

# The Decline of Varanasi Silk Handloom Cottage Industry: A Case Study of Brocade Weaving Community in Varanasi

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## Abstract

The brocade of Varanasi is the distinct workmanship of the weavers where gold and silver thread is practised on fine silk. *Kinkhabs*, one of the finest known Varanasi brocades, have more *Zari* visible than silk. The brocades fabrics are woven in workshops identified as *Karkhanas*. The weavers are known as *Karigars* that means craftsmen. In earlier days only silver and golden wire were used, but now it is replaced with duplicate. Bold and complicated floral and foliage patterns are also made with the use of *Kalga*, *Bel*, *Butis*, designs. Banarsi sarees are world famous for this reproduction, Banarsi *Zari* work comes mainly in pure silk (*Katan*), organza (Kora), georgette and *Shattir*. Various types of silk, and other materials are used in contemporary times. This paper tried to explore the main problems of the craftsmen and throw light on an individual capacity and learnt about weaving process of brocade produced by artisans with the help of hand, tools, and machines. The chief features of artefacts are utilitarian, aesthetic, creative, cultural, decorative, functional, traditional, religious and socially symbolic and significant.

**Keywords:** Varanasi Silk, Brocade, Saree, Craft, Varanasi, Zari.

## Brocade Weaving

The city of Varanasi which has historically been called as Banaras is a world famous centre of brocade and *Zari* works. Varanasi is an international leading silk sari producing centre of India. Brocade and *Zari* have a long tradition in our cultural history.

Ralph Fitch, who was a merchant of London, describes Varanasi as a blooming part of cotton textile industry. In the earliest 19<sup>th</sup> century Varanasi brocade and *Zari* textile was invented. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century weavers of Gujarat migrated to Uttar Pradesh. Silk brocade weaving started in Varanasi in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and perfectly developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Silver and gold threads were excellently practised during Mughal period in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. He informs us that Varanasi produced *Zari* turbans for Mughals. The *Hiranya* (cloth of gold) has been mentioned in Rig Vedic times generally similar for the present brocade of Varanasi. The silk cloth (*Koseyya*) was embroidered by gold in post-Vedic period. Elephants are decorated with golden trapping [1].

Varanasi is the outstanding midpoint of fine and soft textures of fabrics. Brocade is also described in Ramayana and Mahabharata. Other varieties of silk were manufactured in the Mauryan period. Varanasi is famous as a reputed centre of (*Kasikuttama and Kasia*) textiles in the Pali literature<sup>2</sup>.

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Picture No, 1, brocade fabric with, " *Bel Booti ka kaam*".

*Majjhimaniyaka* and *Varanaseyyaka* were popular for their superb texture. *Kasika-vastra*, *Kari*, *Kasikamru* fabrics come to light in the Gupta period. *Zari* brocades, cotton prints and a variety of textile patterns of the Gupta period are revealed by the Ajanta wall paintings. A number of motifs appear on the Dhamekh Stupa at Sarnath which were used by Varanasi weavers in the Gupta period. *Zari* and brocades became a big part of western, central and upper class attires in the fifteenth century. We find *zari* work and brocade vividly used in Mughal and Rajasthan paintings. When Lord Buddha attained *Nirvana*, his body was wrapped in brocade. We find several techniques about brocade in Jataka tales also [3].

Mughals inspired floral patterns. Bold half blooming flowers are shown in Akbar's paintings. Poppy with delicate stem is found in Jahangir's period. In Shahjahan's period detailed study of leaves, lively foliage radiating on both sides can be found. All the motifs were used in the weaving. Peter Mundy visited Vishwanath temple in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and found the silk canopy hanging over the Shiva-Lingam.



Picture No. 2, *Phekua* (Boat Shaped Shuttle).



Varanasi is the rich weaving craft centre of Uttar Pradesh. Silk yarn is the basic element of brocade weaving. Raw silk is the chief fabric procured or imported from Malda, China, Japan, Bokhara or Central Asia. Silk undergoes several processes. The process of silk yarn twisting is called silk throwing.



Picture No. 3, Silk Threads.

Thread is mounted on *Pareta* which consists of bamboo sticks like a cone shape. It easily rotates with the rotation of axis and then transferred to the *Charkha* (reeling machine). The reeling and checking is done by women of the household. Thread is transferred to the bamboo frame with a central axis called *Natawa* which is cylindrical with four and eight planes. The hank shaped thread transferred on the *Pareta*. *Khali* is cylindrical shaped but of a different pattern. This is used between two processes such as twist silk yarn its

transferred from the reel to a *Khali* or retransferring from *Khali* to the *Pareta*. Threads again unwound and attach to a ring which is connected with a three feet long rod. The threads are extended in a manner to a distance of about forty yards. Forty-five similar rods carry the same number of rings as the first through which again the yarn is passed. Thread ends fall down from the last rod of the sequence to about a foot from the ground. These threads are weighed around 23.5 grams. Now weights are given a small spin with the hands. Thread put on *Natai* from this thread is transferred to a little spindle *Nari*. It is finally intended for the boat like shuttle *Nar* (*Phekua*). Silk thread has a gum like substance in its composition. It is removed by boiling the silk in *Aritha* (soap water). This process has to be done with great care as the fibres can get damaged. The yarn is washed two or three times and this process is called *Nikhar* or *Kharna* (brightness) and then sent for dying.

### Varieties of silk

*Tanduri* – Malda is the main supplying centre for *Tanduri* silk. It is used for best quality *Kinkhab* (Brocade).

- *Banaks, Subhani, Angrezi* – are the thinner and finer silks used for soft fabric like turbans, handkerchiefs etc.
- *Mukta* – It is rough and uneven but durable class of silk used for brocade.
- *Sandal* – both white and yellow varieties are imported from Central Asia through Bokhara and Punjab.



Picture No. 4, Mohammad Shamim working on Power Loom, Age: 45, Experience:20 years.

- *Ghungaru* – This silk is generally used in Varanasi for making silk fabrics.

Varieties of *Ghungaru* silk are classified three forms:

- *Chinia* – It is composed with four or twelve strands used for threads of flowered fabrics.
- *Katan* – It comprises two threads lightly twisted used for light fabrics.
- *Pat* – It comprises two or twelve threads doubled together used for thick fabric.
- Waste silk – The glossy portion of silk from mulberry feeding silk worm has been reeled off but some small fibres cannot be reeled. This is called waste silk or *Chashm*.
- *Tasser* silk – This is produced by wild Indian silk worms.



Picture No. 5, *Naksha Patta* (Punch Cards).



Picture No. 6, Sultana working on *Charkha*, Age: 21, Experience:5 years.



### Materials for Brocade Weaving:

Materials used for brocade weaving are given below:

- Handlooms and power looms – (picture no.9) (picture no.4) weaving machines.
- Silk thread– (picture no.3) used in weaving fabric.
- *Kalabattum* – (golden or silver wire) used with silk for weaving brocade.
- *Naksha Patta* – (punched cards) (picture no.5) used as a guidance for making patterns.
- *Phekua* – (boat shaped shuttle) (picture no.2) used for weaving.
- *Charkha* – (picture no.6) used for preparing silk thread.
- Soap water – used for washing silk thread.

Size (*Kalaf*) is used to give plain and smooth texture. After sizing the thread is carefully dried in the sun. It is laid on a *Sancha* (cross sticks). Each stick has glass rings. Thread is passed through these rings to the end, and turned back through a small bamboo and passed to second row of rings and reached back to the first *Sancha*'s starting point. It is rolled around a rod from which it is again unwound and taken on to a *Pareta*. The thread on sticks is delivered to a *Tanihara*. Two sticks are set up for the arrangement in the open space. Two pegs set in the ground between these two rows of *Senth* (sticks) are arranged. *Senth* series are fixed in the ground either in the shape of an X or a V and appropriate space is left between the two rows to allow easy moving of the *Tanihara*.



Picture No. 7, Abdul Ghaffar Ansari, working on Hand Loom, Age:68, Experience:50 years.

Ends of threads are attached from each *Salai* to one of the end pegs. The path of the thread is alternately either inside or outside of each *Senth*. The thread of each series crosses itself between the *Senth*s. The craftsman achieves a sufficient number of threads arranged in this manner. The threads cross at each *Senth*'s each point is called a *Santhi*. The end of each thread is attached to a wooden beam called *Tur*. The other end is attached to a stick which is tied to a peg. The stick has a number of iron hooks called *Kantia Ka Danda*. The bamboo sticks are inserted within the entire length of the warp with the help of cotton twins. They are inserted at six places. The threads appearing are gathered as a rope. Then carefully separated with the help of comb or quills, it is called *Sahi Karna*. When all the threads come in their correct position sticks are removed and the cotton twins are left. The whole cylinder is carefully packed and taken to the loom.

The next necessary material is *Kalabattum* (gold and silver thread) after silk, is used for *Kinkhab* (brocade) making. *Kalabattum* is prepared from silk thread mounted with silver and gold wire. Strong white silk and silver wire is twisted spirally around to cover entire thread. Pure gold wire is not suitable for it because it is hard to yield. The base is prepared from silver wire, and then the gold is added at the pierced plate in the final stage of wire drawing. It is coated with gold. This gold wire is twisted around. Yellow silk thread is used to make gold thread. This is called *Sona Kalabattum*. It makes brocade thick and dense. These *Kalabattum* are very costly. Nowadays gold and silver is selectively used, mostly artificial wires are replaced and sometimes chemical processes are done to produce cheap *Kalabattum*. It is also imported in large quantity from other manufacturing centres in India and abroad. *Naksha* (design) is made out on the paper by *Nakshband* (designer). This work is known as *Likhai* (drawing). Designers reduce it into cotton thread. These patterns give guidance to the *Karigar*. *Naksha Patta* (design punch cards) are used to create the pattern on brocade. First, the artist draws a design on graph paper with the colour concepts. Designs are punched on small cards. For one small design requires creating hundreds of perforated cards to implement the concept. Colour threads are passed through these perforated cards according to designs. *Naksha Patta* is knitted with various coloured threads on the loom. They are paddled in a systematic manner according to the design. The weaving picks up right colour and pattern to create the design. In modern times geometrical designs are used, but lacks appreciation.



Picture No 8, Iqbal Ahmad working on Hand Loom, Age: 32, Experience:12 years.

A sari can take fifteen days to six months to complete, depending on the intricacy of design and pattern. Banarasi saris are mostly worn by Indian women on special occasions. Trousseau, suits, draperies, bed cover cushions cover, vest coat, hand bags, stoles and scarves are other products produced in Varanasi.

### **Different Types of Saris**

Pure silk or *Katan* (Organza) *Kora* (Georgette) and *Shattir* are the main varieties of Banarasi saris.

**Brocade:** Extra weft patterned weaving is known as brocade. The weft thread passes over and under the warp thread regularly. Sometimes gold, silver, or cotton threads are to be woven. It is also called *Kinkhab*. It is very heavy. *Kalabattum* and silk are used together by skipping the way of the steady weft over a wire thread.

**Jamdani:** Cotton and *Zari* threads are brocaded on fabric. Transferred the pattern thread between a varying numbers of warp threads in proportion of the size of the design, and then throwing the *Phekua* (shuttle) to pass the regular weft. *Jamdani* weavers cut threads on the back side according to their requirement. Jasmine, marigold, thousand emeralds, creepy-crawly leaf, diagonal stripped are the main motifs of *Jamdani*. Corner motifs has own special characteristic of binding in the figured patterns using extra weft design thread (*Dampatch*) technique for the ornamentation of the fabric. These fabrics are ornamented with the technique of *Kadhua* (embroidered). When one colour silk thread is used in weaving called *Ek Meena* two threads called *Do Meena*.

**Jangla Sari:** Colourful silk threads patterns distinguish from other Banarasi Sari. Vegetation motifs scroll and spread on *Moonga* silk. Beautiful gold creepers and silver flowers embellished *Jangla Sari*. *Meena* work also used in *Jal Jangla* designs. Running creepers are brocaded on the sari and the end panel combines with motifs of dense forest or the field.

**Jamawar Tanchoi Sari:** These are completely woven into the fabric. There are no loose threads on the back side. Colourful extra weft yarn is used for designing. *Jamawar* tradition come from Kashmir but technique is similar to brocade. Paisley motif is densely spread on *Jamawar* Sari. These are reversible. Zig-zag patterns usually weave in sari's *Pallu* (a portion carried on shoulder).

**Tissue Sari:** Tissue Sari is prepared by *Zari* in weft and silk in patterned thread. Tissue material which has glazed due to the use of gold and silver in weft on silk ground is ornamented with the traditional designs. Borders are decorated with self-woven paisley. It is also known as golden cloth.

**Cut work:** Extra loose floated thread on back side which is not woven in designing is removed from that pattern. These designs provide transparent look. This is the less expensive version of *Jamdani* fabric. Jasmine, marigold floral designs are used in cut work. Threads are cut manually. Beautiful patterns resemble the *Jamdani* designs.

**Butidar Sari:** Golden and silver *buti* richly brocaded with the few use of colourful thread on silk "*Angoor bail*" (Grapes creeper), *Asharfi buti* (coin motif), *Jhumar buti* (ornament motif), *Patti buti* (leaf motif), *Aam buti* (mango *Buti*), and many more motifs are popular. Carrot buti, lichi buti are also in vogue. Katan silk is used for this type of saris.

**Katan:** *Tanduri*, *Banaks*, *Mukta*, *Sandals* are the varieties of silk used. It is woven with pure silk threads. The pure silk saris are now prepared using power looms with innovative pattern and motifs.

**Organza:** *Kora* with *Zari* and silk. Golden and silver threads are richly woven around a silk yarn to create *Zari* brocade.

**Georgette:** Light crape fabric is woven with simple weave. Georgette fabrics are inter-woven with warp and weft. This is popular in modern times.

**Shattir:** This is used for creating contemporary designs of Banarasi Sari. Researchers from the Institute of Technology, Banaras Hindu University proved that chemical dyes used in the process have become a major pollutant in the river Ganga. But natural colours are rarely used for dying in modern times. Indian and Persian patterns change in new attire of elegance. The development of



machine can produce innovative design and pattern in low cost. Silk raw material's costs are increasing fast. Power looms give the impression of Banarasi Saris. Marigold, pomegranate, madder, acacia, plants are used for silk dyeing.

### Reasons for Decline:

Reasons of decline of brocade are as follows:

- Banarasi silk hand looms have been in losses because of the new mechanism, which produces Banarasi silk faster and cheaper.
- Power loom weaving competition has rapidly increased.
- Government protection policies are changing.
- Increasing price of raw silk and shifts in market demand.
- These saris end up as imitation of the original in less prices.
- Old designs are still practised.
- Cheaper silk import from China has worsened the poverty of Varanasi silk weavers.
- Cottage industry is declining. Handloom is decreasing in demand as only higher class can purchase expensive fabrics.
- Crisis of electricity.
- Artisans are rarely in direct touch with exporters.
- Lack of space for display and storage.
- They work in an open area as there are lacks of proper workplaces.
- Noise of handlooms and power looms also pose health hazards like hearing impairments, irritation, mood swings, stress etc.

Hand loom takes two to six months for making a sari, but a machine makes it within a few days. In Abdul Ghaffar Ansari's (picture no.7) words, "A machine can produce all types of designs and only *Bel Buti ka Kaam*' (floral motif) can only be made from hand looms" [4].

"Finishing and perfection can be seen only in handmade products. We Indian craftsmen live in constant stress of poverty," said Iqbal Ahmad (picture no.8) [5].

His sons, wife, daughters-in-law engaged are engaged in art of weaving. They cannot afford basic medical care, education for their children. Weavers' payments are not good. Their children give up the sari weaving profession. They migrate to abroad for more earning and seek jobs to survive. Banarasi Sari has now been recreated on a new platform. Exhibitions are held in various countries. Banarasi Saris are mostly worn in festive seasons and especially for weddings. Globalisation has affected the whole economy and traditional cottage industries. The hand



Picture No, 9, Weaving Process of Brocade on handloom.

loom trade which was booming slumped due to a decrease in demand.

The government should take steps to improve their situation by providing provisions for good



payments, improve their living standard, medical care and education of their children. In this way we can help keep the tradition of Banarasi saris alive, which defines Indian culture and our heritage.

“Those who are working on hand loom are expert and perfect craftsmen,” said those craftsmen, who are practicing with power looms. Actual art is that woven by hands. The handmade Banarasi Sari from Varanasi became a national symbol for Indian Independence. Mahatma Gandhi encouraged Indians to stop wear machine made cloth and as a result handlooms gained prominence.

Varanasi brocades and saris in Uttar Pradesh secured Geographical Indication covering Azamgarh, Chandauli, Jaunpur, Mirzapur, Varanasi, and Sant Ravidas Nagar (Bhadohi) districts. It is an intellectual property right that confines others from marketing or processing a product in the identical name. Good originating in a certain province where a given quality in the same name of the product is fundamentally attributed to its geographical origin. These six cities can legally sell under the name of Banarasi Sari and brocade Geographical Indication and is beneficial for weavers, exporters and consumers. Varanasi brocade and saris fall in four classes including silk brocades textile goods, silk sari, dress material and silk embroidery.

After a long time, the world famous brocade and Banarasi Saris was supported by United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. It is a great achievement for the weavers and people who are associated with the richest art of brocade and Banarasi Sari weaving. Geographical Indication status is essential for this globalisation period.

The young craftsmen are weaving Banarasi Sari in fusion style or with ultra-designed blouses as per the trend in fashion. Fashion designers take interest in promoting Banarasi Sari which is an old traditional wear. Dress material, curtain, cushion cover, table cover, napkins, runner, bags, and wall hangings, are produced according to the international consumers and changes time to time. Handloom weavers tend to manufacture new types of products, keeping alive their traditional art and craft skills. In this way they are earning better wages.

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<sup>2</sup> History of Banarasi Sarees. Retrieved from [www.sari.cz/page\\_1.php?id=15](http://www.sari.cz/page_1.php?id=15)

<sup>3</sup>ibid

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