LESSON 2   BANARAS BROCADES

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2.  **Banaras Brocades**

In the previous lesson you had gained a broad overview of the history and development of Woven Textiles in India. In this lesson you will learn about one of the more famous varieties of woven fabrics of North India, namely, Banaras Brocade.

### 2.0 Objectives

After going through this lesson, you will:

- Gain a broad overview of the history, development, raw materials used, varieties, patterns and designs of Banaras Brocade.
- Be able to identify the fabric of Banaras Brocade by studying its weaving techniques, designs and colours.

### 2.1 Introduction

Banaras (Varanasi), a holy city of Uttar Pradesh, is a centre for brocade and hand-made textiles and saris since ancient times. The word brocade is derived from the Latin word "brochus" denoting to transfix. The Banaras brocade is also known as Kin-khab (Fig. 2.1), which literally means a cloth of Gold. It is commonly known as ‘Shivnagri’ in the trade. The exquisite fabrics, so much appreciated all over the world, are produced by weaving with warps and weft threads of different colours and often of different materials. It appears from ancient texts that in early days gold and silver wires were drawn out to such fineness that they could be woven into fabrics of pure gold and silver. Silk was added later to give colour and body to the textile. Now gold or silver wires are used as a special weft twisted along with the silk. The Banaras brocades and saris are closely woven silk fabrics with the designs worked out in gold or silver. In the past, the gold or silver used was so pure that it never tarnished and it retained its shine and colour for hundreds of years. The art of brocade weaving has survived over the time, and even today various types of brocades are produced in large quantities.
2.2 Historical Background

The brocade weaving centres of India developed in and around the capitals of kingdoms or holy cities because of the demand for expensive fabrics by the royal families or temples. The ancient centres were situated mainly in Banaras, Gujarat, Delhi, Agra and Murshidabad. Northern weavers were greatly influenced, so far as design and technique were concerned, by the brocade weaving regions of eastern and southern Persia, Turkey, Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Over the centuries, brocades from Banaras have created their own special place. The city of Banaras itself has a unique place in Indian history and culture. As far back as 4th century B.C., it was a rich, flourishing city and was renowned world wide for its textile industry. The "Hiranya" cloth mentioned in the Rig-Veda has been interpreted as the earliest equivalent for the Kinkhabs. According to Buddhist literature, Varanasi fabrics were pleasant to handle, beautiful to look at and were greatly popular with rich and tasteful people all over the world. In the Buddhist legends and Buddhist text, there are numerous references to Kasi. As per the legends, when Buddha attained Mahaparinirvana his mortal remains were wrapped in a Banaras fabric radiating with rays of yellow, red and blue. All these references reinforce the notion that brocade art was, in all probability in existence since very early times in Banaras.

Varied patterns displayed in the Ajanta murals of the Gupta period (Fig. 2.2) are believed by some art historians to represent some brocade specimens also, and the floral designs, animals and birds motifs and geometrical patterns have close affinity with the early brocade motifs. It is said that a great fire broke out in Gujarat in the fourteenth century which led to the northward migration of the weavers who set-up workshop at Banaras, Aimer, Delhi and Agra. Muhammad Bin Tughlaq kept 500 weavers at Delhi to make gold brocades worn by his wives and he lavishly distributed brocade pieces as royal gifts.

In Kashmir the brocade art was developed by Sultan Zin-ul-Abidin (A.D. 1459 - 1470) in the fifteenth century. He encouraged the interchange of weavers with Iran. A large number of foreign weavers/artisans assembled in the royal workshop of Kashmir. These artisans migrated to Delhi, Agra, Banaras and other parts of the country. There is a remarkable resemblance between Banaras brocade (Fig. 2.3) and the Jamawar shawls of Kashmir (Fig. 2.4) as they drew pattern motifs from a common source. Jahangir was also a great expert of brocades. Empress Nur Jahan had great love for evolving new patterns.

Many English travellers and other visitors in the early 19th century gave detailed accounts of the glory of Banaras Textiles. They found them “beautiful but very expensive” and fit to be used on important occasions only. The prosperity of the city depended largely on its textile industry and fabrics were exported to Europe. Brocade was used for both men’s and women’s garments.
Every social or religious group had its own norms regarding the colour, design, and material of their garment. Hindus liked bright coloured silk in colours like red, yellow & orange.

Mashrub or mixed fabric was used mostly by Muslims in colours like lavender, sky blue, white and magenta-blanket. The animal or human figured patterns were not favoured by Muslims.

The silk weaving industry in Varanasi had for centuries been divided between the Hindus & the Muslims. The Hindus monopolised trade while the weavers were mostly Muslims.

**Self-check Questions**

1. Define Banaras Brocade. By what other name is it known?

**Activity**

1. Collect some samples of Banaras Brocade.

### 2.3 Facts about Brocade

#### 2.3.1 Raw material

Brocade weaving, especially with gold and silver, has been an age old tradition in India. There are two broad classes of Brocades:

- Brocades of pure silk and cotton blends, and
- Zari brocades with gold and silver threads.

The most important material used in brocade weaving is silk. It facilitates lovely waves, is durable, strong, fine and smooth. There are several varieties of raw silk of which the main ones used for brocades are Tanduri, Banaka and Mukta. Tanduri is imported from Malda and other places. Benga Banaka is a thinner and finer variety and is mostly used to weave soft fabrics such as turbans and handkerchiefs. Mukta is a coarse and durable silk used for kimkhabs, as fine silk does not withstand heavy gold patterns.

**Silk:** The basic raw material of many types of brocade is mainly mulberry silk thread. This was originally imported from China, Persia and central Asia and later was also brought from Italy. Apart from the inherent beauty of silk brocades, the fact that they were made from non-indigenous materials added to their value. Japanese and Chinese silk threads were renowned for their superior qualities of evenness and shine. Mulberry silk was found in India in Assam and Bengal. It also grew in Chota Nagpur, Bihar, Punjab and Kashmir. The well known varieties of silk are munga and tassar. Murshidabad became a flourishing silk centre in the 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) centuries. Most of the silk produced at these centres was exported and a small percentage was used by local weavers.
Silk threads were classified according to their structure, texture, characteristics and laid-down regulations. Chinya is a silk thread with a twist, also known as spun silk and used in making heavy brocades such as kimkhab. Pat or patbana is a silk thread without a twist and is used in both heavy and light fabrics. Raw silk is specially treated for brocades. It is first twisted (called silk throwing) after which the threads undergo reeling and checking for uniformity and roundness. When the yarn has been processed, it is bleached and “de-gummed” as raw silk has a gum like substance (sericin) in its composition. This has to be removed in order to bring out the sheen and softness and to enable penetration of the dye. The task has to be done with great care as the fibres can weaken or get damaged. The silk is boiled in soap water for certain duration and then sent for dyeing.

**Zari:** Zari is the gold and silver thread used in Indian brocades. These were produced mainly in Surat and Varanasi. Kalabattu, the gold and silver thread is not a wire of gold but a specially prepared thread of silk with metallic mounting of silver and gold.

Zari is of two types – **Badla** and **Kalabattu**. Badla zari is made of flattened gold and silver wires with a peculiar stiffness which cracks and therefore has gone out of favour among contemporary weavers. Kalabattu is a thin silver or gold wire that is wound around silk or cotton and now even rayon thread. It is not uncommon to find a blend of gold and silver zari in brocades. This impact is called Ganga Jamuni.

### 2.3.2 Fabric types

Brocade fabric types can be classified into two:

- **Loom finish**
- **Yardage**

Loom finished fabrics are saris, odhini, patkas, pankhas, curtains etc. Yardage is usually used for dress material, upholstery and curtains. The best known brocade fabrics were kamkhwab or kinkhab. Their main centres were Varanasi, Ahmedabad and Surat. Their splendour, elegance and cost gave them their name, which means, ‘something a person cannot dream of if he has not seen it’ (Kam: little, khwab: dream; kin: golden in Chinese). Its specialty is the profuse use of gold and silver thread, such that the silk background is barely visible. It is mainly used for ceremonial robes, hangings and furnishings.

Kinkhab can be of four types:

1. Cloth with pure gold or of silver.
2. Brocade in which the gold or silver thread plays the most important part, with coloured silks interwoven here and there to emphasize the design.
3. Bafta are mostly of closed woven colour silks, with only selected parts of the design in gold or silver thread.
4. Very light brocades of silk, muslins with very little metallic thread, or with golden borders and end pieces sewn on them.
2.3.3 Well known varieties of Brocade

1. Alfi: It is pattern zari brocade used as dress material. The gold or silver zari ‘butis’ are outlined with single or double coloured thread and it is called ‘Meenakari’. It is a specialty of Banaras. In Alfi, only the outline of the pattern is made with colored thread. The inner work is always either in silver or in gold thread.

2. Tashi: It is a variety of kinkhab in which the ground is worked with an extra warp of gold badla zari to create a pattern with an extra weft of silver badla zari or vice versa. Tashi was probably the ancient golden cloth made in India, China or Tibet.

3. Pot Than or Bafta: They are also known as Katan brocades. In this, the silk background is patterned with silk pattern or zari. The material is lighter and is used to make saris and garments.

4. Himru or Amru: These are woven like kinkhwabs, but without the use of kalabattu (see below in raw materials). The pattern is woven using silk thread on silk.

5. Mashru: This is a mixed fabric with a woven striped or zigzag pattern. The warp and weft used are of two different materials like silk and cotton, wool and cotton etc and became popular among Muslims who were not allowed to wear pure silk.

6. Tissue: A thin transparent lightweight material used mainly for turbans, veils, dupattas and saris. Tissue or tarbana is made of single silk warp and single gold weft.

7. Kora Silk: The warp and weft of this material is made of pure raw silk with designs made with extra cotton weft. It is used as dress material and saris.

To summarize:
- Banaras brocades have a rich tradition dating back several centuries.
- Brocades are of two main types - pure silk and zari brocades.
- Raw Silk of several types is the most important raw material in brocade weaving. It must be treated before it is used for weaving of brocades.
- Zari is the gold/silver thread used in brocades.
- Kinkhab is the most well known brocade fabric and is of four main types.

Self-check Questions

2. What are the two broad classes of brocades?
3. Name the two fabric types of Brocades.

4. Name some of the well known varieties of Brocades.

2.4 Pattern

Nature served as the primary source of design making, with the floral forms called butis or butas. Butis (Fig. 2.5) are smaller in size and often made of a single flower, bird, animal or leaf. There are basic patterns which are shaped into several forms such as Badam (Almond) buti, Kairi (Mango) buti, Chaand (Moon) buti, Asharfi (coin) buti (Fig. 2.6), Paan (beetle leaf) buti and Pankha (fan) buti. There are a number of patterns which are derived from jewellery. The decorative mango shaped buta is called Turanj.

Another celebrated pattern of Banaras brocade is Jaal or net design, also known as Jangala. It is a rich pattern covering the ground of the fabric and owes its origin to Turkish brocades. The Banaras Jaal was very delicate. In the Jaal, flower, bird or animal forms were enclosed within a net-worked form evolved from arch, square or other geometrical forms. Flowers and creepers were interlocked, filling up the ground. The Hyderabadi Jungla was introduced to the weavers of Varanasi on demand of the court of Nizam of Hyderabad. Another adaptation from the Persian prototype which became the specialty of Varanasi is Latifa buti, probably named after its designer Latif Mian.

It is a pattern of flowering plant swaying with the wind. The presentation of leaf, flowers, fruits, birds or animals is lyrical but the discipline of a pattern is not disturbed. Even though the outline is not always visible, the forms within which these designs are conceived, is clear.

Religion too provided a variety of decorative motifs. Varanasi being a religious centre had a large demand for cloth woven specially for temples and devotees. Along with floral patterns, auspicious symbols and figures of deities were also used as motifs. Garments such as caps and Safas or angochas had religious mantras woven into them (Fig. 2.8).

2.5 Importance of Colour
Colour plays a vital part in weaving brocade. The charm and subtle beauty of the brocade depends upon colour synchronization. Colours are surcharged with nuances of mood and poetic association in fabrics and weaving as much as in painting. Red is the colour of love, yellow is the colour of basant (spring) or young blossoms, Nila is the colour of Lord Krishna, who is linked to a rain filled cloud and Gerua (saffron) is the colour of the earth etc.

Earlier, vegetable dyes were used during weaving. These produced fast colours, lasted for almost a generation and remained as beautiful and vivid as ever. Nowadays, chemical dyes have gained popularity as they are cheaper, less time-consuming, produce a large variety of colours, and can be manufactured on large scale. Among the chemical dyes, bukni (aniline) was very frequently used to obtain various shades of blue, red and pink. Red and pink were very popular particularly among the common people, for the base colour of fabrics. Some of the names used in Banaras, for the various colours in which fabrics were produced, are:

- Kasni – mixed colour of blue, red & yellow
- Zard – yellow
- Gandhaki – sulphur-yellow
- Kapasi – pale yellow
- Basanti – primrose
- Motia – yellowish-red
- Kaulai – deep orange
- Sultani surkh – scarlet
- Surkh – red and magenta
- Gulabi – pink
- Asmani – sky blue
- Ferozai – turquoise blue
- Lajwanti – deep blue.
- Baijni – violet
- Uda – purple blue
- Kahi – dark green
- Khaky – grey
- Kafuri – straw-coloured
- Badami – light buff

Activity

2. Sketch some Butis used in Banaras Brocade and colour them.

2.6 Weaving

The looms used in various regions for weaving fabrics by the brocading technique vary to a large extent. The looms used in Banaras for the purpose are pit looms, Jacquard looms and power looms. Madanpura and Alaipura are considered traditional weaving areas in Benaras. Each group has its own distinctive style of weaving. The work of Madanpura is traditional and known for its fine designs and colours and woven light transparent materials. The work of Alaipura is not so good but they experiment with new techniques and designs.
2.7 Naksha or the Design

Designs for weaving are made by Naqshaband. They are special master craftsmen in Benaras and are greatly respected by the weavers. The main role of the Naqshaband is to draw a pattern on paper and then create a design on a small wooden frame on which cotton threads form a grid of the warp and the weft. This is known as the Jala.

Preparation of design depends on the creativity of designers. The design is graphed on the graph sheet, usually in white colour. For Jacquard weaving, the graph is accordingly punched on the hard paper, which is ultimately transferred to Jacquard loom.

Originality in designs of Banaras is a key contradiction to the traditional designs and motifs. Of late, many more designs comprising of motifs and patterns of folk-art of Assam, Bengal and Gujarat, as also some adaptations of those that are depicted in the art of Mughal, Rajasthan and Pahari, have been introduced. Favourite patterns were complex floral patterns of 'buti' and combinations thereof, as also geometrical patterns of compartments or closed figures called ‘jal’ or ‘jangla’

The poppy, rose, jasmine, lily, swan, bulbul (nightingale), hunting scenes (Shikarghara), the deer, the tiger and elephant, or the God Krishna and the gopis (milkmaids), the mango, flame (Kalka), scrolls, and flowers often combined with flowing stems and leaves, were among the popular motifs. There were other Nature themes too. For example, the Indian brocade the “chand-tara or the moon and stars” is covered all over with these motifs. Like the Indian muslins, Kin-khabs are known by names of poetic fancy, ‘Ripples of silver’ (Mazchar), 'Sunshine and Shade' (Dhup-Chaun), 'Nightingale's eyes and Pigeon's eyes' (Bulbul-chasm and Halimtarakshi) and Peacock’s neck (Murgala).

One of the important factors determining the use of raw materials is their availability and cost. For example, the silk yarn ‘Kalabuttu’, or its alternative, rayon. In modern times industry captured the market using rayon, a chemical fibre, as silk yarn - kalabuttu is comparatively costly.

2.8 The Markets

Brocade has always been a special fabric catering to the needs of the affluent belonging to the princely states and aristocratic society of India. This received a serious setback in 1947 due to the abolition of princely states. The old market was lost and a new market yet to be found.

Today Banaras brocade is once again in great demand. The vitality of the weaving tradition has reasserted itself. A number of techniques from other centres have
been absorbed. The tanchoi of Surat has been developed into a range of styles. The jamavar pattern and technique of Kashmir has been adapted for saris.

A new range of rich fabrics for the export market have enriched the repertoire of the wavers. The Vishwakarma exhibitions (festivals of India) held in the UK, France and U.S.A., between 1982-85, proved to be the catalyst which revived traditional Indian patterns and fabrics. Indian fabrics became a great success with the fashion designer as well as consumers of a certain class.

2.9 Assignments

2.9.1 Class assignments

i) Make a replica on a drawing sheet of a Banaras brocade sari border.

ii) Draw sketches of various motifs used on Banaras brocades.

2.9.2 Home assignments

i) Find samples of brocade fabrics in your house, a sari shop, books, magazines and internet which represent different weaving styles and techniques you have studies so far. Paste them neatly on clear pages with labels under each photo or picture.

2.10 Summing Up

Banaras Brocade, also known as Kin-khab, is a closely woven silk fabric with designs worked out in gold and silver. Banarasi weavers were unique in their patterns. Nakashabands were the master craftsmen in Banaras and specialized in Jala. Brocade weaving centre were originally established in the capitals of kingdoms and holy cities to fulfil the demand for expensive fabrics by Royal families and temples. Alaipura and Madanpura were the two great traditional weaving centres of Banaras Brocade, each producing distinctly different brocades.

Nature served as the primary source of design making with the floral forms, called Butis and Butas. Butis are small in size often made of single flower, bird, animal or leaf. Jal or net design, also known as Jangala, is another pattern of Banaras Brocade. Banaras Jal is very delicate.

Colour plays a vital role in weaving of Banaras Brocade. Red and pink colours were very popular, particularly among the common people. Zari is a specially prepared silk thread, with metallic mounting of silver and gold.
2.11 Possible Answers to Self-check Questions

1. Banaras brocades are closely woven silk fabrics with designs worked out in gold or silver. Banaras brocade is also known as Kin-khab.

2. The two broad classes of Brocades are i) Brocades of pure silk and cotton blends; and ii) Zari brocades with gold and silver threads.

3. The two fabric types of Brocades are – Loom finish and Yardage.

4. Some of the well known varieties of Brocades are Alfi, Tashi, Pot Than or Bafta, Himru or Amru, Mashru, Tissue and Kora silk.

2.12 Terminal Questions

1. Explain why brocade weaving centres in India developed in and around the capitals of the kingdoms or holy cities.

2. What is the contribution of Muhammad Bin Tughlaq in promoting brocades?

3. What are the materials used in zari preparation?

4. How does Banaras brocade resemble the Jamawar shawls of Kashmir?

5. Name the looms used in Banaras for weaving.

6. Describe briefly the history of Banaras brocades.

7. Describe different forms of Butis used in Banaras brocade.

8. What light does the Buddhist literature throw on Banaras brocade?

9. Mention any five colours used in Banaras brocade.

10. Explain the importance of colour in weaving Banaras brocade. Why are the vegetable dyes being replaced by the synthetic dyes?

11. Fill in the blanks:
   i) The decorative mango shaped buta is called ____________________.
   ii) The Hiranya cloth mentioned in the Rig Veda has been interpreted as the earliest equivalent for the ________________.
   iii) The word brocade is derived from the Latin word _________________.
   iv) In Kashmir, the brocade art was introduced in the 15th century by _________________.
   v) Jaal or the net design is also known as _________________.
   vi) ________________ is obtained by mixing colours of Red, Blue and Yellow.
   vii) Use of ________________ and ________________ makes pure gold zari.

12. Indicate whether True and False:
i) In Banaras brocade mostly multi-coloured patterns are used. True / False

ii) The term Kin-khab literally means a Cloth of Silver. True / False

iii) Red is the colour of Lord Krishna, who is linked to a rain filled cloud. True / False

iv) Gerua is the colour of Earth. True / False

v) There is no resemblance between Banaras brocade and the Jamawar shawls of Kashmir. True / False

vi) The Hyderabadi Jungla was introduced to the weavers of Banaras on demand of the court of Nizam of Hyderabad. True / False

vii) Kafuri is the light buff colour used in Banaras brocade. True / False

2.13 References and Suggested Further Reading


8. Silk Brocades (Roli Books) – Yashodhara Agarwal
### 2.14 Glossary

1. **Jacquard**
   A punch-card pattern-selecting device for handlooms or power looms. It was refined and patented by J.M. Jacquard in 1804. Its speed and ease of use has made the older draw-looms obsolete throughout most of India.

2. **Pitloom**
   A horizontal, ground-staked handloom at which the weaver sits in a pit dug below the floor level; this is a space-and-lumber-saving loom-type typical of most village production in India today.

3. **Warp**
   Set of parallel threads mounted on a loom's frame, kept in supply on a warp beam. In India hand weavers make warps long enough to make three to six saris at one time. (The length of the warp determines the overall length of the woven cloth coming off the loom)

4. **Weft**
   A set of threads that runs at right angles to the warp, interworking with them to create various structures of weaves, such as plain or twill weave.

5. **Shuttle**
   A boat shaped device containing a supply of weft thread on a spool. It travels through the shed from one side of the loom to the other propelled either by weaver's hand or by a mechanical fly-arm.

6. **Tabby weave**
   An over-one, under-one weave structure is called Tabby weave.

7. **Twill weave**
   Warp thread interlaced with the wefts in a progressive, stepped sequence producing diagonals in the fabric.