

## COMMUNITIES: AHIR, MEGHWAAD GURJAR EMBROIDERY: AHIR

Lord Krishna features prominently in the stories that the **Ahir** community tells about its origins and identity. The Ahirs believe that they are descendants of Lord Krishna and that thousands of years ago their ancestors lived with him in Mathura in North India. They say that they left Mathura along with Lord Krishna when he was on his way to Dwarka. However, they did not go with him all the way, preferring to settle in Tharparkar in Sindh, where there was water and fodder for their cattle.


About 700 to 800 years ago, this community left Tharparkar and reached Kutch. Different groups took different routes and settled in different areas of Kutch. Today each of these groups forms a distinct subgroup within the Ahir community. The group that settled in the Praanthad area came to be known as Praanthadiya Ahir. Another group settled in Morbi district on the fertile banks of the river Machhu. They are the Machhoya Ahir. The third subgroup is the Boricha Ahir. Their name is derived from Borsad mata, the goddess whom they worship.

Talking about his community's history, an Ahir elder says:

The king of Kutch gave us land. The Ahir community was always close to royalty. We take pride in having been trustworthy guards and warriors of kings. We established several villages - Dhaneti, Ratnal, Sumrasar ... Other communities also live with us - Muslims, Bawa, Sadhu, Meghwaad Gurjar ... This kind of coexistence is part of our history and part of our humanity.

The Ahirs were one of the first communities to practise small-scale farming in Kutch. With farming came the Ahirs' love for their farm animals. Every Ahir family had at least one pair of oxen. The women created elaborately embroidered animal decorations including the *jhul*, an embroidered shawl that covered the entire body of the animal.

While agriculture is still practised by the Ahir community, the men also have other occupations. Several Ahir villages, for example, make their living from the transport business. The men are truck owners, and an embroidered dangler hanging over the dashboard of the truck is a familiar sight - a happy reminder of home and heritage.



Ahir embroidery has an extensive repertoire. Strong, bold colours, dense embroidery, generous use of mirrors, large motifs and an abundance of floral motifs and borders - these characteristics make Ahir embroidery distinctive. But the drought in the late 1960s left women with very little time to embroider, since they, along with the menfolk, had to take up manual labour to make ends meet.

It was around this time that Chanda Shroff came to the Praanthadiya village of Dhaneti to help out with relief work. She saw the women in their traditional embroidered garments and found a way to use their embroidery skills to enable them to earn an income.

Ahir embroidery has also been traditionally practised by craftswomen of the **Meghwaad Gurjar** community, who have lived for generations alongside the Praanthadiya Ahirs in the same villages.

In fact women belonging to the Meghwaad Gurjar community are the most technically proficient among all Ahir craftswomen. Their stitches are uniform and exquisitely neat and fine. All the subgroups acknowledge this. Affluent Ahir families invite Meghwaad Gurjar craftswomen to their homes and pay them to embroider clothing, home decorations and even their daughters' *aanu* (trousseau).

Ahir embroidery has also been taught to non-embroidery communities. It was taught to the women of Abdasa taluka who were in need of some income during the long years of drought.

Teaching an embroidery style to non-embroidery communities has become a tradition at Shrujan. Parmaben - an Ahir - pioneered this tradition. Rajiben - a Meghwaad Gurjar - carried it forward.

Even in those days, some thirty-forty years ago, Parmaben and Rajiben travelled unescorted. There is a boldness and confidence about Ahir and Meghwaad Gurjar women that also gets expressed in their embroidery. The women use the word *thassa* to describe this confidence.



Master craftswoman Fuliben from the Meghwaad Gurjar community says:

I must be 45 years old. Nobody - not my father, not my husband, not my sons - has ever told me ... *You can't go here, or Why are you going there?*

Our community and the Ahir community are like that. There are no restrictions on going out. When I was small, my mother would not let me go to school, she said that girls don't study, but she never said ... *You can't go here or there.*

I have two daughters. Both of them are in school. I will educate them as much as they want to study. I have taught them embroidery also. Mothers teaching their daughters - that's how embroidery has survived for so long.

Today women sit together in a class to embroider. Four to six hours a day, six days a week.

There are 15 of us in our village cluster who come to class every day. And each one of us earns not less than Rs. 3,000 per month. This means that an amount of Rs. 45,000 comes to our cluster. This happens every month, and for all the months of the year. So tell me, what do you think the changes will be in that cluster? Don't you think the impact will be dramatic enough to change the very face of our village cluster?

A lesson in economics delivered by the 'unschooled' Fuliben!