



Fig.3.6 : Sari with motif showing  
European passengers riding a steam locomotive  
Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalay  
No. 2008.370, Photo courtesy - author

## Luxury Textiles from Bengal

From early times, India produced a great variety of luxury textiles for local courts and affluent classes, as also for the lucrative foreign markets in Tibet, South-east Asia, Far East, East and North Africa, and Europe. Bengal is ranked just after Gujarat in the production of different types of luxury textiles. The fabled muslins and *jamdanis* from Dhaka, the exclusive silk-on-silk embroidered quilts from Satgaon, and the figured silks from Baluchar in Murshidabad are amongst the exclusive textiles manufactured in Bengal.

Several rare and interesting types of textiles have recently come to notice which should be mentioned here. These are samite-weave silk fragments that came out of Tibet and Bhutan towards the close of the last century showing stylized birds and felines, lotus roundels and stars, lotus roundels and scrolling plumes, and lampas-weave silks showing archers and swordsmen, mythical beasts of complicated designs, and an entire group of textiles with Vaishnavite figures and symbols, earlier known as *Vrindavani Vastra*. All these have also been given an Eastern Indian provenance, from the Sultanate court of Gaur to the temples and *mathas* of Assam and northern Bengal (Cooch Bihar).<sup>1</sup> Rahul Jain published similar lampas-weave silk panels that reached the Amber court in Rajasthan. Both Raja Man Singh and Mirza Raja Jai Singh of Amber had close connection with Bengal where they spent long stints as governors of Mughal emperors.<sup>2</sup>

The exceptionally fine work, ability to incorporate unfamiliar subjects, the great variety of design and the high volume of products noticed in the silk-on-silk and silk-on-cotton coverlets, spreads and other types of textiles created by the unknown embroiderers and textile-makers of Bengal from the first half of 16<sup>th</sup> century to the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century is simply overwhelming. Our knowledge on this tradition was limited; however, through the painstaking work of Barbara Karl a great deal of information has emerged. A mere glance of the examples, as she noticed, in Portuguese, European and American museums, castles, churches and private collections, make us conscious about the great variety and diversity of these products.<sup>3</sup>

### Beginning of the Tradition

The story of *Baluchari*, or *Baluchari butidar* or Figured Silks from Baluchar is often traced from its dying days. Very little is known of its origin: who was the first to commission the weave of this special textiles, who were the weavers, who specified and created the special motifs that give it its uniqueness, and where the first looms were set, all remain shrouded in mystery. It is obvious, however, that such exclusive textiles could not have been produced without the patronage of affluent and appreciative users. No art form or craft tradition can survive in the absence of a discriminating clientele, proper appreciation, and liberal patronage, and thrive without a steady demand and ready market. This must have happened with the *Baluchari* tradition at the time of its inception.

### Baluchar: the locale

The name Baluchar evokes the picture of a wide river with sandbanks sparkling in sunlight as commonly met with in riverine Bengal. The rustling saris of lustrous mulberry silk woven with great

expertise, perseverance, and meticulous care at Baluchar and other nearby villages and towns in the district of Murshidabad in West Bengal bear distant echoes of that image. Now, the river Bhagirathi due to rampant diversion of its flow of water throughout its upper reaches is unrecognisable with its meagre flow most months of the year, its disappearing sandbanks, and its withering glory. The cluster of villages where the master weavers worked with their intricately-set looms to produce the most amazingly designed silks that inspired wonder and awe have long disappeared. Also, the pristine tradition of that wonderful class of silk textile known as *Baluchar* or *Baluchari* had been lost forever.

### **Nitya Gopal Mookerji**

The first systematic study of *Baluchar* silks was undertaken by Nitya Gopal Mukerjee/Mookerji, a government officer knowledgeable in the production of silk from extraction of yarn from the cocoons to the weaving of exclusive silks and their marketing. In November 1885, Thomas Wardle, a progressive English businessman from Leek, Staffordshire, England with vast knowledge of Indian silk yarns, was invited to India by the Government of India to study the poor state of silk industry in India, and to suggest measures for its improvement. After travelling widely and making an in-depth study of the silk industries in Bengal and Kashmir Valley, Wardle made a series of recommendations for the improvement of silk production from the rearing of silkworms to reeling of yarns and weaving. He also recommended that some capable person from India should be sent to Europe to study and understand the latest sericulture methods then being practiced in France and Italy. Baboo Nitya Gopal Mookerji was selected for the job. He studied first in Padua and then at Montpellier and, lastly, at Paris under the celebrated scientist Louis Pasteur who succeeded in eradicating the pebrine disease of the silkworms and revived the sericulture of France and Italy.<sup>4</sup> On his return from Europe, Mookerji was appointed Scientific Instructor and Deputy Collector of Murshidabad District. He made extensive field work and published his first detailed note on the reasons of the decline of sericulture in the district.<sup>5</sup> He was concerned with the gradual decline of the once-rich silk industry of Maldah and Murshidabad and wrote a comprehensive account of the Bengal silk industry. *A Monograph on Silk Fabrics of Bengal* by Mookerji was published in 1903 by the Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta. He also wrote two books in Bengali: *Saral Krishi Bigyan* (1904) and *Resham Bigyan* (1908). He resigned from his government job due to disagreements with his superiors for some unspecified reasons.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, the decline in silk weaving started long ago. T.N. Mukharji, Curator of the Indian Museum in Calcutta from 1886 to 1896, and the Officer-in-charge of the Indian Central Office for the Glasgow International Exhibition 1888, noted: "Saris, made at Baluchar near Murshidabad, with flowers and figures, were a short time ago highly appreciated by Bengali ladies, but these have now very nearly been ousted from the market by cheap 'pine-apple' cloths imported from England."<sup>7</sup>

At the time of N.G. Mookerji's field studies in the 1890s the *Baluchari* figured silks were already on the verge of extinction. The master weaver, Dubraj Das, the only person left who could set the extremely complicated *naksha* looms, had nearly stopped weaving due to old age, lack of skilled assistants and falling demand. For quite some time he was producing silks of simpler design with only *kalka koniyas*, corner paisleys, and an *anchal* of nine or eleven *kalkas*, tree-of-life motifs or flowering vases, and rows of simple *butas* filling the ground. These are in many instances inscribed with his name, *Sri Dubraj Das, Mirpur*. He had by that time moved from Mirpur to Bahadurpur but retained his identity as "Dubraj Das who belonged to Mirpur". The last remaining six *naksha* looms at Bahadurpur belonged to him only.

### **Baluchar textile in Historical Perspective**

To trace the origin and steady development of this unique textile tradition we must look at the historical

perspective and the geographical locations where the weavers worked and created their distinctive designs.

The reputation of Bengal's luxury fabrics was widely known from early times. Maldah in the days of the Gaur Sultanate (established in 1388) had a thriving production of silk yarn and weaves. Sir George Birdwood provides a long list of the principal patterns of silk produced there, and further notes: "there is on record that in 1577 Shaikh Bhik, of Maldah, sent three ships of Maldahi cloth to Russia by Persian Gulf."<sup>8</sup> The area around Murshidabad was an important centre of silk production from early times as fine quality of mulberry silk yarn was produced in the nearby villages, and also brought from Maldah area, for long a key centre of silk production. It is known from East India Company records dating 1621 that this was the area "where silk could be provided in infinite quantities at least 20 percent cheaper than in any other place in India and is of the choicest stuff."<sup>9</sup> The first British factory was established at Kasimbazar (Cossimbazar) in 1658. It helped the local producers and weavers to produce high quality silk textiles, which were soon "competing favourably with the high-quality silk goods made in France and Italy."<sup>10</sup>

There is a reference to Baluchar in a biography of Maharaj Krishna Chandra by Rajiblochan Mukhopadhyay: "When Akbar and Jahangir's leading courtier Raja Man Singh was on his way to subjugate Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore in 1612 he stopped at Baluchar on the bank of Bhagirathi and was impressed by its beauty."<sup>11</sup> Baluchar is mentioned by Ghulam Husain Salim in his *Riyaz us-Salatin* when Nawab Alivardi Khan of Murshidabad came upon the Maratha raiders busy looting Baluchar and drove them out in 1742.<sup>12</sup> There is no further information on what was there in Baluchar that the Marathas were looting. Later writers have stated that Baluchar was a prosperous place being the centre of silk textile trade with wealthy merchants residing there.

A more specific reference to Baluchar and its special product was noticed from Dutch records by the historian Sushil Chaudhury. In a list of Bengal textiles the Director of the Dutch factories in Bengal Louis Tallefert in 1755, and again from 1760 to 1763, includes textiles named "*armosijnen* with flowers, on both sides equally beautiful, made in Balouchar" in the category of "*dostanjis*".<sup>13</sup> The exact meaning of the term *dostanjis* is not clear, but *armosijn/armozjin* is the Dutch name for a costly silk fabric. As Shilpa Shah has pointed out, the association of *Baluchar* with floral patterned silks is apparent from Tallefert's description though the *Baucharis* do not have a double-faced patterns.<sup>14</sup> The Marathas invaded and looted Baluchar as it must have attained preeminence and prosperity by the 1740s. There is no further reference to Baluchar or its special product *Baluchari* till the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The name *Baluchar* or *Baluchari* got currency with the association of the village Baluchar on the river Bhagirathi near the town of Jiaganj, about 23 km north of the city of Murshidabad.<sup>16</sup> Baluchar was not the only village manufacturing this special type of silk, several nearby villages like Bahadurpur, Amaipara, Ramnapara, Ramdaha, Baligram, Bagdaha, Beliapukur, Amdaha, Ransagar amongst others were producing fine silk products like saris, scarves, square *rumals*, etc. Today there is no place called Baluchar there. With the changing course of the river Bhagirathi Baluchar has disappeared. When Eva-Maria Rakob visited the area in 1992 to make a field survey of places associated with *Baluchari* she was told that Baluchar, comprising of the *maujas* of Durgapur and Panishali in Jiaganj Municipality had since been absorbed into them.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Patrons**

The social and economic order of the Murshidabad court with its affluent and connoisseur ruling family, rich and cultured nobility, prosperous trading community, and the presence of English, Dutch, French

and Armenian and upcountry traders must have provided the impetus to introduce novel motifs in the fine silks produced by the expert weavers of Murshidabad. The weavers used the same raw material - pure, sensuously soft, lustrous, thin, and delicately textured local mulberry silk - without ever using any gold and silver *zari*. The technique was not very different from that of the draw-loom in use in centres like Patan and Ahmedabad in Gujarat, Benaras and other silk-producing centres of central, western, and southern India. Silk textiles from Gujarat, *Ikat*, brocaded, embroidered, or tie-dyed, had a flourishing market within the country and abroad. Silks produced in Benaras, tastefully designed, woven with bright colours and gold or silver *zari* had a pan-India market and beyond. The market of *Baluchari* silks, however, was mostly confined to Bengal and adjacent regions. The brocades and *Patola* from Gujarat, *Kalamkaris* of Andhra Pradesh or *Himrus* of Aurangabad commanded a far wider market. Looking at the motifs showing Europeans – officials and their spouse, soldiers, and cannoneers – some authors have speculated that these were specifically produced for them on order.

The earliest documents on *Baluchari* are related to the records providing details on objects shown in the L'Exposition Universelle de Paris organized in a grand scale at Grand Palais in Paris in 1855. Choicest and finest silk objects were procured from the best weavers from all over India for exhibiting in the British pavilion that included four *Baluchari* saris. Veronica Murphy selected three of these in the Arts of Bengal exhibition held more than a century later in 1979 at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London.<sup>17</sup> Anita Nathwani published further details on these three, and a fourth one in two recent essays with additional information on the Paris show and their transfer to the India Museum and finally to the Indian Section of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.<sup>18</sup> The names of the exhibitors were not mentioned in the documents.

When these were later included in the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, London in 1886, the exhibition catalogue provided additional details where the names of two lenders were mentioned: Nawab Nazim of Murshidabad and Maharani Swarnamoyi of Kasimbazar. The full entry reads: '2970. Baluchar Sari is lent by the Nawab Nazim of Murshidabad. Maharani Swarnamoyi of Kasimbazar has also lent two Baluchar saris (no.2961, 2962) with figures of gods and goddesses woven at the end.'<sup>19</sup> It may be pointed out here that the *Baluchari* motifs never show figures of gods and goddesses but figures of nawabs and begums, and European sailors, soldiers and cannoneers. The cataloguer may have misidentified the human figures as gods and goddesses.

The only image, Fig.3.5, of a lady wearing a *Baluchari* sari from the middle or third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that has come to notice is that of Sarada Devi, mother of Rabindranath Tagore, who died in 1875. Abanindranath Tagore, Rabindranath's nephew, provides us with a verbal image of the sitter: '*Pankherkaj kara mejhe, mejhete carpet pata, ek pase ekti pidim jwalchhe, baluchar sari pare sadachule lal-sindur taktak karche, katta-didima base achen taktaposhe*'.<sup>20</sup>

Recently, another gorgeous *Baluchari* sari has surfaced from the Tagore family with a strong pedigree. It belonged to Jnanadanandini Devi (1850-1941), who was married in 1859 to Satyendranath Tagore (1842-1923), the elder brother of Rabindranath. She gifted the sari to her daughter-in-law Sangya Devi, wife of Surendranath Tagore (1872-1940). It passed on to their daughter Jayasri Sen on her wedding in 1927. She gifted it to her daughter Haimanty Dasgupta at the time of her marriage in 1963. It finally entered the CSMVS in 2008, Fig.3.6.<sup>21</sup> We are not sure if this sari was received by Jnanadanandini at the time of her wedding in 1859, or was acquired by her later.

The above notices help us to find the patrons of *Baluchari* figured silks. One interesting point to note here is that all four *Balucharis* exhibited in the 1855 Paris exhibition show figural motifs in the *pallu*.



Fig.3.1 : Sari with European riders  
in a horse-driven carriage  
V & A Museum, Acc. No. 6102 (IS)  
Photo courtesy - author



Fig.3.2 : Sari showing European passengers on a paddle steamer, V & A Museum, Acc. No. IS 660-1883  
Photo courtesy - author



Fig.3.3 : Sari with motif horse rider with two attendants, V & A Museum Acc. No. 0786 (IS), Photo courtesy - author



Fig.3.4 : Sari with motif showing woman on horseback  
V & A Museum, Acc. No. 6110 (IS)  
Photo courtesy - author



Fig.3.5 : Sarada Devi, Photo courtesy - author

Two of these, V&A no. 6102 IS, Fig.3.1, shows the motif of a European couple riding a horse-driven cart, and V&A no.0196 IS, shows the motif of a pedal steamer with European passengers and crew. The other two show an Indian lady riding horse: in V&A no.6110 IS, Fig.3.4, she is alone, and in V&A no.0786 IS, Fig.3.3, she is accompanied by female attendants. In the Sarada Devi photograph, Fig.3.5, however, the *pallu* does not have any figural motif but only a row of large *kalkas*. Maybe, by the 1870s *Balucharis* with figural motifs were already getting scarce. The Jnanadanandini's *Baluchari* shows steam locomotives that was introduced after steam locomotives were regularly plying in Bengal

from 1854. The weaver used many elements not integral to the rail engine like oversize steam chutes, festoons, hanging lamps and a flag, an oversize peacock or a composite figure of lion-bodied female or *kamdhenu* sitting on the top.

### **Decline of Murshidabad**

Murshidabad was undergoing a process of rapid political, economic, and social disintegration in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The English had no intention of settling down there, they preferred to strengthen their bases on the far downstream town of Calcutta for strategic reasons. The Nawabs were increasingly denuded of their position and power, social esteem, and prosperity. The East India Company took over the *diwani* of Bengal in 1765 and agreed to pay the Nawab of Murshidabad Rs.53 lakhs per year, reduced to Rs.41 lakhs a year within a short time, and brought down to Rs.31 lakhs in 1770 that was further curtailed in 1772. In the same year the *diwani* and *khalisa* offices were shifted to Calcutta, followed by the mint and the civil courts. By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Nawab's writ was valid only within the fort of Murshidabad.

The process of disintegration of Murshidabad continued throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century though the

production of *Baluchari* silk declined only from the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first stretch of the East Indian Railway, one of the three original railway companies, opened between Calcutta (Howrah) and Pandua in district Hooghly in 1854. Instead of the large seafaring *mayurpankhi* and other river crafts the pedal steamers, Fig.3.2, had started to ply on the Bhagirathi. A few decades later the locomotive and pedal steamer became objects of great popular interest. Yet, by the time T.N. Mukharji (1887-1888) and N.G. Mookerji (1891) made their field surveys the *naksha* looms of Murshidabad were producing only shawls with corner decorations and *butas* in the field. Even the best-known weaver-designer Dubraj Das was in dire straits and N.G. Mookerji makes this fervent appeal in his survey: "Dubraj Das was not ambitious and was quite willing to teach his fellow weavers the art of setting the loom to a desired pattern if he could get a monthly pay of Rs.30 or Rs.40. It would thus seem necessary to offer this patronage to Dubraj if the art industry of Murshidabad was to be kept alive and revived."<sup>22</sup>

The reasons for this decline are many, as N.G. Mookerji has clearly enumerated in his survey. The lack of patronage and its consequent effect on the quality of the product are apparent in many extant examples. Eva Maria Rakob<sup>23</sup> found as many as twenty-one pieces of *Baluchar* silk bearing Dubraj's signature, but none of these has any pictorial design in their *pallav*. He was by then settled for *butas* in the field and floral and *kalka* designs in the *pallavs*. In some examples even the field is plain. The affluent business class of Gujarati, Rajasthani and upcountry origin having their palatial mansions and garden houses in Azimganj, Jiaganj and Baharampur had started to desert these places and moved to Calcutta in the later years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A new class of neo-rich landed gentries and *gomastas* (demi-officials or commission agents in the service of British business houses), were rising fast on the social ladder of this time. To them a *zari*-brocaded *butidar* sari was more desirable than a figured *Baluchari* lacking the dazzle of *zari* embellishment. The days of *Baluchari* figured silk of Murshidabad thus reached its abrupt and sad end with the lack of an appreciative patron and, eventually, faded into oblivion.

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