

COMMUNITY: MEGHWAAD MAARU
EMBROIDERIES: SOOF, KHAARAK

The **Meghwaad Maaru** community came to India as war refugees - a fact that has had a profound impact on the community.

Sujadada shares the journey of his community from helpless refugees to proud citizens and achievers:

We lived in an area known as Tharparkar in Sindh, Pakistan. We practised farming and also kept some cows and buffaloes.

During the 1971 war between India and Pakistan, the Indian Army took control of some areas in Pakistan, including Tharparkar. We had played a small part in this victory. So when we realized that the land would be given back to Pakistan after the war, we knew we could not continue to live there.

We got word from the Army that if we wanted to leave for India we should do so right away. So whatever we could lay our hands on, we loaded on to bullock carts and camels, and left late one evening. We were 17 Hindu families comprising 106 men, women and children. Most of us walked the 36 kilometres across the Rann. We walked all night and reached Vaagad in Kutch.

We stayed for two months in Rudraani village. We told the Army people that we wanted to go to Deesa, where we could start a new life and find some work. None of us had any relatives in India; we did not know a living soul. The Army put us in a truck. We travelled the whole night in the truck. We learnt that the truck was going to Sui Village, which is only half an hour from the Indo-Pakistan border.

We did not want to go back to Pakistan. So, on the pretext of wanting to relieve ourselves, we got out of the truck and refused to get back in. We stayed on the road for three days. We refused to eat. We told the officials ... *Do what you want, shoot us if you want, but we are not getting back into the truck. From now on, we will walk.*

Finally the Army took us to a place called Jura. They made a camp there for us and for other refugees who came after us. It was a frightening situation. At night we were afraid of animals attacking us. At first we were not allowed to leave Jura Refugee Camp, so we could not do any work. We lived on the rations that the Indian government provided and on the monthly stipend of Rupees 21 that each family was given. Later, when we were given permission to leave the Jura Camp during the day, we worked as farm labourers, tailors and did whatever small jobs came our way.

So when *Kaki* (Chanda Shroff) came to Jura Camp in 1974 and asked our women if they would embroider, it was a godsend. From 1974 to 1979, there were about 100 to 150 women in Jura Camp who did Soof embroidery, and it is from these earnings that we fed and clothed our families.

Sujadada's wife, Sonuben, was the first craftswoman that Chanda Shroff met in Jura Camp. Sonuben now takes over the story:

Kaki saw a *bokaani* that I had embroidered a long time ago. She must have liked my embroidery because she gave me a long, nine-metre border to embroider.

Kaki said... *Teach the women in the Camp to embroider, teach whoever is interested.*

My older sister-in-law and I were the only ones in the Camp who could embroider. We taught the others at the Camp. There was no electricity, so we embroidered in the light of oil lamps.

I was very particular about how the embroidered piece had to be treated. I taught the women to take care of their embroidery, to treat it with respect.

This teaching has had a profound impact. Soof embroidery is mostly done on white base fabric. All through the forty-odd years that the Meghwaad Maaru women have done embroidery for Shrujan, and right up to present times, the fabric remains pristine when these craftswomen return the pieces after having embroidered them.

The Meghwaad Maaru community got Indian citizenship in 1978. Some families moved to Sumrasar, others moved to different places including Tharad. The Indian government gave each family some land or monetary compensation to buy land.

Sujadada tells us more about the community's determination and drive to be the equal of everybody else:

The land was not enough to sustain our families and so the men looked to other avenues for income. We did carpentry, masonry, metal work, we even manual labour. We were determined to work harder than the others; we did humble jobs; we educated our children, boys and girls. Every day we took some small step; we were driven, we did not want to feel helpless ever again.

Over the years we have completely integrated ourselves in the very soil of Kutch. If you look at our embroidery, you will see how seamlessly it is interwoven into the fabric. In the same way our community has also become a part of this land and its culture.

The craftswomen of this community are also known for their drive to constantly innovate, to learn more and more, and to succeed.

The community is now well off. There is no financial reason to do embroidery. But the women continue to embroider and earn an income. They do not want to give up the habit of being self-reliant.