

Acculturation of the Gujarati Beaded Toran by the Parsi Community of Surat as Socio Cultural Marker: The Atash Censer with Ladle and Tongs as Apotropaic Motif.

Vahhbiz Engineer¹, Zeenia Engineer²

¹*Research Scholar, Sarvajani University, Surat.*

²*Research Scholar, Sarvajani University, Surat.*

Abstract

This paper investigates distinct Zoroastrian iconography specifically the ‘Atash’ or Fire Censer, with ladle and tongs integrated into the Gujarati beaded ‘Torans’, a traditional Indian craft by the Parsi Community of South Gujarat especially Surat.

The objective is to identify the Atash censer as an apotropaic motif in Parsi cultural artefacts and to trace the iconographic evolution of the Atash censer with its transformation from liturgical instrument to protective motif.

The study employed a qualitative case study approach with in-depth analysis of its artistic, cultural and historical dimensions based on purposive sampling.

The paper has shown the deliberate incorporation of the fire censer as a motif across various Parsi beaded toran, highlighting its dual function in warding off malevolent forces while simultaneously inviting prosperity and good fortune. This is not just an ornamentation but is a cultural signifier, it also shows how religious symbolism is integrated into the daily life reflecting an ancient Indian tradition. This intricate symbolism, deeply rooted in Zoroastrian theology and cosmology, transforms everyday objects into powerful conduits of protection and blessings, thereby fostering a sense of well-being and spiritual connection within the community. By examining the Atash Censer motif, this research shows the role of material culture in cultural memory and identity particularly for diasporic community facing cultural assimilation. This understanding is important for developing conservation strategies for community engagement in heritage preservation.

Keywords: Acculturation, Toran, Atash Censer Motif, Parsi Community, Surat city

Introduction:

This paper investigates distinct Zoroastrian iconography specifically the ‘Atash’ or Fire Censer, with ladle and tongs integrated into the Gujarati beaded ‘Torans’, a traditional Indian craft by the Parsi Community of South Gujarat especially Surat (Williamson, 2016).

The Parsi experience in India has been a balance between assimilation into dominant milieu and preservation of their Zoroastrian heritage (Palsetia, 2001). This balance is manifested in their material culture, where Parsi motifs have been re-contextualized in traditional Indian craft forms creating a new visual lexicon. (Vance, 2016)

The Parsi community is a distinct ethno-religious group which traces its origin to Persian Zoroastrians who immigrated to the Gujarat coast in Indian subcontinent via the sea route in order to escape Islamic religious persecution following Arab conquest of Persia in 7th and 8th century CE. Zoroastrianism was the state religion of the Persian empire and the Mazdayasni faith in which Zarathustra, the Prophet was born. Zoroastrianism influenced Judaism, Christianity and Islam and persists as a living faith despite centuries of adversity. (Boyd, 1979)

The semi legendary Qissa-i-Sanjan, the poetic foundational narrative of Parsi history composed around 1599 CE, by a Parsi priest of Navsari mainly relies on oral traditions. It remains a

valuable source for early Parsi settlements though it can't be treated as literal history. Upon their arrival in Gujarat, as promised to the local ruler Jadi Rana, they assimilated into local Gujarati society, adopting Gujarati language, costume and customs while preserving their Zoroastrian faith and distinct cultural practices (Palsetia, 2001, Subramaniam, 2017). Living harmoniously in the town of Sanjan, upon being granted land by the king, the Priests (Gujarati - Dasturs) consecrated the sacred fire of Bahram after months of purificatory rituals.

The Parsis, judiciously assimilated and by 1465 exhibited an allegiance to their homeland, India in terms of cultural and religious memory and fought alongside the Raja of Sanjan when Alf Khan, commander of Sultan Mahmud of Champaner attacked Sanjan (Sataravala, 2022).

Though numerically and demographically a micro-minority community, the Parsis avoided proselytism and safeguarded their identity through endogamy and ritual purity.

Their adaptability to the local culture and ingenuity in maintaining their identity characterized the community's development in India. The evolution of Parsi identity serves as a case study of cultural resilience and strategic adaptation, wherein the motifs of the craft traditions of their adopted land, serve as religious and ethnic markers of Zoroastrian faith (Shahani, 2003). This unique syncretic aesthetic often involves integration of Persian artistic motifs into local Indian art forms much like the 'sugar in milk' analogy. This analogy symbolizes their promise to the king to enrich society without disruption, which allows them to exist as a distinct but peaceful harmonious minority (Chaubey, 2017, Whitehurst, 1969). This assimilation is further reflected in the adoption of various craft techniques and motifs from Gujarati culture integrating them into their own artistic expressions as seen in the incorporation of Chinese embroidery techniques and Persian designs into Parsi textiles (Cama, 2022, Munroe, 2021). Such cultural borrowings often signify deeper engagements with various material cultures reflecting a "heteroglot material culture" that expresses complex relationships between different cultural groups. (Cifarelli, 2018)

This dynamic interplay between Parsi iconography and motifs and Gujarati crafts also highlights cultural expression and identity formation within Diasporic communities. (Davey, 2019).

In the context of Parsi community of South Gujarat, the process of acculturation of motifs into craft traditions of Gujarat such as beaded Toran is significant. It results in a unique synthesis where Zoroastrian motifs meet the aesthetic and structural framework of Gujarati decorative arts. (Tayaru, 2016, Chukwudebelu, 2024)



Figure 3: Entrance Door Toran with Zoroastrian iconography in Adajan Gaam Agiyari, Surat. Source: Author

Definitions:

For the purpose of this paper Acculturation is defined as the process of cultural change and psychological change that results from contact between two or more cultural groups. (Sataravala, 2022). This dynamic process involves political, economic, demographic and cultural forces which shape the nature and extent of acculturative changes. (Khairuddin, 2023). Acculturation is also a mechanism for cultural maintenance especially for minority groups living in pluralistic society. (Bisaria and Bansal, 2025, Sataravala, 2022)

The beaded Gujarati ‘Toran’ is a traditional decorative hanging across doorways. It serves as a canvas of symbolic expressions. This craft of beaded torans, practiced by women, not only increases the aesthetic appeal of the home but has a deep cultural and spiritual significance. (Sidhu, Karolia, 2023). In Hindu tradition, the doorway is considered the ‘mouth’ of the house - the primary Gateway through which cosmic energy (prana), positive vibrations and prosperity enter the home. It is the transition point between external chaotic world and internal pure sanctuary of home. The doorway especially the threshold (Gujarati-umbartha) acts as a barrier preventing negative energies, evil spirits and misfortune from entering. Hence it was adorned with auspicious symbols. The traditional motifs employed in Gujarati Torans, use the Om and Swastik motifs, Lord Ganesh, fauna like parrot, peacock, elephant and geometric floral patterns¹.



Figure 4: From the collection of Mrs. Khurshid Burjore Dabu. Source: Author

But the Parsi community has incorporated elements reflecting Zoroastrian heritage. This fusion demonstrates material entanglement where cultural narratives are woven into customs that form the fabric of daily life. The Toran is a tangible representation of Parsi identity within a Gujarati context. (Nosch, 2014).

A Motif is a recurring theme, subject or idea that serves as a distinctive feature in an artistic or literal composition often with a symbolic significance within a specific cultural context. (Munroe). An apotropaic motif is a mark or design believed to have the power to turn away evil, bad luck or harm. It is often used at vulnerable entry points of a house like doors, windows, fire places and serves to protect inhabitants from spirits, demons and evil eye².

The motif examined in this paper is the Fire Censer (afarganyu – Parsi Gujarati), which contains the sacred fire (Atash) elevated on a stepped pedestal, with flat ladle (Gujarati-chamach) and Tongs (Gujarati-chipiyo) which is a sacred and apotropaic motif.

The word Afarghan or Afarganyu is related to Pahlavi terms associated with fire and ritual blessings. Afargan (afarganyu) originates from Pahlavi (middle Persian) and means “fire

¹www.remedywala.com

²www.lctstalk.cornwall.gov.uk

holders” or “fire stand”. The Persian word ‘Atashdan’ is also used for fire-holder of fire stand³. The priests in a fire temple tend the consecrated fire 24 hours of the day with tongs and ladle adding offerings of sandalwood, dry logs and incense (loban) keeping it burning continuously.



Figure 5: Jashan Ritual. Source: Author

Significance of Research

Material culture and traditional crafts serve as powerful anchors of community identity, embodying shared history, beliefs and social values. For the Parsi community of South Gujarat crafts such as Gara embroidery, kusti weaving, silver vessels, torans and fire temple objects are not merely decorative or utilitarian items – they are carriers of cultural memory, identity and spiritual significance. These artefacts reflect centuries of adaptation integrating religions symbolism and motifs with Gujarati techniques of beaded toran creating hybrid forms that reflect Parsi cultural identity.



Figure 6: Torans depicting Fire Censer and The Flag of Kaveh. Source: Author

The intricate beadwork and cultural narratives represent a significant yet under documented aspect of Parsi identity and Culture. (Siddhu & Karolia, 2023) The intricate patterns and motifs adorning these Torans carry symbolism, reflecting the Parsi connection to Persian roots while adopting Gujarati decorative arts⁴. These crafts function as tangible links to ancestral traditions and reinforce a sense of collective identity. They also transmit stories of migration, resilience and community cohesion. Their production involved artisans, patrons, users creating social

³www.fezana.org

⁴www.ucl.ac.uk

bonds within Parsi settlements of Navsari, Surat and Valsad. Thus, material culture becomes a repository of heritage and tool for identity in changing contexts.

Methodology:

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to investigate acculturation of motifs in Parsi glass beaded torans focusing specifically on the Atash Censer as an apotropaic device. In-depth analysis of its artistic, cultural and historical dimensions was carried out. Visual culture analysis with detailed toran samples based on purposive sampling was carried out to trace the evolution and integration of the motif. Visual evidence was documented and analyzed to discern patterns of motif usage, stylistic adaptation and iconographical interpretation providing empirical support. This also involved photographic documentation ensuring a comprehensive visual record. (Patel et al, 2013)

All participants involved in oral history or providing access to their collections were fully informed about the study's objective and their rights. Furthermore, appropriate permissions were secured for reproduction of images ensuring compliance with ethical research practices.

An initial exploration of distinctly Parsi motifs such as the winged human headed bull, (Asho Farohar), the dog, the cock, rose and sunflower floral patterns was undertaken to understand how these motifs were retained in their original form or abstracted stylistically. The Atash censer was selected based on its prominence among all samples photo documented.

Selection of Toran samples

For this study, a purposive sampling strategy was used. These samples were sourced from private collections and Fire temples (Agiyaris) ensuring a range of age. The Atash censer motif used in other arts was also examined to understand its transformation across different artistic mediums.

Research Objectives

To identify the Atash censer as an apotropaic motif in Parsi cultural artifacts.

To trace the iconographic evolution of the Atash censer and how its representation in toran differs from the ritual object.

To investigate how the censer is transformed from a liturgical instrument to a protective motif.

Theoretical Background

Interpretive anthropology treats culture as a "web of meaning" so material motifs like the fire Censers on a Toran carry cultural meaning which cannot be fully understood without understanding the community's cultural system.

Chief among interpretive anthropologists is Clifford Geertz who posits that people in any culture communicate and develop worldviews through symbolic systems. Clifford's uses the framework of analysis of motifs through which he opines that religions meaning and cultural narratives are transmitted. Hence motifs are not mere aesthetic elements but reveal layered meanings. He called for (thick description) a method which seeks to understand embedded meanings in cultural symbols and practices.

This paper shows how the fire censer motif acts as a cultural symbol with cosmological expression and is a community identity marker.



Figure 7: Toran with Fire Censer motif and Fravahar with script translated as Happiness unto you. Source: www.mehercollections.com

Rolland Barthes (Semiotics and Mythologies) helps to decode how objects of everyday use take on layers of meaning through his theory of signifier and signified. The core premise forwarded by Barthes is motifs should be understood as ‘signs’ within a ‘cultural semiotic system where each design, icon, shape communicates meanings that are layered. The fire Censer craft motif thus is a second order sign within Parsi Cultural Expression.

Material culture and Craft theory posits that objects are not passive but are carriers of social identity, community beliefs, memory and social life. This approach treats crafts artefacts like participants in social relations. These artefacts have “Social histories”, “Biographies” and carry embedded meanings. By analyzing motifs, an explanation of how they gather meaning over time and how they function in ritual contexts, is possible. This material culture approach compliments interpretive anthropology by providing insights into the Toran’s production context and its ritualistic context.

Research Gap

This paper reviewed existing scholarly works on Parsi culture, Zoroastrian architectural elements and crafts of beadwork in Gujarat, identifying gaps in research regarding historical level and symbolic interpretation of motifs in Parsi Torans.

There has been extensive research on the Parsi identity and cultural assimilation but the Toran, its motifs and acculturation as part of material culture of domestic spaces has been largely ignored. (Palsetia, Manek, 1994)

Many studies have largely focused on textile traditions and Gara Saree in particular but analysis of Gujarati beadwork often overlooks the Parsi beaded Torans and their symbolic content (Raj and Singh, 2025).

The Toran and The Motif:

Zoroastrianism has strict rules about ritual purity which come from dual belief in the cosmic battle between the good creation of Ahura Mazda and pollution due to the evil counterpart spirit Ahriman. Bodily discharge specially during menstruation (known as ‘Dastan’ in middle Persian) are regarded as polluting by druj-i-nasu (fiend of decay) so this place menstruating women in state of ‘ritual impurity’. Due to this in such times women were forbidden from handling sacred materials of kusti weaving as it could pollute. The birth of the Toran took place as this was a practical and creative way for women to continue their craft practices during her ‘time-off’ from kusti weaving. A woman could use her skills productively rather than leaving the loom for kusti weaving idle.

The beaded toran thus became a tangible bridge between ritual demand of the Zoroastrian faith and domestic creative like of women allowing them to use their time in the learned craft of local Gujarati population.

The identity of the ‘Parsi’ is linked to ‘Parsi-Panu’ customs, rites, rituals, religious principles of “Ashoi” i.e. righteousness and purity of body, mind, soul, followed in the domestic sphere. The Toran is one such cultural artefact that reflects the community’s historical trajectory of resilience, identity formation and a repository of both the Persian Heritage and the new Indian cultural landscape. (Vatsal 2013)

Tavaria documents domestic life in Parsi households where ladies would get up at early dawn, sweep the floor and stamp decorative designs of ‘Chunam’ or powdered chalk. Thereafter they would hang torans of fresh flowers over doorways resting them above the glass beaded torans that were a permanent feature of the doorway. After imprinting these designs on doorways and home threshold, they would carry the Fire Censer (afargan) with ‘loban’(benzoin) fumigating all over the house while invoking Divine Blessings with prayers⁵.

Thus, the Toran with its Afargan motif becomes an artefact which provides context to Parsi household identity representing cultural syncretism wherein ancient traditions are reinterpreted.



Figure 6: Afargan used at home Source: <https://www.unescoparzor.com/ecology-society>

The craft of beadwork in India predates the arrival of Parsis and manifests in various forms across different regions and communities. (Williamson, 2016) The Indus valley civilization points to a material culture where bead usage and beadwork was integral to personal adornment, ritual and trade. The ‘Toran’ word is derived from Sanskrit ‘Torana’ which means ‘to pass’ or a ‘sacred gateway’. The original Torana was a magnificent free- standing sacred gateway in Indian architecture. Early archaeological evidence of Toran dates back to Sanchi Stupa built in Mauryan times in the 3rd century BCE. Puranic references link the Toran to the tradition of decorating the main entrance to attract the blessings of Goddess Lakshmi. Historically torans were made from natural materials like mango (*Mangifera indica*) and

⁵ www.parsikhabar.net

‘Asopalav’ (*Polyalthia longifolia*) leaves which symbolized fertility and kept away negative energy and Marigold flowers known to repel insects and the Evil eye.



Figure 8: Kiriya Moti Toran from Mrs. Siganporia collection. Source: Author

In Gujarat embroidered torans of Kathiyawadi and Rabari styles include mirror work while 3 or 5 beaded ‘Kiriya moti’ torans prominent in Kathiyawad are valued for their craftsmanship. (Rivers, 2014)

While both Parsi and Gujarati torans share the common function of adorning thresholds, they differ in their materiality, composition, iconography and cultural narratives they embody. These beads from Parsi torans are made from Czech glass beads which reflect a historical trajectory of maritime trade networks via major port cities such as Surat and Bombay. These cities were centers of Parsi commercial activity, importing quality glass beads from Bohemia and were prominent Parsi settlements. (Rodrigues, 2018)

The Czech beads were prized for their consistent size, brilliance, sheen, vibrant colors, durability and Bohemian industrial prominence in glass technology.

Parsi trading families with extensive global networks extending to China and Europe imported these specialized goods. (Nosch et al, 2014, Radha, 2025)

Religious Significance of Atash

In Zoroastrian doctrine, the fire (Atash / Avestan Atar) is regarded as an agent of ritual purity alongside water (Pahlavi Aban, Avestan Ap). It is the medium through which prayers are offered to Ahura Mazda, who is formless and the Supreme Being of Eternal light, Wisdom and Spiritual energy.

Zarathushtra (Greek Zoroaster) the Prophet addresses the Fire as son of Ahura Mazda 8 times in the Gathas namely in Yasna 25.7 and 71.10. Yasna 31.3, 43.9, 31.19, 34.4, 43.4, 46.7, 62.1, 17.11, Vendidad 4.54 –55, and the Bundahishn refer to the Atash and refer to the consecrated fire as the physical manifestation of Ahura Mazda’s light and righteousness, glorious medium of Divine Wisdom and Illumination, agent of Purity, medium of Truth and justice. It is a storehouse of Divine Energy and the pervasive principle of all Creation. It has the potentiality of fighting physical, mental and spiritual negativity.⁶ In Zoroastrian religion consecrated Fire is referred to as Padshah (Persian) and gets the reverence reserved for Kings. The veneration

⁶ www.avesta.org

of fire predates the prophet Zarathushtra (Zoroaster). The prophet Zarathushtra himself belonged to the priestly class and used to pray facing the fire.

The implements used to house these sacred flames comprise of the Afarganyu - the metal urn or vase crafted from silver for ritual purity and the Khvan - stone platform upon which the Afarganyu rests separating the Holy Fire from terrestrial ground. This specific form of tall urn is elevated on a stone 3- tiered stand. The stone 'khvan' has nonconductive and insulating properties preventing ritual contamination from the ground. This form of the stepped stand reminds the worshipper of the 3- Fold motto of Zoroastrian faith- (Avestan) - Humata, Hukhta, Huvarashta- Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds. These serve as principles of ethical conduct for devotees. The placement of the Afargan on the highest step implies that the Holiest object – the Atar representing pure Wisdom should be the goal of the devotee and can reside only at the pinnacle of continuous spiritual journey. Hence the design becomes a roadmap to ethical progress.

Therefore, Fire is also a symbol of Spiritual Consciousness and to burn it forever good deeds must be performed all the time every day by the devotee.



Figure 9: Afargan with Khvan in Saronda Agiyari Source: Author

Agiyari (Parsi Gujarati) or Atash Kadeh (Pahlavi) has an inner sanctum where the consecrated Fire is maintained. Once consecrated, the fires are kept burning continuously and are never to be extinguished, divided or merged. Only wood or incense are offered to these fires by qualified priests. This shows continuity over centuries.

Ritual purity also pertains to containment of (Avesta- Druj) evil (Karanjia, 2025) and defilement (Avesta-Nasu). Since breath and saliva are causes of contamination and pollution priests tending the fire wear a 'padan' cloth over their mouth and nose. To prevent defilement by hand, the flat ladle (chamach) and tongs (chipiyo) are used. The Afargan has a crucible with a dip in the middle placed over it and it is in the crucible that the fire burns. The high sides of the urn create a physical barrier and ensure distance between the flames and officiating priest. Since the Atash/Afar is highly sanctified, special implements (alat) are used to feed the wood- the 'Chipiyo' (tongs) and 'Chamach' (flat ladle). (Karanjia, 2025). Chipiyo (Tongs) is used for

picking up and placing pieces of sandalwood or other ritual fuel into the fire without direct physical contact, maintaining ritual purity. Chamach (ladle) – A long handled flat ladle is used to tend the fire and offer holy ash to devotees. Worshippers often apply a small amount of the ash to their foreheads as symbolic reminders of inevitability of death and as a reminder to be righteous during their time on earth⁷.

Among the ‘Seven Amesha spentas’ which form the Heptad of Immortals which represent the gifts of Ahura Mazda, is ‘Asha Vahishta’ which represents the blazing Fire and omnipotence of the Divine Being. (Haug, 2003)

Historical Evolution of the Shape of Censer:

The modern Parsi Afargan is a carefully preserved form of cultural artefact that traces its descent from Persian imperial Iconography.

Early Zoroastrian worship as depicted in ancient tomb reliefs such as Naqsh-e-Rostam were open fire cults with elevated makeshift altars, necessitating a separation of fire from common ground. In the Archaemenid era, stepped fire stands were used and these stands are the precursor to the modern Khvan.

With the Sassanid dynasty (224-651 CE) the iconography of fire container was standardized and Fire Temple structures were formalized to contain a doomed chamber with smoke outlets – the sanctum – which housed the consecrated fire. Sassanian coins the silver drachms, consistently depict the ‘Atash tan’ on the reverse.

The ‘atash tan’ shows an “urn vase like container” which is similar to present ‘Afargan’.

The Sassanian Kings wished to differentiate themselves from their predecessors by projecting a new state and religious identity by establishing the altar as a powerful political and religious symbol. Ardashir I placed a representation of his fire on the reverse of his coins and this became the general practice of the dynasty. The circulating coins extended apotropaic protection across the empire transforms currency into a medium of religious and political safeguarding (Gobl, 1971).



Figure 10: Gold double dēnār of Ardashir I

Source:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/e/e3/Gold_coin_of_Ardashir_I.jpg/800px-Gold_coin_of_Ardashir_I.jpg

⁷ www.ramiyarkaranja.com

Apotropaic devices were embedded in regional iconography, architecture and domestic practice.

The Fire Altar occupied a uniquely central and continuous apotropaic role bridging royal orthodoxy, religious orthodoxy and everyday life (Boyce, 1979).

The founding of sacred fires is also mentioned in manuscripts of Kirder, the prelate of the Sasanian period. These fires were founded to replace cult statues. There were 2 categories of sacred Fires 'Vahram' exalted ones and Atash-i-Aduran as ordinary local fires.

Due to this repetition of the altar on Sassanian coinage, this vase shape of Afargan became a formalized symbol of state religion. (Boyce, 2001)

Artistic expression during this time was in the form of symbols like fire altars, vegetal motifs and cosmic order like Sun, Moon, 8-pointed Star, of figurative representation reflecting theological ban on idolatry and emphasis on 'Asha' (Rose, 2011) Other apotropaic animal motifs were boar and lion, eagle.

With the advent of Islamic Arab conquest in 651 CE this Afargan vase like form allowed Zoroastrians to carry the sacred fires to remote mountains and house them in inconspicuous caves and houses, to escape religious persecution. The Muslims burnt Holy texts, extinguished the consecrated fires, massacred populations in a bid to stamp out the Zoroastrian faith.

In India, after the fall of Sanjan to Alf Khan the Parsis carried the consecrated Iranshah Atash Behram (victorious fire) from Sanjan to Bahrot caves in this Afargan and eventually to the village of Udvada.

In the domestic context, fire served apotropaic purposes by purifying spaces after illness, after death, protecting thresholds and luminal zones. It also allowed for regulating ritual time through daily observances and seasonal festivals (Hinnells,1996). In religious orthodox households, the hearth fire is burnt continuously. However, in modern households where flames of hearth fire pose a hazard and cannot be burnt by logs of wood, it is customary to fumigate the house by burning coal embers on a smaller version of the Afargan used in the fire temple. The shape and design is retained in the metal vase like structure used in domestic homes.

Thus, the Afargan shape is not just a fire holder but a preserved piece of religious technology which facilitates the physical transmission and transport of the fire. The design therefore transforms the mundane centuries old domestic hearth fire to a theological symbol preserved through ritual by the diasporic Parsi community. The Afargan as physical object, a symbolic construct, and a motif in craft functioned as a unifying apotropaic device – protecting the king in pre-Islamic era, the community in present day Gujarat, and the Cosmic order at a spiritual level. (Boyce, 1979, Canepa, 2009)

The Fire temples in India have 3 grades of Fires – That of Dadgah, Adaran and Atash Behram (Pahlavi Varharan). The Atash Behram fire is of the highest grade consecrated after collecting fire from 16 different hearth sources like Potter, Brick maker, bronze smith, Black smith, gold smith, Baker's oven, weapon maker, Brewer, burning corpse and Lightning, which are purified collectively. The rituals are performed over a period of more than 1 year by 8-10 pairs of highly qualified priests.

The oldest Atash Behram in India is the Iranshah at Udvada, the fire of which was consecrated about 1280 years ago, but the current site and building dates from 1894. Fire temples have

spatial hierarchy depending on the grade of the fire and rituals of fire tending known as ‘boi’ ceremony (Karanjia, 2025)



*Figure 11: Priests tending Fire in a ritual inside the fire temple in Pune.
Source: Association for Revival of Zoroastrianism*

Though the Achaemenians only used altars in the open and lit fire for rituals. It was the hearth fire in each house that was maintained continuously while the house-head lived. The cult of hearth fire was known to Indo Europe since it is attested among Greeks and Indians (Rig Veda) as well as Iranians. In modern Parsi homes, when hearth fires don’t burn continuously, a scaled down version of the Afargan is used to fumigate the house.(Boyce, 2001)

Therefore, the Fire altar and later the Fire Censer/Afargan due to its theological depth, visual standardization and ritual purpose ensure survival into Parsi domestic practices in South Gujarat and India. (Hinnells, 1996)



*Figure 12: The Afargan with Chipiyo and Chamach
Source: www.avesta.org*

Comparison with other Visual Art forms:

Religious spatial architecture often uses emblematic motifs such as Fravahar – a winged symbol and the Fire Censer as reliefs on the Façade. Both also act as Apotropaic motifs. Historical artistic traditions in Temple architecture includes reliefs of fire altars and symbolic flames in Archaemenid and Sassanian contexts. This continuity of fire symbolism as motif either metal embossed and in plaster relief work on facades was carried on even in the constructed fire temples in India⁸.



Figure 12: Navsari Atash Behram. Source: Author



*Figure 13: 1823 CE - Mody Atash Behram, Surat
Source: Author*

⁸ www.heritageinstitute.com



Figure 14: Pediment of Nargol Agiyari with Censer as apotropaic motif. Source: Author

Parsi households traditionally draw chalk designs on the threshold or kitchen platforms in modern house as part of daily auspicious practices. Although these patterns are not strictly standardized, symbolic Afargans with text involving a Divinity's blessings are often imprinted visually reinforcing the sacred fire and purity⁹.



Figure 15: Chalk design. Source: Author

Silverwork and Ritual Objects

Parsi ritual silverwork – plaques, vases and ceremonial objects incorporate emblematic scenes which include fire censers, flame shapes in relief. These show how fire related forms permeate decorative metalwork.

⁹ www.unescoparzor.com



Figure 16: Metal ware. Source: Author

Textile and embroidery traditions incorporate light and do not incorporate the Censer but fire related symbols like the Sun, radiating designs or paired symbolic forms within wider motif sets reflecting cosmological values.

Furniture: The Sunburst cupboards is a free-standing storage cabinet in which the panels are veneered, carved or inlaid with a radiating pattern like the Rising Sun rays. This design motif symbolizes light, energy and prosperity.

It often appears in European, colonial furnishings. A number of 19th Century teak cabinets from Gujarat and North India exhibit hand carved Sunburst motifs on front panels. In Gujarat context this sunburst was locally called “Surajmukhi” (Sun-flower) adding a layer of symbolic meaning to decorative furniture.



Figure 17: Sunburst (Suryamukhi) cupboard.
Source: Author

Secular Architecture: The front facade of Mumbai Central (Bombay Central) Railway Station is a historic structure symbolizing the fire of victory. Designed by a Parsi architect, the station

is adorned with this fire motif at its entrance. Despite facing wars, riots, and pandemics, this prominent station has maintained a sense of tranquility. Constructed by Shapoorji Pallonji, a Parsi owned company, the station proudly displays two fires on either side of its entrance.



Figure 18: Mumbai Central Railway Station

Source: www.zoroastrian.net

Conclusion

This paper has shown the deliberate incorporation of the fire censer as a motif across various Parsi beaded toran, highlighting its dual function in warding off malevolent forces while simultaneously inviting prosperity and good fortune. This iconographic representation shows the deep-seated spiritual beliefs of the Parsi community, for whom fire holds paramount sacred significance, and their reverence for various grades of sacred fire in their fire-temples (Palsetia, 2001). The fire censer motif is not just an ornamentation but is a cultural signifier that ensures continuity of faith and cultural memory in spite of being a refugee community. This also shows how religious symbolism is integrated into the daily life reflecting an ancient tradition where sacred beliefs are embedded within artistic expression and household items. The fire censer thus emerges as a pivotal element in the socio-cultural scape of the Parsi identity and craft heritage. This integration of symbolic motifs into craft traditions, particularly within the context of domestic items like the toran, illustrates a sustained cultural practice where religious tenets are expressed through tangible art forms. The adoption of the toran in Parsi households as marker of cultural identity further points to acculturation by the community and assimilation in the local Gujarati milieu. This intricate symbolism, deeply rooted in Zoroastrian theology and cosmology, transforms everyday objects into powerful conduits of protection and blessings, thereby fostering a sense of well-being and spiritual connection within the community (Abouali & Kaner, 2023). This reveals a complex interplay between indigenous crafts and external influences that have shaped Parsi visual culture. The persistent appearance of the fire censer in these intricate craft forms further emphasizes its role as a spiritual anchor, connecting the present-day Parsi community to its ancient Persian roots and the profound symbolism of fire as a divine emanation and purifier as demonstrated by its history from early Sasanian times to present times as a diasporic community. This also points to the endurance of Zoroastrian iconography from pre-Islamic to current times. Thus, the stylistic evolution of Atash Censer involves abstraction of its detailed form in order to adapt it to the beadwork yet it retains its recognizable silhouette (Choksy, 2006). This adaptation often emphasizes the key

elements like flames on the chalice like bowl without details like handles, stepped platform and crucible.

Limitations of the Study

The scope of this research is geographically confined to Surat which may limit the generalizability of findings to broader Parsi diaspora. Further research could expand this scope to include Parsi communities in other parts of India to provide a better understanding of motif acculturation. This focus on Atash censer, provides in depth analysis of only this specific motif and narrows the breadth of motifs studies. It does not examine instances of another motif acculturation in Parsi beaded torans.

Further Research

Further research can be carried out into understanding the significance of many floral motifs in Parsi Torans as Zoroastrianism is a religion that values environmentalism long before it became a movement. Every divinity is associated to a flower or plant. Long forgotten signified flora abstracted into design will be revived in cultural memory. Further studies can be undertaken into socio economic factors influencing contemporary production and consumption and aesthetic preferences of the community can be carried out. Despite the rich historical and cultural significance, the craft and its characteristic motifs face loss of intergenerational knowledge transfer, a critical aspect in craft transmission and preservation. Further research can cover its strategy for revitalization and documentation.

Implications for Cultural Heritage

By examining the Atash Censer motif, this research shows the role of material culture in cultural memory and identity particularly for diasporic community facing cultural assimilation. This understanding is important for developing conservation strategies for community engagement in heritage preservation. It emphasizes the need for greater religious awareness and building cultural identity among the young generation of Parsi community for whom visual appeal is often the sole criteria for consuming craft items. (Banda et al, 2024

References

- Abouali, L., & Kaner, J. (2023b). Pre-Islamic religious motifs (550 BC to 651 AD) on Iranian minor art with focus on rug motifs. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 79(3).
- Appadurai, A. (Ed.). (1986). *The social life of things*:
- Bisaria, V., & Bansal, P. (2025). Trends and directions in acculturation research. *Culture & Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067x251315734>
- Boyce, M. (1975). *History of Zoroastrians: Vol-1*. Brill
- Boyce, M. (1979). *Zoroastrians: Their religious beliefs and Practices*. Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Boyce, M. (2001). *Zoroastrians - Their Religion, Beliefs and Practices*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Boyd, J. (1979). *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*.
- Cama, S. (2022). *Celebrating Nature in Parsi Embroidery: All things Great & Small*. Cambridge University Press.
- Canepa, M. (2009). *The two eyes of the earth: Art and Ritual of kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran*. University of California Press.

Chaubey, G., Ayub, Q., Rai, N., Prakash, S., Mushrif-Tripathy, V., Mezzavilla, M., Pathak, A. K., Tamang, R., Firasat, S., Reidla, M., Karmin, M., Rani, D. S., Reddy, A. G., Parik, J., Metspalu, E., Roots, S., Dalal, K., Khaliq, S., Mehdi, S. Q., ... Thangaraj, K. (2017). "Like sugar in milk": reconstructing the genetic history of the Parsi population. *Genome Biology*, 18(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13059-017-1244-9>

Chukwudebelu, I. A. (2024). Exploring the Dynamic Interplay between Religion and Culture: A Multidisciplinary Inquiry. *Journal of Humanities Music and Dance*, 44, 33. <https://doi.org/10.55529/jhmd.44.33.43>

Cifarelli, M., Castelluccia, M., & Dan, R. (2018). Copper-alloy Belts at Hasanlu, Iran: A Case Study in Hybridization and Heteroglossia in Material Culture. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 28(4), 539. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0959774318000264>

Commodities in cultural perspective. Cambridge, UK:

Darabimanes, F. (2023). *Sacred Circle: Symbol of Wholeness in Traditional Persian Art and Architecture*.

Davey, J. (2019). Culture Contact and Cultural Boundaries in Iron Age Southern Korea. *Asian Perspectives*, 58(1), 123. <https://doi.org/10.1353/asi.2019.0007>

Geertz C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays*. New York, NY: Basic Books

Gobl, R. (1971). *Namismatics, Khinhardt and Biermann*

Haug, M. (2003). *The Parsis Essays on Their Sacred Language, Writings and Religion*. New Delhi: Indigo Books and Cosmo Publications.

Hinnells, J.R. (1996). *Persian mythology*. Hamlyn

Jigyasu, Niyati. "Contextualizing 'Traditional Crafts' in Historic Urban Areas." *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*, vol. 11, no. 4, Oct. 2020, p. 330,

Karanjia, D. E. (2025, December 15). Retrieved from www.ramiyarkaranjia.com: <https://ramiyarkaranjia.com/6-qa-about-fire-firetemples/>

Khairuddin, K., & Man, Y. L. (2023). TABOT TRADITION AND ACCULTURATIVE RELIGIOUS TRADITION OF THE BENGKULU COMMUNITY. *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.30821/jcims.v7i1.14602>

Maneck, S. (1994). The death of Ahriman: Culture, identity and theological change among the Parsis of India. In *The University of Arizona eBooks*. <http://arizona.openrepository.com/arizona/handle/10150/186760>

Miller, D. (1998). *Material cultures : Why some things matter*, Chicago. IL : University of Chicago Press.

Munroe, N. H. (2021). Shared Provenance: Investigating Safavid-Mughal Cultural Exchange Through Luxury Silks in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. <https://doi.org/10.32873/unl.dc.tsasp.0092>

Nosch, M. L. B., Zhao, F., & Varadarajan, L. (2014). *Global Textile Encounters*. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh1dpz7>

Palsetia, J. S. (2001a). Preface. In *BRILL eBooks*. Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004491274_003

Palsetia, J. S. (2001b). *The Parsis of India*. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004491274>

Palsetia, J. S. (2001c). The Pattern of Settlement. In *BRILL eBooks* (p. 1). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004491274_004

- Patel, B., Manek, K., & Jani, P. (2013). *Beadwork – Traditional Craft of Saurashtra*.
- Radha, D. (2025). Analyzing Growth Patterns - A Historical Perspective on India's Foreign Trade. *Account and Financial Management Journal*, 10(7). <https://doi.org/10.47191/afmj/v10i7.04>
- Raj, S., & Singh, M. (2025). Woven Heritage, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems: A Comprehensive Reviews on Preservation of Embroidery Culture. *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*, 1309. <https://doi.org/10.21275/sr25823015825>
- Rivers, V. Z. (2014) The torans of Gujarat and Rajasthan: meaning and origins. *Marg, A magazine of the Arts*, 65 (4), 78-94).
- Rodrigues, L. (2018). Gujarat Ornamental Furniture: Artisans, Techniques, Skills and Global Markets During the Nineteenth Century. In Springer eBooks (p. 113). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96839-1_7
- Rose, J. (2016). *RIDING THE (REVOLUTIONARY) WAVES BETWEEN TWO WORLDS Parsi Involvement in the Transition from Old to New*.
- Sataravala, S. (2022). Parsi Identity: Myth and Collective Memories. *South Asia Research*, 43(1), 34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02627280221120336>
- Semwal, V., Guha, S., & Chakrabarti, D. (2024). From Tradition to Transformation: Exploring Broto Folk Art of Bengal. *The Chitrolekha Journal on Art and Design*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.21659/cjad.81.v8n105>
- Shahani, R. G. (2003). *Parsis: Exploring Identities*.
- Siddhu, M., & Karolia, A. (2023). HISTORY, HERITAGE, AND PROSPECTS OF ZARDOZI AND BEADWORK BATUAS OF BHOPAL, MADHYA PRADESH. *ShodhKosh Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.478>
- Simbolon, R. S. B., Sihotang, M., & Tobing, K. (2022). Threads of Tradition: Silalahi Ulos Weaving and Cultural Significance in North Sumatra. *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan Dan Humaniora*, 11(2), 138. <https://doi.org/10.35335/jiph.v11i2.20>
- Subramanian, L. (2017). Parsi Traders in Western India, 1600–1900. In Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.228>
- Tayaru, S. A. M. (2016). *Rituals in Parsi Culture*.
- Vance, N. (2016). *Integrators of Design: Parsi Patronage of Bombay's Architectural Ornament*. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7052&context=etd>
- Vatsal, T. (2013). Still Heard: Echoes from a Colonial Past. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 20(1), 69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971521512465937>
- Whitehurst, J. E. (1969). The Zoroastrian Response to Westernization: A Case Study of the Parsis of Bombay. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 3, 224. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/xxxvii.3.224>
- Williamson, L. (2016). *Tracing textiles, motifs and patterns: historical to contemporary*. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2016&context=tsaconf>