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15 Embroidered Jain velvet hangings (*chors*): objects of art, objects of piety

NALINI BALBIR

Embroidered Jain velvet wall hangings are a specific form of modern religious art among Shvetambara Murtipujak Jains.¹ They form a well-characterised group of artefacts where the technique of golden (and silver) thread couched embroidery known as *zardozi* is made use of, often supplemented by numerous embedded sequins, in order to show various Jain iconographic themes (see below on the repertoire). Maroon is the prevailing colour of the velvet. In most cases an inscription in Hindi or Gujarati is embroidered in a rectangular panel at the basis giving information about the persons involved in the commissioning of the object (fig 1). Despite their rather conspicuous presence in the religious environment of Gujarat and northern India, these hangings have not been documented and are hardly taken note of in secondary literature even when they are reproduced (e.g. Jain-Fischer 1978: I plate XXXII). A rare exception is the following statement:

Ascetics encourage devoted Jains to make an embroidered velvet cloth (*choda*) at the conclusion of the ritual of fasting, meditation and devotion (*upadhaan*). These are often fine pieces of art and are hung behind the preaching ascetic or the

image of the Jina in small temples. (Shah 1998: vol 2, 196).

In the last three years, however, these artefacts have started entering museum collections outside India and becoming parts of exhibitions (Adelaide, Australia, see Bennett 2013; London, see Crill 2015 and Barnard 2016; Norwich, UK, the South Asian Decorative Arts and Crafts Collection, SADACC; Santa Barbara, USA, see Pal 2016); some are occasionally offered for sale on the web. It is necessary to recognise these objects as a significant form of Indian textile art and craft which displays sophisticated traditional techniques and is very much alive.

This paper, in honour of Prof Ratan Parimoo, a true scholar and real gentleman, whose activity at the head of the L D Museum (Ahmedabad) has been so crucial, is a summary of a larger preliminary survey based on a corpus of 52 items described and transcribed individually (Balbir 2016 in French) and a step towards a monograph on the topic.²

Far from being antics, these objects are produced in front of our eyes. In Gujarati these hangings are known as *puthiyum* “object at the back”, a word similar in its meaning to the better known term *pichvai* referring in particular to the hangings used among Vaishnavas, especially at Nathdwara (both words go

back in the end to Skt. *prshtha* directly or crossed with Skt. *paschat*). However, the most common designation used today by Jains is *chor* or *chod*, a word of rather mysterious origin despite some hypotheses, none of which is yet totally convincing (discussion in Balbir 2016 § 4). In its complete form, the hanging itself is supplemented by a canopy (Guj. *chandarva*) and a velvet-festoon (*torana*), as the late Gujarati archaeologist and art historian R N Mehta remarks:

A small hanging draped behind a Jain *Suri* (abbot) when he delivers a sermon. The *Suri* sits on a woollen floor-spread, behind him hang one or more *Puthias*, over him a small *Chandarva* (canopy) with a *Torana* (a draping in front of a canopy) in front of it. (Mehta 1956 : 53 n. 1).

An additional object involving the same materials and techniques is the 'handkerchief' (*rumal*, here fig 2), which is not hung but, like a tablecloth, is laid on a stool placed in front of a teaching monk.

Chors are manufactured as ceremonial artefacts. Their purpose and iconography make them Jain, but the material and techniques used for their making connect them with a well-established tradition of textile work. The cloth is silk-velvet (*makhmal*), which, according to some is of Indian origin, according to others was brought by Arab merchants, and, anyway, is an expensive fabric. Velvet of dark red or maroon colour, regarded as auspicious and prestigious, was used since Moghul times for thrones, baldaquins etc.³ The main technique used for the embroidery is that of couched gold or silver metallic wires known as *zardozi*, used for festive objects or clothing especially for weddings. This technique, which came from Persia, was flourishing in the Moghul period and then at the end of the 19th c. Metal embroidery on velvet produced what is known as *khinkhab*. Today metal embroidery is still practiced in centres such as Varanasi, Allahabad or Lucknow, wherefrom the Jain hangings inscribed in Hindi could come. In Gujarat, Surat has been and remains the main centre of *zardozi* work on velvet.⁴ In the Kayastha Street, located in the Gopipura area, several family enterprises are dedicated to *zardozi* work in its

various applications, *chors* being one of them. One of the most active and famous today is M/S Khimchand Kalyanchand Jariwala whose present director is Mr Devang Nanavati, great-grandson of the founder, assisted by his son Mr. Maitrak Nanavati. The workshop is located in the neighbourhood of Surat, at Abhya Gam village. Of a modest size, it occupies the first floor of a private house and is composed of two rooms and a terrace. It is accessed through an outside staircase. When a Jain customer wants to get a velvet hanging made, he orders it from the enterprise, specifying for which occasion it is meant. A selection of patterns is proposed (nowadays through WhatsApp).⁵ Usually, the embroiderers are Muslims. In recent years, women have also started entering the craft. But here, all are men and Patels aged between 20 and 50. Twenty craftsmen, who have learnt the craft from father to son, work about 13 hours per day, sitting on thin cushions in front of the wooden frame (*karcob*; Gupta 1996 : 125) where the fabric is installed, itself attached to a metallic frame by short white cotton threads which will be removed once everything is finished. On the day of our visit, five men were working at a sari embroidered with golden wires, while the two other groups, each of three persons, were involved in the making of two *chors*. Once the design pattern is selected, it is executed either directly on the cloth or on butter paper (Balbir 2016 fig 2), in which case the paper is placed on the velvet. Lines of holes are pierced on the lines of the design and a fine white powder with boric acid is applied so that the design comes out on the fabric. The tools used by the embroiderers are few and extremely simple: a pair of scissors, a large needle and a small needle.⁶ But their job requires high skill. The wires may be cut into small pieces which are inserted one by one in the fabric with a hooked needle if the decoration so requires. Sequins are also inserted in the same way.⁷ The result of the craft is always extremely sophisticated and refined with minute attention to details (fig 3). On that day, one group was working at a *chor* on bright red velvet (fig 4a) in its early stage. Parts of the design were still visible. The craftsmen were embroidering it mainly with white cotton threads. The second hanging, on

bright blue velvet, was already fairly advanced (fig 4b), and implied insertion of small metallic pieces.⁸ Producing one *chor* may require hundreds of hours. Once the embroidery work is finished, the object is given to other craftsmen who will strengthen the fabric and its borders with a satin or silk lining. Key rings are attached for hanging. When the *chor* is not hung, it is carefully kept in large white cotton pouches. The embroidery of the text inscribed at the bottom will be entrusted to yet other craftsmen and can be done at a later stage.

The selling price of the hangings depends on several factors. Owners interviewed in January 2016 say that a recently made *chor* costed 5 000 to 7 000 Rs., whereas older ones may have costed one lakh. The average size is 5 feet x 3 feet, but smaller and larger hangings are also found. The amount of sophistication in the decoration is another parameter. Some of the objects are filled with embroideries and sequins up to the brim so that there is hardly any spot that remains empty, while others are simpler. Variations in prices are also connected with the materials used. Until 1970s, pure golden and silver thread were used. But increase in the price of raw material has finally led to the increasing use of half fine gold laces or imitation wires, mixed with copper or kinds of synthetic plastic. The cost is less, but risks of deterioration are more.⁹ Diversification in the colour of the velvet is another recent innovation. The traditional maroon background still prevails (70%) but may be replaced by bright red (20%) or dark and light blue (10%, see fig 5). Whereas traditional decoration is made of vegetable motifs, flowers and arabesques, with golden and silver prevailing, various coloured pieces (in the form of glass beads) are more and more inserted in recently produced objects, especially if they are meant to celebrate the religious accomplishments of lay Jains. The more glittering they are, the better it seems to be.

Information regarding the initial purpose of the individual hangings can be gathered from the Gujarati or Hindi texts embroidered at their basis. Whereas those of the earlier years are often very brief, the later ones tend to be more detailed. The wording is codified

and recalls the formulation used either in manuscript colophons or in donation inscriptions engraved on Jain images. The recurring pattern is: at the instigation of the monk or nun X, disciple of Y (*X upadesha thi / prerana thi*), at the occasion of (*prasange* or *nimitte*) with type of event and names of persons concerned, on behalf of (*Z taraf thi / ki or se*) with names of sponsors, in the year so and so, occasionally completed by a place name referring to the sponsors' original place or place of residence at the time of the donation. All monks and nuns mentioned belong to Shvetambara Murtipujak monastic orders. In our corpus the various ascetic lineages (*samuday*) of the Tapagaccha, which can be identified through the name of their respective leaders or founders, are prevalent, whereas the Ancalagaccha is represented in one instance (Balbir 2016, 6.1 for details). One of the reasons to get a *chor* made is to celebrate the promotion of a monk within the religious hierarchy and his accession to the status of either *gani*, *panyasa* or, even more, *acharya*. This applies to monks only, not to nuns who are uniformly referred to as *sadhvis*. Another significant occasion is the celebration of the *diksha* anniversary. In such cases the instigators are other religious colleagues and the sponsors are Jain *shravaks* or *shravikas*. More often, however, *chors* are made to celebrate arduous types of fasts observed by mendicants or by laypeople, especially women. It is well-known that Jains have at their disposal an overwhelming variety of fasts where parameters of difference relate to durations, type of food consumed or not consumed, which combine in a number of ways. The embroidered inscriptions provide a large panel of names (see Balbir 2016, 6.3). Since the making of a *chor* involves substantial expenditure, it is no wonder that it celebrates fasts that are remarkable because of the tenacity required. From series of *ayambil* to one month-fast, *varshitap* or *vissthanaktap*, the choice is open. Married women and nuns are among those who are mentioned most frequently. The purposes of the fasts, however, are not explicit. It is possible to reuse during the period of fasting a *chor* initially made for somebody else. It is hung on the wall behind the place where the fasting person sits during the day, as it is believed that positive vibrations increase one's

energy (*satta*). Mostly, however, the *chor* is offered at the concluding ceremony of the fast (*udyapan*) by members of the family or a larger community group. It often happens nowadays that these concluding ceremonies are held collectively. In January 2013 in Sankheshwar about 50 hangings were exhibited under a temporary tent waiting for the next day when they would be offered to their respective recipients during the celebration. In the same way as a Jain follower may sponsor the copying of a manuscript, the publication of a book or the installation of an image in order to commemorate a deceased family member, he may also do the same with a *chor*. The words *smaranarthe* ‘in memory of’ or *shreyorthe* ‘for the good of’ are then used in the inscription. All different purposes are also liable to combine in the same object.

Once it has been made and used for a specific celebration, the hanging might be kept by the family who paid for its production as private property. But, quite often, the hanging is donated to an *upashray* or a temple where it serves as a backdrop to teaching mendicants. It also happens that a *chor* is specially commissioned by a local Jain community for a specific *upashray* as shown by embroidered inscriptions. A *samavasarana* model in front of a hanging *chor* is a common sight during Jain ceremonies (fig 6). Contemporary Jain mendicants explain it in this way, connecting present with past: the *samavasarana* structure symbolises the Jina’s reaching Omniscience (*kevalgyan*, *kevalajnana*) and the event of his initial preaching to all beings. In the background stands an ashoka tree (see, for instance, *Jainendra Siddhanta Kosha* vol 4 p 335 reproduced in Balbir 2016), replaced today in the same function by the *chor*, where fundamentals of the doctrine or vegetable motifs are often embroidered. In addition, the teaching mendicant inserts himself within a tradition and an ascetic lineage that can be visualised by photographs of their members (see here fig 1). The *chor* is one of these symbolic objects.

The iconography of the *chors* is distinctly Jain, going from symbolic representation of Jain fundamentals to episodes of the Jinas’ lives, other

narrative scenes or pilgrimage places. Whereas earlier hangings seem to favour vegetable ornamentation or arabesques for the borders, there is a marked tendency to have them filled with individual embroideries of the fourteen dreams which are *par excellence* an auspicious category and are depicted on all types of objects. They are a way to symbolise the Jina’s presence and are shown in the regular sequence: 1) elephant, 2) bull, 3) lion, 4) goddess Shri, 5) flower garland, 6) moon, 7) sun, 8) banner, 9) full pot, 10) lotus pond, 11) milk ocean, 12) celestial palace, 13) jewel heap, 14) smokeless fire. They are also often embroidered on the supplementary canopy or on the *torana*, as well as the eight auspicious symbols (*ashtamangala*). Obviously, nothing prevents that these two themes be central in the hanging (see here fig. 1 left side). The selection of the main theme embroidered may be connected with the kind of fast celebrated: for example, the *navpad* or *siddhachakra*, which are frequently depicted, for a *navpad oli* fast or the twenty objects of veneration for a *vissthanak* fast. These are two instances showing how the embroidery of fundamental Jain concepts is prevalent (see Balbir 2016 § 8 for details). Other such representations are the five types of knowledge, the *pancanamaskara mantra*, the wheel of the Law (*dharmacakra*) shown in between two antelopes on each side, known since Mathura art, the eight marvelous signs (*ashtapratiharya*) or the *samavasarana* which symbolize the primary event of teaching. Specific Jain views are propagated through velvet hangings showing the cosmic man (*lokapurusha*, see Bennett 2013: 54-55 plate 24, Crill 2015: 97 fig. 96 or Barnard 2016: 107 fig. 25), or the Jain scriptures. The ‘canon man’ (*agamapurusha*, see Bennett 2013: 52-53 plate 23, or here fig 7) is a counterpart to it which was deliberately spread in the 1940s by the renowned Jain Shvetambara teacher Anandasagarasuri who deployed multi directed activity in order to increase the presence of the 45 Agamas defining Shvetambar Murtipujak identity within the Jain society, whether through editions or through the construction of *Agam mandirs* (Balbir forthcoming). Like here, on such *chors* the space is usually crowded with the names of each individual text. In fig 5 six *sthanacharyas* each

carry a group of texts *11 anga*, *12 upanga*, *10 payanna*, *6 cheda*, *4 mula*, *2 culika*, whereas the fifth Anga, the *Bhagavatisutra*, is carried in solemn procession on the back of an elephant. Pujas centred around the Agamas may also be materialised by the making of individual *chors* dedicated to each text (Balbir 2016: fig 11).

The Jinas' lives are at the heart of several hangings. They are summed up in the five auspicious events (*pancakalyanaka*, here fig 8) : *diksha* (top left), *nirvana* (top centre), *kevalajnana* visually translated into the *samavasarana* (top right), *janma* (in the middle) shown through the bath given by god Shakra, *cyavana* (middle lower part) shown through the mother seeing the fourteen dreams. Any episode meant to illustrate tenacity and perseverance at the time of hardships seems to be appropriate as encouragement for those who have undertaken a fast. Mahavira or Parshvanatha resisting attacks (*upasargas*) before they reached omniscience are cases in point. One of the most frequent scenes embroidered on *chors* is Parshvanatha being assisted by Dharanendra while he is put in danger through the waters thrown by the demon Meghamalin. Shantinatha's previous birth as king Megharatha (here fig 9a) who went up to cut his own flesh in order to save the life of a dove threatened by a falcon similarly embodies keeping to fundamental values despite adverse circumstances. And showing the first Jina Rishabha breaking his one year fast from the hands of Prince Shreyamsa, the first being who was aware of proper food to be given as alms and offered sugar cane juice, is an encouragement for a Jain engaged in a *varshitap* (here fig 9b).

There is, in fact, no limit to the type of scenes that can be embroidered on the hangings. Others are episodes connected with early Jain teachers such as Bhadrabahu and Sthulabhadra,¹⁰ Vajrasvamin, Jambusvamin, Kesi and Paesi (Balbir 2016 fig 7), etc. The wealth of the repertoire of Jain narratives is well exploited in the *chors*. In the well-known Madhubindu story (here fig 1 right side) a man, representing mankind in general, tries to lick a drop of honey although he is surrounded by all kinds of dangers. The story of Dhanya and Shalibhadra, or that of Varadatta

and Gunamanjari associated with the Jnanapanchami vrata (see Balbir 2016 fig 14 and Pal 2016 fig 17) are two instances out of many.

Finally, Jain *tirths* are often embroidered on the hangings, whether it is Mount Astapada, Girnar, Sammet Shikhar, Ranakpur, Pavapuri, Bhadrashwar and, overall, Shatrunjaya, the lord of sacred places (see here fig. 3 details). The *chor* of fig 10 which shows the Luna Vasahi temple at Mount Abu was got to be made by a widow in memory of her late husband. It is undated, but artistic features point rather to the middle of the 20th century than to most recent years.

The iconography of the *chors* has no theory, except for a discussion by Anandasagarasuri about the adequacy of monks showing their backs to hangings where great figures of the past have been embroidered. His *Sagar Samadhan* is devoted to the discussion of points of contention relating to doctrine or practice in the question-answer format. The 723rd one goes:

Is it appropriate that *zari* embroideries of great influent men such as Sthulabhadra, Gautama, Ilacikumar, Vajrasvami, Jambusvami, or the Navapad are found on canopies and backdrop hangings in upashrays? Is it appropriate, when hanging them behind the monks may involve an offence (*ashatana*) to these great men?

The answer is:

The current usage where great men of the past are depicted on canopies and hangings is not appropriate. It is not decent that mendicants sit their backs to figures worthy of worship. It would be reasonable to change this and to favour themes such as sun, moon, the fourteen dreams or the eight auspicious symbols (1972: 279-280).

This is a recommendation to prefer symbolic representations over human figures. According to oral information (in need of further exploration) certain monastic groups follow this advice.

The exact history of these objects has yet to be investigated more. Two early specimens from the 18th century which were meant to pay homage to a religious teacher are known (Mehta 1956). According to informants, the making of these hangings developed under the action of several prominent Jain laypeople in the 1920s-1930s. But of all the dated hangings which could be traced so far none is earlier than the 1950s.¹¹ Jain Shvetambara teachers of the late Middle Ages who provided a normative frame to the life of pious *shravaks* and *shravikas* do not seem to mention the velvet hangings as such. The only textile artefact they mention for solemn occasions is the canopy (Skt. *chandrodaya*). Ratnashekharasuri in the 15th century, followed by Manavijaya at the end of the 17th century, both consider that getting canopies made and offering them to the temples is one way of increasing the temple wealth (under the heading Pkt. *Jina-dhana-vuddhi*): 'Similarly one should deposit (in the temple) new ornaments, canopies etc. according to one's own means' (*evam navina-bhushana-candrodadayadi yathashakti mocyam*).¹² This is one pious act that laypeople are encouraged to perform at least once a year. It is interesting to note that the Hindi translator so-to-say updates the text to today's practice, using the opportunity provided by *adi* to add the hangings: *apni sampatti anusar Jina pratima ke lie mukut adi naye abhushan, chandarva, chor adi banakar mandir mem bhemt karne chahie* (Padmavijaya 1994 : 387). So I would suggest that *chors* are perhaps innovations or extensions of this custom that fit in perfectly with the general pattern : they contribute to the spreading of shared Jain values (*prabhavana*) which they make visible in temples and *upashrays* through the display of a distinct iconographic programme and exemplify the interaction of mendicants and lay followers in the production of an object of piety. The choice of the hanging-form, obviously more easily accessible for viewers than canopies, was probably influenced by the *pichvai* widely present in western India, but one could also think that Muslim velvet banners with *ayats*¹³ embroidered in metallic thread might well have played a part in the diffusion of this form of religious art. Anyway, *chors* contribute both to the liveliness and to

the diversification of metallic embroidery in Gujarat today. They are an additional instance of the way Jains have imbibed surrounding techniques for their own religious purposes.

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Endnotes

1 In order to conform to editorial rules for this volume the use of diacritical marks has been reduced to a minimum. – All photographs illustrating this article (except one) have been taken by the author in Gujarat between 2013 and 2016.

2 I am most thankful to those who have helped in some way or the other for this study especially during fieldwork in Ahmedabad and Surat (10-15 January 2016) : Acharya Vijayashilacandrasuriji Maharaj, Dr Mrs. Kalpana K Sheth, Mr. Devang Nanavati and

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3 See Edwards 2011 (a precise description of metal embroidery in Gujarat and its history): 91ff.

4 See Gupta 1996 (a detailed and precise investigation of *zardozi* work), especially p 76, and Edwards 2011 chapter 3. For the process of preparation of raw materials see Naik 1996: 143-145 and fig 3.7-3.10 in Edwards 2011. Shrikant 1998: 129ff. deals with the subject from the practical angle, providing drawings and patterns for those willing to make metal embroidery.

5 This is the contemporary version of former pattern-books used by embroiderers, see Edwards 2011: 161.

6 See Balbir 2016 fig 4. Gupta 1996: 125 also observes: 'Very few tools are required for the metal embroidery'.

7 On the way to insert sequins and small pieces see Gupta 1996: fig 174 ff. and Sunil Vaid, *Sequins. The Traditional Art of Handcrafted Embroidery* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5cjWYjPUd4>).

8 Our observations correspond to the detailed description of the 'process of the craft' given in Gupta 1996: 126ff. See also the photographs reproduced in Edwards 2011.

9 These changes, which apply to all forms of metal embroidery, are described in Gupta 1996 : 75ff.. They question the survival of the craft.

10 <https://www.etsy.com/fr/listing/228490609/antique-mur-vintage-rare-decor-suspendu>

11 The undated *chor* catalogued in Pal 2016: 210 is ascribed to the 'late 19th century', but no justification is provided for this dating.

12 Ratnaśekhara chap 5 p 24 and Mānavijaya p 333-334.

13 See for instance Gupta 1996: fig 153-154 and Gupta 2005.



Fig 1: *Chors* in context, Godhra, Gujarat, January 2014.



Fig 2: Embroidered cloth (*rumal*) for the celebration of the 50th *diksha* anniversary of Acharya Vijayashilacandrasuriji Maharaj in 2011.



Fig 3a: Landscape of Shatrunjaya with pilgrims climbing up the hill on a *chor* from 1987.



Fig 3b: The first Jina Adinath in a temple at the top of Shatrunjaya, 1987



Fig 3c: Two of the fourteen dreams on a *chor* from 2015



Fig 3d: Bhadrabahuṣvamiḡi on a chor from 1979



Fig 3e: Srinavapadji on a recent chor (inscription not yet embroidered)



Fig 4a: and 4b Embroiderers working at two *chors*, Abhva Gam, Surat, January 2016.



Fig 5: Bright blue *chor* from 2007 along with canopy, showing the 45 Agams and the *Bhagavatisutra* in procession.



Fig 6: *Chor* (dated V.S. 2070 = 2013) and *torana* showing the eight auspicious symbols in front of a *samavasarana* structure in an Ancalagaccha *upashray*, Ghatkopar, Mumbai (Photo by Dhvani Hariya, April 2016).



Fig 7: *Chor* (dated V.S. 2069 = 2012-13) showing the 'canon man'.



Fig 8: *Chor* (dated V.S. 2069 = 2012-13) showing the five auspicious events in a Jina's life, along with canopy.



Fig 9a: Detail of the story of Megharatha, the falcon and the dove (1984).



9b The first Jina Rishabha receiving sugar-cane juice from Prince Shreyamsa to break a one year fast (2007).



Fig 10: Undated *chor* showing the Luna Vasahi at Mount Abu commissioned by a wife to commemorate her deceased husband.

