

**COMMUNITY: MEGHWAAD MAARU**  
**EMBROIDERIES: SOOF, KHAARAK**

The Meghwaad Maaru community practises two embroidery styles - **Soof** and **Khaarak**.

**Soof** embroidery is fine and delicate. It is a counted thread embroidery style: there is no outline or drawing done on the fabric to guide the craftswoman. Instead, the design is mentally conceptualized and plotted by counting the threads of the fabric. The craftswoman thus plays a dual role - she is the designer as well as the embroiderer.

The building blocks of this embroidery are *lath*, *soof* and *leher*. Craftswomen play with these forms to create a huge variety of simple as well as complex geometric motifs.



Soof embroidery requires fabrics that have a basket weave - the warp and the weft have to be of the same count. Craftswomen render the stitches on the reverse side of the fabric. When turned over, the front displays embroidery that is so fine and precise that many people mistake it for weaving or for machine embroidery. They have a hard time believing that such perfection can be achieved by hand. What is more, Soof embroidery sits so lightly on the fabric that even a heavily embroidered sari is easy to handle and wear.

Craftswomen tell us that in the days when their community resided in Sindh in Pakistan, their mothers and grandmothers embroidered small products such as *baagchi* (envelope bags), *theli* (multi-purpose bags) and *batwa* (small bags). The embroidery was rendered on a horizontal and vertical grid. It featured an abundance

of floral and leaf motifs. Animal, bird and figurative motifs seldom made an appearance. The only exception was the peacock motif for which the craftswomen had a particular fondness.

Two ceremonial accessories - *bokaani* (long scarf) and *vanjani* (broad belt) - were embroidered by the bride and worn by the groom on their wedding day. Embroidery was also done on the head covering worn by women; red, green or yellow *chundadi* had small floral motifs sprinkled all over it.

It was at the Jura Refugee Camp in Kutch that Shrujan first met the craftswomen of this community. And it was for Shrujan that these craftswomen, for the first time, embroidered products that were larger than their traditional baagchi, theli and batwa.



The craftswomen embroidered borders, kurtas, and blouse pieces. They also enlarged their motif repertoire as they had more embroidery space to play with on these larger products. This is how the elephant, camel, scorpion, sparrow and *dhingli* (milkmaid) motifs entered the universe of Soof embroidery.

The craftswomen constantly challenged themselves. They embroidered entire saris and shawls with Soof. These heavily embroidered products are treasured for their creative and technical excellence by those who cherish the work of the hand.

During Shrujan's *Design Centre on Wheels* project the craftswomen scaled down the size of the stitches and the mirrors. The embroidery became even finer and more delicate in look and feel.



The most daring innovation, however, was creating complex compositions on a diagonal grid. This is an extremely challenging feat and has earned the craftswomen a place in the history of embroidery.

Embroidery is an integral part of the lives of the craftswomen. And the pursuit of excellence is a strong motivator. Craftswomen acknowledge that the criteria for evaluating creative excellence vary from one embroidered piece to another. They have, however, identified a set of indicators by which the technical excellence can be assessed.

The indicators of technical excellence in Soof embroidery are:

- varied and complex compositions
- stitches used for embroidering the mirrors are thin and sturdy; they are rendered tightly so that maximum area of the mirrors is exposed
- the base fabric underneath the embroidery does not show through.

**Khaarak** is also a counted thread embroidery style.

As has been the tradition, craftswomen use Khaarak to create geometric forms as well as animal, bird and figurative motifs. The peacock is the favourite motif even in Khaarak.



Unlike Soof, this embroidery is rendered on the right side of the fabric. Craftswomen begin by plotting the squares and rectangles that constitute the grid of the geometric forms. A dark colour is used to outline the grid. Spaces within the grid are filled in with different colours. Mirrors provide the final flourish.



Khaarak has a grand stand-alone presence. Craftswomen render an entire composition in Khaarak. They also combine it with Soof embroidery to dramatic effect. And on rare occasions, they add a touch of *ganatri nu bharat* to Soof and Khaarak embroideries. *Ganatri nu bharat* uses the Khaarak grid to create small figurative motifs.

The indicators of technical excellence in Khaarak embroidery are:

- all the squares within the motif are of the same size
- three or more colours are used in each motif - one colour to create the grid, another to fill-in the tiny squares within the motif and the remaining colours to fill in the rectangles
- motifs are densely embroidered
- stitches used for embroidering the mirrors are thin and sturdy; they are rendered tightly so that maximum area of the mirrors is exposed
- the base fabric underneath the embroidery does not show through.