

Short Review Paper

Elephant trappings – Jhul, cloth of gold

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Abstract

Since ages, the practice of draping and armouring an elephant has been prevalent in most Southeast Asian countries, especially India. The process of decorating the giant is an elaborate process as the animal often played an important (and often, the sole) defence of a kingdom thus it exhibited the greatness of sovereign's supremacy or the temple's affluence. The animal is bedecked with numerous jewellery, twisted ropes and embroidered clothes and jhul are one of them. Literally, jhul is a large rectangular unstitched garment caparisoning elephant employed in temple veneration, regal processions and warfare. It is exquisitely embroidered with gilded and silver metallic thread on rich cloth. This research article concerns with the identification of India's languishing textile heritage Jhul – the elephant trappings by documenting the craft with respect to raw materials, techniques, designs and motifs used in making the traditional trappings. This research may also look at the iconography, historical references along with a schematic diagram of jhul and line sketches of borders, jaal, motifs, fillings and central motif used to embroider the fabric.

Keywords: Jhul, elephant, trappings, caparison, gold embroidery, Rajasthan.

Introduction

Decoration has always fascinated people since ages. They not only wish to see themselves beautiful but also the surroundings which led them to decorate their surroundings including animals as well. Animals like cows, horses, camels, elephants etc. were domesticated by men as per their usage. It is very well represented in Indian art and numerous literature that people took extra care of them, especially, their food and living conditions. Among all animals, elephants were always played an important role in guarding the kingdom not only because of their massive appearance, but also the magnificent courage they possess in themselves to shattered their enemy. These qualities captivated the affluent families and temple priests for the purposes of veneration, regal prestige, elephant combat (a favourite pastime in courts of Mughal and Rajput), processions and warfare. They believed that the value of a good elephant, equal to five hundred horses¹. So, they were seamed with both political and religious, which led to dressing them for either purpose as marks of pomp and prowess. Therefore, elephant decoration especially with ornaments like *bedi* (anklets for the foreleg), *dumchi* (tail ornament), *mukut* (metal head decoration), *pitakchh* (bell hung over the back of the elephant), *kalap* (tusk protector) and *jhumar* (ear decoration); highly embellished coverings like *seeri* (head covering), and *jhul* a gold cloth (main decorative body covering) is a vast and well-defined activity (Figure-1)². Jhul is the fabric covering which was used to drape the elephant's back (otherwise termed 'trappings' or 'saddlecloth') is vernacularly referred as *jhul*, which wrapped around the animal. It is a Marathi Prakrit word which comes

into existence in 7th century means 'body cloth of horse/elephant'³. In other words, it is a covering for both elephants and horses which was often made of velvet and has *karchobi* embroidery on it⁴. Also, pali text has quoted elephant in gold trappings as '*gajakattharaṇā*'⁵. The customs and practices of using caparisoned elephants were seen civilized since 2nd-3rd century B.C. Are markable stone sculpture from *Bharhut Stupa*, Madhya Pradesh, preserved in the collection of National Museum, New Delhi, exhibit a procession of four elephants, where Kings carried Lord Buddha's relics on these four heavily decorated elephants (Figure-2). These elephants are bedecked with ornaments like tassels, dangles; head covering and *jhul* which is made to drape over the back and fall on either side of the elephant. It comprised of intricate and beautiful decorative motifs with large borders. Perhaps, the fabric used for the covering is embroidered, as the motifs used in it, is alike to the *zardozi* motifs. There are many other examples which are preserved in the National Museum which claim to be the *jhul* of an elephant.



Source: Arms and Armor Gallery, National Museum, New Delhi.

Figure-1: Jhul, Body covering of Elephant.



Source: National Museum, New Delhi

Figure-2: Kings carried Lord Buddha's relics on these heavily decorated elephants.

Methodology

The present study titled as Elephant Trappings – *Jhul*, Cloth of Gold is the report of the study undertaken in a pursuit to document a languishing craft of *jhul* making. As the craft faces extinction due to the decline of using elephants because royalty faded away and so, their patron which results in an adverse impact on the art. Therefore, the documentation appeared necessary to preserve this tradition. The main focus of the study is to trace the history of the traditional craft of *jhul* and understand the raw materials, techniques, designs and motifs used in making trappings. Exploratory research design approach was used for the study. In order to fulfil the objectives, the research work was done in two sections i.e. documentation of *jhul* pieces available in the museums and to private collectors along with a schematic diagram of *Jhul* and line sketches of borders, *jaal*, motifs, fillings and central motif used to embroider the fabric.

Area Selection: Elephants are an essential part of the lifestyle of royalty throughout India and especially Rajasthan. Today, they are an important part of marriages, ceremonies and festivals like *Dussehra*, *Gangor* and *Teej*. Hathi Gaon, a small village located in Jaipur houses around 110 elephants that were set up by the government in 2010 to give proper shelter to all the families and their elephants. Since the study selected is on the *jhul* craft, the area of work was mainly Jaipur (*Hathi Gaon*) where the *jhul* has been made and the craft continues till today. The *jhul* pieces from the collections of the palace museums of Rajasthan and Delhi museums were also included in the study.

Sample Selection - A few of the families from *Hathigaon* were involved in the craft of *jhul* making. In Jodhpur, only two families could be reached who were involved in the embellishment of the pieces. Also, visits were made to museums (Mehrangarh Fort, Jodhpur; National Museum, New Delhi; Crafts Museum, New Delhi.) which have *jhul* collection. The curators of above museums and private collectors were approached to study the conservation practices being followed by them.

For the selection of the sample inclusion criteria were: i. Artisans from *Hathigaon* who are involved in making of *jhul* pieces. ii. Traders/dealers who deal in the *jhul* pieces, iii. Private Collectors, iv. Museums Curators/ conservators.

Data collection: Data will be collected through primary and secondary resources like literature review, interviews (with

mahouts, *lavazama* dealers, museum curators, researchers), observations, photographs which will be further corroborated by visiting different museums like Mehrangarh Fort, Jodhpur; Crafts Museum, Delhi; National Museum, Delhi; city palace museum Udaipur, Maharani Munnar Kumari Museum, Dungarpur.

Results and discussion

This part of trappings - *Jhul* is an unstitched garment, tailored in a large rectangular piece (Figure-3), where the central panel is bereft of any embellishment covers the back and side panels which are highly embellished, flung down on both sides of the animal and covers the legs. It not merely fulfilled the purpose of draping the colossal being, but also invoked to exhibit the king's greatness or the temple's richness. The respondents of Mehrangarh Museum informed that elephant has been extensively used by the kings from early times and their trappings were distinctly ornamented with wires of silver and gold. Such ornamentation of fabric is well known as *zardozi* which means 'decorations of fabric with a gold wire', in other words, "*SalmeSitare Ka Kaam*"⁶. It serves an example of using varieties of gold and silver wire in different forms on heavy based fabric. *karkhanas* were required for the production of '*zardozi*' craft. These *karkhanas* were catering to the craft as per king's demand. Out of the many products that were finished by using *zardozi* embroidery, trappings were one of them. It was an elaborate work which is exquisitely done for the emperors only. Later, when the royalty diminished and the one who left were not willing to continue with the practice led to the documentation of craft '*Jhul* – Elephant Trappings'.

Documentation of *Jhul*: The documentation of this textile craft has primarily helped in understanding the importance of animal covering, especially for elephants. Through the documentation, we came across about how elephants were tamed in India and become important for the ritual ceremonies and for the processions. Therefore, their decorations and coverings also became significant for great displays. Documentation enables the collection to be researched and published, also for finding basic aspects of the role of the object during its active life, technologies involved in its production and the material used.

During the field survey, the researcher found that traditionally the process of making *jhul* starts with the measurement of an elephant. The dimensions of the *jhul* vary as the size of elephant vary. Once, the measurement is calculated, craftsmen are set to work on patterning the piece. They fix the tailored piece on a

frame to carry out the embroidery, which is referred to *karchob* work, one of the forms of *zardozi* done on weighty and massive fabric. *Zardozi* embroidery was mainly accomplished with gold and silver metallic wires, used in embellishing the raised designed part from the general level. Later, these wires are secured with different stitches like couching and laid couching. Hence, gold wire embroidery was almost of essential “laid

work”⁷. Thereafter, the lining is provided to the rich cloth to support the gold work along with the fringes trimmed on all four sides of the piece (Figure-4)⁷. However, presently the dimensions of the *jhul* have a standard measurement, calculated by the craftsmen. The material they use is self-patterned brocade fabric which reduces the work, cost and time.

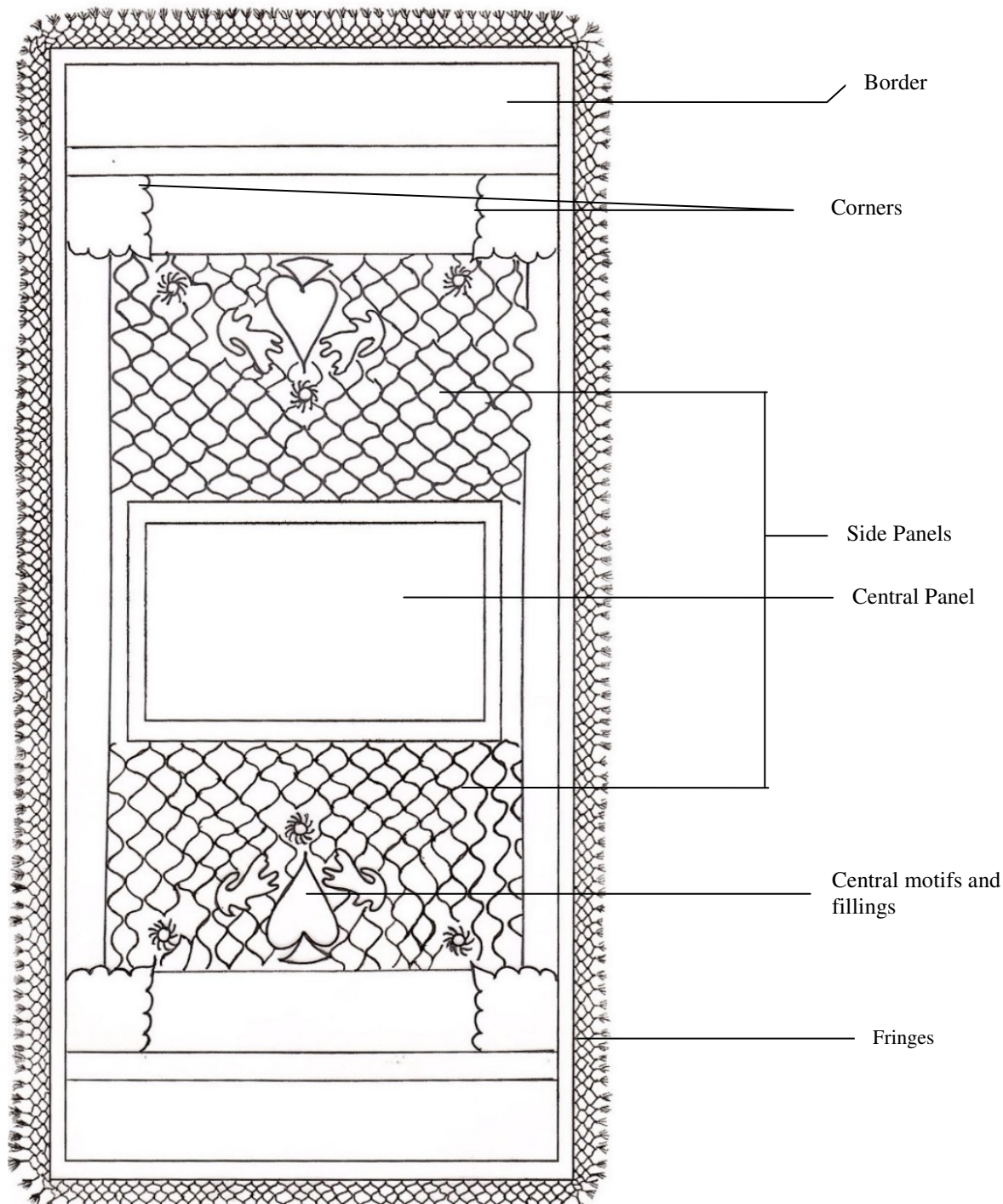


Figure-3: Line sketch of Jhul – Elephant Trappings.



Figure-4: Craftsman doing zardozi embroidery⁷.

The above description of *jhul* making is studied in detailed and documented under the following subheads to get an insight into the craft. These are as follows: i. Raw Material, ii. Procedure and technique, iii. Designs and motifs.

Raw material: The raw material used in the manufacturing of the *jhul* consists of fabric, *zari* threads and other embellishments accompanied by it.

Fabric: In the making of *jhul*, different kinds of fabrics were required for base and lining. Traditionally, the base fabric was heavy in weight, perhaps velvet can be one of those. However, from the observation of the old pieces available in the museums and also the miniature paintings of different schools depict the same that velvet, brocade, silk, etc., were used as a base fabric for the production of the animal trappings. Customarily, the embroidery was heavy and massive, which needs to be backed to sustain the work. Therefore, the lining of coarser cotton is given along with the second lining i.e. *mashru* which provide the finished look to the object. Presently, no such heavy embroidery is carried out, instead, they use the self-patterned brocade fabric, which cut down the time involved in embellishing the *jhul*, along with the lining of satin fabric.

Threads: Various types of *zari* and silk threads were employed to embroider the fabric. In *zardozi*, the silk thread only acts as a binding medium and the body of the design is completed by laying varieties of metallic threads in several shapes and forms along with the precious and semi-precious stones. In the past, for *zardozi*, gold and silver were used and due to their unique feature of being ductile, allows the finest of the wire to be

drawn⁷. The scientific process of drawing the wire was observed by many scholars. Where, Sir George Watt describes “about a foot long, the silver bar was wrapped once or twice with a gold leaf and placed under the furnace till the gold fuses. After fusing, gold unites with silver and changes its colour and then it is inserted in a massive sheet of strong iron to fix the position. The protruding portion was seized by a powerful clamp. Those thick wires were passed through the series of smaller size openings time after time till it achieved the thickness of a hair and became many miles in length. Because of the ductility property of the gold, a desired thin wire was drawn from the silver bar, completely coated with the gold. In next stage, the wires were flattened by being hammered as it passed across an anvil, to make it more uniform. Silver wires were produced by exactly the same process except that the bar is not gilded⁸. When the required thickness of the wire is attained, it can be bent, plaited, spirally twisted or shaped for the particular style of design.

Embellishments: They form an important part of raw material apart from *zari* (flat metallic strips wrapped around the silk thread). Traditionally, embellishment included stones, *sitaras* (sequins), and beetle wings which were being used in the embroidery⁸. It was found that sapphires, rubies, diamond were also used since *Mughal* times, along with gold and silver *zari*.

Colours: Colours and its radiant energies affect the human mind more dramatically and positively. Traditionally, rich purple, *maroon*, royal blue, bottle green, golden yellow and red were the colours used for the base fabric as gold work on dark colour background appears to be richer.

Procedure and technique: In the following steps, the process of making *jhul* is described below as was observed in a workshop at Jaipur.

Preparation of Khakas: The paper designs used in embroidery are called *khakas* Figure-5. During the course of the study, it was found that the craftsmen were also involved in designing and also own a craftsman who does the designing for them. The designs were first made on butter paper with a pencil. Then the designs are pricked along the outline of the design pattern by a needle to make a perforated design *khaka*.



Figure-5: Perforated Khakas.

Preparation of Fabric: The preliminary arrangement of *zardozi* embroidery is made by fixing ordinary cloth *lattha* or lining material on a *karchob* with the help of cotton strings. The strings are used because they are sturdy which help to stretch the fabric. The *lattha* serves as an under the fabric, which supports the base fabric on which designs have to be embroidered.



Figure-6: Fabric stretched on to the Karchob.

Tracing of Design: The perforated design sheets were placed on the stretch cloth. To position the design correctly, workers were using different powders i.e. chalk powder or *neel* which is properly mixed with kerosene oil and the mixture is passed through holes. When the pattern has been lifted away, a fine dotted line remains on the fabric Figure-7.



Figure-7: Designs are traced through perforated design *khaka*.

Stitches: The characteristic feature of *zardozi* is that the metal wire is not used in the form of thread, unlike in other embroideries; rather the metallic wire is used for embellishing the raised part done by padding technique i.e. couching embroidery. Therefore, three set of yarns are used one is laid yarn i.e. coarse cotton threads, other one is couching yarn, which is stitched over the laid yarn after embellishing with gilded wire⁹. This bulbous effect is achieved through either sewing with coarse cotton threads or by fastening the pieces of cardboard or *buckram* on the design portion. Thereafter, the

gold wire is laid onto embossed effect, which is secured with couching and laid stitches. CharuSmita Gupta, the textile historian, mentions that these stitches were taken by passing the needle which was threaded from underneath the fabric to the surface and then from the surface to below. The needle thus moves upward from the wrong side. The *zari* wires were cut into small pieces and laid so closely that they appear to be a continuous thread which moves from one side to other in the motion of the needle⁸.

Finishing Processes: After embroidery work is over, light strokes are given with a hammer and dabber to give the lustrous look to the embroidery Figure-8. And then starch is applied on the reverse side of the piece so that stitches are held in their position tightly together Figure-9. In Rajasthan, craftsmen are using *lai* for the starch (thin sticky paste prepared by mixing refined wheat flour (*maida*) with water) and kept it under the sunlight till it dried. Then the piece was removed from the *karchob* and basting is done.



Figure-8: Light strokes of hammer.



Figure-9: Application of starch.

Basting: After the massively heavy embroidery of fabric, the heavy cotton lining is sewn at the back to give the support to the gold work. To make this colossal piece more magnificent, the artisans add the fringes to the *jhul* on all the four sides of it.

The same procedure as discussed above was followed for making traditional *jhul* pieces, however, now the workmanship and the materials used for the construction is of inferior quality.

Designs and motifs: A schematic design catalogue of *Jhul* were prepared (See Below). For the purpose of the catalogue, a traditional *jhul* can be divided into three panels i.e. the two side panels, centre panel and the ends on all four sides that are finished with fringes. Either side of the panel was heavily embroidered while the central panel was left unfilled since howdah (a carriage which is positioned on the back of an elephant) has to be placed on it (Figure-3). The catalogue comprises of line sketches of borders, jaal, motifs, fillings and central motif used on the panels (Figure-10). The inspiration for the designs used in the traditional *Jhul* pieces can't be traced. However, present-day *Jhul* pieces have designs that are taken from the surroundings, nature and design books and as per the demand of the customers.

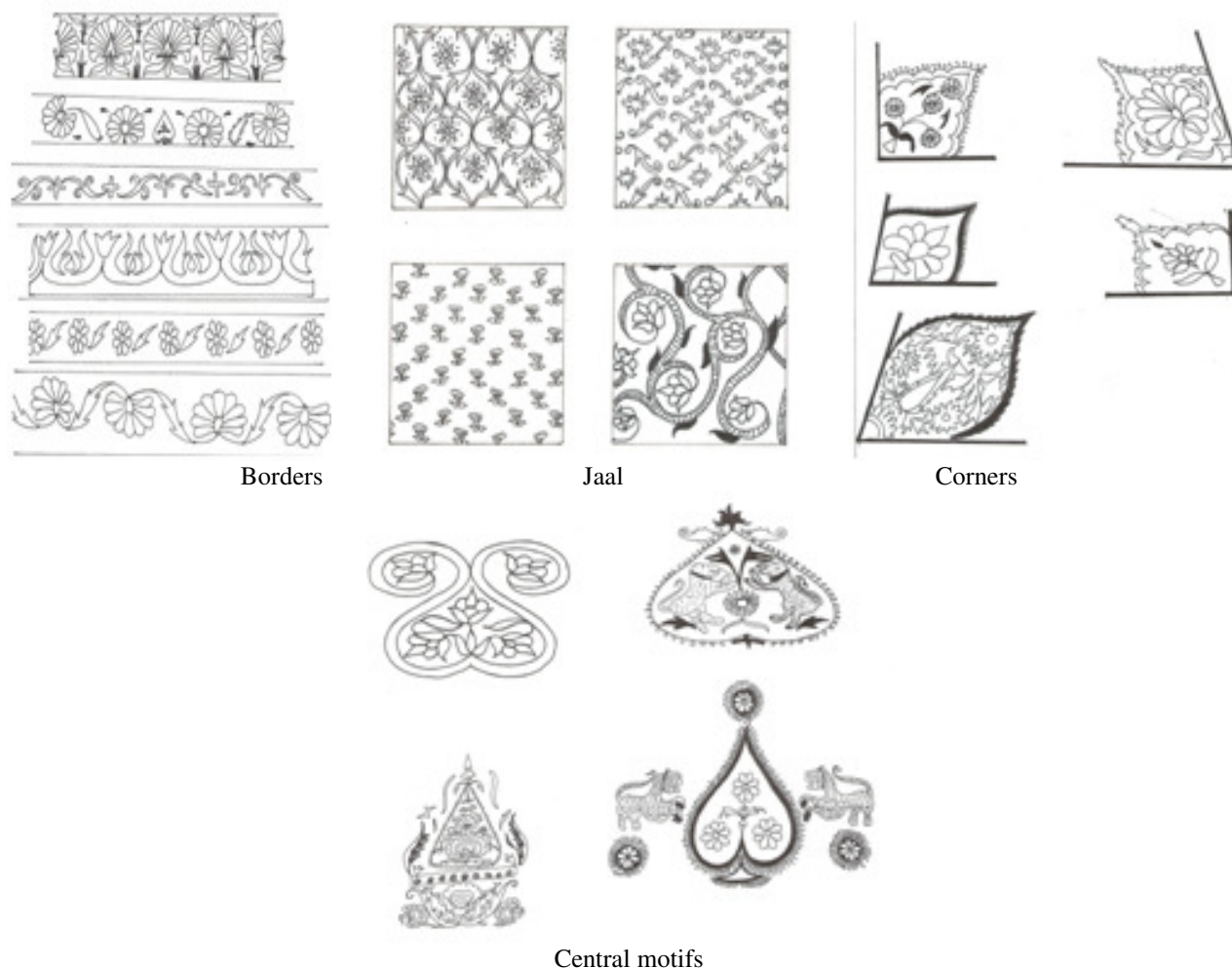
The traditional motifs which were majorly used in the *Jhul* pieces were as follows: i. *Jali*, also known as geometric designs like *Chamelikijali*, *diamond ki jali*, *star ki jali*, *chaklewalijali* etc. ii. A *Bharat* design as the name indicates fills the portions by embroidery. They were also known as filler designs like *tankebandi ka kaam*, *sitareki BharatkharBharat*. iii. *Patti*,

Phul and *Janwar* have wide range motifs like *gende ka phul*, *teen khar* etc.

During the field study, it was also found that in the contemporary pieces, the designs which were used remain the same as in traditional *Jhool* pieces. The designs were much louder and the delicacy and intricacy of the designs in the pieces have been reduced and their names are also changed. They were called by names like *mor*, *Trishulvalakona*, *jail ka kaam*, *sherkiladai* etc. Earlier the illustrations were more comprehensive and sophisticated but now the size of the designs has increased with no or very little elaborate work.

Conclusion

Elephants used by the royalty were heavily adorned to depict their importance and status and thus the decorative trappings were greatly embellished with *zardozi* embroidery which was done with slender gold and silver wires all over the span of the fabric. To further upgrade the lavishness, gems, precious stones and diamonds were fastened to the fabric. Therefore, leading to the "cloth of gold" for the trappings¹⁰.



Central motifs
Figure-10: Motifs and Designs.

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