

EXQUISITE EMBROIDERIES OF KUTCH

PRACTISING COMMUNITIES -
CULTURE, COSTUMES, CRAFTS



PRIYA SMILES DEVASAHAYAM WILLIAM

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OF KUTCH**

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ISBN

Paperback 978-1-5457-6077-2

Hardcase 978-1-5457-6078-9

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EXQUISITE EMBROIDERIES OF KUTCH

This literary tapestry captures the essence of Kutch's embroidery heritage, offering readers a profound understanding of the cultural wealth embedded in each masterpiece.

About the Author

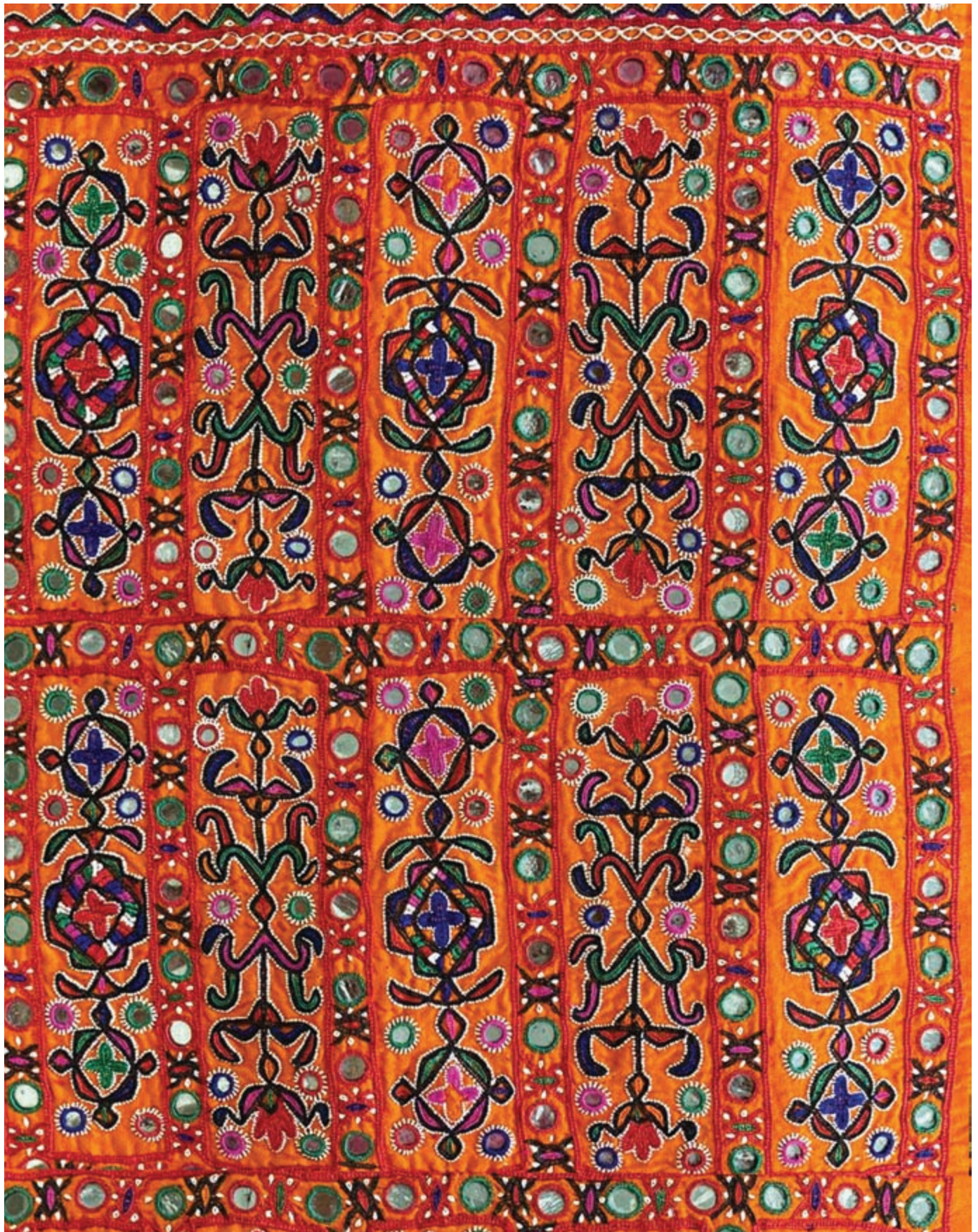
Dr Priya Raj William (Priya Smiles Devasahayam William), is an accomplished scientist and author of the book, 'Exquisite Embroideries of Kutch'. She seamlessly blends her background in biochemistry with a passion for textile preservation and cultural exploration. Her doctorate in conservation of textiles and antiquities urged her to tap into an interdisciplinary expertise to preserve the heritage of the different communities of Kutch. For over three decades, Dr Priya dedicated herself to extensive field and academic research in Kutch in Gujarat, India, meticulously unravelling the intricate historic, ethnic and cultural threads of Kutch.

Her international journeys of exploration and research, reflects a commitment to tracing the evolution and potential origins of the aesthetic textile creations of Kutch, demonstrating a deep curiosity about the cultural tapestry of the diverse communities of this exceptional region.

Dr Priya's unique perspective, marrying scientific acumen with a profound appreciation for cultural heritage, enriches her narrative. Her research is not only a testament to the splendid artistry of Kutch but also a scholarly exploration, as she weaves together the historical, social, and artistic dimensions of these exquisite embroideries.

Dr Priya Raj William's in-depth documentation emerges as a bridge between the scientific and cultural realms, bringing to life the stories captured within the stitches that have adorned the vibrant communities of Kutch for centuries, if not millennia.





Mutva Embroidery



**Hon'ble Chief Minister of Gujarat State, India
Shri Bhupendra Patel.**



Bhupendra Patel

Chief Minister, Gujarat State

Dt. 31-12-2024

Message

Mahatma Gandhi said “*Real India lives in its villages*”. Majority of our art, crafts, skills, antiques and artisans have emerged from the rural areas. Arts and Crafts have been woven in our social fabric. Social relationship along with artisans in different states of India represents the real strength of the Nation. Our artisan, our skill, workmanship and most important our human values etc. are in versatile demand across globe and in entrepreneurship as well. Our Kutchee exquisite embroidery work made with tiny needle and threads on different fabric has spread wings throughout the globe. Gujarat has proven its skill power through various world famous artisans including different embroidery work especially Kutchi handicraft and our yarn weaving including Khadi etc.

I am much pleased to learn that **Dr. Priya Smiles Devasahayam William** has adorn an initiative to amplify the methodology of various embroideries executed by different ethnic communities in Kutch during her stay between this karmic people. Her endeavours to echo such artistic skills of our Kutch by publishing a colourful voluminous publication titled “**Exquisite Embroideries of Kutch**” is praiseworthy. I am sure; this valuable book will surely succeed and become a perfect match maker for the people who seek to learn the skill and dexterous art. I, hereby, extend my heartiest best wishes to the astute and studious creator for grand success of the valuable publication and for her bright future ahead.


(Bhupendra Patel)

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Apro/ab/2024/12/31/rs

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Rabari Embroidery



Antique Silk Mochi Shoemaker Embroidery

OVERVIEW

The motivating compulsion behind this literary compilation, '**Exquisite Embroideries of Kutch**', stems from the urgent desire to safeguard the methodologies utilised by 19 major embroidering communities of Kutch in Gujarat, India, to create over 33 distinctly different styles of embroideries. Regrettably, many of these embroideries are rapidly disappearing into the chasm of modernization, or even worse, are being obliterated by sudden natural disasters.

The innate artistic brilliance of the Kutchi embroiderers is intertwined with ancient designs, motifs and techniques that percolated into Kutch during millennia of transnational interaction through land and sea routes. Numerous invasions and annexations of Kutch to foreign and Indian kingdoms combined with royal, aristocratic and local patronage through the ages, have collectively shaped Kutch into a rich, cross cultural meeting ground of complex textile art forms.

This literary venture chronicles the social structure of the diverse embroidery

practising communities of Kutch. It also attempts to trace the history woven into their unique varieties of needlework and documents the precise methods of rendition of each embroidery style. The exquisite embroidered textiles of Kutch, which evolved over thousands of years in the remote northwestern border of Gujarat, reflect the core identity of the women of the area, showcasing how these unnamed artists from various castes and communities, expressed their history, life stories, religious practices and beliefs through stunning and captivating needlework.

The origin of Kutchi embroideries is considered to have its roots in the ancient Indus Valley Civilization, as evidenced by shared designs and patterns used. The foremost example is the embroidery of the Mutva Muslim community, wherein can be found Indus Valley designs that seem to have seamlessly flowed into Kutchi embroideries. Similar designs can be seen meandering through Central Asia, Uzbekistan and other far off lands, probably through ancient trade routes.



The popularity and commercial viability of the embroideries of Kutch reached its zenith when the impeccable **Mochi** embroidery became highly sought-after by Mughal royalty and fashionable Kutchi aristocratic families. The delectable embroidery of the Mochi or shoemaker community, rendered using an Aar hook from the reverse side of the fabric, captivated the fancy of Western Society also. Aari Bharat soon became a vital part of the repertoire of Indian Trade Textiles, attracting the patronage of the rich and the famous, particularly in Britain. The Mochi's heady interpretation of realism in embroidery can now be seen only in a few museums and private collections.

Affluent women of the **Lohana** community were entranced by the perfect blend of colour and design in Mochi embroidered high fashion garments of the 16th to the 19th centuries. They incorporated these stitches into their own costumes and honed their needlework into an incredible art form. Pastoral communities like the **Ahirs** and **Kanbis** were so enamoured by the shimmering embroideries of their wealthy clients that they developed their own robust versions of needlework, unified by mirror studded embellishment. The Kanbi community, generally used their needle art to adorn their bovine workmates, while the Ahirs combined thread and glass into gorgeous ensembles for their brides and children. Embroidered bridal dowries, which are frequently a communal or family effort, commanded respect for the bride's artistic prowess in her new home.

The **Rabaris** are another notable nomadic tribe in Kutch, famed for its elaborate mirror encrusted textile ornamentation. Their sombre dark garments are converted into treasure troves of splendour by bold mirror studded needlework. This nomadic tribe can be identified a mile off by their beautiful veils that are decorated with gorgeous large embroidered medallions flashing with multi-shaped mirrors. Rabari door hangings and household decoration textiles, on the other hand, use embroidered figurative elements to tell a story, be it religious or day to day anecdotes.

Artistry flows through the veins of the people of Kutch and caste differences could not hold back the unrivalled creative skills of the **Harijan** community. An admixture of bold colours and impeccable designs, held together by an intricate

array of reflecting mirrors, tell exciting tales of bygone days. One can observe centuries-old interactions with people near and far, nestled within their vast collection of designs and motifs. The ingrained artistry of this talented community, has converted their embroidered works into a profitable vocation. Pakko, Kacho, Karekh, Neran, Bhavadia and Patchwork embellished textiles vie for the buyer's attention in commercial circuits. The popularity of these embroideries is still untouched by the advancing tide of urban living.

Haleputra Muslims, Raisiputra Muslims, Khatri Muslims and Mutva Muslims, particularly of the Banni area, have their own exuberant styles of needlework. Metallic thread composites are favoured by the Haleputra and Raisiputra Muslims, while very fine, stitches embedded with tiny mirrors are the trademark of the Mutvas. Haleputra and Raisiputra embroidered garments are meant purely for personal use, while sumptuously rendered Mutva embroideries are highly sought after by fashion houses worldwide.

Other Muslim communities, who are noted for their uniquely identifiable needlework are the **Grasia Jaths, Madhani Jaths, Dhanetah Jaths and Fakirani Jaths**. Each of these communities has its own signature style of embroidery, and the women are instantly recognisable by the embroideries adorning their yokes. Grasia Jaths make exclusive use of cross stitch in ancient designs developed by their forefathers.

Mahajan embroidery is uniquely different in that it uses Cretan Stitch interspersed with Interlacing Stitch to construct floral patterns. Cretan stitch is frequently used in Greek embroidery of Crete, which possibly points to interaction between the local people with Greek armies that had settled along the western coastal areas of India. This lovely embroidery is, however, waning in its practice.

Sodha and **Jadeja** communities of the Banni grasslands of Kutch, also have their own superbly designed embroideries and pattern layouts. The Sodhas use simple Satin Stitch over counted thread, to create a heady medley of vibrant patterns filled with functional elegance, akin to the Phulkari work of Punjab and Sind. Geometric patterns, rule unchallenged in Soofe embroidery of the Sodhas, while Jadeja women use a story telling modus in their needlework. Jadeja embroidery is also



diminishing in production and use.

All Kutchi communities use a highly technical Interlacing Stitch, 'Bhavadia Interlacing Stitch', which appears to be the common factor behind all its embroideries. This stitch can be observed in Armenian Interlacing Embroidery and several antique German White-work Embroideries. It is unlikely that these highly complex stitches developed independent of one another and may point towards ancient interactions, possibly via the Trade Routes.

The **Bhanushali** farming community makes use of an abundance of solar motifs, flowers and vegetation emblazoned on their skirts and blouses in a riot of unadulterated colour. Their cherished embroideries, which were once treasured symbols of family pride, are vanishing not only from circulation, but also from their memory.

The **Madhari** community of Kutch is a small group of nomadic people with an infinitesimal but undeniable presence in Kutch. This snake charmer community maintains a low-profile when compared to their closely related Banjara nomadic cousins, who are full of vibrancy and colour.

Madhari embroidery, which is rarely practised nowadays, is used mainly on the carry bags housing their dangerous companions. Intriguing linear designs are used to produce unconventional patterns composed of running stitch laid in a grid, pattern, which may be interlaced.

In a nutshell, this literary documentation, serves as a comprehensive chronicle, giving step by step illustrated explanations about most of the stitches used by the embroidering communities of Kutch, using DIY (do it yourself) format. Moreover, it clearly describes the method of actually preparing sample pieces of each of these embroideries. The social and ethnographic details of the exceptional needle working communities of Kutch are also recorded, for a better appreciation of their phenomenal artistic genius.

The overriding objective is to preserve the knowledge of the ancient needleworked art forms of Kutch for future generations.

Author's Note and Acknowledgements

I still remember the mild apprehension mingled with overwhelming anticipation, with which I proceeded with my family to the fantasy-world like land of Kutch, with its unexpected salt marshes of the Rann, never ending Banni grasslands, mysterious fog-covered coastline, intriguing walled cities and dancing whirlwinds. This spellbinding yet unfamiliar remote land, was accentuated by people wearing the most gorgeously embroidered garments, which shimmered and shone with every step that they took. On closer examination, variations of rendition and heterogeneity of themes, clearly distinguished different communities to the percipient onlooker. At that instant, the desire to know more about these unique people in their sumptuous garments took firm root.

My husband, Ranjit Raj William IPS, was posted in the district of Kutch as District Head of Police in 1985. This gave me the opportunity to pursue my unrestrained curiosity and learn more about the mostly unexplored embroidering communities of Kutch. I was enchanted by the timeless information that the embroiderers of different communities had captured within their cherished textiles, a creative canvas freely available to the adept fingers of the women of Kutch. The enigma surrounding the origins of stitches that were employed in remote corners of the world, which unexpectedly emerged within the framework of Kutchi embroidery, piqued my interest and enticed me to delve deeper into the designs and motifs that I encountered in Kutch. I treaded on the heels of several Kutchi motifs, traversing across Samarkand to the Middle East, then to Turkey, Egypt, and Europe, right up to Japan in the Far East.



The author Dr Priya Raj William (centre), with her husband Mr Ranjit Raj William (right) and daughters Namratha William Joseph (left), Lovelina William Fenton (far left) and Naveena William Wijayaratna (far right).

Re-tracing the probable routes taken by the mystical eight-pointed star design, solar motifs, fertility devices and protective symbols, was a fascinating experience. Trade, acting as a significant repository for the mixing and mingling of distant cultures along both the Silk Road and the Ancient Maritime Routes of seafarers, emerged as a compelling factor behind this remarkable amalgamation of designs in Kutch.

The motivation behind the creation of this book, 'Exquisite Embroideries of Kutch', takes cognizance of the fact that Kutchi embroideries do not comprise of just a handful of needlework categories, but over 33 distinctly different genres of embroidery are encompassed within its fold. Several of them stand at the very brink of extinction, or are in fact already extinct. There is thus an overriding need to record and preserve the broad spectrum of diverse techniques utilised by 19 or more different embroidering communities in Kutch. A daunting task but not impossible.

I thank my Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ for inspiring the concept behind this project and guiding me through the entire process of information gathering, documentation, illustration and publishing.

The initial close and continuous interaction with various communities of Kutch during the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, gave me the opportunity to learn firsthand their signature embroideries and practise them. Vijayalakshmi Ben, who worked with Shrujan, an organization established in 1969 to enable Kutchi women embroiderers to earn a dignified livelihood, introduced me to several women belonging to different Kutchi communities, who were involved in commercial embroidery. My profound admiration for the captivatingly diverse range of Kutchi embroideries and their talented creators, prompted

me to explore their engrossing history and sheltered lifestyle. The interaction fostered between us a sense of mutual respect and empathy, which ultimately helped cultivate long-standing friendships. Considering the unparalleled beauty, intricacy, and heterogeneity of stitches found in various styles of Kutchi embroideries, I realized the critical importance of systematically studying and documenting these remarkable forms of Kutchi needlework. Such efforts are of paramount importance for preserving the permanence of Kutchi embroideries and for passing down the knowledge of this art form to future generations.



The author meets an embroiderer in Ludia village, Banni.

The subsequent years were dedicated to gathering details about the precise methods and techniques used in the execution of each type of embroidery, directly from the practitioners themselves. I personally visited far flung villages and learnt varieties of stitches used by unrelated needlecrafting communities. Members of different embroidering communities willingly shared details about their communities and needlework. They voluntarily allowed their collections to be examined and photographed. Many families came dressed in their ceremonial garments for our photo shoots. This allowed me to observe and track any changes in design, style and rendition that occurred over the years.

*My parents (right)
Mr Smiles Devasahayam &
Mrs Betty Devasahayam,
and my parents-in-law
Mr William Devadason &
Mrs Rose William provided
steadfast support at the home
front.*



I personally created a range of embroidered pieces and samplers, showcasing various embroidery types, to study and document each stitch used across 33 styles practised by 19 distinct embroidering communities in Kutch. Repeated visits to Kutch helped clear all the doubts and glitches that cropped up from time to time. Documenting each stitch with easy to follow illustrations was undertaken to immortalise the knowledge about each stitch and its technique of implementation. Some embroideries like Node, Khatri Bharat, Chekan Bharat, Boria Bharat I could not learn as I did not find people who could teach me these traditional types of needlework.

Illustrating the stitches and their modalities of rendition was a great challenge and also great fun. My family both encouraged and critiqued this drawing project, which involved creating over 2500 personally hand-drawn illustrations and capturing more than 4000 photographs. From this vast reserve collection we collated more than 800 illustrations and 1000 photographs to be used in the book.

My heartfelt appreciation to my husband Ranjit Raj William, who has been of immeasurable support and help throughout the entire process of information collection, photography, data compilation, editing, and other pre-publishing processes. I could not have written this book without his constant support, assistance, love and encouragement. Many nights were spent burning the midnight oil together, while checking, editing and proof reading. I can't thank you enough Ranjit.

I am greatly indebted to our daughters Namratha, Lovelina and Naveena, who accompanied us during most of our travels to secluded and nearly inaccessible areas, without too much resistance. I extend special thanks to the three of them as they were often roped in to model several ethnic garments, when live models were not available.

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my parents Mr Smiles Roland Devasahayam and Mrs Betty Smiles Devasahayam for always encouraging and supporting my every endeavour. Thank you so much for inculcating in me a spirit of curiosity and for honing my skills in research and documentation by guiding me to pursue invaluable educational qualifications. My father-in-law Mr Devadason William and mother-in-law Mrs Rose William were my mainstay throughout the entire process involving extended periods of absence, long hours of travel and toil.



Mr Suresh Bhai Vagela who was the principal photographer for the book was like a brother to me.

A great big 'thank you' to late Mr Suresh Vagela, my colleague and close family friend, who assisted me for most of the photography in the book. However long we travelled or however rough the terrain, he was always present for the photographic documentation. We miss you so.

Heartfelt thanks to all the crafts persons of Kutch, who took the time and effort to teach me the numerous types of embroideries practised by their communities. I also thank all village leaders and

people of different ethnic communities, who voluntarily shared valuable information about their communities, posed for photographs and allowed impromptu picture-taking.



The author acquires knowledge of the intricate stitches used in a remote hamlet in Kutch.

I am extremely grateful to the police force of Kutch who took great interest in my venture and introduced me to many little known resident artisans and embroiderers of Kutch who lived in nearly inaccessible hamlets, far from familiar tracks. They directed us without hesitation to secluded, lesser known craft pockets in the district, making my research work more in-depth and comprehensive.

I want to express my sincere gratitude to Jhatam Bhai, his wife Jayashree Ben, and their family for being incredibly supportive and such hospitable hosts. They always welcomed us into their home, whenever we had to go back to Kutch for more pictures, local interaction or museum visits. I fondly remember the delicious food in their restaurant, Anando, which we enjoyed as we pored over and reviewed various aspects of the book.



*Pillars of support during the venture –
Left to right – Anees Jhatam (Chunna), Gangaram Bhai Bhanushali and grandson, Jhatam Bhai, Ranjit Raj William, Naveena, Lovelina, author, Jayashree Ben Jhatam, Mohini Ben G. Bhanushali, Bhumi Ben M. Bhanushali.*

Thank you, Chunna, for agreeing to be my ethnic wear model.

Mr T.S. Randhawa IAS, you have been a great source of encouragement to me. You gave me many helpful pointers, and also motivated and guided me to get the manuscript published.

I also acknowledge the valuable support rendered by National Museum as well as National Museum Institute of History of Art, Conservation and Museology, New Delhi and Victoria and Albert Museum, London, who permitted me to examine and analyse their textile collections of India. The Applied Arts Museum, Tashkent, in Uzbekistan shared a great deal of information about their collections and provided a wealth of knowledge for my study. Louvre Museum, Paris, and Egyptian Textile Museum, Cairo, were also good sources of in-depth information about the Trade Textiles of India. I found quite a few textiles originating from Kutch in Sanskriti Museum of Indian Textiles, New Delhi. The Head of Conservation, Ms. Priya Kapoor, was of immense support and help with her vast expertise on Indian textiles.

Aina Mahal Museum and Government Museum, Bhuj were key sources of facts about the local textiles of Kutch. Jadhavji Mohanlal Sathvara Collection, Bhuj, Kutch and several private collectors in Bhuj have also kindly shared their collections for both photography and perusal.

My special thanks to our three sons-in-law, Dilip Joseph, Michael Fenton and Mayura Wijayaratra for their efforts in procuring the best equipment needed for the endeavour, be it cameras or computers, editing software or photo editors, they found them all. Thank you.

I would also like to convey my sincere thanks to the staff of Devasahayam and William Enterprise Private Limited for all the help extended for pre-publishing research and fine tuning. Special thanks are due to J. Jeyachandran and J. Nandakumar for their immense help during the entire book printing process. I greatly appreciate the enthusiastic assistance rendered by G. Balaji, Paul Pradeep Kumar and Suresh Gajendran, throughout the making of this book.



*Gangaram Bhai
Bhanushali*



Vipul Bhai Vaidya

Special thanks to Gangaram Bhai Bhanushali, social activist and renowned personality in the News publishing domain in Kutch.

My sincere thanks are due to Vipul Bhai Vaidya, former chief reporter of Kutch Mitra Newspaper and former Editor of Divyabhaskar Magazine, and Anand Rasik Lal Bhatt of Kutch Uday Newspaper for their support in the finalization of the manuscript and verification of data prior to publishing. They have also been of immense help in coordinating the distribution and marketing of the book.

Thank You All.



Kutch is a classic example of the peaceful co-existence of ancient traditions and 21st century modernity.

Resort in Gandhidham, Kutch.

The majority of the people of Kutch live in **Gavms** (villages), in small circular thatched huts called **Bhungas**, more or less as their ancestors did centuries ago. **Bhungas** have recently given way to small, two to three-room houses made of mud bricks. Most Kutchi people continue to follow the traditional occupations of their immigrant forefathers. Cattle-rearing is one of the major occupations of Kutch, with the camel holding pride of place in their herd. Although many communities have adopted agricultural pursuits, rural Kutch continues to be primarily dependent on livestock.

Daughters are considered as gifts from the gods, forebringers of wealth and fortune into their homes. Sons are expected to follow their father's profession. Every woman is taught to shoulder the responsibility for her family's well-being, both physical and spiritual. Cooking, housekeeping, child nurturing, and observation of religious fasts for her family's prosperity and happiness are considered unequivocal duties of the woman of the house. The woman is obligated to uphold the traditions of her community, such as spinning, weaving, sewing and embroidery. She is also expected to impart these skills to the next generation.

Kutch has had a rather cloistered existence as the enormous salt marsh, The Great Rann, has been a natural barrier between neighbouring Sindh in the north and northwest and Rajasthan in the northeast, for the last two centuries. The Little Rann effectively separates Kutch from Banaskantha and Mehsana districts on the east and Surendranagar on the southeast. The Arabian Sea hugs the southwestern and western coasts of this large district. The Gulf of Kutch, an estuary arm of the Arabian Sea, separates Kutch from Saurashtra in the south. This secluded geographical location of Kutch has acted as an inbuilt blockade against rapid social and cultural changes.

The Rann, also known as the '**White Desert**', continues to be the most exceptional and awe-inspiring landmark in Kutch. It is a vast expanse of marshland covered by a thick layer of crystalline salt. More often than not, a great part of the 20,720 square kilometres of the Rann is inundated by seawater. The sparkling snow-white landscape is devoid of both vegetation and habitation. Whining ferocious winds blow across this ethereal landscape, pluck heavy salt-laden foam, and fling it around like bitter-tasting snow. The Rann is therefore often referred to as '**The land of the devil's**



An exceptional sight - Salt laden foam in the Rann has crystallised into miles and miles of diamond-like salt crystals and transformed Kutch into, 'The land of the devil's snow'.

snow'. Lt. Burns, who was in Kutch in the 1920s, has fittingly described this area as, '***The space without counterpart in the globe***'.

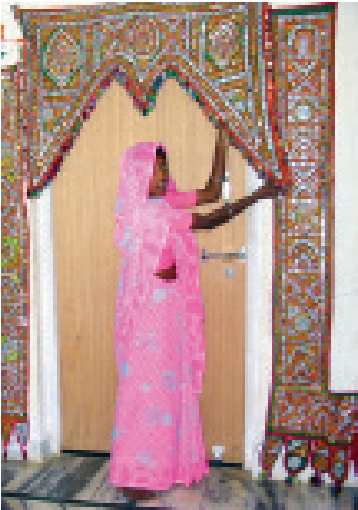
The Rann, with its mysterious and pristine white beauty, camouflaging the dangers lurking within, has often lured unsuspecting adventurers to their untimely demise within its unrelenting vastness. There are no roads in the Rann, only beaten tracks for camels and camel-carts, which, more often than not, get washed away without a trace. The saline air dehydrates the body quickly. At night, the eerie sound of the wind causes further disorientation and even hallucinations. Days in the Rann are hot and windy. Sandstorms and the blinding glare of the sun's rays create ***Mrig-trishna*** or mirages. Kala Dungar Hill (458 metres) serves as a prominent landmark during the day but during murky, dark nights, a person just a foot away, may remain undetected. The saline waters of the Rann, concealed beneath the salt crystals, may be treacherously deep.

The Rann is usually traversed on camels, asses, horses, or even on foot. The versatile camel is considered the most trusted mode of transport across the Rann. A ***Puggi*** (local

guide) and a local camel handler may be one's most dependable escort for traversing the treacherous terrain, which is quite devoid of landmarks. There are several beaten tracks across the Rann, marked by stones and bones of dead animals, to guide the traveller and to serve as a grim reminder not to stray from the dangerous path. Nights are misty, windy, and shrouded in a mysterious phosphorescent glow.



The Rann of Kutch is guarded by grim sentinels.



Personally embroidered articles created exclusively for home use bear an indefinable quality that only inherent talent can bestow - Bachau Taluka.



Kutchi men still prefer to be seen in exotic Kutchi clothes, which reflect time-honoured traditions.

A number of semi-islands like Bela, Pacham, Khadir, Chorad and Banni, along with small masses of land called **Bets** or **Dhois**, rise above the saltwater and offer welcome relief from the

ominous Rann.

The Rann - The Beginning

Geologists say that in ancient times, Kutch was a large island surrounded by the sea in the south and by a fresh water lagoon in the northern and eastern regions, caused by the emptying of the eastern branch of the Indus River into the Arabian Sea. Between the 12th and 13th centuries, seismic disturbances in the area caused the main body of the Indus water to move from the eastern to the western branch of the river. The fresh water lagoon that formerly occupied the Rann area began to dry up and seawater seeped into these low-lying lands. This region, in course of time, was transformed into the grim treeless, uninhabited marshlands known as the Great Rann and Little Rann of Kutch. This viewpoint is confirmed by the finding of various Harappan sites like Desalpar, Ganthli, Dholavira, Gadada, Surkotda, Shikarpur and several others along the fringes of the Great and Little Ranns.



The Rann often traps unsuspecting travellers and cattle who underestimate the perils lurking within the ethereal-looking salt marsh.

Legends and Folklore

Ancient Hindu myths and legends refer to Kutch as, 'A desert with few and wild people.' It is supposed to have remained so until a holy man lost in the forests near Narayan Sarovar on the western tip of Kutch, cleared the region by fire, to find his way home. From the ashes, so it is said, sprang such rich crops of grass that large numbers of pastoral tribes settled there.



Dhinodhar Hill is lush and fertile compared to the barrenness of the surrounding Rann.

Legend ascribes the formation of the Rann to the great sage Dharamnath who lived in Kutch during the latter part of the 12th century AD, during the reign of King Rayadhan. The sage is said to have started a formidable twelve-year-long penance on the summit of Dhinodhar hill. The penance involved balancing on the crown of his head on a small conical stone, placed on a narrow platform. Folklore declares that the power he received due to this reparation was so great that the gods themselves descended from heaven to request him to desist. The sage replied that if he broke his penance, the first place he laid eyes on would become completely barren. He was instructed by the gods to direct his gaze towards the sea lying north of Dhinodhar. Thereby, the sea in that area dried-up, leaving behind the marshy wasteland that came to be known as the Rann.

Not only was the Rann formed by earthquakes, but quakes have continued to rock the region time and again, causing untold destruction. The massive earthquake that occurred on 26 January, 2001, not only caused

immense destruction but also created social and cultural changes in its wake. Entire villages were wiped out, people lost almost all their possessions, and the very psyche of the people of Kutch was shaken. Kutch is slowly heading back to normalcy, although scenes of devastation are palpable all around. Many craft pockets disappeared overnight. For many years, people were so busy re-building their destroyed lives that little time was left for the pursuit of traditional crafts in their original complexity and purity.



Rural Kutch was for centuries, housed in environment friendly mud Bhungas.



Changing face of the Bhunga - After the earthquake, traditional mud Bhungas have been replaced by brick Bhunga-type structures.



The earthquake on 26 January, 2001, wiped out entire villages without a trace, causing the discontinuation of many craft traditions in Kutch.



Kutch District is described as an extraordinary expanse of wilderness possessing a rare timeless quality.

Kutch district has a coastline of approximately 352 kilometres. The coast of Kutch can be divided into two stretches, the Arabian Sea Coast, stretching from Lakhpat to Mandvi, and the Gulf of Kutch, extending from Mandvi to Shikarpur in Bachau Taluka. Kutch possesses eight ancient seaports - Mandvi, Mundra, Jangi, Tuna, Kharirchar, Jakhau, Koteswar, Lakhpat, and a modern port, Kandla. Consequently, Kutchi merchants have perpetually had easy access to overseas trading facilities throughout the ages. From ancient times, Kutchi traders had established trade links in the coastal regions of the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Middle-East, Zanzibar, East and West Africa, and almost all seaports of India. Kutchi seamen were famed for their navigational prowess and skilled handling of their sturdy Kutchi crafts. The coast is flat and is intercepted by small natural creeks like Kori, Boacha, and Godia, possessing both depth and water, crucial requirements for fishing launches and coasting crafts.

Kutch is classified as a Semi-Arid Zone due to the scanty average rainfall it receives, of just about 340 mm. Although the land is fertile, most of the land remains uncultivated due to

the scarcity of water. 73% of the land area is wasteland, while forest areas constitute 6.3% of the total land area. The vegetation comprises cacti and thorny **bhavad** (Acacia) bushes. The temperature varies from 4° Celsius in winter to 45° Celsius in summer. Relative humidity is about 60%. Generally speaking, Kutch has cold winters and hot summers with pleasant mornings and evenings.

The district abounds in places of pilgrimage for followers of numerous religious sects. Bhuj (Swaminarayan), Naransarovar (Vaishnavism), Koteswar (Shaivism), Bhadreswar (Jainism), Mata-no-Madh (Kapadis), and Hajipir (Islam) are notable areas of religious pilgrimage. Kutch has also produced many saints and priests like Jesal Toral, Menkan Dada, Hajipir, Dharamnath, and several others.

The current population of Kutch is approximately 2.1 million, three-quarters of whom live in rural villages. The offices of the district government are located in the capital city of Bhuj. The district boasts of ten important towns, 1389 inhabited villages, and about 73 deserted villages.

The people of Kutch are adventurous, generous and kind-hearted. They are also reputed to be shrewd but straightforward businesspeople.

Kachchi is the mother tongue of most of the inhabitants of Kutch. It is written in phonetic Gujarati as it has no written script. Like Hindi, it has no neuter gender. Rural communities give less importance to reading and writing. However, great importance is placed on the continuance of tradition through example and

verbal transference.

The cattle population of Kutch is one and a half times its human population. About 40% of the salt produced in India is generated in Kutch.

The Great Rann of Kutch is the only breeding place in India for migrating flamingos. Wild ass, which are often referred to as stripeless zebras, are confined to the Little Rann of Kutch.



The Great Rann of Kutch is a habitat for migratory Siberian flamingos.



Pelicans roosting in the Rann is a riveting sight in Kutch.



Sailboat racing in Mandvi - Kutch coast has numerous ancient ports with maritime trade links with cities in Asia, Africa and Europe.



Kanth Kote Temple, Bachau - Several splendid ancient monuments in semi-ruins are observed in difficult to reach areas in Kutch, far from the general tourist-circuit.

The unique location of Kutch as a gateway into ancient affluent India had turned the region into an ideal steppingstone for various plundering invaders with a lusting eye on the stupendous wealth of India, to time and again, attack the subcontinent from the north and northwest. Kutch has, therefore, a lively and colourful past, with different foreign invaders leaving their own indelible stamp on the culture and lifestyle of the local people. The remarkable fusion of distant cultures with vibrant indigenous styles has moulded Kutch into an artistic paradise.

Kutch is a repository of age-old artistic traditions. Exquisite embroideries, patchwork, leather craft, textile printing, tie and dye, Mashru weaving, wood carving, lacquer work, silver inlay, bead work, jewellery making, terracotta ware, and mud relief wall-decoration are famous crafts produced by skilful Kutchi artisans.

The intricate ***Bandhani*** (tie and dye) work of Bhuj is in great demand all over the world even today. Special cloth printing processes that are unique to this area, like Batik, Ajrakh, and Rogan, have made a name for themselves, both in and outside India.

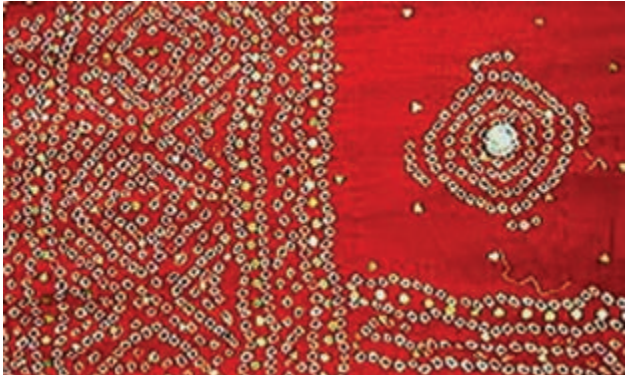


*Lakhpatji Chaturdi,
Bhuj.*



*The historical Lakhpatji
Chaturdi monument lies in
ruins after the earthquake
in 2001.*

Kutch is famous for **Kamangiri** art or Mural painting.



*The tie and dye technique known as **Bandhani** work from Kutch is renowned worldwide.*

For centuries, Kutch had its own currency, tariff, language, customs and even time. The former currency of Kutch during the princely regimes consisted of **Kori**. Locally used weights and measures were also



***Kori** - The former currency of Kutch.*

quite different from the rest of Gujarat.

Kutch had a cloistered existence under the princely regimes. Its walled cities were locked at sunset and opened at dawn. During the reign of Rao Khengarji III (1875-1942), the keys of the five gates of his capital city, Bhuj, were delivered to him every night and were handed back every morning. This system ended in 1948 when his successor, Maharao Madan Sinhji, acceded to the Indian Union.



The glorious colours of sunset over the Rann - Colour is but a transient element in Kutch, which makes it invaluable for local artisans who use brilliant hues with undiluted vibrancy in their artwork.

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