

Painted Ceilings of Rājā Patani Mall's Bārādarī

—
Anjan Chakraverty

The sad demise of Rai Ananda Krishna on 13th December 2014 was virtually the end of an era of Banaras-centric art historical studies and connoisseurship. Numerous sessions that I was fortunate to have spent with him were hugely enriching and, in particular, his narratives of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Banaras were unforgettable chronicles, grand openings to peep into a complex phase of artistic achievements and patronage. This story of the murals of Rājā Patani Mall's bārādarī is entirely based on one of his many discourses. I dedicate this note to one of the great scholars of our times and an eminent interpreter of Indian art and cultural history.

Emergence of Banaras as the commercial capital of north India and the growth of its urbanized character with a distinct culture was a historic consequence of the decline of Murshidabad and the collapse of the banking-trading network of Jagat Seths in Bengal in 1757.¹ One of the factors sustaining the economic growth of this important pilgrimage city was certainly the immigrant merchant capital. After a gap of almost five decades, Rājā Patani Mall's (c.1770-1840) arrival in Banaras was a historic event. He was granted by the Mughal Emperor Akbar Shah II (c.1806-1837) a *mansab* of five thousand and western territories of Bihar. A Vallabhaite *Vaiṣṇava*, he settled down at the Chowkhamba area, establishing his *koṭhī* adjacent to the Raṅgīldāsa Phāṭaka. In the neighbourhood there were several influential bankers and traders in *kinikhāb* (brocades) and *jawāharāt* (precious jewels). Prominent among them were Nagarseth Shah Gvaldasa, Rangildasa and Chabildasa. They immigrated from Disa (Gujarat) and were instrumental in the formation of the seat of *Puṣṭimārga* Vaiṣṇavism at the Chowkhamba area itself that in its turn fostered 'a sense of community' among the affluent devotees, both Gujarati and Agarwal.

Taking up his residence at Banaras in c.1800, Rājā Patani Mall was instrumental in making certain diplomatic treatise for East India Company and Nawāb of Avadh.² Seeking the help of James Prinsep, a remarkably versatile personality, he embarked upon the construction of a permanent bridge over river Karmanāśā replacing the one made of ropes by Nana Fadnavis. It was formally opened to the public in 1831. "He was a man of short and fragile stature yet full of foresight and business acumen," thus described Rai Ananda Krishna, his great grandson. A great connoisseur of music and art, Patani Mall had a handsome collection of jewels, precious objects of carved and

jem-encrusted jades, masterpieces of champlevé enamel and several eighteenth-century *muraqqās* containing an assortment of miniatures. A copy of *Sūrasāgara*³ with two hundred and one images and the *Bālakāṇḍa*⁴ of *Rāmacaritamānasa* with one hundred and fifty-five paintings are the two outstanding examples of illustrated manuscripts to have survived the fire that so badly devastated Patani Mall's library during the late nineteenth century. Fortunately enough, 'Shaikh Phul in his Hermitage'⁵ by Bishandas, one of the most gifted painters of Jahangir's atelier, did also survive the destruction. This Mughal masterpiece was mounted in one of Patani Mall's *muraqqās* and also bore the inscription of Jahangir. The other single sheet *syāh-kalam* depicting of 'Mir Rustam Ali's Holī Celebration',⁶ a crucial work to determine the nature of the transplanted late Mughal style at Banaras, was also a part of this grand princely collection.

The two Mughal gardens of Patani Mall, one at the Nāṭī-Imlī and the other at the Kuśasthali, were meant to serve as ideal settings for many luxurious pursuits that the landed aristocracy of the era would invariably indulge in. In particular, the Nāṭī-Imlī garden, known as *Choṭī Bāg*, was constructed in 1810 for holding the elaborate wedding ceremony of his daughter.⁷ The *Choṭī Bāg* garden complex included besides residential quarters, a

hammām, water-cascades and a *bārādarī* (a pavilion with broad openings) for holding *mehfil* (dance-music soiree). The *bārādarī* was a rather simplistic two-storeyed structure (Fig.1). Each storey had a central chamber encircled with a porch. Slender stone pillars supported the extended structure of the porch whereas the evenly dressed stone slabs forming the ceiling were laid on wooden beams. The plastering of the walls was done with quick lime



Fig.1 : Patani Mall's *bārādarī* at the *Choṭī Bāg*, Nāṭī-Imlī, Varanasi, 1810.

and mortar to achieve a mellow creamy white surface. The ceiling of the chamber and porch were primed with a mixture of lime and marble-dust to the thickness of an egg-shell. Painting was done using pigments tempered with gum arabic and a coat of *roghanī* (a mixture prepared by boiling linseed oil with resin) was applied to protect the embellishments. The practice of varnishing the murals done in *fresco secco* technique or tempera was made popular in Banaras towards the beginning of the nineteenth century by the migratory Rajasthani wall-decorators (*rañg-sāz*). Some of the surviving examples of *roghanī*-coated murals beautifying the interiors

of Hindu shrines and secular edifices may be located in Banaras, Chakia and Mirzapur.

Patani Mall's aesthetic sensibility combined the best of two traditions namely, the opulence and extravaganza of Avadh and the refinement and a certain classicism of Rajasthan. This remains manifest in the ceiling decorations of the twin chambers (Fig.3) and of the surrounding porch of the *bārādari* (Fig.2). The chambers at the ground floor and first floor have ceiling decorations with standardized layouts comprising central medallions or floral cartouches set within a frame of meanders. The workmanship is explicitly



Fig.2 : View of the porch (southern wing) from the inside, first floor Patani Mall's *bārādari*, 1810.



Fig.3 : Floral cartouche and creepers grown with blue roses, ceiling decoration of the chamber, the central panel, first floor, Patani Mall's *bārādari*, c.1810, opaque watercolour on lime and marble – dust priming, varnished, approximately 158 x 465 cm (entire panel).

that of Avadh lineage and there is every possibility that a master *rang-sāz* from Lucknow assisted by a group of local *naqqāśa* completed this undertaking. Floral cartouches and the creepers studded with half-open buds and blue roses in full bloom have a rococo charm (Fig.3) that enliven the interior of the chamber at the first floor.⁸ The palette is also reminiscent of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century *champlevé* enamels of Lucknow,⁹ an exclusive genre of luxury goods Patani Mall was so utterly fancied with. Emerald and indigo, cobalt blue and touches of subdued ochre against a massive expanse of white were possibly meant to replicate a *chatbandī* made out of a chintz yardage produced at some major cotton printing centre of north India other than Sanganer.

The all over patterning on the ceiling of the porch was conceived as a reflection of a pond overgrown with pink and blue lotuses (Fig.4). Executed by a *rañg-sāz* from Rajasthan, probably from Jaipur or Udaipur, the depiction is a superb combination of tradition and innovativeness. The scroll-work of spiralling stalks with lotus flowers and buds has a rhythmic vitality relatable to the oft-repeated swaying lotus creepers in the usual pigment-painted *Jala Vihāra pichavaāis* from Nathadvāra.¹⁰ Rajasthani wall painters were invited by the Rajput princes residing at Banaras as early c.1580 and the tradition continued unbroken even in the later centuries. *Pichavaāi* painters from Nathadvāra were visiting the Sixth Seat of *Puṣṭimārga*, Jivanji's *Haveli* or Gopal Mandir at Chaukhamba, for routine wall decoration and to paint oversize hangings for special ceremonies. The lotus-creeper grid at Patani Mall's *bārādari* has a remarkable dovetailing of large design repeats and a distinctive palette that would exemplify how the standardized ornamental framework of Nathadvāra *pichavaāis* was transformed into a pastoral poetry pulsating with enlivening details. All we need to notice is the skill and adaptability of the migrant painters in response to the exclusive requirement of the altered patronage in a new locale. Whereas many figural idioms for expanded narrative panels that we come across in the contemporary wall paintings of Baranas continued for decades together, the purely ornamental murals executed for Patani Mall hardly had any post-cursor.



Fig.4 : Lotus scroll-work, ceiling of the porch (southern wing), first floor, Patani Mall's *bārādari*, 1810, opaque watercolour on lime and approximately 279.4 x 475 cm (entire wing).

Endnotes

1. C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, Combridge, 1983, p.104.
2. Swami Medhasananda, *Varanasi at the Crossroads*, Kolkata, 2002, pp.814-15.
3. Rai Ananda Krishna, "An Illustrated Manuscript of Suradasa's Padas (Poems)", *Kalā : The Journal of Indian Art History Congress*, ed. M. N. P. Tiwari and K. Giri, Volume : V, 1998-99, pp.11-14.
4. G. Parimoo Krishnan, Introduction, *Ramayana A living Tradition*, Singapore, 1997, pp.24-25.
5. S. C. Welch, *India : Art and Culture 1300-1900*, New York, 1985, pp.212-13.
6. Richard Lannoy, *Benares Seen from Within*, England, 1999, p.580.

7. The grand marriage celebration of Patani Mall's daughter, however, was the most happening event for the fun-loving Banārasīs to spin an entire web of unreal tales and fabricate pungent gossips around. A contemporary song satirizing the event is as follows :

पटनीमल ने ब्याह रचाया, लहँगा बेच लुगाई का ।

मासे भर की तीन कचौड़ी, खुर्मा मासे ढाई का ।।

(Paṭanimala held the wedding celebration (of his daughter) by selling (even) the leheṅgā (the flared skirt) of his better half (yet) the three kacaurīs (served during the banquet) weighed only one māśā and the khurmā, only two and a half māśā).

8. Anjan Chakraverty, *Ali Hasan alias Kalloo Hafiz – the master naqshaband of Banaras brocades*, New Delhi, 2002, Pl.6, p.15.
9. Stephen Markel, "This Blaze of Wealth and Magnificence: The Luxury Arts of Lucknow", *India's Fabled City – The Art of Courtly Lucknow*, Los Angeles, 2010, pp.198-225.
10. Robert Skelton, *Rajasthani Temple Hangings of the Krishna Cult*, New York, 1973, pp.68-71; Amit Ambalal, *Krishna as Shrinathji*, Ahmedabad, 1995, p.149 and p.161.

Courtesy : All the photographs – Klaus Rotzer, 1989.