



Metal Embroidery on Elephant Trappings (*Jhul*)

Shakshi Gupta

For as long as human beings have existed, they have aimed to adorn themselves with symbols of status and beauty, including profuse ornaments and other embellishments like embroidery (thread or metal), appliqué, patchwork, quilting, fringes, beads, etc. Additionally, they also decorated and furnished their houses and endowed their surroundings, including animals, with finer appearance and adornment. This has been extensively represented in Indian art especially in sculptures, paintings etc. and is also mentioned in numerous literary texts which lend the insight into their times.

Animals such as cows, goats, horses, camels, elephants etc. were domesticated by men on account of their inherent qualities like intelligence, easy obedience, loyalty and services to their chief even in difficult times. Therefore, Man often took extra care of these animals, especially with regards, their food and living conditions. Above all, elephants were an exigency for monarchs because of their enormous and majestic appearance, religious associations, and their use as a seat for the king during festive regal processions, royal hunting and/or portrayal of their enviable knack in executing their bravery in warfare. So, the giant animal was festooned with marks of pomp to depict their eminence. Elephant decoration especially with ornaments and gold cloth ("*Jhul*") evolved a vast and well-defined activity.

As an art, it developed independently from various grounds of South Asian countries, especially in princely courts of India, to widen the animal's majestic appearance, leading to its decking with various ornaments (Figure 1) such as *bedi* (anklets for the hind legs), *dumchi* (tail ornament), necklaces with hanging bells and *gajagaha* (ear decoration); highly embellished coverings like *seeri* (head covering), and *jhul* (main decorative body covering), howdah (a seat, placed above the *jhul*). Presently, body painting is often also employed to further beautify the animal, but whether the practice was prevalent in that era is debatable.

Literally, *jhul* is a carpet-like large rectangular covering used to drape the elephant's back and cannot be tied down, since it flung down on both sides of the animal. This 'trapping' or 'body armour' is vernacularly referred to as *jhul*, deriving from the archaic Marathi/prakrit word, meaning 'body cloth of horse/elephant'¹ (Figure 2). The Hindi *Shabdsagar* dictionary of *Shyamasundara Dasa* mentions it to convey covering for both elephants and horses, which was often made of velvet and has *karchobi* embroidery on it². The term was used interchangeably with other words in different eras; so far, the meaning has always remained the same as aforementioned; for instance '*kuthh*' in Sanskrit, '*gaj-jhamp*'² in *Ain-i-Akbari*; '*gajakattharaṇā*' in *Pali* texts, etc.



a. Seeri (head covering), Jodhpur

b. Gajagaha (ear decoration)

c. Jhul (main decorative body covering) Dungarpur

Figure 1: Various ornaments for elephant decorations



Figure 2: An elephant entirely decorated with gilded trappings (*Jhul*) with howdah at atop, National Museum, New Delhi



Figure 3: An elephant entirely decorated with gilded trappings (*Jhul*) with howdah at atop, National Museum, New Delhi

In order to understand any craft, it is imperative to know its history through early literature or references. Traditionally, the practice of arraying elephants for warfare/religious veneration has been depicted in mythology, so their association with religion and deities like Lord *Indra* (who mounted *Airavata*, celestial elephant (Figure 3)) gives way to the royal appropriation. The harnessed elephants were civilized by men as early as 2nd - 3rd century B.C is evident from the remarkable stone sculpture of *Bharhut Stupa*, Madhya Pradesh, preserved in National Museum, New Delhi (Figure 4). These processional elephants, decorated with head covering and *Jhul*, are portrayed as mounted by kings who were carrying the Buddha's relics. It is certain from these that *Jhul*- comprised of intricate motifs with large borders. Perhaps, the fabric used for the covering is embroidered, as the motifs carved on it give the resemblance of the motifs used in gilded *jhul*. Likewise, there are many other examples are well displayed in the galleries of National Museum, New Delhi.

In the medieval period, especially, during the reigns of *Mughal Dynasty* and *Rajputana clans*, the employment of extravagantly decorated elephants in imperial courts reached its zenith. Special detailed accounts (*philkhana*) were maintained to keep records of elephant collection and their glittery adornments. Presenting caparisoned elephants, as gifts became a tradition among the royalty, which trickle down from the fashion of *Mahabharata*⁵ and *Ramayana* (1000-700 B.C.E.).



Figure 4: Sculpture of caparisoned elephants carrying Buddha's relics, National Museum, New Delhi, 2nd - 3rd century B.C

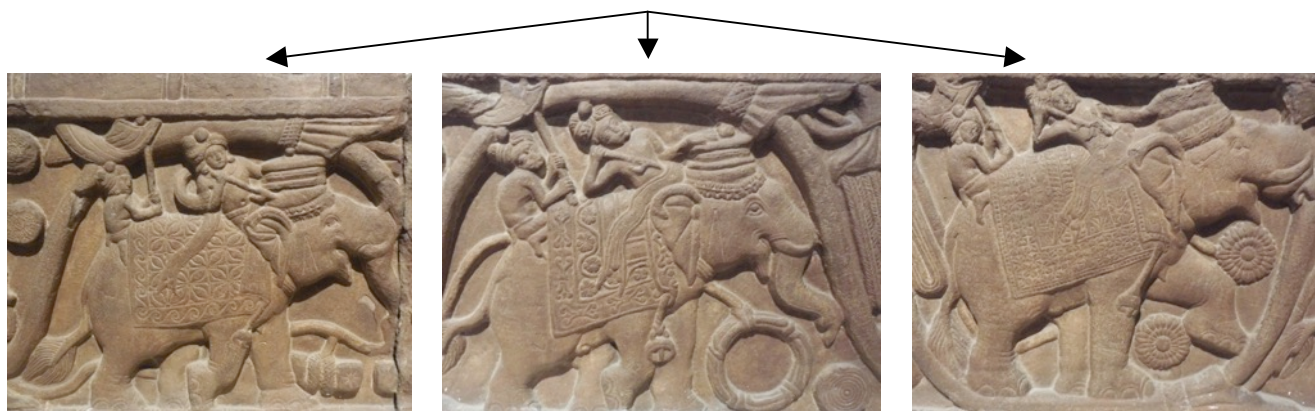


Figure 5: Details of caparisoned elephants

The famous traveller *Ibn Batuta* too discussed detailed accounts of elephant trappings during his travels through medieval India, describing the trappings of the royalty as being decorated with gold embroidery. He mentions that on 14 morning, 16 elephants were adorned with a *jhul* embroidered with silk and gold threads and were kept reserved for the Sultan's use only. This information suggests that the use of the gold threads for embroidery had become famous among sovereigns. However, the craftsmen of *Rajput* and *Mughal* reign were manufacturing the *jhuls* in the *karkhanas*, where they were sewing the rich fabric (like silk or velvet) to the lining with half *ser* of cotton thread and embellishing it with *zardozi* (gilded metal embroidery).

Zardozi as a craft flourished primarily around the princely courts of medieval period and later opulent population. The word '*Zardozi*' comes from Persia, which means embroidery with gold. Gold being highly malleable and could be moulded in numerous shapes and sewn onto the yard goods as per the requirement, which make the material rare and prized. The embroidery is carried out on various devices like handloom, *karchob*, etc depending upon the material used for embroidery. Gold flat hammered wires were extensively used for it, however, change in applications results in changing of shapes, styles and thicknesses in the wire. Generally, these flat metallic wires (*badla*) were either embroidered on finer fabrics or woven with yarns, or sometimes combined with other threads like silk or cotton by wrapping the wires around them in either 'Z' or 'S' twist resulting in the formation of *zari* or *kalabattun* (depending upon the variation of gauge). These *zari* threads were interlaced with yarns on the loom and were also embellished on the surface of rich textiles like silk, silk satin, velvet, and resulted in a variety of *karchobi* embroidery products, including trappings. Since, the trappings (from the collection preserved in different museums) had large and intricate motifs enclosed with defined borders; so, the embroidery is finely drawn in a couched technique to give a puffy effect.

Metal embroidery on *jhul* was a combination of embossed and couched embroidery which means the designs are padded with several layers of cotton threads, resulting in raised or embossed effect, which are later laid with *zari* threads to even the surface. These *zari* threads were lay down at right angle to the direction of the last layer of padded threads and secure them through couching and laid couching stitches. It is used as an embellishment to fill the area in a unidirectional manner using long floats (the surface appears to be satin stitch) from one edge to another. These floats has been secured edge to edge with herringbone stitch, where every stitch taken on the front loop with it a section of *zari* wraps around the thread of the stitch with a crisscross of herringbone forms on reverse side of the fabric.

Various styles of patterns were achieved on these stitched *zari* threads by the craftsman in that age by varying the spaces of stitches employed under couching and laid couching technique. So, the stitches can be classified as:

Whipped running stitch: This stitch is mainly used for binding the *zari* threads at their place. In this type the double row of threads are stitched where one thread is taken as running stitches with the long floats on the surface and shorter at the back.

While, the other thread is used to fill the interstices between the stitches taken by first row of thread where the stitch goes left over right of the running stitch. The whipped runningstitch gives the resemblance of stem stitch (Figure 6).

Basket stitch—This stitch is used to create various patterns like basket, brick, etc., here, the floats of the stitches go equally over and under the desire number of laid threads (usually four gold threads are taken at once) across the surface. Then, again the stitch will go in the same method and sewn exactly between the prior stitches. Also, the spaces between the stitches can be either equal or vary to the length of the floats taken in a stitch, depending upon the pattern required. (Figure 7)



Figure 6: Whipped runningstitch



Figure 7: Basket or brick pattern

Diaper couching stitch – This stitch is used to create diagonal, ladder pattern etc., here, the couched thread comes up from one end of the reverse side and looped over the rows of laid thread (can either be one or grouped in) with inserting a needle diagonally into the fabric. (Figure 8)

Reverse Couching – This stitch produce zigzag patterns (Figure 9)



Figure 8: Diaper couching pattern



Figure 9: Zigzag pattern embroidered on elephant *jhul*, National Museum, New Delhi

These stitches help in keeping the *zari* threads at their position throughout the work. Consequentially, these distinct and varied effects make the motif surface more elaborate. Sometimes, gilded spangles or *bankdi* (flat metallic crimped wire) were used to outline the edges of the motifs and also, hand-knotted fringes to which the loose tassels are hanging are sewn at the border of the fabric. Hence, the “cloth of gold” reference for the trappings / *jhul*!

Later, the use of elephants gradually decline during the British rule. In 1903, Lord Curzon, the viceroy, invited 48 kings from across the country for a Delhi Durbar. All of them mounted lavishly attired elephants covered with a gilded *jhul* and the procession traversed the roads of *Shahjahanabad* and assembled at Coronation Park. This was the last time when so many decorated elephants were seen altogether (Figure 10). However, the cultural traditions of India never die. Hence, the bedecked elephants are still used in regal/religious processions, marriages and other grand occasions by royal families (and often, the sole) with great pomp and show, and it's assumed that they shall continue to do so for many years to come.



Figure 10: Procession passing through Jama Masjid, Delhi, (Source- Wikipedia)

Bibliography

- Abul-Fazl, 1965 *Ain-i-Akbari*, translated into English by Blochmann, New Imperial Book Depot, New Delhi
- Beveridge, A.S.; 1970, translated the *Babur Nama* into English
- Davids, T. W. Rhys and William Stede, 1921-1925, *The Pali Text Society Pali - English Dictionary*
- Ganguli, Kisari Mohan, 1896, *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa Translated into English Prose from the Original Sanskrit Text; adiparva* also mentions the offerings, the precious stones, gold and jewel, the wealth in cow, elephant and horses; curious textures, garments, and mantles; the precious shawls and furs and carpets made of the skin of the *Ranku*
- Gupta, Shakshi, 2015, *Dissertation on Jhool – The Elephant Trappings*, Lady Irwin College
- *Ibn Batuta*, 1933, *Ibnabatutaki Bharat Yatra*, translated into Hindi by Dinesh Sharma, National Book Trust, India
- Reader's Digest, *Complete Guide to Needle Work*, The reader's digest Association (Canada) Limited
- Watt, Sir George, *Indian Art at Delhi 1903*, Published by the Superintendent of Government Printing, India

Sites Visited

- <http://dsalrv02.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.6:1:6856.dasahindi>
- <http://dsalrv02.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/search3advanced?dbname=vaze&query=%E0%A4%9D%E0%A5%82%E0%A4%B2&matchtype=exact&display=utf8>
- <http://dsalrv02.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.2:1:1062.apte>
- British Museum - painting / album www.britishmuseum.org
- http://www.gutenberg.org/files/28269/28269-h/28269-h.htm#Page_130

About the Author

Shakshi Gupta is Masters in Fabric and Apparel Science, specializing in Traditional textiles and conservation with a research work on 'Jhool- The Elephant Trappings' from Lady Irwin College, New Delhi. She has done her internship with National museum under the guidance of Dr. Anamika Pathak. She has worked as an 'Archivist' at The Maharana Mewar Charitable Foundation, The City Palace, Udaipur for the documentation of Mewar textile collection under the Textile Conservation Consultant, Ms. Smita Singh and has also worked as 'Project Assistant' at the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts, New Delhi. Presently, she is associated with Mehrangarh Museum Trust, Jodhpur, as a conservator under the super vision of Ms. Smita Singh for the exhibition 'Royal Rajasthan: The Desert Kingdom of Jodhpur' in collaboration with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.