



**A**shavali brocades unveil layers of time and history, lineage of legendary weavers and power of patronage. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Asawal or Ashaval or Ashapalli, after the name of King Asha Bhil, was an important township. This old settlement or *pura* had boundaries extending from Sarangpur in the East, Ramnath in the West, Kamnath in the South to Maneknath in the North.<sup>1</sup> The city was situated on the raised left bank of 371 kilometer long river Sabarmati, about 173 feet above sea level. The traditional houses in Ashaval were built in blocks or *pols*, varying in size from small courts of five to ten houses to large quarters of the city containing as many as 10,000 inhabitants. Such larger blocks were generally crossed by one main street with a gate at each end and were subdivided into smaller courts and blocks, each with its separate gate branching off either side.<sup>2</sup> In 1074, the Solanki ruler Karnadeva-I of Anahilvada-Pattan defeated the king Asha Bhil and thereafter, the city was named Karnavati. The Solanki rule lasted until the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when Gujarat came under the control of the Vaghela Dynasty of Dwarka. It was in 1403, at Ashaval, Tatar Khan proclaimed the independence of the Gujarat Sultanate. Later, it was renamed as Ahmedabad when Ahmed Shah, son of Tatar Khan, ruled over the territory in 1411. After Patan, Ahmedabad was declared as the capital city of Gujarat.<sup>3</sup> *Ashaval-nu-tekro*, Fig.14.2, near Astodia *darwaja*, Fig.14.3, is considered connected to the old Ashaval.<sup>4</sup>

It is pertinent to mention that during the fieldwork and on reviewing literature, maps indicating geographical boundaries of Ashaval were nowhere found. Dr. Manek Patel 'Setu' has mentioned the area of Ashaval in his documentary on Ahmedabad and in the book *Ahmadabad* (1988). Both these references indicated a few landmarks towards the possible geographical area of Ashaval. Following the same landmarks, a map has been drafted that indicates the areas where these brocades might have been woven and sold to the traders, Fig.14.1.

### Ashavali Brocades

Origin of brocade weaving in Ashaval is not known because of the dearth of evidence. It is believed that the locally-manufactured brocades were named after Ashaval, the old city, Fig.14.4. In the early Christian era, Gujarat emerged as an important silk-weaving centre in

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Fig.14.17 : Fragment of traditional woven Picchwai  
Satin weave foundation  
foundation warp  
and weft: mulberry silk  
in dark blue  
extra weft: twill weave Krishna  
floral *buta* and cows  
in gold and silver *zari*  
with ocher hands on cows  
Photo courtesy: Amit Ambalal

the western region. Pattan produced, as noted by Abul Fazl in the *Ain-i-Akbari*, "imitations of stuffs from Turkey, Europe and Persia" in addition to "velvets and brocades". Also, locally-produced cotton fabrics were "taken to distant parts as gifts of value". The list of "Gold Stuffs" in *Ain* also mentions *Tas*, *Darai-baf*, *Muqayyash* and *Shirwani* from Gujarat. Silk cloth was manufactured in the greatest volume in Bengal but the varieties made in Gujarat were superior to all regions in terms of fineness.

As mentioned in the *Imperial Gazette* (1908), white and yellow varieties of China silk were imported at the rate of Rs. 18 or Rs. 20 per pound. The silk brocades of Ahmedabad were sold in Bombay, Kathiawar, Central India, Rajputana, Nagpur and in the Nizam's Dominions. The brocades were woven using real gold and silver *zari*. Tin and electroplated *zari* were used, at a later date, in some brocades.<sup>5</sup>

Poet Premanand, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century poet of Gujarat, has described several varieties of textiles and costumes in his poetical composition, *Kunvarbai-nu-mameru*. As per the text, mother-in-law of Kunvarbai, the daughter of Narsingh Mehta, a devotee of Lord Krishna and renowned poet, demands the following textiles as part of the trousseau : 5 *sher kunku*, 7 *shrifal*, *pacchedi* 15 *kodi*, 50 *patola*, 20 *mann vankadiya*, 30 *kodi fofad*, 5 *vastrana* 25 *vagha*, 4 *choka ditras*, 60 *mugta*, 100 *chaniya*, *chir* 40, *dhotiya* 30, 2 *kodi jarkash-ni-sari*, 12 *kodi reshmi sari*, *simple sari* 3 *sher*, *jhal* 4 *sher*, *ghar sari* 10-20 *kodi*, 16 *kodi bhat*, *chhit mor vitukadi*, 9 *kodi than*, 50 *soneki chain*, 1000 *sona mohar*. The term *jarkash-ni-sari* literally refers to the sari made of *zari*, which perhaps is indicative of the early form of *Ashavali* sari.

Traditionally, the *Ashavali* sari was woven on a 105 cm wide pit loom with the count of upto 112/120 ends and 112/96 picks per square inch. The field woven in 4x1 satin weave added to the heaviness and sheen. The *pallu* and cross borders were woven in a taquete structure; 1/3 twill weave front was combined with a separable plain weave back. These surfaces were further calendared to lay emphasis on the smoothness and thinness. With the passage of time, the weavers kept on changing the value and intensity of the colours. The colours became brighter and flamboyant relating to the *Paithani* sari from Aurangabad and Burhanpur, woven much later during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Further, the process of weaving was simplified and the saris woven in plain weave were patterned with the supplementary weft in 1/3 twill or 1/7 twill. Some *Ashavali* saris were woven with metallic ground and patterns in multiple colours of silk, some in twill woven metallic weft while some in the combination of the two. The saris woven in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century have been simplified in style and process as compared to the complex technique used in the patterns of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Historians have mentioned that during the period between 11<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, there were 500-600 looms in Ahmedabad and 900-1000 looms in Surat, which employed a large number of master brocade weavers. Shahpur, one of the suburbs of Ahmedabad, was the main centre. The brocades were woven in the forms of canopies, floor spreads and hangings, yardages, saddle-cloths, bags and fans. The rich colour scheme and *minakari*, inlay work, continued as predominant aspects of such brocades.

Moravej pointed out in his comparative study that several characteristic features of the Safavid brocades re-appeared in the *Ashavali kimkhabs*.<sup>6</sup>

### **Design vocabulary of *Ashavali* brocades**

The *varnaka-samucchaya* of circa 16<sup>th</sup> century, a compilation of technical and popular terms, mentions the names of various brocaded garments such as *kasbi kanchli*. It also refers to certain common motifs such as

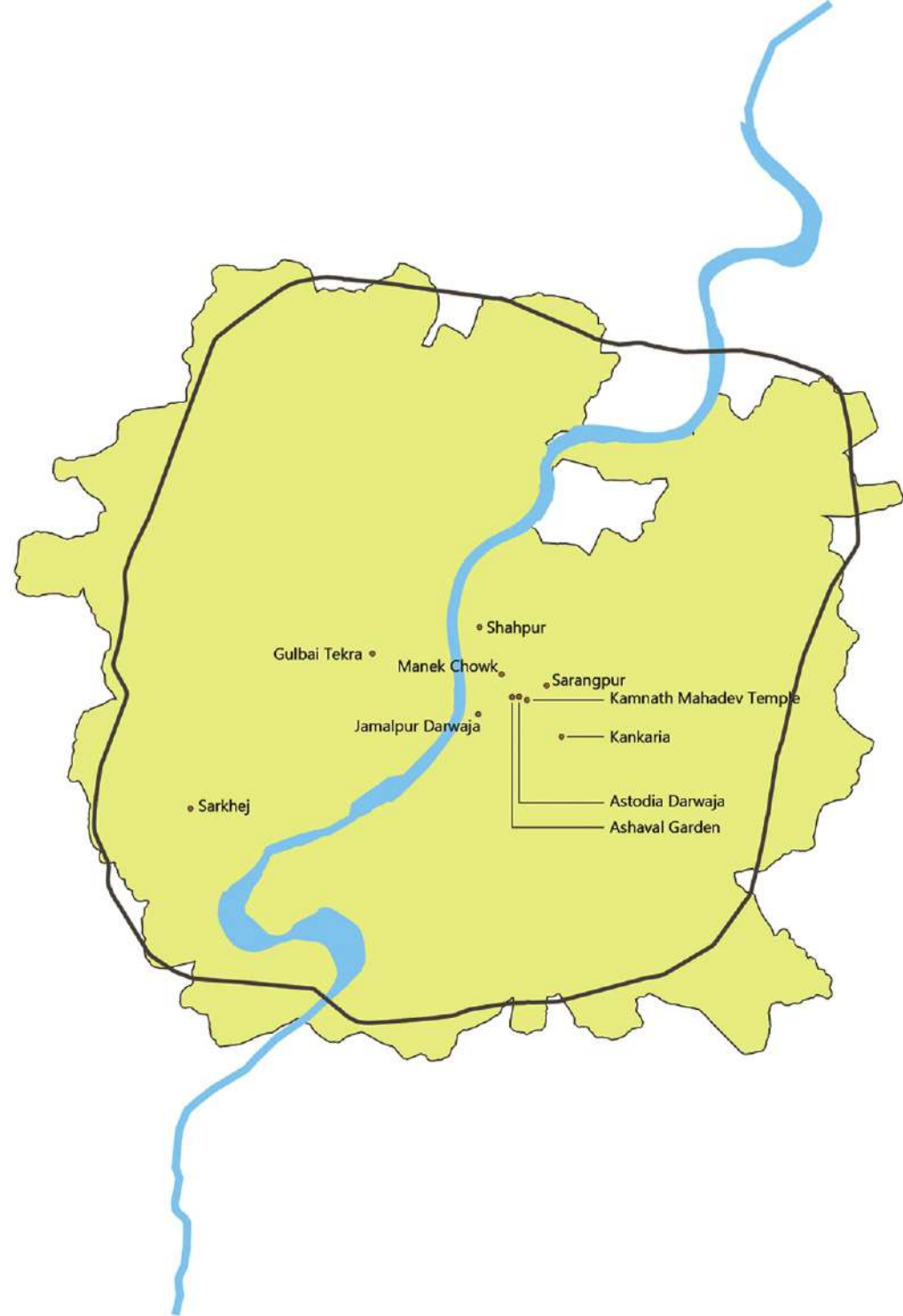


Fig.14.1 : Map indicating the location of Ashaval and areas where brocades were woven and sold  
 Disclaimer: This map (not to scale) is used for representational purpose only and does not claim accuracy for coordinates distances or bearings



Fig.14.2 : Ashaval-nu-tekro



Fig.14.3 : Ashaval Garden near Astodia *Darwaja*

Fig.14.4 : Remains of the Fortified City Outer Wall





Fig.14.5 : Layout of Ashavali Sari, early 20<sup>th</sup> century  
 Plain weave foundation; foundation warp and weft: mulberry silk, extra warp: gold zari. Photo courtesy: Mitra Patel

Figs.14.6 & 14.7 : Fragments with Swan motif; Plain weave foundation; foundation warp and weft: mulberry silk in ochre and pista green (respectively); extra weft: twill weave patterns in gold and silver zari. Photo courtesy: Amit Ambalal





Fig.14.8 : *Toran* with Swan border with Krishna  
in the center on blue background  
Plain weave foundation; foundation warp and weft: silk in ochre  
and *pista* green; extra weft: twill weave patterns in  
gold and silver *zari*, length 16.5cm , width 251cm  
Photo courtesy: Amit Ambalal



Figs.14.9 & 14.10 : Lion and Paisley *Kunia* (corner motifs in sari)  
Plain weave foundation; foundation warp and weft: silk in royal blue and off white (respectively)  
extra weft: twill weave patterns in gold and silver *zari*





Fig.14.11 : Fragment with Parrot motif; Plain weave foundation; foundation warp and weft: silk in fuchsia  
extra weft: twill weave patterns in gold zari

Fig.14.12 : Body of sari with *Chand-tara buta*; Plain weave foundation; foundation warp and weft: silk in cyan blue  
extra weft: twill weave pattern in gold and silver zari





Fig.14.13 : *Pallu* (end-piece) of sari with stylized Paisley *buta*; Plain weave foundation  
foundation warp and weft: mulberry silk; supplementary weft in *pallu*: gold *zari*  
extra weft: natural dyed mulberry silk in twill weave stylized paisley in *minakari*

Fig.14.14 : Fragment of traditional *Bakhubhai nu kinkhab*; Plain weave foundation  
foundation warp and weft: mulberry silk in sky blue; extra weft: twill weave leaves pattern in silver *zari*

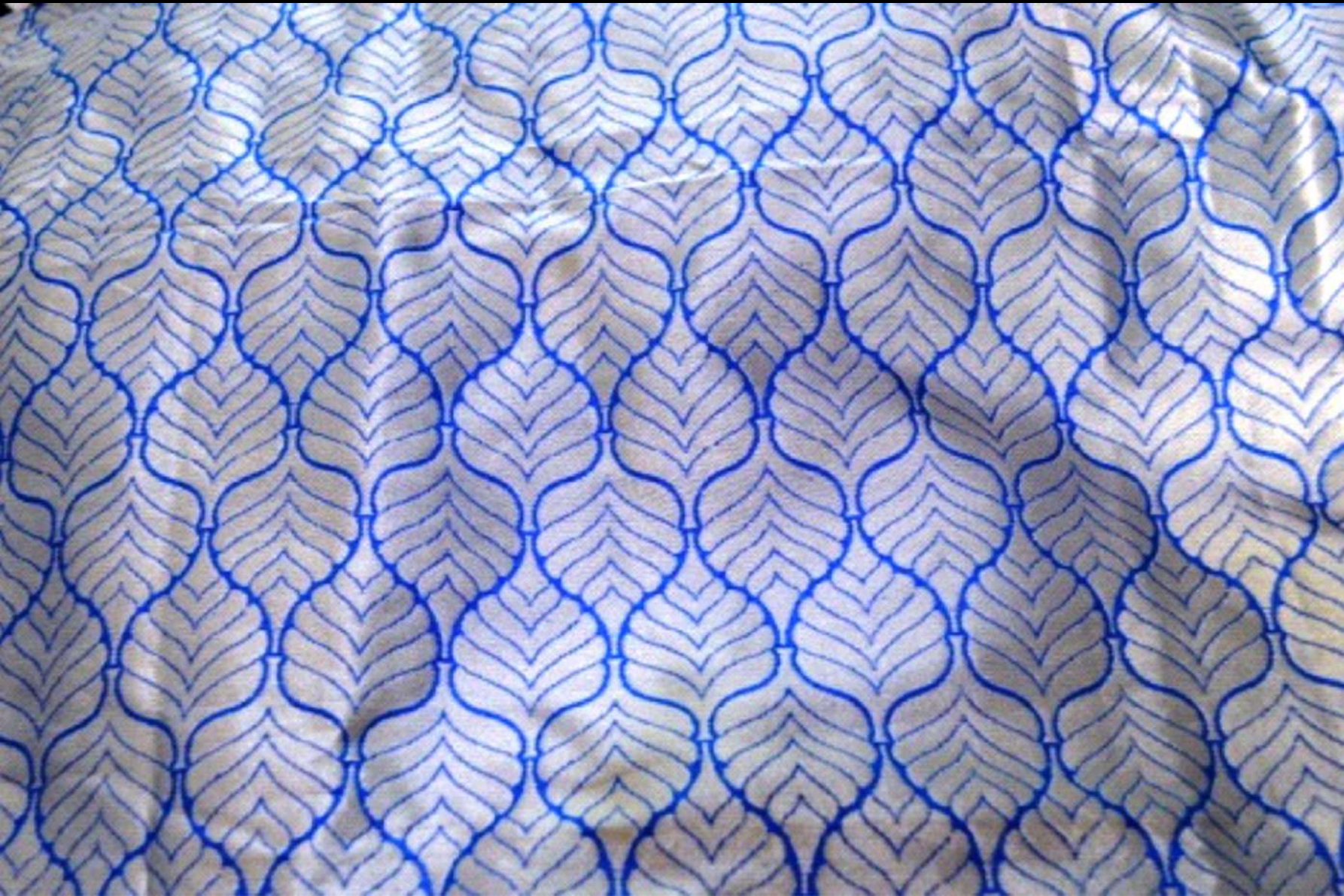




Fig.14.15 : Body of sari with circular lion pattern and a floral *buta* in the centre  
 Plain weave foundation; foundation warp and weft: mulberry silk in indigo  
 extra weft: twill weave pattern in gold *zari*



Fig.14.16 : Body of sari with a grid of parrots forms and peacock *buta* in each block  
 Plain weave foundation  
 foundation warp and weft: mulberry silk in red; extra weft: twill weave pattern in gold *zari*



Fig.14.18 : Body of sari with *Asharfi* motif and *phul-vela*; Plain weave foundation foundation warp and weft: mulberry silk in red; extra weft: twill weave pattern in gold and silver *zari*  
Photo courtesy: Gujarat State Handloom and Handicraft Corporation Ltd.



Fig.14.19 : Fragment of *hathi-vela*  
Plain weave foundation foundation warp and weft: mulberry silk in brown extra weft: twill weave elephant and floral *buta* in green and silver *zari*



Fig.14.20 : Fragment of calligraphy woven in fabric; foundation warp and weft: silk in red  
extra weft: twill weave patterns in gold *zari*, Photo courtesy: Gujarat State Handloom and Handicraft Corporation Ltd.

Fig.14.21 : Vishnubhai, the master weaver, begins his day by offering prayers to his father Somabhai and the almighty



*gaja-vadi* or *hathi-vela* (elephant border), *hansa-vadi* (swan border), *mandala* (ornate circle) and *putalium* (multiple doll figures). The borders of the *Ashavali* saris got their names after the motifs that were woven, like *popat kinar* (parrot border).<sup>7</sup>

The *Ashavali* design vocabulary includes stylized motifs of paisley, Fig.14.5; parrots, Fig.14.11; peacocks, Fig.14.16; and lions woven with floral motifs in the field, Fig.14.15. While human and animal representations were not woven in most parts of India because of Islamic influence, Gujarat was an exception. One of the traditional designs for the *kinkhab*, produced primarily for royal consumption, was ornate cypress or paisley pattern, Fig.14.13. Figurative designs include depiction of lord Krishna, Figs.14.8 & 14.17, *putli*, bird and animal motifs. The *kinkhabs* were priced according to the design and intricacy of the weave. Popular traditional *kinkhabs* were: *ganshiyo*, *kashini katarani*, *kotha katarani*, *kalash bhaat*, *phool bhaat*, *mohor*, *lalbadami*, *garebandi*, *mor-putli*, *katarano lilo*, *khapaidi*, *taramandali*, *lerio* and *badami-kantha lila*, *lapano kashini*, *mor-vela*, *phul-vela* and *popat-vela*. The floral border with *minakari* on gold ground is also named as *Ashavali* border when woven along the sari or attached to the *Paithani* saris of Maharashtra. Traditional colours of the brocades are red, purple, dark blue, sky blue, magenta, *mehandi* green, parrot green, black and white. The motifs are, invariably, outlined with the black or indigo silk to make these stand out against the base fabric colour. *Ashavali* borders are woven with silver and gold *zari*<sup>8</sup> with motifs in coloured silk.

*Ashavali* brocades produced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are beautiful examples of sustainable textile. These brocades have survived at Ridrol because of consistent efforts, prayers and hard work of the weavers. Though initiatives at different levels in terms of adding variety in the products have been taken, a lot more is still required to be done so that the glory of this textile and heritage can pass on further to the next generation. Buying local handloom products empowers the weaver. Hand-crafted brocades are priced possession for the elite and symbolize high end fashion.

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