

# Baluchari: Evolution and the Present Status of the Craft

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**ABSTRACT:** Baluchuri weave is a style of brocade weaving introduced during the eighteenth and nineteenth century in India. The craft originated and derived its name from the village of Baluchar (present day Jiaganj) in Murshidabad district of West Bengal. The prime focus of the craft was its elaborate and intricate *pallu* / *anchal* or the end piece, the border and *butis* or sprigs scattered on the field of the *saree* (India traditional dress for women). The saree was initially patronized by the Mughal ruler Murshid Quli Khan (first Nawab of Bengal serving from 1717 to 1727) and gained popularity among nobles and traders of that time. However, due to various reasons this craft got almost extinct, it has been revived again in the last century through the initiative of Central Government and have been prospering since then. The present work has been done in spatio-temporal frame. The evolution was analysed through secondary data, existing samples and visuals along with primary field data. The present status of the craft was analysed through extensive primary research and field study and through in-depth personal interviews as well. The survey of the two different markets i.e., Delhi and Kolkata, was conducted in two stages through structured questionnaire. The results generated were quite interesting affirming a great huge scope for further research. The present paper discusses on the rise, the gradual decline and the revival of and spread of this craft again by the initiative of the Indian government.

## INTRODUCTION

The record of ancient and medieval Indian textiles exists mostly in literature and sculpture. There is archaeological evidence of a cotton textile industry at Mohenjo-Daro in the Indus Valley around 3000 BC, and a few fragments survive from much later periods (Sukaadas,'92). Most of the extant textiles are dated after the seventeenth century, because the monsoon climate has been very destructive to early

specimens. The Greeks with Alexander the Great wrote of the fine flowered muslins and robes embroidered in gold they had seen in India. They may also have seen the cotton fibre that grew on trees.

A handbook of Kautilya's administration, the *Arthashastra* (an ancient Indian treatise on statecraft, economic policy and military strategy), tentatively dated to the third century BC, dealt with methods for distributing materials to spinners and weavers whether the workers were guild members or worked privately at home. At that time, few occupations were open to women. In ancient and medieval India, the textile industries were politically controlled, and if a ruler

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was favourably disposed towards the arts, weaving prospered. Differentiation was made between the rural textiles woven for the masses and those made in state workshops for royalty and the well-to-do in other countries. The best workmanship was found in the ritual hangings for temples. Fabric names apparently represented the places where they were woven, and details about weaving techniques were scanty.

A succession of Sultans controlled most of India until Genghis Khan attacked early in the thirteenth century and Tamerlane invaded in the late fourteenth. Returning home from China in 1292 CE Marco Polo left detailed accounts of the people and industries of the coastal regions of India in the late thirteenth century (Sukaadas, '92). He mentioned seeing on the Coromandel Coast the finest and most beautiful cloth in all the world like '*buckrams*' like the tissues of spider webs, and he observed dyeing with indigo in the great textile centre of Cambay and spinning of cotton in Gujarat. Under the Sultan of Delhi (1325-1351) a permit was required to buy silks, satins, and brocades, and only the well-to-do were allowed to have them. The Sultan employed four thousand silk weavers who made robes of honour, hangings, and gifts of gold brocade for foreign dignitaries (Wilson, '79).

Babur, a descendant of Genghis Khan, founded a new and important dynasty, the Mughal, in 1526. A series of great rulers – the greatest of them Akbar who ruled for the second half of the sixteenth century – governed a glorious empire where the textile arts flourished until the late seventeenth century. Some of the best accounts of Indian textiles were written by European ambassadors to the Mogul courts. Fabulous horse and elephant trappings, as well as the apparel, pillows, and wall hangings, were remarked upon. A king always wore a garment but once. There were marvellous gold brocades called *kimhabs*, or *kincobs* (India silk brocaded with flowers in silver or gold), from Banaras. Writers proclaimed on the sheerness of Dacca muslins, called evening dew, running water, or sweet-like- 'sherbert'. Seventy-three yards, a yard wide, weighed only one pound. By comparison, the finest Swiss cottons ever made were at best sixteen or seventeen yards to the pound (Wild and Wild, 2005).

During the Mughal rule, manufacture of textile reached new zeniths; Akbar developed the *kharkanas* (court workshop) (Gillow and Bernard, '91; Roy, 2007; Harris, 2004) to impart the improved system and skills of manufacture to the people. Under the puritanical Aurangzeb (1658-1707) the *kharkanas* (Gillow and Bernard, '91; Roy, 2007) of the Mughal court at Lahore, Agra and other cities declined and the craftsmen relocated to their own towns and villages. A new generation of Indian weavers became *ustads* themselves and the technique of brocade weaving soon spread to central India and Bengal, the land or the natural habitat of the wild silk moths, where silk cloths of simpler designs were woven for generations.

Bengal which produced the finest wild silk started producing soft brocades of pure silk with mellow colours. The Baluchari saree has a sprawling epic quality that almost refuses to be contained. The undulating sandy shore and the, lifting waves spell the charm of Baluchari sari (Khera, '90). Baluchari textiles are essentially 'Baluchar Butidar' sarees that stand out for their outstanding choices of motifs and the complicative weaving technique. Other than the saree, only a small group is comprised of *rumals* (square scarves), table cloths, *sashes* (a *sash* is a large and usually colourful ribbon or band worn around the body, draping from one shoulder to the opposing hip, or else running around the waist), and shawls which are rarely to be actually found, apart from literary references. The unique feature that the Baluchari saree beholds is the elaborately woven *anchal* or *pallu* or *pallav*. And the exquisite borders. Silk weft dyed in white, antique gold, orange, red, yellow, green etc. are generally used to create the designs, with dark shades like blue used for the field colours. Designs so woven like mosaic look like enamel led jewels on dark background (Khera, '90). The *kalka* or the mango motif characterized the *anchal* or *pallu* with diverse designs bordering the saree. The body of the sari covered with sprigs of '*butis*' epitomized the name '*butidar Baluchari*' (Khera, '90; Lynton, '95; Chisti and Singh, 2010; Harris, 2004).

The Baluchari saree became extinct with the death of master craftsman Dubraj (Khera, '90;) about hundred and four years ago approximately. With the efforts of All India Handicrafts Board and the Design

Centre in 1956, the Baluchari art was revived where *sarees* were being produced by weavers of Bishnupur in Bankura district. The initial days saw replicating and reviving the old pieces from the Baluchar region, but as time moved on newer innovations developed gradually.

### METHODOLOGY

Methodology is an integral part of any research and for this paper bottoms up approach have been used. This idea for this topic was conceived during the classroom interaction with dissertation guide. Then descriptive literature review was done on the Indian crafts. This resulted narrowing down to Baluchari craft. To understand the evolution, we had to first understand the origins of the craft from many craft museums located both at Kolkata and Delhi, through several visits, to understand the finer design of the craft and its history. After this the field site was chosen. The ethnographic study was conducted in 3 successive field visit in the year of 2013 among the weavers using unstructured interviews.

Upon gaining the knowledge from weaver and analysing their craft by visually comparing with those of preserved design of museums paper was written.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Old and undivided Bengal is known for its ancient textile tradition, which was rooted above all other in skilled weaving of the delicate muslins, folk embroideries of the quilts and the finest woven silk saris. The fine *malmals* and *jamdanis* of Dacca and the Baluchar brocades saris of Murshidabad were prized possessions (Gillow and Bernard, '91; Khera, '90). The exquisite ornamental ground, stylized corner figure and highly decorative end piece or *pallu* and border made the *butidar* Baluchari most popular and cherished possession (Khera, '90; Chisti and Singh, 2010; Harris, 2004). The name Baluchari is derived and named after the village of Baluchar, situated on the banks of the river Bhagirathi, in Murshidabad district of West Bengal. Although the village is not indicated on maps as a village but the old area of the Baluchar village form parts of four different 'mouzas' (smallest administrative part of a town) of Jiaganj municipality. The origin of the Baluchari lies in the town of Baluchar – a sandy shore

(modern day Jiaganj) in Murshidabad. It was patronized by Murshid Kuli Khan in the early eighteenth century while transferring his capital to Murshidabad (after his name). The formation of the actual *Baluchar gharana* is not dated but the sarees, handkerchiefs and shawls show a highly technical excellence (Khera, '90) which were woven on primitive looms. This particular type of brocade silk along with such difficult multi coloured motifs required a very complex loom, and the 'naqsha' or the primitive version of the modern day jacquard loom was best suited for fulfilling the purpose. The silks woven in Baluchar region were most intricate and sought-after silk in Bengal. 'Naksha/Naqsha' means pattern and each of the patterns were designed separately and the warps of the thread on the loom were set accordingly.

A great deal needs to be clarified, which is difficult since no large-scale research on this aspect has been undertaken so far. As stated by Amit Ray, "The main hurdle is establishing a precise chronology for these beautiful fabrics is the lack of written data" (cf. Rakob, '95). There are two dates that mark the most likely period of Baluchar weaving. The first is 1704, during this year, Murshid Quli Kan of the Subha of Bengal, moved the capital of Bengal Presidency from Dacca to Murshidabad (Rakob, '95). Murshidabad at that time was already known for sericulture, due to the supreme quality of the silk produced in the region, it became a flourishing centre for trade and commerce where Jain traders, nobles and craftsmen came to settle. Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, especially, the newly established court exercised great influence and was conducive to the social thrust for developing such a unique form of an art requiring not only skilled masters but also well to do patrons (Rakob, '95). The second date is in the year 1903, the year when master Dubraj Das died at the age of ninety, who was the only master in the art of Baluchari weaving. The general opinion is that with the death of the master these artistic textiles also got extinct (Rakob, '95).

### THE PIONEERS, THE COMMUNITY AND THEIR TRADING POINT

Speaking on the origin of Baluchari, without the mentioning of Dubraj, its origin is incomplete. Mia

Jan, Dubraj Das, Hemchandra Bhattacharjee and Gostha Karmakar were the designers and weavers who pioneered in creating the Baluchari sarees. They inherited the traditional expertise of their families which eventually achieved fame at the hands of men like Mia Jan and his disciple Dubraj Das during the 19th century. The weavers of Murshidabad silk were predominantly of Hindu origin belonging to the *Tanti* community (Roy, 2007). The origin of a third style of silk brocade is quite controversial. In Bengal the only other place which involved the loom patterns was Dacca, known for its ‘Jamdani’ craft, although the two styles differed completely from each other. It is not unlikely that with the shifting of political centre from Dacca to Murshidabad, a Dacca weaver might have settled near the region and evolved a particular technique of the ‘Butidar Baluchari’ under the fostering patronage of the new aristocracy settled around the city. Another opinion that prevailed was that weavers from Benares came and settled in Murshidabad and started the art and the craftsmen were already well conversant with the art of weaving brocades.

The rich and poor hawked these sarees from door to door or in local market or *haats* or bazar and soon

Kasim Bazar (Khera, '90; Roy 2007, Mukherjee, '03) sprawled up as a busy trading venue. These trading points also sometimes served as the inspirations for the weavers. The rich Jain merchants who also carried on this trade inhabited the towns around Baluchar. In the orthodox Muslim community silk and printed clothing was not favored, although there was no restriction of depiction of stylized picture of plants, the designs of any living animal on clothing was forbidden in religious books, eventually concluding that patrons of the Baluchari were mainly the Hindus and the Jain businessmen.

The designs clearly bear the testimony of that period that influenced the depiction of the typical Baluchari saree, comprising a standard length of 5 yards with 42-45 inches in width (Chisti and Singh, 2010; Khera, '90). However, with the passage of time and after the death of the master craftsmen Dubraj in 1902, and with the imposition of the foreign rule and several other related issues led to the decline of this beautiful and remarkable craft of Bengal.

#### FACTORS GOVERNING THE DECLINE OF THE CRAFT

##### *Impact of the British Rule*

Industrial revolution, trade and globalization in the nineteenth century devitalized and possibly destroyed the traditional craft industries in this region of British India. The world changed enormously which did not allow the traditional crafts or industries to continue in their own traditional way (Roy, 2007). Machinery was a great threat to the skilled handloom weavers and as well as other design-intensive crafts of India. Adding to this unfortunate situation was the deaths of master craftsmen who had failed to transfer their traditional skills and knowledge to their next generations.

The tragedy that had hit these craftsmen who were once upon a time reigned as masters of this weaving craft, was the result of a combination of crass commercialism, an insensitive urge to modernize and globalize and contrarily as well as ironically over enthusiasm on the part of “culture vultures”. Instead of reflecting on culture care, their urge led to consumerism — an excessive urge to capitalize on ethnicity which resulted in starvation deaths, suicides



Figure 1: Image of a woman smoking hookah seated on a chair wearing European garment, outlined with white and filled with pink coloured thread. (Courtesy: INA Metro Station, Ministry of Textiles, New Delhi)

and a sense of alienation among the surviving weavers (Ramaswamy, 2002).

As the demand was small, the artisans remained as their own master; they were able to pay and bear their own expenses in replenishing raw material, replacing or repairing their tools and most importantly were free to make their own decisions. In a competitive world of the traditional weavers as the demand rose, the scale of production also increased and expanded, and the families became exclusively absorbed in this weaving craft called Baluchari at the cost of farming and agriculture which was in earlier times their part occupation for sustenance. Many new non-traditional, non-weaving families, entered in this profession in course of time to match the rising demand of this craft (Dasgupta, 2000). In order to compete with the foreigners, the weavers had no choice left rather than to surrender to the power looms (Khera, '90) which was capable of producing at a much faster speed. It was useless to expect the rich middleman to be generous even in their wildest dreams. The only hope for amelioration rested with the traders was to organize a new system, which would slowly lead to the emergence of putting out the older system (Khera, '90; Dasgupta, 2000).

#### *Change in Clothing Preference*

The popularity of the fabric that looked like silk along with eye catching finish and European elegance of pattern led to the decrease in demand for pure silk. The colorful and full figured saree was now considered to be clumsy in the acquired taste of the modern eye (Khera, '90). People now searched for sarees with fewer amounts of figures and less variety of colors (Mukherjee, '03). The Indians who prefer wearing sarees were now slowly getting accustomed to the western fashion; sarees with dull colours and less of detailing were being preferred over the rich and intricate and colorful ones. The English colour palette and aesthetic were slowly engulfing the Indian traditions and tastes.

#### *Lack of Patronization and Death of Craftsmen*

The outcome of the above situation was so severe that there wasn't much talent left (Mukherji, '03), only Dubraj knew how to set the loom according to the patterns and fix the *Naksha* loom, even for an old

pattern if a loom was out of order, other weavers had no choice rather than to come to Dubraj to restore it. Dubraj being a poor man was always anxious to keep his secret that brought him occasional money as charges whenever a weaver brought his loom to be adjusted. But Dubraj was interested in imparting his knowledge only if he was patronized and his private interest protected (Mukherjee, '03), which unfortunately failed to occur and he became almost redundant with the spread of English education which brought about socialistic ideas that could not at all help in the growth of the art (Khera, '90). Modern culture completely ruined and changed the aesthetic taste of the late nineteenth century people who now favored pale, colorless cheap goods over the rich and traditional Indian textile.

#### *Loss of Faith among Hindus*

Another reason that led to the waning of the craft was the fading away of faith from the Hindu community. The inland trades of the Berhampore silk and silk products were completely reliant on the requirement of the Hindu ceremonial rites, unfortunately the advent of the British, the usage of foreign silk was seen as a common affair in Bengal (Khera, '90) along with the usage of pure cotton, jute or woolen articles as '*Pattabastra*' (pure silk). Hence this resulted in the gradual reduction of the demand for indigenous silk articles required for the ceremonial purposes; this decrease seemed to be proportional to the decrease in Hindu faith.

#### REVIVAL IN BISHNUPUR

Initially with the death of the last member Dubraj, who was keeping alive the Baluchuri tradition, the art of weaving of Baluchari sarees in Murshidabad died. Only a few specimens were retained by some of the aristocratic families. According to an article published in the *Statesman*, Kolkata, on 25th December, 1989; Subhogendra Thakur better known as Subho Thakur, inherited some of the masterpieces of Baluchari sarees, and he was totally moved by the skills and beauty of the sarees and this energized him to move forward into their making. He doggedly attempted the revival of this art, pleading with the State Handicrafts Department and meeting some indigent weavers who were interested. Fortunately he

came in contact with Shyam Das Babu, then the Assistant Director of the Regional Design Centre. The challenge to weave Baluchari was given to the master weavers of Gujarat and South India but eventually their performance was not to the desired level and thus rejected. However, Akshay Kumar Das a retired designer of the Regional Design Center took up the challenge in the year 1956, who belonged to Bishnupur, a sub-division of Bankura district of West Bengal. Akshay Kumar Das with the association of the Chief Organizer of the Silk Khadi Seva Mandal, Sri Hanuman Das Sharda, the Baluchari weaving and its revival was initiated in Bishnupur. Thus a deal was made where payment for cutting and designing will be charged, along with a condition that the government would have to buy the first six sarees that would be produced in the workshop. Work started with the help of an experienced designer of Silk Khadi Seva Mandal and by Akshay Kumar Das. The entire length of a saree was reconstructed by them from an old and worn out specimen and thus there soon emerged a Baluchari saree in a new avatar in 1957 (Khera, '90).

#### *A New Story Created*

Keeping the tradition alive of changing the styles of the motifs borrowed from the changing world (Mukherjee, '03; Lynton, '95; Chisti and Singh 2010; Khera, '90), the artisans now started drawing inspiration from the terracotta tiled temples built by the Mallya (also spelt as Malla) Kings and the folk tales prevalent in the region of Bishnupur and Bankura. In context of depiction of *Ramayana*, 'Sita-Haran' (the abduction of Sita) and 'Uttar Ramayana' served as the most prominent themes; and from *Mahabharata*, 'Subhadra-Haran' and 'Rasleela' were popular. Apart from the two epics, other prevalent themes are 'Shahjahan and his Peacock Throne', or like a typical village scene, dancing girls, marriage ceremony, peacock motif, Bankura horses, nawabs, 'Hawda-Hathi' and 'Nauka-Bilash' (boat ride), out of the most popular themes the famous temples of Mallya Kings are the major source of inspiration for motifs such as the 'Rasmancha', 'Jorbangla' and the 'Madan Mohan' structures. Besides these, historical events and significance are also often depicted e.g., 'Dalmadal' (canon used by Mallya King Gopal Singh against the Maratha commander Bhaskar Rao), 'Madan Mohan'

(Lord Krishna) carrying the Bishnupur fortress in one hand with a canon at his feet. The body comprising of 'butis' are made of stylized flower, *ambis*, Bankura horse, Garudh (Khera, '90); and lady in sitting pose and many geometric designs. The arrangements of the *butis* are very dense near the *anchal* and gradually become sparse as they move away from the *anchal*. According to the proprietor of the Silk Khadi Seva Mandal, Sri Bhagwan Das Sharda, the leaf, the flower and the animal serve as the three major motifs. All the motifs fall into these three categories. The *kalka* or the stylized version of the mango motif (Khera, '90; Mukherjee, '03; Lynton, '95; Chisti and Singh, 2010) which was previously the distinctive feature of the old style was no more an integral part of the new styles that emerged. The weavers need for precision and this was directed towards perfecting the art of weaving, which is evident from the immaculately matching concentric rectangles. With the changing motifs the craftsman's repertoire of colors also changed. To keep up the pace with fast moving technology, the *naksha* looms were replaced by the Jacquard looms.

#### ORGANIZATION OF THE INDUSTRY

The Bishnupur Silk Khadi Seva Mandal, a khadi institution, continued its effort to fully revive the art of Baluchari weaving to its original glory in its humble way. Although Central government played the vital role in reviving the weave, State government also joined the race. Through various handloom organizations like Tantuja, Tantushree, Banglashree and Manjusha the State government started the operation. Other than these there were individual entrepreneurs as well, who had their own looms running. After passing of some years a small group of weavers broke away from the Silk Khadi Seva Mandal and started their entrepreneurship. As the situation turns today, the individual entrepreneurs are making headway into the commercial market of this business. Their works are creating waves and many of them have been recipients of National and State level awards.

It was observed that a three-tiered system of organization exists with the artisans working under Silk Khadi Seva Mandal, Tantushree and individual entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurs have their own looms and the artisans that work on the loom may be

one of the family members. The Silk Khadi Seva Mandal and Tantushree on the other hand have taken certain looms under their contract and goods produced have to be delivered to the respective organizations.

*Evolution During 18th and 19th Century  
(Under Mughal Rule)*

*Motifs and Designs*

Baluchari sarees are known for its intricate designs and figurative motifs that highlight the border, the *anchal* or the end piece and the body and stories are depicted on and within them through the finest of brocade weave. The motifs used in the Mughal periods were a combination of floral and figurative motifs and had a unique tradition where the motifs were subjected to a constant change. The motifs were outlined with a different colour and later were filled in by another colour. The motifs were very detailed and intricately worked upon. The extra weft used was untwisted silk floss which eventually imparted a raised effect and a three-dimensional feel. The weavers drew inspiration from the daily life, social events, Mughal court scene, British culture and other significant events. One of the most prominent and extensively used motif was the *kalka* / *paisley* or the mango motif, this motif was used in the *pallu* of almost every saree either in multiple number or in a singular one. The other prominent motif was 'nawab smoking a hookah', 'nawab smelling a rose', 'begum with a hookah', 'begum with a rose', 'nawab riding a horse', 'hunting scene', 'nawab on elephant'. The influx of European culture was also portrayed through various motifs where Europeans were shown riding a steamboat, riding railway carriages, etc.

The following visual represents a detailed view of a *pallu* highlighted by a single *kalka* with figurative border around it. The motif is in the form of a Persian vase with a flowing *kalka*.

*Colors*

During the early 18th and 19th century the silk yarns used for weaving Baluchari saree were solely dyed using vegetable colors. The colour palette was limited only to a handful of number of colors and which were mixed to bring few more shades. The most widely exercised ones were indigo blue, dark shade

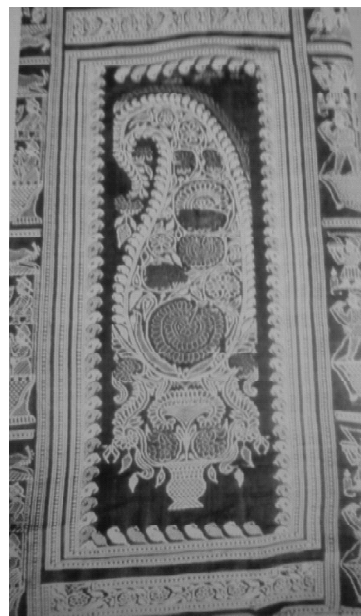


Figure 2: Detailed view of the end piece of a Baluchari saree showing a singular flowing *kalka* motif combined with a Persian vase in the centre of a figurative *pallu*.

Source: The Woven Silks of India; Baluchari Textiles, by Eva Maria Rakob (Rakob, '95).

of indigo blue, red, magenta, purple, yellow, orange, and chocolate. Green was also a commonly used colour but unfortunately it was not colour fast green as the dyers of Murshidabad were unaware of producing it (Agrawal, 2008). Though black was a prevalent colour but black vegetable dye was not available. In order to achieve the desired black shade, the cloth was sometimes dyed several times in dark indigo or chocolate shade. To dye the silk in deep chocolate black, it was dyed in 'annatto' colour and put in a vat containing a mixture of 'annatto' and 'sajji' (crude sodium carbonate). After it was dyed with 'annatto' it was treated in a vat containing lac dye which dyed it deep red and later it was again dyed in deep indigo which completed the process achieving the desired results (Khera, '90). On the ground a single colored warp and weft were used, the *butis* were made sometimes by a single colour like white or yellow or sometimes two to three colors were used for the *butis* in sequence. For the *pallav* or *anchal* and the border, two to three colored threads were used which gave a outlined 3 dimensional effect to the motifs. The *kalka*



in the *anchal* were made with two or more colors to give a richer look.

The following visual is an example of an exquisite Baluchari sari woven during the Mughal era in Murshidabad region, the ground of the saree has both warp and weft in purple colour, the colors used in the extra weft for making the motifs are in white, red and yellow colour. For the floral border, white and red is used, where white being the prime colour and red used for filling and highlighting the motifs. For the *butis*, a sequence of white, yellow, white and red is repeated which covers the entire ground, four of the *kalka* motifs are made using white with a detailing of red colour and the fifth one is made using yellow colour with a detailing done in red.

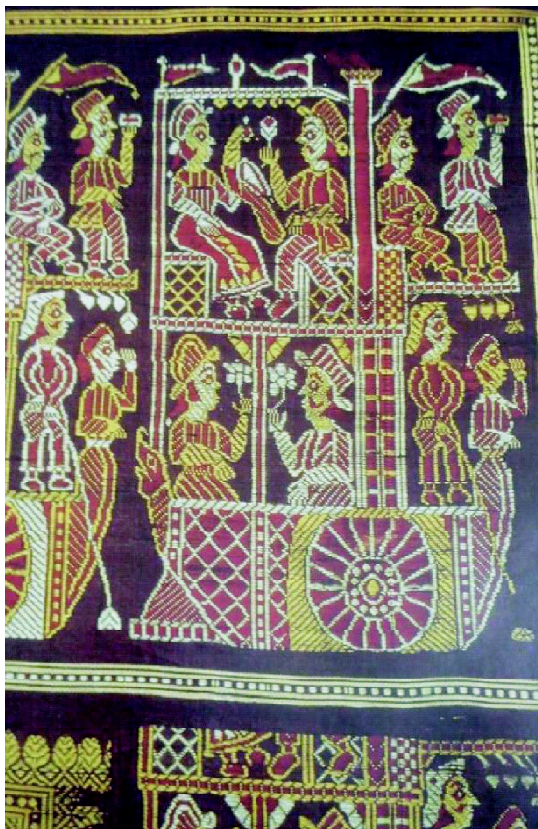


Figure 3: Detailed view of a motif showing seven European riding a steamboat. The Europeans are shown wearing contemporary European attire. Two couples are seated in chairs in a closed compartment. The remainders stand outside with binoculars. Plain dark purple ground weave, outline design in creamy white; Source: *The Woven Silks of India; Baluchari Textiles* by Eva Maria Rakob ((Rakob,'95)

The following visual depicts the different types of layout and arrangement of *butis* and *kalka*.

#### *Material Used*

Bengal in India was the region whose silk was renowned all over the country and even across the world. Bengal was one of the leading producers of silk, large consignment of silk was exported to Europe, the Middle East and the far East during the nineteenth century. Murshidabad was a region that produced a large variety of wild silk and pure silk out of which the production of mulberry silk headed the list. For weaving the Baluchari saree, silk was used both in raw as well as in dyed form. The uniqueness of this type of brocade weaving was that it used both silk for the ground as well as for the motifs, unlike the Benares version where saree comprised of silk base and motifs made with gold and silver *zari* threads. The silk used were both in twisted as well as untwisted form. The superior texture of the ground of the sari was achieved by combining a weft of three or four ply untwisted silk yarns with a warp of two ply often in twisted form (Chisti and Bannweji, 2011).

#### *Layout and Technique*

The original '*butidaar* Baluchari' saree had a length of five yards with a width ranging from forty-two to forty-five inches. The *pallu* or *anchal* was the most prominent feature of the saree, and the length varied in great extent. The length generally varied from thirty-six centimeters to hundred and eighty centimeters; and more the length – more detailed and intricate was the *pallu* or *anchal* (Rakob,'95). The end piece had a set of concentric rectangular boxes where the innermost rectangle had *kalka* or an equal number of *kalkas* in its centre. The innermost rectangle was outlined with figurative motifs, which was again outlined by another rectangular frame generally comprising of floral motifs. The inner core and the outer perimeter were filled with floral decorative devices (Khera,'90). The outer quadrangle was divided into fascinating figure designs in architectural friezes typical of the Baluchari. These were placed in each separate compartment and repeated all around (Khera,'90; Chisti and Bannweji, 2011; Mukherjee,'03). The body filled with the *butis* or sprigs were generally floral but geometric motifs also





Figure 4: End piece of a black Baluchari saree showing the four *kalkas* with floral rectangular frame which is bounded by motifs (Europeans riding steamboat) repeated in a geometrical pattern with another thin frame bounding it.

Source: *The Indian Sari*, by Kamala S. Dongerkery, 1961.

prevailed. The placement of these *butis* differed in two to three ways. In one layout they may be evenly distributed throughout the ground at equal distance, in another layout – they may be concentrated around the *pallu* and slowly getting sparse as they move upwards. Another layout comprised of diagonal bands covering the entire ground. The bands were generally of two types, one was continuous band and the other one was *butis* placed diagonally in the form of a band, these two types of bands were placed alternatively. This form was more commonly known as '*lahariya*' or the waves (Khera, '90, Ghosh, '45).

The Murshidabad Baluchari was woven in *jala* or the *naksha* loom where the designs were made using extra warp made of untwisted silk floss which imparted a raised effect. According to the quality of the saree, 100, 200, 1500, 1600, 2200 or even 2400 threads were arranged on the warp beam. By rule the general length of the warp was about fifty to hundred

yards in length in order to make five to twenty saris comprising of the same pattern and layout. The motifs were made using shuttle less spools of threads that passed through the desired shed created. The technique is almost similar to the technique used for making 'Jamdani' i.e. embroidery on the loom itself but the only difference is that in Baluchari the motifs and designs are more prominent with outlines, highlighting and filling the motifs. 'Meenakari' was one of the prominent features in the motifs where coloured threads filled up the outlined motifs and designs.

#### MOTIFS AND DESIGNS IN BISHNUPUR

The revival of the Baluchari in Bishnupur during 1957 was the brain child of Subhogendra Nath Tagore and executed by Akshay Kumar Das, a retired designer of the regional design centre started by replicating the worn-out pieces inherited by Subhogendra Nath

Tagore. The early phase saw the replicas of the Murshidabad style but as time went by the motifs and designs started getting modified. The tradition of constantly changing the motifs was maintained. The *kalka* or the *paisley* motif was no longer the same as it was during the Mughal era; it got completely stylized and resembled with the *alpona* or the floor art of Bengal. The artists started drawing inspirations more from the Hindu mythology, lifestyle and the events that were integral part of the Bengali tradition. Motifs were also inspired from the intricate terracotta plates adorning the walls of the temples in Bishnupur, the folk tales of Bishnupur also found its place among the elaborate *anchal* of the saree. Flora and fauna and other famous artifacts of historical significance were also woven. Scenes from epic tales of Ramayana and Mahabharata were depicted on the *pallu*. The most prominent motifs were 'Uttar Ramayan', 'Sita-haran', 'Subhadra-haran', 'Rasleela' etc. other than these the motifs were dancing Bankura girls, a typical village scene, marriage ceremony, peacock motif, Bankura horse, 'Hawda-Hathi', Radha and Krishna's boat ride or 'Nauka Bilash', Shahjahan and his peacock throne and the magnificent Bishnupur temples especially, the 'Rashmancha', 'Jorbangla', and the 'Madan Mohan'. The 'Dolmadal' canon used in a war by the Mallya kings also featured among the other prominent motifs. With the advent of time the *paisley* motif also got transformed where it was replaced either by a pair of two peacocks or two dancing girls in a dancing pose back to back. Peacocks, Bankura horses, *paisley* inspired from *alpona*, leaves and foliage, dancing girls, lady carrying lamp, stylized flowers, geometric designs etc. were now being featured as the *butis* for the '*zamin*' or the body of the saree. Following are few examples that were created during the revival phase.

### Colors

After the revival of Baluchari, the saree encountered with riots of colors. The advent of technology saw the usage of synthetic dyes in various shades, tints and hues. The weavers now were reluctant in using vegetable dyes and were more inclined towards using these synthetic dyes, as they were cheap, readily available, easy to use and most importantly, numerous colour options were now

available. Mainly acid dyes were used but apart from that, vats as well as direct dyes were also being used. According to the weavers, the acid dyes and the direct dyes were meant for increased glaze but unfortunately they were more prone to colour fastness but in case of vat dyes, they imparted decreased glaze but were less prone to colour fastness. The acid and direct dyed yarns were mainly used for the ground weaving whereas the vat dyes yarns were used to weave the *anchal* and borders. During this period, the ground of many saris woven retained the original colour of the mulberry and the tussar yarns, but sometimes they were also dyed in slight tint of the extra weft yarns used for the *anchal* /*pallu* and the borders and the *butis*. Colors like fawn, light green, cream, light pink, light red etc. dark shades like magenta, chocolate, royal blue, navy blue, mustard, brown, mud colour, purple, *mehendi* green, turquoise, maroon, black and wine red were the popular colors that were used. Other than these colors, the motifs were also made in silver-white and golden-yellow when made in single colored ones, but when they were made using two colors, shades like pink, blue and brown were predominantly used as the second colour. Later during the late 80s and 90s 'dhoop-chaun' or the short effect was quite prevalent in the trend where the warp and weft yarns were colored in different colour and woven for the ground.

### Materials Used

The main component i.e. silk remained as the first and last choice for the weavers to be used for weaving the saree. The silk yarns used now were procured from both Malda district and the Murshidabad district of West Bengal and silk yarns imported from Bangalore. Apart from 'mulberry silk', the 'tussar' variety of silk also started being used; apart from all these yarns, the wild variety especially the 'muga silk' was also now being experimented to be used for the extra weft. During the 18th and 19th century, the ground was woven by a combination of weft of three to four ply untwisted silk and a warp of two ply but now the weavers preferred a two ply pre-twisted or "organzine" Bangalore silk for the warp with a combination of two ply twisted or untwist silk for the weft. The count of the warp was eighteen denier by twenty denier (18/20 D) or twenty denier by twenty

two denier (20/22 D), whereas the weft was twenty two denier by twenty four denier (22/24 D) or twenty four denier by twenty six denier (24/26 D). the prices for the Bangalore silk was Rupees one thousand per kilogram (₹ 1000/- per kg) and that of the Maldah variety was Rupees seven hundred to eight hundred per kilogram (₹ 700-800/- per kg). The sheer weight of the Baluchari sari was solely achieved by the quality of the yarns itself, the number of filaments brought together in the reeling and the temperature of the water at the reeling stage. But unfortunately, the yarns now available neither used the optimum number of filaments for the right denier nor were boiled at a proper temperature during reeling process. This affected the quality of the yarns and eventually the weight of the saree.

#### *Layout and Technique*

During the Mughal period the *anchal* represented a combination of concentric rectangle and figurative motifs repeated in a geometrical fashion, similarly during the initial phase of the revival period the sariees replicated the same layout but gradually as the motifs were gradually modifying, the layout also got somewhat bespoke. Although the repetition of the figurative motif in geometric pattern remained unaltered, the concept of the concentric rectangles somewhat got slowly dreary, soon got superseded and was no longer used. The centrally placed *kalka* or *paisley*'s were also no longer seen and instead were replaced by dancing girls, pair of peacocks, etc in few sarees the border were placed horizontally at the beginning and the ending of the *anchal* or *pallu*. The length of the *pallu* also started to increase and instead of a maximum length of thirty-six inches (during the Mughal period) it reached a staggering length of forty-eight inches. The motifs were enclosed in niches or compartments and the whole saree was divided into 8, 10 or 12 segments. The sizes of the segments were governed by the number of these segments. The main motif inside the quadrangle may be woven so as to cover the length and width of two to four niches. Few sarees saw the *butis* getting sparsely woven and were placed evenly at regular interval with a discernible gap between them. In another layout, the *butis* woven were more concentrated near the end piece and gradually became sparse as they moved upwards away

from the *pallu* or the *anchal*. The 'lahariya' style *butis* were also no longer used and soon became obsolete. The looms used for waving were no more 'jala' harnessed looms, instead of them 'jacquard' looms were used. The designs were woven using extra warp as well as extra weft technique. The motifs were no longer highlighted using white thread and the intricate filling was also lacking. The motifs were majorly being made in single colour and did not impart the three-dimensional feel and looked two dimensional.

### PRESENT BISHNUPURI SAREE

#### *Motifs*

The craft after its revival has been indigenous to Bishnupur and very few people in Murshidabad continue to weave the saree. Although it has been thriving for a few decades, but unfortunately there has been no major change in terms of motifs. The themes and the inspirations remain the same but the range of variation in motifs has been curtailed. The set of motifs and stories keeps on altering from time to time according to the market trend. The prevalent motifs that adorn the *pallu* or the end piece are now those derived from the epic tales like Mahabharata and Ramayana. The motifs derived from Mahabharata are 'Draupadi's Vastraharan', Subhadra Haran' etc. Motifs inspired from Ramayana are 'Sita Haran', 'Sita in Panchvati' etc. The other prevalent motifs that are widely used are those derived from the Hindu culture like 'marriage ceremony', 'women blowing conch', 'men playing the tabla' etc. The depiction of the famous temples of Bishnupur is also quite common, temples like the 'Jorbangla', 'Madanmohan', 'Raasmancha' etc are often featured on the *pallu* as well.

#### *Colors*

Colors that were previously used were limited and hardly were explored and experimented much but with the advent of technology and modernization it had taken on the colour palette in the new age Baluchari sarees. The weavers were experimenting with every possible tint, shades and hues of each colour. If there were two to three shades of pink available before, now there are more than five to six shades of pink available that adorned the saree. The

weavers were mixing a little bit of one shade with little bit of other shade, and increase the variety of the colour palette. The colour palette saw a riot of colors, from shades of yellow like mustard, canary, ochre, chrome to various shades of blue like indigo, navy, royal, midnight, Prussian etc. Prominent colors are magenta, purple, lilac, lavender, fuchsia, red, rust, moss green, steel grey, black, orange, peach, bottle green, turquoise, white, cream, yellows, blues, maroon, shades of brown etc. The short effect where the weft and warp are in two different colors is also used. Previously there was only colour used all over the ground, but now the saree may be divided into two or more parts and colored differently. The ground for the *pallu* / *anchal*, the pleats may remain in one colour and the rest in different colour. Moreover the saree may also have broad vertical colored segments of near around 1.5 to 2 inches in thickness all over it with brocade *zari* titivating it.

#### Material Used

The preference for material for the saree i.e. silk remained same and much alteration in terms of variety and quality has not been witnessed. The silk is procured from silk merchants of Malda and Murshidabad district of West Bengal and from Bangalore. The silk purchased is in raw form which is later dyed in shades as per the requirement. The varieties that are used are the mulberry silk, tussar variety of silk, muga silk and the organzine silk. The mulberry and the organzine variety are majorly used. The major difference that has been undertaken by the weavers is the introduction of synthetic tested *zari* thread to make the designs and the figurative motifs. The designs remain the same but instead of using silk yarns for doing the brocade weaving *zari* is used and sold in the market by the name of 'Swarnachuri' saree. The silk yarns available now are more fine and lustrous. The warp generally is of two ply twisted yarns with a thread count of twenty by twenty-two denier i.e. 20/22 D whereas the warp is generally a three ply twisted yarn of the same count i.e. 20/22 D. the *zari* thread used is a synthetic one and the count used is generally twenty eight by thirty denier i.e. 28/30 D. The Malda variety of thread is priced at Rupees three thousand per kilogram, the 'organzine' or the Bangalore variety is priced at Rupees four thousand

five hundred per kilogram and the *zari* is priced at Rupees two thousand and six hundred per kilogram. The approximate length of a sari is five and a half meters and the width is approximately one and a half meter.

#### Layout and Technique

Like always the major focus and the most vital element of the Baluchari is its *anchal/pallu* or the end piece. Previously the major elements were the heavily ornate *anchal*, the border and the plain ground with sprigs or *butis* spread all over it. Although the focus remains the same on the end piece and the border, but the layout of the *butis* in the plain ground has been subjected to experiment, where different layout of the *butis* is noticed. The *butis* were placed very closer to each other and represented a pattern originally, but as time passed the spaces between the *butis* also increased and grew in size and were very sparsely placed. The layout also saw the amalgamation of different style like the saree getting divided into different section like that of the *patlipallu* style, with different colored end piece and different colored pleats. The ground sometimes comprises of broad stripes of colour instead of keeping it in a single shade. The *butis* are arranged in a row and resemble straight vertical stripes. The body is also sometimes heavily worked to resemble the pattern of a Banarasi saree. Big and small *butis* are densely packed all over the ground and gives a very rich look. The pattern or the arrangement of the figurative motifs remains the same with the absence of the *kalka* as well as the concentric floral border rectangular frames.

#### CONCLUSION

The unique feature of the Baluchari weave was the usage of number of *jalas* (primitive jacquard) for the numerous elements that in turn created a homogenous whole. The manner in which fourteen *jalas*, pattern harness mechanism created individual pattern in order to achieve a harmonious splendor in Baluchari was an astounding technical and aesthetic landmark (Chisti and Singh, 2010). The depiction of elaborate floral vine border interspaced with the pictorial depiction of human and animal motifs in active and animated form reached the zenith of narrative story telling. The finest of Baluchari had

the figurative motifs faced inwards from either side of the border, (Chisti and Singh, 2010) integrating the layout and slowly building up to the central motif in the end piece. The introduction of new motif created along with the variation of scale was often seen in the end piece, border and body. The usage of pure silk without the use of any gold thread within a most complex grid of the *jalas* set apart Baluchari from all other saree in not only Bengal but also other brocade tradition in the country. The Baluchari saree woven on jacquard looms in Bishnupur and Murshidabad today is totally incapable of comparison with the traditional one both in respect of texture and technique (Chisti and Singh, 2010) as they attempt the pictorial element without the body and substance of what gave the Baluchari its typical character. It was a product of patronage that lost its original richness once it adopted the norms of increased production. The closest approximation to the traditional Baluchari was woven at Weavers Service Center for the Vishwakarma Puja in the year 1982 (Chisti and Singh, 2010). It is quite prevalent that due to the lack of awareness among the masses regarding the two-distinct style of the 'Butidar Baluchari' saree the original variety evolving from the Baluchar region has been overshadowed. The knowledge is limited only to a handful of crowd specifically the researchers and few craft enthusiasts. The original variety has a huge potential to comeback. There lies a huge scope of research where the craft can be taken to a whole new level and gain market popularity with new design intervention along with usage of new technology and skills to overcome the drawbacks.

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