

## BOOK REVIEW

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### **Rabari : A Pastoral Community of Kutch**

Francesco d'Orazi Flavoni, Published by IGNSA, New Delhi and Brijbasi Printers Private Limited, New Delhi, 1990, pp.132, Rs.575/-

For decades Rabaris have been camel herders wandering in the arid regions of Gujarat and Rajasthan in search of food and water for themselves and their animals. Far removed from the ever-fragmenting urban systems, the Rabari, once nomadic pastoralists now largely sedentary agriculturists live in mudcowdung houses and spend their lives tending camels goats, cows and buffaloes in perfect harmony with the surroundings. The hub of their existence consists of a series of adaptations to the parched environment threatening the very survival of life forms, and confirmation of their dependence on, and inter-dependence with nature and its resources through their holistic lifestyle, life cycle, life function and world view. This lifestyle manifests itself, among others, in embroidery and embroidered motif for which Rabaris are known far and wide.

The dialogue of human beings with nature and environment, having considerable bearing on life and creativity of women, provides the anchor point of lifestyle projects undertaken at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts under its *Loka Parampara* programme. In the man-animal-nature matrix, the photographic documentation by Francesco d'Orazi Flavoni stands out as first of its kind. The Introduction by Baidyanath Saraswati topped with an enriching photographs in a perspective from which they become comprehensible to intellectuals and intelligentsia on the one hand and patrons of art and aesthetics on the other.

This book is exemplary of an approach derived from reversing the oft-beaten trend of employing photographs to substantiate the text. The hundred photographs herein are substantiated with a rather broad based text. The well arranged photographs collectively deal with the cosmological-temporal dimensions, artistic manifestations, migration, camping strategies, traditional technologies and daily routine. Each photograph, with no exception, is of tremendous depth carrying substance beyond the visual.

The emotive content of photographs particularly those illustrating, a mother breastfeeding her child (Nos.13 & 79), young 'Vagadiya' and 'Kacchi' women (Nos.33 & 66 respectively) carding and spinning activities (Nos. 40 & 41), shepherd (No.71) and men waiting for some ceremonies to begin (No.91) bespeak volumes about Rabari perception of self, selfhood and identity. By the same token, the deeply wrinkled faces of elderly men and women (Nos.22,27,85-87) tell the tale of their lives.

The accompanying text brings the Rabari socio-cultural milieu to the fore. The many shades in the legend of their origin, finely interwoven with affinity and kinship, travel and migrations, rites and customs, nature and ecology, and art and artistic manifestation well provide insight into Rabari being. What emerges as significant and important is not merely the information but the underlying emic current that minimizes bend, distortion and ill-representation arising from studying a community from the outside.

The text and the photographs together transcend the limitations of space and time to transport experts and lay persons alike to the land of Rabaris. Reading this book, if I may add, has been a personal experience.

The testimony to the book is borne by the words of Kapila Vatsyayan, "I was enraptured by the quality of the photographs – the sensitivity of the eye – the sympathy of the heart which had captured through the lens, the strength and character, the upright integrity and dignity, the joys and travails, the colour and skill of `Rabaris' of Kutch... " and again, "The physiognomy of the faces, the freshness and vitality of youth and, the tensionless wrinkles of ripening age reflect an inner harmony of `Being', a gift of holistic living which will, no doubt, be lost when the tensions of progress and development will devour them as others" (foreword).

**- Nita Mathur**