

## **COMMUNITIES: MEGHWAAD MAARWAADA, HAALEPOTRA**

**EMBROIDERIES: KHUDI-TEBHA, KAMBIRO, PAKKO MUKKO, KACHCHO KATARI, KACHCHO KAMBIRI**

Elders of the Meghwaad Maarwaada community trace their ancestry to the Marwar region of Rajasthan. They say the community moved to Tharparkar in Sindh in search of work about 700 years ago. Another wave of migration took place after a few generations when some Meghwaad Maarwaada families came to nearby Kutch and settled for a while in Pachham. From here the community spread out across Kutch.

Being a community of skilled artisans, known especially for their weaving, woodwork and leather work, they earned their welcome by creating the different crafts that were needed in the day-to-day life of the village of their residence. They also continued to practise their traditional occupations of rainfed agriculture and cattle rearing on a small scale.

Says an elder:

As time passed, those of us in Kutch developed a distinct cultural identity. But some things remained the same. Our regard for our cattle, for instance. Although many of us earn our livelihood from leather work, we will never kill an animal for its hide. I say this with pride.

Like so many other communities, the women of the Meghwaad Maarwaada community also brought their embroidery tradition to Kutch.

The Meghwaad Maarwaada tradition is the only one that incorporates beads in the embroidery. Craftswomen use beads not just as accessories or tassels but as the main decorative element.

Says a young Meghwaad Maarwaada woman:

We like to decorate everything. Our windows, doors and even our door handles are decorative. Have you seen the bright, colourful bob-pins that the young girls wear in their hair? Everything has to be eye-catching. This is true even of our everyday quilts.

It was a quilt that started Shrujan's journey with the Meghwaad Maarwaada community.

Chanda Shroff tells the story:

In 1976 we saw a quilt that had a unique kind of embroidery. We were told that it was Khudi-Tebha and Kambiro embroidery created by the Meghwaad Maarwaada community who resided in Banni. We wanted to meet this community, so Narsangbhai took us to Hodko village in Banni. We met Bhura Bhasar, and the women in his family who embroidered quilts.

I myself liked to make quilts. So I designed some quilt uppers using silk fabric and created patchwork designs in colours that would attract an urban audience. I sent the quilt uppers to Kutch. Bhura Bhasar got them embroidered with Khudi-Tebha and Kambiro.

This went on for many years.

I used to sit with the women in Hodko, and discuss colour matching with them. Since these were patchwork quilts, different coloured threads had to be used for the different patches; at the same time the overall effect had to be pleasing. Traditionally Kambiro embroidery was used very sparingly. We got together with the Meghwaad Maarwaada women and transformed the Kambiro into the main feature of the design.

All these small innovations made our embroidered silk quilts extremely popular. The huge demand enabled us to provide more than enough work to the craftswomen.

In the mid-1980s, during the long spell of drought, more and more women needed work. We got Khudi-Tebha and Kambiro embroidery done on yardage and then used the embroidered fabric to create kurtas.

We also worked with Bijal Mangoo and his wife Sajnaben who was exceptionally skilled. They would distribute the work to craftswomen in many different villages, pick up the embroidered pieces and settle payment.

In 1998, I told Bijal Mangoo that I wanted to meet these craftswomen to talk to them about the textile panels for the *Design Centre on Wheels* project. He told me that outside men were not allowed in the villages. So his mother accompanied me.

The women I met with Bijal Mangoo's mother were from the Haalepotra community. I did not know about this community. I was as pleased to meet the Haalepotra women as they were to see me. They said *...we have been working for you for more than 20 years and now you have come to meet us!*

Thus it was after about 22 years of work that Shrujan realized that the Khudi-Tebha and Kambiro quilts were being created not just by Meghwaad Maarwaada craftswomen but also by women of the Haalepotra community.

Originally from Arabia, the Haalepotra community settled in Sindh before moving to Banni about 400 years ago to practise the traditional occupation of cattle rearing. Even today the men rear sheep, goats, cows and oxen. They go all the way to Saurashtra in Gujarat to sell their oxen. They make coal from *gaando baawad*, a wild and thorny bush that grows profusely all over Banni.

The women earn from embroidery. Their earnings help meet household needs - rations, medicines, clothing, and fodder for their cattle.

Chanda Shroff picks up the story once again:

Shrujan continued to work with both these communities.

The demand for quilts, however, began to decrease around the year 2000. So once again we worked with the craftswomen to create some more innovations. This time Shrujan explored the full potential of the *khudi* and *tebha* stitches. We showcased this embroidery on smaller products such as jackets, cushion covers and bags.

It is the simple running stitch that creates Khudi-Tebha and Kambiro. But the willingness and openness of the Meghwaad Maarwaada and Haalepotra craftswomen helped us to transform this stitch and to take these two embroideries to new and glorious heights.