

REMINISCENCES

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Dialogue with Rabaris



After having written out particularly difficult passage, I walked out of the building of brick and concrete into the sprawling green lawns of the Centre where three women enwrapped in black shawls sat huddled together near the Mati-Ghara. I stood close by watching their nimble fingers kneading mud and giving it the shape of a camel by meticulously following the instructions of a man in a large, white turban, short upper garment and *dhoti* covering the legs. A little girl enthusiastically laid out small mud toys to dry.

As they lifted their faces, the exceptionally long and heavy earrings and consequently elongated ear lobes and bores, black dresses and the tranquil expression held my interest and attention. I sat with them talking about their life and living in Kutch. Soon one of them held my wrist and led me inside the Mati-Ghara – the mud house in which they were, kind of reproducing their embroidery and lifestyle for then ensuing Exhibition. Pointing toward an enclosure of clay, well polished and embedding many mirrors, she said:

"This is our house. See the walls, we decorate them. In our land, this is not new. All the houses are decorated in the same way. It is the brown-haired people [referring to the foreigners] who exclaim, *bahut accha* [meaning 'very beautiful'] on seeing them".

Turning towards cattle, camel and other animal figures, she said a peculiar sense of identity and ownership:

"This is our *mal* which is never to be kept inside the house. Within the house is the pitcher, the hearth".

Perhaps Rabaris divide space into the domestic and the extra-domestic.

This was my first encounter with the representatives of a community about which I had read in books and journals. Here, in the live situation, I found substantiation of my textual knowledge and also contrast with it. My fascination with Rabaris and their work increased many times. In the next few days, I went to them frequently.

I saw their relationship of long antiquity with plant, trees and animals in the motifs on their heavily tattooed arms and in the embroidery. They displayed the embroidered bags and wall hangings, skirts beset with mirrors, patterns from patchwork, jewelry and replica of animals. These are usually made for personal use by women who sit together after the men folk have left for work and seek to complete a piece with perfection and precision to the last stitch.

In another context, women said that they would feel shy in wearing a saree, in their own words, "even if it were to cost Rs. 5,000." They insist on wearing the traditional dress, especially when on travel, since it, at the outset, distinguishes the Rabari from all other communities. For two women, this was the first visit to Delhi and admittedly a cause of anxiety and tension. One of them said that she spent the night in the train thinking about how the city and its people would be. Soon after reaching here they realized the spatial and emotional distance that they had traveled. They remember the village and relatives with much

fondness and find it difficult to cope with the situation in which they do not know, hence cannot greet by name, the people who come to see their work.

I asked them whether working here in the contrived situation at Delhi was in anyway different from that in their land. The answer surprised me. In their own narration:

"There is no difference in making these things here and in Bhuj. Why should there be a difference? We work with the same material, create the same objects and designs there and also here. The divergence between the two situations consists of: (i) here everything is provided, there we have sometimes to fetch material, even water from a distance; (ii) here we are using fevicol and sawdust which we do not use there; (iii) here we are continually at this kind of work from morning to evening while there we take to it and leave it at will and due to pressures for domestic chores; and (iv) here our work is for display so we have to be extra careful while there it is often for self-consumption and rarely for commercial use. But these are not big differences".

They were happy with the arrangement of many people coming to see the exhibits prepared by them.

A distinct sense of continuity is pervasive in their thought. Evidently, the Rabaris do not perceive total decontextualisation of art and artistic manifestations. To them, the micro-context emerges whenever and wherever two or more women collect and mix earth with cow-dung for making figures or thread the needle for embroidery work. Their sense of identity and distinctiveness appears to be rooted primarily in the *persona* of their being as also in ties and relationships with others in the community.

An important requisite of Rabari continuity is the careful handing down of tradition from one generation to the next.

"On the contrary", said the Rabari man "it will perpetuate in entirety. The younger generation (pointing to the little girls) takes interest and even tries to make innovations. There is no alternative. We do not take to studies, therefore, do not get employment and have to depend on all this for livelihood. One generation seeks to do better than the preceding one. The children learn by seeing. They get trained by bringing water, taking the objects for drying, handling the material and by observing the older women at work with rapt attention".

The projected optimism put the long ranging turbulence in the mind concerning irretrievable erosion of aesthetic cultures to rest. There is much to know and learn from them; I did not make an attempt in this direction. Rabaris have left but the lingering memory of their presence throbbing with life and vitality deludes the absence.



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