

Historical Overview of Kutch Embroideries

Amita D Pandya* & Kruti L Dholakia

Department of Clothing and Textiles; Faculty of Family and Community Sciences;
The M S University of Baroda; Vadodara, 390002- Gujarat
E-mails: amita_1957@yahoo.co.in; krutidholakia@yahoo.com

Received 14.02.12; revised 21.06.12

Handicrafts for eternity hold the essence of its original abode though it transforms according to the change in milieu and time. Knowledge of past at all times facilitates the inkling of foundation. It provides the inspiration for future modifications and innovations. Embroidery of Kutch has withstood the ravages of time and tough competition with other handicrafts of the region. The changing times have though, affected Kutch and its crafts as various progressive factors like commercialization and industrialization that have influenced the life of artisans. It was essential to record the history of omnipotent needle craft of Kutch in order to maintain the roots intact which can serve as a guideline for future generations. Survey was undertaken to exhume and document the history of Kutch embroidery craft apart from desk research.

Keywords: Kutch, Embroidery, History

IPC Int. Cl.⁸: D, D01H, D02G 3/00, D03, D05C, D06H

India has been unparalleled for its variegated handicrafts. Native and migrant folks from various parts of the world have contributed to India's craft legacy. Their skills continued to create inexorable master pieces inspired by their surroundings and using indigenous materials post settlement/migration. Kutch is one such craft pocket in India where various communities from adjoining countries have migrated and settled since centuries, practicing their regional crafts since ages. As Kutch being parched, drought prone region, embroideries have always aided as a means of supplementary income for their creators with its cultural and social significance. Intricate and alluring embroideries have befitting an identity

Of the district since time immemorial. Earthquake in 2001 has affected the people of Kutch, but also made the region known worldwide. However, over past few years there has been aloft graph in domestic as well as foreign visitors in Kutch. Currently government has initiated to promote Kutch as one of the most preferred tourist destination; by these means developing industrial opportunities. The impact of the above might have lead to a change in socio cultural traits thereby affecting their lifestyles. Thus, it is posing a threat to the flourishing embroidery industry of Kutch. Historical database always serves as an

indication of original form of any craft and provides better insight. Therefore, there was a felt need to study the history of Kutch embroideries practiced by various communities in Kutch. The study will assist future researchers and designers to understand craft through history.

Objectives

The study was undertaken with the major objective to document the origin, history, motifs, stitches used, tools and processes followed in the past.

Methodology

Primary and secondary source of information were used for the present research. Non-probability sampling procedure was adopted for the selection of the sample comprising of artisans above the age of 60 yrs. Interview and observation method was used for data collection. The artifacts preserved in the Kutch museum was also studied through observation method and analyzed.

Results and discussion

In view to provide comprehensive details, results have been discussed according to the type of embroidery practiced by various communities. To facilitate better understanding the discussion has been bifurcated into various heads such as

*Corresponding author

Origin and History, Motifs and Stitches embroidered, Socio-cultural rationale and Economic significance.

Origin and History

The data pertaining to the origin and history revealed that, *Kanabi*, *Bhanushali*, *Satwara*, *Lohana* and *Mochi* were practicing intricate embroideries in Kutch region² however, the embroideries except that of *Mochis* practiced by the captioned communities were redundant since around 40 yrs. (Figs. 1 & 2).

Mochis- the cobblers were historically practicing *Mochi-bharat* which was also known as *Aari bharat*. The name *Aari* embroidery was derived from the hooked needle used for embroidery known as *Aari* (Fig. 1A). Literature records explained the fable that a Muslim man from Pakistan taught the beautiful embroidery to the cobblers who were recruited by the ruling emperors 16th century onwards. Their main occupation was to decorate the artifacts and apparels of the royal families.² The researcher observed similar wall decoration pieces and apparels for the queens of the state in the Kutch museum which supported the literature evidences (Figs. 2A&2B). *Aari* embroidered products were gifted to British rulers by Kutch kings. During data collection the grandson of the *Aari* embroidery trainer aged 45 yrs in his interview responded that his grandfather was appointed by government to train the groups for *Aari* embroidery after independence. But, the trained artisans migrated to neighboring district therefore *Aari bharat* was not being practiced in Kutch. His family had switched over to other occupation since *Aari* work was highly time consuming yet, not lucrative.

The communities such as *Halaypotra*, *Pathan*, *Raysipotra*, *Darbar*, *Meghwar*, *Mutwa* and *Sindhimemon* were practicing *Pakko*, *Neran*, *Kharek*, *Suf*, *Khudisebha* and *Mukko* embroideries. Of these, the *Pakko*, *Kharek*, *Mukko* and *Khudisebha* embroideries practiced by *Halaypotra*, *Pathan*, *Raysipotra* were similar to each other. The artisans of the age between 50-70 yrs. stated that they were unaware about the time and origin of the embroideries but opined that it might have been initiated by *Halaypotra* community. *Halaypotras* were cattle breeding communities and historically *Pathans* assisted them.

With respect to the origin of *Mukko* embroidery in Kutch an artisan of around 50 yrs of age from *Pathan* community explained that her maternal grandmother *Mithabai* and *Bhegibai* from *Halaypotra* community learnt *Mukko* embroidery in Pakistan before partition. These women trained their family members and

relatives and the embroidery continued. The artisans of *Raysipotra* community mentioned that they were also cattle breeders similar to *Halaypotras* and *Pathans* therefore, travelled together many times with these two communities a living as neighbors. Consequently, the craft might have been adopted from *Halaypotras*.

The artisans from *Darbar* and *Meghwar* communities of age around 60-70 yrs narrated that *Darbars* were landlords in their native *Sindh* and *Tharparkar*. *Meghwars* were working at *havelis of Darbars* as servants. Besides household chores, *Meghwars* had to also embroider for *Darbar* families. Probably *Meghwars* adopted the same embroidery style as *Darbars* on their apparels and home decorations. Further it was revealed that *Darbars* got their daughters married to places across the country. Therefore, they used to learn the craft of embroidery from *Meghwars* which was helpful to their daughters who got married outside their regions. Their traditional embroideries were *Pakko*, *Kharek* and *Suf* in their native place. At present only those artisans who have migrated in 1970 are aware of *Suf* embroidery techniques. Few artisans from *Meghwar* community adopted *Mukko* embroidery skills from *Halaypotra*, *Pathan* and *Raysipotra* communities as their habitats were adjoining to each other.

Pakko, *Kharek*, *Mukko* and *Khudisebha* embroidery practiced by *Mutwa* communities were more intricate than the embroideries of any other communities'. *Mutwas* were migrants from *Sindh* owing to their dispute with the ruling empire. An artisan of around 72 yrs of age responded that they carried their embroidery when they migrated from *Sindh* to Kutch. Though unaware about the origin of the embroidery, it is introspected that the need to ornament the fabric may have given birth to embroidery. Earlier they were not wealthy enough to purchase material and if at all they got some fabric they embroidered it only for their household anthology. Collected embroidered pieces were arranged in various forms to create a product. Embroidering on small pieces might have led to achieve the fine skills matchless to any other community as stated by the researcher. Similar to *Meghwar* artisans, *Mukko* was adopted from the *Halaypotra*, practiced around 25 yrs ago but *Mutwa* artisans were efficiently embroidering more intricate *Mukko* embroidery than *Halaypotra*, *Pathan*, *Raysipotra* and *Meghwars*. Their basic skills were responsible for the proficiency in *Mukko* embroidery despite of it not being their embroidery.



Fig. 1 & 2: 1A; *Aari*-tool used for *aari* embroidery, 1B; Clay used to draw the motifs, Fig. 2A; *Aari* embroidered wall decoration piece with chain stitch using floral motifs, Fig. 2B; *Aari* embroidered skirt portion with floral and human figure with chain stitch, Fig. 2C; Yoke embroidered by *Dhaneta & Fakirani Jat* communities, Fig. 2D; Yoke embroidered by *Garasia Jat* community, Fig. 2E; Showing *lath* with black satin stitch and *butti* with square chain stitch, Fig. 2F; Extinct *Lor* motif of *Darbar* and *Meghwar* community, Fig. 2G; *Mutwa* embroidery from Kutch museum collection with minute mirrors, and Fig. 2H; *Pakko* embroidered by *Sindhi memon* (from the Kutch museum collection)

Sindhi-memon were also the migrants from *Sindh* but believed to be from a different *Sindh* region. Their pattern of embroidering *Pakko* was different from the rest of the communities in terms of various stitches used. According to, three respondents aged between 60-65 yrs they practiced *Mukko* at their native place also along with *Khudisebh* though latter was in lesser quantity in comparison to other communities.

Jat community of Kutch were said to be migrants from Persia through Baluchistan to Kutch and settled since 12th -13th centuries. Thus, the embroidery done by them was similar to the embroidery done in Baluchistan. As an artisan aged about 80 yrs from Tal village narrated that after migration *Jat* community was divided into three sub communities as per their selected occupations. The statement was coherent as embroidery practiced by three sub communities and attire worn was similar to each other except that of *Garasia jat*. The main article embroidered by them was *Churi*, the yoke for the female attire (Figs. 2C & 2D).

Ahir embroidery was practiced by *Ahirs* migrated from Mathura and settled in north western part of Gujarat including Kutch. However the origin of the craft is obscure. The artisans of age 70-80 yrs stated that this embroidery is at least 500 yrs old.

There were different opinions regarding the native of *Rabari*. It is also believed that the community is descendent from Jaisalmer. It is also believed that the community is migrated from Afghanistan through Baluchistan. Yet, others opined that they root from *Sindh*.^{1,3}

The artisans from *Rabari* communities of age around 70-75 yrs stated that they were the nomads and travelled from one place to another place through all the regions mentioned above prior to settlement in Kutch. Actual origin was unknown but their embroidery was more than 500 yrs old. As per the societal norms it was mandatory for each girl to carry around 30-35 embroidered pieces including apparels and home decorations. Though they were married in early childhood, the girl could not go to her in-law's house unless she had stipulated number of embroidered pieces prepared. As a result girls were at their maternal home till 30-35 yrs. Since, last 20 yrs embroidery was banned among *Dhebaria Rabari* cult. As observed, the artisans were still not allowed to practice the embroidery for their own utility but were permitted only for commercial purpose.

Motifs

Results related to motifs used by the selected communities revealed that the major source of inspiration was nature and objects used in routine life of the artisans for all the embroideries such as flora-fauna, human figures, animals and birds.

Mochibharat was highly influenced by *Mughal* style while Persian influence was evident in the stylized floral motifs mainly with stem and flowers that were observed in the museum collections (Figs. 2A & 2B). *Jaal* arrangement was commonly observed on home decoration products whereas, floral *buttas* were embroidered on apparels such as blouse, skirts and coat. Animal figures such as elephant with *howdahs* and elephant fighting with lion was depicted on home decoration artifacts. Bird motifs comprised of swan, sparrows, and parakeet. Human figures were also commonly found (Fig. 2B).

Of the total respondents, 98 % artisans of *Halaypotra*, *Pathan* and *Raysipotra* explained that about 30-35 yrs ago majority of the articles were embroidered with *Neran* embroidery and *Pakko* was seldom practiced. The term *Neran*, derived from *nen-* which means eyebrow. Since, last 30-35 yrs *Neran* was not practiced and trend of practicing *Pakko* and *Mukko* embroidery was persistent. At the time of investigation, floral motifs were pre-dominant in the above said embroideries.

Floral motifs embroidered in *Pakko* practiced by *Darbar* and *Meghwars* were having *Bhoriful* was inspired from flowers of berry fruit. A motif composed of several units placed in circular pattern was known as *Gul*, the term used for flower in local colloquial language. *Buttis* were the placement of number of flower petals (Fig. 2E). The motifs were also inspired from the ripple pattern created during summer in the desert as well as the ripples created in water, known as *Lor* or *Ler* (meaning waves) (Fig. 2F). *Gingri* (tiny bells of anklets) and *Rano band* (from the jail) were also used. *Ler* and *Gingri* had now disappeared. *Rano bandh* was very popular in recently embroidered pieces. The motifs were also enthused from insects such as *vinchi* (scorpion). Animal motifs were not embroidered by these communities but peacock was a part of various placements. Dry fruits such as *Badam* (Almond) and *Kharek* (Dates) also inspired the artisans. *Kharek* was mainly embroidered by *Meghwar* artisans.

Floral motifs were majorly popular in *Mutwa* communities. They also embroidered *Bhoriphul* like

Darbar and *Meghwar* communities. *Golado*, (flower in Sindh) was also one of the motif. *Chakkan jo gul* was very popular motif probably due to its minute segments and intricate embroidery. The segment of three petal *butti* was repeated in all four directions to create *Chakkan jo gul*. Historically, interlacing stitch was used as fillers but recently many arrangements such as *Panj kanio* (5 sections), *Addhad* motif comprising of half units were in practice. Since last three decades motif known as *Dhoran'* was included in the embroidery, which was adopted during the course of migration, therefore artisans were unaware about the meaning and significance of the motif. Vast varieties of motifs were practiced earlier but after the government intervention only lucrative motifs survived. *Phuldi* motif was adopted from *Jat* embroidery and was practiced by *Mutwas* for more than three decades.

Ginni (coin) was very commonly used motif among *Mutwa* community. Yet another motif was *zarmar* (necklace), similar to the motif practiced by *Halaypotra*.

Floral motifs were usually visible in *Pakko* practiced by *Sindhi memon*. Mainly four motifs, *tevrani ful*, *sinye nu ful*, *taadi valo gul*, and *handa valo gul* served as major motifs in ancient times. *Tevrani ful* and *Sinye nu ful* were inspired by the flowers in the *Sindh*. *Taadi valo gul taadi* meaning leaf was created placing the leaf like triangular shape next to each other in circular format. *Fuldi* motif was inspired from the nose pin, now vanished (Fig. 2H). Historically human, animal and bird motifs were not represented in their embroidery but, recently motifs such as *Kagda na pag*, (crow's legs) was introduced.

Embroidery practiced by *Jat* had maintained their motifs till the date. *Fuladi* was traditionally only depicted in their marriage attire but currently it was very popular among all the three subgroups. *Fuldi* was the most common motif used by *Fakirani- Jat*. Other motifs known as *Gheta sing* (horns of sheep), *Khes khudi* (from men's shoulder cloth print) and *limbodi aako* (fruit of neem tree-*Azadirachta indica*) were also used for embroidery. At the end of the yoke they always embroidered wavy, zig zag pattern known as *chher*, means infinite.

One cult of *Garasia Jat's* subgroup used to embroider by counting threads of the fabric i.e. warps and wefts which created cross stitch and the motifs were different from to other *Jat* sub group (Fig.1D).

Ahirs were highly inspired by natural motifs namely *Sachu phool* (real flower), *Zad* (tree), *Suda*

(parakeet), *Mor* (peacock); human figures, insects, from domestic activities, *Maiyari* (a lady churning curd), *Paniari* (lady carrying water pot) were also depicted. Deities like lord *Ganesha* and lord *Krishna* formed spiritual motifs. A motif created by mirrors in circular arrangement was known as *Dhungo*. It was highly popular amongst *Paratharia- Ahir* since past 20 yrs. In recent times all the three cults of *Ahirs* had stopped practicing embroidery for their household utility due to cultural changes.

Rabaris were highly inspired by animals and birds, were used in stylized forms. Peacock, Parakeet, Cat and Elephant were mainly used with the motifs such as *Vinchi* (scorpion) and *Derdi* (temple).

Stitches

Chain stitch was used in *Mochibharat* also known as *Aaribharat* for both outlines as well to fill the motifs. The specimen preserved in the museum had very minute stitches resulting in more than 25 stitches in one inch of area (Figs. 2A & 2B).

Pakko embroidered by *Mutwa* community was the most intricate embroidery with open chain stitch. Field and outline were both embroidered with open chain stitch. Back stitch was worked around the motifs to highlight. References explained that after independence, the practice of *Mochibhar* gradually started vanishing while embroidery practiced by *Mutwa* gained popularity due to its fineness surpassing fineness of *Mochi* embroidery.

Earlier, *Pakko* embroidered by *Darbar* and *Meghwars* depicted satin stitch outline of the layout. The satin stitch was done by counting the ends and picks. The satin stitch outline was known as *Lath* meaning a stick (Fig. 2E). Motifs were filled up with square chain stitch. The space in between the *lath* was fill up by the *Chag* (bundle of thread with couching stitch). *Pakko* practiced by *Halaypotra*, *Pathan*, and *Raysipotra* was similar to *Darbar* and *Meghwar* in terms of stitches but they were having larger area to fill up, as a result their embroidery appeared bolder in comparison to that embroidered by *Darbar* and *Meghwar* community. The only difference was they were not embroidering *Lath*.

Mutwa community was performing minute mirror embroidery highly responsible for its popularity. The mirrors were as small as 0.5 cm. of diameter (Fig. 2G). Mirror was used to ornament the embroidered piece and was embroidered with buttonhole stitch. Around the mirror scattered *Romanian* and Buttonhole stitches was carried out in circular manner to highlight the mirror.

Sindhi memon was using Romanian and square buttonhole stitch to fill up the motif while out lined with chain stitch. The researcher could locate only one specimen displayed in the Museum probably done by *Sindhi memon* community (Fig. 2H).

Pakko embroidery practiced by *Jat* was carried out with *Vell* stitch whereas *Garacia-jat* practiced it with a cross stitch. Mirrors were embroidered with very compact herringbone. Square buttonhole and Satin stitch were observed in the embroideries of recent time.

Ahirs used chain stitch for outline, among which *Parathariya Ahir* used simple chain and *Boricha* and *Machoya Ahir* used open chain stitch to embroider the outline. The filling was done with *vaano* (herringbone). Mirrors were used to fill up circular space and the space in between the motifs. Mirrors were embroidered using buttonhole or herringbone. *Bavalio* (interlacing) was also used in *Ahir* embroidery and back stitch (*Bakhiyo*) to highlight the motif.

Rabari embroidery is embroidered with open and square chain stitch. *Vagadiya-Rabari* artisans used interlacing stitch in major part of the embroidered surface as compared to *Kachhi* and *Dhebariya-Rabari*. Different shapes of mirrors were the specialty of the *Rabari* embroidery. *Tak* i.e. mirror of different shapes were known as *kali-tak*, *kagda tak*, etc. As observed by the researcher in recent time *Rabaris* had shifted to machine embroidery and readymade laces and tapes available in their local market.

Tools and Processes

Main tool used for embroidery was needle. *Aari* embroidery was done with hooked needle to create the chain stitch (Fig. 1A). Process for *Aari* embroidery included block printing of motifs before embroidery. Outline of the motif was embroidered first followed by the field of the motif. Suf and cross stitch were worked by counting the threads. *Pakko*,

Mukko, *Ahir* and *Rabari* embroidery was practiced by drawing the motifs were drawn on fabric with locally available clay (Fig. 1B). Similar to *Aari* embroidery, outline was embroidered first and then it was filled up. Lastly, back stitch was embroidered to highlight the embroidery.

Conclusion

Findings revealed that majority of the artisans were not aware about the time and place of the origin of their Embroideries but they had an approximate idea about origin and age of their embroideries. All the embroideries have undergone changes due to various factors such as religious, cultural, social, economic and commercial. The study undertaken will definitely be an aid in preserving the historical aspects of the omnipotent craft before the same undergo tremendous changes and reaches to extinction. It is recommended that government should also intervene by putting the step forward in designing and implementing the policy to preserve the embroideries of Kutch.

Acknowledgement

The authors acknowledge the artisans for providing the information to complete the research fruitfully. Kutch Museum authorities are specially acknowledged for their cooperation and permission to refer to the museum collection.

References

- 1 Elson V, Dowries from Kutch, Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles, California, 1979.
- 2 Nanavati K Vora M & Dhaky M, The embroidery and Beadwork of Kutch and Saurashtra, Department of Archeology, Baroda, 1966.
- 3 Jethi P, Kutch: People and Their Crafts, Limja Prakashan, Bhuj, Kutch, 2008.
- 4 Singh K, People of India- Gujarat, Part-III Volume XXII, Popluar Prakashan PVT.LTD, Okhla, Delhi -2003.
- 5 S Laxmi Puja & Padma A, Ari Work-Elegant Fabric Enrichment, Clothesline, November-2002.