

## Kutch is unique...

The claim that Kutch is unique is not just an expression of pride of a people in love with their homeland. The geography, the geology, the ecosystems, the diverse communities, the values that Kutch embodies - the synergy of all these factors makes Kutch a unique habitat.

The land that we know as Kutch was born in the sea. It existed even before the Jurassic period, when the entire East-West plate surfaced out of the sea. This elevation is called the Bhuj Ridge. It is in the shape of the shell of the tortoise or *kachua* - from which comes the name - *Kutch*.

So Kutch was born in the sea and rose from it. We know this on account of the fossils of the sea creature called *ardhlakhyo* (the ammonite) and the dinosaur eggs that have been found in Kutch. Both these creatures were there in Kutch when it emerged from the sea.

The Jurassic period dates back 213 to 144 million years. That is at least how old Kutch is.

Immediately after the Jurassic period came the Cretaceous period when the rivers started flowing and the sandstones that stored sweet water in their belly were formed. This was followed by the Tectonic movement when the underground volcanoes broke through the Jurassic and Cretaceous rocks to create the black basaltic hills and fertile soil that gave rise to the thorn forests. Finally, there was the Recent Period when the Alluvial plains formed the grasslands.

Not only does Kutch have the four main geologies of the world but these diverse geologies also gave rise to its diverse ecosystems.

There is the desert ecosystem of the Rann, which has clayey soil. In the middle of the Rann, there is brackish water caused by the intermingling of water from the sea with the sweet water of the rivers. This brackish water gives life to millions of small sea creatures, which in turn attract migratory birds, such as the flamingoes that fly 3000 to 4000 kilometres to the Rann during the breeding season.

Kutch also has the mangrove ecosystem along its coast, where the sea and land converge. The mangroves are the nurseries and hatcheries of almost all of the sea life. Kutch is the only place in the world where an arid desert ecosystem has a mangrove ecosystem huddled next to it.

There is also the thorn forest ecosystem that grew out of the fertile lava soil that poured forth during the Tectonic movement. These thorn forests became protected areas or *rakhaals* because of their extraordinary biodiversity and the rare and diverse animal, bird and insect life that abound in them.

And there are the grasslands. For centuries the river waters kept bringing down the silt to the shallow sea that existed to the north of Kutch. Over time, the sea retreated towards the Rann and land emerged from the sea. In the Kutchi language, that which gets created is called *Banni*. So 'Banni' was the name given to this 'created' land famous for its grasslands with their 40 and more varieties of grass.

Kutch has about 46,000 square kilometres of land. This makes it a small region and perhaps the only region of its size in the world to have such a diversity of geologies and ecosystems. This could be the reason why so many communities from Central Asia and other parts of Asia migrated to Kutch and made it their homeland.

Each community had the wisdom and the knowledge to sustainably live off one of the four ecosystems that Kutch is blessed with.

The *maaldhaari* (cattle-herder) communities came from as far away as Baluchistan in Central Asia. Like all the other migrant communities, they crossed over from Sindh. These Muslim communities - Mutva, Node, Haalepotra, Jat- remained in the north, moving around in the Banni grasslands, following the rain and making a temporary home wherever they found fodder for their animals.

The Hindu communities - Jain, Bhatia and Lohana among others - moved to the southern parts of Kutch, with its long coastline of 352 kilometres. These communities understood the ecosystem of the sea and became the entrepreneurs, the seafarers and the traders who set out into the world.

The presence of different communities and the way they interacted with Kutch is also responsible for its rich and varied crafts tradition.

The migrant communities that settled in the north brought with them a lot of their crafts and their embroidery skills from the traditions of Central Asia, Persia and Turkey. The seafaring communities of the south also influenced the crafts. They brought in the best timber from South-East Asia to build their wooden mansions called *havelis*. In doing so they patronized several crafts and several generations of craft families. The *khundkaam* (woodwork) artisans created intricate carvings in different parts of the havelis. Their best artistry was seen on the majestic teak wood doors at the entrance of the havelis. Artisans from the Gajjar community erected entire

havelis without using a single nail. *Kamaagari kala* artisans decorated the havelis with fresco wall paintings that depicted scenes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The rulers of Kutch, who were migrants themselves, also played a part in sustaining the craft traditions. The most famous example of royal patronage is the Aina Mahal, commissioned by Lakhpat Raja of the Jadeja dynasty in 1752. Ramsingh Maalam, a gifted artisan, lavishly decorated the palace with a variety of crafts, including mirror work, carved woodwork, inlay work, wall paintings, Aari embroidery and silverwork. The diverse geologies were also crafted into different building traditions. Each one had its own colour story. Dressed stone in brown, pink, white and black was crafted from sandstone, and used in palaces and havelis. Limestone was used to build beautiful dry masonry random rubble walls. Laterite created bright red walls and from basalt came the majestic black walls.

The diverse geologies and ecosystems, the rich and varied crafts and building traditions - all these make Kutch unique. However, its most cherished feature is the happy intermingling of opposites. The best metaphor for this syncretism is Lakhpat. Among its 43 heritage structures are places of worship belonging to many religious traditions - some of the oldest Shiv temples, mosques, gurdwaras and dargahs sit next to each other in this remote corner of Kutch. They tell the world that opposites are not to be feared but understood and celebrated.