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Embodying Embroidery: Researching Women's Folk Art in Western India

Michele Hardy

Introduction

South Asia is home to an incredibly rich variety of embroideries that include folk, courtly, ritual, and commercial traditions. The scholarly literature on South Asian embroidery has been meagre however and historically emphasised professional embroideries at the expense of the folk¹. With few recent exceptions² folk embroidery in the Sub-Continent has most often been described and classified without reference to the women who make it or the specific cultural traditions that support and give meaning to it³. These 'characterising' accounts of folk embroidery are likely the result of historic circumstance and ancient bias⁴, but they are also the result of certain methodological shortcomings. My research attempts to counter these shortcomings through the use of embodiment and focusing not strictly on embroidery, but embroidering—the processes involved, their contexts, change, and women's perceptions of meaning. Despite the growing influence of theories of praxis and embodiment on the social sciences⁵ and their demonstrated potential for furthering understanding of gender and textiles⁶, there has yet to be an experiential, embodied account of embroidery in South Asia. This paper will examine the potential of embodiment to further women-centred, praxis-oriented research, enhancing understanding of embroidery and women's relationship with it.

Let me take a moment to spell out exactly what I mean by embodiment and how it differs from more traditional ethnographic field methods. Traditionally, ethnography has been based on 'participant observation' where the researcher, him or herself, is assumed to be the "main tool" of inquiry⁷. That said, 'participation' has often involved a more physical than emotional engagement. The emotions and the senses, together with intuition and spirituality are considered suspect, biased, and denied recognition as legitimate 'ways of knowing'. They are trivialised—as the prerogative of women—or relativised—as the prerogative of 'others'⁸. The 'observation' half of the ethnographic equation has tended to privilege sight and the seen (including texts) which are assumed to be objective, impartial, and authoritative. An experiential, embodied approach to ethnographic research challenges the implied dualism of mind and body, subjects and objects. It emphasises the role of whole sensing-thinking-feeling bodies—not just parts of them—in the production of ethnographic knowledge. Moreover, by stressing relationships and interactions it promotes an ethical co-production of knowledge⁹. An embodied approach reminds us that researchers are not the main *tools* of inquiry, but the main *bodies* of inquiry.

The Mutwa of Kutch

My doctoral research has involved documenting recent shifts to folk embroidery in Western India and eliciting women's perceptions of these changes. I have been working with a Muslim clan known as the Mutwa who live in a cluster of villages along the northern frontier of Banni, a semi-isolated tract of land in northern Kutch in the State of Gujarat (Ill.1). Mutwa women are locally, and increasingly internationally¹⁰, renowned for the intricate, mirror-studded embroidery they produce. Although the Mutwa have never been isolated from change, since the mid 1960's the pace and direction of change has been unprecedented. Traditionally cattle herders, they have been forced by altered environmental conditions to seek new occupations¹¹. The construction of roads, telephone lines, and the introduction of regular bus service has linked the Mutwa with urban centres as never before. While this new accessibility has opened up the world to the Mutwa, it has also brought the world to the Mutwa. Visitors arrive almost daily—many bemoaning the Mutwa's 'degraded' traditions, others dismissing them as backwards. Not surprisingly the Mutwa, particularly the youth, have an increasingly ambiguous relationship with 'tradition'.

Although mirror embroidery is widely produced in Kutch and neighbouring areas¹², Mutwa mirror embroidery is among the finest. The Mutwa share with other groups in Kutch a limited repertoire of stitches; each deploys in their own characteristic ways. Motifs are also widely shared although those favoured by the Mutwa tend to stylised flowers and geometric patterns in keeping with Islamic iconoclasm. Before the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 the Mutwa used cotton thread or untwisted silk floss (*pat*) obtained from markets in Sindh. Currently they use rayon floss ('*art silk*') on cotton or synthetic fabrics purchased for them by male kin in town. Embroidery has been used to embellish women and children's clothing, domestic items like quilts, bags, and cushions (Ill.5), and a variety of textiles used during the wedding ceremony including a mask (*serra*) worn by the groom (Ill.6). This list of embroidered objects is inherently partial and shifting. At some time in the distant past the Mutwa stitched tents (*maroe*) for the bridal couple however they have not been used since partition. Similarly, heavily embroidered dresses worn by young girls (*udarne*) and young women (*choori*) began to fall out of fashion 60-70 years ago. Currently, it is only married women over the age of about 25 who wear embroidered blouses (*kungeree*) (Ill.2). Although specific blouses embellished with prescribed motifs and colour combinations once identified women at different life stages, those associated with the youngest women and brides have fallen out of fashion. Until recently, brides used to wear a special wedding blouse (*guj*) adorned with tiny shells, tassels, and stitched *chandre* (moons) over each breast and shoulder (Illus.7&8)—widely acknowledged symbols of women's fertility¹³. Young brides rarely, if ever, wear *guj* while the motifs associated with them are no longer stitched. Although many women under 25 are exceptional embroiderers, they do not wear embroidered blouses. Currently young women prefer un-embroidered Punjabi suits—long, semi-fitted dresses worn with gathered trousers—perceiving these as more modern, more modest, and more in keeping with their evolving Islamic identity.

Beginning in the 1960's and 70's and coinciding with the environmental changes that forced the Mutwa to seek new occupations, outside interest in Mutwa embroidery was piqued. Many collections of Mutwa embroidery were built at that time¹⁴ even though, for some women, selling off their embroidery was a last resort. At the same time the Mutwa begin stitching commercially for a local NGO. While outside interest in embroidery and the new availability of inexpensive materials temporarily stimulated production of embroidery for the Mutwa's own use, currently married women spend most of their time stitching embroidery for sale. Where mothers-in-law traditionally gave three special blouses to new daughters-in-law (Illus.3&4), these are now generally replaced with Punjabi suits. Although blouses are still occasionally given, they are acknowledged 'sentimental' gifts which the bride is expected to sell not wear.

The Embodied Embroiderer

My embroidery lessons began slowly with Nani. We both felt shy and self-conscious. She took me to her grandfather's house where a chest of embroidery was kept for sale to tourists. She pointed out the different stitches and identified a number of motifs. She drew a simple design on a scrap of cloth and demonstrated pucco before turning back to her own embroidery. It looked so easy. Commonly called the 'open chain' or 'ladder stitch' in English, pucco is the most prevalent stitch used by Mutwa women. "It is a simple craft, anyone can do it," I had heard people say again and again. Yet after painstakingly stitching, watching my orange ladder veer left and right, swelling and constricting, I realised 'they' had probably never tried it.

I had obtained my supplies from the markets in town learning, in the process, to ask for unspun rayon floss that is 'guaranteed' colour fast as opposed to only possibly so, a difference reflected in the price. I also learned to look for the thin, unblemished pieces of mirror the Mutwa cut into tiny circles to embellish their embroidery with. For my first round of samples, I had especially purchased hand woven white cotton fabric. To my mind, and according to my previous experience, that was what you learned to embroider on—white because it forms a neutral background, cotton because it feels nice, and hand woven because it is easy to stitch through. Returning to the village, I quickly learned why white was not a practical choice in a village

essentially built of mud and dung. More slowly I realised that Mutwa women virtually never wear white¹⁵ and never embroider on white hence, even though I had chosen the proper thread colours, the designs never 'looked right'¹⁶.

*My working relationship with Nani gradually settled into a regular pattern. We generally met in her extended family's courtyard in the morning, then drifted off to her father's house if the children became too rambunctious—or even if they didn't. She preferred to embroider in her own home, against the wall by the window for light. Generally it was just the two of us though occasionally a cousin or a girlfriend would join us or one or the other of her brothers would drift in to watch for a while. Sometimes Nani's mother would sit on one side quietly stitching or cutting mirrors while listening to the Quran reading broadcast on Radio Pakistan every morning. And sometimes she would spread her prayer mat and do her **namaz** (prostration and prayer) right there. Nani often cared for her uncle's two young daughters, who would sit quietly watching her stitch, absorbing its colours, its patterns and rhythms. After their brother was born he too was frequently included in our circle.*

I spent a lot of time stitching with Nani. Although I had initially hoped to learn with an older woman, one who, to my mind at the time, was a more 'authentic' embroiderer, learning with Nani had distinct advantages. For one thing, she had the time and the interest. When I started my research Nani was 17, unmarried, and spent most of her time stitching. Her aunt and grandmother, though renowned embroiderers in their time, were busy caring for husbands and children and periodically claimed they weren't interested in embroidering any more. Unlike most married women (and many other unmarried women) who stitched almost exclusively for sale, Nani was embroidering items for her dowry (*dagio*) as well as for sale. Stitching with Nani I realised women employ different stitching strategies depending on the intended use and destination of their embroidery¹⁷. Another advantage of stitching with Nani was that, unlike many of her elders, she embraced rather than dismissed change. She was a patient teacher putting up with my need for repeated stitch demonstrations and endless, seemingly irrelevant questions. Still, there were many things Nani couldn't explain or I didn't know to ask. It took, for example, many hours of tortured stitching before I began to appreciate the relationship between needle size, cloth texture, and stitch fineness. It wasn't until much later that I realised my efforts to stitch finely and evenly were being hindered by my reliance on sight. I discovered, quite by accident, late one afternoon as the sun was setting and the light was growing dim, that my stitching improved as I was forced to trust my sense of touch and the rhythms I had embodied but not yet exercised. While these insights are likely not revolutionary, they suggest an altered experience of time and space, and the relative role of the senses in knowing betrayed by normative ethnographic methods.

Late one afternoon I was sitting with Nani in her father's house embroidering. We sat in the light near the door, facing her grandfather's house—Nani was on one side, out of sight of passers-by. I sat in the middle of the light shining through the open doorway. Bent over my work I didn't notice the group of Border Security officers who had gathered in the courtyard. I found out later that they were a newly posted group who had come to ask Nani's grandfather about the foreigner who was living in the village. They must have stood there watching me for several minutes before I happened to glance up. I saw the shiny black boots, the green uniforms, the rifles, the fixed brown stares and realised I was being surveyed. I retreated self consciously into my stitching, no nod, no smile. My eyes, my thoughts protected. Stitching. Bored or convinced of my innocuousness, they shuffled away.

The Mutwa observe a form of purdah that discourages photographs of women and curbs the interaction between women and men outside of their extended families. Because most of the men in the village are considered kin, purdah is relatively relaxed within the village¹⁸. That said, as young women mature they tend to remain close to home at least until their own children have grown. Although male visitors from other villages should avoid contact with non-related women, occasionally it is unavoidable. Caught unaware women dive for cover or, if not possible or if the

man is not too serious a threat, they tug at their veils, lower their eyes and retreat into their embroidery. I had seen women react this way in front of strangers as well as, though less stringently, elder males or women they were not interested in interacting with. I had even done it myself. There was a young woman in the village who used to occasionally follow me around and harass me. Avoiding her was not always possible in such a small village. Instead, Nani and I would grow uncharacteristically quiet, and focus intently on our stitching until she grew bored and moved on. It didn't always work—sometimes she would just snatch my embroidery away and knot all the threads. Embroidery, for the most part, offers women not just a guise or a productive excuse, but a physical means of protection, a means of claiming integrity and chastity, of including or excluding, showing respect or disdain for others.

I returned to Kutch last May to visit the Mutwa. I had been away for 18 months so there was much catching up to do. There had been births, deaths, weddings, engagements, fights and reconciliations that I was anxious to hear all about. I hadn't intended on embroidering during my visit as time was short and I was concerned that the Mutwa might be offended if I seemed to focus more on embroidery than our conversations. But after a couple of days they asked why I wasn't stitching, as if something were amiss. I recalled a comment Nani's aunt had once made—that my embroidering was "very good". I thought she had meant that my stitching was good or at least it was improving but I began to realise she had meant I was good because I stitched. I spent my time embroidering rather than running around here and there—something the young woman who periodically harassed me was criticised for. She rarely embroidered anymore and when she did it was careless. She ran the risk of being labelled "halky-halky"—literally, fast. I was judged against a backdrop of foreign tourists and textile researchers who had come before me—in fact had come and gone but seldom stayed and stitched for any length of time. 'My idea', was acknowledged as 'a good idea'—which I took to mean that my approach to learning embroidery, an approach which involved learning about being a Mutwa women, was appropriate and supported.

A Mutwa woman who spends a lot of time stitching and stitches well is said to have "hooner". This suggests that skill, while ostensibly about technical ability, embraces temporal and moral dimensions. I was 'good' because my embroidering implied concentration, discipline, and industriousness—qualities ideally associated with women in purdah. Anthropologists have tended to view purdah primarily as a means of controlling and controlling access to women—at best partial views that overlook Muslim women's impressions, incentives, and experiences¹⁹. Given that Islam is a religion that places enormous emphasis on 'right practice' as opposed to 'right belief'²⁰, an alternative understanding of purdah is as a form of praxis or 'esteemed behaviour' for Muslim women²¹. For the Mutwa, embroidery is evidence of purdah observed. Similarly, embroidering is an important means of instilling good habits and moral qualities.

Conclusion

As a maker of textiles who shifted to study other makers it was perhaps only natural that I would insist on an embodied approach to researching women and embroidery. But apart from a whim, embodiment has proved a uniquely suitable and insightful means of approaching embroidery. As a craft exclusively associated with women in Kutch, there are no histories of folk embroidery, no records, nor formal means of instruction. While motifs and stitches are readily named, meanings are often barely articulated, implicit, and shared.

My research involved over 22 months of fieldwork; much of it spent bent over a scrap of cloth torturing my fingers and knees. It was wonderful. Sitting there stitching, day after day, facilitated discussions of embroidery issues, examination of embroidery in production and use, participation in decisions about design, marketing, gifting and other related strategies. And as I have tried to suggest here, embodiment added further depth, enhancing normative ethnographic methods that have tended, if not to overlook, to undermine the complex meanings associated with Indian folk embroidery. An embodied approach shed insight into the performative aspects of embroidery—how embroidering is a means of

including and excluding, of showing respect or disdain for others. Moreover, in a context where embroidery is increasingly produced for sale to outsiders and is no longer worn by young Mutwa women, embodiment revealed how embroidery is being displaced—its symbolic significance denounced and censured. Where embroidery has often been associated with women in purdah, embodiment suggested ways in which embroidering not just demonstrates morality, but actually enhances it. Embodiment provided a means of eliciting the subtle connections and disconnections between Mutwa women's bodies and their embroidery. As both a method and a motif, embodiment expands the discussion of embroidery beyond the embellished surface, promoting a more finely textured understanding of women and folk embroidery in South Asia and, potentially, beyond.

Illustration 1. Map of Western India showing Kutch

(highlighted).

Illustration 2. Contemporary Mutwa *kungeree*.





Illustration 3. Mutwa *kungeroo*, c. 1988. *Kungeroo* were traditionally gifted to new brides by their mothers-in-law.

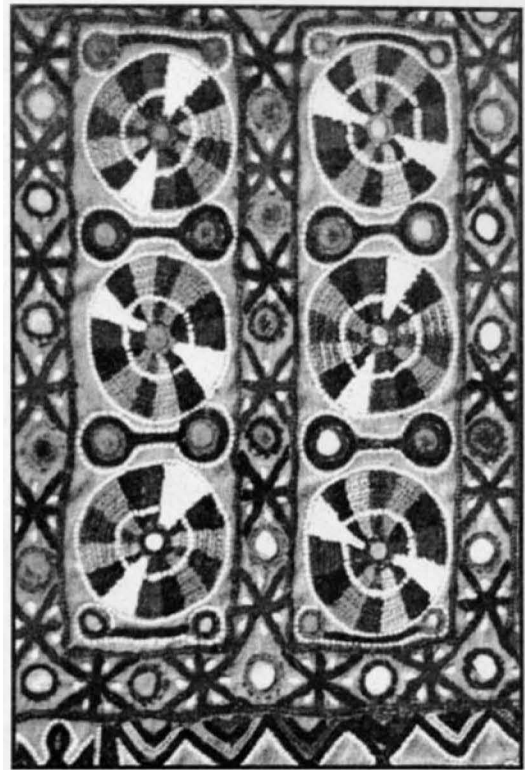


Illustration 4. Mutwa *kungeroo*, detail of Ill. 3.

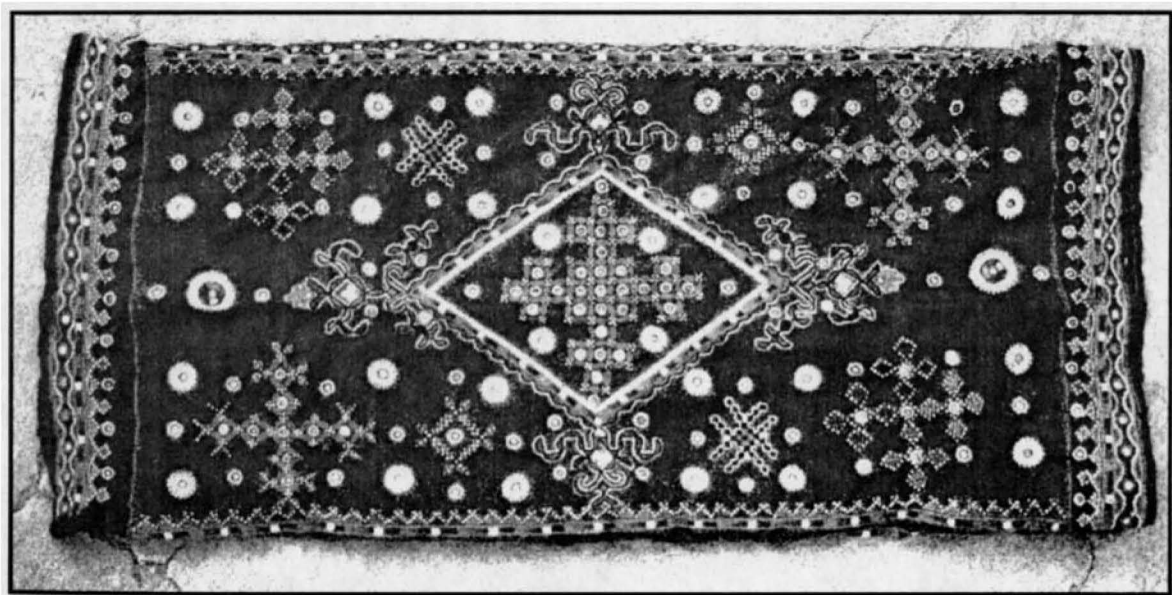


Illustration 5. Cushion cover (*ooseeko*), c. 1990. Young Mutwa women traditionally stitched a cushion cover for their dowries.



Illustration 6. *Four Mutwa grooms wearing embroidered and beaded masks (serra), 1998.*



Illustration 7. *Mutwa wedding blouse (guj), c. 1970.*

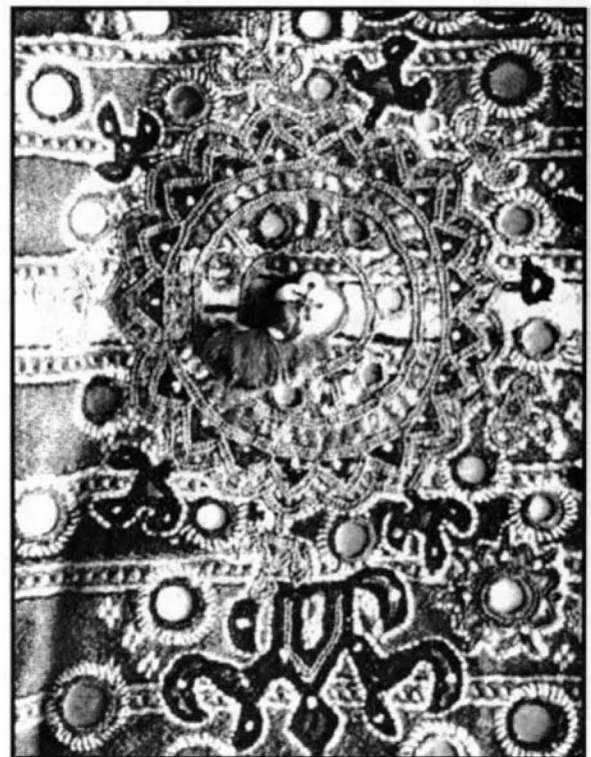


Illustration 8. *Detail of Ill.7 showing the moon motif (chandre).*

A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s

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N o t e s

¹ See the *Journal of Indian Textile History*; Irwin, J. and Hall, M. *Indian Embroideries*. Ahmedabad: Calico Museum, 1973; Irwin, J. "The Commercial Embroidery of Gujarat in the Seventeenth Century", *Journal of Indian Society of Oriental Art* 17, 1949, 51-56.

² Frater, J. "The Meaning of Folk Art in Rabari Life", *Textile Museum Journal* 4, 1975, 47-60; Frater, J. *Threads of Identity: Embroidery and Adornment of the Nomadic Rabaris*. Ahmedabad: Mapin, 1995; Tarlo, E. *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*. New Delhi: Viking, 1996; Elson, V. *Dowries of Kutch: A Women's Folk Art Tradition in India*. Los Angeles: University of California, 1979; Jain, J. *Folk Art and Culture of Gujarat*. Ahmedabad: Shreyas Folk Museum, 1980.

³ For example: Nanavati, J.M., et al., (1966). *The Embroidery and Beadwork of Kutch and Saurashtra*. Baroda: Museum Monograph Series, 1966; Grewel, N. and Grewel, A. *The Needle Lore*. Delhi: Ajanta, 1988; Chattopadhyay, K. *Indian Embroidery*. New Delhi: Wiley, 1977.

⁴ While these 'characterising' accounts have been shaped by the availability of historic evidence, it can also be argued that they have been effected by widely held gender biases, Orientalism, and particular European ideas regarding the relative merit of the arts. See, for example: Parker, R. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. London: Women's Press, 1984; Said, E.W. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1979; Kristeller, P.O. "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics (I)", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, 1951, 496-527.

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⁷ Burgess, B.G. (ed.): *Field Research: A Sourcebook and Field Manual*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982.

⁸ Code, L. *What Can She Know?* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991; Young, D.E. and Goulet, J.G. (eds.): *Being Changed: The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1994; Hardy, M. "Crafts and Knowledge", in Hickey, G. (ed.): *Making and Metaphor: A Discussion of Meaning in Contemporary Craft*, Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994, 48-57.

⁹ Harding, S. "Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?" in Harding, S. (ed.): *Feminism and Methodology*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, 1-14; Abu-Lughod, L. "Writing Against Culture", in Fox, R.G. (ed.): *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, Santa Fe: School of

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¹¹ Mehta, L. Kutch, the Sardar Sarovar Project and the Socio-Economic Component in Water Resources Management: The Case of Kanmer in Eastern Kutch (Final Report). London: Overseas Development Institute, 1996; Williams, L.F. *The Black Hills. Kutch in History and Legend: A Study in Indian Local Loyalties*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981.

¹² Mirror embroidery is common in Sindh, Pakistan, Kutch and Saurashtra in Gujarat and western Rajasthan. See: Askari, N. and Crill, R. *Colours of the Indus: Costumes and Textiles of Pakistan*. London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1997; Nabholz-Kartaschoff, M.L. *Golden Sprays and Scarlet Flowers: Traditional Indian Textiles*. Kyoto: Shiksha, 1986.

¹³ Paine, S. *Embroidered Textiles: Traditional Patterns From Five Continents*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1990.

¹⁴ See, for example, the prefaces to Jain and Elson, op cit.

¹⁵ Unlike Mutwa men who wear white cloth for any special occasion, Mutwa women only wear white when they marry, when they go on pilgrimage to Mecca, and after they die.

¹⁶ Unbeknownst to me at the time I was re-enacting cultural preferences that had 'coloured' the export market for Indian textiles to Europe two hundred years ago. Irwin notes that it was not until Indian artisans started producing coloured designs on white backgrounds (as opposed to reserved white designs on coloured backgrounds) that Indian painted textiles gained popularity in Europe ("Indian Textile Trade in the Seventeenth Century: 1) Western India", *Journal of Indian Textile History* 1, 1955, 5-30.

¹⁷ In stitching for commercial purposes women simplify stitches, tend to make them larger with thicker threads and emphasise patterns that can be produced more quickly. In her recent book on the Chikan embroidery of Lucknow, Clare Wilkinson-Weber makes a similar, more thoroughly documented, point (*Embroidering Lives: Women's Work and Skill in the Lucknow Embroidery Industry*. Albany: State University of N.Y., 1999).

¹⁸ For a discussion of the differences between Muslim and Hindu forms of purdah in South Asia see: Vatuk, S. "Purdah Revisited: A Comparison of Hindu and Muslim Interpretations of the Cultural Meaning of Purdah in South Asia", in Papanek, H. and Minault, G. (eds.): *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*, Delhi: Chanakya, 1982, 54-78.

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²¹ My thoughts on purdah as praxis are inspired by A. Boudhiba's discussion of Muslim habits and embodiment (*Sexuality in Islam*. London: Routledge, 1985), and Barbara Metcalf's edited work on *adab* (*Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*. Berkeley: University of California, 1984).