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2002

## Contemporary Embroideries of Rabaris of Kutch: Economic and Cultural Viability

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Frater, Judy, "Contemporary Embroideries of Rabaris of Kutch: Economic and Cultural Viability" (2002).  
*Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 386.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/386>

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## **CONTEMPORARY EMBROIDERIES OF RABARIS OF KUTCH: ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL VIABILITY**

Judy Frater

Monghiben Rabari is attending an exhibition and sale in Mumbai. Her traditional embroidery has taken her from Vandh, her village of mud huts and camels on the seacoast of Kutch to India's most cosmopolitan urban metropolis. She is thrilled by the glittering bustle, and by the customers' enthusiastic response. She deals directly with them, as a professional artisan. And not only do the customers buy; one woman is so impressed that she wants to learn embroidery. She engages Monghi as a teacher during the afternoon lulls of the exhibition.

Surely, we have succeeded in the transition from tradition to profession. Crafts have become viable both economically and culturally. Women are earning fair wages for their art, and also respect. I ask Monghi how she likes being a teacher.

"Sometimes it seems like all we DO is embroidery!" she exclaims in exasperation.

Thus Monghi provokes me to examine whether embroidery today is viable, economically or culturally, to the Rabaris who execute it?

### **Rabari Traditions**

Traditionally, Rabari women practiced embroidery as an integrated part of their nomadic existence. Embroidery was an affordable aesthetic expression of community, sub-community and status within that community. Embroidery was portable, created wealth. A woman adorned herself and her household with her own efforts, utilizing time between more essential chores. The glittering pieces that a girl embroidered for her dowry were considered a contribution to the marriage exchange. Women worked as artists, without thought of time, concentrating on making the most beautiful contributions they could, knowing that their work would be appreciated by community members who shared their aesthetics and values. Not only would Rabaris not think of dowry pieces and personal adornment in terms of commercial value; they feared showing them lest outsiders would try to purchase them.

### **The Advent of Commerce**

In the last four decades many changes have impacted traditional embroideries and women embroiderers of Kutch. During this time Kutch, like most of India, has seen increasing population, increasing cultivation and deforestation. With less grazing land, it is difficult to maintain large herds. Rabaris have adapted by relying more on sheep and goats than the original camels, and herding in nuclear rather than joint family units.

Among the Dhebarias and Vagadias, the majority of whom continue to transmigrate, finding adequate pasture has become difficult, and these subgroups have become increasingly marginalized. Kachhi Rabaris, in contrast, have adjusted by decreasing the size of herds and grazing them locally. Supplementing their income from the sale of milk with minor jobs and sometimes dry farming (one crop yearly, depending solely on rain), they have managed to

avoid long migration. Since the 1960's Kachhis, particularly those residing near the Kutch District headquarters Bhuj, have begun to settle.

Periodic droughts and spiraling inflation forced rural communities to seek supplements to their meager earnings. One income was no longer adequate. By the mid 1980s farming communities gained access to irrigation and could grow cash crops. They began to employ women laborers in the fields. Economics leveraged culture, and Rabaris started to work for wages.

Simultaneously, embroidered embellishment came into fashion in India and abroad, and has since enjoyed a remarkably long popularity. Commercialization of an art that was meant for the home held mutual appeal. Artisans could earn without disturbing the social order. Women could work at home, on their own schedule as independent contractors. At first, Rabari women worked in the unorganized sector. They did embroidery for shopkeepers or local middlemen. In rare instances, women also went out, picking up enough work for a group of women. They worked on "labor" embroidery, whatever was given to them, regardless of material and style. But neither artisans nor customer were satisfied. Pay was extremely low, even when more was promised. Even when artisans did their best work, the client criticized them; it wasn't the style expected.

While studying embroidery traditions of Kutch, I perceived that most commercial ventures were economically exploitive and culturally destructive. When this perception was corroborated by the artisans whom I was studying, and they asked me to help them, we established Kala Raksha/ Preservation of Traditional Arts. Kala Raksha was conceived as an applied anthropology project. Driven by artisan initiation and based on artisan participation in design, pricing and marketing of their crafts, the project intends to enable artisans to utilize their existing traditions to earn the income they want and need.

### Money, Art and Viability

Nonetheless, professionalization of a tradition produces conceptual bifurcation. Where women have chosen to embroider for a living, they clearly distinguish between commercial craft and traditional art. The two are different entities, and do not directly overlap. Rules and standards for each are distinct.

Both commercial and traditional embroidery comprise elements of effort, value and satisfaction- of economic and cultural viability. As viability ultimately determines longevity, we may examine these factors from the perspective of the artisan to question the economic and cultural viability of either embroidery. Is either likely to survive? What contribution will either make to the development of the community to which it belongs?

### Embroidery as a Strategy for Income Generation

In commercial embroidery the focus is unquestionably on economic viability, the ratio of effort to value. For Rabaris, who are less culturally restricted than many other communities of Kutch, commercial embroidery initially was deemed "expensive." They explored their options and found more lucrative seasonal work as agricultural laborers, in

government drought relief projects, or even in construction. For them, there was little difference between embroidering for wages or doing farm labor. They enjoyed having options and utilized them to bargain for maximum rates.

Over time the embroidery business became more organized. Rates improved, but even when women are allowed to set their own wages, as they do in Kala Raksha, they rarely earn as much as they can by other means of manual labor. The accepted perceived value for handwork, within the artisan community as well as the market, is still low. Relativity to possibility has most probably kept the wage for handwork down. Women of many communities are not allowed outside the village and have little choice but to earn by embroidering at whatever rate is offered. Asked if she could earn as much embroidering as doing drought relief work, Monghi, who works with Kala Raksha, calculated and replied, "if we get up early and don't wash our hair that day." Even when rates are similar, women may prefer manual labor. Embroidery is tedious, Rabaris say, and physically demanding.

Reliability raises the economic viability of commercial embroidery. Other sources of income, though higher, are seasonal and not always predictable. As families who worked with Kala Raksha realized that they could depend on this income, they began to regard earnings and earners with more respect. Small adjustments in domestic patterns enabled women to devote more time to embroidering for cash, thus increasing income.

#### Redoubled by the Earthquake

The massive earthquake that devastated Kutch in January 2001 precipitated unimagined changes in the economics of handwork. Nascent social changes accelerated exponentially. In Kala Raksha, we initiated a program of distributing rehabilitation funds in the form of matching grants against wages. The incentive of earning double, meant to encourage women to participate in their own rehabilitation, in addition unequivocally illustrated the importance of good wages in productivity. Women worked more. Their production capacity doubled! They also worked better. No longer feeling they needed to increase the distance between stitches by a hairsbreadth, or eliminate one of ten mirrors, they produced embroidery of excellent quality. The small domestic adjustments went public. Family members gladly helped with cooking, cleaning and child care to enable women to maximize their embroidering time, now doubly valued.

Women used their matching grants to improve their families' nutrition, repair homes, plant fields, seek timely medical attention, implement time saving and income generating activities, and pay off loans. Clearly, women know what to do with their income. The fact that they do not usually spend on better food or invest does not mean that they do not know how to use money, but simply that they do not have enough to use.

The earthquake provided these women with the opportunity to experience their ability to significantly improve their standard of living. Time will tell if they value these changes enough to continue the trend even when wages are no longer double.

As the women of Kala Raksha began to value their work more seriously, embroiderers all over Kutch realized that they had to. Sadly, the enormous need for reconstruction in post earthquake Kutch and the astounding outpouring of funding for that purpose were coupled with greed. Instead of offering day labor jobs to local villagers who critically needed the income, construction coordinators brought in cheap *adivasi* labor. Suddenly, unskilled earning options for both men and women of Kutch closed. Artisans know it is likely that this new low-rung labor force will resettle in Kutch and take up the agriculture, drought relief and construction jobs of which they and their husbands once availed.

### Cultural Viability of Commercial Work

The ratio of effort to satisfaction plays a less critical role in deciding the means by which a woman will earn. Originally those women who were needed at home to care for family members chose to embroider for income, as it enabled them to work flexible hours. Over time, as others have determined that the reliable income and comforts of working at home compensate for relatively low wages, they have realized cultural viability. Nomadic Rabari women no longer have to migrate. “Because we can rely on earning through our embroidery,” they say, “we no longer have to toughen our hands and blacken our skin in the harsh desert sun.”

While in the embroidery workplace, the economic viability of embroidery has increased a woman’s sense of worth as a member of society, her sense of herself as an artisan may have diminished. Commercial work is not creative, and often is only marginally related to artisans’ traditions. Artisans embroider as dictated, rather than work from their own sense of aesthetics. When presented with a set of four alien colored threads, Rabari women balked. “If we use these, it won’t be Rabari,” they said. In traditional work, there is no distinct separation of colour, stitch, pattern and motif; these work together in units. Design intervention separates these elements and juxtaposes them in new ways. It separates design, or art, and craft, or labor. The result often disempowers artisans. When design is reserved for a professional designer and craft is relegated to the artisan, the artisan is reduced to a laborer. In effect, she is correct in her assessment that there is no difference between construction work and commercial embroidery.

Finally, commercial embroidery does not enhance social status. In India, social status is largely independent of income, and the status of any hand work or labor is low. Most professional artisans dream of white collar jobs for their children, regardless of income, simply because they are regarded with higher status. For village women, who rarely have access to options other than labor, most commercial embroidery simply reinforces the status quo. The exception is for a few motivated individuals in organizations which give women access to management such as Kala Raksha, SEWA or KMVS.

### The Impact on Traditional Art

#### Economic Viability

Whatever means of earning they have pursued, Rabari women now have limited time for traditional embroidery. Rabaris cannot afford to be sentimental. If we look at traditional work, it brings us genuine pleasure, they say. But it earns nothing. And money is sweet.

“Expensive” is the term they use for traditional work. Ever practical, they predict that only if a girl’s father is well off can she afford to do her own embroidery. Otherwise, in their assessment, the need to earn will ultimately ruin and end traditional embroidery.

Their prediction is borne out in the case of the Dhebaria Rabari subgroup. In 1995, in response to the pressures of social changes, the Dhebaria *nath*, or group of elders who determine laws within the community, banned the making and wearing of embroidery. Ostensibly, the rationale for this extreme step was that embroidery was becoming too expensive in terms of time and monetary cost.<sup>1</sup> The ban was thus decreed to stop this trend. It is absolute, with an enforced fine of RS 5,000 (the monthly pay of a high level government servant) for infraction.

### Cultural Demand

Yet, the cultural demand for embellished textiles as wealth, status, and identity marker is intact, and even increasing. Coping successfully with the contemporary commercial world does not preclude maintaining a tradition. Among Kachhi Rabaris, a girl is now expected to bring forty to sixty embroidered *kaanchali* (blouses) as part of her dowry. It is the young engaged and newly married Kachhi women themselves who have increased the requirements. When a bride arrives at her in-laws’, contemporaries ask aloud how many *kaanchali* (blouses) she brought? The new bride makes a point to wear a new *kaanchali* each day and everyone inspects and reports on it with excruciating detail. Bonding with peers is essential; thus fashion becomes critical. And natal families criticize girls for not completing their embroidery in time.

### Negotiating a Solution: Viability and Tradition

Women now have to balance multiple demands on limited time, and time is suddenly a critical issue. The concept of time has brought a consciousness of labor to the home as well. Embroidery is art, and it is also labor. These aspects, once integrated like the elements of colour, stitch, pattern and motif, are today delineated. Now, the focus is on the labor aspect of embroidery. In their traditional work, women look for ways to minimize effort.

The essence of the nomadic Rabari culture, and the embroidery that expresses it, is adaptability. The conclusion of my historical research on Rabari embroidery was that each Rabari subgroup had retained some elements of previous styles critical to expressing identity. Viability was the important factor. Which elements were maintained was not important. It is the fact of maintaining tradition that is critical to the Rabari sense of identity.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Embroidery had become a means of leverage for increasing the value of exchange and delaying final transfer of brides to their in-laws’ homes. (for details, see Judy Frater, “When Parrots Transform to Bikes: Social Change Reflected in Rabari Embroidery Motifs,” *Nomadic Peoples* (1999, Vol. 3, issue 1).

<sup>2</sup> Judy Frater, *Threads of Identity: Embroidery and Adornment of the Nomadic Rabaris* (Ahmedabad: Mapin, 1995).

In the last three decades, embroideries of the Rabaris of Kutch have adapted and evolved at an exponentially increasing rate, commensurate with the rapid social changes of the late 20th century. The changes in traditional style exemplify attempts to make traditions culturally and economically viable. Among the Kachhis, three significant trends emerge: changes in the naming of motifs, changes in portrayal, and changes in production.<sup>3</sup>

Over time, many early Kachhi Rabari motifs were updated to current styles. In some cases, however, a traditional motif was not only updated but also given a contemporary meaning. *Haathi* (elephant), a historical motif no longer culturally relevant, for example, became *kabaat* (a cupboard), symbol of settlement and prosperity. *Paaniyaari* (the water bearer) became less relevant with the advent of tube wells and taps. The symbol then became the legendary Shraavan, who carried his parents on his shoulders, indicating increased participation in mainstream Hinduism. More recently, new motifs with names such as *minni* (cat), and *saikal* (bicycle) further indicate that settling is entering the Rabari mindset.

Two essential differences in the portrayal of contemporary motifs articulate concurrent changing attitudes. Motifs have become more abstract and decorative than narrative, and more subject to different interpretations, reflecting that life is becoming more abstract and complex for Rabaris, and more ambiguous. Motifs also tend to be isolated and elaborated, rather than stitched in tableau, illustrating the break up of time in Rabari consciousness. No longer do women want to commit to long extended periods of time to embroider.

Rabari women do have less time, between working for wages and household demands. At the same time, these working women have cash to spend. Earlier, this situation resulted in Kachhi women employing other Rabari s who are confined to their homes by family situation (such as small children or elders who need constant attention) to hand embroider for them. This trend began to alter the conception and role of embroidery within the society.

More recently, Kachhi Rabari women opt to have embroideries professionally stitched at least in part by machine, and to add ready-made elements such as rick-rack. This trend has significantly altered the production of Rabari embroidery. As Kachhis increasingly employ machine stitching to outline their embroidery, motifs are to some extent determined by the few people with sewing machines and become homogenized. The use of machine stitching thus offers another explanation of why abstract motifs are subject to interpretation.

Retaining cultural viability, the new methods of production increase economic viability. The use of time savers such as machine embroidery and ready made elements stand as a metaphor for tradition and adaptation. The outlines of motifs are done by machine; then women fill in the areas by hand with their choice from the limited repertoire of patterns. The same concept in fact is used in traditional hand work. Women outline their patterns first, then fill in the details with accent stitches and colors. Tradition, as Rabaris comprehend it, is personal innovation (the detailing) within the patterns shared by the group (the outlining). The new motifs are created using the same proportions and types of shapes and lines as

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<sup>3</sup> Frater, 1999.

traditional motifs. Machine embroidery is unquestionably a departure. But it follows the essence of tradition and does not radically change the aesthetic. It simply saves time.

Dhebaria Rabaris, prohibited from hand embroidery, devised an equally viable substitute. Of all subgroups in Kutch, these Rabaris had the most developed sense of decoration. Their embroidery was characterized by highly skilled labor intensive work, which typically covered the fabric surface, and by attention to detailing with fine accent stitches, beads, buttons and, later, trims.

Today, Dhebarias piece together with different colored synthetic fabrics their *kaanchari* (blouses), children's garments, *theli* (bags), *toran* and *chaakla* (doorway and wall hangings), and decorate these with elaborate layering of ready made rick rack, ribbons and trims. The seams of blouses are embellished with *bakhiya*, the fine back stitching previously used, which is still allowed. In addition, a fine line of *jeek*, hand satin stitching in variegated colors, and a line of striped piping elaborate the seams.

The look is consistent with the earlier Dhebaria aesthetic. The trims are placed where embroidery was: on the seams and borders of garments. Ribbons are used to make traditionally embroidered bold figures on bags, hangings and quilts. The series of sparkling and finely detailed ribbons echoes the bands of mirrored embroidery previously used and creates a similar elaborate textured effect. And the attention to detailing is maintained by allowable hand stitched accents such as fine *bakhiya* and *jeek*.

Economically, the new Dhebaria style is also viable. Women have to purchase the trims, and either purchase a sewing machine or pay someone to tailor their pieces. But hand embroidery was expensive mainly in terms of time. An embroidered blouse took weeks to months of leisure time to prepare, whereas a ribbon trimmed blouse takes two days to stitch. In terms of money, trims and cloth cost slightly more than embroidery threads (about RS 60 vs. RS 40, which is the range of a daily wage). If a woman has to pay for stitching a blouse, charges are RS 80 to 100, about two days' wages. The trade of money for labor assumes that women and their families have options to earn, but it is fair.

In both contemporary examples, viability directed adaptation. For Rabari artisans, the decision to use machine work and ready-made elements or labor intensive hand embroidery per se is not as critical as whether the result is viable in terms of expressing the current aesthetic and enabling a woman to satisfactorily meet the increasing demands on her limited time.

### From Viability to Vitality

Successfully negotiating solutions to the problems of economic viability, Rabaris have paradoxically increased the cultural viability of their embroidery traditions. The very pressure of balancing two types of embroidery has actually forced artisans to take creative leaps in their own work, to find ways to eliminate tedium and focus on the art of craft. In both Kachhi and Dhebaria Rabaris, what we find vital is the essence of embroidery: the creative impulse, the compulsion to decorate. The fact that the form is a newly evolved response to current constraints is testimony that the tradition lives.



In minimizing labor, women have shifted the focus of creativity. Different skills have become important in new traditions: choosing from the array of available materials, conceptualizing patterns and, in many cases, sewing (in addition to embroidering). The new styles in fact allow women to focus on design rather than execution. While the current innovations sacrifice the timeless sense of art, they facilitate an acceptably similar result. From the artisan's perspective, what an excellent trade: labor for creativity.

New traditional work is an increasingly important means of expressing identity. Even in the extreme case of the Dhebaria Rabaris, the devastating ban on hand embroidery did not incapacitate their ability to express their identity by elements of their dress. Dhebaria women assessed the sudden adversity and adapted creatively. They changed their style radically by innovating on their existing aesthetic, and their identity remained intact.

New traditions are also vital in expressing status within the community. The minimization of labor has allowed entry of new elements to traditional art, as well as enabled more rapid execution. Fashion has entered the new tradition. With this, the sense of the individual has emerged.

Monghi loves the design aspect of the new traditions. Working with intense concentration on her dowry, she has a sudden inspiration: she will embroider a whole border for her *ludi*/veil, rather than the two patches in the corners that are current fashion. She chooses a bold diagonal pattern, and adds holography sequins instead of mirrors, to lighten the weight and dazzle the eye. As a flourish in a raga, her idea elicits a spontaneous "wah!" among her peers. Everyone is impressed, and Monghi has the great satisfaction that she has started a fashion trend that will be attributed to her. The two borders take time, but labor per se is not the only issue. Here, the ratio of time to result is culturally cost effective.

### Commercial Craft Re-Visited

Why, then is Monghi ambivalent about embroidery? For young Rabaris of Kutch today embroidery has multiple dimensions. It is a means of earning a livelihood, increasingly important for the family, it is an increasing social obligation, and it is an expression of creativity. Perhaps Monghi is right: embroidery is all she does.

While traditional embroidery is viable, from Monghi's perspective, professional embroidery is only partially so. Women have more status in their societies because they are earning. But they also have more responsibility and much less time. The wages for commercial work are less than desirable; the work is not creative. In fact, women are investing in commercial work the labor that they are eschewing in their own embroidery. Monghi knows there are other options. Awareness of options is one of the goals of empowering women through income generation. Dissatisfaction and struggling are a part of understanding choice.

As it is today, hand embroidery as income generation would seem to have a limited life span. Commercial work is a departure from tradition externally imposed. In this workplace, artisans are seen as technically skillful. But they have more creative

potential, as demonstrated by the solutions they have found to questions of economic viability identified within their own traditions.

From their perspective, artisans perceive questions of economic viability in their commercial work. Can we look to their own solutions to the problems of the ratio of effort to income as a solution? Perhaps a better strategy would be to let artisans themselves decide. Artisans would be truly encouraged to be creative if they could be presented with the problem of the market and assisted in finding the solutions.

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