

Carpets and Mughals: An Analytical Study

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The carpet industry exists since about the beginning of the 13th century. Carpets of all shapes, sizes, textures and grades gained important position not only in the life style of the Sultanate of Delhi but also in the life style of the Mughals.¹ The Mughals did not only pull the niche for their dressing patterns and designing and in the selection of materials used for them but were also conscious about the interiors of their palaces, which can be seen through the carpets used by them. Even the Mughal paintings highlight the richness of carpets with different motifs in accordance to the use. The palaces were well-decorated in colourful *shatrangis* from the period of Akbar till Bahadur Shah.

Carpet was more or less a synonym for a variety of floor spreads. In the Mughal court, each such covering had a distinctive term based on its individual usage or function. The terms include *Zamiposh* (the cover for the floor), *takhtposh* (the cover for the *takht* or raised rectangular, square or circular wooden platform with supporting legs), *palangposh* (the bed spread), *Dastarkhan* (the spread used for dining purpose), *janamaz* (the prayer mat), *khanposh* (the cover for food trays) and so on². The design orientation in each variety was specifically related to its usage. *Janmaz*, the prayer mat, would depict a *mehrab*, an arch with pillars signifying the mosque or a rectangular niche in a wall with the tree of life. Inscriptions from the Quran were often embroidered. The central area in all coverings was deliberately left plain to suit the purpose of sitting while offering prayers. *Dastarkhan* devoid of any embroidery meant for sitting and keeping food. *Saazposh* often in the form of the particular instrument had embroidery only along the borders³. The silver and gold wire embroidery in repetitive *guldaudi* buti adorns the continuous border of the spread. The centre of each buti has red silk embroidery; border designs are used to fill the entire spaces. The *buta* designs again in floral pattern adorn the inner borders of the extended arm. The central part both in head and the arm is devoid of any embroidery. *Zamiposh* which is used for general or occasional purpose of sitting would have embroidery restricted to the borders, gold and silver gilt wire, spangles and sequins only on the borders with repetitive flower and geometric patterns and repetitive *patti wall buta* design⁴.

Abul Fazl in his *Ain-i-Akbari* recorded that the king caused carpets to be made in wonderful varieties and charming textures. He appointed experienced workmen (*karigar*) who produced masterpieces, which excelled the *gilims* of Iran and Turan. Imperial *karkhanas* were established for the production of carpets in all important towns of the Empire, particularly in Agra, Fatehpur and Lahore. All kinds of carpet weavers have settled in these towns.⁵ In the imperial workshops, single *qilims* were made 20 gaz 7

tassujes long and 6 gaz 11½ *tassujes* broad⁶. Cotton carpets were originally introduced by Emperor Akbar and *karkhanas* for their manufacture were set up at Agra, Lahore and Fatehpur Sikri. Highly priced carpets costing Rs 1800 were manufactured beside large varieties of *jajams*, *shatranjies*, *baluchis* and silk mats⁷.

To show the gorgeousness of carpets and skilled workmanship of the weavers during the Mughal period, two specimens are noted below. The delicate design and its pattern highlight the Mughal taste for their carpets.

Prayer rug

Woollen pile, silk warps and wefts,

Length: 12.5 cm, width: 90 cm

Mughal, 2nd quarter of 17th century

This prayer rug shows a flowering plant within a niche and has the deep colouring. In this rug, the plant is flanked by a cypress trees, characteristic of many prayer rugs, notably those of the 'millefleurs' type of the early 18th century A.D. A further similarity between them is the use of multi-coloured silk wraps, a technique found in the blue ground animal fragments. The knotting of the rug is extremely fine (1058 knots per square inch / 174 per square cm) and this combined with the use of fine lustrous *pashm*, the wool used in making Kashmir shawls, gives the effects of a sumptuous velvet rather than a wool rug⁸.

Animal Carpet

Woollen pile, cotton wraps and wefts.

Length: 403.5 cm, width: 191.2 cm

Mughal, 1625

The design of this carpet dating from the reign of Jahangir (1605-1627), shows the influence of the fondness for naturalism prevalent amongst the court painters at the time. The animals and figures dominate the carpet rather than being used as abstract elements of design. However their apparently random dispersal throughout the field is,



in fact, the basis of skilfully organised series of focal points (the rhinoceros at the top, the fighting camels, the central elephant, fighting tigers and bottom elephant) enclosed by a sinuous double meander whose key elements are the crocodile in the upper half of the carpet, and the dragon in the lower. The design of the fighting camels is based on a well-known painting by the 15th century Persian artist Bihzad which found its way into the Gulistan Library portion of the Jahangir album together with a copy by the Mughal painters Nanha. The border is made up of ogival cartouches alternately containing natural birds and animal⁹.

As the Mughal court, dress represented a culture often originally alien to that of the craftsmen who made them and whose ability had long proved itself a prime asset, carpetry introduced from Persia had its own distinctive aesthetic touch under the Mughals which exists still today depicting that royalty in its own way through these ages. With a slow decline in patronage from the Mughal courts this carpet industry faced a major setback.¹⁰

Notes and References:

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2. Rana, Girish Kumar, *Zari Industry in India: Art and Craft*, New Delhi, 2008, pp.39-40.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 44-46.
5. Nath, R, *Private Life of The Mughals of India (1526-1803)*, New Delhi, 2005, p.177.
6. Abul Fazl Allami, *The Ain-I-Akbari*, (Trns.), H. Blochmann), New Delhi, 1877, pp. 345-347.
7. Verma, Tripta, *Karkhanas Under the Mughals (From Akbar to Auangzeb)*, New Delhi, pp.87-88.
8. Victoria and Albert Museum, *The Indian Heritage (Court Life and arts under the Mughals rule)* Alpine Fine Arts Collection, New York, 1984, p.75.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
10. Rana, *op.cit.* p. 44.