

FROM THE IGNCA ARCHIVES

Published in Vihangama 2003 Vol. III (May - June)

RABARIS - THE PASTORAL COMMUNITY

Rabaris are nomadic herders who live scattered through out Gujarat and Rajasthan. Originally only camels were their source of livelihood. However, now, they keep goat, sheep, cow or buffalo. Rabaris are highly adaptive and hence there appears to be some differences among the community, living in different locations. The Rabaris have permanent villages, which are occupied half the year. Also, women live in the villages as men go out with their cattle. One of the most striking features of the Rabari community is their artistic embroidery.



Rabari Child



Richly Rabari embroidered children's cap

Rabaris are usually divided into four group, on the basis of geographical criteria: the Rabaris of Kutch, of Saurashtra, of north Gujarat and of Rajasthan. All Rabari women dress in severe black, always. What renders their clothes richness is their embroidery, which has highly skilled stitches and superb colour combinations. Women decorate the insides of their homes with mud relief and their household textiles like quilts and shopping bags show off the proficiency of their needlework. IGNCA has in its archives two sets of collections - the Rabari embroidery and photographs on the lifestyle of the pastoral community (the one in Kutch). Both have been shown in separate exhibitions previously.

Like most communities in India, Rabaris too have an unwritten dress code that reveals the status and stature of a person. They have the code for everyday wear, ceremonial and wedding dresses. For instance, the blouse pleated at the breast sets a married woman apart from the single. The older women and widows wear plain black with no embroidery. The outer layer of the dress is a long woolen shawl. Un married women wear white while the married and the elderly wear brown or black. In the case of nubile or young married women, the shawl is adorned with miniscule deep red circular designs, made by the tie-and-dye method. The widow's shawl is plain black. In some regions, Rabari women may embellish their shawl with applique work or embroider the centre seam, add mirrors or ever do up the border.

Men wear dhoti and on the top a short double breasted waist coat (all white) laced over the chest and tied, long sleeves which are gathered up and folded at the arms and a white turban. On special occasion, the turban is an embroidered one.

All Rabaris, difference as there might be, believe in two legends about their origin and lineage. Rabari means the one that has gone outside (dwells outside). According to one of the legends on their origin, Lord Shiva gave Sambal, one of his minions, three apsaras, to marry and flourish with a condition that he will not speak one word to them. If he violated the condition, the apsaras would be lost forever. From his association, one son and four daughters were born. Soon, the family grew too numerous and so the lord asked him to go and dwell on the earth. Since then Sambal was called Rabari. On earth, they resided in Marwar, the region that lies on the foothills of Aravallis with Udaipur as its centre. The daughters were married off to Rajput men.

According to another version, Sambal was an ace camel breeder. Someone started stealing the beautiful and sturdy animals. Sambal soon discovered that the stealer was a goddess. However, Sambal caught her and through a clever stratagem removed her clothes, leaving her in an embarrassing situation. As per the tradition in situations like this, the two married and after wandering across Haryana, Rajasthan and Sind, settled in Kutch. Yet another story, with precise time and place says that Allauddin Khilji had fallen in love with an extraordinarily beautiful Rabari woman. The community not wanting this marriage escaped to Nagar Summa (present day Sind, where they were given refuge by the king. However, the Muslim forces invaded Sind (circa 1350) and the community once again escaped, running eastward and settled in Kutch.

Whatever be the legend and stories about their origin, there is no doubting that Rabari is a close-knit community, allowing only social participation in meals and smoking even among sub-groups. Marriage between sub-communities is not accepted.

The photographs in IGNCA collection have been taken by Francescod' Orazi Flavoni, who was an Italian diplomat. He spent nearly a decade working on this nomadic community. The photographs portray the different activities of the people, their dwellings, their tools and their dresses. In all there are 50 photographs in the collection. The embroidery collection is larger, with 90 pieces. From children's cap to huge quilt covers, the IGNCA collection covers not only all articles of daily use among the Rabaris but also includes various patterns and designs that are specific to certain sub-groups. There are toys with embroidery and bead-work, shopping bags that are made by women mostly to show off their talent as they are carried to the market place and heavily done skirts and blouse worn on special occasions.

Changes all around in the society are not leaving the Rabaris untouched. The younger generation now prefers to wear frock and trousers, though as they grow they submit to the community pressure. However, it is certain that the IGNCA collections of both photographs and embroidery will continue to cherish and preserve the Rabaris, even if time takes the charm out of these very special people.

Mangalam Swaminathan