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Banaras Brocades

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BANARAS BROCADES

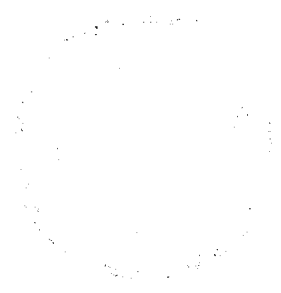
Edited by
AJIT MOOKERJEE



Banaras

- Fig. 1 *Chiriyā būṭī*: bird motif, detail from the frontispiece. Taken from a *Kimkhāb* piece.
Fig. 2 *Koniyā*: the corner *Shikārgāh* hunting scene, detail from the frontispiece.
Fig. 3 *Haran būṭī*: the deer motif, detail from the frontispiece.

On the cover: *Thān* (for sewn garments), *Janglā Shikārgāh*, probably manufactured in some centre outside Banaras, ca. 1925 A.D.



Brocades

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

by Rai Anand Krishna

LIVING WEAVERS AT WORK

by Vijay Krishna

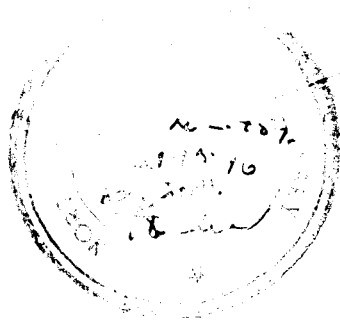
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Preface

Banaras (Vārāṇasī) has long been famous for its brocades and sārīs. 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 or silver. Silk was added later to give colour and a body to the textile. Now gold or silver wire is used as a special weft twisted along with the silk. The Banaras brocades and sārīs are really 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 retained its lustre and colour for hundreds of years. The art of brocade-weaving has survived the ravages of time and even today various types of brocades are produced in large quantities.

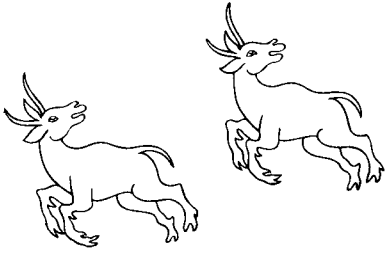
To pay homage to our living mastercraftsmen, the Crafts Museum has been publishing authoritative as well as useful works on Indian arts and crafts. Second in the series, the book provides a survey of the historical background and living weavers at work. This is probably the first attempt ever made to present a fairly comprehensive study of the general pattern and character of Banaras brocades.

Multicolour and monochrome plates in this book give the reader a glimpse of wealth of traditional textile designs of Banaras.

The short notes, which accompany the illustrations, give the necessary technical information about the different designs, thus making the book useful not only to the serious student of textiles but also to the ordinary reader.

As Director of the Museum, I should like to express deep gratitude to the members of the Crafts Museum and officials of the All India Handicrafts Board, particularly the Chairman, Smt. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, who initiated the scheme. Thanks are due to Shri Brijpal Das, Mayor of Banaras, and to various master weavers for their unflinching help and co-operation. The Museum also appreciates the valuable advice received from Dr. Nihar Ranjan Ray, Dr. Moti Chandra and Dr. S. K. Saraswati.

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BANARAS BROCADES

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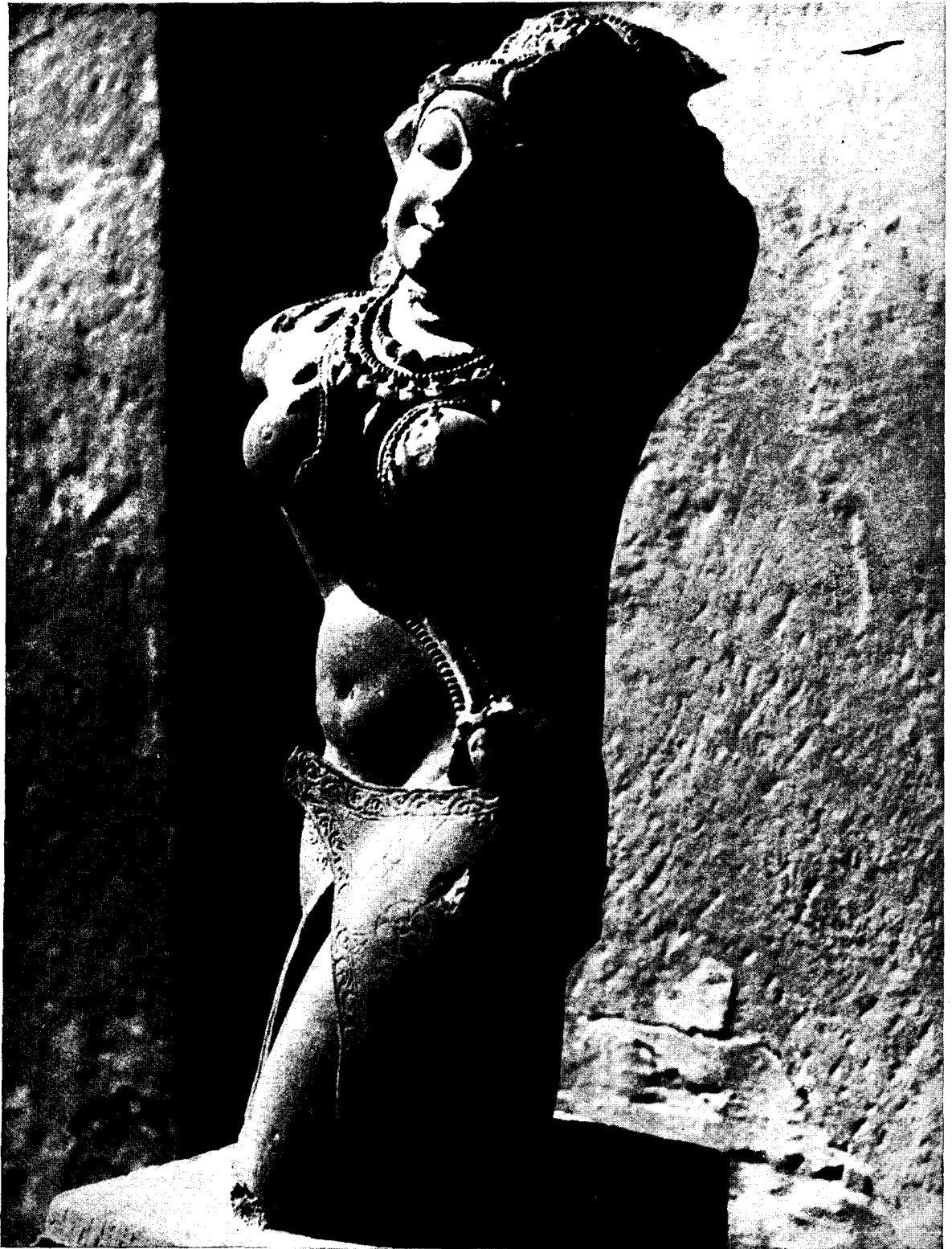


Fig. 4 *Vrikshikā* wearing a brocade piece: from Gyāraspur, now Gwalior Fort, Archaeological Museum, Madhya Pradesh. c. 10th century A.D.

CHAPTER ONE

Historical Background of the brocade and zari textiles

Banaras is a world-famous centre of hand-made textiles. Its principal products are the *zari* and brocades. These fabrics seem to have a long and continuous tradition in our cultural history. Other centres in India also produced and continue to produce the abovementioned types of textiles, but the ancient tradition of weaving is more preserved in Banaras than anywhere else.

Since the *Rig Vedic times*, we hear about several kinds of textiles among which figures out the cloth of gold¹ (the *Hiranya*) as a distinguished type. The gods in their resplendent grandeur wear it, as they drive in their stately chariots. The *hiranya* cloth has been usually interpreted as the earliest equivalent for the present day *zari* work or the *kimkhāb* (brocades). We also find specific reference to the embroidery in the Vedic literature.²

After a vacuum of almost a thousand years or more of the post-Vedic period, we are ushered into the age of early Indian empires about which important and contemporary literary accounts are abundantly available. The sixth century B.C. presents a mature society, complexity of thought and advancement of material progress including the art of weaving. The *Jātaka* tales³ and other early Pāli texts form the main source of our information in that period of Indian history; we know about the weavers (*tantuvāyas*), their guilds and several interesting details about their technique.

The *Jātakas* supply other interesting informations about the brocades. "The silk cloth (*koseyya*)" was most probably embroidered by gold. Kings wore turbans of gold (cloth). The state elephants also had golden trappings.⁴

1. *Rig Veda*, 5/55/6 wherein Maruts appear wearing such cloths.

2. Dr. Motichandra—Prāchīna Bhāratīya Veśa Bhūṣhā (Hindi, 1950) p. 4.

3. Ratilāl Shāh—Pre-Buddhist India (Bombay 1939) p. 194 ff.

4. *Ibid* p. 195.

CHAPTER TWO

Living Weavers at Work

PREFACE

A visit to any weaver's house in Madanpurā or Alaipurā, or any suburban locality (the manufacturing centres of Banarasi fabrics) in Banaras will convince the visitor of the complexity of the process of brocade manufacture. The visitor will find neither an ordinary, simple folk-loom nor a power-driven mechanical loom of precision, but he will find in a congested apartment an indigenous wooden loom of its own pattern having an elaborate and crowded arrangement of cotton strings from top to bottom. Here, he will also observe the absence of rapid motion, exactness in working, and uniform punctuality in the sequences of the different operations. Instead, he will find a concentrated simple human figure, patiently and quietly sitting at it, and like a puppet, now and then swiftly passing or retorting the shuttle through the layers of the warps, and then immediately purfling along the weft with gold thread or dyed silk by tucking its tubicles through the warp. He carefully works the whole day, and for days together, in the hope of a bright future when he would be able to turn his product into money for future investment and for subsidising his family. This is the general and most familiar appearance of a manufactory of Banaras brocades. But one cannot realise that behind this commonplace view lies the mystery of the elaborate process from selection and preparation of the yarn to the reproduction of the rich designs, all of which require traditional training and practice, and observation, experience, and skill of the artisan.

THE SILK YARN

Selection and acquisition of suitable material and to make it fit for use are the first and most important steps of the industry. Of this, the silk yarn forms the chief element.

The operation begins with the selection of the raw silk which is of various qualities, and imported from various production centres. Formerly

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