

The Living Embroideries of Kutch

How many styles of embroidery are practised in Kutch? The honest answer would be . . . We are still counting!

The embroidery traditions of Kutch are rich and varied. And they are alive. Working with craftswomen over the last five decades, Shrujan has been able to identify **42 distinct embroidery styles**, the most popular of which you will see on display.

These embroideries are practised by **12 different communities**. These include communities that have settled in Kutch for several generations, like the Ahirs; others, like the Meghwaad Maaru, who came to Kutch as refugees from Sindh, Pakistan; and even some, like the Mochi, who live in nearby Banaskantha. Many communities practise more than one embroidery style; even different subgroups within a community may have different styles.

The Many Meanings of Embroidery

Historically, embroidery has been a personal craft. It does not need elaborate tools; only a one-and-a-half inch needle and some coloured threads. Girls learn the craft while still young. They assist their mothers in rendering the simpler stitches and motifs. Once proficient, the girls show off their skill on the items they embroider for their trousseau, the *aanu*.

The skill is valued. Not so much the product. There is no tradition of preserving embroidered textiles. Some of the most spectacular pieces, however, are passed on from mother to daughter. These precious heirlooms are cherished for the many stories they tell about the past. They also serve as learning resources for the younger generation.

Embroidery is not only about decoration. It demonstrates qualities of character - patience, neatness, intelligence and even a sense of humour. Embroidery also plays a role in courtship. Prospective marriage partners cannot meet before marriage; so after the engagement is confirmed, the girl sends the boy some items that she has embroidered - a handkerchief, a belt, a wallet . . . These are love letters of a unique kind.

The many meanings of embroidery are still intact despite its transition from a personal to a commercial craft in 1969. It was around this time that Kutch was devastated by long years of drought. Chanda Shroff saw in the practice of embroidery a sustainable means by which the women could earn a livelihood. The income earned has transformed the lives of thousands of families. Craftswomen take pride in putting to use the skill in their hands to stand tall on their feet.

Practising the craft as a means of livelihood does not leave much time for doing embroidery for personal use - doing it just for the sake of doing it. Even so, this is still a revered tradition. To embroider a piece as much or as little as they want, to play with stitches and colours that are dear to them, to create a world and fill it with meaning and magic - this is what embroidery has always been about.

