors. Gradually, this opulent embroidery style established firm roots in India. Nonetheless, the expansion of trade in the craft remained confined to the nobility. Fall of the Mughal Empire resulted in a total dislocation of the craft-production units. Hereafter, the manufacturing network which was mainly confined to the Mughal workshops shifted to the provincial courts, namely Rampur, Bhopal, Jaipur, Hyderabad, Faizabad-Lucknow and Banaras (Varanasi).

On January 1, 1877, when queen Victoria got the title of *Kaisar-i-Hind*, the Empress of India, *zardozi* artisans in Delhi were involved in a major way as Delhi Durbar was being organized by Lord Lytton. Twenty-six years later, on 1st January 1903, Viceroy Lord Curzon organized an equally grandiose ceremony to celebrate the Proclamation Ceremony of Edward VII as the King Emperor. Third Durbar was held at the time of the transfer of power from Kolkata to Delhi in 1911. Delhi became a seat for the preparation of these three grand events; the streets witnessed the impressive spectacle of royal procession in the Mughal-rule galore. Numerous *zardozi* accessories including elephant and horse trappings were fancifully embroidered and displayed in the series of procession. British, though impressed by the extraordinary workmanship of the *zardozi* artisans, had done away with the concept of having *karkhana* or the production units in the court set up. This was the end of noble court *karkhanas*. At this juncture, patronization for the craft from Portuguese and other European countries, several eastern countries, European nations, America and Japan opened new markets for the craft. Seeing tremendous scope of work many artisans of Delhi and Agra chose to remain in these Mughal cities establishing their *karkhanas* to commercial and household set up. Several other regions in Uttar Pradesh, Hyderabad,



Fig.8.2 : Altar spread, late-19th century, velvet, zari wire 96 x 92 cm. The *thali* cover has green velvet centre with central hexagonal motif extending towards outward body and corners. The inside corners have *pan buti*. The red border has *zardozi* embroidery with floral *buti* intercepted by green embroidered corners. Jnana Pravaha Museum, Acc. no. 2013.23

Karnataka, Rajasthan, Panjab and Gujarat witnessed the spread of *zardozi* embroidery in the local courts and market set ups. The art of *zardozi* was patronized by the *Nawabs* of the Awadh and other royal families around Lucknow. Varanasi, the seat of many important Hindu shrines including Kashi Vishwanatha temple, continues to have several clusters of *zardozi* artisans embroidering numerous accessories for the temples. These, primarily, include dresses for the principal icons and *chhatris*. Several satellite cities around the main seat of power in Uttar Pradesh also emerged as centres for the *zardozi* craft. This was the time when women started to learn the craft within the domestic quarters. Menfolk would bring the orders and deliver the finished items back to the market and women would do the embroidery. As the *karchob*, the frame for making the *zardozi* items, entered the household units, there was equal participation in making and marketing of the *zardozi* articles. Post-Independence gender equality emerged conspicuous even in the practice of this traditional craft. This was the phase when the work was started to be practiced in smaller towns of Bareilly and Farrukhabad. Several families in Allahabad and Varanasi, Agra, Lucknow and Rampur, Bareilly and Farrukhabad and nearby villages supply exquisite *zari* embroidery works. The technique of *zardozi* was mingled with the *ari* work which is faster and easier to learn. Blends of *zardozi* and *ari* work made a great combination in terms of



Fig.8.3 : Woman's *kurti*, satin, *zari* wire, early-20th century, L. 51.5 x Sleeve (end to end) 112 cm

The intricate *zardozi* work on this red *kurti* is dense on the central border, sleeves border, shoulders, neck-line.

Lot ka phul and creeper motifs are the major design motifs embellishing these parts.

Scantily placed *butis* cover the body. Jnana Pravaha Museum, Acc. no. 2002.252





Fig.8.4 : Child's *achkan*, satin, zari wire plain *gota* tape, early-20th century
L. 62.5 x W. 39 cm., This purple *achkan* is profusely embroidered all over with large floral *butas* highlighting the borders with denser stitches. Technically, this embroidery is referred to as *gota-patti* work or *lappe-ka kam*, much popular in Rajasthan. Jnana Pravaha Museum in Rajasthan. Acc. no. 2002.261.



attractive bargain price. The pieces for embroidery such as sari, *salwar-kameez* suits and *lehenga* are now sent to the satellite centres of surrounding villages from traditional centres like Varanasi and Lucknow. Today, most of the work done in Farrukhabad is sold in Chandni Chowk market of Delhi. There are evidences in the *zardozi* families in Farrukhabad of the work orders being received from Mumbai as early as 1926. Several *zardozi* families in the ancient city of Varanasi (Banaras) have been credited for reviving this rich craft and, currently, supply exquisite *zari*-embroidered wedding outfits, [sarees](#), [salwar-kameez](#) and *sherwanis* to boutiques and swanky showrooms all across the country.

Along with the historical vicissitudes, the cost-related change in the quality, both of the material to be embroidered and materials for embroidery, greatly influenced the production and marketing range of *zardozi* craft during mid-20th century.

Technique and Material

Zardozi as a technique is different from other techniques of Indian embroidery like *sujani*, *kantha*, *phulkari*, *Kashmiri kasida*, *kasuti*, etc. where the movement of the threaded needle is guided by the type of stitch employed. Silk, cotton or wool yarn are pliable enough to pass through the needle and then through the cloth. However, in *zardozi* embroidery thread is used only to stitch the variety of metallic wires, which are not pliable to pass through the needle and then through the fabric. The technique and material for *zardozi* embroidery is thus different from other embroideries.

After the change of power from Mughal to British, several new aspects had been introduced to the making of *zardozi* articles. During the Mughal period, metallic embroidery was done on massive ceremonial furnishings and trappings as well as apparels and furnishings. *Mashru*, silk, muslin, velvet and brocade, *bafta*, *amru*, *ghatta* or satinette like velvet were embellished with pure *zari-badla*. British introduced several cloth materials made with man-made fibre. *Zardozi* craftsmen adapted to work on these materials like net and tissue, satin and georgette, etc. Simultaneously, because of the high cost-raise it was becoming difficult to work in pure *zari* wire.

Zardozi is primarily known for the shimmering golden brilliance. Silver has better ductility and lower cost compared to gold. Therefore, since the ancient times, a bar of silver was drawn into long wires by passing through decreasing perforations in a steel plate called *jantri*. These silver wires, generally flat, were wrapped with pure gold leaf. These gold-plated wires were called *sone ka tar*. The pure silver wire was called *chandi ka tar*. In local parlance, *zardozi* embroidery was thus called *sone-chandi ke tar ki kadhai*. As the time passed, the quality of metallic wire underwent tremendous changes. When the price of gold rose, gold-plating was done instead of gold leaf wrapping. The wire drawn through *jantri* was called *badla*. The wire was given various shapes called *kora*, *dabka*, *gizai-chikna*, *zik*, *chalak*, *tikora*, *kangni* and *khichcha*. The physical properties of these wires decide the specific placement of different wires in the designs. For instance, the stems of the flowers or the outlines of the blossoms or foliage are generously done with *gijai* wire, as *gijai* is thin and stiff wire. *Khichcha*, another variety of coiled wire, is transparent and when coloured threads are passed through it produces a polychromatic effect. *Kora* and *chikna* are flexible coiled wire. *Kora* is dull and *chikna* is lustrous. *Nakshi* is a thicker wire. The silver base wires with gold wrapping or plating were also called *asli tar* or *sachcha tar*. Accordingly, *zardozi* with such material was popularly referred to as *sone chandi ke tar ka kam*, keeping it fairly apart from other embroideries. Gradually, after increased cost of gold and silver, it became difficult to afford *sachcha tar* or *asli tar*. The wire manufacturers introduced copper wire into the market as a replacement of the silver wire and gold-plated the same. For a certain period of time, the gold/silver-plated copper wire retained the shiny brilliance but because of the tarnishing property of the copper, the embroidery eventually lost



Fig.8.5 : *Topi*, velvet, satin, *zari* wire late-19th century, 22.5 x 19 cm
This *topi* with black body and pale green border is profusely embroidered with variety of *zari* wires making floral and creeper patterns. Jnana Pravaha Museum, Acc. no. 2002.264.



Fig.8.6 : *Topi*, velvet, *zari* wire, late-19th century, 15 x 12 cm. This stylistically stitched *topi* has circular pink top and green rectangular base. Whole body has floral creeper motifs in variety of *zari* wire. Jnana Pravaha Museum, Acc. no. 2002.263



Fig.8.7 : *Topi*, cotton, silk thread, *zari* wire, mid-19th century, 51.6 x 17 cm. This stylistically stitched conical cap has bold *kairi* and other floral *buti* filled with *zardozi* wire. The *zari* and red silk yarn have been used simultaneously. Jnana Pravaha Museum, Acc. no. 2010.2



Fig.8.8 : Hand-held fan, velvet, satin, zari wire, silver mid-20th century, diam. 26 cm, handle 41 cm. The fan has two parts - body and the handle. Circular body in velvet with satin border has a jasmine *buti* at the centre. the creeper pattern is embroidered in circular manner on the border. The outer border has satin and *gota-patti* work. The silver handle has *repousse* work. Jnana Pravaha Museum, Acc. no. 2002.256

the sheen. At this juncture, aluminum wire was used instead of silver wire. These were the most unfortunate experiments which greatly impacted the *zardozi* embroidery. People started to refrain from getting the *zardozi* embroidery on the dresses as this would tarnish after some time. The poor wire quality led to severe deterioration in the craft manufacture. The copper wire was called *nakli tar*. With an aim to resurrect the declining business of *zardozi* artisans which was directly linked to the poor quality raw material, new interventions were made and soon polyester wire was introduced in the market. The polypropylene wire was known as *plastic tar*. Further, the quality of electroplating with gold-polish on copper was also improved and new varieties of golden wire were manufactured. This wire had the shine and did not tarnish. This new variety of metallic wire has given a new lease of life to the *zardozi* embroidery and, also, the range of affordability expanded beyond the upper elite. The glitter and opulence of the vintage style is revived but the quality is in several layers. The rich and affluent go for the *asli tar ka kam* while major market is sustained through what is known as "tested *zari*".

Embroiderers

Zardozi, the traditional practitioners of *zardozi* craft, were Ansari from the Sunni Muslims sect. Most of the Ansari *zardozi* work in their domestic *karkhana*. The owners of the commercial *karkhanas* are, mainly, Sheikh, Saiyyad and Pathan. Marriages are preferred within the community. However, since all Ansari are not *zardozi*, marital interaction among non-*zardozi* artisans, mostly, weavers, are very common. Presently, the number of embroiderers, particularly women *zardozi*, is expanding beyond these community segments. After initiatives of several governmental and non-governmental bodies, concerted efforts are being made to train women in the villages around the major towns where *zardozi* is practised. The work is distributed to the women in the rural areas who complete and give it back on the piece rate basis. The work is given and collected by the city *karkhana* owners so that women can earn a decent wage while working at their home. This system has empowered women who keenly participate in training female artisans in the workshop to strengthen their economic holding through *zardozi* craft. Another appreciation has come in the form of the award of GI tag to *zardozi* work of Lucknow which is class apart. The work here is done, essentially, on fine muslin mainly in *badla*.

To sum up with a positive note, the art of *zardozi* with a strong historical presence in the Mughal and Provincial courts in the yesteryears has today penetrated in all sections of the Indian society. The *zardozi* are also now expanding their workmanship by training a large number of women in the villages.

Further Reading

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