

## Muse in the things overlooked

The Berlin-based art collective called Pirate Printers uses street fixtures as printing elements to design T-shirts and bags. The signages on vents, manhole covers, even utility graters make for fashionable prints on cloth.

## TEXTILE HERITAGE

# Nestled in 'gara' needlework...

**GOPIKA NATH** sews the narrative of the intricate, pictorial and well-embellished 'gara' embroidery, the artistic pride of the Parsi community, stitch by stitch

Amitav Ghosh's book *River of Smoke*, from the *Ibis Trilogy*, is centred on the opium trade with China. I had read the book without realising the significance of this in the evolution of Parsi gara embroidery, not until I spent an hour with Ava Khullar of the Parzor Foundation. Her passionate narration of the *Qessa-ye Sanjan* — how Zoroastrians fleeing Iran arrived in India, and their economic advancement through the opium trade, lent insight into how the exquisite, embroidered *garas* became "a tool for a new identity of the rich and prosperous community." A recent exposition in New Delhi featuring Parsi life and culture added to the idea that the Parsi gara was not just an ornately embroidered *saree*. A unique narrative about the history and culture of this community unfolded through them.

### Satin stitches

The gara is an intricately embroidered saree worn by the Parsi community. It is embellished primarily with the satin stitch, and was made in China until early to mid-20th century. Woven on narrow Chinese looms, the saree width was achieved by stitching two separate pieces together — referred to as *dor-pat*, *do-pati* or two-strip gara sarees. An important factor in the evolution of the gara is a condition laid down by the ruler of Sanjan for the Zoroastrians seeking refuge. In Iran, the women wore tunics called *izar*, but in India, they began wearing sarees because one of Jodi Rana's (a figure from *Qessa-ye Sanjan*) five stipulated conditions was that the women must adopt the Gujarati dress.

In the 18th century, the stitches used by Chinese embroiderers were a combination of satin stitch with its variations. These embroidered silks came via Parsi trading vessels returning to Indian shores, to become the gara saree. The fine hand-embroidery which makes a gara a gara is so perfectly executed, it is difficult to distinguish which is the right side.

Girls educated in convent schools in India are usually taught to embroider with satin stitch, where the back and the front of the motif are identically filled. It requires skill, where pulling

the thread through the fabric either too loose or too tight causes undesirable ripples in the motif. It wasn't a stitch that I learned well enough. But, when I was learning it, I assumed it had always been part of the Indian ethos. Little did I know that not only was satin stitch integral to the Parsi gara, but that it had come to India from China.

### Life in Canton

It is evident from Ghosh's narrative that Parsis made a life in Canton that was beyond trade when Bahram reveals "that this place had been an essential part of his life, and not just for reasons of business: it was here, in Canton, that he had always felt

most alive — it was here that he had learnt to live... it was Canton that had given him wealth, friends, social standing..."

That refugees from Iran, living in India, went to live in China, becoming profiteers of the opium trade, is another key feature in unravelling the Parsi gara story. Europeans had a penchant for Chinese luxury goods, including tea. However, a lesser demand for European goods in China created a trade imbalance. In 1780, Britain began exporting the opium grown in India, creating a steady supply for Chinese addicts. This resolved the trade imbalance and altered the fortunes of a near-bankrupt Empire. Many Indian business communities tried their hand, but it was the Parsis, functioning as traders and intermediaries for the British, who flourished.

With this fascinating historical backdrop, the embroidered motifs of lily, lotus, chrysanthemum, peony, weeping willow, cherry, pine, bamboo, divine fungus, cranes, peacocks, swans and pheasants that adorn the garas are no longer just flowers, trees and birds. Nor is the satin stitch just an embroidery-embellishment variant. Unfolding with stories of intrigue, they also establish a Chinese-inspired, Irani-Parsi lexicon of embroidery.

Traditional Chinese motifs had many meanings. The plum, peony, lotus and chrysanthemum, depicted together, signified different seasons. Symbols were also used to illustrate Chinese legends and myths. The gara designs are a complex amalgam of ideas from Iran, China and India,



**PATTERNED** Divine fungus & peacock motifs; (top) a 'gara' embroidery done by using the awl; (left) designer Ashdeen Lilaowala's creation. (PHOTOS BY AUTHOR)

**“THE 'GARA' IS AN INTRICATELY EMBROIDERED SAREE WORN BY THE PARSI COMMUNITY. IT IS EMBELLISHED PRIMARILY WITH THE SATIN STITCH...**

with European influences.

Canton, with its proximity to foreign trading posts, was popular for embroidered textiles where Chinese motifs were re-contextualised to appeal to European tastes — more Chinoiserie than Chinese. A later move toward authentic embroideries was puzzling for locals, because scenes of ordinary life and labour were embroidered instead of more 'auspicious ideals'. The pagodas, boats, China-Chini, and scenes of Chinese daily life are depicted on Parsi embroideries too.

### Symbolism & design

As nature worshippers, the embroidered gara motifs of flowers, trees, fish, rivers and birds are also imbued with meaning. The rock-like divine fungus provides protection, symbolising longevity and immortality. Trees and vegetation represent seasons, and the chrysanthemum connotes joy. The Rooster, from *Bundahishn*, the Zoroastrian 'Book of Creations', is considered auspicious for it heralds the dawn, bringing light to dispel darkness.

From 19th century onwards, Chinese craftsmen travelled to India. As *Aspheryas*, or door-to-door vendors, they carried

bundles of silk on their bicycles. They would bring huge bundles from China and leave them in the homes of the Parsis, taking only a few items to sell. In the afternoons, they would return to sit on the verandahs and ply their craft. Parsi women watched and learnt the art. Seeing the popularity of the Parsi gara, craftsmen of Surat began emulating this embroidery, integrating native skills and motifs with Chinese designs, to produce a Surat *gara saree* that included lace (or net-work) and French knots.

In early to mid-20th century, decline in the fashion for *garas* saw old sarees cut up and used as housecoats. "They are breaking up a ship to make a stool," remarked a Parsi grandmother. However, the loss was not irreparable as interest soon revived. Among others, fashion designer Ashdeen Lilaowala designs sarees and garments using Parsi motifs and variations thereof.

He works with craftsmen, primarily from Bengal, employing the traditional satin stitch using a needle and also a quasi-satin, filled-in effect, created with the awl or *ari*, where the thread is pulled over the fabric surface by the hook to create a long chain stitch as a filler, as opposed to tiny chain stitches that outline and fill-in motifs in traditional *ari*-work.

According to Khullar, in Iran, Zoroastrians were known for their weaving skills as 'people of the loom' and were carpenters who built ships, but they did not do embroidery. Although Parsi women did try their hand, it was never taken up as a traditional craft where skills and stories were handed down from generation to generation.

Most Parsis don't do much embroidery today. For the few who do, they take up to six months to complete a gara, losing sleep if they don't get it right — where the stitches are close and shading so seamless, it's a veritable painting done with the needle.

## PLAY CENTRAL

# Shed the age-old take on old age

After the premiere of the play *Mr & Mrs Murarilal* in Mumbai, film producer-director Subhash Ghai messaged the play's lead actor, Satish Kaushik, "The play tells you how to laugh in your loneliness."

Indeed, this Saif Hyder Hasan-directed play does exactly that. A poignant tale of three elderly, lonely figures coming together by chance in a beautifully landscaped park, it makes light of a plight that many senior citizens face — being neglected by family members who are too wrapped up in their own lives to spare some comfort time for their parents or grandparents.

Actor Satish Kaushik, better known for his comic screen-personas like Calendar (*Mr India*), Kashiram (*Ram Laxman*) and a host of others, plays the pivotal, serious-jolly Mr Murarilal, a retired army cook who puts up a jovial front, foot-tapping to old Hindi film songs. We catch up with the actor to talk about the latest feather in his cap...

**You are known for making viewers laugh. What attracted you to a character who has sacrificed his whole life for family members and yet is all alone in his autumn years?**

I decided to do this play because of its profundity. A lot of people look upon old age as a burden, but *Mr & Mrs Murarilal* celebrates old age. It says that after gathering a lifetime of both, happy and not-so-happy experiences, you must learn to live life for yourself, and live it fully, doing what you enjoy most. My character, Murarilal, has been let down by the family he nurtured, but he doesn't brood. Instead, he packs up sandwiches and picnics in a park where he sings old Hindi film songs, breaks into dance, and even flirts with another lonely soul who calls herself Mrs Murarilal (played by Meghna Malik). These are not our real names. We adopt them for fun. The two develop such a bond during the course of one night that they can even joke about sex and other so-called taboo topics.



**JOLLY** Actors Satish Kaushik and Meghna Malik in 'Mr & Mrs Murarilal'.

When Mrs Murarilal asks him, "When did you last cry?" he retorts, "Ask me when I last had sex." And she sportingly obliges. Delightful moments... In my growing-up years in Delhi, I saw elderly

couples from Western countries with backpacks, sun hats and walking sticks, enthusiastically visiting historical sights like the Lal Qilla and the Qutub Minar, undeterred by age; and I would marvel at their energy levels. This is why I could identify with director Saif's story about senior citizens who want to enjoy life.

**Have you personally seen the loneliness of the elderly?**

Yes, I have. In fact, I often feel guilty about how I did not devote much time to my father. I was so caught up with my career in Mumbai that I could not be beside him when he was old and had lost his memory. This guilt lessened a little when I invited my mother to stay with me. Now that I am no longer struggling to establish a career, I try to make up for my past behaviour by spending time with my older brothers and sisters. I have realised the benefits of the joint family system in which the seniors

are given their due, surrounded by their children and grandchildren. But I've also realised that lifestyles have changed, and so the older generation must not hinge its happiness on youngsters, who have their own compulsions. Instead, it must enjoy life and uninhibitedly do what it most enjoys.

**Did the play affect you as a person?**

As an actor, I've learnt a lot from this play. Earlier, even though I had done plays written by stalwarts like Brecht, Ibsen, Eugene O'Neill, Gorky, Vijay Tendulkar and Arthur Miller, I just mouthed dialogues. This play has made me realise that acting is not just about learning the text, but projecting the subtext as well. That's how I ended up improvising many of my dialogues. Personally, the play has taught me to take greater care of my body. I have cut down on drinks and partying, and have started working out at the gym. These days, I enjoy talking to young and talented people who are half my age because I

learn so much from them.

**Do you feel our country lacks facilities for senior citizens?**

Yes, I wish we had comfortable, sophisticated homes for them where they can read books, watch films or join classes to learn new skills like music, painting etc; homes where they can celebrate the last stage of their lives. As you grow older, your skills get honed, so our seniors should be given the opportunity to keep these skills alive.

**If you had to choose between enacting Kashiram, for which you won a Filmfare award, and Murarilal, which one would you choose?**

I have enjoyed playing both the types, and I'd like to continue doing all kinds of roles. I would do both. My zest for acting hasn't decreased. In fact, my appetite for doing good work is increasing by the day.

ALPANA CHOWDHURY