

THROUGH A PHOTOGRAPHER'S EYE - RABARI

A PASTORAL COMMUNITY OF KUTCH

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Committee Room, India International Centre



Recognition of photography as an art form as also the use of the photographic medium in the multi-dimensional activities of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) has led it to develop a serious interest in the growth of photography in India. Many important collections of photographs, including the work of Raja Deen Dayal and Cartier Bresson's photographs of India, have been acquired and are proposed to be exhibited in series of Exhibition entitled: "Through a Photographer's Eye."

Photographs of Rabaris of Kutch, the subject of the present exhibition, link with the programme of the Janapada Sampada Division of IGNCA which undertakes studies of distinctive communities in India with a view to examine the inter-relationship of their art and creativity with the socio-economic life style and belief systems. Life style is fundamental to various expressions of art and is the primary inspiration from which all arts originate, receive sustenance and find their final fruition. Life style studies have, therefore, received logical primacy in the academic programme of IGNCA.

The fast changing pace of cultural life style consequent on economic development and industrialisation calls for immediate documentation of artistic manifestations before distinctive identities of communities are lost as they already have in many parts of the world. A sensitive photographer with a perceptive eye and a sympathetic heart can capture the strength of character, the upright integrity, the joys and travails, the colour and skills of many communities. Dr. Francesco d'Orazi Flavoni, a senior Italian diplomat, did this for the Rabaris of Kutch by photographing them over a span of nine years. Rabaris are usually divided into four groups, identified on the basis of geographical criteria: The Rabari of Kutch, of Saurashtra, of north Gujrat, and of Rajasthan. Photographs of Flavoni cover the Rabaris of Kutch. They have three subgroups. The 'Kacchi' living in the western part of the peninsula and in areas surrounding the city of Bhuj, the 'Dhebariya' who reside around the towns of Anjar and Mandvi, and the 'Vagadiya' present in the talukas of Vagad and Rapar.

The photographs bring out the dignity of life and culture of Rabaris. Flavoni's pictures of these sturdy and enterprising nomads reflect the enormous plastic ability of photography to capture not only gestures and emotions but the very spirit of a people. Rabaris are lean of build, noble in bearing, their oval faces uniquely expressive with well shaped, deep set eyes, which at times are green or blue in colour. Obesity is rare among them. They are rich in their smiles in sharp contrast to the harshness of the land that they inhabit. The physiognomy of the faces, the freshness and vitality of youth, and the tensionless wrinkles of ripened age reflect an inner harmony which is a gift of holistic living.



Rabaris are a colour ful people by nature and their costumes exhibit the entire range of spectrum. It is the quality of their aesthetic preference which makes them unique, different and extraordinary. Their distinctive arts manifest themselves in the style of mudhuts, mirror work, and exquisitely embroidered designs. Their aesthetic sense is varily displayed in the selection of colours -- red and black, violet and pink -- and floral geometric and herring-bone designs done by chain stitches. Their charming physique is profusely decked with ornaments made of silver and gold. Men also wear earrings, in particular, one called the toliya, semiconical and quite heavy.

Of all the features which distinguish Rabaris from other communities, the most noticeable is dress with the striking chromatic contrast between stark black of women's shawls and the white of men's attire. On gala occasions, the whole costume of men, including the turban, is embroidered, although the style and background colour (white) remains unchanged. Outstanding feature of the women's dress is the long wooden black shawl originally white for the young women and either dark brown or black for the older ones. In the case of nubile or young married women, the shawl is adorned with miniscule deep red circular designs, made by 'tie-and-die' method. The widow's shawl is plain black.



Rabari villages are well kept and clean; the interior of the huts are remarkable in their spotlessness and orderliness. The harsh physical environment has kept the Rabari life simple, fulfilling only essential needs which include their aesthetic needs. But their life is always dignified. Never does one get the impression of grinding poverty, of material and moral degradation of the individual. In the Rabari cognitive system man, animal, and nature are viewed as a unity.

Animals, especially camels, are inseparable inmates of the Rabari family. Forest, hill, and desert do not divide their life. On the contrary, nature unites them in their aesthetic appreciation, artistic manifestation, and ceremonial performances.

