

# The Splendour of Mewar Textiles and Costumes at Gokul Niwas Gallery, The City Palace Museum, Udaipur

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## Abstract

The Gokul Niwas Gallery, The City Palace, Udaipur holds a rich collection of textiles and costumes from nineteenth and twenty-first century associated with the House of Mewar. This gallery is a tribute to Rajmata Sahiba Sushila Kumari Ji, who has discovered this extraordinary collection in the royal-stores and meticulously documented and preserved these family heirlooms for posterity. Post-independence, Maharana Bhagwat Singh laid the foundation of the Maharana of Mewar Charitable Foundation (MMCF), The City Palace Museum and subsequently, this royal store's treasure trove had been donated to the MMCF, which are now in the repository of the Museum. The objective of this paper is to provide information about the textile treasure exhibited in 'The Curtain Raiser: The Mewar Regalia, Textiles and Costumes Exhibition' along with the brief description of a few masterpieces displayed in the gallery.

## Introduction

In his memoir, Colonel James Tod (1782-1835), the British Political Agent at the Mewar court from 1818 to 1822, has described many first-hand information of official decorum of Mewar court and its splendid opulence of early nineteenth-century. During this time, he has also collected comprehensive materials related to history and geography of Rajputana and Central India, which was published as '*Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*' in 1829 and 1832. He was one of the few nineteenth-century writers, who had provided the details of the textile tradition of Mewar. While describing the textiles and costumes of Mewar he wrote:

"It were useless to expatiate on dress, either male or female, the fashion varying in each province and tribe, though the texture and materials are every where the same: cotton in summer, and quilted chintz or broad cloth in winter. The ladies have only three articles of *parure*; the *ghagra*, or petticoat; the *kanchli* or corset and the *dopati* or scarf, which is occasionally thrown over the head as a veil. Ornaments are without number. For the men, trousers of every shape and calibre, a tunic girded with a ceinture, and a scarf, form the wardrobe of every Rajpoot. The turban is the most important part of the dress, and is the unerring mark of the tribe; the form and fashion are various, and its decorations differ according to time and circumstances...."<sup>1</sup>

James Tod was mesmerized when he visited the City Palace, Udaipur for the first time to meet Maharana Bheem Singh (r.1778-1828) just after signing the treaty with the British in 1818. He has described furnishings used for the *Darikhana* (court) set up for his meeting at the Mor Chowk (peacock-courtyard) and rendered in vivid detail about the *raj-gaddi* (throne), a large bolster adorned with a mantle of embroidered velvet, the velvet canopy supported by silver pillars, the carpet and other embellishments and the seating arrangements of Maharana, Prince and courtiers.

He has even mentioned the usage of muslins, quilted chintz, shawls, brocades, cloth-of-gold and animal trappings of embroidered-velvet in Mewar court. James Tod had aptly identified all the textile materials, as many of them can be witnessed in the paintings of that period; and also meticulously mentioned in the *Haqiqat-bahidas* (daily records) of Mewar rulers. Presently, very few examples of costumes and textile furnishings of Rajasthan have survived. Nevertheless, the Mewar family has preserved many textile artifacts and furnishings at their royal residence; The City Palace, Udaipur. This remarkable collection is now in the possession of Maharana of Mewar Charitable Foundation (MMCF), which was established on 20th October 1969 by Maharana Bhagwat Singh Mewar (r.1955-1984) after the integration of all the princely states in the Indian Union, under the aegis of the City Palace Museum, Udaipur to sustain and preserve the rich cultural heritage of Mewar dynasty. Since 2014, under the patronage of Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar, the 76<sup>th</sup> custodian of House of Mewar, a collection of over hundred textiles, costumes and accessories are on display at 'The Curtain Raiser – The Mewar Regalia, Textiles and Costumes Exhibition' at Gokul Niwas Gallery, MMCF, The City Palace, Museum Udaipur. A few of the textiles and costume objects from this exhibition will be discussed briefly in this article to provide a glimpse of the royal collection.

### The Collection Displayed at the Gokul Niwas Gallery

The textiles and costumes displayed at the Gokul Niwas Gallery (Figure 1a & 1b) are remarkable for their robust design, lavish materials and bold workmanship, which all are quintessential qualities of the arts of the Mewar. They are redolent of the splendour of the city of the Maharanas and exude an opulence that celebrates more fullness of life than mere wealth. The costumes and textiles are a wonderful example of preservation of tradition as seen in the wearing styles of the region, adapted and innovated by successive generations of the royal family and court. They are, in general, of varying quality and historic importance and also one of the most instructive collections of Indian textiles known anywhere.



Figure 1a: 'The Curtain Raiser – The Mewar Regalia, Textiles and Costumes Exhibition' at Gokul Niwas Gallery  
Photo Courtesy: The City Palace Museum, Udaipur





Figure 1b: 'The Curtain Raiser – The Mewar Regalia, Textiles and Costumes Exhibition' at Gokul Niwas Gallery Photo Courtesy: The City Palace Museum, Udaipur

The displayed collection consists of traditional male costumes like *aago*, *angerkhi*, *dodhi*, *kamri-angerkhi* along with metal thread embroidered velvet jacket, *choga*, French brocade *sherwani*'s, cummerbund, magnificent metal thread embroidered female *poshak* and chiffon sarees. Royal kids ceremonial headgears and their apparels like boy's *bagalbandi* and girl's *poshak*, etc. are also exhibited. Gallery also showcases rich embroidered horse trappings, rugs, carpets, board games, ceremonial banners, traditional textile ceiling fans, door chick blinds, furniture with silk covers and old leather suitcases. A significant attraction in the gallery is a nineteenth-century palanquin cover embroidered with gold and silver metallic threads, heavily studded with sequins and lined inside with a beautiful *mashru* fabric. Following are brief details of a few textile treasures displayed at the Gokul Niwas Gallery.

### Jewelled Shawl

This jewelled black Cashmere wool shawl is embellished with embroidery of *tilla-ka-kaam*<sup>3</sup> using gold and silver-wrapped thread and *meenakari* work with green and red untwisted silk thread along with Basra seed-pearls. (Figure 2) This object is a combination of abovementioned three significant materials and techniques. The first one is *tilla-ka-kaam*, in which gold and silver-wrapped threads are twisted into tiny spirals, which are tacked down (couched) to hold them in place. This was one of the favourite forms of embroidery for woollen garments, tray-covers, elephant and horse trappings and for the palace furnishings in India during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The second one is *meenakari*, though; the word *meenakari* (enamelling) is normally used for infused brilliant colours used in decorating metal ornaments. The Iranian craftsmen of the Sasanian era invented this art and Mongols spread it to India and other countries. Archival records reveal that during eighteenth and nineteenth-century *meenakari* was used in brocades of Gujarat and Banaras by creating weaving patterns with coloured silk and zari yarns. Probably this was the time when the *meenakari* embroidery had also been developed in northern India. The third and most important material used is Basra seed-pearls; these were the vast majority of the pearls used by the Indian jewellers and textile manufacturers between the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth century. This Basra pearl-embellished shawl bears testimony to the importance of trade between the Gulf region and India. Broadly, the pearls are defined as natural or cultured alternatives. The naturally occurring pearls are extremely sparse, oddly shaped and precious. In mid-nineteenth century, the highest quality pearls were discovered in Gulf's region and were then bartered and sold in Basra, an Iraqi city located on the banks of the river, Shatt al-Arab. It was the centre of trade; mostly to the Indian merchants.<sup>4</sup> This shawl is splendidly embroidered with the motifs of golden *kalghi* motif, *buti-jal*, *turanj* (paisley) and *bel* (scrolling) designs. The pictorial reference available in the textile gallery shows that Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar the 76<sup>th</sup> Custodian of House of Mewar has also worn this shawl.



Figure 2: Jewelled shawl, Photo Courtesy: The City Palace Museum, Udaipur

### **Tash fabric Bagalbandi**

The next significant and gorgeous display is *bagalbandi*, which are a short jacket with closed neck and its strings tied on the left side near armpit. These *bagalbandi* are crafted with a *gota* appliqué work on *tash* fabric (cloth-of-gold) and must have been worn by the royal kids for the ceremonial purposes. (Figure 3) Generally, the metals were used in varieties, for decorating fabrics for instances, through weaving, embroidery, printing and painting. One of the best ways of making gleaming fabrics with metal, especially for the royal and elite patronage, was to weave it with gold/silver metal-strips in warp/weft in combination with silk or cotton fibre as warp/weft to produce the luxurious, flexible and dazzling fabric, which was used for making garments as well as the standards. One such jewel produced in India was the *tash* fabric, also known as 'cloth-of-gold'. These fabrics were very expensive and sold as per the weight of the fabric and the price was calculated as per the *tola*, a unit of measuring gold in ancient India and South Asia.<sup>5</sup> The main production centres of *tash* fabric were Aurangabad, Hyderabad, Surat, Ahmedabad, Varanasi, Bihar and Murshidabad. In *Ain -i- akbari* a list of gold stuffs is given, in which it's mentioned that the *tash* brocade was coming from Gujarat, and the cost was 1-35 M. per piece.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 3: Tash fabric Bagalbandi, Photo Courtesy: The City Palace Museum, Udaipur



### Furnishings: Embroidered Carpet and *Huqqa-posh*

In every society, textiles play an essential role. The primary role of textiles is to provide protection and warmth, however, in many instances; their purpose has been extended beyond the practical needs. The textiles can take various forms and can be decorated with countless techniques to communicate numerous information and purposes. Since ancient times the textiles have been used to communicate the social status along with a wealth of the person and their personality. The metal thread and silk had played a major role in depicting and communicating these virtues. The seating arrangements in the Royal court were done using silk or velvet carpets and curtains having metal threads embroidery. The Royal court was used for holding formal and informal meetings to discuss and deliberate various matters pertaining to the functioning of the state. In Mewar there were various types of court or *darikhana* settings. The locations for the court and the court settings and arrangements were chosen specific to the occasion, season, festival, status and number of guests. The large carpet (*bichayat*) displayed in the gallery must be used as furnishings for any such court settings. The green and purple colour carpet is embellished with golden metal wrapped-thread and *sitara* (metal sequins) on velvet fabric; creating vine and floral motifs. The low relief of metal thread embroidery suggests that probably it is an early nineteenth-century carpet.

Another exquisite example displayed in the gallery is *huqqa-posh* or *zer-andāz*<sup>7</sup>. (Figure 4) *Huqqa-posh* (*huqqa-mat*) is a small decorative mat placed below the hookah. Hookah is a tobacco pipe with a long, flexible tube, which draws the smoke through water contained in a vase-like container and it need few more accoutrements like mouthpiece and a mat. It was an integral part of court culture in India during eighteenth and nineteenth century. This *huqqa-posh* must have been part of the royal furnishings, which were used to decorate the ceremonial courts. The blue velvet fabric is embellished with *karchobi* embroidery using floral, bird and animal motifs. For metallic *karchobi* embroidery mainly *sitara*, golden *dabka*, golden *kanpar*, *gijai*, *nakshi* and red coloured semi-precious stone are used. Finally, it is trimmed with golden *zari kinari*, *tara ladi* and twisted *dapka ladi*.



Figure 4: Embroidered Carpet and *Huqqa-posh* Photo Courtesy: The City Palace Museum, Udaipur



## Conclusion

Through this exhibition, the City Palace Museum has brought together costume and textile treasure belonging to the house of Mewar and furnishings representing the splendours of the Mewar court. This exhibition spanned the period from the beginning of the nineteenth-century to the twenty-first century, bringing together over hundred magnificent objects. The exhibition showcases the changing role of the Maharanas within a social and historical context, and also reveals how variation in their sartorial preferences and patronage of the arts, resulted in the creation of splendid and beautiful textile artifacts, which fundamentally symbolises the royal sovereignty, identity and power.

## References

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## About the Author

Smita Singh is an independent Textile Conservation Consultant and researcher with over eighteen years of work experience for renowned textile conservation projects with some Indian institutions of eminence. She was a Textile Conservation fellow at British Museum, London supported by Charles Wallace India Trust; University of Applied Arts, Vienna, Austria supported by Eurasia-Pacific UNINET & NMI; and Opificio delle Pietre Dure (OPD), Florence, Italy. Apart from her association with the City Palace Museum, Udaipur since 2014, her recent projects were the conservation of textiles and costumes of Mehrangarh Museum Trust, Jodhpur for the 'Peacock in the Desert: Royal Arts of Jodhpur' exhibition held in collaboration with Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and conservation of the elephant and horse armour at MSMS II Museum, Jaipur. She is a Founder Member and Chief Editor at Textiles and Clothing Research Centre, New Delhi.