The Meaning and Mythology behind the Costumes of Kutch

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by

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CONTENTS:

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Thanks to Arthur Duff who graciously lent me his time and his textile collection; and to Dr. Nicola Gordon Bowe, my thesis tutor.

INTRODUCTION

I was first introduced to the textiles of Kutch in a small lecture last year given by Arthur Duff, an architect, and collector of Kutchi textiles. As each garment was passed from person to person I felt an excitement build inside me, and I knew I wanted to know more about these wonderful textiles.

India, a country I have not yet been to, is a place that, when I see pictures of it, or read about it, also gives me an excited feeling. It is a place I dearly wish to visit. Becuase of the feelings these textiles and India have stirred in me, I decided I wanted to know more and understand why the people of Kutch produced such wonderful garments and clothing. I have only discussed women's clothing because it is they who dress more in the traditional way then the men. I wanted to discover why they wear these particular clothes, what inspired them to use each colour, symbol and shape. I thought this would be a relatively easy task and would be a simple matter of finding the right information. But such information does not really exist.

What I did discover though is that India is an almost impossible place to understand with its colourful history and variety of complex religious beliefs. India cannot be placed under a heading and then explained. It must be understood on a number of different levels, taking each religion into account and each level of society into consideration. Because Kutch is such a small area I thought this might be easy to understand, but again I was wrong. Each community in Kutch has a different set of gods they believe in and worship. It is impossible to include every detail of any culture in India because it has such a vast and complex history, especially mythologically. So in this thesis I have only included

the parts that I feel are relevant to what I want to discuss, which is basically to discribe Kutchi clothing and its meaning.

Writing this thesis has shown me how different we are to other people, and how things that we take for granted have a different meaning and purpose in another part of the world. It has shown me a totally different way of life, of living and of thinking. I have learnt quite a lot from studying these people, and writing my thesis has opened my mind to the ways of other cultures and people. I hope the reader may learn, experience and enjoy these costumes through what I have written.

List of Plates:

List of Plates:

CHAPTER 1

A brief discription of Kutch, the caste system and the differences between Hindus and Muslims.

Kutch, a district of Gujarat State can be found in northwest India. As small and as isolated as this area is, it is renowned for its incredibly original, colourful, skillful and very beautiful textiles.

Kutch is a very small region. It covers only a very small portion of land (about 175 miles by 50 miles). As with the rest of India, the majority of Kutch's inhabitants are Hindu, the minority, Muslim. In Gujarat, Muslims perform only 8.45% of the total population of the state, but even so, they have played a very important role in shaping the culture of Gujarat, particularly in the arts and crafts area.

To look at the rich and colourful textiles of the people of Kutch, one might believe that they have been inspired by their surroundings, but quite the opposite is true. Kutch is one of the poorest, most desolate regions in Asia. I have never been there but the impression I get from all sources is that Kutch is a colourless, treeless expanse of arid plains and rocky hillsides. It is supposedly a monotony of dull tones

> painted with shades of yellows and browns, broken by the irrigated fields of rich green and punctuated by clusters of thorn and other hardy trees adjacent to the wells and seasonal lakes.[1]

Until quite recently, time has, in a way, stood still in this part of India. There have been no major changes or developments and the people live as their ancestors did centuries ago. Even now with the changes being made by the Indian Government and the break-down of the caste system, because Kutch is so isolated from the rest of India, change is not very evident just yet.

Kutch is surrounded on the west by the Indian Ocean, to the south, by the Gulf of Kutch and the north, east and

southeast is surrounded by the Rann of Kutch which is an inhabitable desert. (Fig. 1.)

Kutch is divided into nine 'counties' called talukas; these are Lakpat, Abrasar, Nakatrana, Mandvi, Mundra, Bhuj, Anjar, Bachau, and Rapar. Most of Kutch's inhabitants are the descendants of immigrants who came from other parts of the Subcontinent during the last millenium. India has quite a colourful history when it comes to invaders, some of these include the Aryans, Asians, Persians, Greeks and Muslims, all of which have in some way contributed to the colourful culture of Kutch.

Two events from the past have left a big mark on Kutch's social structure and religion: the Aryan and Muslim invasions.

Back in the second millenium BC, Aryan invaders from Central Asia and their descendants settled throughout much of the Indian Subcontinent. With them the invaders brought a written language called Sanskrit, the Vedas,which are sacred teachings, and a pantheon of gods who could be controlled through prayer and appeased through sacrifice. The invaders assimilated local deities, fertility goddesses, and nature spirits. These gods who possess many forms, express an awareness of the complex nature of the universe. This complexity is handled and expressed in a visual form. Iconographical conventions such as multiple arms or deities that are part human and part animal have all originated from the visual vocabulary of these Asian's religious traditions. They also introduced the caste system to India. This originated from a need for separations and exclusions governing inter-marriage. The caste system which has been practised for the past three thousand years was abolished by the Indian Government in 1948. Nevertheless, it will be quite a while before the people of India can readjust their lives to suit this new arrangement, especially in rural

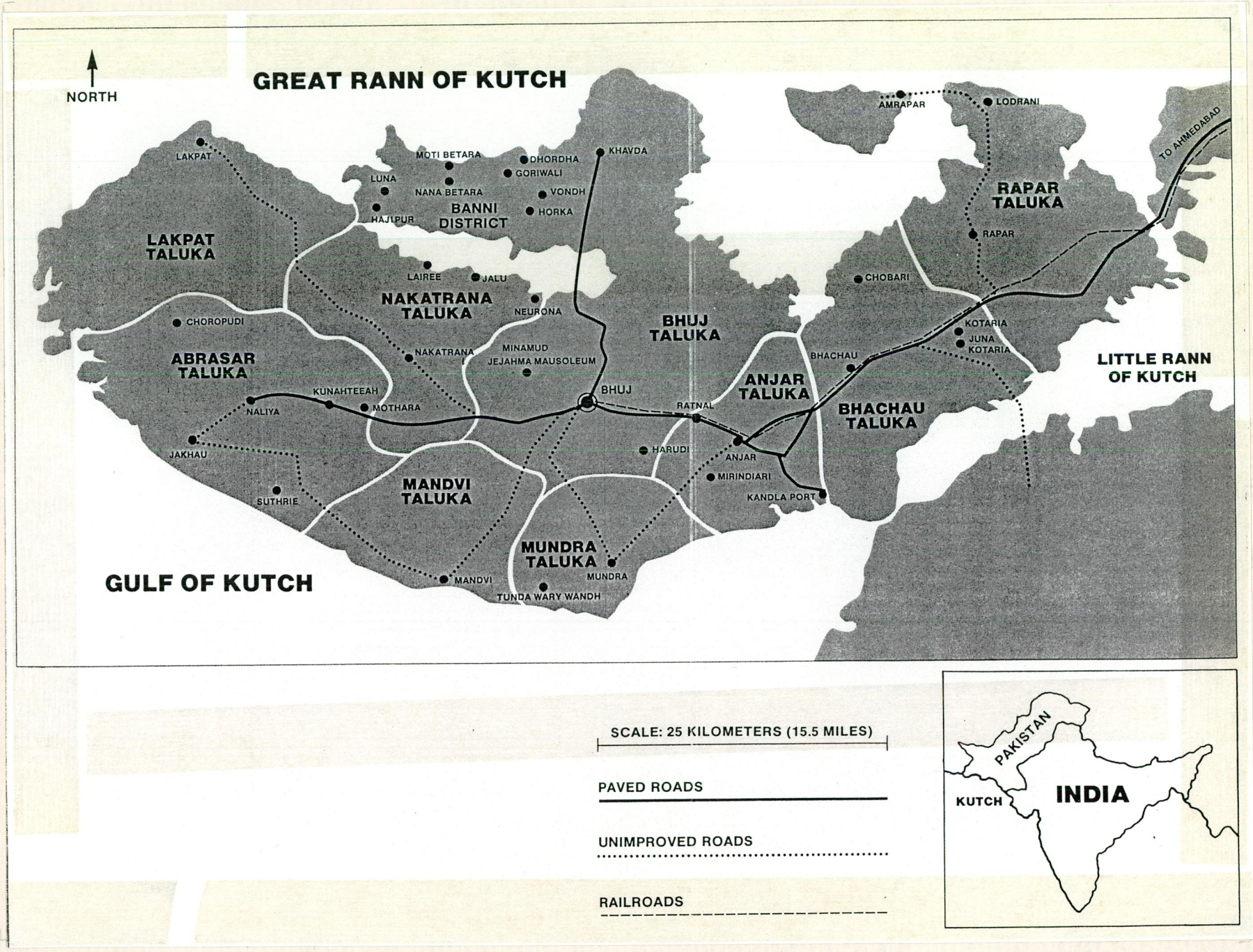

Fig. 1; Map of Kutch.

areas like Kutch where they are not so informed about any other system of living.

The caste system is similar to our class system except it is much more rigid and tangible. It is there and it is obeyed and one cannot change one's place or move up in this system except through death and rebirth.

> What really divides villagers is not ecomonic status but the caste system; it excludes large numbers of its own believers. Those living outside a village are outcastes and however hard they work, nothing save death and rebirth will enable them to cross the divide and set up home in a village centre. By accident of birth Hindus are totally segregated.[2]

It is a complex system which combines a set of rules governing intermarriage with a rigid occupational hierarchy. The population is divided into five different categories from the highest caste, the Brahmins, down to the lowest known as either the outcastes, the untouchables or, as Mahatma Ghandi renamed them, the Harijans (meaning men of god or children of god). The other three castes are the Kshatriyas, the Vaisyas and the Sudras. Each caste has a specific job specification and life attached to it so that once you are born into one you cannot escape it. The Brahmins who are of the highest caste have provided religious and political leadership and it is they who perform marriage ceremonies. Second down the line were the Kshatriyas, the secular leaders who have provided military protection and can generally be found in India's police force. Next came the Vaisyas who controlled commerce. Members of the fourth caste, the Sudras, were servants and craftsmen, which make up the majority of the country. The outcasts, the lowest caste, performed the most demeaning tasks which no-one else wanted; this included jobs such as sweeping the streets, cleaning latrines and dealing with dead animals. Originally, these people probably found

themselves in this caste because they were unwilling to abondon practices opposed to Aryan ideals. Even today, with all the changes that are being put into action, a Harijan may not draw water from a high-caste well, nor may he enter the home of a high-caste family for fear of caste reprisal. In the main cities things are more flexible but at the same time university professors will still be Brahmins, police and soldiers will be a Kshatriya sub-caste, businessmen and merchants, a Vaisya sub-caste, and craftsmen and artisans, a Sudra sub-caste, whereas street cleaners and gardeners will invariably be a Harijan. These people were forced to exist almost totally outside the Hindu social and religious community and at one time were considered polluting to the touch and unfit to be seen by the upper-castes. The Brahmins were those who invaded the Subcontinent thousands of years ago and placed themselves in such a high-up position. The Aryans obviously thought a lot of themselves.

Of these five castes there are about three thousand subdivisions and then there are further divisions of the subdivision. A jati is a subdivision of a caste and a nat is a subdivision of a jati. All of these jatis and nats each go under a different name and are spread throughout all of India. These jatis are arranged hierarchically. Both jatis and nats are regional in character and impose hereditary occupations such as camel herding, farming or weaving, on their members. It is forbidden to take food with or marry someone outside one's own jati and although people claim that girls can marry into any nat of their own jati, this hardly ever occurs.

The second event which has left a big mark on Kutch (and the rest of India) is the invasion of Muslim armies, between the eight and fifth centuries AD, into India. Their main contributions to Indian civilization were the Islamic religion and the purdah which is a complex set of

rules governing the relationship between men and women. Today Islam is the second most important religion in Kutch and purdah is practised by a large portion of the population both Islamic and Hindu. The Muslims of Kutch are descendants of the invaders themselves. They generally adhere to the basic principles of Islam believing in a single god and the teachings of the prophet Mahommed. Although Muslim and Hindu beliefs are quite different, exchanges of attitudes and traditions are quite common among people living in close proximity, and centuries of interaction have left their mark on each religion.

The purdah is a system that is very restrictive to women. Most Muslims practise it quite religiously but others, and some Hindus, just practise some aspects. According to the most restrictive tradition, a woman must cover her face in front of all unrelated men, her husband, her sons-in-law and their families. She may only expose her face before her father, her sons and her brothers. The Muslim woman is not allowed to speak her husbands name or talk directly to him when a third person is present. Even though this system is theoretically very strict, in actual practise, each family manipulates it to suit themselves.

> The mythology of India is not only used and is part of the living culture of the uneducated masses, but of every level of society. The Indians have always tended to retain their early beliefs and mould them, sometimes perhaps to distort them in such a way as to mirror new social conditions or to fit into a new philosophical scheme.[3]

Since 1948 the caste system has been abolished by the Indian Government and intensive efforts have been made to eliminate child engagement, child marriage, and the giving of a dowry. As a result of these policies, the traditional social organisation is beginning to break down and irreversible changes are occurring throughout India. There are no obvious changes in places like Kutch just yet, but it will

eventually catch up with the rest of its country and many ancient traditions will soon disappear. So, the work that the people of India participate in is not out of a desire or choice but because of birth and social status. Most of the people of Kutch are craftsmen, farmers or herders. These people seem to accept their surroundings unquestionably and get on with their work, enjoy it, and develop a great skill at what they do, but even so, they are not placed high on the social ladder. Because of this, the Indian Government has introduced a scheme whereby craftsmen receive financial rewards which shows greater appreciation and respect and gives satisfaction to the craftsmen.

Communities of the same caste within a village or town practise similar tasks or contribute various elements of production eventually creating the type of textile for which that area is famous. In every instance, however young or old, in fact, the whole family participates in the production of a fabric - this is more true for the rest of India, as it is the women who produce all the embroidery work in Kutch although they receive the initial material to work from other neighbouring communities. The men of Kutch generally are out working in the fields all day which the women sometimes do aswell along with their traditional household chores. The needlework that the women do is considered a leisure activity and the women devote their time to this in the winter when there is little outdoor work. Apart from all this it is her job to shoulder the responsibility for her family's physical and spiritual welfare. Sewing, cooking, housekeeping and childcare are her lot, and in addition she is expected to attend to correct forms of religious observance. Women accept that they must do all of this, which is an awful lot, and yet they still manage to find the time to put all their creative energy into their needlework and embroider some visually, very rich and exciting textiles.

One of the main distinctive features of the textiles of Kutch is that they are unique and individual and nothing similar can be found in the rest of India. Here, you will not find the traditional sari that is worn throughout most of the rest of the subcontinent, but instead, a blouse and skirt combination worn with a large shawl is much more typical, expecially among Hindu groups. The majority of Muslims wear dresses (or else tunics with trousers). These communities live side by side at peace, and express their differences mainly through colour and textiles.

The whole reason why I am writing my thesis on this subject is because I was totally captivated and charmed by these textiles when I first saw them. They are such a joy to look at and to think that they are the everyday clothes for these people of Kutch! It must be such a colourful place to walk through.

> No other land enjoys such a profusion of creative energies for the production of textiles as the subcontinent of India. The interaction of peoples invaders, indigenous tribes, traders and explorers - has built a complex culture legendary for its vitality and colour.[4]

This comment was made about the whole of India but it perfectly describes Kutchi textiles.

Clothing forms a dual function of concealment and display and does both of these for the women of Kutch. On the one hand the clothes cover her almost from head to toe yet at the same time compliment her body and show a delight for shape and form.

The clothes must primarily protect the body against the elements, so the heavy material of the skirt and shawl protects the body from the sun, yet at the same time the

backless blouse provides ventilation (Fig. 2 & 3). It also serves another purpose and that is to provide easy access to breast feed her child - all she need do is lift the blouse slightly. This same blouse is divinely decorated and a great amount of work is put into the decoration of it. This blouse also compliments the woman's body. It is made to reveal and accentuate the lines of the body, it sits on the bust without distorting its natural outline and in certain blouses is obviously showing off the bust (Fig. 4). "Nature is not stilted or stifled but is allowed to express herself with a sober eloquence through such garments".[5]

The skirt is always full and heavy; they are usually decorated in horizontal bands of rich embroidery. The motifs they use in their embroidery are usually derived from nature, both flora and fauna, geometrical shapes, and local mythology (Fig. 5). These include the peacock, parrot, parakeet, elephants, flowers, trees etc.

One of the main functions of their clothing is to proclaim the particular sect and social standing of the wearer. Distinctive embroidered clothes are worn as a proud badge of caste cultural identity. Each caste has its own style of embroidery, range of clothes and repertoire of stitches. Caste and social status is indicated by the colours and materials used. The merchant communities often work in silk whereas the farming and pastoral communities usually use cotton or wool. The cut, material and ornamentation of a costume can reveal the age, occupation, origin, caste and marital status of the wearer. Young women and children wear the most colourful and exciting garments. Widows are stripped of most of their jewellery and some wear white only for the rest of their lives.

Fig. 2;

Ahir skirt,
Rabari blouse.

Fig. 2a; Detail on Rabari shawl.

Fig. 3; Back view of Rabari blouse.

Fig. 4;

Rabari blouse.

Fig. 4a; Detail of Rabari blouse.

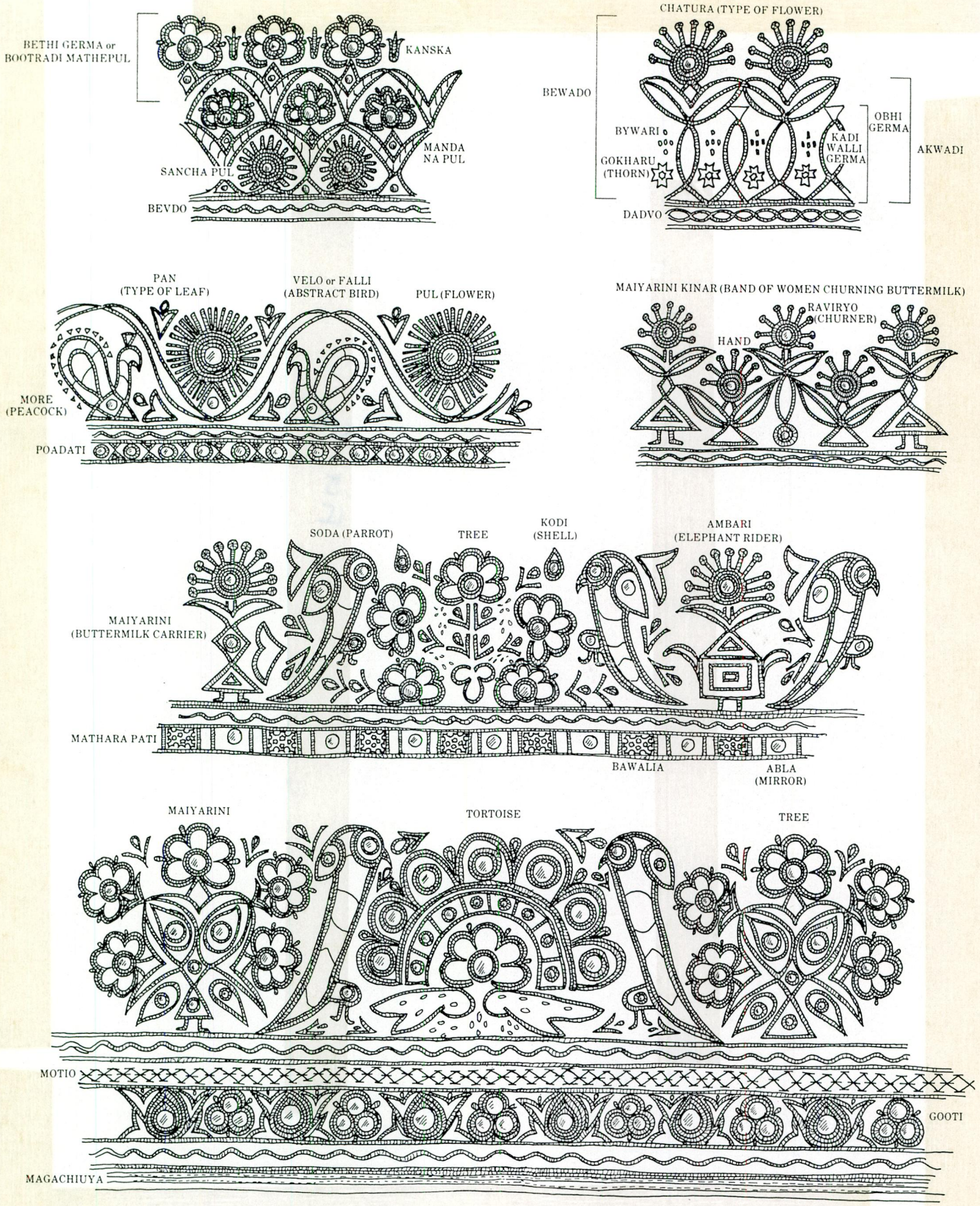

Fig. 5; Motifs found on Ahir clothing.

Now as the caste system is breaking down, there will be little need to dress in a way that will identify one group from another, and with the change of women's roles, the need for embroidery shall most probably, also be lost.

Even before now, costumes were more influenced by the interaction of neighbours than by jati tradition, where each community borrowed different ideas from the next, but even so, they always managed to have some distinguishing mark.

There is such a lack of pretension in the costumes these people wear. These garments are created out of love and pleasure, deep religious meaning, and of course, necessity. This is so unlike the Western World where fashions and styles are changing constantly and what is considered a 'work of art' in one season may be laughed at in the next. The clothing of Kutch never changes, they have been the same for centuries yet no-one ever tires of them. The only factor that may have changed, and this is in recent years only, is the material used (from natural to synthetic) and the dyes (from natural to chemical). (Fig. 6).

I have said earlier on that to look at these textiles one might be mistaken in believing that these people are influenced by colourful surroundings, but quite the opposite is true. It is because there is such a lack of colour in their surroundings that these people are so colourful. It is they themselves that compensate for their dreary landscape. When it comes to weddings and festivals the landscape must change quite dramatically with such an influx of colour arriving from all the other villages. For these ceremonies, the people of Kutch dress in all their finery to please the gods. The bride's costume and dowry

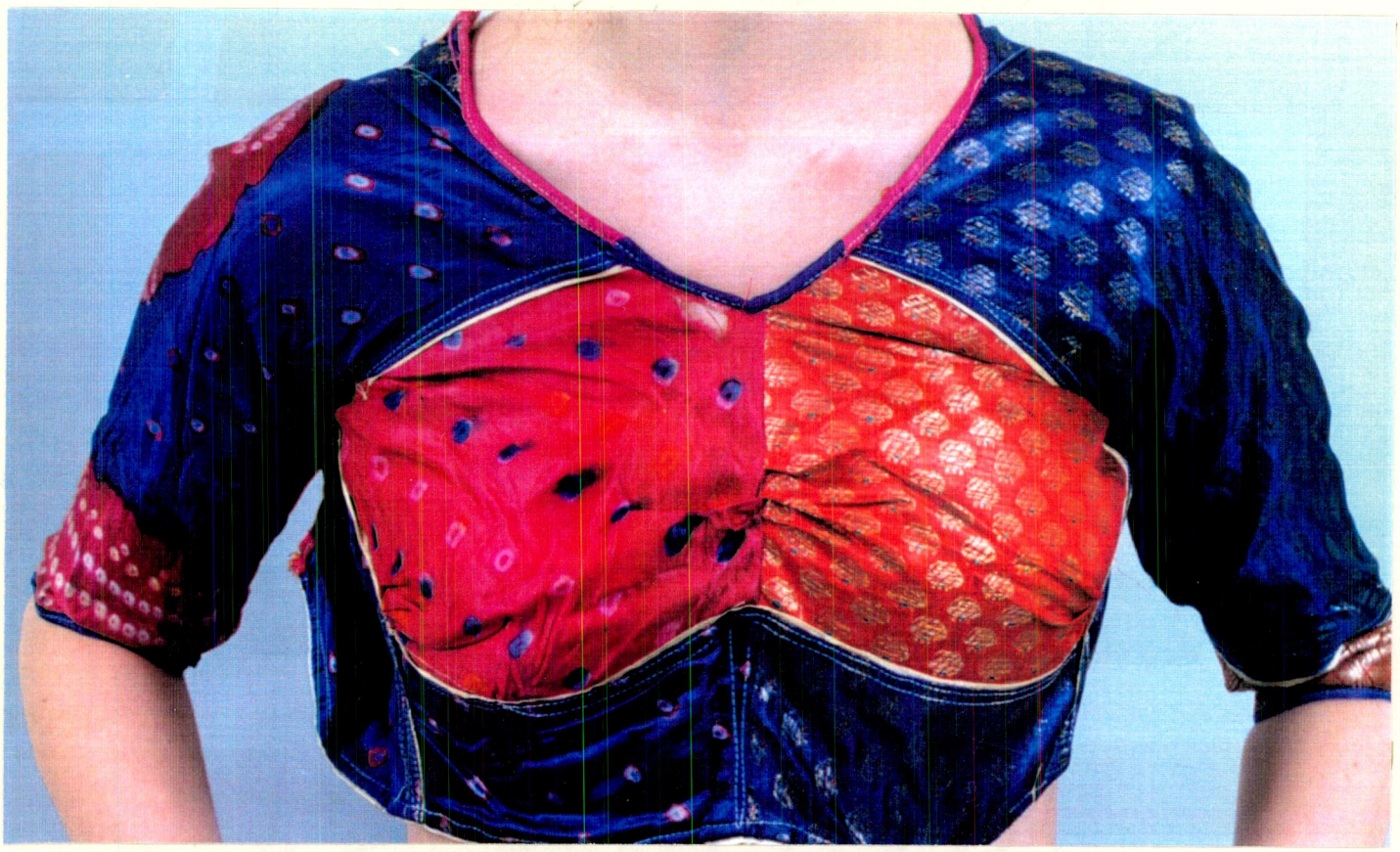

Fig. 6; Urban Rabari blouse.

is also taken very seriously. In Kutch, the marriage is the most important ritual event in the lives of the Hindus and Muslims. Their lives are governed by tradition and the need to survive, and it is the wedding which ensures the survival of these groups. The dowry also reflects a concern with survival and tradition.

> Dowry gifts reaffirm traditional group affiliations, regenerate the material culture of the community, and by furnishing basic necessities and providing financial security, the dowry helps the girl to survive in the first years of her married life.[6]

The overall impression I get from these people, and from their clothing, is that they are a caring, peaceful, colourful crowd, who are more concerned with helping each other out, than noticing any differences they may have with their neighbours, and although there are so many social divisions they still manage to live side by side in peace and harmony expressing any differences they may have through clothing and colour.

CHAPTER 2

A look at the different communities, their costumes and wedding customs.

In this chapter I will briefly explain and describe some of the communities found in Kutch. They shall be from both Hindu and Muslim communities. As I've already mentioned, the Muslims form the smaller community of the two, but this doesn't make them any less important. I shall also briefly describe their wedding customs and the difference between the two. Even though there are these differences they still manage to live in harmony beside each other and through this interaction have borrowed some beliefs and customs from each other.

A wedding is the most important event that can happen to a person from Kutch. No other ceremony is viewed or treated with as much respect. It allows the people to pass on and continue their traditions that keeps them together as a community. It also enables them to continue the circle of life they believe in. Hindus believe that the cycle of birth, death and reincarnation is repeated indefinitely until salvation eventually occurs. Marriage helps to continue this cycle but it also helps to continue the family, and the family's role in its village. When children are born their role is already predetermined. A boy will follow his father's profession, marry and perpetuate the family through his sons. A daughter is accepted as a gift from the gods, she is valued as an extra set of hands that will help with taking care of the household; but since she will eventually marry and leave, she is considered far less valuable than a son. Nevertheless, great preparation is put into her wedding. A dowry is being formed years before her marriage, sometimes even before it has been arranged as it consists of a lot of work. A great amount of detail goes into the embroidery of the clothes she receives.

There is usually a two year period between engagement and marriage. The usual age of the bride is between sixteen and twenty, although she could be younger even though the

legal age for marriage in India is eighteen. Her actual wedding day is very important because on that day she stands as a momentary goddess, a symbol of fertility and hope for future generations. A Brahmin (person from the highest caste) priest chooses an auspicious day to marry the couple, a day that he believes will bring them happiness and good luck. At the ceremony the bride and groom sit on stools while a Brahmin priest ties a corner of the groom's turban to the girls chandhanni; this chandhanni is a tie-dyed head covering, like a heavy veil, worn for the marriage ritual. The Brahmin then drapes a skein of thread over their shoulders and chants in Sanskrit (the language the Aryans brought to India when they invaded it). The bride and groom then walk around a small spiritual fire; she leads on the first three rounds and he on the fourth. This completes the formal marriage rite. This is basically and generally what happens but customs vary from village to village as is the same with the Muslim wedding.

The bride and groom may marry on any day of the year except Ramadan and Muharram. For their wedding the bride and groom appear before the Mullah (he is the ordained leader of the local Muslim community). He asks them to consent to marriage three times in front of three witnesses.

One exception to these weddings is that of the Bharvad community from the Rapar taluka. Here they perform mass marriages at a very young age. The people here were afraid their daughters would be kidnapped by Muslims and so married them soon after birth. Thus, a mass marriage is performed so that the girls would be protected by the crowds surrounding them.

Each community, both Hindu and Muslim, has different traditions and customs that they act out before, during

and after the wedding. But the basics of the wedding are similar as is the giving of a dowry to the bride. This consists of gifts from the girls own family and also from the boy's, items such as clothing, textiles for the house and jewellery are received. The jewellery is a financial backing for the girl and the rest of the gifts help the girl to start her married life.

I am now going to give a brief introduction and description of some of the communities of Kutch. It is the jatis (a subdivision of a major caste) rather than the nats (a subdivision of a jati) that I shall be discussing. Both jatis and nats are regional in character, and occupations are already hereditarilly predetermined. These occupations include camel herding, farming or weaving. Several different jatis can and do follow the same occupation. It is forbidden to take food with or marry someone outside one's own jati, this seldom occurs.

The first jatis I shall discuss can be grouped together as Hindu farmers. They are the Ahirs, Bansalis and Rajput jatis and come from most of the talukas in Kutch. They are all Vaishnavites which is third down the line in the caste system. They grow cash crops such as cotton which provide income to purchase food and other necessities. When the women are not working in the fields or tending to their household responsibilities, they can be found doing embroidery, if not for her own household, then for their daughters dowries. This can take several years as the dowry includes items such as wall-hangings, bags, quilts and costumes. These costumes are distinctive in each jati and show which jati a girl lives in. The motifs usually depicted by these jatis are floral, geometric, animal and human. The women of each jati combine and interpret these motifs differently and the embroidery has its own characteristic colour balance. For example, the

young Ahir women usually wear gathered skirts which are red, green, blue, brown or orange in colour. These are tie-dyed and richly embroidered. Their backless blouses are also made of richly embroidered red or black tie-dyed silk or mushru (fabric made of cotton and silk mix). For important events, young and middle-aged women wear odhnis (veils) of red and black striped mushru with embroidered edges (Fig 2.). Every other day they wear odhnis of cotton.

In comparison to the Ahirs the Rajput women wear a skirt of dark block-printed cotton which is gathered, and with it a backless embroidered blouse with bold geometric floral and stylised animal motifs. Dark odhnis of either wool or cotton with embroidered edges are worn by women of all ages.

The Bansalis nowadays can be identified by wearing red skirts, blouses and odhnis made of light-weight mill-made cotton. Up until 1960 they wore richly embroidered garments, after this they used less time consuming methods for decorating their clothes, eg. block-printing and tie-dying. Before this they had grown and spun thier own cotton.

The next grouping of communities I shall discuss are the Frontier Herders. They live in the desert near the northern frontiers of Kutch and make up twentyone small autonomous communities - which include eighteen Muslim clans known as Banni Muslims, the Baluch from the Rapar taluka, a group of Hanjans and the Danetah Jats. These herders are among Kutch's poorest inhabitants. They are a mixture of both Hindu and Muslim, and the interaction between them has produced a fusion of culture traits. They have similar household textiles, costumes and embroidery patterns and it is these items that provide the only colour in their drab surroundings.

The Jats are the next group I wish to discuss. They are all Muslims and can be found in several areas of Kutch including the talukas of Lakpat, Abrasar, Nakatrana, Bhuj and Mundra. The Jats are particularly conscious of their identity as a group. Their sense of unity comes from a perception of shared historical traditions, and belief in a common ancestry.

The term 'Jat' means a multitude of groups with different cultural backgrounds. The Jats are most famous for their churi. It is unique in comparison with the costumes of the rest of Kutch. It is a beautiful, long, full caftan-like dress that is worn by all Jat women; this makes the different nats of this jati easy to identify by the colour of the churi and the embroidery used. The embroidery on the bodice relates information about age, marital status and geographical location and exhibits a symmetry unequaled in Kutchi embroidery. There are three different nats of the Jats in Kutch; the Dhanetah Jats, the Gracia Jats and the Fakirani Jats.

The Dhanetah Jats are the largest group and live throughout north-western Kutch. The Dhanetah churi is made of eight meters of heavy black cotton. It achieves its fullness through a group of very small gathers found under each sleeve. The reason why they wear black is because of an old oral tradition to do with their expressing grief over the death of a holy person. They left that area before the mourning period ended, and since the women never knew when to discard their mourning, black became the traditional colour of their dress. Young girls and newly weds wear red. The bride wears this dress until it is worn out and then replaces it with black. The bodice of the churi is decorated in embroidery and mirror work and there is a choice of four different designs.

In comparison, the Gracia Jats wear red only (Fig. 7). Their churi is made from five to six meters of lightweight cotton and decorated in embroidery consisting of seven different designs. These Jats practise the purdah (the system observed by Muslims that is very restrictive to women) yet at the same time worship a mother goddess: Jeejamah.

The churi is treated with divine respect by the Gracias. It is said to be the descendant of the dress worn by the daughter of a very respected and holy man, and is treated as a sacred object. Men are not allowed to touch this garment and every Friday at sunset women are expected to fold their unworn churis, pray, and wave a stick of burning incense over the garments. Even more proof of how highly respected this garment is, is that in a place called Jura, the women throw all their old churis down a well, this is what they do when disposing sacred objects that have been defiled or broken. The churi may not be sold to anyone as it is considered very bad luck on the Jat people and could put a curse over them.

The Hindu Pastoralists is another term to describe even more jati's. The Rabaris and Bharvads are the two largest jati's belonging to this group in Kutch. The Rabaris can be found in many talukas throughout Kutch and can also be found in north-west India. The Bharvads can be found in Anjar and Bachau talukas. Women of both these jati's dress in heavy dark wool costumes which stand in stark contrast compared to their neighbours, who wear light coloured cottons.

As in each jati throughout most of Kutch, they have their own religious shrines in their villages. Each jati and nat have their own particular gods and goddesses that

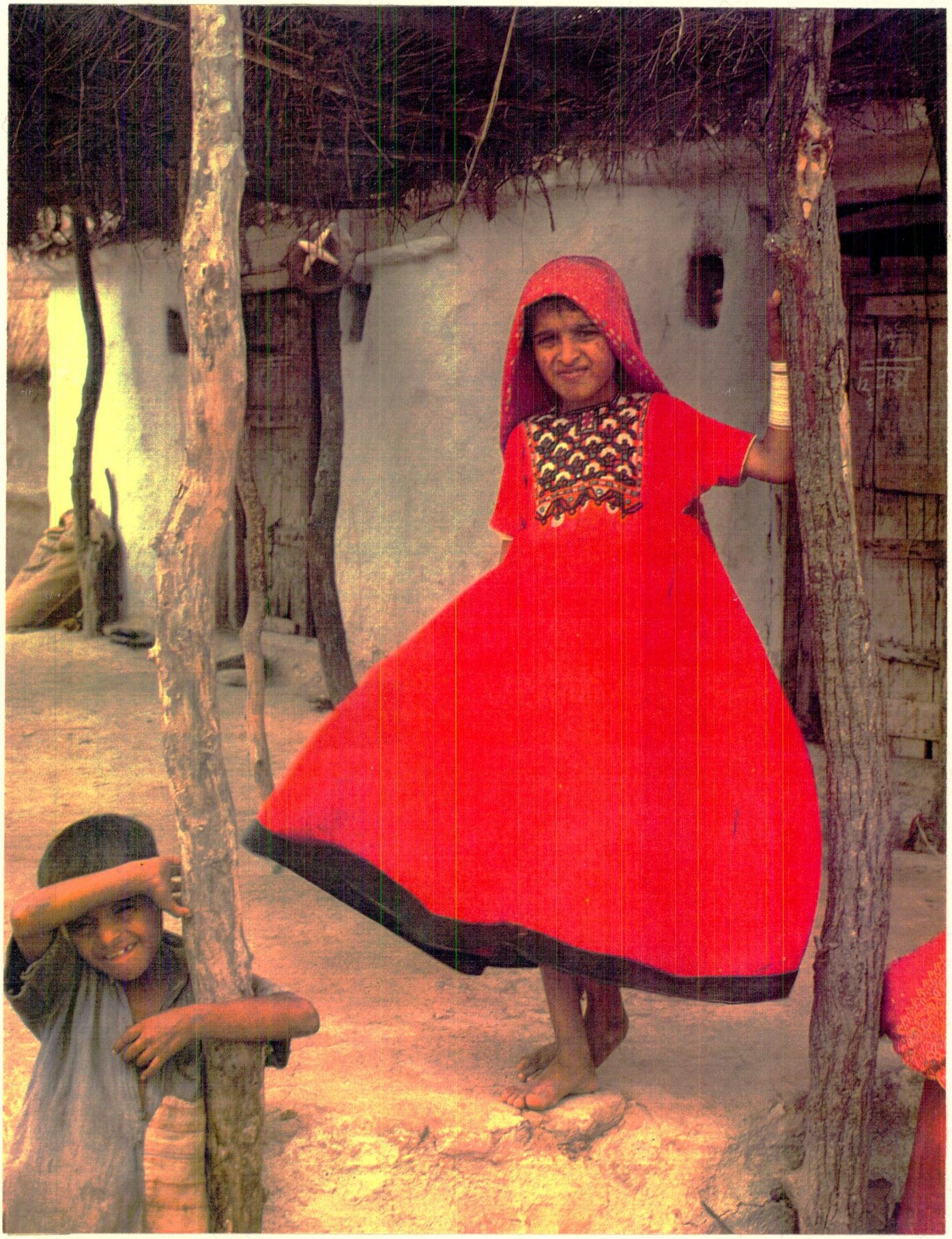

Fig. 7; Gracia churi.

they worship. This is what makes the beliefs of India so difficult to understand. There isn't one single god you can describe and explain, but thousands.

Religion is very important to the Rabaris and their clothing is connected with a mystical camel-herder named Shamal. He punished a thieving goddess by making off with her clothes but ended up marrying her. They also believe that Krisna, another god, once blessed a sheep, and since then they do not wash their woolen odhnis or skirts.

Elephants, birds, camels and temples are some of the motifs that decorate their embroidered blouses. These blouses are made of dark heavy cotton with borders of geometric pattern. For special occasions they wear silk blouses. Unlike other people in Kutch, they combine square, triangular, diamond-shaped and round mirrors on their textiles.

The Bharvads are not as religious as the Rabaris. They do not have shrines but worship an avatar of Vishnu known as Thakurji. They, like the Rabaris, also dress in dark heavy costumes.

The craftsmen and merchants are the final grouping of Kutch people. These people form innumerable groups of Hindu and Muslim labourers, craftsmen and merchants and live in gams (villages) throughout Kutch. The Kolis and Khatries are two examples of these people and represents both ends of the economic spectrum. The Kolis are Hindus and extremely poor, the Kolis, aswell as the Khatries, are influenced more by their neighbours costume than by their own jati tradition. Nevertheless, like all the other Kutchi communities, they also have their own distinguished

style that tells them apart from their neighbours and identifies them as a community.

CHAPTER 3

The meaning behind the
colours, the symbols and
a look at their mythology.

The reason why I am writing my thesis on the textiles of Kutch is to discover the meaning behind them, if there is any. I was anxious as to whether I would find any information about their meaning, but I needn't had worried because even if there isn't any obvious meaning they definitely hold a lot of significance because the Hindu religion "covers the whole of life, it has religious social, economic, literary and artistic aspects."[7]

So even if I hadn't been able to find any relevant information or proof of my query, I would have known at least this much.

Another thing I have discovered while writing this thesis is that India is an extremely complex and very difficult culture to understand. Just when I believe I've finally come to some understanding I read another piece of information that confuses me yet again. But when I read that

> Every attempt at a specific definition of Hinduism has proved unsatisfactory in one way or another, the more so because the finest Indian scholars of Hinduism, including Hindus themselves, have emphasised different aspects of the whole.[8]

I finally realised that it isn't just me who has difficulty in trying to grasp the meaning behind their whole culture. There are plenty of works written about India, and each about a different aspect, or a different area, and to gather information from each of these sources and make it relevant to the people of Kutch is quite difficult as each area has different customs and beliefs. So what I have placed together are the parts that definitely do have relevance for Kutch, as well as an over-all generalised look at the Indians belief in magic and mythology.

> The core of religion does not (even) depend on the existance or non-existance of God or on whether there is one god or many. Since religious truth is said to transcend all verbal definition, it is not conceived in dogmatic terms. Hinduism is then, both a civilization and a conglomerate of religions, with neither a beginning, a founder, nor a central authority, hierarchy, or organisation.[9]

This quote (to me) best discribes what the religion of India means to the Indians on a social level because there are numerous contradictions and inconsistencies in the stories concerning practically every deity. The way the Indians themselves have been able to understand is to identify the new gods with the old. It is generally the upper castes that believe in the new gods and the lower castes and the people from rural India that believe in the old. By identifying the new gods with the old they could make an attempt to reconcile all beliefs. The idea of reincarnation was developed to the point where any deity, hero, spirit or human being might be an incarnation of any other. And by realising this, every Indian believes that they are worshipping the same deity except at a different stage of incarnation or under a different name. In terms of religion the common people are at least one step behind the educated because they still worship the old gods, but because they sorted out their beliefs, as I have just mentioned, they believe that they are still worshipping the same gods except at a different level and so the complexity of their whole religion is understood by all.

Everything the Indians do means something. Everything is connected with their beliefs so their whole lifestyle revolves around their religion. One of the main aims of folk people, such as the people of Kutch, is to escape the

powers of the 'evil eye'. They believe in horoscopy, astrology, divination and the reading of omens and auspicious moments. The Hindu religion is one of the oldest religions in the world. Its mythology consists of the stories of many varieties of gods, their myths, and the tales of Hinduism. The mythology has inspired a massive amount of literature, theatre, song, dance, architecture and painting. The mythology is there so that Hindus can understand the origin of the universe and man's place in it, or it can simply tell a story to explain the holiness of a certian object. There is no aspect of Hindu life that is not entwined in mythology.

This brings us back to the meaning behind the textiles of Kutch. Because clothes are such a normal everyday functional fact, we tend not to put much importance on them, we simply notice them for their decorative value. To look at these people we know that they are very colourful, and because they cover themselves from head to toe, they display an air of mystery, "A people used to heavy veils and ample close fitting garments is apt to betray a temperament touched with a spark of romance and intrigue."[10]

We also know that everything the Kutchi does is connected to his/her religion, and because of this knowledge we can accept the fact their clothes are not solely functional and decorative. A lot of their clothes and jewellery are worn to protect them against evil spirits and to bring them good fortune; for example, if a woman wears a 'lucky ring', it may bring union with the man she desires or it may increase her beauty. These people also believe that by wearing gold it will purify them due to the brightness and incorruptibility of gold. A person who wears this sacred metal believes him/herslef to be proof against the attacks of evil spirits.

Colour is an extremely important part of this culture. Different colours mean different things on different occasions. One interpretation of the meaning of colour comes from textile scholar Pupal Jayakar

> In India the sensitivity has expressed itself in poetry, painting, music and the costumes worn by both peasant and emperor. Raga was the word used for both mood and dye. Colours were surchanged with naunces of mood and poetic association. Red was the colour evoked between two lovers; a local Hindu couplet enumerates three tones or red, to evoke the three states of love, of these manjitha, madder, was the fastest, for like the dye it could never be washed away. Yellow was the colour of Vasant, of spring, of young mango blossoms, of swarms of bees, of southern winds and the passionate cry of mating birds. Nila, indigo, was the colour of Krishna, who is likend to a rain filled cloud. But there is another blue, Hari Nila, the colour of water in which the cloud is reflected. Gerua, saffron, was the colour of the earth and the yogi, the wandering minstrel, the seer and the poet who renounces the earth. These colours worn by both peasant and emperor were but a projection of the moods evoked by the changing seasons. The expression of mood through colour and dress was considered of such consequence that special colours were prescribed to be worn by a love-sick person or a person observing a vow.[11]

This is one persons interpretation of the meaning of colour. Even different tones of colour have different meaning; dark blue describes the emotion of love, it is also said to be a humbling colour and a mischievous colour, whereas indigo blue symbolises loathing. Yellow is a calming colour, it also gives the feeling of astonishment or a feeling of the supernatural. Green, because it is a mixture of yellow and blue, is a frivolous colour if it's a bluey green and calm if its a yellow-green. White is the most expressive colour of the ideal of virtue and renunciation. When a

woman's husband dies she is stripped of all her colourful clothes and jewellery and is seen wearing only white; this shows her purity. Although a mournful colour, white is also a colour of laughter, it is the colour of the moon and donates emotional sensualism. Black is a colour of grief and terror. Red, commonly worn by almost all the communities in Kutch, is an exciting colour, it can also mean rage, or love. Orange, because it is a mixture of red and yellow, and because they are contrary in their character, they produce a queer and mystical effect on the mind. Purple is seen as an evil colour associated with witch-craft and magical spells. It is a representation of night and day mixed together and leads to a morbid sense of distraction or reserve depending on the amount of red and blue. Pink possesses all the power and vividness of red without its impulsiveness or violence.

The Kutchi people do not wear a particular colour because it is complimentary to them, but because it means something and it is traditional, something that has always been done, in the same way that embroidery patterns and techniques are passed down from mother to daughter virtually unchanged.

The colour a youth must wear for his religious initiation is dependent on what caste he is born into; a Brahmin should wear reddish-yellow garments, a Kshatriya should wear light red, and a Vaisya should wear yellow. For bodily purification, white, red, yellow and black, must be used by the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra men respectively. The symbolism of colour is one of the many sources from which primitive religion and magic have derived much of the strength and conviction; it plays a very eloquent part in the legendry lives of the gods.

The type of material worn against the skin is also important. Hemp is worn by the Brahmins, silk is worn by the Kshatriyas and Kusa grass by the Vaisya. These materials were prescribed for the vestments of the three upper-castes during the period of their lives as students. All these fabrics were considered to be the dwelling place of fire. This is important as fire is the great purifier, and any object in which it happens to dwell, whether literally or symbolically, is to purify any person it comes in contact with. Fire is also treated as a symbol of life and the protective powers.

Age is another factor which determines the colour of clothing. Girls and young women wear the brightest and most colourful embroidered costumes. Older women generally wear a more toned-down, subtler version of this costume, and as I have already mentioned, widows wear white to show their new status.

Different communities favour different colours. The most common colour worn throughout Kutch is red. The Dhanetah Jats are an acception to this though, their churis (full caftan-like dress) are nearly always black.

In all the other communities in Kutch, the women's costume consists of a skirt, backless blouse and a veil. Each community has its own set of particular colours, symbols and patterns that are embroidered onto their clothing and each community can be distinguished from these particular traits.

These symbols and patterns found on Kutchi clothing once had a specific meaning and the Kutchi were aware of these meanings. As time went by, the understanding behind each symbol was lost or was not as apparent as it used to be. Because of this the same symbols and colours are used as

they always have been, generation after generation, but now it is because they are colourful and simply because it has always been done. I don't think that these women sit down to embroider a garment with the knowledge of knowing exactly why they embroider a certain symbol, shape or colour. She is doing it because her mother did it before her.

There has never before been a break away from this tradition. It is only now, with the changes in the caste system, and their new awareness of the rest of the world, and their own country which they have previously been cut-off from, that things are starting to change; this is not out of choice, but necessity. With the breakdown of the caste-system, these people can now be educated and have more of a say in what they choose to do with their lives rather than let tradition dictate to them. Girls are also being educated, and because of this they have little or no time to learn the fine skills of embroidery, so all of their beautiful embroidery will eventually probably become extinct. There has already been quite a noticable change in the visual presentation of their clothes. What was once handwoven, locally, dyed naturally and intricately hand embroidered that took hundreds of hours of a woman's leisure time, is now synthetic in everyway. The fabric and dyes are synthetic and chemical, and the embroidery is either done by machine or replaced by printing the symbols rather than sewing them (Fig. 6).

So even if the symbols did have meaning once, it is becoming more and more impossible to understand what they mean or what they used to mean, as the people of Kutch are getting further away from their original, traditional way of life. Some meaning can still be extracted from their clothing but it is a different type of symbolism from what I originally thought it would be.

When I first saw these textiles and before I began my research on them, I thought there would be magical and mystical stories to back each piece of clothing, so I was quite disappointed to discover otherwise. I still do believe there are fascinating stories behind these costumes but that they just aren't known anymore. Even so, the information I have gathered is just as interesting, but in a different way.

Should the meaning behind the Kutchi decoration be so important? Can we not just accept it as decoration for the sake of decoration? Or maybe it should be accepted simply as a way of pleasing the gods, as a form of worship. The Kutchi people cover practically everything in pattern, from their temples down to their textiles, even their cooking utensils are decorated extensively. Do they think of why they use a certain shape or symbol or should it just be a way of pleasing their gods?

> The man who built the temples did not build them as exercises in the science of a building, nor the sculptors who adorned them produce art as art. Their purpose was the primary purpose of all traditional art, to teach men the great truths of the universe. That was the first criterion which a building or a piece of sculpture or a painting had to satisfy.[12]

The meaning of these textiles could be derived from a number of objects and ideas, and for a number of different reasons. One could look for deeply profound reasons to understand them, or one could look at surface reasons. From writing about and explaining the background of the Kutch people, I have tried to show the depth of meaning of these people and their textiles. Their background consists of a lot of changes caused by invaders (Aryans, Asians, Persians, Greeks, Muslims etc.), and religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism etc). This variety of cultures and religions lends to a lot of interaction of ideas and influences. Religion governs every part of these

peoples' lives and it's because we know this that I assume these beliefs play an important role in the constructing and embroidering of a garment.

Other influences must be assumed though; these include their surroundings and life styles, and the way they observe these things. We know that the landscape of Kutch is very colourless and barren, and so to make up for this monotony, they indulge themselves by dressing from head to toe in bright and cheerful colours. Not only do they cover themselves, but their animals and houses are also adorned with beautifully embroidered covers and hangings. They even pattern the walls of their homes with elaborate mud-work designs using mud, dung, white paint and mirrors to create these decorations. "Indian art was always close to life, reflecting, and using the forms of nature and man."[13] This is very true of the people of Kutch. What they depict on their clothing are objects and scenes from their everyday lives. They celebrate what they possess and display this in a stylised and colourful way to abstract themselves and their environment. By wearing such colourful clothing they place themselves apart from the landscape and identify themselves as different from it. Butter churning is a very common depiction; it is the richest part of the produce taken from the cow, and so they celebrate this by depicting it in a joyous and exciting way. Designs and motifs are inspired by the indigenous flora and fauna and local mythology.

An example of the Rabari's mythology would be the story about the cult of Jakh. The story goes that in the olden days Jam Panvaro was the oppresive ruler of Paddhargadh. When his tyranny became unbareable, the people of the community prayed for the Jakh, the saviours from

outside India, to come to their rescue. The Jakh consisted of 71 horse-riding men and their sister Sanyari. They destroyed the city of Punvaro and relieved the people. Since then, the 72 Jakh are worshipped by the people. At Kakadbhit, in Nakatrana taluka, there is a major shrine to the Jakh. On the second Monday of the Hindu month of Bhadrapad, there is a great fair in the honour of Jakh (Fig. 8), which is attended by the Rabari in large numbers. At the time of the fair, the stone images are white washed and adorned with flower garlands, and mirror embroidered torandoor friezes. The visitors offer coconuts and silver canopies to honour their past oaths and take new oaths in anticipation of the fulfillment of their wishes.

The Ahir who derive their origin from the cow-herd god Krishna, pay great respect to this deity. On the day of Divali they take out their cattle to the streets. People of all communities feed them. On this day they also worship cow-dung heaps, representing the mythical Mount Goradhana, sacred to Krishna. Traditionally the Ahir worship various goddesses. The main one is Jogani. An annual fair is held at the temple of Jogani Nal in Anjar taluka which is attended by the Ahir in the thousands. At this fair the Ahir men, women and children, decked in their best clothes and ornaments, can be seen arriving in their bullock carts. It is customary to offer the hair of a child (cut for the first time) to the deity by whose grace the child was born. Cattle being the chief wealth of the Ahir, they regularly offer sacrifices of blood, flesh and wine to the various deities for the protection of their animals.

These festivals are just a few of the many that exist in the Kutch to celebrate and worship their local deities.

Fig. 8; Statues of Jakh.

They are a tradition that has survived intact and remains alive due to the geographical isolation and the absence of industrialisation. Even if the traditions of their costumes disappear, their beliefs will still hold.

Other motifs and symbols found on Kutchi clothing are those of the more abstract and mythical type. Examples of these are the 'tree of life' (Fig. 9 & 10), and the zigzag, a recurrent motif (Fig. 10, 11 & 12). The zigzag design is known as Kungri and is meant to symbolise the top of a fortress wall, which in turn can mean protection of any sort. The swastika, a symbol of fortune and a bringer of good luck, is also displayed on Kutch textiles (Fig. 9). The swastika "because associated in Hinduism with the sun and also with Ganesha, the pathfinder whose image is often found where two roads cross".[14] Lozenge, circular and other geometric shapes are also found on Kutch clothes. The themes and images depicted in these textiles are also reflected in songs and poetry, aswell as in mythology and folklore, all of which were mostly handed down by mouth.

All of these symbols and motifs come together to display a rich and very colourful show of the way these people perceive their surroundings. Contrasting colours are used because they believe these make the most pleasing colour combinations, evidently because these colours (red, green, yellow, pink, orange, blue, black etc) strengthen each other in contrast, unlike the bland surroundings they live in.

> Clothes have a language which expresses through its symbolism the subtle working of the collective mind of a nation in its most obscure aspects.[15]

Fig. 9
Satwar shawl.

Fig. 10; Ahir purse.

Fig. 11, 12; Ahir boy's jacket.

Fig. 12a; Ahir boy's jacket.

Although these costumes do have decorative and functional qualities, the value of many of these goes far deeper but it is difficult to understand what these values are. We have a general idea but not a specific knowledge. Maybe these textiles would loose their mystical qualities if this knowledge was gained. The use of certain techniques, motifs or materials may render a fabric special in ways that are difficult to translate, even objects with basically secular associations. Even though we don't fully understand these textiles, they are a feast for the eyes and offer us a pleasure without our knowing why.

> Many symbols which in their original use had a definite meaning are now purely ornamental and decorative. Nevertheless they have their profound unconcious appeal.[16]

CONCLUSION

Writing this thesis has opened my mind a lot and inspired me a great deal. It has given me a great urge to go to Kutch and experience all this colour and to find out what the people themselves are like, and what they think and feel about their surroundings. Their customs do not allow for a change in mood, or a new image, they are what they are and have always been accepted this way. I would like to know if these people question this fact and would they change if they wanted to. All of this is going to change quite soon anyway because of the changes in the caste system and these textiles will probably cease to exist.

A decline in these textiles is being predicted from all sources and is already evident. The Kutchi people, who have always been isolated from the rest of the world, are now getting a glimpse of other ways and styles and, and are being influenced by these 'new' fashions.

It won't be long before these people have adapted themselves to the ways of the rest of India, and when this happens they will have lost their identity, but maybe I am being selfish in wanting them to stay the same. These people live under a lot of poverty and their government is trying to help them. Eventually they may get a chance to choose what they would like to do with their lives rather than let tradition dictate to them, but inevitably something must give and this will be centuries of history of the textiles of Kutch. Sacrifices will be made and sadly the price of progress will probably be the destruction of one of India's most magnificent textile traditions.

Fig. 13; Node blouse piece.

Fig. 14; Urban Rabari blouse.

Fig. 15; Rabari odhni.

Fig. 16; Rabari boy's jacket.

Fig. 17; Rabari boy's trousers.

Fig. 18; Rabari child's shoes.

Fig. 19; Rajput fan.

Fig. 20; Rajput blouse.

Fig. 20a; Rajput blouse.

Fig. 21; Ahir blouse.

Fig. 21a; Ahir blouse.

Fig. 22; Ahir blouse.

Fig. 23; Harijan blouse.

Fig. 24; Harijan enclave.

Fig. 25; Mocchi work embroidery.

Fig. 25a; Mocch work embroidery.

Fig. 26: Detail of Bansali/Rajput blouse.

Fig. 27; Embroidered section of a blouse.

Fig. 28; Gracia churi.

Illustrations:

Fig. 1: Map of Kutch. (7, p. 12)

Fig. 2: This skirt and shawl should not be worn together as they are from two different communities. They are presented this way to show how they are worn. The skirt is from the Ahir community and the shawl is from the Rabari community.

Fig. 2a: Detail of embroidery on Rabari shawl. In the centre is a tree, this is surrounded by two peacocks and thorns (Gokharu). This is all embroidered in chain stitch, the stitch commonly used throughout Kutch.

Fig. 3: This illustration shows how a blouse is worn under the shawl and shows how it provides ventilation. It is kept on the body by tying at the neck and the centre of the back.

Fig. 4: Rabari blouse. This blouse exagerates and celebrates the female form. It is covered in mirror work. The shista or abla mirrors used are bought in either pre-cut rounds or in large pieces to be cut up with scissors.

Fig. 4a: This shows how a blouse is patch-worked together with different fabrics. The mirror work can be seen in more detail.

Illustrations:

Fig. 5: (7, p. 14). This clearly illustrates the different motifs commonly found on Ahir clothing and textiles. Chain stitches are used to outline the motifs and the designs are filled in with chain stitch, buttonhole stitch or herringbone stitch.

Fig. 6: A good example of the result of the changes in the caste system. Half of this blouse is done by machine and the other half is tie-dyed: this is because only half of the garment can be seen when worn with the shawl. This blouse is from an urban Rabari community, where, because of living in a town, they have less time for embroidery and more access to synthetic goods.

Fig. 7: Gracia girl wearing a Dhenetah Jat style churi.

Fig. 8: (10, p. 102). Statues of Jakh. This shows the warriers riding on their horses. The Jakhs were legendary horsemen who freed Kutch from the rule of tyrants in the 10th century AD. The horses are draped with Ahir herding caste embroidered 'torans' (door hangings).

Fig. 9: Detail of Satwar shawl. The swastika, tree of life, women dancing and churning butter are all seen here.

Fig. 10: A purse from Ahir. Tree of life and zigzag motif displayed.

Illustrations:

Fig. 11, 12, 12a: This is a young Ahir boy's jacket. it is embroidered in red, green, blue and yellow. Zigzag motif, amongst others, is depicted here.

Fig. 13: Node blouse piece with medallion designs typical of eastern Banni.

Fig. 14 & 14a: Urban Rabari blouse. Again we see that half of the blouse (the right) is more decorated than the other. Floral, geometric and zigzag designs.

Fig. 15: Wagardia or Daysee Rabari odhni. They use brightly coloured threads to embroider the medallions. This type of decoration appears on both everyday and festive wear. The rest of it is tie-dyed or block printed.

Fig. 16 & 17: Rabari young boys' jacket and trousers. Embroidered in pink, yellow, red, blue, purple and green. Very geometric in design.

Fig. 18: Shoes for a child; Rabari.

Fig. 19: Rajput Fan. The fan is held at the handle and swung around. This is an example of how the Kutch decorated almost everything.

Fig. 20 & 20a: Rajput blouse. Very floral in design without any mirror work. Detail shows how blouse is constructed with a gusset piece for under the arm.

Illustrations:

Fig. 21 & 21a: Ahir blouse. Detail shows peacock motif.

Fig. 22: Ahir blouse very similar to figure 21, except this blouse is at a different stage of decoration. This shows how the women worked out the design first and then filled it in later. Compare the top of the blouse with figure 20 and see the difference. At the bottom of this blouse some embroidery work has been started but left unfinished.

Fig. 23: Harijan blouse. Longer than blouses from the rest of Kutch. Very symmetrical design.

Fig. 24: (7, p. 56). Harijan enclave at Horka.

Fig. 25 & 25a: Mocchi work embroidery. The Mocchis were traditionally cobblers and leather workers by trade, who developed the art of embroidering in fine silk chain stitch. Motifs include elephants, women, parakeets and floral.

Fig. 26: (10, p. 110). Detail of an embroidered 'choli' blouse showing a woman smoking a hookah. Bansali or Rajput caste.

Fig. 27: Front piece of dismantled blouse. Darker tone in the centre of the piece suggests that it used to be gathered on this line. Motifs include elephants, parakeets and peacocks.

Illustrations:

Fig. 28: (7, p. 57). Gracia Jat churi from Kunahteeah.

Foot Notes:

1. 10, p.57.
2. 1, pp. 44 - 50.
3. 15, p.11.
4. 10, p.6.
5. 5, p.144.
6. 7, p.19.
7. 8, p.889.
8. 8, p.889.
9. 8, p.889.
10. 5, p.viii.
11. 10, pp. 14 - 15.
12. 6, p.10.
13. 6, p.6.
14. 12, p.12
15. 5, p.viii.
16. 5, p.132.

Glossary:

chandhanni:	wedding veil/shawl.
churi:	traditional dress of Jat women.
gam:	hamlet, town or village of any size.
jati:	word for caste. (Subdivision of a major caste.)
mushru:	textile, warp faced satin/silk weave.
nat:	term for a subdivision of a jati.
odhni:	womans veil and head covering, worn throughout northern and western India.
taluka:	administrative unit of Kutch.
toran:	decorative hanging for above doorway, more common among Hindus then Muslims.

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