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## KUTCH EMBROIDERY: EPITOME OF ARTISANS' HISTORICAL SOCIO- CULTURAL LIFE

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**Abstract:** Culture of any cult or region plays an incredible imperative role in establishing an identity responsible for societal development. Handicrafts have always served as indicative measures to judge socio-cultural traits of any assemblage. Particularly crafts rendered on textiles are strong indicators of the social identity of the wearers. In India embroidery practiced by various communities in Kutch of Gujarat has always served as their identity. Present paper focuses on the historical perspective and rationale of these embroideries in artisans' socio cultural life.

**Keywords:** Artifact, Craft, Community, Economic status, Trousseau

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**Introduction:** Handicrafts tradition has always been an eternal part of the artisans though originated to fulfill the necessity. India has been recognized as one of the rich handicraft pocket of the world. Each handmade piece expresses the artisan's own tastes, emotions, surroundings and also serves as a mirror of societal norms and cultural inheritance. The Embroidery practiced in Kutch which was originated as a need to decorate fabric or to pass the leisure time fruitfully. The craft occupies its own importance in the social and cultural life of the artisans. The communities are practicing the craft inherited from their native place. In recent days owing to migratory factors and due to ongoing expansion of industrialization in Kutch, there are possibilities of transformation in the societal norms and cultural traits of these communities. As a result, efforts have been made to study the embroideries practiced in Kutch from its historical perspective of the socio-cultural life of the communities. The study would intact the details obtained regarding the related subject and also be an aid to the future learners, historians and sociologists.

**Methodology:** Desk research was conducted by referring books, journals and documents from various resources to acquire basic gen about the craft, artisans and locale of the study. Interviews cum focused group discussion methods employing open and close ended interview schedule were adopted. Artisans above 60 years of age were selected through purposive sampling method. The researcher procured the information pertaining to each embroidery practicing community's basic societal formation and important customs which facilitated in understanding the association of embroidery with their socio-cultural life. The data was subjected to qualitative analysis.

**Results and discussions:** The analysis of the data indicated that the embroidery practicing communities hailed to Hindu and Muslim religion. Darbar, Meghwar, Ahir and Rabari communities were

Hindus whereas Halaypotra, Pathan, Raysipotra, Jat, Mutwa, Node and Sindhi Memon hailed to Muslim religion.

Name of the embroideries were either derived from the name of the community, from the motifs used or from the characteristics of the stitches implied. On probing further it was found that irrespective of the religion, embroidery of each community evolved as a result of the need to decorate fabric by indigenous material and readily available skills. Needle was the only indispensable embroidery tool required, making it easily accessible for women of each family to practice the craft extensively. In the absence of tele-entertainment and communication facilities such as television and cell phones during ancient times, the craft served as a leisure activity. They were embroidering various artifacts for themselves, family and also for the household decorations. As narrated by 90 per cent artisans, due recognition of their embroidery skills might have inspired the association of the craft with their socio-cultural rituals of life. The idea might have been generated by women artisans themselves as they always played a vital role in constituting societal norms and cultural ethos. Embroidery craft was forever handed down to the generations. During the process of imparting and grasping the pertinent skills embroidery served as a bridge to create an emotional bond amid trainer and learner, the duo mostly being mother and daughter. Of the total respondents, 99 per cent of the artisans stated that they started learning embroidery craft at a tender age of six to nine years. Generally, they begin embroidering on small piece which shapes up to a 'bujaki' (purse), gradually precede with larger articles such as wall hangings, bags and door hangings. Once perfection is attained on the skills they embroider bodice known as 'kapdu', 'kanchli'(Plate-1A) or 'kanjari' (Plate-1C), amongst the artisans. Cent per cent of the artisans were of the opinion that the refined skills of embroidering as well as intricate embroidered relics were the status symbol.

Embroidered articles were gifted to the relatives during various rituals. Embroidery was considered as one of the eligibility for the girls to be selected as brides, as marriage is considered a highly established and important institution of life and society in India. All respondents stated that the fine embroidered articles served as a means of introduction of the bride to her prospective in-laws. Culturally, it was mandatory for each girl to learn and fulfill the expected embroidered articles for her trousseau as well as gifts for the groom and his family. Similarly grooms' family too presented two to three embroidered artifacts during engagement and marriage ceremony. The richness in terms of fineness, neatness and attractiveness of each embroidered pieces determined the bride's hands on skills. The quantity of embroidered pieces included in bride's trousseau was parametric to judge her family's social and economic status.

Embroidery being highly important factor to represent the cultural, social and economic status of the artisans, it was very commonly found that artisans often commissioned the work or got it made by order to fulfill their requirement and thus to be acceptable to the in-laws family and society. The trend of commissioning the work had a direct implication on the economic condition of the artisans as embroidery was a source of supplementary income. On the other hand only those who were economically sound could get their work commissioned; others being unable to present sufficient number of embroidered articles in their daughter's trousseau which was not appreciated.

**Articles embroidered:** The articles embroidered by the artisans of all the communities were observed to be similar in terms of design. These articles mainly consisted of apparels, home furnishings and accessories. Of these, all the communities were offered to prepare traditional articles like veil cloth, bodice, skirts, bags of various sizes, quilts, pillow covers, wall hangings, door hangings, etc. The artisans from Rabari and Ahir communities also had a trend of embroidering men's apparels namely Kediya (upper garment) (Plate-1B), Bandi (jacket), Chornu (lower garment). Darbars and Meghwars were embroidering Bokani (head gear to be worn at the time of wedding) (Plate-1D) apart from female attires and home decorations whereas Halaypotras, Raysipotras, Pathans, Jats, Sindhi-memons and Nodes were embroidering Akhiyo (face mask) (Plate-1E, G) to be worn by bride and groom at the time of wedding which was mutually exchanged by mother in laws. Mutwas were embroidering Female attires and quilts. Minimum number of each type of article required for matrimonial exchange varied according to the customs of each community however, there

was a similarity found in the range of the articles gifted.

Apart from marital customs, various artifacts had its definite utility. The type of embroidery done on the apparel or the Theli or Kothali (bag) carried by the person at public place also served as an indication to the people to identify person's community. The amount of embroidery varied in each of these artifacts based on its utility. The casual apparels were having minimum embroidery whereas, those which were being used as festive wear contained more amount of embroidery. The embroidered attire was also associated significantly to the marital status of the woman as embroidery on the dress was considered symbolic of being wedded. On probing, 98 per cent of the artisans reported that as a part of custom it was mandatory to wear an embroidered garment for a married woman, whereas, unmarried and widows were refrained from wearing embroidered garments. The artisans belonging to Rabari, Jat and Ahir communities respectively reported that unlike Darbar, Meghwar, Mutwa, Node, Sindhi memon Halaypotra, Pathan and Raysipotra customarily in the past both the unmarried woman and a widow were allowed to wear an embroidered garment but the amount of embroidery was comparatively very less.

Apart from the above mentioned articles like wall decorations and door decoration pieces the Hindu artisans also followed the custom of embroidering home decoration and animal decoration products whereas, artisans of Muslim religion mainly embroidered apparels and quilts. On various Hindu occasions such as Diwali, Weddings, Navaratri (nine days folk dance festival) animals and houses were decorated by embroidered products. Animal decoration included the horn covers, saddle cover and face mask. Home furnishing articles consisted of wall decoration mainly Chakla (wall hanging) and canopy, door decoration items included door hanging known as Toran and Sankhiya hanged on both sides of the door which was symbolic of welcoming the guests.

Weddings (Plate-1H), Iid and circumcision (Plate-1F) ceremony were main occasions on which the Muslim artisans were wearing highly embroidered articles.

**Conclusion:** The study revealed that embroideries were interwoven with the community life. Each of them developed their own distinct style of embroidery according to their design concept. Impact of religious and cultural believes in varieties of articles embroidered were palpable. The embroidery was associated with the communities since their childhood, either as observer, learner or wearer of the embroidered objet d'art. It bestowed an identity to the respective community and portrayed artisans'

social, cultural and economic status. With the urbanization and industrialization, communities' mind set and beliefs may shift to meet the altering needs since change is the rule of the world. In such a scenario, the study researched will always serve as a guiding force for the future generations to

understand the history of the embroidery. It will unwind the warps and wefts of the embroidery and its interlacement with people's socio cultural life.

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**Plate - 1**



**A - Kanchali of Rabari Woman**



**B - Kediya of Rabari child**



**C - Meghwal newly wedded woman wearing Kanjari**



**D - Meghwal groom wearing Bookanni**



**E - Akhiyo of Halaypotra groom**



**F - Jat mother and child on child's circumcision ceremony**



**G - Akhiyo of Jat groom**



**H - Jat bride**

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