



Fig.16.4 : *Gharchola* sari, Holyweaves, Varanasi, contemporary, Image courtesy: Umang Agrawal

झीनी झीनी झीनी बीनी चदरिया
 काहे कै ताना काहे कै भरनी, कौन तार से बीनी चदरिया ।
 इंगला पिंगला ताना भरनी, सुखमन तार से बीनी चदरिया ।
 आठ कंवल दल चरखा डोले, पाँच तत्त गुन बीनी चदरिया ।
 साई को सियत मास दस लागे, ठोक ठोक कै बीनी चदरिया ।
 सो चादर सुर नर मुनि ओढे, ओढ के मैली कीनी चदरिया ।
 दास कबीरा जतन से ओढे, ज्यों की त्यों धर दीनी चदरिया ।

Five centuries ago, the weaver-poet Kabir, working on a loom near the banks of the Ganga in Banaras, wrote '*jhini-jhini bini chadariya*.' More cryptic than Kabir's other well-known poems, '*jhini-jhini*' compares the mortal body with a fine, translucent cloth woven by God, the supreme weaver, himself. Kabir's words could be used for describing Banaras as a textile centre in the present.

jhini-jhini bini chadariya

(How delicate and pure, is this fabric the Lord has woven)

For a city with almost 3000-year old tradition of weaving, current silk technology and design language of Banaras dates back just a few centuries. As India's best-known centre for the patterned silk textiles, the city traces its sophisticated drawlooms (*naqsha-jala*) to the Mughal *karkhanas* of western or northern India, which in turn are believed to have owed their drawloom-weaving expertise to medieval Central Asia or Iran. The modern jacquard technology now adopted across the local silk-weaving industry came, of course, from Europe where the jacquard machine was invented and modernized during the Industrial Revolution. Besides a dominant imprint of Late Mughal pattern vocabulary of Banarasi silk also has Iranian, European as well as mythological Indian references. Despite its shorter history compared to that of the other great silk-weaving centres of the Old World, Banaras retains some of its finest skills to this day. It is also the only major centre where patterned silk textiles are still woven on handlooms on an industrial scale. There are now several Indian and international fashion designers who use Banarasi textiles for their richness and refinement in their collections, as well as for the adaptability of Banarasi silk to highly individual, even idiosyncratic, design sensibilities.

kahe ka tana, kahe ki bharni, kaun tar se bini chadariya

(What is this warp? What weft is this? Of which fibre is made this fabric?)

Early historical references found in Buddhist and Hindu scriptures point to Banaras as a cotton-weaving centre. At present, however, the warp in almost any hand-woven Banarasi fabric is of silk. Cotton warps

rarely appear. Typically, for modern handloomed Indian fabrics, it is simpler to introduce different types of yarn in the weft to vary fabric quality and weight. In Banaras, therefore, we find several types of mulberry and non-mulberry silk and silk-waste yarn used in the weft, as well as cotton, *pashmina* and merino wool, linen, art silk (rayon), other synthetic yarns, along with what is, arguably, the defining element of classical Banarasi silks: *zari* or metal-wrapped thread. The metal thread itself is of several different types, with varying alloys of precious and base metals.

Until a decade or two ago, brocaded cotton saris were quite common but, in recent years, their production seems to have fallen. One possible reason for this is the extremely fine reed used in routine Banarasi weaving, which calls for the use of very fine cotton yarn and require sizing skills that mostly died out in the previous century. Ironically, weavers working with fine reeds as well as laboriously hand-brocading their fabrics are generally considered to be highly skilled, but the wholesale shift to silk warps also implies that Banarasi weavers have too easily given up on fine cotton that is more difficult to handle. Equally, the reluctance to weave cotton fabrics also means that Banaras offers few fabrics that are suitable for the harsh Indian summer. Today, the traditional Banarasi silks, patterned ornately with gold and silver *zari*, are still valued but tend to work best for what in contemporary fashion parlance is termed "occasion-wear". The heavily brocaded, high-end wedding sari (and its innumerable cheaper versions) remains a staple of Banarasi looms but these inherent skills and strengths also constrain the weavers from tapping into a larger urban market for prêt garments.

ingla-pingla tana-bharni, susman tar se bini chadariya

(The breath taken, the breath released, the breath is this warp and weft; the veins that stretch, the nerves that bind, there flows this very fabric)

Banaras textiles reflect not only the interlacing of many yarns and artisanal skills, but also the intermingling and assimilation of diverse communities, religions and cultures. The textile industry is neither back nor forward-integrated, which means that each function at the product end as well as the business end is fulfilled by many different facilitators. A master-weaver, or *grihastha*, usually controls the product end, working with an identified set of freelancers such as a *naqshband* for artwork and point-paper patterns; a *patta-ustaad* for the punching of jacquard cards; the *tanara, rangrez and muquadam* for all the yarn and loom preparation that precedes weaving; the *bunkar/karigar* or *julaha* for weaving; and a *rafugar* or other artisans for post-loom processing. The master-weaver generally co-ordinates with a trader or *gaddi-dar* for patterns, production parameters and also, occasionally, for yarns and *zari*. The *gaddi-dar* in turn wholesales or retails the textiles to his customers. Taking feedback from his clients, the *gaddi-dar* guides the *grihasth* about the design, colour and quality of a fabric. Contrary to popular stereotyping, in the present day, no function is entirely controlled by a specific religion or even community.

While this complex production chain worked flawlessly in the heyday of the Banarasi textile industry, the situation is now quite different. The decline in the industry in recent decades reflects not only line-loss and price-escalation without an accompanying increase in value addition through the chain, but also an overall degradation in quality and design. It is important to note that the few *gaddi-dars* who maintained their investment in design and in the quality of their craftsmanship have seen their businesses grow even during the downturn.

atha-kamala dal charkha dole, panch tatva, gun bini chadariya

(An eight-petalled lotus is the Lord's spinning wheel; it spun the five elements, and all three virtues, from which this fabric was woven)

With its lengthy patterning processes and its wide design repertoire, the Banaras silk industry offers a depth of fabric character and quality that is, quite simply, awe-inspiring. A *kadhava* Banarasi sari, a Tibetan *gyasar* brocade, a *tanchoi* apparel fabric or a *kora-katarvan* (organza cutwork) or white-on-white furnishing, each can sustain an entire weaving ecosystem on its own. Yet, in Banaras, these production systems are all interchangeable. In many instances, several different fabrics can be woven on the same loom with the same set of hands. The skills that the master-weavers of Banaras have inherited for patterned weaving, moreover, remain unparalleled. The one constant during the changing patterning techniques over time (from the draw-loom to the punched-card jacquard and on to the newly-introduced electronic jacquard) has been the mastery of the Banaras weavers over the entire weaving process.

Even the powerlooms that dominate the Banarasi textile industry today have absorbed the local weavers' age-old skills and strengths. In some ways, the local powerlooms, which were introduced in the city about sixty years back but gained traction only during the eighties, are an extension of the Banarasi handloom. For this reason, some fabrics woven on Banarasi powerlooms may appear indistinguishable to the untrained eye, from those produced on handlooms. This has resulted in a growing overlap between the two technologies. Given the fabric qualities that the powerloom can now replicate, the handloom process invariably appears slower and more expensive by comparison. Unlike the products of many other Indian weaving centres, however, there remain a number of traditional, handloom fabric types in Banaras that a powerloom cannot replicate.

From the perspective of contemporary fashion and textile designers, the handlooms are ideal not only for their adaptability but also for the fact that premium qualities can be produced in small runs. From the perspective of trade, on the other hand, the powerlooms offer advantages of scalability. They also cater to a larger market. It is imperative therefore, that instead of considering Banarasi powerlooms and handlooms as competing technologies for the same market, we see them as specialist and diversified producers with more or less independent markets, and which can co-exist to mutual advantage.

sai ko bunat mas das lage, thok thok ke bini chadariya

(It took the Lord ten months; it took the finest skill, and infinite patience; it took endless labour to beat in this weft)

Patterning on complicated looms is often viewed as a refined textile art. It can be seen, equally, as a sophisticated binary technology that reveals itself during the design-drafting, graph-making, card-punching, loom set-up and weaving stages. Creating a woven surface, and a patterned one at that, is more complex than ornamenting it with a mere surface technique such as embroidering or printing. This also means that for any garment designer to work with patterned textiles, needs to have a sound understanding of loom-technology and weaving technique. Together with the exceedingly slow pace of



Fig.16.1 : Rangkaat sari with *konia*, silk, Holyweaves, Varanasi, contemporary, Image courtesy: Umang Agrawal



Fig.16.2 : Bhagwad Gita shlokas woven in supplementary weft, Holyweaves, Varanasi, contemporary
Image courtesy: Umang Agrawal



Fig.16.3 : Silk and wool shawl woven in *tanchoi* technique, Holyweaves, Varanasi, contemporary
Image courtesy: Umang Agrawal



◀ Fig.16.5 : Jacquard attachment with punched cards on handloom, Holyweaves, Varanasi
Image courtesy: Umang Agrawal



Fig.16.6 : A loom shed with frame looms
Holyweaves, Varanasi, Image courtesy: Umang Agrawal ▼

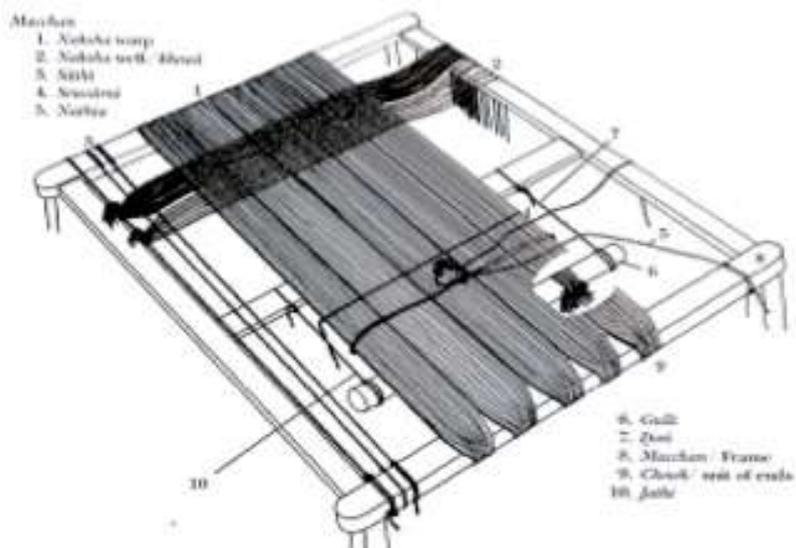
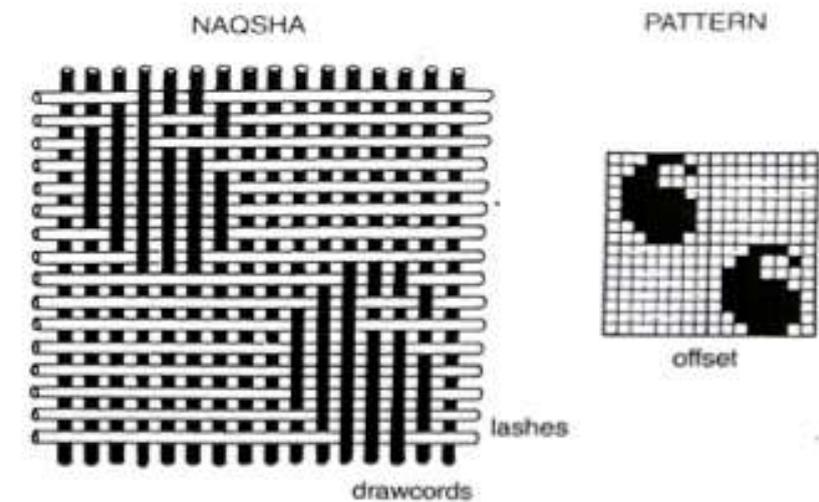
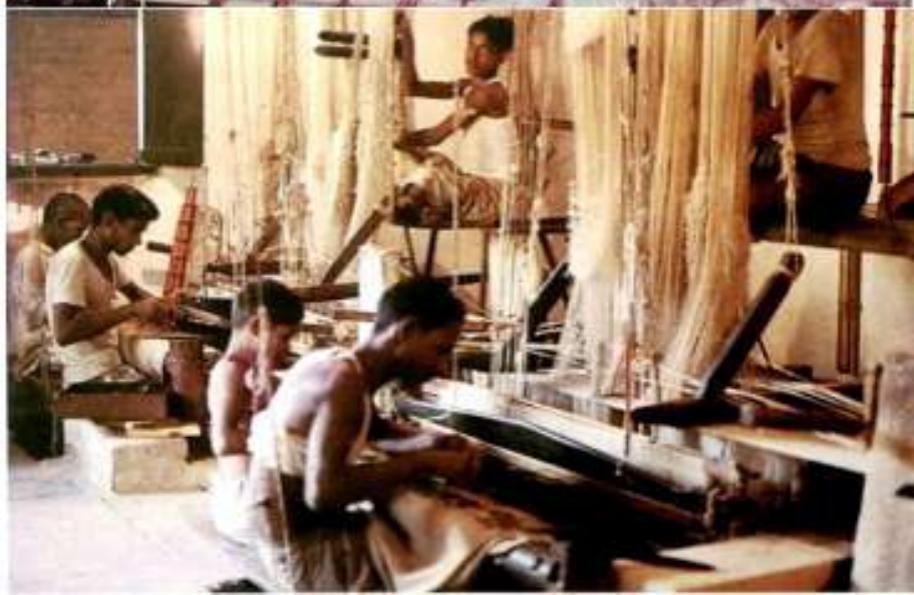
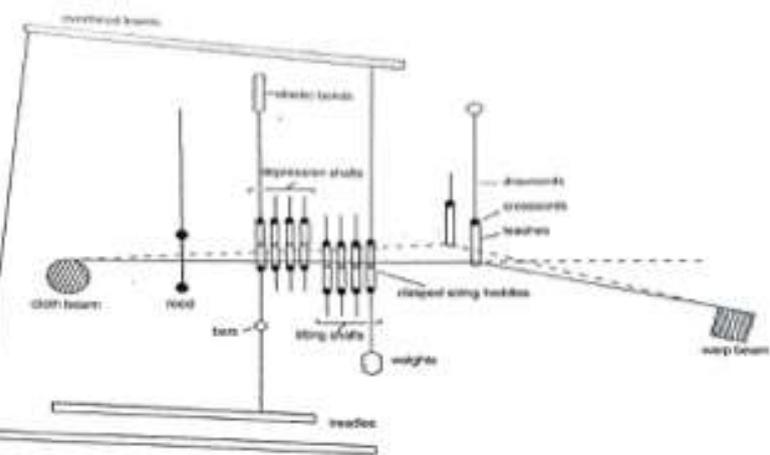
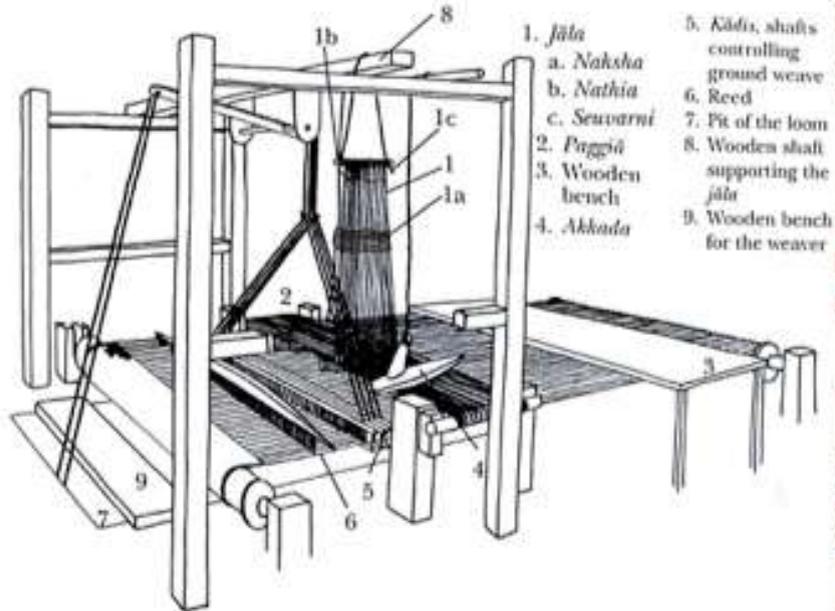


Fig.16.7 : A collage of *Naqsha*-making various sources: *The Indian Drawloom & it's Products* by Rahul Jain & internet archives

Fig.16.8 : A collage of *Jala*-weaving various sources: *The Indian Drawloom & it's Products* by Rahul Jain & internet archives



weaving on a drawloom or a jacquard handloom, this can easily become a barrier to the entry of contemporary designers who wish to work with the Banaras textile industry to produce seasonal fashion collections. However, with some basic understanding of the technique, a plethora of options open-up before a designer to tweak every stage of handloom weaving and thus add new dimensions to their textiles even with age-old tools and know-how. The camaraderie between a designer and a master-weaver also brings-in the concept of “co-design” wherein the designer's vision and the master-weaver's fine-tuned execution are manifested in the final product.

There are several Indian and international designers who have seriously researched and developed Banarasi textiles and continue to use them season after season. Of late, the interventions of several stakeholders, represented by the Banarasi Vastra Udyog Association and aided by the Government of India through Ministry of Textiles have resulted in a growing interest and resurgence in the Banaras textile industry and a new popularity for Banarasi fabrics in the contemporary fashion scene. More and more textile and garment designers are showing interest in working with Banarasi silk. Of all the virtues penned by Kabir, it is perhaps patience, that any designer wishing to work with Banaras producers and weavers will need in abundance.

*ye chadar sur, nar, muni odhi, odh ke maili kini chadariya
das Kabir jatan se odhi, jyon ki tyon dhar dini chadariya*

(Worn by the celestials, worn by the seers and mortals alike, this fabric was defiled by one and all; your devotee Kabir wore it scrupulously and discards it just as it was: forever unsoiled, forever pure)

Over the past decade, the demand for the higher-skill textiles of Banaras has been falling. The factors that can be attributed to this are stagnation in design, quality-control issues, reduction in demand owing to cyclical fashion trends, as well as competition from powerlooms as also other weaving centres. As a result of this decline, many skilled weavers have migrated to other professions, even younger weavers are no longer entering the industry in any appreciable number. Very recently, however, the efforts of the Central Government and Banarasi Vastra Udyog Association have resulted in a resurgence of the Banarasi handloom textiles. The industry, therefore, appears to be turning a corner. While the *grihasths* as well as the fashion-designers working with them, have focused on traditional skills and vocabularies for developing design, the Government has emphasized weaver wage-optimization, skill-upgradation and establishment of facilitative centres for product quality and process improvement. This two-pronged approach has been successful, to an extent, in bringing back the Banaras textiles to the forefront of the Indian fashion scene in recent seasons. Such efforts, if sustained over time, should go a long way in restoring the position of Banaras as India's premier centre for high-quality silk textiles.

HEMANG AGRAWAL is a fashion and textile designer trained at NIFT, Mumbai. As creative director of The Surekha Group, Varanasi, he is engaged in the revival of several age-old techniques of hand-loom weaving since 2001, and specializes in fabrics made purely out of golden and silver metallic yarns. While his products take forms of garments, saris, scarves and yardages, he largely remains a process-driven designer wherein the traditional weaving-skills and designs always take precedence. Involved in restoration of vintage textiles for several royal families of India, his work has been featured & awarded at several platforms including the NetFlix series, "The Creative Indians." info@hemangagrawal.com