

COMMUNITY: MOCHI EMBROIDERY: AARI

The history of Aari embroidery shows that this embroidery did not belong to any specific community. Aari was a *court embroidery* done by male artisans exclusively for royalty. Aari had a strong presence in the Mughal court and continued to enjoy popularity during the British Raj when the European elite also became its patrons in addition to the maharajas and princes.

Today Aari is practised in many parts of India. In Kutch and Banaskantha it is the craftspeople of the **Mochi** community that create Aari embroidery for Shrujan.


Chanda Shroff tells the story of her involvement with Aari and the women of the Mochi community:

We had seen Aari embroidery in Aina Mahal Museum and Calico Museum. This embroidery uses only one stitch but the way the stitch is used is fascinating. It can create complex curvilinear shapes. It can create realistic representations including portraiture. No other embroidery can do all this as effectively.

Whenever we saw a new embroidery style we would try to find out which community did it and where that community resided.

It so happened that many of our Jura Camp girls who did Soof embroidery had got married and moved to Tharad. So we had started work in this area. The year was 1983. In Tharad we came across men from the Mochi community who were making a particular kind of footwear called *mojadi*. The *mojadi* uppers had Aari embroidery on them. We found out that this embroidery was done by the women of the Mochi community.

We very much wanted to get involved with Aari embroidery. But the women would have to enhance the quality of their Aari, which was not as fine as the museum pieces we had seen. There was also the matter of finding Aari designs. Since Aari was not their personal embroidery, the Mochi community did not have any garments or household items that could serve as references for designs.



We had seen a *ghaaghro* design in Aina Mahal. We took permission to copy the design and stencilled some of its motifs on small pieces of fabric. We purchased a few thin, fine awls and also fine threads. Having made all these preparations, we went back to Tharad. We gathered a group of women in the government guest house and gave them the stencilled pieces of fabric. That is how we started the work. There were two women, both named Ramilaben, who did very good work.

Slowly the number of villages in which Aari embroidery was done for Shrujan increased. The women needed the income.

In 1985 Rasiklal came to meet me. He was from the Mochi community and he was the only man that I knew of who did Aari embroidery. He was also very good at colour matching. In the kind of Aari embroidery that the Mochi craftswomen do, colour matching is very important because many shades of the same colour are used in gradation to embroider a single motif. We gave Rasiklal the responsibility of distributing work to the women and supervising it in a few villages.


For the *Design Centre on Wheels* project, large-size textile panels had to be embroidered in Aari. We organized a visit to Aina Mahal and Calico Museums for the women. We all went in a bus. The craftswomen brought their embroidery along with them. By now the quality of their Aari was far superior to what they had rendered on the first pieces. But the fine and delicate Aari that the craftswomen saw during this study tour made them realize that they still had a long way to go if they wanted to create museum-quality Aari.

The craftswomen worked hard to enhance the quality of their Aari. They were determined that their work also be displayed in a museum for all the world to see.

Our in-house artist created the designs for these panels. He too was inspired by the Aari that he had seen and studied in the two museums.

The panels became the design bank of Aari embroidery.

The designs were adapted to a wide range of products, including saris, *chaniya cholis*, kurtas, wall hangings and bags.



In all the other communities, embroidery was a means of personal expression, which at some point in time and for economic reasons became a means of earning a livelihood. With the Mochi community, embroidery was always a means of earning a livelihood. But the level of skill that the Mochi craftswomen have achieved in rendering an embroidery that is not their own, is truly remarkable.