

The Living Embroideries of Kutch

Our first Museum Show celebrates the Embroideries of Kutch.

Kutch has at least a 5000-year-old history of arts and crafts. Many of the communities that migrated to Kutch enriched this tradition. This is especially true of the communities that practised hand embroidery. Each community had a distinct embroidery style that was passed on from mother to daughter. Over the centuries, the embroideries changed and evolved. They embraced other influences but kept their core values intact.

Embroidery was a personal craft. Unlike all the other crafts it had no commercial agenda. It was a means of personal expression and a marker of community identity. Women used embroidery to decorate day-to-day as well as ceremonial clothing, household items and adornments for animals. Some communities embroidered a wide range of items, others were more selective. But all revered it equally.

The years 1966, 1967 and 1968 were years of severe drought. Food and hope were hard to find. It was after this that a fundamental shift took place in the role of embroidery. It continued to be practised as a personal craft. But it also became a means of economic survival.

Shrujan pioneered this shift. Its founding member came to Kutch to help run a free kitchen in Dhaneti village. She was moved by the women who were reluctant to accept any kind of charity. She asked herself how she could be of help. And found the answer in their exquisite embroidery - the unique skills that the women possessed could become a practical means to enable them to earn a home-based, sustainable and dignified livelihood. They could embroider textiles that could be fashioned into clothing, accessories and lifestyle products, and sold in urban markets. This was the beginning of Shrujan as a socially motivated commercial enterprise. And also the beginning of an extraordinary adventure with the embroidery craftswomen and the embroideries of Kutch.

Over the last five decades we have created a 20,000-strong family of Shrujan craftswomen. We have discovered 42 distinct embroidery styles practised by 12 communities. These include communities that came to Kutch as refugees from Sindh, Pakistan a few decades ago and have now settled here; we also work with communities settled in nearby regions such as Banaskantha.

There have been ambitious projects such as *Design Centre on Wheels*. Over a thousand large-size embroidery panels were created as part of this project. The panels showcase the highest standards of technical and creative excellence. Many of these panels are on display in this Show. Traditionally embroidered textiles and contemporary expressions from the Shrujan product line have also been showcased.

The adventure continues . . . An ongoing project - *Pride and Enterprise* - takes us into the realm of research and documentation. As we get closer to the embroidery communities we are discovering new styles and new aspects to their craft. We are producing Craft Heritage Books and Self-Learning Films on all the embroidery communities. We have also recorded over a hundred oral narratives of people intimately connected with Kutch.

This Museum Show - **The Living Embroideries of Kutch** - is dedicated to the embroidery craftswomen of Kutch who create entire worlds with just an itsy-bitsy needle and some coloured threads.