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# GLOBAL TEXTILE ENCOUNTERS

*edited by*

Marie-Louise Nosch, Zhao Feng
and Lotika Varadarajan

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*Front cover:* A richly embroidered child's *Jhabla* or tunic patterned with an intercrossing *Simurgh* (senmurw) and peacocks from the Indian tradition along with floral designs from Persia (Photographed by Ashdeen Z. Lilaowala for the Parzor Foundation; © Unesco Parzor).

*Back cover:* European foliage and scallops form the base of this Parsi embroidered sari (Photographed by Ashdeen Z. Lilaowala for the Parzor Foundation; © UNESCO Parzor).

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# 29 Parsi Embroidery: An intercultural amalgam

SHERNAZ CAMA

Shernaz Cama, PhD and Associate Professor, teaches at Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi University, India. She has been involved in cross-cultural and inter-religious studies at various levels since the time of her PhD research work on *Blake and Zoroastrianism*. She has edited and authored several books and has assisted senior scholars from India, Japan, Germany and France in their research projects on Zoroastrianism.

In 1999, Shernaz Cama was invited by UNESCO to initiate a project on the Preservation and Promotion of Parsi Zoroastrian Culture and Heritage, (UNESCO PARZOR). As honorary Director of the project, she guides researches in various aspects of Zoroastrian culture and demography all over India

She has produced three movies for the Parzor project and was the curator of the Parzor exhibition, *Pictures with a Purpose*. She has also headed an international six-country multinational Candidature for the UNESCO Award, *Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*, while the Candidature *Navroze* has been declared in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2009.

Shernaz Cama has been awarded the Mazda Education Foundation Award and Mancherji Edalji Joshi Memorial Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Zoroastrian community. She lives in New Delhi and has a son.

From early history, textiles have woven together the tapestry of humanity. The Parsi Zoroastrians, now a tiny minority of under 65,000 individuals in India, have saved, in their cupboards and trunks, this proof of our world's multicultural history. Complex roots and routes lie behind what we call "Parsi Embroidery" today. The tradition grew from Achaemenian Iran, travelled through the Silk Route into China and then came back with Indian and European influences, to its originators, the Parsi Zoroastrians of India.

Zoroastrians are followers of the Prophet Zarathustra. The loss of the Sasanian Empire led, in 936 CE, to a few Zoroastrians seeking refuge at Sanjan on the West coast of Gujarat in India. According to legend, the local ruler, Jadi Rana, presented them a bowl filled to the brim with milk. Their wise priest and leader slowly stirred in a spoonful of sugar, without allowing the milk to overflow. Thus, the Parsis or 'people from Pars or Fars', in Persia, mingled unobtrusively. One of the conditions of their refuge was that they would adopt Indian costume and language. Yet, the Parsis managed to create a distinct identity for themselves. Textiles, one of the key markers of cultural identity, have contributed greatly in this respect.

Zoroastrianism celebrates the animal kingdom and the bounty of nature in its sacred texts, ceremonies and myths; revels in flowers and gardens, birds and beauty which provide the backdrop for its motifs. This *Spenta* or 'bountiful' world is to be treated with care, each tiny butterfly a manifestation of God's Goodness.

"Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds, *Humata, Hukata, Huvarashta*", the core and mantra of both the religion and its cultural attitudes, is believed to have power to transform negation, drive away evil and enable this world to reach ultimate joy. The Zoroastrian, therefore, must be a person of action. Respect for material creation as a manifestation of God's Goodness, is a cardinal tenet of the Zoroastrian faith. "He who sows corn, sows righteousness", says the sacred text, the *Vendidad*; to serve nature then is to serve God, and thus, reverence for nature became interwoven and embroidered into the costumes of daily life. Embroidery has, thus, always played a vital part in the Zoroastrian love of life. Despite their assimilation into India, the Parsis clung to their core cultural belief of a love of life in all its forms and continued to appreciate beauty in every aspect of their lives.

In the Zoroastrian homeland of Iran, the *ijar* or trousers were accompanied by a long *jhabla* or tunic, which reached the knees. The head was covered with a shawl and the entire costume embroidered with rustic, simple embroidery. Fish and bird motifs prevailed, as did flowers, roundel like emblems of *Khurshid* (the Sun) and tiny birds and animals. The Sasanian Empire (*c.* 3rd–7th century CE), brought Zoroastrian motifs into their textiles. By celebrating and thus regenerating this tangible world, the Zoroastrian defeats forces of negativity which try to stifle natural powers of expression as well as spiritual creativity. However, the Zoroastrians of Iran became a conquered people, forbidden from wearing bright colours as yardage. Their headdress became dark, navy or black, yet their love of life continued to be expressed in their embroidery. Here, in this wedding dress we see peacocks and exotic colourful creatures, embroidered onto a traditional wedding shawl with the sacred *Ariz* (or fish), emblem of fertility (Fig. 29.1).

In India, Parsi women's wardrobes contained *ijars* and *jhablas* and, only later, petticoats under their saris. Parsi women had adopted the sari when they migrated from Iran to Sanjan (Giujarat, India) but, in order to keep it distinct, wore their pleats on the right and made the *pallav* reach almost to the feet. When other women wore cottons or Indian silk, they stood out in distinctly patterned embroidered garments.

In many ancient cultures, women's crafts have links with sacred traditions. In a traditional Zoroastrian home, be it in Iran or India, the *kusti* weaving loom was an important part of the household, where women created the sacred girdle worn by all Zoroastrians. Even today, a girl is expected to hand-stitch her wedding *sudreh*, a sacred vest, its little Pocket of Good Deeds or *gireban* symbolizing the essence of this culture.

Craft traditions continued across generations and centuries. Fifty years ago, most Parsi homes had an embroidery cupboard. On its shelves stood Chinese lacquer boxes, wicker baskets with tools, and amazing colours and shades of embroidery thread. A shelf could contain embroidery pattern-books from all over the world. Here, in one corner, pressed into brown paper folders were butter-paper patterns, some home

Fig. 29.1: This photograph is courtesy Elizabeth Gersivitch. It depicts a 19th-century wedding shawl collected from Iran and carefully preserved (© UNESCO Parzor).

Fig. 29.2: Roshan Patel of Hyderabad kept the embroidery tradition alive till her death. Here we see: a) her tracing and b) the completed purse she designed and embroidered (© UNESCO Parzor).

drawn, yellowed with age. They often had handwritten instructions about colour preferences, or initials and dates to indicate for whom and on what occasion the pattern or *khakha* had been created (Fig. 29.2).

The iconography of traditional Parsi embroidery comes to life through flowers, birds and animals, which are celebrated as emblems of power, protection and purity.

The simurgh (senmurw) and rooster are sacred birds who provide health and protection. The rooster, when it crows every morning, slays the demon of darkness and becomes sacred to the archangel Yazata Sarosh. The simurgh ensures health and faithfulness. These protective powers make them a favoured emblem on children's clothing (Figs 29.3 and 29.4).

In the *Bundahishn*, the Pahlavi Text of Creation, each day is dedicated to an angel, symbolized in the material world by a flower. So, the red hundred-petalled rose stands for *Din* – Angel of Religion, the marigold for *Atar* – Angel of Fire, the white jasmine for *Vohu Manah*, The Good Mind (see Fig. 29.5). The Parthian (2nd century BCE) band of pearl discs and trellis grid patterns, seen in Iranian architecture and forest scenes, often found later on carpets, became popular in embroidery. Even when Islam became the religion of a conquered Persia and forbade portrayal of live figures, Zoroastrian motifs, animals and birds continued to be seen. As Allgrove McDowell states: "The textiles of conquered Persia preserved its original national identity and passed it on to future generations" (McDowell 1989, 157).

It was in the Tang and Song dynasties (618–1279 CE) that this Persian love of nature mingled with the skill of the embroidery schools of China across the Silk Route (McDowell 1989, 157–169). In this early stage of the intercultural amalgam, it can be seen how, after interaction between Persia and China, the satin stitch, the long and short stitch and the Parsi *khakho* or seed pearl stitch, began appearing alongside the Chinese chain stitch. Today, we have documented more than six forms of satin stitch in Parsi embroidery, while the *khakho* or 'forbidden stitch' no longer has any practitioners. Its intricacy resulted in women losing their eyesight; hence it was officially discouraged (see Figs 29.6 and 29.7).

Fig. 29.3: *Jhablas* or tunics were worn particularly by children. This bright red *jhabla* combines two protective symbols: the rooster and the Chinese Divine Fungus (© UNESCO Parzor).

Fig. 29.4: This child's *jhabla* or tunic has an intercrossing *simurgh* (senmurw) as its pattern. It is richly embroidered and includes peacocks from the Indian tradition along with floral designs from Persia (© UNESCO Parzor).

The Chinese connection with Persia was an overland trade link; this would change into a sea trade link with the later Indian Parsis. The first Parsi to sail for China was Hirji Jivanji in 1756. For almost 200 years, Parsi traders prospered, trading at Canton, Macao, Hong Kong and Shanghai. The Chinese had begun exporting their embroidery to Europe as early as the 13th century CE. By 1578, the Portuguese were allowed to trade from Canton and the city developed into an important centre for the export of

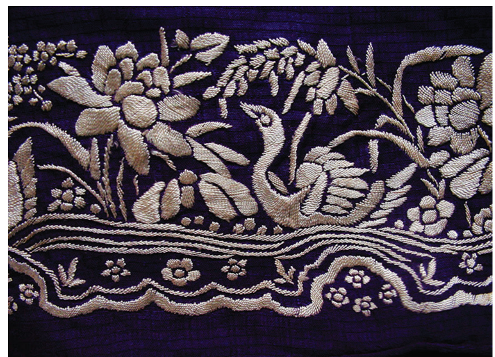

Fig. 29.5: *Ava Yazad*, Angel of Water, is depicted in this Parsi *kor* or border with the Water Lily, her representative flower (© UNESCO Parzor).

Fig. 29.6: An undated *khakho jhabla*. The birds, placed in a *Gul-e-bulbul* pattern, seem to be seated on an adaptation of the Chinese Divine Fungus image. This *jhabla* again represents the intercultural heritage of Parsi embroidery (© UNESCO Parzor).

Fig. 29.7: This *khakha* stitch *kor* (border) was embroidered by Gulan Billimoria in the 1960s. She did beautiful embroidery but lost her eyesight towards the end of her life (© UNESCO Parzor).

embroidered shawls, hangings, fire screens and other textiles, made for European clients and with increasingly western designs.

Legend has it that a Parsi trader in Canton, watching craftsmen embroider a rich textile, requested them to embroider six yards of silk as a sari for his wife in India. These first pieces, embroidered on satin, have no borders or *pallavs* and seem like yardage. These pieces often carried Taoist and Buddhist symbols of protection, such as the Divine Fungus (see Fig. 29.8).

The original name for a fully embroidered sari was *badhi bhareli*. In this, embroidered yardage was covered on all four sides as if bordered within a frame. This yardage is called *gala* in Gujarati and its enclosed patterned space gave its name to the *gara*.

Fig. 29.8: The late Mrs Bhicoo Manekshaw of Delhi is the owner of this *gara*, made for an engagement in her family in the late 19th century. It includes motifs of the Divine Fungus and plants which symbolize fertility, as well as scenes of lovers (© UNESCO Parzor).

The oldest saris had a small width and required a narrow joint to be attached; these were called *dodhpatti*. As power looms developed, the width increased. To facilitate the wearer and customize this cloth into a sari, the top of this yardage was left unembroidered, as was one edge, to make it easier to tuck in at the waist. Parsi women, following Indian traditions, began designing *kors* (borders) to match the inner embroidery, as well as frontage or the *pallav* which would highlight the design. Soon, Chinese yardage had developed into the Parsi *gara* (sari).

The colours favoured in the Persian tradition were imperial purple and other rich shades. As Indian influence grew, the auspicious Indian *kunku* red or vermillion became a favourite, particularly for engagement saris. Parsis wear white, symbolizing purity, at their weddings, but began a tradition of using red for the engagement sari. Here, we can see a vermillion engagement *gara* which combines Persian trellis patterns, the flowers and birds from the Iranian tradition, with the Endless Knot from the Chinese cultural vocabulary (see Fig. 29.9).

Intercultural exchanges continued in other motifs too. The Indian Ambi and Persian Cypress combined to create powerful motifs for *pallavs* which included Chinese baskets symbolizing plenty. The Imperial presence of Europe brought an amalgamation of scallops, bows and ribbons, and thus, four cultures came together in the Parsi sari (see Figs 29.10 and 29.11).

The greatest amount of information collected on the China trade came during a research visit to Hong Kong in 2006, where Parzor textile researcher, Ashdeen Lilaowala met Parsis, who had been involved in the China trade for several generations. Dr Phiroza Nariman (née Tavadia) recounted how Shameen Island and Garden Island – British and French Concessions and parts of the Canton settlement – had been home to Europeans and Parsis. All around this area were villages from where men came regularly to take orders for embroidery and understand designs and colours from their Parsi clients. Parsi women preferred white and cream rather than typical Chinese multicoloured embroidery, because it matched the white lace *sudrehs* every

Fig. 29.9: Indian peacocks combine with Persian trellis and flowers, joined with the Endless Knot, to create a combination of auspicious symbols for this engagement *gara* (© UNESCO Parzor).

Fig. 29.10: European foliage and scallops form the base of this red embroidered *gara* (© UNESCO Parzor).

woman wore, showing under her blouse. It was here that Pestonjee Burjorjee Dhabhar began exporting *garas* and other embroidery materials to Hormusjee & Sons and Karanjia in India. While the trade had been going on since the mid-19th century, it became formalized by these shops during the early part of the 20th century. This trade was customized, as seals in Gujarati from the Chungtai area have been found on garments meant only for the Parsi trade.

Along with full *garas*, the border sari or *kor* became popular. Certain patterns in *kors* are found repeated in different colours according to individual preference. The *cheena cheene* (Chinese figures), *kasab pakshi* (birds), *murgha batak* (roosters and fowl) and flower *kors* were regularly made, while the *kanda papeta* type of sari, being less expensive than

other varieties, acquired this 'common' nickname. (Figs 29.12 and 29.13)

Records of Parsi trading families tell us that the China trade flourished most when Parsi women actively participated in adapting Chinese yardage into designed *garas.* We have on record Roshan Guzder of Calcutta, who remembers stories of her grandmother travelling from Canton on a Chinese junk, and designing patterns for Parsi families in Bombay. These patterns were copied on tracing paper with *neel* (indigo) and then carried back to China for embroidery.

Fig. 29.11: The Chinese basket of plenty placed within an Indian *Ambi* or paisley is the primary motif on the sari *pallav* of this purple *gara*. The basket, like the Ambi, is an auspicious sign and would stand out dramatically in the Parsi Gujarati method of wearing a right handed or *seedha hath pallav* (© UNESCO Parzor).

A cross-cultural dialogue was also to be found in the technical development in Surat of the *saali gaj* silk, a semi-transparent silk fabric, light enough to be draped as a six-yard sari, yet strong enough to bear the weight of several kilos of heavy embroidery.

The designs over time were more and more influenced by the Parsi clientele. For many years it has been recognized that the Chinese *gara* and the Surti or Gujarati *gara* are individual products of the creative imagination. So, to understand how Chinese embroidery and Persian motifs blended with European design and Indian patterns to create 'Parsi embroidery' in India, we have to look at Surat and grassroot settlements of South Gujarat.

Until the early 1960s, Chinese *pherawallas* or textile vendors came regularly in the winter season to family homes across Gujarat, the Deccan, Bombay as well as Calcutta, wherever Parsi settlements were to be found. A man, in a white tunic and white trousers, with a small black skull cap, would arrive on the veranda early in the morning each week. Bejan Bodhanwala (b. 1928) recalls how in the Bharuch Parsi *Vad*, Chinese men carrying cane baskets with *kors* and saris artistically draped, would visit on foot or on bicycles. Mr Bodhanwala explained that the Chinese would come into Bharuch as a group but having divided the area into specific regions, only one Chinese trader would come regularly to a household.

In Bharuch, Parsis chose not to wear cotton and, to distinguish themselves from their Hindu and Jain neighbours, wore Chinese silk rather than Indian *paaj.* Several other elders across Gujarat recall Chinese men on bicycles who sold *garas* by weight. The heavier *garas*, with more embroidery, were more expensive.

Fig. 29.12: The nine-yard *kor* which edges a Parsi sari is seen here with roosters, butterflies and floral motifs (© UNESCO Parzor).

Fig. 29.13: *Kanda papeta* literally means onions and potatoes, and signifies simple embroidery (© UNESCO Parzor).

Parsis provided a good income for these Chinese peddlers. Over the years, they developed a close relationship with their clients. Because they could not afford storage space, the Chinese would leave their heavy bundles of cloth on a particular veranda during their visits, returning there after the morning sales were done. In the heat of the afternoon, they rested on the *otla*, veranda, had their opium, and dozed. While waiting for the cool of the evening, they would take out little embroidery rings and start work. Parsi women, after completing the day's chores, would come out on the *otla* to watch the embroidery with interest. Bodhanwala knows that his mother Homai, learnt embroidery from these men. During the years 1938–1942, Chinese peddlers taught the women of his household certain stitches and motifs. The peddlers carried their original patterns on black cloth. Once they had finished copying a design,

they leveled out the embroidery with small, sharp scissors. All these techniques and stitches were assimilated by Parsi women into their craft, adding their own myths and sacred symbols. Later, they incorporated the *aari* and *mochi* stitches, which they learnt from their Gujarati women friends. In the Deccan, Deccani Zari work began appearing on Parsi *jhablas* and children's prayer caps or *topis*.

It was in this way that Chinese embroidery became part of Parsi craft. Mothers learnt these special skills and passed them on to a new generation of women. They in turn used this craft, and with the education and freedom Parsi women enjoyed, created businesses or professions for themselves.

None of the people interviewed could provide dates for their collections or specific photographic proof of the Chinese peddlers. At the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, the archives contain a collection of Parsi embroidery which gives us some dates. The V&A has its origins in The Great Exhibition, 1851. Several of the exhibits from this Exhibition were bought to create the nucleus of the V&A collection. The Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851 had provided the impetus to collect textiles from all parts of the British Empire. Its collection today contains many pieces acquired in Surat, done mainly in *aari* stitch. The earliest dates available on record are 1852, while a large archive was acquired in 1883. Several of the Parsi *jhablas, ijars* and *kors* state clearly 'Parsi women's embroidery' and these do not have typical Chinese motifs. Border or *kor* catalogues are still available with families in India but written records of sales did not exist except in retail stores. Most transactions were done mainly at home and, even today, sales of Parsi embroidery go undocumented.

As times changed, and with the movement of the Parsis away from Gujarat into small apartments in urban centres, a way of life was lost. The large embroidery cupboards neither fitted into the flats of Bombay, nor could they be carried when Parsis migrated abroad. All that remains today are the products – the *garas, jhablas* and *ijars* which carry the memory of a people and its culture.

As each culture faces the homogeneity of globalization, ethnic and cultural distinctions, including clothing, become a way of recalling identity. The UNESCO Parzor project has tried to draw the attention of the world to the Parsi community. The enthusiasm with which the ordinary Parsi has responded to Parzor's Craft Research and Revival Module provides hope that this fragile yet distinct thread in world textile encounters will continue to add worth to that tapestry which is India's multicultural heritage.

## Acknowledgements

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have been conducted during Oral Tradition Recordings across India, China and Iran by researchers from the UNESCO Parzor Project. This article on embroidery draws upon Parzor oral heritage recordings over the past 10 years. These and the photographs are the copyright of UNESCO Parzor.

## Further Reading

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