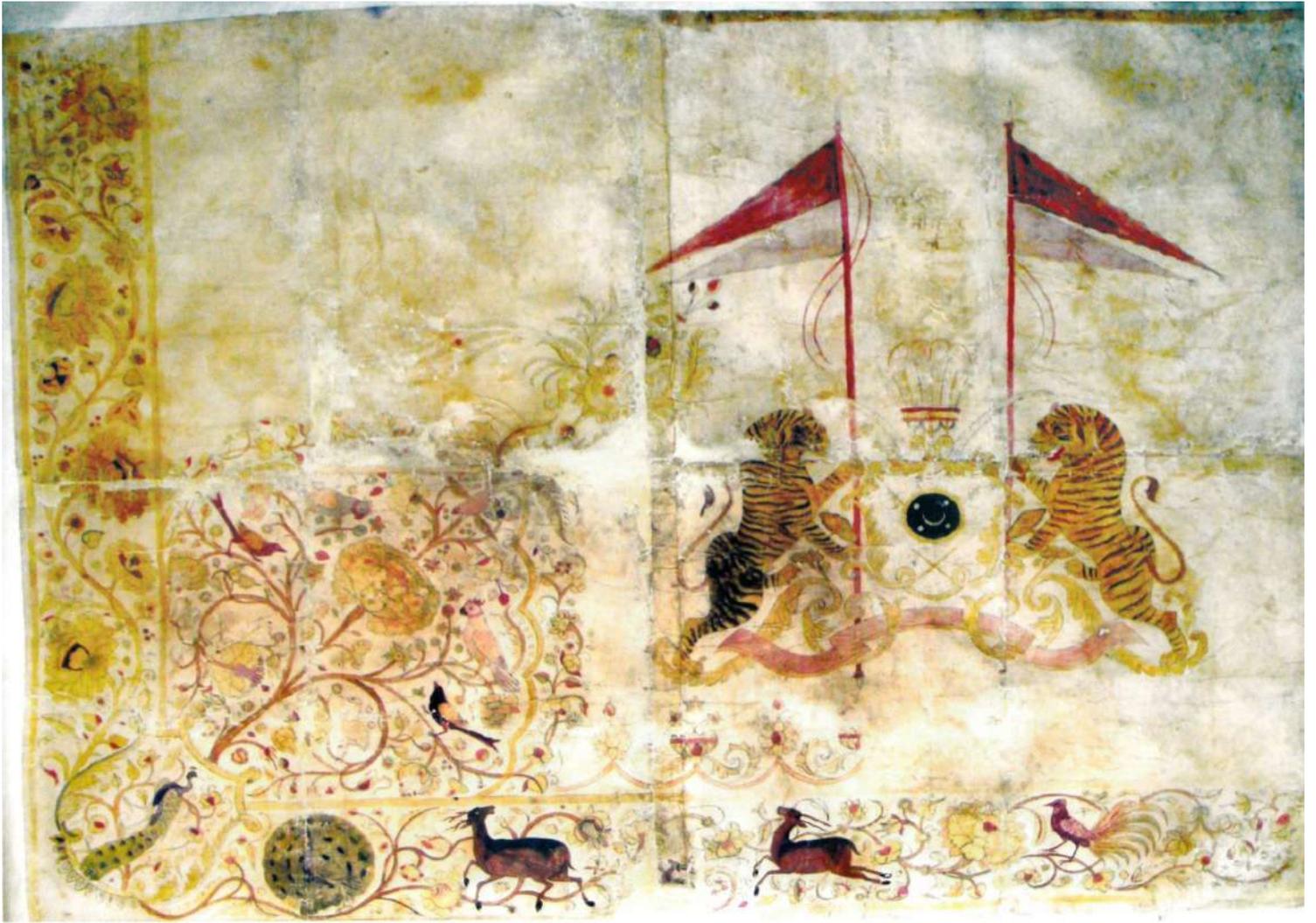


A *Śikāragāh Khākā* for Elephant Trapping (*jhūla*)

Anjan Chakraverty

This rare surviving specimen, datable to c. 1890 of an actual-size coloured *khākā* or *likhāī* on paper (Pl. 18.1) portrays a single corner motif (*koniā*) with *śikāragāh* imagery for an embroidered elephant *jhūla*. It was executed by some anonymous Banaras painter cum multi-media designer, engaged by a local trade agent dealing in *zardozi* (embroidery with metal-wrapped yarns and flattened metal strips) besides *kimkhāb* and luxury goods inclusive of decorative furniture of neo-Egyptian fashion. One of the recent acquisitions of Jñāna-Pravāha, this *khākā* would indeed add to the range of several interesting pieces of *zardozi* and *goṭā-kinārī* work at its Textile Section. Till 1990 this piece was lying in the family guild of a hereditary *zardoz* residing at Shivala *mohallā*, South Banaras beyond Madanpura, adjacent to Oudhgarbi-Chippitola (calico printers' quarter). Migration of *zardoz* artists from Lucknow, who were in turn displaced from the Imperial Mughal ateliers of Agra-Delhi, is to be linked with the arrival of scions as also High Stewards to Avadh Nawabs from 1750 onwards. Many of them resided in and around Shivala, close to the royal palace of Mahārājā Banaras, with their entourage of bankers and clerical staff, musicians and jesters, weavers and calico printers (*chippigar*, *chippā*), embroiderers and goldsmiths settling down in the neighbourhood, at Oudhgarbi, Chippitola, Sonarpura locality, Banaras, under the impact of the growing power of the British, from 1764 onwards, provided a sanctuary for skilled craftsmen. "I am informed that several families of Gujarat silk manufacturers, *soucars* and other," recorded Charles Malet in 1788, "distressed by oppressions of the farmers (i.e. of revenue) of this state (Maratha) who rule that province, have fled to and settled at Benares where they practice their former occupation."¹

Compared to the development of brocade weaving in the city, the history of *zardozi* is a comparatively less-explored chapter. Regarding the Shia *zardoz* artisans of Shivala we know that they were of Sayyad, Sheikh, Mirza and Pathan origin. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, quite a few Mirza and Pathan *zardoz* families moved from Shivala to Telianala and *mohalla* Chauhatta Lal Khan, near Rajghat. There they initially started working for Mirza Shigufta Bakht, the younger son of Mughal *Shahjada* Mirza Jawan Bakht Jahandar

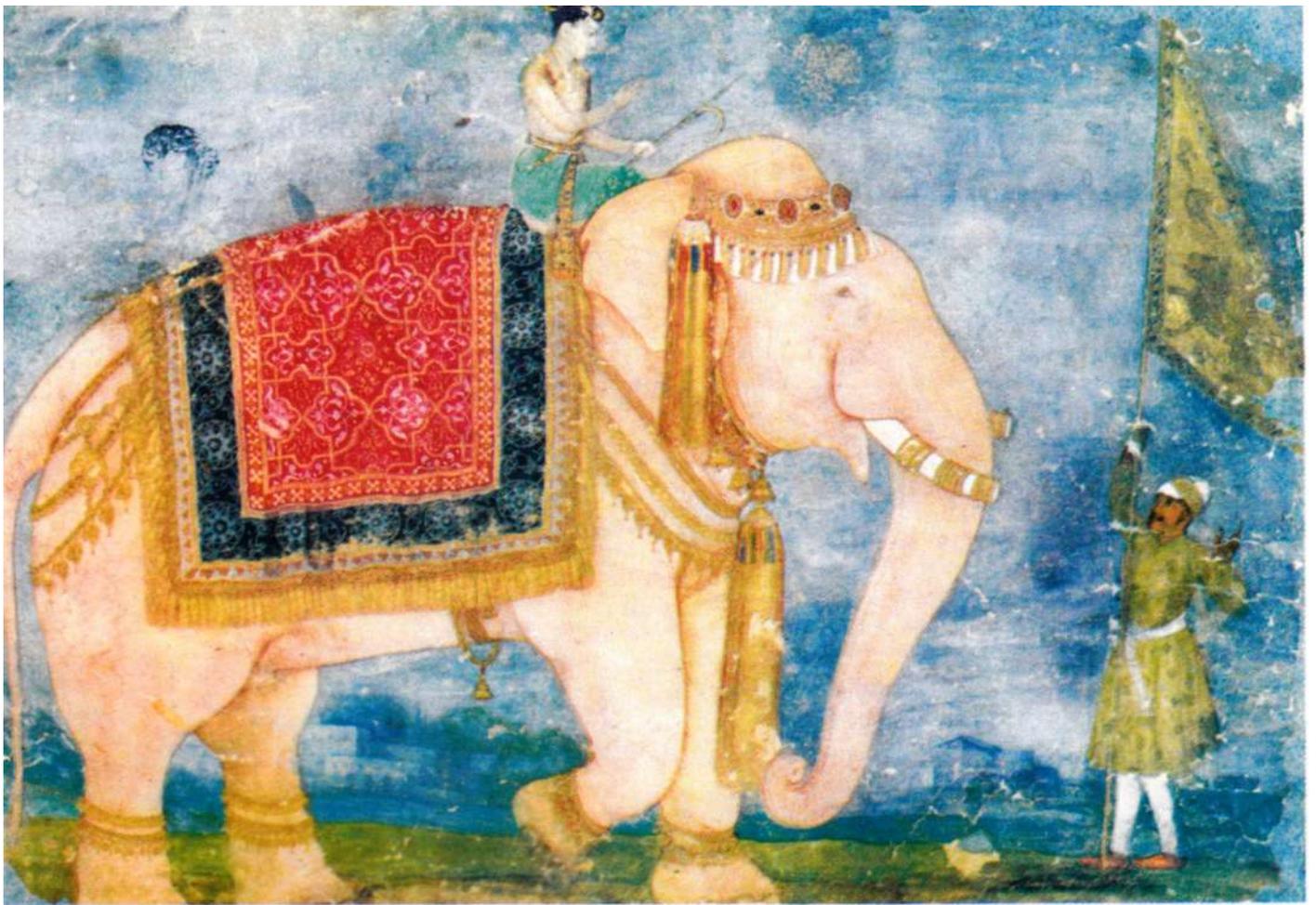


Pl. 18.1: Śikāragāh khākā for a jhūla, c. 1890 opaque watercolour on paper strengthened with cotton backing, 125.7 × 98 cms., Jñāna-Pravāha, acc. no. 2010:27

Shah, and also for Nawab Lal Khan, the *subedāra* of the city. As is evident, the embroiderers were approached over the decades by less-exalted patrons as also trade agents who promised them a continuous inflow of remunerative commissions. Incidentally, the artisans created for the Mahārājās of Banaras and for several major Vaiṣṇava and Jaina temples besides many *akhārās* and *maṭhas*, an entire array of exquisite items. Emergent elite circle of Banaras acquired standardized items whereas the trade-agents visited the principalities (*riyāsat*) in the nearby region namely, of Rewa, Sarguja, Dumraon, Darbhanga and Badahar, to mention a few, finalizing orders in tune with the demands of the spectacle-loving ruling princes of these states. Successors of these *zardozi* artisans, once confined to the exclusive patronage of émigré nobles, are still active in their family guilds, redefining the ever-changing ornamental repertoire with innovative diversity.

It remained a normal practice in Banaras that the *khākā* or *likhāī* handed over to a master *zardozi kāriḡara* were returned back to the trade agent who preserved such pieces amidst the bunch of sample designs to book further orders. The coloured or monochrome *khākā* was copied by the *kāriḡara* on thick paper or card and design contours were pricked with needle. Motifs were transferred on to the fabric by pouncing powdered chalk or charcoal along the perforated design. The pricked design or *sojan* was retained and the *khākā*, was kept in the guild till only the completion of embroidery to check periodically specific details as well as to absorb in the needlework the individualistic traits of a particular painter-designer. The *khākā* together with the finished piece of embroidery was sent back to agent's trade bureau (*gaddī*). In exceptional circumstances, as in the present case, the meticulously coloured *likhāī* for some reason was not delivered back to the agent and was kept, folded into a square format in the cardboard box containing several examples of *sojan*, at the *zardozi* guild (*kārakhānā*).

"The elephants cloth or covering", noted William Hawkins who witnessed the pageantry of spectacular *Nauroz* ceremonies at Jahangir's court, "is very rich, either of cloth of gold or rich velvet".³ Edward Terry categorically stated that due to the hot weather the English broadcloth was not in popular demand instead it was found handy "for coverings of elephants, horses, coaches."⁴ However, his description of elephant trappings matches with a number of contemporary renditions in painting: "They (elephants) have faire coverings either of cloth or velvet or cloth of silver or gold, and for greater state, banners of silk carried before them in which is the ensigne of their great king imprinted."⁵ The silk *lampas* with cartouches and palmettes on the red field with an indigo border with roundels worked out in white seems to be an exclusive covering designed for Dara Shikoh's pink elephant, Gajapati (Pl. 18.2). The design layout is notably different from the usual ones derivative of Safavid medallion carpets⁶ or, a mid-seventeenth century improvisation with flowering



Pl. 18.2: Dara Shikoh on Gajapati, c. 1628-30, opaque watercolour on paper, 24.6 × 34.3 cms., Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Cambridge, Mass



Pl. 18.3: Firuz Jang with his keeper, c. 1650, opaque watercolour on paper, inscribed : 'amal-i....s chand' (?) 17.7 × 21.3 cms., present whereabouts not known

shrubs arranged in vertical rows over the central field.⁷ Interestingly, a length of deep red velvet with scrolling vines of *eslimi* type furnished with a matching lining used for the royal elephant Firuz Jang, was certainly not meant to be used during a ceremonial procession (Pl. 18.3). Towards late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century the design format of the Mughal elephant trappings underwent considerable change. For instance a red velvet *jhūla* with the broad flower-strewn border surrounding all the four sides with almond-shaped *butā* forming the corner motifs (Pl. 18.4) seems to be one of the grand ceremonial textiles created conjointly by a master designer and *zardoz* for Akbar Shah II.⁸ A Banaras mica painting (Pl. 18.5) of c. 1870 depict a richly embroidered *jhūla* enhanced with pleated edging. Interlacing floral meanders form a mesh (*jaṅgalā*) pattern covering the entire red ground and matching perfectly with similar embellishment on the *ambāri*.⁹

Jñāna-Pravāha *khākā* presents an assortment of newfangled decorative motifs energetic and earthy, resulting from a design impulse atypical of late-nineteenth century Banaras. Multimedia artists of the city with inimitable mastery in the field of drawing specialized in *śikāragāh* patterning, fusing figural and fauna imagery with fluid foliate arabesque.¹⁰ A meander¹¹ studded with voluminous blossoms having the features of lotus and rose combined serves as the vertical border. Placed horizontally unfolds another flowering creeper, each of its involutions set with gazelle, dancing peacock displaying overarching plumage and wild pheasant. The border was guarded at the top with festoons (*jhālara*) of floral and polylobed escutcheons emerging out of leafy scallops. Both, the vertical and horizontal meanders end up at the corner, culminating in a rococo cartouche with a part of the flowering sprig pervading in, alight with a peacock. Stemming out diagonally from the cartouche is an over-sized flowering sprig that forms the baseline for the multi-cusped corner motif or *koniā* imagined as a pleasure grove infested with pairs of graceful parakeets, cuckoos and egrets. Conceived as per the norm of pointed repeat, the unit has a certain airy configuration, reminiscent of a corner design (Pl. 18.6) for wood-work or metal-craft included in the scrap book of the Avadh painter Mummoo Jan (c. 1830-1910). The *koniā* ends into a palmette finial serving as the *taj*. Above the coat of arms, possibly belonging to Rewa or Gwalior, the artisan inscribed sparse *nāgarī* letters of which a fraction reads "Darbhanga". The parts of the *likhāi* delineated in translucent golden yellow outlined with black were meant to be translated into golden *zarī* work employing the technique of *zeengārī* or *vaslī kā kāma* and highlighting the constituent details with sequins, pearls and semi-precious stones. Polychrome details of the *likhāi* were the pertinent clues for the laid work with matching silken yarn.

Once the finished *jhūla* was placed on elephant's back, the proud owner seated in the *howdāh* sniffing the heady fragrance of a tropical bloom gazed at the far pavilions while



Pl. 18.4: Akbar Shah II with Prince Mirza Salim on an elephant, Delhi, 1827, watercolour on paper, 18 × 12 cms., acc. no. IS 59-1964, V & A Museum, London



Pl. 18.5: Elephant with a 'howdah', Banaras, c. 1870, gouache on mica, 13 × 18 cms., acc. no. IS 20-1956 (32), V & A Museum, London



Pl. 18.6: A corner design, Avadh, c. 1870, opaque watercolour on paper, Mammoo Jan's Album, acc. no. 8344, Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi

accompanying retainers on foot enjoyed the bejewelled bowers at their disposal resonant with the melody of the cuckoos.

Footnotes

1. K. Datta, *Survey of India's Social Life and Economic Condition in the Eighteenth Century*, Calcutta, 1961, p. 86.
2. Sunnī artisans of local origin, belonging to Sayyad and Sheikh as well of Pathan sub-castes, received training from Shia master embroiderers.
3. Ed. William Foster, *Early Travels in India 1583-1619*, New Delhi, 1985, p. 105.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 327
5. *Ibid.*, p. 306
6. Asok Kumar Das, "The Elephant in Mughal Painting", *Marg*, Vol.50, no. 3, March 1999, p. 37.
7. P. Pal et.al, *Romance of the Taj Mahal*, Los Angeles, 1989, Cat. no. 189, p. 177.
8. M, Archer, *Company Paintings-Indian Paintings of the British Period*, London, 1992, Cat. no. 144, p. 163.
9. *Ibid.*, Cat, As 213 (32), pp. 206-07
10. A. Chakraverty, "The Fauna Imagery in the Brocaded Textiles of Banaras", *Kalā : Journal of Indian Art History*, Vol. V, 1998-99, pp. 159-164, Pls. 68-83; A. Chakraverty, *Ali Hasan alias Kalloo Hafiz - the Master Naqshaband of Banaras Brocades*, New Delhi, 2002, p. 35, Pls. 19, 27, 29, 30.
11. These burgeoning meanders are referred to by the Banaras artisans as *luḍhakañṭī bela*, each of their curled up units moving up and tumbling down in a sequence of rhythmic alteration.