Design Resource

Parsi Embroidered Sari Borders

History of Embroidery on Silk

by
Ms. Heta Pandit
Independent Researcher

Source:
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Introduction

The origins of the Parsis in India:
Long before the Parsis arrived in India as settlers, the small ports of Gujarat in north western India were familiar to the shore traders of Iran. These Iranian traders had set up shore trade posts but had not yet entered into any contract for cultural or social assimilation or syncretisation. There is no doubt that these Iranians were practising Zoroastrians and that they had no intention to either convert Indians to the Zoroastrian religion or be converted to local religious practices themselves.

It is only in the 8th century that Zoroastrians from Iran sought settlement "rights" in India as a corollary to religious persecution in their homelands of Yazd in Iran. These settlers probably came in several waves over a period of time and gradually adapted local Gujarati customs, dress, food, language, socio-religious rites while zealously safeguarding tenets of the Zoroastrian faith as proscribed in the Zend Avesta.

Adopting Saris as Parsi Dress:
Legend has it that when the Zoroastrians arrived in India they promised to "dissolve" in the land of their adoption like "sugar in milk". This promise was apparently made to Jadi Rana, a local ruler and included the adoption of local dress such as wearing the Indian sari the way the local Gujarati women draped it.

It is not known if these local women wore saris with borders or the heavy embroidery similar in nature which is now known Parsi "gara" embroidery. But then it was in late 19th and early 20th century with Sino-India trade that this trend became popular.

It is also popular that this trend was favoured by the wealthy Parsi women of Bombay (now Mumbai) as a mark of distinction from socially lower ranking Parsis from other parts of Gujarat (then part of the Bombay Presidency) who were mostly farming women or wives of farming Parsi men. These women were mostly wives of wealthy Merchants.

One thing is clear, however, that the heavy embroidery and embroidered borders (called "kor" in Gujarati) were favoured by wealthy Parsi women who had access to them and who could afford the luxury of silks, chiffons, velvets and lace as daily wear.

The popularity of Embroidered Saris and Borders:
Another reason for the popularity may have been because these wealthy Parsi women wanted to draw parallels with British women (who favoured Chinese embroidered textiles for their "exotic" form and value) and therefore (in the absence of their own caste and class compartmentalisation) an affinity with the ruling class.

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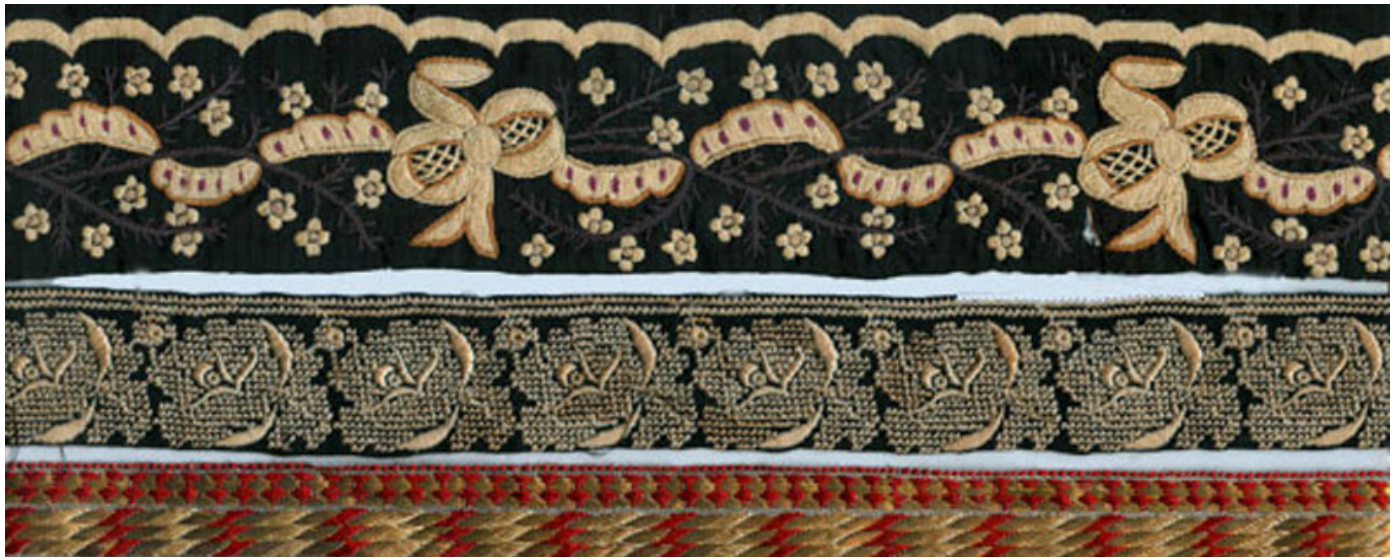
The Author's Personal Connection with Parsi Embroidery:
This treatise is based on my own collection of sari borders or "kors" handed down to me from my mother Mrs Manijeh Boman, her mother Mrs Tehmina Rustomji Patell and my mother's paternal grandmother Mrs Gulbai Pallonji Patell. The collection, collected over a century by three generations of Parsi women is a reminder of the call of the Chinese vendor who used to come to our home in Bandra Mumbai with the cry "Kapla! Kaplaaaa!" his own version of the Gujarati yodel "Kapra" or garments.



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Import and Present Status

Import of Embroidered Silks:

The import of silks, embroidered borders and embroidered nightwear, kimonos, unstitched fabric, caps and shoes was a result of Sino-India trade. The embroidery was done in Canton (now Guangzhou) and the importers mostly Parsi merchants. These silks were often bought and sold by the weight. This explains why the embroidery was economically rendered as it did not cover the sari areas that were tucked or not visible. This also explains the popularity of the embroidered borders. Saris were bought plain, by the weight, and then borders bought separately and stitched on. This also gave the added advantage of flexibility for borders could be then switched from sari to sari. My own maternal grandmother, for example, would wear one border with a sari and then switch the border to another sari so as not to "repeat" her garment more than once! (Incidentally, she also had several single earrings made to be worn on the one earlobe that was visible as the other ear was covered with the "sor" or tail end of the sari pallau and therefore not visible!)

Present Status of Embroidered Saris and Borders:

Towards the middle of the 20th century, the Sino- India trade petered out but the popularity of the borders and embroidered textiles remained constant. To make up for the lack of supply, Indian craftsmen produced the zardosi borders in gold and silver to keep up with the demand, changing the nature of the traditional Parsi embroidered "kor" sari. European and British mills also made their contributions to the market with their English designs and patterns reinforcing their social acceptance in an Anglophile Parsi society. Whatever the reason of losing its source of supply back then, it is a fact that the Parsi "garas" and "kor" saris are here to stay no doubt aided by recent efforts of PARZOR (a UNESCO recognised non-governmental organisation dedicated to the restoration and revival of this art in India) and have become a vital part of both Parsi and non-Parsi bride trousseaus in Mumbai.

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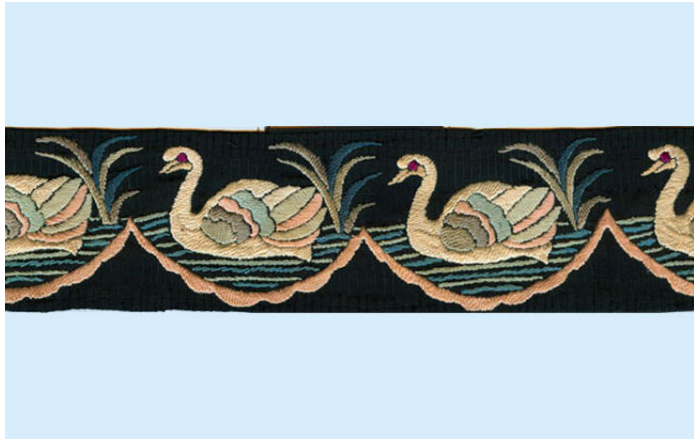
Elements Of Style

The border collection falls into several broadly defined categories:

- Chinese embroidered borders with typical Chinese motifs of peonies, cherry blossom trees, pagodas, Chinese ladies at leisure, acanthus leaves, pebbled pathways and pretty clouds.
- Chinese embroidery with European motifs like swans or ducks, lily pads, reeds on a pond, running water.
- Cross stitch embroidery with typical English floral motifs like roses, daisies and other floral sprays.
- Borders embroidered and then cut out in stylised patterns of pineapples, baskets, etc.
- Borders with abstract patterns in gold/silver or a combination of both metals.
- Borders in silver zardosi work in paisley patterns.
- Borders in machine or handmade lace with silver floral work superimposed.
- Borders assembled with plaits made of two or three different colours.
- Bead, thread and metal on a bed of silk to form a border in relief.
- Borders in silver and gold thread work with silver or gold sequins as fillers.

Border which is narrative and complex in nature that includes flowers, acanthus plants, pebbled pathways, cherry blossom trees, human figures etc.



The border design of a serene pond with reed grasses and swans has been rendered in muted satin shades of grey and pink offsetting a dark background.

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River border - This wide border woven in gold with a burgundy pattern on it may have been done in Europe for the Indian market.

Gold sequins act as fillers in this border with circles done in gold thread. Note the chain stitch edging.

White sequins form a second layer on this fabric in black where the wave pattern has been added in white and gold thread with a running stitch.

Handmade lace & simple flower-leaf pattern border.

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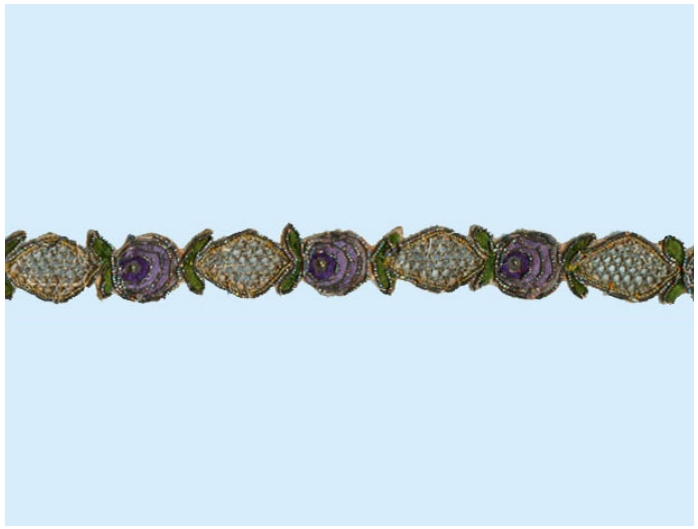
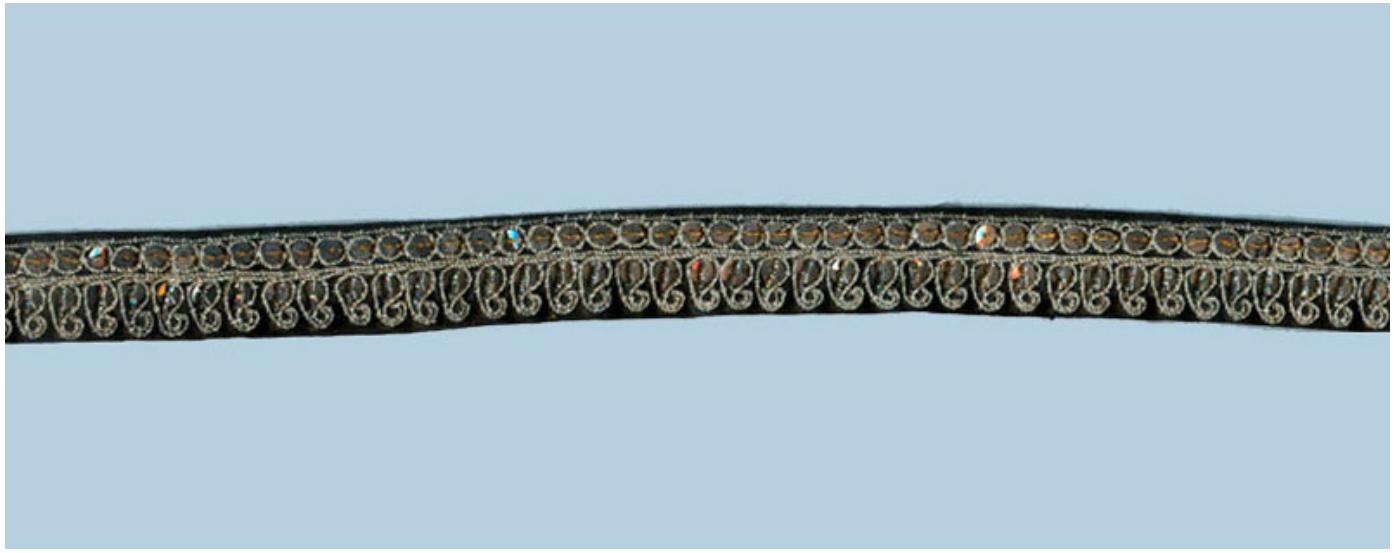
Flowers stamped out of silver metal adorn the stylized waves on this border.



Pineapple border - Purple rosettes linked with a basket design in silver thread forms the main body of this border.



Mango border - This border has been worked in the familiar mango or Paisley pattern in gold wire with a bed of gold sequins defining the edge.

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Popular and Recurring Motifs and Patterns

The first wave of migrants from Iran was of farmers and although they branched into trades and businesses in their host country, the Parsis remained bonded to their agrarian roots. Therefore it is only natural; that they should find symbols and icons that reminded them of these agrarian roots, attractive in the Chinese embroidery rendered in their garments. Lily ponds, hens with chicks, ducks, roosters, creepers and vines, floral sprays and horse carts are both popular and recurring motifs in Parsi saris and borders. Goldfish and carp are two symbols that are representative of plenty and fertility for the Parsis. The silver tray that one sees in every Parsi home holding a lamp, rose water, a cone shaped vessel also includes a silver fish rendered in great detail. It is this same detailed rendering that one sees in the borders. Pheasants and phoenix also form a part of the repertoire of popular and recurring motifs in Parsi embroidery on borders. The mythical phoenix referred to as the "shahmrug" or royal rooster is a recurring motif in many ancient stories and myths told and retold in the Middle Eastern region as well as in China.

It is interesting to note that in this geographical region the phoenix is not the mythical bird that rises from the ashes but is a bird that is a harbinger of good fortune and good tidings. In the popular story dedicated to Mushkel Aasan Behram Yazd; for example, it is the phoenix that saves the protagonist and his family from ruin and a sullied reputation. Peacocks are also recurring popular motifs in borders. This may be the result of the influence of peacocks rendered in Indian embroidery and iconography related to the worship of Lord Krishna in the Indian pantheon. Roses, daisies, floral wreaths and floral sprays may have been an influence of English embroidery on lace tablecloths, doilies, table runners and curtains imported and in use by the British in India. Braided borders were also quite popular as they were easy to make since the Chinese were pioneers in braiding machines.

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Wearing the Sari Border

There were basically two ways in which the border was worn. One was as an add-on to an existing plain or jacquard sari and the other was an embroidered border as an extension of an embroidered "gara" sari. In this article the author has focussed on the add-on embroidered border that was sewn on to a plain sari. The embroidered border as an extension of the embroidered sari is a vast and comprehensive subject. This border flows from the main content of the embroidered sari and therefore often has a repeat of the motifs and icons in the main body of the sari fabric. The author's study of the "gara" is limited and therefore defines the scope and limitation of this article.

The add-on border served two purposes. It added a decorative element to an otherwise plain garment. It also held the light fabric down with its own weight and thereby prevented the sari from riding up the wearer's leg. This was a genuine concern as some Chinese unembroidered plain silks and French chiffons were extremely light fabrics and could cause embarrassment to the wearer if worn without being weighed down by a border. One must recall that these were (Victorian) times when legs and even feet were not exposed in public. And although the sari as a garment was adopted by the Parsis in India, the Indian Parsis did not expose their midriffs in the manner of their other Indian counterparts. This was so well into the middle of the first quarter of the 20th century. In fact, I recall my grandmother always wearing a long blouse under her sari; long ruffled sleeves that covered her wrists, the ends of the blouse weighed down by pieces of lead so it would not ride up above the sari waist band. In many ways, the borders held the sari down and in place, a requirement that fulfilled the principles of modesty of that time. Curiously, therefore, the embroidered border had a functional purpose in the plain sari and not just a superficial or symbolic ornamental one.

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The Technique

• In the Chinese embroidered borders with typical Chinese motifs of peonies, cherry blossom trees, pagodas, Chinese ladies at leisure, acanthus leaves, pebbled pathways and pretty clouds the most preferred embroidery stitch seems to be the satin stitch. This stitch performed the dual purpose of covering large areas of the fabric quickly while giving a rich texture that gave a tangible feel to the design. This rendering added value to the designs enriching the emotional response of the wearer to the embroidery on the fabric.

• In the Chinese embroidery with European motifs like swans or ducks, lily pads, reeds on a pond, running water, etc. the stitches were also European. Thus the knot stitch and the couching stitch were introduced into the elements that formed the designs that were obviously meant for the European market or the Indian market that was under European influence.

• Cross stitch embroidery with typical English floral motifs like roses, daisies and other floral sprays was done on matte cloth and was probably rendered on paper stencil designs. The cross stitch seems popular on black fabric, although Parsis considered black an inauspicious colour rarely worn outside of funerals and memorial prayer services.

• A combination of several stitches was employed in borders embroidered and then cut out in stylised patterns of pineapples, baskets, etc. With the decline of the Sino-India trade, Parsi women took two options to meet their sari embellishment needs. Indian craftsmen were roped in to make zardosi borders, caps, garments, etc. Silver and gold thread, coloured glass beads and silver and gold "springs" earlier perceived as being too ostentatious, were freely adapted into the sari. The other option was to import sari fabric and sari borders from Europe. Hence, towards the end of the first quarter of the 20th century we see a combination of borders that are zardosi in rendering and English in design; English in design and rendered in almost comical fashion by either poorly skilled Chinese embroiderers who had no cultural links with motifs such as floral baskets, potted plants, linked flowers and ribbon bows.

• Sequins were sometimes added to borders to serve as fillers when the scrolls, scallops and interlacing left too many gaps in the border. These sequins were simply tacked on with a simple stitch.

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This richly textured border is narrative and complex in nature and includes flowers, acanthus plants, pebbled pathways, cherry blossom trees, female figures perched on stools and female figures carrying potted plants.

This amazing design in cutwork has been rendered in shaded thread with every floral centre uniformly colored in red.

The clumsy ribbon bows in this border design are perhaps copies of a European original.

Scallops form the edge of this border done in gold thread and gold springs to form a simple yet dramatic design.

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Use of minimum colors for flower and leaf pattern with black background.

This border in relief incorporates thread work, glass beads and a heavy satin stitch on velvet fabric.

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Taboos

Despite the commonly held boast that the Parsis in India were a more evolved better educated community as compared to their non-Parsi counterparts in the country of their adoption, the Parsis held many taboos and superstitions aloft in their everyday existence. A few those are relevant to this article on sari borders are mentioned below:

• Black saris and black borders were considered unlucky or inauspicious wear and meant only for funerals and memorial prayer services.

• White blouses were almost de rigeur for saris of any colour for everyday wear. This was for reasons of thrift (you did not have to make a blouse to match a particular sari as "white went with everything") as well as because white was seen as auspicious and therefore a declaration of the purity of the wearer's intentions.

• A knot at the end of the thread before you begun embroidery was considered inauspicious and therefore an absolute taboo. When you ended an embroidery sequence you turned the thread in and out and ended the sewing but never with a knot. Even today, when a sari is inspected before purchase, it is turned over to see if there are any knots in the embroidery work.

• Considerable significance is attached to the first time a young girl wears a sari. This is not just a declaration and societal acceptance of her coming of age but also an acknowledgement of her behaviour in adult society. Feasting often followed the party given in honour of this event. The "first sari" was almost always preserved as a special garment and remembered just as one would a wedding dress. Once this young woman goes through this celebration, she is expected to be treated as a lady and is expected to behave like one in adult society. Destroying the "first sari" or giving it away is seen as an act of sacrilege and an insult to collective memory. Thus the "first sari" is seen not just as another garment but as a repository of the community's cultural ties to the land of its adoption.

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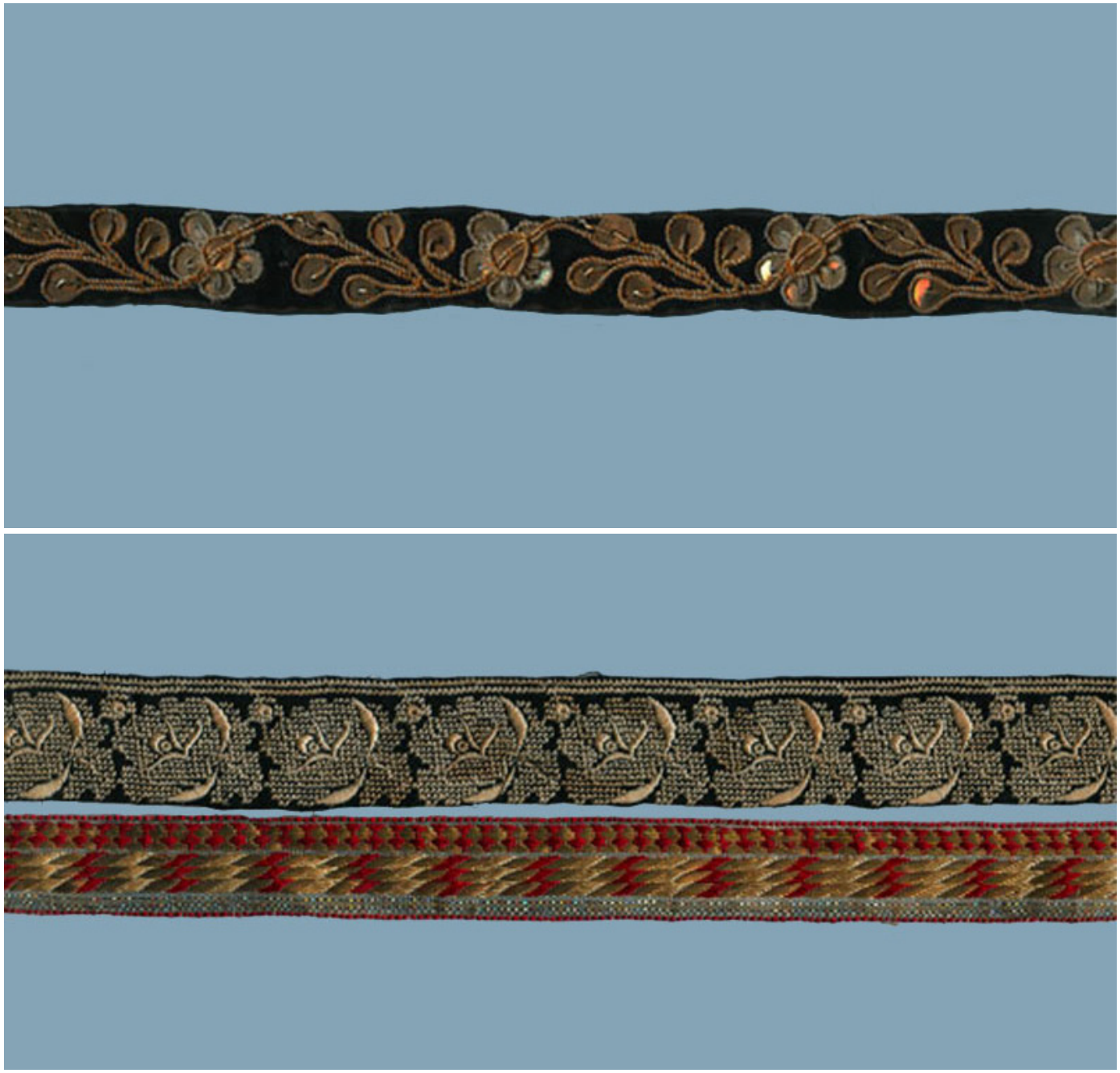

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Contact Details

This documentation was done by Ms. Heta Pandit

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