

Treasure of Thread Work of Rajasthan

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ABSTRACT

The Indian craft is rich and diverse. Each state has a different craft and the country reflects the craft of different empires. Embroidery remains a tradition in Rajasthan, preserved over centuries by the artisans. The artisans see this not as an occupation, but rather a mark of respect to their heritage. The most important centers of embroidery work are located in Rajasthan and this handicraft is one of the main sources of income for many communities. Even though embroidery is one of the traditional ways of decorating apparels, it is still popular among the younger generations. Be it the ancient designs or the modern designs embroidery continues to be one of the common ways of decorating clothes..

Key Words: *Embroidery, Rajasthan, Motif, Design, Apparel*

I. INTRODUCTION

The desert of Rajasthan is famous for its tough life conditions and rough atmosphere but when we talk about the colors, the flora and fauna, sand and its smooth flow and especially about the people here, all the heat converts into warmth. Rajasthan's embroidery is famous because of its versatility of the creations by the artisans. An array of stitches is used by the artisans to decorate the products. In the western region of Rajasthan the most important centers of embroidery work are located and this handicraft is one of the main sources of income for many communities. Eventhough embroidery is one of the traditional ways of decorating apparels, it is still popular among the younger generations. Be it the ancient designs or the modern designs embroidery continues to be one of the common ways of decorating clothes (www.craftclustersofindia.in). Embroidery, here, is a part of the women's daily life of how a day is spent. The women of the house and neighboring houses gather at one place to embroider clothes for the family, prepare the articles they will carry to their new home as dowry. Women folk design household products, utilitarian articles and other decorative pieces but with increasing demand of these unique high quality products, hand embroidery craft has become a commercial activity. Large numbers of families of highly skilled crafts people were migrated to western Rajasthan from Pakistan during the 1971 war. The artisans were selling their products to the middlemen and they were exploiting them. They had no option but to sell their products to these middlemen from Barmer and Jaisalmer on very low prices, who in turn were selling it in high-end market at very high margins. The main

feature of their product was hand embroidery on cloth. The products were of very high quality, fit to be sold in elite markets and even to be exported. NGOs as Urmul Trust organized these families in groups and helped them in marketing of their products through market linkages it created for them. Today Rangсутra, Dastkar, Dastkari Haat Samiti, Sampoon and Fab India help them to promote and market the product of desert craft within the country and across the globe (<http://www.urmul.org>). The consumer is interested to have new innovative and latest traditional designs. The Indian folk arts and embroidery play an important role in creating many new designs in the fashion world (Kaumari and Jacob, 2004). Ritukumar opined that blending old and new with a stunning effect is the trend today. This way, it's not just the craftsman but also the customer who is benefitted. In fact specialists feel that today, there is much more scope for creativity and innovation, because of the acceptance level. Ritu kumar has further elaborated that translating traditional designs in to wearable modern styles must be quite a challenge. "True our rich crafts heritage must not be lost to modernity". The challenge therefore lies in unearthing the roots and rhythms of tradition and adapting them to modern tastes (Kumar, 2004). The artisans of western Rajasthan are associated with embroideries from generations and are working for the big players selling these products in the market too. This paper highlights the transformation occurred in the embroideries practiced in the western Rajasthan and their presence in the current market.

Indians are world famous for their magnificent workmanship and for producing exceptionally beautiful textiles. Unity in diversity is expressed not only through culture and customs, but also in costume and decoration. Each state has its unique embroidery expressing the lifestyle of its people, their occupations, customs, thoughts, beliefs, and likings.

The belt comprising the Saurashtra and Kutch regions of the state of Gujarat, up through northern Gujarat and western Rajasthan and into the Thar Parkar district of Sind in Pakistan was once the world's richest source of embroidery in previous centuries.



Rajasthan, a princely state in northwest India bordering Pakistan, has been rightly called the treasure throne of Indian handicrafts. Here, where the Thar Desert burns the land, people seem to compensate with riotous colors and exuberant form, creating a sense of luxuriance through their art. There is a profusion of hues in the buildings, the clothing, and in the embroideries of the region. Each textile product made is a source of fascination that exhibits visual and aesthetic flavor.



A large variety of embroideries are practiced in different districts of Rajasthan. The main types of embroideries are Mochi Bharat, Heer Bharat, appliqué work, and bead work. Court embroidery is practiced in the princely cities of Jaipur (the capital and largest city) and Jodhpur. Marriage costumes, wall hangings, quilts, cradle cloths, and animal trappings are embroidered, appliquéd, decorated with bead work, and embellished with mirrors, sequins, buttons, and shells.



The court embroidery consists of Gota, Salma, and thread work. A special feature of Rajasthan that is popular all over the world is silk embroidery done on leather goods, especially shoes and purses. It is amazing to note that the women of remote villages, unexposed to modern civilization, are the experts in preparing articles of such great aesthetic value.



Most of the brightly colored, patterned, and embroidered blouses and shirts, decorated handbags, and rucksacks that are displayed in Western markets come from Rajasthan.



Rajasthan is a colorful state known the world over for its embroideries. Centuries-old skill and imperial heritage make the traditional art and craft of Rajasthan a world-famous attraction. The dazzling traditional garments and textiles attract domestic as well as foreign tourists and markets and are a good source of income generation for the women who create these embroidered pieces of art. More work yet needs to be done in relation to self-sufficiency and women's empowerment to protect and enhance the revival of the traditional embroideries of Rajasthan.

1. Rajasthan History

The history of the Indian state of Rajasthan is about 5000 years old. The history of Rajasthan can be classified into three parts owing to the different epochs- Ancient, Medieval and Modern.

Ancient Period, up to 1200 AD

Rajput clans emerged and held their sway over different parts of Rajasthan from about 700 AD. Before that, Rajasthan was a part of several republics. It was a part of the Mauryan Empire. Other major republics that dominated this region include the Malavas, Arjunyas, Yaudhyas, Kushans, Saka Satraps, Guptas and Hunas. The Rajput clans ascendancy in Indian history was during the period from the eighth to the twelfth century AD. The Pratiharas ruled Rajasthan and most of northern India during 750-1000 AD. Between 1000-1200 AD, Rajasthan witnessed the struggle for supremacy between Chalukyas, Parmars and Chauhans.

Medieval Period, 1201 – 1707

Around 1200 AD a part of Rajasthan came under Muslim rulers. The principal centers of their powers were Nagaur and Ajmer. Ranthambore was also under their suzerainty. At the beginning of the 13th century AD, the most prominent and powerful state of Rajasthan was Mewar.

Modern Period, 1707 - 1947

Rajasthan had never been united politically until its domination by Mughal Emperor - Akbar. Akbar created a unified province of Rajasthan. Mughal power started to decline after 1707. The political disintegration of Rajasthan was caused by the dismemberment of the Mughal Empire. The Marathas penetrated Rajasthan upon the decline of the Mughal Empire. In 1755 they occupied Ajmer. The beginning of the 19th Century was marked by the onslaught of the Pindaris.

EMBROIDERY IN INDIA

Embroidery is an expression of self, rendered with patience and dedicated hard work, it is an art rightly described as "painting by needle". Embroidery adds grace and elegance, life and style even into articles

of everyday use. Folk embroidery has always been a form of self-expression for the women. It mirrors their lives, reflects their hidden desires & aspirations and religious belief of the society to which they belong. India has one of the richest histories of textile production spanning almost 5000 years. Indian fabrics were renowned for their sheer weaves and elaborate patterns. The processes of dyeing, printing, painting and embroidering have always been highly advanced. Skilled artisans have handed down this remarkable tradition of vibrant handcrafted textile from generation to generation. Embroidery in India occupies a central and dominant place in the arts of India, which is essentially meant to strengthen the fabric and to decorate it, is an important part of household tradition and the major centers of this traditional art of embroidery are located in different parts of the state. The artisans involved in embroidery work in this western region of India are deft in creating several kinds of embroidery stitches on shawls, scarves, table covers, cushions and bed spreads. Each state in India has a style unique to its tradition. The satin stitch is used in Kashmir. The darn stitch, which produces the 'bagh' and 'phulkari' stitch of Punjab is vibrant like the people of the state. The interlacing white on white 'chikan' work of Uttar Pradesh is breath-taking and requires a lot of skill. And colorful silk floss on grey fabric breaks the monotony of Rajasthan. Indian embroidery uses many stitches as well as variations of basic stitches. The running stitch, back stitch, stem stitch, feather stitch, interlacing stitch, satin stitch, cross stitch etc. are just to name a few. Indian embroidery exists in exquisite variations and vibrant colors, with each state having a unique style of its own. That one can think of in the fabric. Hand embroidery is a beautiful art that almost anyone can learn. It is an art that should be preserved well worth learning.

TRADITIONAL EMBROIDERIES OF DESERT

CHAR KOS PE PANI BADLE ..AATH KOS PE VANI ... A PROVERB

“Every nine miles the water changes, every eighteen miles the speech” (one kos is equal to 2.25 miles approximately)

I can't count about the miles exactly but one can feel vernacular changes in culture, traditions and craft practice in every few kilometers in India. Each and every state has its unique craft style and a glorified history. Western India also having its own style and craft culture. The desert of India is renowned for its colorful embroidery. Embroidery also communicates self and status. Differences in style create and maintain distinctions that identify community, sub-community, and social status within community. Each style, a distinct combination of stitches, patterns and colors, and rules for using them, was shaped by historical, socio-economic and cultural factors. Traditional but never static, styles evolved over time, responding to prevailing trends. Desert regional styles of embroidery are *suf*, *khaarek*, and *paako*, patch and appliqué work, and the ethnic styles of *Rabari*, *Garasia Jat*, and *Mutava* community. Also embroidery of *sindh* (*sindhi kam*).

Suf

Suf is a painstaking embroidery based on the triangle, called a "suf." *Suf* is counted on the warp and weft of the cloth in a surface satin stitch worked from the back. Motifs are never drawn. Each artisan imagines her design, then counts it out - in reverse! Skilled work thus requires an understanding of geometry and keen eyesight. A *suf* artisan displays virtuosity in detailing, filling symmetrical patterns with tiny triangles, and accent stitches. *Pakko*

Means solid, is a tight square chain and double buttonhole stitch embroidery, often with black slanted satin stitch outlining. The motifs of *paako*, sketched in mud with needles, are primarily floral and generally arranged in symmetrical patterns.

Khaarek

Khaarek is a geometric style also counted and precise. In this style, the artisan works out the structure of geometric patterns with an outline of black squares, then fills in the spaces with bands of satin stitching that are worked along warp and weft from front. *Khaarek* embroidery fills the entire fabric.

Patch and Applique work

Patchwork and Appliqué Patchwork and appliqué traditions exist among most communities. For many embroidery styles, master craftwork depends on keen eyesight. By middle age, women can no longer see as well and they naturally turn their skills and repertoire of patterns to patchwork, a tradition that was originally devised to make use of old fabrics.

Mukka

The style *mukka*, solely worked in couched metal thread, or in *Sind*, combined with a variation of *paako* embroidery, seems to have historically been concentrated in *Sind* and *Dhat*, as well as in urban areas of *Kutch*

Sindhi kam

Is also known as an interlacing embroidery, the design of *sindhi* embroidery are mostly chevrons and checks giving them a stylish classic as well as traditional look which is sometimes created in floral and bird form.

Aari work

The Indian craft of *aari* embroidery can be traced back to the 12th century and was patronized by the Mughal

courts. It is extremely fine and has a timeless refined elegance. The main tool used in this style is aari, a hooked needle, or cobbler's hook to create elaborate motifs and designs. Mochi or aari bharat is one of the embroidery techniques which was done both for personal and commercial use. It is an adaptation of the cobbler's stitch which was executed by the mochis or cobblers on leather goods and later translated the medium to fabric.

The Craft and process Embroidery involves the embellishment of any material with pattern or design using a needle. The embellishment is made on fabric with threads and sometimes with other materials. The earliest Indian needles were excavated at Mohenjadaro and can be dated to circa 2000 BC. In traditions of Embroidery and dress, one can 'read' the complicated ethnic and caste relationships that characterize the social matrix of the people. Each unique combination of stitches, motifs, patterns and colours conveys the historical experiences of the people who make and use it. Skills and patterns have been transferred through generations over hundreds of years. Thus the distinctive styles of domestic embroidery vary from caste to caste rather than from village to village. Embroidery plays a major ritual role in marriage; a girl prepares items for her trousseau throughout her childhood. Embroideries created by village women bring a spark of color into objects of their everyday and ritual use. Hours available after essential chores are spent embroidering by female pastoralists, agriculturists, and artisans of Hindu, Muslim, or Jain religions.

What is the Craft process

Design The designs were freely drawn or worked by counting threads. Also we transferred onto the base material with the help of tracing paper or carbon paper. Patterns are created with the help of needle and thread. Sometimes even a hook is used to embroider.

Stitching

Patterns, motifs and colours are usually very specific to the Desert region. Most of the product range created for local market or for self-use. A specific stitch or combination of stitches is used to decorate the base material. A separate technique exists for metal or other precious threads, for non-pliable materials such as quills and for narrow decorative trims like cords and braids.

Who practices this craft

Women traditionally do embroidery. Regional characteristics of hand embroidery are distinctive; the satin stitch and cross-stitch embroidery are from Sindh, Phulkari from the state of Punjab, chain stitch work of Kutch, and Kathiawar and Kantha of Bengal. Each of these regional styles has its distinctive combination of techniques, color, and designs. Regions famous for embroidery are primarily in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Kathiwar, Uttar Pradesh, Bengal, Kashmir, Punjab, Karnataka, and Bihar.

2. Rajasthan woman helps 15,000 more sell their products globally

A social worker in Rajasthan is creating a sort of revolution by helping 15,000 women stand on their feet. Lata Kachhawaha of Barmer helped the women in selling their embroidery to foreign clients, earning a global identity in Kashidakari, a traditional form of handicraft which has been passed down through generations. This kind of embroidery is used to decorate shawls, handkerchiefs, bed covers, cushions and bags, among a host of other items.

Speaking to IANS, Lata said, "Three decades ago, life in Barmer was quite different as there were very few women working in fields. While there was one woman posted in the Home Guards department, there were two to three widows serving in schools. So bringing out women to fields to work was quite challenging but it was not impossible," she says.

"Basically, I was from Jodhpur and had come here after my mother's demise for a change when I was 22. Social work was something which impressed me and hence I joined Magraj Jain who was the founder of Sure (Society to Uplift Rural Economy) as I was instantly inspired by the work he was doing."

She said, "We started imparting training to women from Barmer villages in groups counting to 100-150 and 200 and in the next 20 years, this number touched 15,000. These women have been linked to different groups/markets to sell their work and earn a decent living. Our women are now trained in quality maintenance and fixing costs in the international market."

In fact, this art has also brought fame and laurels in foreign countries as the products made using this embroidery have been showcased in countries such as Germany, Japan, Singapore and Sri Lanka in various exhibitions.

However, a few decades ago, this embroidery was limited to families and was given as dowry to decorate homes or was gifted to family members. But today, renowned brands such as Fabindia, Ikea, and Rangсутra get a large part of their material from the women of the Meghwal community in Barmer.

Narrating the condition of Barmer when she started working, Lata says, "The conditions in Barmer were tough at the time when I came as droughts were regular features. Also there were no roads and transportation and communication in remote areas was a challenge. Further, the biggest issue was water shortage."

"We saw how women who were working with their embroidery art were fleeced by a few merchants acting as

middlemen who sold kashidakari items in the market, leaving families to receive very little income, mostly Rs 200."

Most of these women are adept in kashidakari embroidery and are from the Meghwal community whose families had settled here post the 1971 Indo-Pak war.

"So we aimed at preserving and promoting Kashidakari art, while ensuring these women attain financial independence. Hence we started a programme with 224 Pak-oustee women in the town."

In 1994, Lata joined hands with designers from National Institute of Design, National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) and Dastkar to hold workshops and develop over 250 designs in accordance with the fashion trends of the time.

"In 1994, we took these women to Delhi Haat which was their first train ride and their experience boosted us to take more big initiatives," she says.

"Today, generations of women are involved in this work, and even the daughters of these households are earning as well as being able to study," she says.

Lata has been recognised by the Government of Switzerland and felicitated with the International Prize for Women Creativity in Rural Areas, as well as the Mahila Shakti Award and Senior Citizens Service Award by the Rajasthan government.

She remembers her mother and says, "She would tell me that while society has many ways to dictate what a woman should or should not do, I should stay focussed enough to carve my own path. She encouraged me to be educated, and I finished my postgraduate degree in law before coming to Barmer. Her words inspired me to ensure that other girls had the opportunity to realise their dreams," she says.

3. Famous Textiles of Rajasthan

The textiles of Rajasthan represent a mixture of vibrant colors & royal ancestry. As the fabrics in this state are woven with intricate delicacy & extreme attention to detail, it is highly recommended across the world to buy these textiles from the locals of Rajasthan and not from any urban markets. So, without wasting any time, let's dive into the rich history of Rajasthani textiles.

Bandhani

Bandhani (Derived from the Sanskrit word bandh, which means to bind and tie) is a tie-dye fabric embellished by plucking of the cloth using fingernails. Colours specially used in Bandhani are yellow, red, blue, green & black. As it is a tie-dye process, only natural colors are used & a large variety of patterns can be created. Bandhani is also worn for symbolic purposes, red represents a Hindu bride & yellow represents maternity. Fun Fact: The earliest examples of Bandhani work date back to 4000 BC.

Leheriya

Practiced exclusively in Rajasthan, Leheriya is a tie-dye technique which results in a glistening cloth with distinguishing patterns. Done on thin cotton or silk cloth, the lengths of Leheriya are usually appropriate for sarees & turbans. Usage of Indigo is prominent for coloring Leheriya, giving a dazzling look to the fabric.

Fun Fact: Turbans of Leheriya cloth were a popular male fashion choice in the 19th & 20th century.

Bagru

Named after the town they are popularly produced in, Bagru cloth is created by natural dyeing & using an interesting hand block printing method practiced exclusively by the Chippa community. Known for its zigzag patterns, bagru printing is done using vegetable & Indigo colours. Fun Fact: Bagru Printing made its way into Rajasthan during the 17th century. The Chippa community immigrated to the desert state to get away from the social upheaval going on in Gujarat at the time.

Kota Doria

The most famous cloth manufactured in the Kota region is the Kota Doria. Popular features of this textile are the checkered square designs & lightweight feel. Onion juice in addition to rice mush are applied during the weaving process of this garment, ensuring the durability of the material.

4. Designer Ruma Devi Who Battled Hardships To Help 22,000 Women Become Financially Independent

She is just an eighth pass but she has made around 22,000 women in Rajasthan self-dependent by giving them decent jobs.

She owns a client list of eminent designers from across the world who have been visiting Barmer to work with her iconic style and talent.

Thousands of Rajasthan's rural women empowered through up-skilling in embroidery

Thousands of migrants from Pakistan, who settled in Chohtan block of Barmer after the 1965 and 1971 India-Pakistan wars, faced financial difficulties due to limited opportunities for work in the desert area. The societal norms didn't allow women from this Meghwal community to step out for work, but they knew *kashidakari*, a type of embroidery that creates natural motifs with multi-colored threads and beads. Their fortunes changed sometime in the mid-80s when Lata Kachhawaha brought in trainers from India's premier design institutes to teach them new designs that could be used in clothing and linen. And, there was no looking back.



Today, over 40,000 women in Rajasthan, including Pakistani refugees, are earning a living through traditional handicrafts, animal husbandry and agriculture, thanks to Kachhawaha's efforts.

While women knew some traditional designs, experts from National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, NIFT Delhi and Institute of Craft and Design, Jaipur held around 50 design workshops with them and developed 250 new designs in line with consumer demand. "Around 12,000 women have been trained in *kashidakari* and patchwork," says 68-year-old Kachhawaha, whose broken engagement over her dusky complexion changed the course of her life.

She has been the driving force behind the Society for Uplift of Rural Economy (SURE) that was set up by her mentor Magraj Jain in 1990. SURE has skilled the women and linked them to buyers who give regular orders, resulting in stable income. It also organises exhibitions within India and abroad to give artists exposure to the latest trends besides popularising the crafts.

"We have held exhibitions in Germany, Japan, Singapore and Sri Lanka. This helps women gain confidence and get an understanding of the market and consumer preferences," she says.

5. Learning & Earning

Leading outlets such as FabIndia, Ikea and Rang Sutra source clothes and home furnishings from the women associated with SURE. The women work three to four hours in their free time and earn between Rs 3,000 and Rs 5,000 per month. "For women who are not literate and have never stepped out of their homes, learning a new skill and earning money is a big achievement. When I started working with them, they were earning Rs 200

per month,” Kachhawaha adds.

While she has improved the lives of thousands of people, it has not been an easy path. When Lata began her work in 1985, the situation in villages was very harsh. People were suspicious of outsiders and skeptical about a woman telling them about livelihood, health, education, she recollects.

“There was no electricity or telephones. Government services had not penetrated. The hamlets were remote and there were no schools or hospitals. People would not bathe or wash clothes for several days,” she says. Reaching some of the remote hamlets was a challenge.

But that did not deter Lata as she continued her work. Her organisation SURE has also set up 3,000 self-help groups with 14,000 women who are involved in animal husbandry and agriculture. They sell milk to the local dairies and goats for meat besides cultivating cash crops like *jeera* and *isabgol* (psyllium husk). It helps them earn around Rs 5,000 to Rs 8,000 per month.

SURE has helped another 14,000 women in Jodhpur set up kitchen gardens and grow plants such as *amla* (Indian gooseberry), *ber* (Indian plum) and pomegranate, earning around Rs 5,000 per month.

6. Life Changing

It was a chance meeting with Jain that set the future course of her life. At 22, she had completed her post graduation and was pursuing law and was engaged to be married. But stray comments on her complexion by her fiancé angered her. “We were both educated and from good families. But I did not like his narrow-mindedness.” And that’s when she resolved not to get married.

After her parents’ demise, she visited Barmer with her brother. It was her brother who introduced her to Jain, who was working to provide stable sources of income to villagers. Kachhawaha was inspired by Jain’s vision and threw herself into social service. Since the past 40 years she has been working with women to provide them with livelihoods, improve literacy and health, educating village children, including those with special needs.

Her own experience with women in Rajasthan continued to inspire her to work in newer areas. She recalls a village sojourn. “I woke up early one morning. It was still dark outside. The women of the house were going out. They said they were going to answer nature’s call. They had no water and they said they used sand to clean-up. Some even used sand during their periods,” says Kachhawaha.

“Women had to travel for hours to fetch water for daily chores. We taught the women to build *tankas* or tanks to store water and reduce their labour,” she says.

7. Education & Health

The Non Government Organisation (NGO) opened education camps at two locations for girls where they were given basic training in math and Hindi and were later admitted to regular schools. They also opened two residential schools where children of migrant labourers could study while their parents went to other states for work. SURE also has a residential school in Barmer for the deaf-mute and visually challenged children.

Many of these children are now teachers or employed in small jobs, she says.

SURE also helped train 250 local midwives in 18 villages in Chohtan block of Barmer district. They were trained on safe deliveries, immunisation and hygiene. Besides, SURE’s work includes awareness generation around TB, malaria, diarrhoea, importance of cleanliness and personal hygiene.

Jain was awarded a Padma Shri in 1989 while Kachhawaha has also received several awards including the International Prize for Women Creativity in Rural Areas by the Switzerland government and the Mahila Shakti award and Senior Citizens Service award by the Rajasthan government.

The NGO, which has an annual turnover of Rs 8 crore, now has around 65 members and works in Barmer, Jodhpur, Jalore, Jaisalmer and Tonk. It gets donations and contributions from individuals, government and companies.

SURE is also working in Jammu and Kashmir with Dabur where they are carrying out renovation and sanitation drive in schools. They also did a project in Himachal Pradesh with JSW group to train 1000 girls about personal hygiene and nutrition. Good work, surely, knows no boundaries.

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