

## Travellers, Kinkob Bāzār and Ceremonies

Anjan Chakraverty

With an insatiable craving for adventure and an unceasing desire to discover far-away wonderlands, travellers hailing from Europe and America were attracted to Banaras, the ever-enchanting City of Light. While stationed at this pre-eminent pilgrimage centre, they took note of the many aspects of this multi-ethnic city and recorded an array of fascinating details in their travelogues, journals and letters. Visiting mostly through riverine routes and even overland, they were struck by the remarkable architectural glory of the urban locale and, at the same time, never failed to appreciate the sculpted rhythm of sacred images and the painted delight on the walls of secular edifices. Undoubtedly, the magic of the locally-manufactured opulent brocades cast its spell on many of them and some of their narratives, revolving around this fabled textile form, are of great historical relevance. However, there also arrived European painters with considerable enthusiasm to recapture picturesque views of the river-front as early as 1781 but none of them left any visual document related to the art of brocade weaving or that of kinkob bāzār. A selection of such passages having direct bearing on the timeless legacy of Banaras *kinkhab* or kinkob<sup>1</sup> vis-à-vis trading patterns, devotional practices and pageantry at the court, have been strung together in this short essay so as to serve as a basic text for further scrutiny.

Exploring the eastern parts of India between 1585 and 86, Ralph Fitch, the “Merchant of London”, visited “the great town” of Banaras and noticed there a flourishing cotton-weaving tradition. He stated in his story of adventures : “... great store of cloth is made there of cotton and sashes (turban-cloths) for the

Moore's".<sup>2</sup> This brief noting, however, points to the continuity of the cotton-weaving tradition for more than a millennia in and around the city, as has been referred to in the *Jataka* tales.<sup>3</sup> A perceptive observer at the court of Jahangir and a companion of William Hawkins, William Finch acted as a representative of the King of England at the Mughal court. Voyaging across the dominions of the Great Mogul, Finch visited the city in 1611 and found "the principal mart of Bengala goods" there in "Bonarce" (Banaras).<sup>4</sup> Further to their pithy detailing, neither Ralph Fitch nor William Finch mentioned the existence of any imperial workshop for weaving in the city at this stage.

During his visit in 1632 while serving East India Company, Peter Mundy noticed a silken canopy, might have been a locally-manufactured ceremonial textile, spread inside the sanctum of the celebrated shrine of Vishvanatha<sup>5</sup>. A native of Venice, Niccolao Manucci spent almost a lifetime in India, from 1656 to 1717, and in his literary romance, *Storia do Mogor*, recorded :

In this city (Benares) is made much cloth worked in gold and silver, which is distributed hence all over the Mogul realm, and is exported to many parts of the world...<sup>6</sup>

At the town of Benares and others dependent upon it are made many stuffs of silk, cloth of gold and of silver, turbans, waist-belts, and goods suited to women's use<sup>7</sup>.

Incidentally, Manucci was the first to mention categorically the trade-oriented manufacture of sumptuous figured silks enmeshed with golden and silver metal-wrapped threads in Banaras as also in the neighbouring territory. Another important detail in one of his passages is regarding the production of waist-belts (waistbands?) or *paṭkā*, an important costume accessory of the courtly sartorial ensemble of the Mughal era.

Lengthy excerpts from the travelogue of Jean Baptiste Tavernier (Fig.1), a French jewel merchant, highlight in particular two interesting aspects of the urban domain related to the consumption of *kinkhab*. On his sixth voyage to India, he spent two rainy days in the winter of 1665 in the "very well built town" of Banaras and presented a graphic description of one caravanserai, serving as a whole-sale market for the commodities inclusive of a range of textiles:



Fig.1 : Jean Baptiste Tavernier, by Nicolas de Largilliere, oil on canvas, 212 x 121 cm., Anton Ulrich Museum, inv. no. Gg520

In the middle of the court there are two galleries where they sell cottons, silken stuffs, and other kinds of merchandise. The majority of those who vend the goods are the workers who have made the pieces, and in this manner foreigners obtain them at first hand. These workers before exposing anything for sale, have to go to him who holds the contract, so as to get the imperial stamp impressed on the pieces of calico or silk, otherwise they were fined and flogged.<sup>8</sup>

The routine stamping of cloth to ensure the quality of the product did also prevail in the Mauryan era and such a quality-ensuring mark was termed as *abhigyana mudra* or “the identity stamp”, impressed invariably on the bale with vermilion. At the Pañca-gaṅgā ghat inside great Bindu Madhava temple, a cardinal Vaiṣṇavite shrine consecrated by Rājā Man Singh I (r.1589-1614), of Amber, Tavernier was greatly impressed to witness the charming silk brocades as also pigment-painted textiles conjuring up a discreet ceremonial décor :

...(the footstool placed before the altar) covered with a beautiful tapestry, sometimes of silk and sometimes of gold and silk, according to the solemnity of the rite which is being celebrated. The altar is covered with gold or silver brocade, or some beautiful painted cloth<sup>9</sup>.

Elaborating upon the devotional practices inside Bindu Madhava temple, he added :

At the entrance of the pagoda, between the principal door and the great altar, there is to the left a small altar, upon which an idol made of black marble is seated, with legs crossed, and about two feet high. When I was there, near it, on the left, sat a small boy, son of the chief priest, and all the people who came there threw him pieces of taffeta, or brocade like handkerchiefs, with which he wiped the idol and then returned them to the owners.<sup>10</sup>

Tavernier's account allude to quite a generous use of silk brocades, *kimkhab(?)*, as routine ceremonial offerings in the temples, especially those belonging to the Vaiṣṇava sect, and, one may presume these were hand-crafted in Banaras itself, largely for the domestic market.

There emerged during the eighteenth century, an eventful era full of political skirmishes in the history of Banaras, a class of nobility consisting of merchant princes and warring aristocracy. They controlled the urban economy and to a degree shaped the trajectories of power. A treaty between Raja Balwant Singh and the British in 1764 proved positively beneficial, promising social security to the merchant community and artisans. In 1794, Rājā Mahip Narain Singh (r.1781-95) relinquished the reign to the British. Enjoying full protection of the British and relieved of administrative duties, Raja Udit Narain Singh (r.1795-1835) and Maharaja Ishvari Prasad Narain Singh (r.1835-1889) stood out as outstanding patrons and revitalized an entire range of artistic traditions. Truly, it was the phase when religious and cultural life of the city evolved fully, assuring a distinct identity and conditioning in its turn the state of the art. Banaras “provided a sanctuary for skilled craftsmen” and, in particular, experts in draw-loom weaving migrated from Gujarat, Delhi and Lucknow-Faizabad. These master weavers were solely responsible for a complete transformation of the market-town textiles into fabled luxury brocades.

Many of the westerners who visited Banaras in the nineteenth century were instantly attracted to the bustle and colour of the local market for textiles, situated inside the central city-area, i.e. *pakkāmahāl*. Lord George Viscount Valentia, a member of the British nobility, held a *durbār* when he visited the city in 1803 and noted down in his travelogue:

...the next day held a *durbār* or levee for the natives of rank sufficient to be entitled to sit down in my presence. Several shroffs first appeared, to show me the specimens of their finest manufactures in silk, gold cloth, and embroidered gauzes. The pieces were of the richest patterns, and very high priced. I understand that more are manufactured here than at any other place in India, and that they are not only used in the East for dresses of ceremony, but are exported in considerable quantities to Europe.<sup>11</sup>

Reginald Heber (Fig.2), the Anglican Bishop of Calcutta, during his week-long stay in September 1824, observed closely the many shades of the urban space and remarked:

Benares is, in fact, a very industrious and wealthy as well as a very holy city. It is a great mart where the shawls of the north, the diamonds of the south,



Fig.2 : Bishop Reginald Heber

and the muslins of Dacca and the eastern provinces, centre, and it has very considerable silk, cotton, and fine woollen manufactories of its own...<sup>12</sup>

The scenario continued unaltered as Thomas Babington Macaulay passionately described in 1867:

From the looms of Benares went forth the most delicate silks that adorned the balls of St. James's and of the Petit trianon : and in the bāzārs the muslins of Bengal and sabres of Oude were mingled with the jewels of Golconda and the shawls of Cashmere.<sup>13</sup>

Fanny Parkes, the daughter of a colonial officer, travelled extensively across the country and in her *Journal*, an entry, dated Aug 17, 1836, reads:

On my return to my *budjerow*, a number of native merchants were waiting hoping to dispose of their goods to the strangers; they had boxes full of Benares turbans, shawls, gold and silver dresses, *kimkhwab* and cloth of gold. This place is famous for its embroidery in gold, and for its tissues of gold and silver. I purchased some to make a native dress for myself, and also some very stiff ribbon, worked in silk and gold, on which are the names of all the Hindu deities...<sup>14</sup>

In the course of her earlier visit to Banaras on December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1826, she had a chance to move around in the depths of the bāzār and there she noticed:

The shops of the *kimkhwab* and turban manufacturers, as also of those who prepare the silver and gold wire used in the fabric of the brocade worked in gold and silver flowers, are well worth visiting.

Beetle wings are procurable at Benaras, and are used there for ornamenting *kimkhwab* and native dresses. In Calcutta and Madras, the embroider gowns for European ladies with three wings, edged with gold; the effect is beautiful. The wings are cheap at Benaras, expensive at other places.<sup>15</sup>

Incidentally, she also acquired some mica paintings made by the local artists and stated, "the best are executed at Benaras".<sup>16</sup> Even prior to the British rule, the city had numerous market places and some of these had been classified as per the specific commodities made available there for the traders. Chowk was certainly

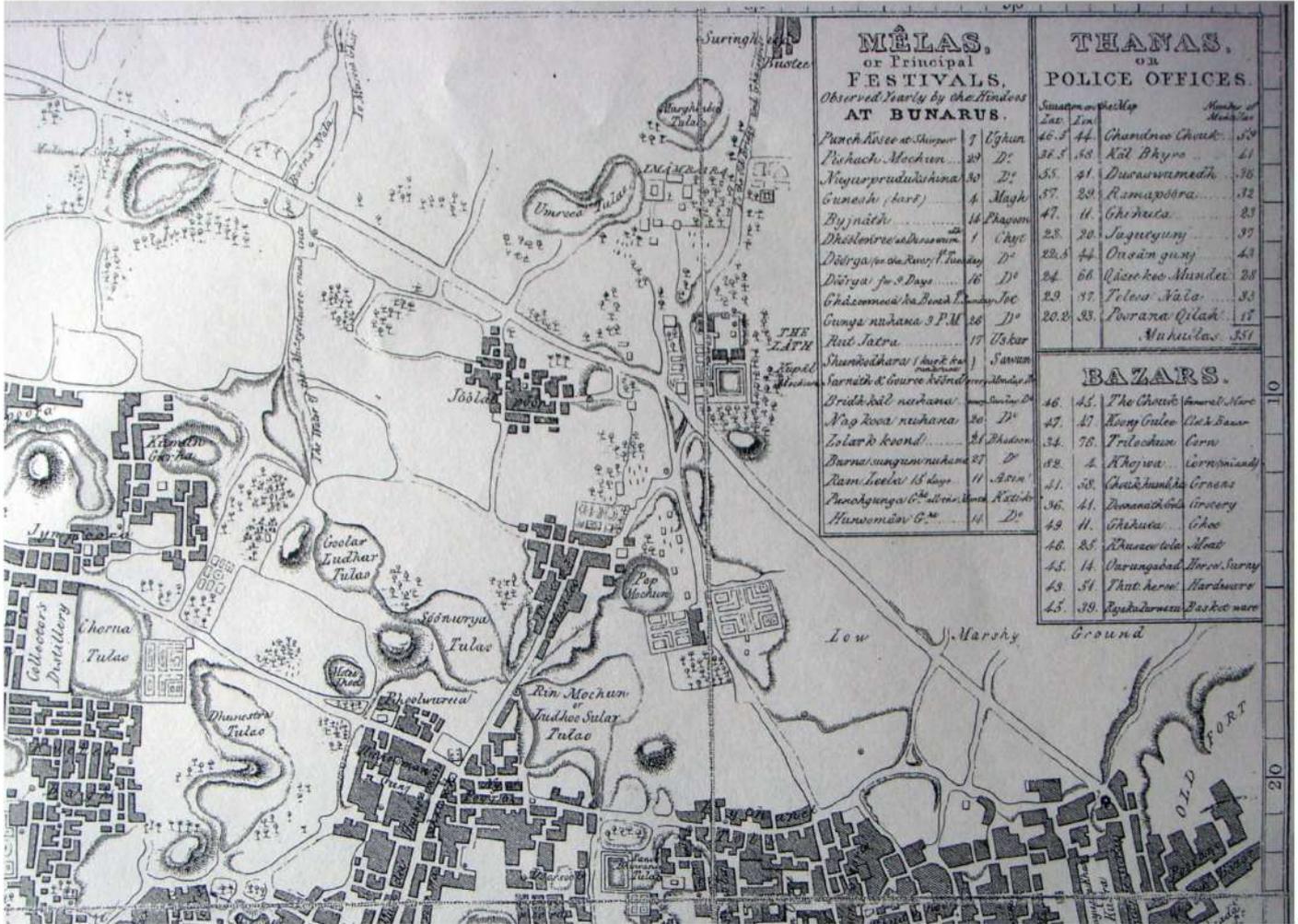


Fig.3 : List of Bāzārs, detail, Map of Varanasi by James Prinsep, 1822

the principal market and Kunj Gali, at least from the early nineteenth century, was the prominent “Cloth Bāzār”, a distinguished trade-centre for the luxury brocades of amazing variety (Fig.3).

Mrs. Harriette Ashmore had a chance to witness the bāzār of the Chowk sometimes in 1841, and there she found a bewildering range of commodities, “horses of beautiful and strong breed” as well as velvets with bejewelled embroidery. A perceptive narrator of details, she wrote:

Besides excellent sale of shawls, diamonds, pearls, and other costly items taking place through tradesmen of the place, many of them were engaged in making and dealing in the famous indigenous fabric made of gold and silver, called “Kinkhab” in India. The weaving of these pieces of art is jealously kept a secret by the makers, which has not been able to imitate in Europe till today. Nothing can also equal the beauty of embroidered velvet meant for turbans for the rich Indians, and this, on the head, seems to sparkle, as if from costly stones.<sup>17</sup>

A little later, Mrs. Colin Machenzie visited Banaras with her husband Col. Colin Machenzie, a military officer and a great scholar in 1847. Her shopping experience at the *gaddī* (trading-bureau) of an eminent brocade manufacturer was equally rewarding. An amateur artist, she became instantly enamoured of the gold-silver cloth when the bales of kinkob and *jāmadānī* were unrolled one after the other for her perusal. The descriptive passage from her journal is as follows:

...This was the house of one of the richest manufacturers at Banaras. Half of the room was raised one step. Here we sat while bales of the most magnificent gold and silver stuffs, called “kinkob” were unrolled before us. I do not suppose any European brocades equal them. They are used by the natives for trousers ...Some of the muslins spotted with gold, and muslin shawls and scarves with gold and silver borders for about thirty rupees were beautiful....<sup>18</sup>

The information that she gave, in particular about the contemporary pricing of *zarī-dārjāmadānī* of Banaras, is particularly useful in assessing the commercial context of this textile form, much in vogue at this time.

John B. Ireland, the American traveller, visited a brocade-weaving workshop on Nov 6<sup>th</sup>, 1853 during his stay in Banaras and left quite a vivid account in one of his letters that formed his continuous journal:

Then home and to the “kinkob” manufactory where they make the beautiful silver and gold clothes. I saw several in the looms, exquisitely beautiful. They were about five feet wide and nine yards long – these were worth \$175 – others not quite so handsome \$150 – one represented the Punjab war, but it was not well done. I saw others not quite as handsome, to be used by the less wealthy for robes – the more valuable kinds are used by the Rajas. I should like much to have a piece, but they work them all in such large pieces and would not cut them, and a whole piece is rather expensive when 65 percent is added by exchanges and duties.<sup>19</sup>

Ireland mentioned a very special variety of brocade with figure-centric patterning that had been commonly referred to by the master weavers of Banaras as “*tasawīr*”.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, as per the description given in the travel-narratives of the British traveller G. T. Vigne, Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab had commissioned a pair of shawls depicting his own victories.<sup>21</sup> However, there is a remote possibility that a similar subject may have been



Fig.4 : Maharaja Ishvari Prasad Narain Singh (r.1835-89)  
opaque watercolour on paper, c.1850, Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi



Fig.5 : *Kinkhab* yardage, Banaras, c.1870, Coll. Jñāna-Pravāha Museum, Varanasi



Fig.6 : Reversible silk shawl, Banaras c.1890, Coll. Jñāna-Pravāha Museum, Varanasi

commissioned for a *kinkhab* length by Lehna Singh Majithia or his son Surat Singh Majithia, the ex-general of Maharaja's Sikh Army, residing in Banaras at this time.

*Kimkhabs* were the prime objects presented to the dignitaries visiting the Ramnagar Court across the Ganges. Prince of Wales, during his visit to India in 1875-76, was received by Maharaja Ishvari Prasad Narain Singh (r.1835-1889; Fig.4) in a spectacular ceremony, faultless in terms of royal panoply, on January 5, 1876. William Howard Russel's Chronicle includes the following passage:

Shortly before sunset the prince embarked in a handsome gallery, with two sea-horses at the bow, which was towed by a steamer to the old fort of Ramnagar, four miles up the Ganges, where the Maharaja of Banaras received the Prince on a canopied and garlanded landing-stage. It was the grandest and most characteristic reception possible... The Maharaja led the Prince upstairs, where, after the usual presentations and a short conversation, a long file of servitors laid examples of gold brocade of the famed *kinkob* of Banaras (Fig.5), Dacca muslin, and costly shawls (Fig.6) at the Prince's feet, while the Maharaja sat, like a benevolent old magician in spectacles and white moustache, smiling, in his hall, with his hands joined in a deprecating way as each tray was laid on the ground, as though he would say, "Pardon that unworthy offering!". The Maharaja then conducted the Prince to a room where other beautiful presents were laid out on tables. In a third room a rich banquet was served, which was untouched.<sup>22</sup>

Coronation ceremonies and royal weddings at Maharaja's palace used to be the occasions for the most impressive display of Banaras brocades and Kashmir shawls. Eye-witness records, none to have surfaced so far, might have helped us re-construct the measureless grandeur of such splendid textiles.

## References & Notes

1. Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo Indian Words and Phrases, And of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive*, London, 1886, pp.484-85.
2. Ed. William Foster, *Early Travels in India 1583-1610*, London, 1921, p.20.
3. Ed. E.B. Cowell, *The Jataka*, Vol. III, London, 1895, p.181.
4. Foster, *op.cit.*, p.176.
5. Anand Krishna and Vijay Krishna, *Banaras Brocades*, New Delhi, 1966, p.32.
6. Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, trans. William Irvine, London, 1907, Vol.II, p.77.
7. *Ibid.*, p.402.
8. Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India by Jean Baptiste Tavernier*, Vol.I, Translated by V. Ball, London, 1889, Delhi, reprint 1995, p.97.
9. *Ibid.*, Vol.II, p.181.
10. *Ibid.*
11. George Viscount Valentia, *Voyages and Travels to India, Ceylone...*, Vol.I, London, 1811, p.69.
12. Reginald Heber, *Bishop Heber in North India – Selections from Heber’s Journal*, ed. M.A. Laird, Cambridge, 1971, p.152.
13. Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays Contributed to the Edinburgh Review*, London, 1867, p.620.
14. Fanny Parkes, *Begums, Thugs and Englishmen – The Journals of Fanny Parkes*, selected and introduced by William Dalrymple, New Delhi, 2003, p.279.
15. *Ibid.*, pp.40-41.
16. Mildred Archer, *Company Drawings in the India Office Library*, London, 1972, p.134.
17. Harietle Ashmore, *Narrative of a Three Month’s March in India; and a Residence in the Doab*, London, 1841, p.188.
18. Mrs. Colin Machenzie, *Six Years in India*, London, 1857, p.23.
19. John B. Ireland, *Wall-Street to Cashmere : A Journal of Five Years in Asia, Africa and Europe*, New York, 1859, p.329.
20. A Yusuf Ali, *A Monograph on Silk Fabrics Produced in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, Allahabad, 1900, p.57.
21. Rosemary Crill, “Textiles in the Panjab”, *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms*, Ed. Susan Strong, London, 1999, p.129.
22. William Howard Russel, *The Prince of Wales’ Tour : A Diary in India*, London, 1877, pp.389-390.