



# The Parsi Gara Saree: Then and Now

Words by Anushe Engineer



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The white crane sat quietly amidst the cluster of white flowers while another swooped above it, just inches away. The momentary beauty of this image is preserved permanently — timeless — much like the Parsi Gara saree it is stitched upon in shades of silver and ivory silk.

Among heirloom knick knacks and a bottle or two of strong whiskey, gara sarees are an axiomatic staple found in every Parsi household. These wearable works of art are carefully tucked away in a woman's closet, brought out only for the most sublime occasions of the year. And while this unique form of hand-embroidery enjoys high appreciation across and beyond the subcontinent even today, the history of the Parsi gara saree has never accompanied the fame.

The gara saree first appeared in India in the 19th century when Parsi businessmen returned from their trade expeditions to China. The gara saree itself was not brought back, but the sceneries and stitching methods observed on Chinese clothing was what Parsi designers in India adapted into their own style, paying homage to elements of nature and daily activities observed on these voyages. Unlike traditional sarees that are often made from cotton or silk and designed with block print, gara sarees are exclusively hand-embroidered on crepe or



organza fabric.



A group of Parsi women pose for a photograph, with the front three adorning gara sarees, circa 1940-50s. (Photo courtesy Ashdeen)





A sleeveless jabla covered in gara embroidery, circa 1930. (Photo courtesy *Ashdeen*)

Each gara saree is born from the work of several highly skilled artisans hand-embroidering designs into the five meters of fabric for weeks and months at a time. The finished product tells a unique story of its own, coming with a price tag much higher than what the average



saree costs.

Renowned luxury label *Ashdeen* sells sarees priced as high as INR 350,000, approximately \$4,500. The founder and owner of the label, Ashdeen Lilaowala, explains that “heavier” gara sarees — ones with intricate stitching all across — cost a few lakh rupees, while sarees with a simple border or “lighter work” are priced at INR 45,000. Skilled artisans, like the ones he hires, are few and far in between, and they are paid generously for keeping alive a form of craftsmanship that has seen great decline at one point.





A classic Parsi gara saree in a rich shade of red covered with large swooping cranes and blossoming flowers. (Photo courtesy, *Ashdeen*)

Once a prized possession for Parsi and non-Parsi women alike, the popularity of the gara saree began fading in the 1930s, coinciding with Gandhi's call to boycott British imports into India. Exquisite fashion statements were no longer sought after, and as simpler styles entered the market over the next few decades, the gara saree lost the glory and charm it once enjoyed.

The recent rebirth of gara designs has come not only in the form of reimagined designer brands but also as journeys of enlightenment. In collaboration with UNESCO's Parzor Foundation, Lilaowala traveled through Iran and China for field research to better understand the meaning behind certain motifs and how Persian and Oriental influences made their way to the gara saree. *Ashdeen* materialized in 2012 as a fusion of his passion for design and intrigue for classic Parsi heritage, with each gara saree being more personal and contemporary rather than commonplace gara sarees of yore.

Zenobia Davar is similarly knowledgeable about the history of gara sarees, melding her

childhood love for embroidery and newfound entrepreneurial skills to create her boutique, *ZS Embroidery*. She often takes the time to educate her clients on the difference between “authentic” and “imitation” gara sarees, the latter being a product of machine work instead of hand-embroidery. For her, spreading awareness, valuing heirlooms and protecting the identity of the art is as significant as creating the sarees themselves, and she’s often dispensed her wisdom when invited to talks by fashion institutes. Her gara designs have adorned more than just sarees, finding their way to stoles, prayer caps, purses and even as framed artworks, and she eagerly restores damaged sarees and *kors* (gara borders) to former glory.







Several artisans spend weeks hand-embroidering realistic gara designs on each saree. (Photo courtesy *Ashdeen*)







Although not a novelty anymore to find gara designs on various other products, contemporary designers are frequently innovative with their trade, adding a unique twist to gara sarees today akin to how regional influences made a splash in the early 20th century. One such label is *Jophiel*, founded in 2020 by sisters Kainaz and Firoza Tarapore. Their collection includes an extensive range of purses, stoles and clutches embroidered with gara designs, a perfect complement to a gara saree or a staple accessory with various other outfits. Davar's boutique, has recreated the children's *jhabla* as a casual top for women, while chic designer brand *Patine* boasts a diverse collection of kurta sets, pants and jackets donned with classic gara styles.

Lilaowala explains why diversifying beyond classic gara sarees is crucial nowadays.

especially since 80 percent of the market, both in India and globally, has always been non-Parsi. Younger women and brides appreciate the handwork and story behind gara sarees, he observed, and his Indian bridal wear collections readily cater to this growing market demand. His latest collection, Rhythm and Blues, was inspired by blue oriental pottery which he melded with dance and ballet, creating a fusion of the senses. Similarly, Jophiel aims to make gara products more affordable and accessible to a wider customer base, which is why their purses and stoles are some of their more popular items.





Stoles boasting gara embroidery. (Photo Courtesy *Jophie!*)







Clutches embroidered with gara designs. (Photo courtesy *Jophiel*)

All three designers concluded that social media has undoubtedly accelerated and globalized the growth of their business. *Ashdeen* has been part of shows in Singapore and Hong Kong, and *Lilaowala* hopes to someday open a store in Dubai, perhaps, or set up his collections in other stores too. *Davar* and *Tarapore*'s thriving businesses exude the same love and heritage to clients that was handed to them by aunts and grandmothers decades ago, which is what they hoped for when they started out not long ago.

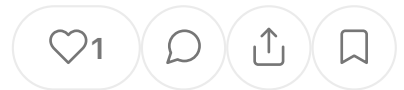
In many ways, the Parsi gara saree is reflective of the Parsi community in the subcontinent.

Each saree is the product of communal effort that effortlessly intermingles with people of varying religious and socioeconomic backgrounds. Gara sarees have dwindled in number, just as Parsis have, but their impact and timeless charm will be around for many more years to come.


## Credits:

Anushe Engineer is a freelance writer and recent graduate from Scripps College who covers politics, culture, history and religion in South Asia. Born and raised in Karachi, Pakistan, she moved to California for the sun, beaches and hikes, and an undergraduate education. Contrary to her name, she is not a real engineer.

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