

# RABARI EMBROIDERY

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Matighar, IGNCA

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## An Expressive Art

Rabari embroidery not only tells us much about their culture but is also like a language in which the women use to express themselves.



The exhibition of Rabari Embroidery which was organised by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts is an outcome of research and documentation to record the creativity of women belonging to the Rabari community in their daily life and lifestyle. A unique exhibition of its kind, the exquisite embroidery is a feast for one's eyes.

The Rabaris are a wandering community known for their extraordinary capacity for survival and adaptation in the arid regions of Gujarat and Rajasthan. They are recognised for their distinctive arts, especially embroidery, beadwork and mirrored mud sculpture.



Rabari women make mud sculpture themselves. They also traditionally spin the wool from their sheep and give it to local weavers to make the woollen skirts, veils, blankets and turbans Rabaris use. But, the Rabari women are most renowned for their handwork which was displayed in this exhibition.

Rabaris embroider a wide range of garments, bags, household decorations and animal trappings. The objects that they embroider highlight important events, rites and values in their lives. Girls traditionally embroider blouses, skirts, veils, wall hangings, pillows, purses and *Kothalo* which are dowry sacks, as their contribution for their dowries.

Married women embroider children's clothing and cradle cloth as well. These embroideries not only reflect the primacy of children, the mirrors which are embellished also protect their children from evil spirits that inhabit their world. Some embroideries emphasise particular customs. Elaborately embroidered *kothaliya* -- purses in which the groom carries ceremonial gifts of *pan* and *supari*, symbolise the importance of exchange in maintaining familial ties. Embroidery on *ludi* veils underscores the importance of *laj* the conventional modesty that Rabaris observe.



Mature Rabari women dress in black signifying ritual mourning. By legend they are honouring a king who centuries ago died protecting Rabaris. Younger women during mourning wear coloured blouses which are subtly embroidered at the sides indicating that the woman is mourning. A cross like pattern in blouses is essential for women who are not widowed. Their skirts are beautifully embroidered with colourful thread and scraps of silvered glass.

Other embroideries on display preserve the Rabari memory of their origins as desert dwelling camel herders. Rabaris embroider camel trappings to honour the camels they still keep for ceremonial use. Rabari grooms wear elaborately embroidered long adan jackets and *chorani* pants, and brides wear *ghagharo* skirts. These garments evoke the dress of royalty centuries ago, reinforcing the legend that Rabaris once enjoyed close association with Rajput rulers.



The way in which Rabaris embroider also tells us much about Rabari culture. Rabari embroidery is like a language with which women express themselves. The composition created by the women comprise specific motifs each of which has a name and meaning. Many of these symbols represent elements intrinsic to Rabari everyday life and throws light upon how the community sees their world. Others have historical meaning and help to perpetuate the Rabari knowledge of their heritage.



Over time, symbols may go out of fashion, or may be adapted to current fashion. In some cases, a traditional symbol is given a contemporary meaning so that current work reflects today's life. The style with which Rabaris embroider, the combination of stitches, colour, motif and pattern is then the medium with which women express themselves.

As with language, the elements of this medium are manipulated according to rules. The style is thus understood as an entity and used by all members of the community in the same way. Rabari style reflects an aesthetic sense also expressed in the mud relief, jewellery and even tatoos of Rabari women.



Rabari embroidery is distinct among other styles practised by Rabari neighbours. This style is by no means static. Stitches change, scales increase and decrease and colours become bolder and brighter. This embroidery is continually revitalised by the spontaneous innovation of Rabari artisans. Its the creativity of Rabari women, a manifestation of their extraordinary capacity for adaptation that keeps this traditional vital.

