

***Raṅg-bhurri* and *Cirāi kā Kām* at Bhāskar Talāo or Bhāskarā**

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My initial visit to Bhāskar Talāo in 1989 with Prof. Klaus Rotzer and a second trip in March 2000 made me witness the slow death of a monument resulting from the ignorance and sheer apathy of the residents in the neighbourhood towards the artistic tradition and antiquity. Prof. Rotzer devoted several decades in preparing exhaustive photographic documentation of the Banaras architecture, specifically of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, as also in making authentic ground plans and elevation drawings for a comprehensive contextual study of those monuments. However, he did everything single-handedly and his published articles are the only authentic analytical interpretation of the subject. Apart from Bhāskar Talāo he introduced me to several other crucial examples of architecture in Banaras, Gangapur and Mirzapur, each one of them deserving indepth study. Numerous other lesser known monuments of the city, sharing the same fate with Bhāskar Talāo, are withering steadily till they sink in oblivion for good.

Situated on the south-western fringes of Banaras on the way to Rohania, Bhāskarā (Fig. 20.1) is a sacred architectural complex consisting of a Śiva temple, a *dharmasālā* and a reservoir (*tālāb*, *talāo*, *bāoli*). It was commissioned in 1899 C.E. by Matadinji Shukla of Narwal (Kanpur) for dedication to his *guru*, the great mystic, Swami Bhāskarānanda Saraswatī who passed away in the same year. Dedicatory inscriptions in Sanskrit and Hindi (Fig. 20.2) carved in sandstone panels were fixed on to the exterior of the temple.¹ Two voluptuous winged *parīs* standing on ornate pedestals with inverted lotus finials hold the panels. They were painted in the *raṅg-bhurri* technique whereas the pedestals (Fig. 20.3) were done in sgraffito or *cirāi kā kām* as it has been popularized locally. The eastern and southern facades of the reservoir and the succeeding landings leading towards the central cavity have sixteen octagonal platforms (Fig. 20.4). Each one of the facets of the platforms measure 71.2 cm at the uppermost level of the moulding and were copiously decorated with sgraffito on all the sides. Miniature models for bathing pool (Fig. 20.5) as also 19th century monochrome litho-printed illustrations (Fig. 20.6) from Banaras present similar layouts. Much in vogue throughout the 18th as well as 19th century, the Bhāskarā, examples of *raṅg-*



Fig.20.1: Bhāskarā, a general view of the reservoir and shrine.



Fig.20.2: Winged parī holding the inscription slab.

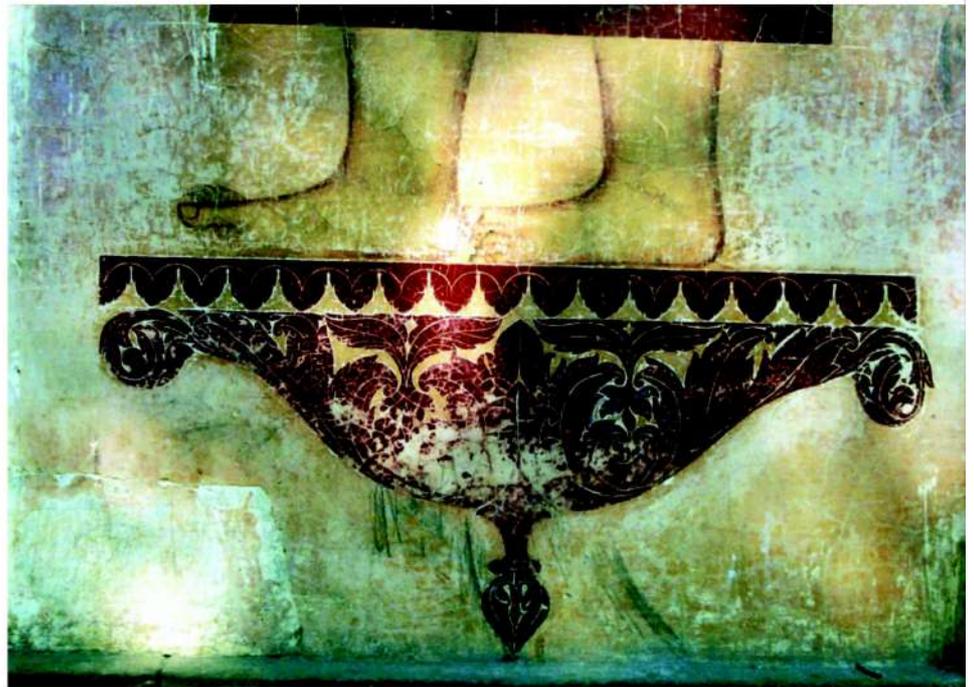


Fig.20.3: Pedestal for the standing parī, sgraffito on mortar and quicklime Base.



Fig.20.4 : Octagonal platforms on the eastern facade of the reservoir



Fig.20.5 : Model for bathing pool, 18/19th century, Banaras, buff sandstone, 60.5x63x20 cms, present whereabouts not known, Pub. Sotheby's Auction Catalogue, Oct 1991, London, Lot. 754, pp.206-207.



Fig.20.7 : Quatrefoils and palmettes, sgraffito, 1899 C.E.



Fig.20.6: View of a tank in a garden setting, Banaras, Rāmacarita Mānasa ms., c.1860 CE, monochrome litho print on Sanganer paper, Private Collection.

bhurri and *chirai kā kām* are probably the last specimens of a dynamic mode of wall decoration in Banaras. Migrant Muslim artisans, hailing originally from Delhi-Agra, Datia-Orcha or Jaipur, settled down in the city towards late 17th and 18th centuries in stages specializing in both the interrelated genres. They trained a good number of local masons and also *naqqāsa* or multi-media pattern drawers having expertise in Indo-Persian non-figurative ornamental repertoire as also decorative calligraphy.

A contemporary account, though cryptic, will serve as a base reference towards the understanding of *rañg-bhurri* and *chirai kā kām* vis-a-vis painted architectural embellishments of Banaras. During his week-long stay in September 1824, Right Rev. Reginald Heber, the Lord Bishop of Calcutta, did not fail noticing the prevalent mode of painted wall-decoration of Banaras. "The material of the buildings is a very good stone from Chunar," he noted in his journal, "but the Hindoos here seem fond of painting them a deep red colour, and indeed of covering the more conspicuous parts of their houses with paintings in colours of flower-pots, men, women, bulls, elephants, gods and goddesses in all their many-handed and many-weaponed varieties".² The distinctive style of wall painting with 'a deep red colour', invariably on the exterior and selectively in the interiors of the edifices, were executed on finely prepared ground (*astarkārī*: plastering) of *cūnā-barī*, a mixture of mortar and quicklime.³ The purplish red ochre pigment, locally called *hiraunjī* (Persian: *hormuzī*), was imported from Hormuz, an island in the Persian Gulf. *Rañg-bhurri* was a monochromatic version of Jaipur *arāyes* or *ālā-gilā* though from 18th century onwards *harā-dhāba* or *harā-bhātā* (terra verde), imported ultramarine and yellow ochre (*zard gel*, used in Persia for plastering the wall) were included to enhance the effect. Figural, zoomorphic and floral imagery were the most common motifs and the skilled workmanship was the essential prerequisite as it was virtually impossible to go in for any major alteration or graft in any outstanding correction once a piece is finished. Normally, the paint was applied with brush and contours were softened with cotton-pads (*pocārā*). Some of the finest examples in Banaras and Mirzapur represent a figural mode that was suitably expanded in unison with an impressive vocabulary of purely ornamental motifs.⁴ Winged *parīs* at Bhāskarā with cylindrical limbs, modelled emphatically and less subtle in terms of detailing, have an unmistakably Avadh countenance.

Cirai kā kām or sgraffito work⁵ on the octagonal platforms and ornate pedestals for the *parīs* belong, both technically and aesthetically, to a different category displaying an entire range of Indo-Persian designs.⁶ The workmanship was imbued with a sureness of purpose and each one of the panels has a singular charm. The master artist engaged at Bhāskar Talāo seems to have had a longing to record whatever was passed on to him by his predecessors and virtually created a dictionary of motifs used most frequently in

Cirāi kā kām. Designs were worked out on deep red surface, of approximately 2 or 3 mm thickness, releasing the underlayer of *cūnā-barī* to act as the background and also to peep through the scratched-out finer details. One particular platform has a row of quatrefoils running all along the base, immediately below a concave zone of densely-set, vertically-rising palmettes (Fig. 20.7). One would notice an equally simplistic rendition of a horizontally extending leafy twig of *ficus Indica* (*pīpal*) covering the sides of another platform (Fig. 20.8). *Pīpal* leaves were shaped within crisply defined contours, enlivened with engraved veins branching symmetrically. Palmettes in clusters appear on many of the concave mouldings (Fig. 20.9), their serrated flourishes charged with a characteristic late-Mughal lyricism. Equally splendid are the matching teritobate and ovaloid cartouches (Fig. 20.10 & 11) set with full-blown stylized blossoms in the centrally-placed circles rotating anticlockwise. Full-bodied leafy abstractions were repeated to fill up both the side-units within the cartouches. As stated before local *naqqāśa* worked in the company of the migrant master artists and they did not only imitate and absorb the fineries of the craft and the associated ornamental repertoire but also innovated certain decorative images in tune with the local artistic milieu of Banaras. A floral meander with palmette escutcheons (Fig. 20.12) is one such motif with a distinction. The meander (*bela*) has a rhythmic flow integrating a dynamic interlacing of leafy shapes and a plethora of double-reflexed volutes clung to the principal stalk. Highly stylized flowers studded in each convolution were based on chrysanthemum (*guldāodī*). However, similar undulating meanders reappear in innumerable contemporary metalware and textile. A solitary fish composed in an ovaloid cartouche (Fig. 20.13) display a bold and simplistic configuration quite unlike the other Indo-Persian motifs. Being an auspicious symbol, carved and painted fish invariably adorned the main entrance of a house and this particular representation is based on such popular prototypes. In the last decade of a century that proved decisive in altering the artist-patron nexus in Banaras the sgraffito artists employed at Bhāskar Talāo seem to have made an incessant effort to record their design vocabulary with the hope that they might succeed in getting a few more commissions to keep the art alive.

References and Notes

1. The Hindi version is as follows: जिला कानपुर मौजे नरवल के निवासी श्री जगन्नाथशुक्लाजी के पुत्र श्रीमातादीनजी ने निज गुरु श्रीभास्करानन्दसरस्वतीजी के प्रसन्नार्थ धर्मशाला, कूप, बागीचा सहित यह भास्कर सागर नामक तालाब श्रीरामचरण तिवारीजी के प्रबंध से संवत् 1956 में बनाया है।
2. Reginald Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India from Calcutta to Bombay*, 1824-25, Vol.I, London, 1829, p.372.
3. Ahsan Jan Qaisar, *Building Construction in Mughal India*, 1988, Delhi, pp.19-20.
4. Major examples at Banaras and Mirzapur could be noticed, if at all they are still in situ, on the



Fig.20.8: Pīpal leaves, sgraffito, c.1899 C.E.



Fig.20.10: Leafy flourishes in trilobate cartouche, sgraffito, c.1899 C.E.



Fig.20.12: Floral meander topped with rows of palmettes, sgraffito, c.1899 C.E.

Fig.20.13: Fish in an ovaloid cartouche sgraffito, c.1899 C.E. →



Fig.20.9 : Palmettes, sgraffito, c.1899 C.E.



Fig.20.11: Leafy flourishes in ovaloid cartouche, sgraffito, c.1899 C.E.



cusped arch at the main entrance of Patani Mal's garden; Alamgiri mosque; on the exteriors of the residential quarter attached to Amethī Śiva temple opposite Apārnatha Maṭh (Dhundhirāj Galī) and a private residence at Tedhī Neem; Ram Mandir (1857) at Śital Dās kā Akhādā; a huge panel enhanced with colour on the facade of Gosāin Rāgho Giri's Śivālā, Mirzapur.

5. Term Graffito or Sgraffito comes from Italian verb *graffiare* = scratch. It is applied to denote the technique of producing a design by scratching through a layer of paint or other material to reveal a ground of a different colour in ceramics, mural decoration and even painting. Popular in Italy and other parts of Europe during Middle Ages and Renaissance, the technique was introduced in India originally by the Portuguese and alike *parchin kāri* (Italian form of stone intarsia known as *commesso di pietre dure*) was developed in Mughal North India with a heightened interest towards representing Indo-Persian designs characterized by a linear interplay of segments. (G.V. Mitterwalner, "The Hindu Past - Sculpture and Architecture", *Mārg*, Vo1.XXXV, No.3, pp.38-40)
6. Surviving 18th century examples in Banaras may be noticed at the Tomb of Lāl Khān, Rajghat; Tripuliā Gate, Ramnagar (1770, collapsed in 2010); on the ceiling of the turrets at the Rāmbāgh reservoir, Ramnagar; on the ceiling of the turrets at Bhaironath, Pancakroshi; on the ceiling of the turrets and *naubatkhānā* at Rānī Bhavānī's garden, Kāli Bāgh; on the ceiling of Jagat Singh's Śivālā; Jagatganj; on the ceiling of Chet Singh's Śivālā, Śivālā; on the exterior wall of the Nagpur State Garden, Assi and several other secular edifices situated in the older part of the city.