

Animal and bird motifs of Murshidabad's Baluchari silk of India

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Abstract

The present study was conducted to document the animals and birds motifs as design enrichment on Murshidabad's Baluchari silk of India. The study emphasized that varied animals and bird motifs were used in Murshidabad's Baluchari silk in order to beautify the fabric from past till present day. The foremost objective of the study was to study the representation of the animals and bird motifs and to comprehend the applications of these motifs in Baluchari saris of India. The data were collected through individual observation of specimens in various museums, emporiums, handloom fairs. The research methodology was qualitative and to derive information various motifs were gathered from books, articles, magazines, and online articles on Baluchari saris of India. The documentation of motifs is very vital and it will assist as a guide to the craftsmen, as they represent the mastermind of unique talent effortlessly synthesized from time to time to new cultural influences. Through documentation, this collective variety of animal and bird motifs used on Baluchari textiles will be accessible to designers, artisans, academicians and students. It can also involve conserving a way of life and attitudes in addition to a set of techniques passed down through the generations.

Keywords: Animals motifs, baluchari, birds' motifs, design, documentation.

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1. Introduction

The art of weaving, one of the earliest of human crafts that began as a utility, gradually evolved into an index of aesthetic progress and some of the products eventually acquired the dignity of recognized art objects like masterpieces in another form.

The Baluchar style originally comes from a place of the same name in Murshidabad district, West Bengal, and had its heyday under the patronage of the royalty and nobility (Chattopadhyay, 1995). Among the wide range of Murshidabad's beautiful textiles, the most artistic was the Baluchari. It has been eulogized as the "loveliest and most charming of all silks of India"; fantastic in their uniqueness they form today the prized antiques of art hunters and precious heirlooms of many a Bengalee home (Sukla, 1992).

Baluchari sari was a popular nineteenth century figured silk, elaborately woven brocade known to have been made at least as early as the mid eighteenth century through to about 1900 in the village surrounding Baluchar. Baluchar saris are similar in appearance and in weaving techniques to many Banaras brocades, although they never contain zari thread, only silk (Linton, 2009).

Baluchar had a distinction of its own and it stood as a class by itself. The high class texture of the silk, the extra judicious color harmony and pictorial splendor combined have conferred unsurpassed charm, elegance and dignity to it. So though brilliant in appearance, the color harmony was rather soft, subtle and reposeful; with sensitive touches of gaiety and glamour (Sukla, 1992).

2. Methodology

The research approach is qualitative. For analysis, a variety of content analysis was used to systematically document the birds and animal motifs used in the decoration of the Banaras brocades of India. Information related to birds and animal motifs was collected from primary and secondary sources. Primary source comprised of specimen, of embroidered traditional Indian textiles. Actual samples were seen in various museums, emporiums, exhibition, fairs, malls, haat, etc. Few of the places visited were: The National Crafts museum, Delhi, The National Museum, Delhi, Dilli Haat, New Delhi, Surajkund Mela, different state Emporiums, Exhibitions and fairs related to textiles of India like Trade Fairs, Handloom Expo etc. Secondary sources of data collection were books, articles, magazines, online visual collections, and online articles, various researches both published and unpublished on traditional embroideries of India. Documentation of motifs is done. The documentation of motifs is very vital and it will assist as a guide to the craftsmen, as they represent the mastermind of unique talent effortlessly synthesized from time to time to new cultural influences. Through documentation, this collective variety of animal and bird motifs used on Baluchari textiles will be accessible to designers, artisans, academician and students. Documenting a cultural heritage linked with a craft is directly related to the preservation of traditional art. Historical database always serves as an indication of the original form of any craft and provides better insight. It provides an inspiration for modification and innovation in the present and continuity for future.

2. Results and Discussions

The most striking is the design, composition of the Baluchari fabrics. Baluchari means the exquisite Baluchari saris, 5 yards in length, 42 inches in width and woven in silk, which were unique. Its chief characteristics was the emphasis on the 14 to 32 inches anchala (Pallu) or end piece which was decorated with utmost silk so much so that the motifs and subjects worked can now be looked upon as a reflection of contemporary life style and tradition (Das, 1992).

It is a plain woven fabric brocaded with untwisted silk thread but with unique designs. The big pallu which is main piece is a large panel with mangoes in the centre, bordered by diverse designs, depicting royal court, domestic or travel scenes with horse riders and palanquins, the lotus, the bee, the rosette, the stylized peacock, the bridal alpina (floor design) of Bengal, the Taj etc. (Chattopadhyay, 1995).

They have elaborate floral borders, buti in the field and a row of the large floral kalga in the center of the end piece. The kalga are characteristically surrounded by up to three boxes like rows containing a repeat motif of human figures. The figures are commonly involved in such activities as smoking a hookah, riding elephant, riding horse, or smelling a flower etc. (Linton & Singh, 2009).

A remarkable feature of the Baluchari saris is the introduction of human figures in their contemporary costumes and modes.

India had a past tradition of floral and a bewildering range of textile designs, figured with hamsa (swan) and other animal motifs. This tradition can be traced in a few available old specimens where the peacock motif either is single or in pairs, rows of deer in alternate colors can be seen. Floral motifs, flowering shrubs, mango motif or *kalka*, tree of life or meandering creeper as a reminder of traditional decorative designs of India and influence of Hindu spirit (Katiyar, 2000).

The old designs gradually transformed into newer forms by the introduction of human motifs with Muslim setting. Pictorial representation of subjects included a seated lady holding a flower, a lady riding on horseback, a lady smoking a traditional hookah, a pair of ladies with birds in hands or in conversation. Male figures on horseback represented nobility (Chishti, 2013).

Figure 1. Few of the Baluchari textiles depicting animal and bird motifs



3.1. Present status

The Baluchar saris being woven on jacquard looms in Bishnupur and Murshidabad today do not compare with the traditional Baluchar either in texture or technique, for they attempt the pictorial element without the body and substance of what gave the Baluchar its character.

The researcher analyzed that some of the most common animal motifs are horses, elephants, deer, hunting scenes and lions. Most common motifs from bird kingdom were; hamsa (swan), peacock motif either single or in pairs and parrots.

These animal and bird motifs were seen individually, in pairs, in the group or in association with other motifs like horses with riders, elephants with rider, lady riding on horseback, chariot driven by horses, lady feeding a peacock, palanquin, royal court, Baluchar butedar (floral patterned) like lotus, rosette, the bridal alpina (floor design) of Bengal, The Taj, kalga (Mango motif), tree of life or meandering creeper, human figures like a seated lady holding a flower, a lady smoking a traditional hookah, a pair of ladies with birds in hands or in conversation.

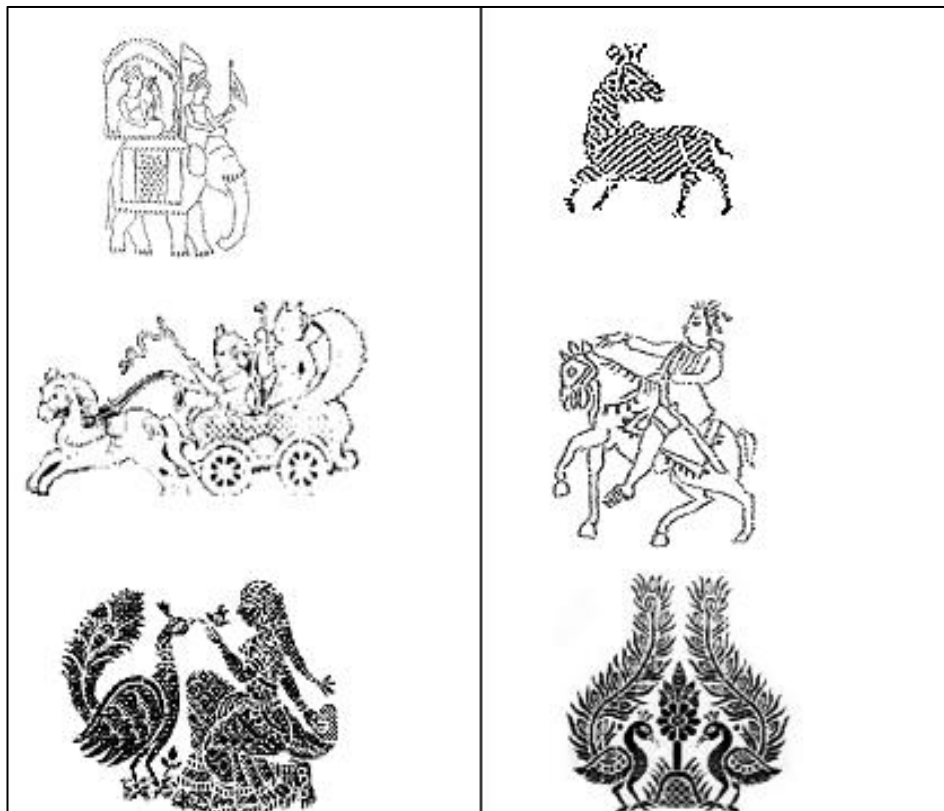


Figure 2. Few of the animal and bird motifs

4. Conclusion and recommendations

The Baluchari saris of Murshidabad are characterized with horse, elephant, deer, hunting scene, and lion motifs. Other motifs from bird kingdom were; hamsa (Swan), peacock either single or in pair and parrot. These animal and bird motifs were seen individually, in pairs, in group or in connection with other motifs. The study could be done related to product diversification of this Baluchar work and the rehabilitation of crafts person involved in this work.

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