

Koran-Crochet Lace: A Cultural Art and Its Sociological Relevance Among the Alavi Bohra Community of Baroda

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Abstract : Crochet, a textile art with enigmatic beginnings, has shown diverse cultural expressions across nations. Within the Alavi Bohra community—a Shia Muslim group residing in Vadodara (formerly Baroda), India—this skill possesses distinct symbolic and aesthetic significance. Locally referred to as “Koran,” the gold and/or silver crochet lace utilized in traditional women’s garments embodies artistic legacy and social identity. This study examines the societal importance of this art, its contribution to community identity, and the factors contributing to its progressive decrease among the youth. The investigation employed comprehensive interviews with two women from the community who has expertise in Koran production. Utilizing historical, ethnographic, and sociological perspectives, the study emphasizes how this creative legacy functioned not only as a manifestation of creativity and talent but also as an instrument for gendered socialization, cultural preservation, and communal cohesion.

Keywords: Koran, Alavi Bohra community, minority within a minority, crochet.

Introduction - The Alavi Bohra community, a distinctive sect of the Musta’li Isma’ili Shia branch of Islam, is predominantly located in Vadodara, Gujarat, India. This community, a minority within a minority, has historically preserved its religious identity through distinctive practices, attire, language, and creative traditions. The tradition of crocheting intricate laces called “Koran” has been essential to women’s cultural expression and domestic aesthetics.

Crochet, while universally practiced, gained local significance through its integration into community traditions. The incorporation of crochet in traditional Alavi garments, particularly as ornamental lace in women’s dress such as the Ghagro Odhnu, exemplifies a complex fusion of functionality, aesthetics, and cultural identity. This study illustrates the evolution of crochet from a European ecclesiastical art to a vernacular, feminine, and culturally significant manifestation among the Alavi Bohra community, exemplifying a notable instance of cultural syncretism and gendered tradition.

The Historical Origins of Crochet: Crochet is a centuries-old art form that employs yarn and basic instruments such as a hook, needle, and stitch marker. The creation of a beautiful crocheted product necessitates both comprehension and imagination from the individual, including a spectrum from basic lace and shawls to sweaters, toys, and intricate works of art.

The term “crochet” originates from the French word

“croche,” which translates to “hook” (Mathieson, 2013). The exact origins of crochet are unclear, but it gained popularity during the Great Irish Famine (1846), when nuns instructed destitute people in the craft for income generation. This craft disseminated throughout Europe and ultimately reached colonial India, where indigenous tribes modified it into their ornamental and wearable art forms (Mathieson, 2013).

In contrast to knitting, which use two needles, crochet employs a single hook to manipulate and interlace yarn into diverse patterns. The artist employs many stitch techniques, including single crochet, half double crochet, double crochet, and treble crochet, to create an array of designs such as shell and bobble patterns (Mathieson, 2013). The spectrum can vary from delicate lacework to intricate Irish lace to more substantial fabric constructions, contingent upon the thread and hook dimensions. The tools and techniques employed are notably diverse, featuring hooks constructed from wood, bone, or metal, with sizes varying from 0.5 mm to 16 mm. (Govil, Chanana, & Mundkur, 2024).

The Koran Lace and the Alavi Bohra Tradition: Within the Alavi Bohra community, crochet has been adapted as “Koran” lace, predominantly employed to embellish the dupatta of the traditional Ghagro Odhnu. The Ghagro Odhnu consists of a flared skirt, blouse, and a dupatta, typically made of georgette or chiffon, often adorned with gold or

silver crochet lace borders. This lace, is typically crafted from 'kasab' (fine thread) or 'Jhink' (thicker thread). The threads utilized in Koran lace consist of either genuine or fake silver/gold threads entwined around cotton thread. Glass seed beads and pure silver or plastic sequins 'tikri' enhance the lace, transforming it into not merely a fashion accessory but also a representation of feminine artistry and communal aesthetics.

Abida, one of the respondents who began crafting these laces at the age of 19, stated that she acquired the skill from her maternal aunt and mother. She would often visit her friends to share and swap the koran designs. Another source of koran designs was her visits to shops selling koran materials, where she would observe and memorize various designs of the Korans available for sale or exhibition, come home and make samples of those designs for future reference.

These shops and businesses were located in Nakhuda Mohalla, adjacent to Mohamadali Road in Mumbai. The stores offered koran materials, and also sold readymade koran of both verity the handmade and machine-produced korans. The majority of the shops were owned or managed by members of the Daudi Bohra group or individuals from the Memon community. These stores possessed their own workshops where they manufactured kasab, jhink, and salmo. They also made customized zardozi embroidery on the ghagro odhnu. The other respondent, Tabassum, stated that the majority of the material for the koran was obtained from a business she refers to as the 'lal darwaza in dukan' - the shop with the red doors. Tabassum, who resides in Vadodara, would request her sister or one of her male cousins to procure the koran material from Bombay (now Mumbai). During 1974-75, when the price of silver was approximately 5000 rupees per/kilograms, the cost of one tola or ten grams of kasab/Jhink was ten rupees. One Koran required approximately 2 to 4 tolas of kasab, depending upon its size and design. Occasionally, 'salmo,' a spring-like metallic filament twined around a cotton thread, was incorporated in the production of the koran.

She stated that during the 1970s and 1980s, most girls in the neighbourhood had the skills to create the Koran, since they had ample time to do it. The creation of the lace was arduous, requiring prolonged periods of sitting over several days to finish the koran. Approximately seven and a half meters of koran is required, which is hand sewn along the margins of the dupatta. Every loop had to be sown on the dupatta to help maintain the shape of the lace. The technique is very simple where a needle and thread is used to carefully stitch the koran on the dupatta using a running stitch.

As most of the korans are made from real silver it has to be preserved with utmost care. Most women keep the folded dupatta in multi-layered cloth or a plastic bag which is sealed properly to prevent any perfume or strong scents from coming in contact with the koran. The perfume is one

of the sources of oxidization of the silver according to Tabassum.



Image 1: Koran made from silver kasab and jhink



Image 2: Silver Koran made with kasab and jhink



Image 3: Silver Koran with glass seed beads



Image 4: Silver Koran made with kasab, salmo and silver sequins directly woven on the edges of the dupatta

The silver Koran must be preserved meticulously to prevent oxidation as cleaning it gets exceedingly challenging. Abida stated that a specific powder existed that eliminated oxidation from the Koran, restoring it to a pristine condition. To clean it, one must detach the lace

from the dupatta and immerse it in a solution created by combining the specific powder with water. She cannot remember the name of the powder but states that its sale was thereafter discontinued by the stores. Another technique for cleaning the Koran involved creating a solution by combining baking soda and detergent powder with water, then boiling the Koran in this combination using an aluminium saucepan. Tabassum, stated that she used a combination of detergent powder, turmeric powder, and lemon juice in boiling water to assist in removing oxidation. She had consulted the silversmiths for a treatment for the oxidation, but was informed that due to the cotton thread at the heart of the silver Koran, it is challenging to clean the oxidized areas. She was concerned as the majority of her Korans now exhibit signs of oxidation.



Image 5: Silver Koran that has become oxidized

Cultural and Religious Importance: The Alavi Bohra group prioritizes religious conservatism and cultural preservation. Crochet lace, particularly the silver-threaded Koran, symbolized feminine virtue, piety, and domestic proficiency. Women crafted this lace for their bridal trousseau, embellishing clothes utilized in religious rituals, community celebrations, and everyday attire. Tabassum, one of the interviewees, disclosed that she acquired the skill of making the koran at the age of 18 from her sister and cousin. However, due to the prolonged production period, she had commissioned seven silver laces for her youngest brother's wedding—five for her sisters-in-law, and one each for her sister and herself. That occurred in 1996 and it cost her 2500 rupees apiece. The expense of the lace was disregarded as wearing the traditional attire at the wedding was deemed essential. Women made six to seven traditional garments for the wedding of a close relative.

Tabassum states that the abilities of crafting a Koran and making a topi were deemed essential for girls. As the ghagro odhnu was the daily attire for women during that period every dress was decorated with a koran. Thus, all the girls in the neighbourhood were proficient in crafting the koran. It was seen as a source of pride to replicate any design after observing it for a few minutes, memorizing it, and thereafter replicating it at home. Tabassum stated that today the girls are not interested nor wanting to learn making the koran. Nor are they interested in wearing the traditional dress as they have plenty of options like Punjabi, Chaniya

choli, Sharara, saree and other dresses to adorn themselves.

From a cultural anthropology perspective, this lace serves as a material artifact that reflects and symbolizes both individualism and the communal identity of the community. The deliberate, contemplative act of crocheting embodied spiritual patience and feminine solidarity, frequently taking place in informal assemblies.



Image 6: Alavi Bohra women wearing the traditional dress – the Ghagro Odhnu

Gender and Creative Labor: Crochet, in this sense, is a gendered activity traditionally transmitted from mother to daughter as a means of social grooming and preparation for matrimony. Women utilized crochet not only as a creative expression but also as a means of generating revenue, particularly within economically disadvantaged families. Custom-made Koran lace was offered for 100 rupees or less, whereas pure silver lace commanded greater prices in the 1970s. During that period, the price of silver per kilogram escalated rapidly, rising from 1,635 rupees in 1970 to 5,930 rupees by 1978. The ladies acquired crocheting skills to create lace and topis, a traditional headwear for males in the Bohra group, specifically the Alavi and Daudi Bohra.

This facet of the Alavi Bohras can be associated with the overarching notion of domestic economy, wherein female artistic talents and home-based manufacturing are indirectly connected to the capital market. The creation of craft or art, perhaps driven by necessity, serves to support the family. This labour remains obscured since it transpires within the domestic sphere. The craft of koran making is informally passed down from mother to daughter and among relatives and friends; yet, it is not acknowledged as labor, despite its importance in generating cash for family sustenance (Bourdieu, 1977) (Marvin, Cultural Anthropology, 1995). Embroidery has historically been regarded as women's activity, particularly during the Renaissance period when it became associated with femininity (Parker, 1984). Currently, males are engaged in commercial embroidery, including machine embroidery and zardozi work. However, the creation of the Koran within the Alavi Bohra community has consistently been the purview of women.

The Sociological Deterioration: Identity, Modernity, and Fashion Transformations: Notwithstanding its historical significance, the tradition of crocheting Koran lace has

experienced a marked decrease since the 1990s. A multitude of societal variables has contributed to this.

Young women have demonstrated less enthusiasm in acquiring this complex skill, preferring instead ready-made or machine-produced fashion items. This signifies a wider transition towards convenience, rapidity, and the globalization of fashion. Today, several factors such as advanced education, parental ignorance regarding the art of crocheting, the cost of silver and gold, and a deficiency in patience and commitment to engage in it as a hobby contribute to this situation.

The Ghagro Odhnu has predominantly been supplanted by the Rida, also known as the Libas al-Anwar for ladies, a multicolored attire with intricate lacework. Introduced in 1978 by the then leader of the Daudi Bohra community, this garment was designed with consideration for Islamic principles and Fatimid heritage (Libas al-Anwar: The Attire of the Dawoodi Bohra Community). The Rida was embraced by Alavi Bohra women as an emblem of modernism and intra-community solidarity. One answer indicated that Alavi Bohra members began to widely adopt the rida after 1990, currently, Alavi Bohra women wear the garment for religious and various events, including weddings and funerals.

Today, rather than crafting a koran, the dupattas are embellished with Zardozi, a traditional kind of embroidery from the Indian subcontinent that employs gold, silver, and colored threads to produce elaborate, delicate designs on fabrics such as silk, satin, or velvet. This art form has historically embellished royal attire, wall hangings, and ceremonial artifacts. The phrase "Zardozi" originates from Persian, with 'zar' signifying gold and 'dozi' denoting needlework. Women also use machine made lace, fabric paint and to decorate the dupatta.



Image 7: Zardozi work on the dupatta



Image 8: Handmade embroidery on dupatta with plastic sequins

Another reason for the decline in the traditional dress among the Alavi Bohra women is the traditional dupatta's volume and impracticality for domestic tasks have rendered the garment unwieldy. Oral histories from community women indicate that some fought customary attire after marriage but ultimately conformed owing to patriarchal pressures. Subsequently, when the younger generation embraced a more pragmatic Punjabi costume, the older generation also adapted their daily clothing accordingly.

Cultural Deterioration and Communal Identity: This decline can be examined via the perspective of cultural erosion. The Alavi Bohra community's shift towards mainstream Dawoodi Bohra cultural symbols jeopardizes the survival of distinctive traditions such as Koran lace. From the standpoint of identity theory (Jenkins, 2014), this signifies a shift from a unique group identity to a uniform religious identity, wherein aesthetic distinctions are obscured.

Conservation and Recovery: A Path Forward: Although its significance is diminishing, there exists potential for resurgence through community-organized seminars on traditional lacework and crocheting. Currently, crochet goods are seen as stylish. This has prompted numerous individuals from the younger age to create and market their work on online platforms such as Amazon, Etsy, and Flipkart for money generation (Govil, Chanana, & Mundkur, 2024).

The Alavi community trust, local NGOs, and cultural groups might significantly contribute to revaluing crochet lace creation, not merely as an artifact but as a vibrant tradition, by acknowledging it as cultural heritage.

Conclusion: The craft of Koran crochet lace among Alavi Bohra women transcends mere decoration; it serves as a cultural reservoir of religious meaning, feminine identity, and communal tradition. The decline signifies not just the disappearance of an art form but also indicates a wider cultural transition and identity conflict within the community. Comprehending and safeguarding this heritage necessitates a sociologically insightful and historically cognizant methodology, guaranteeing that what is deemed "lost" now may be "revived" tomorrow with pride and intent.

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