

**Openings in the Ethereal Expanse :
Two Fragments of a Chatbandī from Petaboli (alias Nizampatam,
Coromandel Coast), Andhra Pradesh**

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The two small yet notably enchanting fragments¹ (Figs.1 & 2) of resist and dye-painted as also stamped cotton in the Jñāna-Pravāha Collection belong



Fig.1: *Apsarās* and *vidyādharas*, fragment of a *chatbandī*, Coromandel Coast, c.1828, *kalamkāri*, Jñāna-Pravāha Collection, Acc.no.2012.3



Fig.2: *Apsarās* and *vidyādhars*, fragment of a *chatbandī*, Coromandel Coast, c.1828, *kalamkāri*, Jñāna-Pravāha Collection, Acc.no.2012.4

to a *chatbandī*² that in its entirety must have been an enormous textile, as may be ascertained from four large segments³ published so far of a single parent piece. This *chatbandī* and few *pichavais* (temple hangings)⁴ have a stylistic similarity and, according to the information from local sources, were put on display in accordance to the norms (*paddhati*) or requirements of the 'wonderfully aesthetic rituals' during particular community festivities (*utsava*) in a Vallabha *Sampradāya* shrine of Banaras till 1970s, before the entire lot got dispersed. There is, however, another relatable contemporary specimen, again a canopy⁵ from the temple repository (*bhaṇḍāra*) of a certain Vallabha *Sampradāya* shrine of Gujarat or Burhanpur or may be that of Hyderabad. Presently, this red-ground canopy of a comparatively smaller dimension is in the Kokyo Hatanaka Collection, Japan. An affinity in terms of thematic component and figural depiction is apparent among these pieces as both the canopies were visualized as scenes of 'celestial celebration', conjured up with 'winged

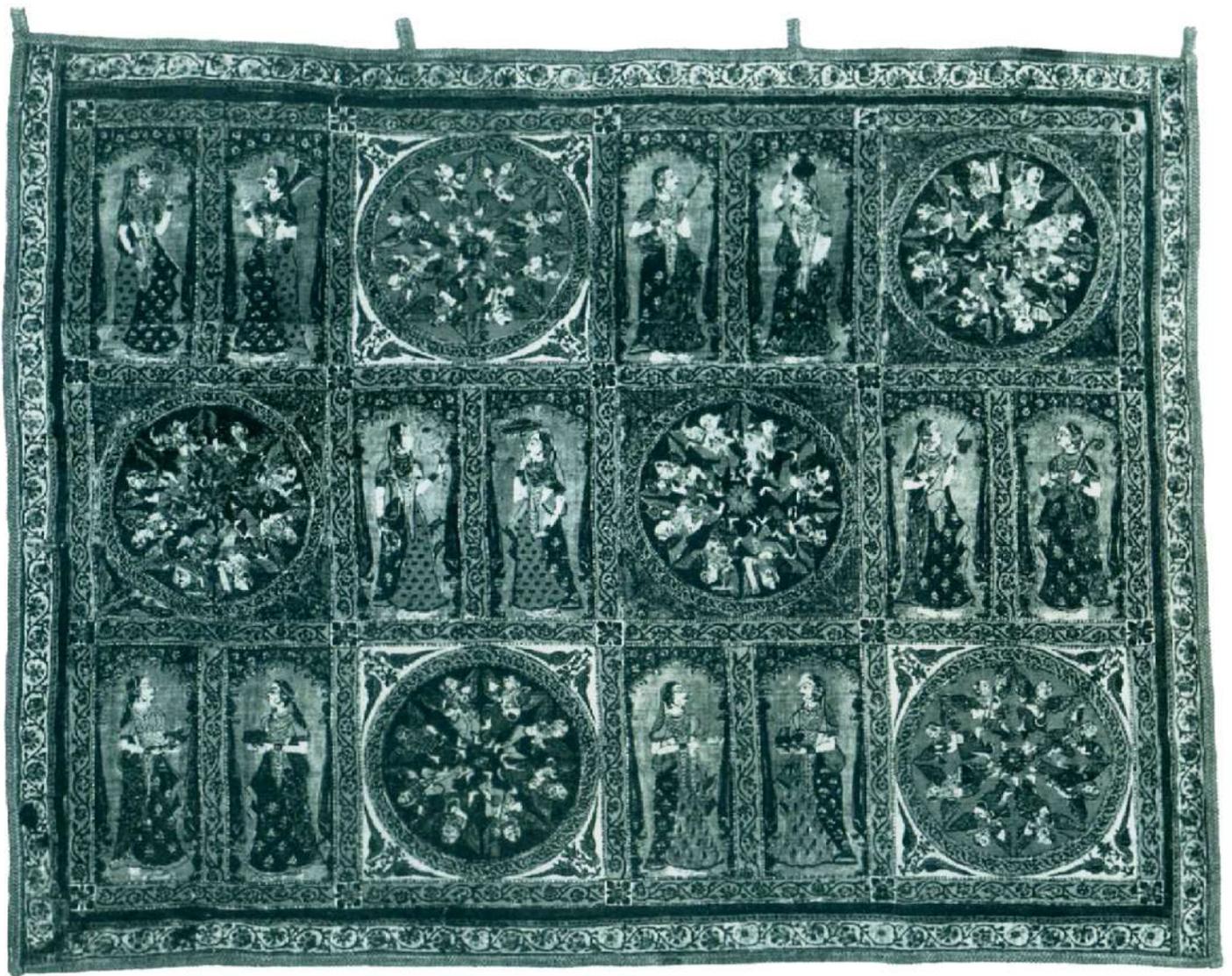


Fig.3: *Pichavai*, Coromandel Coast, c. 1800, painted & printed cotton, from Sotheby's Auction Cat., 1992

musicians and dancers, worked in a welter of fine details', spilling over the entire surface.⁶ Interestingly, there is one *pichavai* (Fig.3) belonging to yet another group of ceremonial drapes of the same sectarian inspiration that needs to be mentioned at this point.⁷ The chequerboard-like division of the horizontally-expanding centrefield of the hanging was filled alternately with pairs of reverential *gopīs* standing *la front* under cusped arches and *maṇḍalas* of celestial performers. Each *maṇḍala* has eight winged nymphs, facing each other they form four distinct groups. In the two canopies cited above, as also in this *pichavai*, celestial performers arranged in *maṇḍalas* or in multi-lobed medallions continue as a recurrent motif, leading to an attribution, seemingly plausible, to the same circle of *kalamkārī* masters active around the Masulipatanam region, perhaps at Petaboli, *alias* Nizampatam, a leading production centre for fine painted cotton on the Coromandel Coast. These sacred textiles, displaying

elaborate stages of dye-resist processing, are datable between CE 1800 and 1830.

Referring back to the principal *kalamkārī chatbandī* under consideration, one would love to know the context of its very presence in Banaras as well as the factors of patronage instrumental to a certain degree behind such an exclusively commissioned textile ensemble. With the arrival in 1828 of the *Nidhi Svarūpa* Mukundarayaji, the miniature metal image of infant Kṛṣṇa, from Nathadwara, Jivanji's Haveli or Gopal Lalji Mandir (estd. CE 1772) at Chaukhambha became the seat of *Puṣṭimārga* Vaiṣṇavism in the city of Śiva. It was undoubtedly 'the effort and energy' of the charismatic Goswami Giridharji Maharaj (CE 1719-1840), tracing his genealogy to Yadunathji, the youngest son of Goswami Vitthalnathji, that '*Puṣṭimārga* once again gained prestige in the area'.⁸ The shrine of Mukundarayaji fostered 'a sense of community' amongst the well-heeled as also influential Gujarati and Agrawala trader-bankers settled in the neighbourhood. The affluence of these devotees was one of the reasons behind the shifting of the *Ṣaṣṭha Pīṭha* or the sixth seat of Vallabha *sampradāya* in Banaras from Surat, 'which has suffered a decline to merchant fortunes in the eighteenth century'.⁹ Not only a 'theologian of standing', Giridharji was an aesthete at the same time with a thorough understanding of the *sevā-paddhati*, elaborate rituals of serving and adorning, the cardinal element of the Vallabha sect. His efforts towards the re-establishment of the *Puṣṭimārga* involved the expansion of his activities to the eastern region and even to the Deccan. During his sojourn to Hyderabad in c.1823, Raja Bhagawan Das Shah, a high official at the court of Nizam Sikandar Jah, Asaf Jah III (r. CE 1803-1829), took formal initiation into *Puṣṭimārga* from Goswami Giridharji. Alike several other affluent Gujarati banker-jewellers having unswerving faith in the Vallabha sect, Shah also had his private shrine at his residence in Sultanbazar locality at Hyderabad and here he continued the *bhoga*, *rāga* and *śṛṅgāra* in conformity with the instruction for the *aṣṭa-yāma sevā* given by Giridharji. The exquisitely designed *chatbandī* was a part of the complete set of ceremonial textiles,¹⁰ a sumptuous offering of Shah to his great Goswami for display in the newly-constructed Mukundarayaji Mandir at Banaras.

These *kalamkārīs* from Banaras and several related pieces have been once attributed to Burhanpur¹¹ but a more convincing provenance has now been suggested, linking the 'exceptionally fine' drawing of the figures, their 'charm and spontaneity' to the 'infinitely versatile *kalamkārī* painters of south-east

India'.¹² The palette and the field-patterning of the awning (Fig.4) resemble to a certain degree 'the painted ceiling of some western Indian (especially Gujarati) temples', both Hindu and Jaina, and 'it is possible that they were made as portable versions of such shrines'.¹³ In the *Brajabhāṣā* devotional poetry of the



Fig.4: *Chatbandī*, c. 1828, Coromandel Coast, Tapi Collection, from R. Barnes et.al., *Trade Temple & Court*, 2002

Puṣṭimārga Vaiṣṇavism one would find numerous descriptions of the ethereal expanse, *vyoma maṇḍala*, signifying a realm of the divine beings and heavenly performers, *apsarās*, *kinnaras* and *vidyādhara*s, who while witnessing the many *līlās* of Kṛṣṇa jubilate with music and dance, as also cause the rain of blossoms. Interestingly, the ceilings of the medieval Hindu and Jaina shrines were also embellished with carvings of celestial beings representing the heaven. An intricately-carved and iconographically-unique *antarikṣa* or *vyoma-paṭṭa* (c. 10-11th century) from central India, corresponds to the classical mythic imagery of *vyomarūpa*, populated with divine beings.¹⁴ Notable is the continuity of such archetypes in the *maṇḍalas* painted on the ceilings of Jaina *derāsara* of the Maratha period.¹⁵ However, these 18th-19th century embellishments are marked by notable stylistic changes conditioning figural depiction and subsidiary ornamentation. The winged nymphs in *Chughtai* caps, hovering around an eight-petalled floral centre-piece (Fig.5) from the painted ceiling of a 19th century Jaina *derāsara*¹⁶ can be compared with the depiction of angels in a manuscript illustration¹⁷ from Hyderabad, datable to c. 1700, by a some migrant

Golconda painter. A happy blending of Islamic decorative nuances with the traditional myth-inspired visualization can be again noticed in the Banaras *chatbandī*, exploding with 'the rhythm and energy' of Deccani arabesque.

Always open to newer artistic influences and innovative idioms,¹⁸ Goswamis of Nathadwara were never hesitant in including such a charming visual imagery that obviously stood for celestial zone for a temporary ceiling embellishment of the shrine. Goswami Giridharji seems to have had conceptualized a special *śṛṅgāra* on the same line that prompted him to commission this exclusive *kalamkāri*

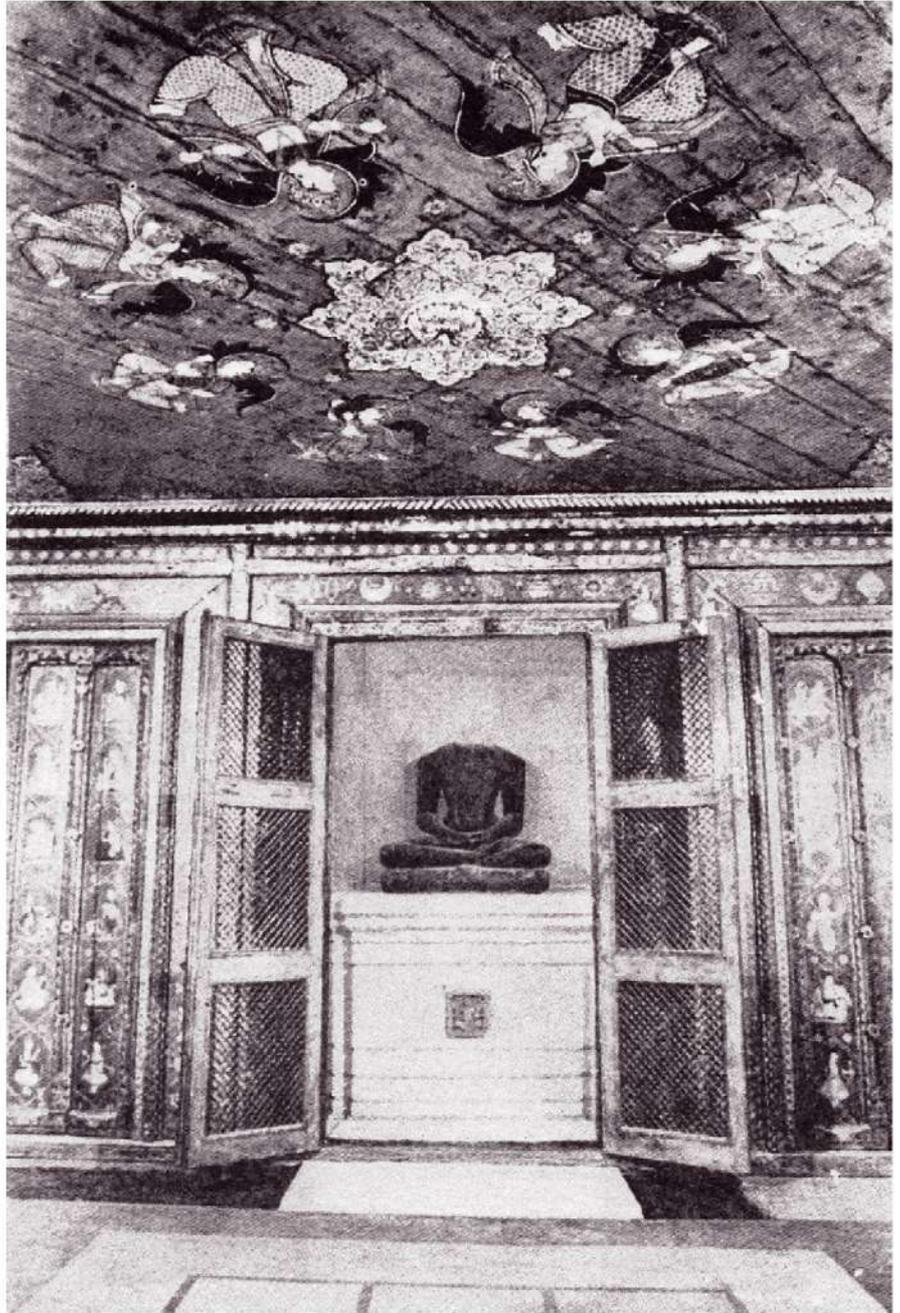


Fig.5: Winged nymphs around a floral centre-piece, painted ceiling of a Jaina *derāsara*, 19th century, Gujarat, from *Calico Museum of Textiles and Sarabhai Foundation Collections : Notes on the Jaina Galleries*, 1999

chatbandī. In every likelihood, Bhagawan Das was entrusted with the task to get manufactured a complete set of ceremonial drapes by engaging a master *kalamkāri* painter of the Masulipatam region. Incidentally, considering the massive dimension of the *chatbandī* the dye and resist-painted technique was found more suitable compared to the technique of pigment painting, so much in popular practice at Nathadwara. It was not easy for Shah to get skilled *kalamkāri* artisans of Masulipatam school having expertise in the figural genre. Finally, it seems, he succeeded in contacting one such master painter-dyer still active in his guild at Petaboli, *alias* Nizampatam, about forty miles south-west of Masulipatam, the

former commercial capital of Golconda kingdom. "Since Petaboli lay within the Muslim-ruled state of Golconda", as John Irwin opined, "style and subject-matter inevitably reflected Persianized tastes of the ruling-class who were the main patrons".¹⁹ Elaborating upon the heterogenous character of the Coromandel school of cotton-painting he further stated: "Since the tastes and fashions of their Persian, Indo-Persian and European patrons were foreign to their own local tradition, they depended for their subject-matter mainly on musters provided by the commissioning merchants. These musters were seldom, if ever, complete designs but consisted usually of incidental and unrelated figure-groups which the cotton-painter incorporated as subordinate elements in designs of his own decorative conception. Thus, no matter how hybrid or eclectic were individual elements in a design, they were transcended by a decorative style, which was truly their own, and which gave final stamp of individuality, charm and distinction...".²⁰ Irwin's critical analysis of the early group of cotton-paintings painted cottons from Coromandel coast give us the right perspective to evaluate the syncretic character of the Banaras *chatbandī*. There is a strong possibility that the design for the awning must have been master-minded by a mural painter from Hyderabad or Golconda as per Shah's guidelines. A Baroque flavour in the accentuated openings in the air and the effect of swarming life that we notice in the *chatbandī* might have been one among many Italianate influences having a remote link to the presence of European mural painters in the 16th century Deccan.²¹ Surprisingly, this survived even up to such a late period as a stock motif in the repertoire of the hereditary muralist who, while making the muster for the *chatbandī*, found the device of dividing the length of the fabric with cusped stellar shape medallions of varying magnitude perfectly suitable to interpret the heavenly zone, animated with *maṇḍalas* of celestial performers.

The field patterning of the *chatbandī* with numerous unreal openings in the shape of multi-lobed medallions of various dimensions into the heavenly quarter may, on the other hand, have been based to some degree on the essential grammar of *bahurandhraka jāla* (multi-orificed tracery).²² As a result, the solid space was reduced into a vibrant airy distance discernible through a trellised grid, frozen yet fluid. The complex arrangement of eight-lobed and six-lobed medallions as radiating from several large sixteen-lobed medallions (Fig.4) is a designer's improvisation upon the stepped-square pattern used in

pha kiao (large decorative hangings, lit. pillar cloth) manufactured during 18th and early 19th century at Coromandel coast for export to Thailand.²³ At the centre of the eight-lobed red medallions appear single figures of winged *apsarās* bedecked with an assortment of beaded jewellery (Fig.1) in a characteristic dance posture. They wear costume, both uncut and tailored, enhanced with vertical stripes and lattices stamped with floral motifs and meanders. Each *apsarā* was encircled by four swarming *vidyādharas* and four *apsarās* but in several medallions one or two parrots, their heads gracefully attenuated, replace heavenly music-makers. Besides dancing, *apsarās* partake in a variety of activities namely, blowing trumpets, playing *vīṇā* and cymbals as also carrying garlands and trays of *moḍak*. *Vidyādharas* were depicted all along with frontal face, wearing *kirīṭa mukuṭa* and their foreheads adorned with red *tilaka* atypical of Vallabha *sampradāya*. Their shoulder mantles and sashes flutter in the background, emphasizing their airborne presence. Rejoicing along with congregating *apsarās*, they play kettle-drums (*duṇḍubhi*), *mṛdaṅga* or *pakhāvaja*, carry *morchala*, *cañvara* (fly-whisk) and *patākā* (flags). Compared to the classic seventeenth-century painted cottons of Golconda school, attributed categorically to Petaboli, the figural drawing of the *chatbandī* lacks precision and linear terseness. The detailing of the limbs is cryptic and casual. However, an exceptionally complicated design structure with perfectly synchronized placement of an entire array of medallions (Fig.4) necessitated use of stencils and pounce. Designs pounced on the fabric were developed with *kalam* (pen) loaded with *kasim* and resist was applied with brush of varying thickness.

On the cusped contours of the medallions (Fig.6) were stamped leafy meanders in black and red blossoms, their fern-like serrated petals resembling that of cornflower. The scrolling meanders flow uninterrupted as each hand-engraved block for the blossoms and leafy flourish was adjusted meticulously within the spatial constraints of the narrow attenuated border. Similar floral blocks were used in the late 18th and 19th century on the yardage printed for export to Iran by Indian as well as Iranian craftsmen stationed at Masulipatam.²⁴ One may at the same time appreciate the skirt of the *apsarā* (Fig.6) decorated with miniscule flower-heads in polychrome and undulating vines set in thin vertical bands. Outlines were first printed in black or red and then the dyes and resist were applied into each detail. A wide range of dyes, each treated separately, created a mosaic of tonalities. Indigo was painted at the last stage on

the white base for the sky blue as well as on the deep chrome for a saturated *terreverte* to serve as the ultimate background for the red medallions.

The Vaiṣṇava devotees of Banaras while setting their gaze upward towards the details of the *chatbandī* stretched across the ceiling of the Gopal Lalji temple during a special ceremony, had the most rewarding experience of the ethereal expanse, and, simultaneously an entry into a mesmerizing domain of wonder and fantasy, promising extra-ordinary aesthetic delight.



Fig.6: Dancing *apsarā*, detail, Fig.1

References

1. *Fragment : A* , Fig.1, pattern-dyed cotton (plain weave), thread count 30/30, twist 2/2/, drawn, painted and stamped with dyes, mordants and resist, 43.5 x 48 cms. Jñāna-Pravāha Coll., Varanasi, Acc. No. 2012.3, Unpublished.
Fragment : B , Fig.2, pattern-dyed cotton (plain weave), thread count 30/30, twist 2/2, drawn, painted and stamped with dyes, mordants and resist, 44 x 55 cms. Jñāna-Pravāha Coll., Varanasi, Acc.No. 2012.4, Unpublished.

2. A canopy or awning, also referred to as *chatgiri*, utilized for masking the ceiling of a chamber, pavilion, shrine or even that of a tent enclosure as well as baldaquin.
3. Mattible Gittinger, *Master Dyers to the World*, Washington, 1982, fig.76, p.87, the piece has a large central medallion; J. Guy and D. Swallow, *Arts of India*, London, 1990, Plate 110, p.129, the piece has borders on three sides and quarter-medallions as corner motifs; S. Yoshioka, *Sarasa, Printed and Painted Textiles*, Kyoto Shoin, 1993, p.10; R. Barnes, S. Cohen and Rosemary Crill, *Trade, Temple and Court*, Mumbai, 2002, Cat.no.93, pp.224-25, the piece also has a large central medallion.
4. Gittinger, *ibid.*, fig.68, p.77 & fig.69, p.78; Barnes et. al., *ibid.*, Cat. Nos.81, 82 & 83; K. Krishna and K. Talwar, in *Adoration of Krishna*, Mumbai, 2007, Cat. Nos.38, 39a, 39b & 40; B.N. Goswamy & K. Goswamy, *Wondrous Image*, Ahmedabad, 2014, Cat.no.15, pp.78-79.
5. Kokyo Hatanaka (ed.), *Textile Arts of India*, Kyoto, 1993, Plate 23, pp.38-39; cf. Barnes, *op.cit.*, for the interpretation of the field pattern.
6. Gittinger, *op.cit.*, p.78.
7. *Sotheby's Auction Catalogue: Islamic and Indian Art, Oriental Manuscripts and Miniatures*, 29th & 30th April, 1992, London, Lot. 507, p.219.
8. Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*, Delhi, 1997, pp.122-23.
9. *Ibid.*, p.123.
10. R. Skelton, *Rajasthani Temple Hangings of the Krishna Cult*. New York, 1973, p.25.
11. Gittinger, *op.cit.*, p.87; Guy & Swallow, *op.cit.*, p.128.
12. Barnes et. al., *op.cit.*
13. *Ibid.*, Guy & Swallow, *op.cit.*
14. N.P. Joshi, *Śilpa-Sahasradala*, Varanasi, 2012, pp.470, 496-498.
15. Anonymous, *Calico Museum of Textiles and Sarabhai Foundation Collections : Jaina Textiles, Manuscripts, Sculpture, Ceremonial Objects and Woodwork*, Ahmedabad, 1999, pp.5-6.
16. *Ibid.*, p.5.
17. Mark Zebrowski, *Deccani Painting*, London, 1983, fig.195.
18. Goswamy, *op.cit.*, pp.38-39.
19. John Irwin & Margaret Hall, *Indian Painted and Printed Fabrics*, Ahmedabad, 1971, p.14.
20. *Ibid.*, p.16.
21. *Ibid.*
22. M.A. Dhaky, *The Indian Temple Traceries*, New Delhi, 2005, pp.68-69, pls.191-92.
23. John Guy, *Woven Cargoes*, London, 1998, Plate 183.
24. Jennifer Wearden and Patricia L Baker, *Iranian Textiles*, London, 2010, pp.65-66, figs.48-50, Pls.94, 96; Hatanaka, *op.cit.*, Plate 6, p.22.