

It's all a Fishy affair of dynasties

Fish, not fried or curried, not on a plate, but mounted on a head-gear worn by high-rank military officials of Mughal dynasties who had won emperor's favour for their valuable service. So, unfolds the fishy story of *mahi-ye maratib* or 'Fish of Dignity' which once used to physically represent as a golden fish or an elongated fish head. It was extravagantly exhibited at royal functions and worn in royal processions by the noblemen who had been so awarded. However, the credit does not go solely to the Mughals, scholars say it has been generously awarded to warriors for their valour by Muslim rulers in India, be it Lucknow Nawabs, Delhi Emperors, or Deccan Sultans. Further back in time, there has been a long legacy of the fish emblem in pre-Islamic and Islamic cultures of the Middle-east and South Asia. The presumed origin traced to Persian king Khusru Parviz who instituted while ascending his throne around six hundred AD. Intuitively, from Persia it would have travelled and taken a longish sojourn in South Asia, was eventually assimilated into the local culture.

Mughal Emperor Akbar happened to be a judicious person and granted *mahi-ye maratib* selectively, but the tradition eroded from Bahadur Shah, and the honour had become less discriminating. After Mughals, it was in *Lucknowi* culture, where the fish was adorably absorbed and metamorphosed into a decorative motif widely incorporated in the artefacts, ornaments, or other objects. In course of time, the fish duo became almost a signature of *Lucknowi nawabs*. In physical appearance, it was a pair of fish arranged head-to-head so that their curvilinear bodies formed almost a circle, but it had also sparked blossoming of innovative variations. The fish-pair appeared in a vast range of objects of art or on the items of daily chores, from medals, throne chair, punch daggers (*Katar*), presentation cup, to wine decanters, ornaments, plates, bowls, etc. The emblem became so culturally entangled that it was often used as the primary design in *Lucknowi bidri-ware* (metalware made of zinc, copper, and lead-tin alloy), even in the post-Nawabi era.

So, imagine.....a fish duo had once infectiously wooed the dynasties but not luring their taste buds, but relentlessly making their feisty presence in the art and culture.



Photo Source: Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), <https://collections.lacma.org>

Source: *This Blaze of Wealth and Magnificence: The Luxury Arts of Lucknow and The Use of Flora and Fauna Imagery in Mughal Decorative Arts* and by Stephen Merkel

Collector: Avik Ray