

THE SEARCH FOR SINDHU

**AJRAKH
DIARIES**

Through
Language
and Lens

**SHABRI
WABLE**

The Clothes
Maker of Bhuj

**KHATRI
AND
KHATRI**

First
Families
of Ajrakh
Craftsmen

**THE
CERAMICS
OF KUTCH
AND
SINDH**

**Nani
Fatima's
Sindhi
Nada**

THE VOICE OF FASHION



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The Search for Sindhu: Closing Arguments

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

'The Search for Sindhu'

A rediscovery of shared vocabularies of crafts and design in Sindh and Kutch—from cloth to ceramics, from Ajrakh to embroidery, from pastoralism to Sufism, from old to new



When Good Earth founder and creative director Anita Lal first mentioned a show called Sindhu to celebrate 10 years of the brand's everyday wear label Sustain, an undercurrent of déjà vu coursed through me. As a culturally aware Sindhi, the tug I felt was subjective. The river Sindhu or the Indus, that also finds mention in the Rigveda, is not after all just about Sindh as a geographical region. In its gurgle and meandering path flow memories and slices of the ancient Indus Valley Civilisation from the archaeological site of Mohenjo-Daro, 2500 BCE. Its trade routes, cultural bonds, the crafts and ceramics of that era and the way it connects histories of an entire subcontinent along the Arabian Sea from Tibet to Kashmir, Punjab and Sindh made it a unique idea for a fashion and design show.

Pastness has an irrefutable enticement but that it would also illuminate links with our current lives, pieces and parts of our wardrobes and cultural inheritance was the promise of Sindhu. A potent context to explore content on crafts and textiles. A series that could tap shared vocabularies of design, block printing, embroidery, pastoralism, pottery, colour, cotton and other connects across the border between Pakistan and India.

Good Earth's Sindhu collection (shown at IGNCA in Delhi) looks at "persistence of pattern" from the Indus Valley Civilisation to what survives as living textiles today. At "roots and routes" through Ajrakh, the sacred cloth of the past with its resist printed, mordant dyed cloth in madder and Indigo, in floral and geometric patterns. Good Earth interprets these through two leitmotifs. Fostat Brocade (derived from patterns of Fostat Ajrakh) and Mingora Ajrakh, design explorations that use classical traditions as inspiration but add unusual artworks to it.

On the other hand, at TVOF, we worked on a series called The Search for Sindhu. Stories told through photography and writing reported from the crafts-rich region of Kutch.



▲ **Top:** A handwoven Mashru jacket edged with hand-done zardozi and resham threadwork by Good Earth, a part of the The Sindhu exhibit.

◀ **Bottom:** Families get together in Zerarwadi, Kutch at an artisan's home to showcase their craft.

We set out to understand the story behind the current resonance of Ajrakh in design institutes and exhibitions across the world, in fashion markets, in art galleries, among students and researchers of crafts techniques and whether the hand-created textile can withstand the new pressures of the market without being qualitatively compromised.

What we also brought back however, are how the centuries-old textile is made and worn today in Kutch. Accounts of Sindhi Muslim communities from Khavda, Banni and other border regions of Kutch. The crafts they practice and sustain. From pastoralism to Sufism, language to music, recitations of famed Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif's poetry by the Maldhari singers of Kutch and their use of Ajrakh. The shrinking availability of the "original" Sindh Ajrakh in the markets of Khavda.

From the only practitioner of the Sindhi *nada* (drawstring), a pre-knitting technique, in Pacham in Moti Bandha district, a lady Fatima Bai, fondly called Nani by the entire village to the famed Khatri of Kutch, the master craftsmen and makers of Ajrakh, their explorations of commerce and creativity. If Dr Ismail Khatri of Ajrakhpur who was awarded an honorary doctorate by a UK University and his sons Juned and Sufiyan are one influential pillar of this story, the other is an obscured one. Bilal Indris Khatri of Khavda, an extraordinary artist skilled at making the "*dupaasi*" (two sided) Ajrakh still struggling to find ways to fund, promote and sell his work.

If there is the account of the septuagenarian A.A. Wazir, Kutch's well-known collector of antique crafts and embroideries, there is the young Shabri Wable who calls herself a clothes maker.

Wable works with local communities and organisations in Kutch to create clothes and support developmental ideas through crafts having relocated from Pune to pursue a slower and more conscious life far from the madding crowd.

The work of institutions like Khamir, Shrujan or Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan may be known to those who followed the crafts resurgence of Kutch in the rehabilitation years after the Bhuj earthquake. Our stories though flow, much like a river from region to religion, the different block printing motifs used by Hindu and Muslim Khatri, the importance of Ajrakh in the life of a Sindhi Kutchi, especially the pastoralist menfolk, the use of natural dyes in Ajrakhpur, the plant installed to recycle water used in the dyeing vats to which is then released to the fields, how the very intensity of colour of madder and Indigo changed after the earthquake as the quality of the water—that was anyway high in iron content—changed. There is science and craft. People and products. Progress as well as poverty.

The Search for Sindhu is a rediscovery.

You will find all these stories here in a rolling

series. Including first person narratives and interviews with scholars and writers who have worked with and worn Ajrakh as identity, or those who understand ceramics, community life and crafts.



Shefalee Vasudev



Jenaben Jakhau painting a pot at Khamir Craft Facility.

Khatri and Khatri

The First Families of Ajrakh



< Dr Ismail Khatri with Soofiyan and Juned.

A crafts diary from Kutch begins and ends with Ajrakh. An Ajrakh diary begins and ends with the Khatri community. A Khatri diary may begin with Dr Ismail but doesn't end there
By **Shefalee Vasudev**

It is 10 am and we are at Dr Ismail Mohammed Khatri's studio in Ajrakhpur. This village (with only *pucca* houses) that came up after the devastating Bhuj earthquake of 2001 as a resettlement space is named after its artisan community that creates, reimagines, block prints, hand dyes and supplies Ajrakh textiles to a large number of brands and retail giants in India. Even art galleries and museum shops in some parts of the world.

Dr Ismail's studio is ochre yellow; a contemporary new space designed by Uday Andhare of Ahmedabad-based architectural firm Studio Indigo. It mixes local Kutchi architecture with modern and functional interventions. It has a warm, artisanal vibe in the way it uses materials, including

discarded old Ajrakh blocks, as a design element on the wooden doors at the entrance. More than 50 people can be entertained here at once. Or a student eager for a practical lesson in dyeing and printing. Deep, dark wood has been effectively used with painted stone to display old archival designs. Large wooden chests store the "museum" pieces as the Khatri call them.

The store is inside, so you meander from the central courtyard which has an old-style cot strung tight with colourful synthetic wire into the store which sells Ajrakh-printed saris, dupattas, materials, stoles, a few tailored pieces for men and women—*kurtas*, jackets, dresses—and bedsheets and bedcovers. Everything is



Top: An Ajrakh-printed fabric at the store.

Bottom: Samples of natural dyes used in Ajrakh block printing, displayed at the studio.

hand-made. Every piece has been created with natural dyes.

First, The Ajrakh Takeaways...

It is the cloth of Sindh. And the oldest piece of dyed and printed cloth was found in Mohenjo-daro.

It is a geometric and abstract red-blue-black-white field of block printed mordant and resist textile using a mix of geometric and floral motifs.

Also called Azraq, Arabic for azure, Ajrakh involves 9 to 21 stages of printing and dyeing processes making it amongst the most complex crafts techniques in the world.

A single pattern may require several blocks each carved with different elements of the complete design. Blocks are used in stages to build up mordants and resists before each colour of dye bath.

“Original” Ajrakh also means fabric printed on both sides and is a “dupaasi” (two-sided).

According to historical texts, Ajrakh came to Kutch about four centuries back when Rao Desar, the king of Kutch brought two craftsmen with him from Sindh.

Among traditional motifs of Kutchi Ajrakh are dholak (drum), champakali, haanso (birds), chhedo (border), maleer (sunflower-like circles) designs. The newer ones including Mughal-inspired motifs, smaller paisleys, graphic zigzag lines and meenakari (enamel work) designs.

In Kutch, Ajrakh is worn by the pastoral communities, especially the menfolk as a shoulder drape, a lungi, twisted as a belt to hold something around the waist, as turban, folded to become a carrier for rotlis (bread), to wipe the face, or support the head for a quick nap. It is unstitched, personal and age-old.

The First Men Of Ajrakh

We sit in the central hall of Dr Ismail’s studio having sugared tea with 31-year-old Juned. He is the younger son of the famed Dr Ismail, (the studio is named after him), the 60-year-old master craftsman credited with resettling a large section of the Muslim Khatri community involved in Ajrakh printing from Dhamadka their former village home to Ajrakhpur. Dr Ismail was awarded an honorary doctorate by a UK university for his astute approach to business, craftsmanship and innovation.

The family carries a happy baggage of respected names. Dr Ismail’s father Mohammed Siddiq Khatri was an exceptional master craftsman. As a familiar network of collaborations



comes alive in conversations with the Khattris, it is soon obvious that they have worked with every noted crafts practitioner in India.

How The Story Turns

Juned is dressed in blue denims and a white kurta. His dark, thick beard veils his grins. Before he began to pull out pieces of Ajrakh fabric from the store to tie them on his head or waist, then drape on the shoulders to demonstrate the versatility of the drape, his phone rang non-stop. From Kutchi to Gujarati to a sing-song and indulgent English, from his “gooo-d morning” “hai-lohs” and “b-byes”, Juned is a man of the world. A far cry from his adolescent self, when, as a son of the indigo-laced soil of Kutch, he went to learn enterprise and creative strategy under Judy Frater, guru and mentor of more than one generation of craftsmen in the region. Frater, who currently runs Somaiya Kala Vidyalaya in Adipur, earlier taught at Kutch’s Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya. She has singularly impacted many artisans. From Bhuj to Dhamadka. From Mandvi to Khavda, Frater’s name keeps coming up in awe-inspiring references.



“The very essence of Ajrakh is slow and excellent, not perfect as perfection is an industrial idea.”

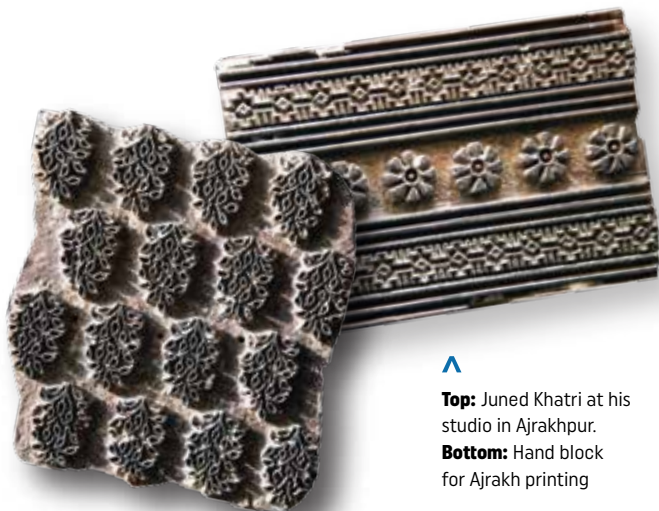
“I was a *mazdoor* (labourer) then, now I am an artisan,” says Juned covering the distance between his school dropout years to education under Frater. He emphasises how he learnt to articulate with designers and brand representatives from cities. Today, he is a confident promoter of Ajrakh. He travels abroad many times a year giving lecture demonstrations from Japan to Canada or setting up exhibitions. He argues persuasively about pricing and quality. Quite like his elder brother, the 36-year-old Sufiyan, who has recently recruited a Japanese designer to work with their studio for an evolution of the design language.

Each family in Ajrakhpur and Dhamadka is involved in some form or the other with the Ajrakh industry. Many others work with tie and dye—or *bandhini*. Not everyone involved or employed here is an artisan or craftsperson. Some are just daily wage workers. Yet, the surge in the demand for Ajrakh as well as the crafts and textiles of Kutch is undeniable. No wonder locals wear only screen printed and naphthol dyed Ajrakh. The “original” has taken wings to the cities of the world.

From curated collaborations to large-scale wholesale supplies and brands like Fabindia, Shoppers Stop or Reliance Retail, they do it all. That is why it is also for the crafts curious reader of these stories to know that not every person related to the Ajrakh industry in Kutch is an artisan. Many are crafts labourers or hired hands, who work in the seven day a week workshops as employees.

So while Juned’s question, “Why do people love this centuries-old textile so much?” needs to be answered, the last word goes to Judy Frater.

“The Khatri who make Ajrakh know that in the true sense of slow fashion, the longer you take to make one, the better it is. The very essence of Ajrakh is slow and excellent, not perfect as perfection is an industrial idea. Today, ironically, Ajrakh is so much in demand that it is endangered. The tremendous push to scale up forces artisans to cut corners and devalue their work. Industrial-scale Ajrakh stresses the environment with its frightening consumption of water and the society with its transformation of a horizontal social structure to a vertical one. Dr Ismail however has gotten off the bullet train of scaled-up Ajrakh production. He is again carving his own blocks and printing his own fabric. “What do we need to do to get this quality?” I ask him. He beams and says, “You have to make it with love.” ■



Top: Juned Khatri at his studio in Ajrakhpur.

Bottom: Hand block for Ajrakh printing



Pottery Yarn

From Sindh To Kutch

Decoding a lost civilisation through rural pottery and how the Sindh-Kutch Kumbhars share similar tools, techniques and design vocabularies
By **Meera Goradia**

< **Right:** A glazed plate from Sindh - wares that came to Kutch till a few decades ago.
Bottom: Paatar - a plate made in many sizes common to Sindh and Kutch.

Among the many exciting experiences and insights that working in Kutch with artisans gave me, is an enduring emotional connection that they feel for the people, culture and land of Sindh. The idea of Sindh has hovered over everything like a halo, a legend that uplifts. Many artisan communities of North West Kutch actually have close relatives living in Sindh, people left behind after the Partition.

Kutch was a part of the ecosystem with the Sindh Province along with parts of Rajasthan. There was trade and movement, especially when there was a drought. The pastoralists would take their animals up to Sindh where the water was. There are living traditions still of shared saints, music poetry and crafts across these regions, which are now separated by political geographies.

My work in Kutch has led me to the most unusual places making me witness to many stories in the making. One such was the work that Khamir, a Kukma-based NGO—where I worked as director from 2009-2016—did with the Kumbhars or the potters of Kutch. Our engagement with pottery took us back 7000 years to the Indus Valley Civilisation, the largest urban culture discovered so far at that point in history. It spread all the way from Rakhigarhi in Haryana to beyond the Swat Valley in the North West Frontier Province. New sites are still being discovered. It would seem that Sindh and Kutch have been inextricably





Top: (L-R) Amad, Ramzubhai and Niraj Dave

Bottom Left: Matti, a pot used for storage of grain, recreated for Khamir.

Bottom Right: Lotiya – a pot used for storing buttermilk or water.



linked since birth. Our work led us to understand the role pottery plays in decoding details of a lost civilisation.

The same quality of techniques, textures, designs and treatments are seen across the large geographical spread of the civilisation. This indicates a tremendous mastery over manufacture that ensured uniformity despite different clays of the regions. The precision and standardisation of practices followed then has not been seen even in the pottery practices of today.

We were amazed to trace similarities in design found in the present day pottery of Kutch. While there is no evidence of glazing in the Indus Valley artefacts, there are complex applications of engobe or using a clay slip which is made from metal oxides and stains, one of the hallmarks of Kutch pottery today.

The intricate painting done by women over the clay products is an embellishment with a slip. The pottery furnaces found at the Indus Valley sites indicate a process of very slow firing.



“We were amazed to trace similarities in design found in the present day pottery of Kutch. The tradition of making earthen toys during Diwali is a Sindhi tradition now embedded in Kutch.”

Sindh On Their Minds

The pottery team at Khamir included a diverse mix of *Kumbhars*, young designers and seasoned ceramic artists. We were excited by the research of the pottery practices, particularly Niraj Dave, one of the designers who found a strong comradeship with Ramzubhai, a master craftsman from Bhuj. They decided to get into a working partnership that they believe will continue for life. Their company is named Dehaati which means rural. Dave has now made Kutch his home and set up a studio space in a village close to Bhuj. He is part of the extended pottery family of Ramzubhai, his sons Amad and Mithu and a number of other *Kumbhars* in Kutch.

I was curious to see how this story was panning out, how Dave and Ramzubhai were taking their echoing passion forward and whether the past traditions we had researched, found resonance in their work. To my delight I discovered that Sindh was still very much on their minds.

“We are known as Sindhwas”, Ramzubhai says. He tells me that the communities across the border are the same as those

living this side. In fact, he often gets local demands for making ‘Sindhi’ products like *taasdi* or *tass* (storage vessel), *mangdi* (storage for food and milk products) or *paatar* (dough preparation plate). The tradition of making earthen toys during Diwali is a Sindhi tradition now embedded in Kutch. Ramzubhai’s son Amad says that he felt the Sindhi potters are far more skilled than those in Kutch. He produces a series of short videos on his smartphone about potters working in Sindh with a display of their products.

Shaping Similarities

Dave felt the commonality is in the shapes, techniques and designs that can be traced all the way to the Indus Valley artefacts. Terracotta with engobe is the common practice across Kutch and traditionally throughout most of India traditionally. The potters have played with porosity in dexterous ways to suit the function of the product. Each community had specific shapes, sizes and preferences for design. For example, the Rabaris, a pastoral community always on the move had a very small opening and space on the neck of the pot to enable tying it to a moving cart. The small opening ensured that water did not spill out. Old photographs of Sindhi potters showed the same shapes, designs and tools.

Painting is a very important aspect of Kutch pottery, done by women. Dave has named one of his collections after Hoorbai, an artisan in painting. The women do the painting with a fine bamboo tip in Kutch as in Sindh, perhaps a tradition passed down from the Indus Valley Civilisation. Recently, Dave developed a special collection of these traditional shapes for Good Earth with the Japanese finish of raku. Seven thousand years later, pottery continues to trigger creativity. ■

Meera Goradia has been working with the crafts sector since three decades. She is currently a crafts consultant.



Sufi diva Abida Parveen
seen wearing a length of Ajrak.

The "Ajrak" of Sindh

An "Ajrak" conversation with author and anthropologist Nandita Bhavnani whose exploration of Sindh resonates with insight
By **Shefalee Vasudev**

The book *Sindhnamah*, a large format, fat tome, written by Nandita Bhavnani with design and publication by the late Gita Simoes released by the HECAR Foundation in 2018 can best be described as hardbound nostalgia for indhis. Especially those who are constantly in a lost and found relationship with their culture.

A majority of Sindhis across the world who may speak and read the language well (like me) or not at all, do feel the need now and then to renew their connect with folk stories of Sindh, recipes, language, music and customs.

Sindhnamah with photographs by Pakistani photographer Nadeem Khawar is like a warm embrace, it is a trip back home to a parental refuge.

It encompasses many aspects— archaeological links to Mohenjo-Daro in the Indus Valley Civilisation, history, architecture, trade routes, music, mosques, people, recipes and folk tales from Sindh. The Mumbai-based Bhavnani, understands the inheritance of loss viscerally but has been able to turn it into an academic curiosity and search instead of lament. She travelled extensively to Sindh for her research, interacting with Sindhi families, poets, writers and musicians there. In this interview, she speaks about "Ajrak" as she spells it in Sindhi (and Urdu) the subject of one of her

pieces in *Sindhnamah*. Edited excerpts, followed by an excerpt from the book.

How would you describe the relationship of Sindhis living in Pakistan with their Ajrakh?

Ajrak is very widely used in Sindh today. It is a highly wearable drape, used in many creative ways, and therefore very much a part of the living culture of Sindh. As I have mentioned in my essay in *Sindhnamah*, men use it as a turban, a cummerbund or as a shawl. Women use it as a dupatta or make kurtas out of it. It is used as a bed sheet or bedcover, and sometimes made into a small hammock in which a baby can sleep. It is rolled up and used as a *sandhro* or belt by wrestlers in the Sindhi sport of *malakhro* (wrestling).

Ajrak is often used in the making of *rillis* (Sindhi quilts) as well. I have also seen small pieces used to decorate sling bags; Ajrak scarves, saris, *salwar-kurtas* and so on. I understand that author and activist Noorjehan Bilgrami has done good work in this field.

Today, the Ajrak of Sindh has become a symbol of cultural identity: it is Sindh's signature textile. Many Sindhi nationalist leaders like to be seen wearing Ajrak.



The entrance to the main prayer hall from the central courtyard at Jama Masjid of Thatta, Sindh, Pakistan.

In *Sindhnamah*, certain architectural representations correspond to block printing patterns of Ajrakh. Did you have any conversations that connected colour, architecture and textiles?

Since the representation of human forms is forbidden in Islam, Islamic art is rich in designs, patterns, motifs, arabesques. Some are abstract, others represent objects from day-to-day life like flowers, stars, the sun, etc.

In *Sindhnamah* too, I have observed that the geometric patterns on the carved and sculpted tombs at Chaukandi (and other similar medieval graveyards) belong to the universe of exquisite designs found in numerous other forms of Sindhi arts and crafts: textiles, embroidery, pottery, jewellery, wood-carving and tile work. This theme has also been explored by Ethel-Jane Bunting in her book, *Sindhi Tombs and Textiles: The Persistence of Pattern*.

In Kutch, Ajrakh made by the Khatri communities and worn by the pastoralists is primarily seen as a drape for men. Is that true in Sindh too?

I don't think that it would be accurate to say that Ajrak is primarily a men's drape in Sindh. Given the multiple ways that it is used there, it is a universal drape, in my opinion. It is used by both men and women, and gifted to and from both

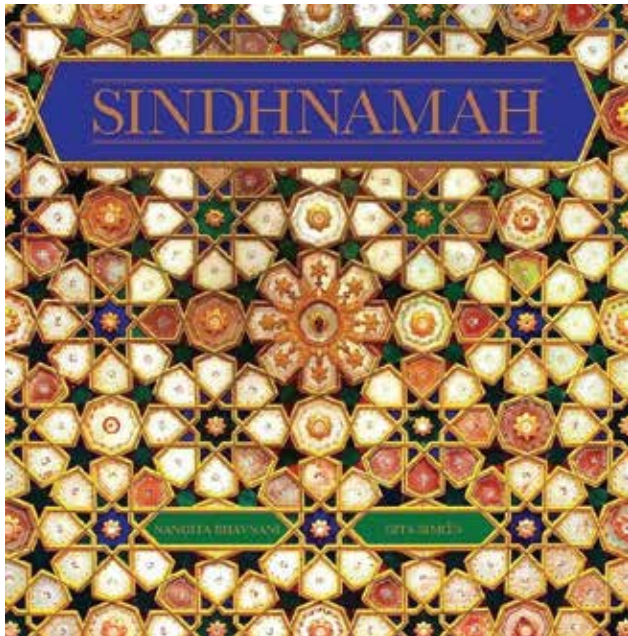
men and women. The world-famous Sufi diva Abida Parveen has especially been seen wearing a length of Ajrak from Bhit Shah (one of the most important Sufi shrines in Sindh) on her shoulder.

Excerpts from 'Ajrak', a small chapter in *Sindhnamah*

...Ajrak is created by both the soil of Sindh and the water of the Indus. Apart from the cotton cloth and indigo, the dyers and printers use a variety of natural products – flour,

rice paste, cow dung, castor oil, almond gum, dried lemon, jaggery, tamarind seeds and many more. They also use small balls of *gissi*, or camel dung, which not only bleaches the cloth and makes it softer, but also brings out the brightness of its colours. Water is essential to the making of an ajrak. Water is used for bleaching, dyeing and boiling the cloth, which is washed multiple times, either in the Indus or in one of its many canals. The riverbanks are then used for drying the cloth.

Today, the Ajrak of Sindh has become a symbol of cultural identity: it is Sindh's signature textile. Many Sindhi nationalist leaders like to be seen wearing Ajrak.



Top to Bottom: Cover of the book 'Sindhnamah'; Sindhi ajrakh pieces.

An ajrak is a long strip of cloth, typically five metres long. The central rectangle is the main ground, block printed with motifs. On the edge of each length are longitudinal borders while the *palaands* are the broad ends. Ajraks typically come as a set of two long pieces of cloth. Each piece is half the width of the final ajrak, and they are joined longitudinally to complete the piece.

Teli, or 'oily' ajraks are considered the best, since their colours only get brighter with the passage of time. *Bipuri*, or *dopassi* ajraks – those which have both sides printed – are deemed to be superior to, and hence more expensive than, *ekpuri* or *ekpassi* ones, which have only one side printed.

There are various ajrak designs, and each distinctive pattern has its own name, taken from the quotidian objects that form the main motifs, which include *jaleb*, or sweetmeat, almond, peacock, grindstone and cloud.

...The intricate and laborious process of the dyeing and printing of an ajrak is executed by highly skilled craftsmen known as Khatris, both Hindu and Muslim. The head of each atelier is known as an *usto*, or master craftsman. Working under him are other craftsmen, or *karigars*, and apprentices, or *chhokras*. This complicated process may involve as many as 21 different stages: boiling the cloth in copper vats to make it softer, and repeated rounds of bleaching, dyeing and printing (both mordant and resist).

Sindh has had an ancient tradition of dyeing cloth. The oldest scrap of dyed cloth in the world was found at Moenjodaro. Sindh exported cloth to Mesopotamia, where it was known as Sendal or Sindhu. Jewish merchants took this cloth further west to Greece, where this fine cloth became known as Sindon.

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Today, the ajrak of Sindh faces many problems. For one, the craftsmen often don't have access to adequate or clean water, so necessary for ajrak production. Also, members of the younger generation find this work too labour intensive, but reducing the number of dyeing and printing processes results in inferior quality. Natural dyes have been supplanted by chemical ones, sometimes cotton cloth is replaced by synthetic cloth, and now ersatz ajrak is also printed in factories.

While the production of traditional ajrak has declined in Sindh, efforts to conserve it are being made by a few individuals in Sindh, notably Noorjehan Bilgrami. ■

Nandita Bhavnani an anthropologist is a qualified chartered accountant with a law degree. She is the author of Sindhnamah (2018), The Making of Exile: Sindhi Hindus and the Partition of India (2014), and I Will & I Can: The Story of Jai Hind College (2011).

PHOTO ESSAY

Rites of Ajrakh

A journey through village hamlets and highways of Kutch where Ajrakh is worn as the Sindhi-Kutchi identity

Text by **Shefalee Vasudev** and
Photos by **Sondeep Shankar**

The idea of a photo feature on how Ajrakh is contemporarily worn in Kutch came from the Good Earth team. First in conversation with Anita Lal, the founder and creative head of the brand who was keen to explore the nuanced ways in which the age-old influence of Ajrakh could be expressed to the viewer, visitor, customer. Then more specifically from Kanupriya Bhattar, the curator of the exhibition section of Sindhu: Threads that Bind. The grand show was staged by Good Earth on October 20 at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) in Delhi.

With that in mind, I reached out to people in Kutch. Community workers, Ajrakh artisans, master craftsmen, NGO representatives, embroiderers and karigars to create a matrix of subjects with multiple ideas as layers of information and discovery in the final photo. The search for the “right people” included Maldhari singers in Bhirandiyara village near Khavda and some village seniors including a Jamut (a panchayat-like head), from Dinara and Sama villages. We went out as far as Pachham in Moti Bandha district to find Bachaya the sole gent’s tailor in that hamlet.

The aim was to photograph locals, mostly pastoralists who wore Ajrakh as a part of their everyday lives, or during festivities or weddings. Who treasured it as a piece of their culture and heritage. Every single piece of Ajrakh you see worn in these photos belongs to the wearer.

A number of these Ajrakhs—like the one worn by the dazzlingly pretty 11-year-old girl Mitha in Zerarwadi village for instance—are “Sindhi” Ajrakhs. Not crafted in Kutch but in Sindh, Pakistan. These have either been saved over



Mitha, 11, who tried to start her own “cupboard”, a small cart selling vegetables only to have to shut it down due to no sales. Zerarwadi hamlet in Banni. Mitha wears her mother's Ajrakh paired with golden earrings and a necklace. That's how the women wear it for a festival or wedding.

decades as heirloom pieces or purchased from traders who would come to sell wares from across the border to Khavda village. A practice that has recently been discontinued according to sources.

Incidentally, Mitha was wearing the gold earrings, the only precious item from her mother's wedding trousseau, when we reached the Zerarwadi hamlet. She said she wanted to show them off. When I complimented her effusively, her mother Noori, brought out the gold(en) necklace to complement it. Her little brother then insisted he be made a part of the frame.

On the other hand, Shabri Wable, a trained designer from Pune who has relocated to Kutch for a slow and conscious life and calls herself a “clothes maker”, works as a bridge between village artisans and crafts organisations. She has her own small design label called Bajra. She suggested we shoot with her near the “*shaak* market” (vegetable market) near Bhuj Gate in the old city, a place she frequented. The cow you see walking languidly along wouldn't get shooed away



Bachaya, 30, gent's tailor, Pachham hamlet, Moti Bandha. He wears his Ajrakh twisted on his back. An "authentic piece" from Sindh, Pakistan, owned by Fatima Bai.

Ruksana Amin, 23, Bandhini artisan, Ajrakhpur.



Neetu, 6 years, who began attending village school, plays around as her father's Ajrakh dries on the clothes line in Bhirandiyara village.



Hashim, 10, school dropout, Zerarwadi village. He learnt to read the Koran before discontinuing school.



Abdul Karim Mianji, 73, animal herder, Dhamadka in 15 metres and more of Ajrakh—lungi, turban and shawl.



Hirabhai Khajur Marwada, age not known, with Mayanbhai Narayanbhai Marwada, 32, Maldhari singers of Bhirandiyara village who sing Sufi music. Their Ajrakhs are "asli" (original) from Sindhi, Pakistan, bought from travelling traders.



Sama Hassan Mohammed Malik and Rashid Noor Mohammed Sama on the Khavda road wearing their Ajrakhs as patka (headgear).



> **Shabri Wable**, 34, clothes maker, Bhuj, wearing her dupaasi Ajrakh that she bought from Bilal Khatri's workshop in Khavda.



^ **Unidentified taxi driver** in Bhuj City, wearing a screen printed Ajrakh as a shawl. Local communities cannot afford hand printed and natural dyed pieces for dailywear.



^ **Sama Hassan Mohammed Malik** of Dinara, **Sumrah Abdul Rahim Habib** of Sumalpur, **Younus Dosal Sama** of Dinara and **Morzi Umar Sama** the 27th Jamut of Kutch from Dhrobano. They often congregate to sip chai and exchange village gossip at a tea stall on the Khavda highway.

and photographer Sondeep Shankar who had accompanied me from Delhi had to keep clicking till Shabri and the cow ambled together in camera-friendly camaraderie.

There are many details in this photo series that speak of the life and times of Ajrakh in Kutch. The intimacy that Sindhi-Kutchis feel about it, its versatile usage and significance in pastoral wardrobes. Do notice the colourfully embroidered line running on Mayanbhai's Ajrakh (one of the two Maldhari singers from Bhirandiyara), hand done by the women of the Marwada family. Originally, Sindhi Ajrakh is a thin long piece of cloth. The wider shawl is derived when two such pieces are stitched together at the centre. The embroidery is a local innovation. Bachaya's (the gent's tailor) shawl had one too, a multi-coloured spine of embroidery.

Also, the Khatri trio—Dr Ismail, the mastercraftsman, and his sons Sufiyan and Juned of Ajrakhpur, have never been photographed together wearing Ajrakh by anyone outside family occasions.

As someone born and raised in Adipur, Kutch I have many old acquaintances, a deep familiarity and lifelong bond with the region. I speak Sindhi, Kutchi and Gujarati. But that wasn't enough for this reach out. A number of locals helped enhance the core idea. Shabri Wable kept sharing thoughts and names of people. Kaladhar Mutwa, a Sindhi poet from Banni district talked about the authentic use of Ajrakh. As did Ghatit Laheru, the director of Khamir (a platform for crafts, heritage and ecology of Kutch).

Without Good Earth inviting The Voice of Fashion to be a part of their Sindhu exhibition, this journey that mixed documentary, photography, textile and cultural understanding would not have come to fruition. ■



▲ Shabri Wable. Shot by: Saumya Sinha.

Shabri Wable

The Conscious Clothes Maker Of Bhuj

Her non-conformist approach towards clothing, crafts and commerce has made Shabri Wable a valuable resource to village artisans in Kutch
By **Saumya Sinha**

The longing to practice a slow life in a crafts-rich culture and establish an alternative to the profit-driven model of disposable fashion urged entrepreneur Shabri Wable, 34, to relocate from Pune to Bhuj, Kutch in 2014.

Today, Wable steers her young conscious clothing label Bajra and engages in consultancy work that bridges the gap between crafts institutions and artisans in Kutch.

On a warm Thursday in September, Wable dressed in a white and grey handloom cotton tunic and pants designed by her, with hair securely yet casually tied in a bun, is our trusted local adviser for the day in Bhuj.

Her style, as does her work, reflects the local lineage of Kutch's craftspeople and pastoralists, in an au courant packaging. For instance, her salwars, like the local *ezars* (rural salwars for women that are almost 128 inches at the waist) always end above the ankle—she wears Kutchi silver jewellery, toe rings as finger rings and pastoral earrings.

With Wable, we travel to hard-to-reach villages like Pachham and other village hamlets of Banni where she introduces us to resident women artisans she works with.



▲ Looks from Wable's label Bajra.

Over hot rustic food and post a brief photo session, Wable, perched at the sofa in her minimalistic home, looks tired yet attentive. Her home doubles up as the studio for her label Bajra, named after the rainwater-fed, locally grown millet, launched in 2017.

The Kutchi Grammar Of Bajra

Over the last five years, Wable, who went to design and fashion schools in Pune and Mumbai, has been working closely with the pastoral communities and artisans of Kutch.

“Fashion is inherently elitist. Craft has a more solid ground. I am against the idea of fashion driving craft. I learn a lot about style from the craftswomen. The way they carry their clothes with grace and dignity inspires me. They wear the heaviest polyester garments and the chunkiest jewellery and are so confident and sure about their look.”

Made using tailoring waste, handwoven deadstock, fabrics and discarded clothing, Bajra retails dresses, *kediya* (a gathered top worn by Kutchi herdsman) and kimono-style tops, reversible jackets, tops, pants. There are also interpretations of local garments like the *ezars* deftly styled and stitched as contemporary, wearable pieces. These materials are upcycled in a village-based network of tailors and hand-embroiderers using indigenous pattern-making methods.

The clothes are priced between ₹4,000 and ₹10,000; Wable's clientele includes customers in their late 30s-50s, but she rarely looks at market trends. Instead, she focuses on the rich



local skillset at hand. “I have a tailor who can stitch the garments of any of the Kutch communities. They are great resources for me,” says Wable.

The Ecosystem Of Crafts

Wable also works as a consultant with organisations like Khamir, a Kutch-based NGO and crafts resource centre and the non-profit Shrujan that works with Kutch's craftswomen. Her interest to collaborate with craft organisations stems from a long-standing appreciation of handicrafts and handlooms of Kutch.

“*Fashion is inherently elitist. Craft has a more solid ground. I am against the idea of fashion driving craft.*”

“As a student in 2012, with a proclivity for handlooms and handicrafts, I had a chance to come to Kutch and work with Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya (Kutch's first design school) where I learned so much about embroidery and handicrafts,” says Wable.

She credits Judy Frater's—co-founder of Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya and now the founder-director of Somaiya Kala Vidya—contribution and approach towards artisans as



▲ Shabri Wable Shot by: Saumya Sinha.

creative people, which left an indelible mark on Wable's mind. Prior to Khamir,

Wable worked in the retail sector in Hyderabad until 2014. She was a part of "Living Lightly: Journeys with Pastoralists", an exhibition in Delhi in 2016, which showcased the culture and crafts of Kutch's nomadic communities.

For the exhibition, Wable designed garments with Kutchi Muslim women artisans—all commissioned by Khamir. The success of this exhibit gave her the confidence to start her apparel label.

The Local Interpreter

Wable sees herself as an artisan. "I don't look at artisans as people who are working for me. I work with them. I use the same phone they use and I take pride in that. Maybe I want to be an artisan myself," says Wable. The relationship though is not always smooth. The artisans do not often approve her penchant for dull sombre hues while she does not like the bright colours that are fundamental to the vocabulary of Kutchi crafts.

But this is where Wable plays her role as an interpreter and facilitator of overlooked artisanal talent of Kutch.

It is the artisans in villages like Pachham cut off from the gains of commercial fairs, who have the necessary skills but lack even the basic amenities and means to make a steady living who can benefit most from Wable's intervention.

For Wable though, progress is defined not by technological advancement or financial dividends but ethical choices. "I don't know why people see an artisan living in a mud house as someone with poor hands and not skilled hands. There is prosperity and happiness too, of a different kind, in these villages," says the clothes maker of Bhuj.

But for an entrepreneur running a glocal clothing label—how difficult is it to trade off the zing of mainstream fashion business, in favour of a minimalistic life in a quasi-rural setup?

"I read something revelatory some time ago: 'You can either want less or earn more' and I chose to want less. The day this became clear, it was no more a trade-off. It became the path," signs off Wable.■

My Sindhi Identity

Memories and Musings

How the absence of material culture in my inherited Sindhi identity, was filled by gifts from Sindhis in Pakistan and Kutchi Muslims
By **Rita Kothari**

Two decades back, when I first saw a picture of Pakistani singer Abida Parveen wearing an Ajrakh and singing songs of Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif, I had not known that this was part of my heritage. I come from a mercantile family of Sindhi Hindus who, after Partition, took to livelihood as their first priority.

Conversations regarding what people wore, or remnants of that history in cultural artefacts were few and far between. In fact, objects were referred to by their prices, rather than design, material or motifs. My mother often asks, “*Tuhinji hua panj sau vaari dress kithe aahe* (Where is that dress of yours that cost 500 rupees?)”. The coarseness of this approach irked my teenage self and it took me some years to understand where this might have come from. Thus, these connections between objects and my Sindhiness were marked by many years through absence and even disavowal. Also, when I was growing up (during the Eighties), we tried hard not to be identified as a Sindhi in Gujarat. It generated a



perception of being “Muslim-like” in the minds of mainstream Gujaratis. The shiny clothes Sindhis staying in the refugee camps of Wadaj and Kubernagar wore, were for me an unpleasant association.

Coupled with this, there was an absence of heirlooms at home. In fact, my family was determined about its detached relationship with objects that can and should be left behind when migration or death occurs.



Top: A Kutchi woman.
Photograph by Sondeep Shankar.
Bottom: A group of Kutchi Women.

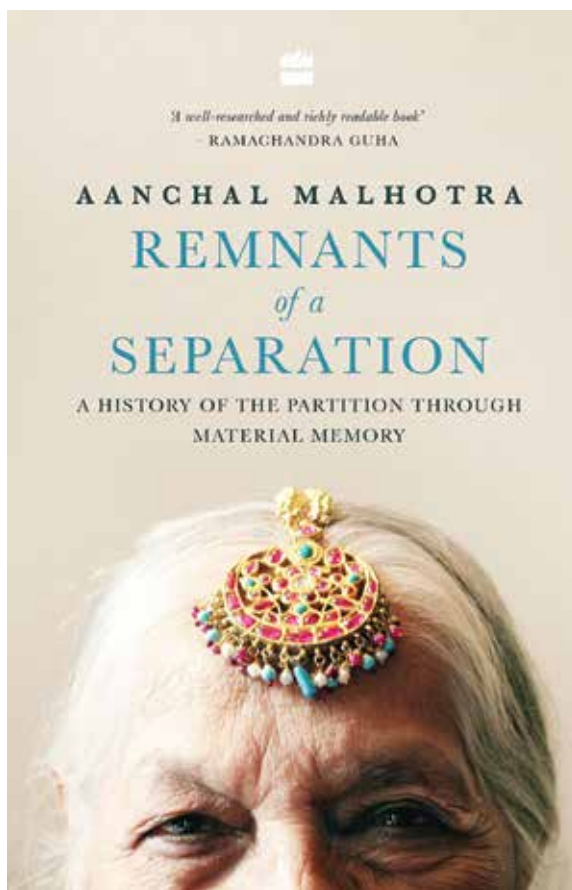
I remember how empty my father's cupboard became the moment he died. I stared at the empty spaces and mourned not having materials of memory. An ominous sense of transience characterised my life in those years and it took some time to situate that in both the present and past of my parents' lives.

In fact, when I read Aanchal Malhotra's book *Remnants of Separation* (2017) I was reminded of how my journey has not been one of inheriting objects, but rather of creating one. The account below throws light on this phenomenon.

Then came a time when I made my first visit to Pakistan. I was welcomed with Sindhi Ajrakh, bestowed upon me with other embroidered pieces, pickles from Shikarpur and I returned to India laden with love and materials. Since then, my Sindhianness extended from being a place of lack and inadequacy to one of excess and celebration. In the intermittent years when I started to spend time in Banni, in Kutch this relationship became even stronger. The women of Banni made me wear their *kanjris* (embroidered tunics) and had a photograph of mine taken. Through these objects, I left feeling that my sense of Sindhianness now encompassed regions and religions and I could revel in being a subcontinental Sindhi, rather than the "adh-mussulman" (half Muslim) Sindhi of Gujarat.

While I was writing this piece, I attended the World Sindhi Congress (WSC) in London. This 31st session, like many others preceding it, laid out the marginalisation and atrocities against Sindhis in Pakistan. As an Indian Sindhi, I felt protected and sheltered from the accounts I was listening to. Rather my generation is protected and sheltered. Our parents who crossed the border certainly faced worse adversities. As I sat there on the dais with the Sindhi Ajrakh around my neck, I felt one with Sindhi nationalists Dada Rochiram, Dada Khaliq Junejo who have spent a lifetime working in Sindh.

The Ajrakh is my entry into this world, and yet my parents never mentioned it to me. It's quite possible that the Ajrakh



Book cover of 'Remnants of a Separation' by Aanchal Malhotra.

It's quite possible that the Ajrakh rose from being a local symbol to a national badge in Sindh during the heydays of Sindhi nationalism.

rose from being a local symbol to a national badge in Sindh during the heydays of Sindhi nationalism. It's also quite possible that around the same time Jhulelal, the river god worshipped by Sindhi Hindus rose from being a local symbol to a Brahma-like deity.

Be that as it may, our Sindhi worlds are both connected and divided. One of the attendees at the London Congress gave me a kurta with Sindhi embroidery. I looked at it longingly, knowing that this material connection with Sindh was now going to be mediated through people I met abroad. I would now be picking up my Ajrakh or *kanjri* from people who travel to me, instead of travelling myself to those places.

But the next moment, images of Niayamat and Sabia in Banni, both embroidery artisans float before my mind. In my mind's eye I see them wearing *mutwa* and *jat* embroidery (community specific hand embroideries of Kutch), proudly displayed on their *kanjris*. I ask myself why did I think of Sindh 'over there' again? There are parts of Sindh next to me in Gujarat.

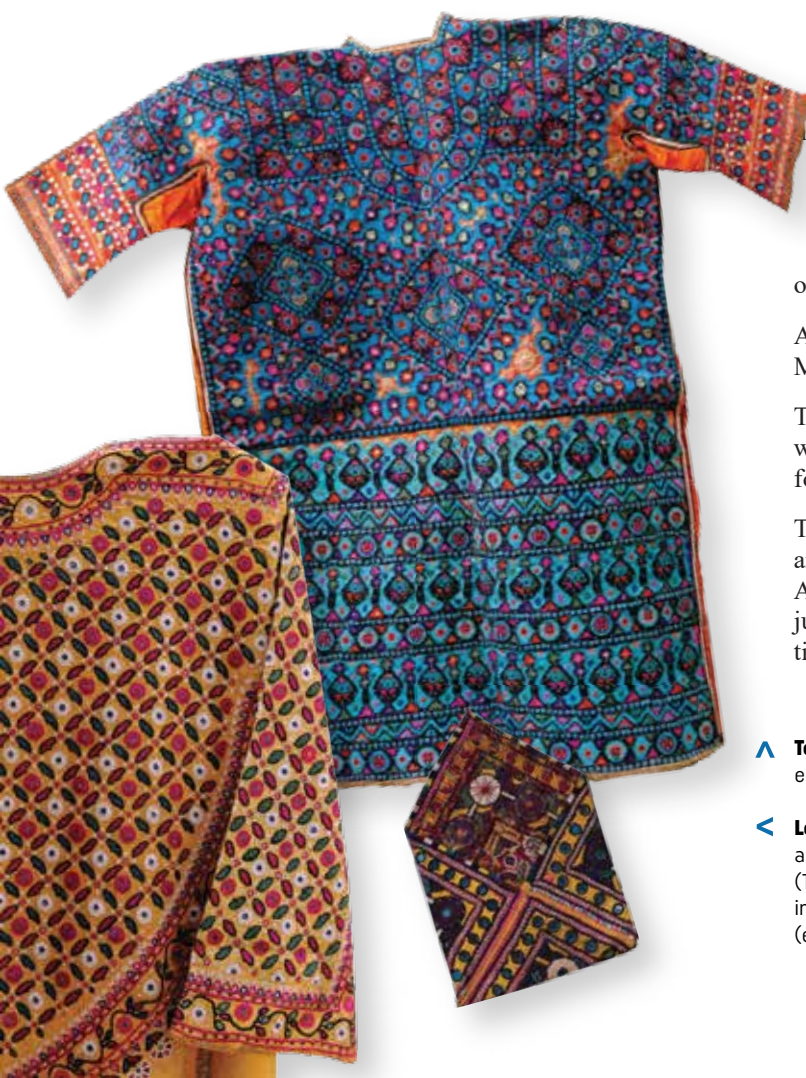
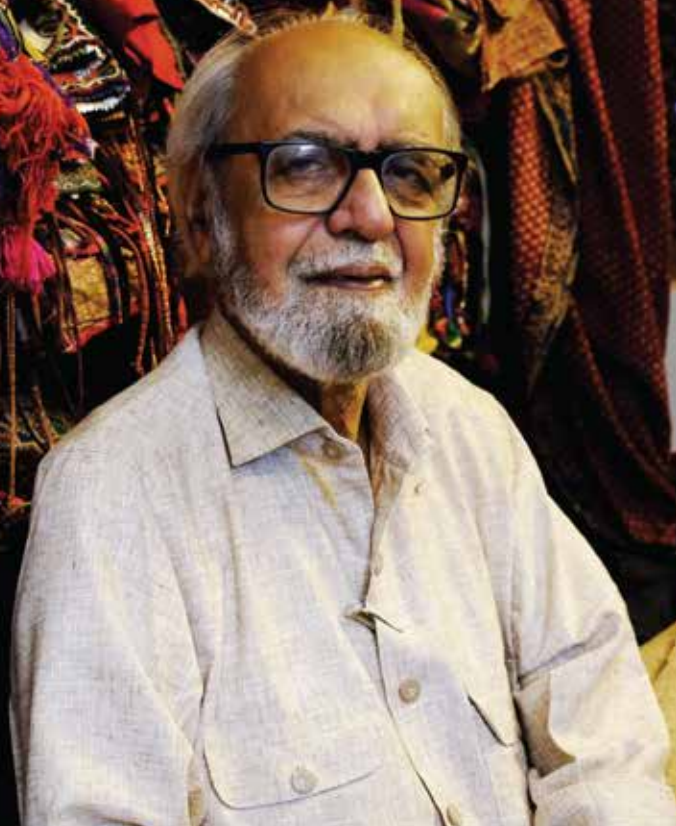
Today I flaunt my *kanjri* given to me by women of Banni, and the Ajrakh given to me by Sindhi nationalists. It is through these objects that I have filled the gap

of my childhood. The remnants were missing, but they are now aplenty, just like the love that became available to me on both sides of the border. ■

Rita Kothari is a Sindhi author and academician who grew up in Gujarat. Her book 'The Burden of Refuge: Sindhi Hindus in Gujarat' pioneered the study of Partition in the context of Sindhis. 'Unbordered Memories' was an English translation of Sindhi stories while 'Memories and Movements: Borders and Communities in Banni', Kutch examines Banni and the Sindh imaginary among pastoralist communities. She currently teaches at Ashoka University, Haryana.

The Antiques Collector of Kutch

Uncommon laces with exquisite embroideries and hundreds of old textiles that mirror the skills of the past—A.A. Wazir's collection, like his mind, is a rare museum
By **Shefalee Vasudev**



The man on the phone is gentle but echoes with intent. It belongs to a man senior and serious. “Antique pieces, sir, that offer a glimpse of shared vocabularies of embroidery in Sindh and Kutch?” It is an unclear ask. Yet you sense that the person at the other end has captured it instantly.

A.A. Wazir. On the Internet, the name comes up with Museum Quality Textiles in Bhuj.

The moment you enter the small room of a home in Bhuj which holds the treasures that Wazirbhai has been collecting for the last 50 years, you know why.

The word “antiques” has a magical bind to it—it has depth and seduction. It holds a promise even though it is of the past. Antiques are not something everyone can own. They are not just scraps of history. They represent the material culture of a time gone by. You may be able to afford an antique, but may

▲ **Top:** A.A. Wazir, a well-known collector of antique crafts and embroideries at his home-studio in Bhuj.

◀ **Left:** Long, hand-embroidered choli (blouse) made by a female artisan from a pastoral community in Kutch from A.A. Wazir's (Top) archives; A.A. Wazir's favourite: a cholo (tunic) salwar set in golden yellow silk Mashru with Sindhi embroidery; a Batua (envelope-shaped purse).

Top: Batuas (envelope-shaped purses), with different kinds of rural embroidery stitches and motifs.

Bottom: Wall hangings with handmade woollen thread embroidery from A.A. Wazir's collection.



not value it without an abiding curiosity for the time, place and person it once belonged to. There are traders and there are collectors. Wazir senior (because his sons are also involved in the business now) is both.

Even at first sight, the 75-year-old, frail looking, bespectacled, silver-haired Wazirbhai with a salted beard does not look like yet another trader. We are now speaking in Kutchi, his mother tongue.

The man who once sold miniature Mughal paintings in his youth in what was then Bombay, including to Jehangir Art Gallery, has always nurtured a yearning “to save heritage pieces for documentation”.

The room where guests, buyers or museum collectors are welcomed has many thousands of embroidered and handmade pieces, repositories of colours and skills, in tall piles all around. Others are stacked in glass showcases. Some are stowed away safely in butter paper and cloth bags in other sections of the Wazir residence.

A rare lace or few with embroidery so intricate that you need a magnifying glass to admire its beauty sits unraveled on the floor. There are yokes and patches, wall hangings and borders. Beaded textiles, needlework, block printed fabrics, cross stitches, and the many embroideries of Kutch's pastoral communities.

You may be able to afford an antique, but may not value it without an abiding curiosity for the time, place and person it once belonged to.

“My grandfather dealt in *dhurries* and spices but I was less interested in business, more in collecting heritage pieces,” says Wazirbhai. In 1971, he came to Kutch and began to collect what may now be more than 1000 pieces from just 20 plus communities of Kutch. Wazirbhai's antiques include creations from Kutch's Muslim communities, as well as from Harijans, Meghawals, Lohanas and Memons. Among others. To call his archival pieces representative of class, caste, history and artisanal knowledge is superficial. The collection is a museum folded in cupboards. It includes *kanthas* of Bengal, Banjara tribal pieces, *phulkaris* from Punjab, some *jamavars* of Kashmir.

“For the last ten years, we have been selling to textile museums around the world and in the near future, we will have a museum of our own in Kutch,” says Wazirbhai.

Wazir senior and his sons meet buyers, inquisitive visitors,



▲ A.A. Wazir looks at a pencil drawing of Karachi.

even tourists by appointment. With us in the room are a couple of designers from China, avidly photographing and sighing over Wazirbhai's wares. In the collection are Sindhi embroidery pieces from Karachi.

Some are around 80 to 90-years-old. Densely embroidered with "hurmico" popularly known as the "Sindhi stitch". He shows us these alongside embroidered patches made by female craftspersons from the Banni district on the Kutch-Sindh border.

The similarities are evident. Wazirbhai's personal favourite is a golden-yellow salwar and tunic (*patloon* and *cholo* in Sindhi) in silk Mashru with delicate, almost baroque red-black-green embroidery on the tunic and the *salwar*. "I acquired this from an antique collector in the US many years back," says Wazirbhai.

"Most of these embroideries were an expression of what the women in rural communities wanted to articulate. There was no TV, no Internet, no distractions, no freedom to engage with the outside world. Women did not work as paid 'artisans' but to create things for their families, homes and themselves. The embroideries are of best quality because

there was no commercial purpose behind them," he says.

The Meaning And Value Of Antiques

That definition of an antique resonates. An object that is not labelled just by age and vintage, but by a story that didn't die. The meaning of which lives with the collector and the possessor. "The condition in which it is acquired or sold, the time period when it was made, its vintage and historical value in the vast repertoire of Indian antiques", are the ruling reasons that help Wazirbhai and his sons price a particular antique. "It is not always so easy or simple and there are times when I bring down the pricing if I sense that the person seeking it is a real connoisseur but can't afford the asking price," he adds.

Wazirbhai has a quiet insight that comes with experience, refinement of thought, filtering through what is on sale and what cannot ever be bought. It is an almost philosophic attention to detail that gives him the mind of a museum maker. A Kutch trip to explore the region's artisanal wealth or how Sindh is inexorably tied to the vocabulary of Kutchi artisans would be incomplete without getting a whiff of that fragrance. ■

Nani and her Hand-Knit Sindhi Nada

An unusual encounter with a village artisan who uses a pre-knitting technique, a wooden frame and sticks to weave a crochet-like drawstring

By **Shefalee Vasudev**



▲ Fatima Bai aka "Nani" skilled in knitting the Sindhi nada and making patchwork quilts. Photo courtesy Saumya Sinha.

Nobody in Pacham-Mota Bandha village in the Banni region of Kutch can explain why Fatima Bai is called "Nani" in the tiny hamlet. She is Nani to her children, siblings, cousins, in-laws and her grandchildren of course. Except for Haroon, her widely smiling husband, with rough hands and an unkempt beard, she is the uncontested village "Nani".

Nani, that means maternal grandmother in many Indian languages, including those spoken in this region—Gujarati, Kutchi, Sindhi—is one of the most endearing relationship terms in Indian cultural life. It is an apt title for Fatima Bai, just by the unexplained science of how nicknames sync with personalities or how personalities provoke nicknames. Nani exudes a maternal vibe. Her eyes sparkle with curiosity and concern. Her lean, taut frame hugs you tight in its embrace.

Fatima Bai's Many Skills

Nani is the only skilled maker of the Sindhi *nada*, a hand knitted drawstring worn in Sindh with women's salwars or ghaghras and adorned with tassels at both ends. It looks like crocheted lace but this technique of weaving actually pre-dates knitting done with sticks on a wooden frame. "The warping of the yarn is done on a wooden frame," says Shabri

Wable, a cloth maker and crafts consultant from Kutch. Wable is our *sutradhar* (our advisor and guide) on this visit to Pacham.

A few years back, Wable stumbled upon Fatima Bai's unique skill of weaving the drawstring. Nani had learnt it as a young teenager in Sindh, Pakistan before she got married to Haroon of Mota Bandha village in Kutch. To her marital home, she didn't just bring with her this skill but also the determination to use it and teach it to other women in the village. Fatima Bai had also learnt to cut and tailor clothes on a sewing machine.

Many decades later (Nani says she may be around 50 years old), Wable would persuade her to try knitting the Sindhi *nada* with cotton threads instead of the shiny, acrylic ones used in the village which are cheap, don't snap easily and have a sheen to them. These multi-coloured threads are also used to create machine embroidery embellishments on clothes— mostly tunics of long and short lengths in floral printed synthetic materials bought from Khavda village and on *ezars* (salwars worn by rural women that are almost 128 inches at the waist).

In 2016, Nani's Sindhi *nadas* knitted in colourful cotton threads with pretty, hand-made tassels were displayed and

Nani, that means maternal grandmother in many Indian languages, including those spoken in this region—Gujarati, Kutchi, Sindhi—is one of the most endearing relationship terms in Indian cultural life.

sold at a beautiful crafts bazaar in Delhi. The bazaar put together by Meera Goradia a crafts practitioner and consultant was alongside *Living Lightly: Journeys with Pastoralists*, an exhibition curated by the Kutch-based Sushma Iyengar.

“Lightly lived” is a heavy term, you realise when you enter a pastoralist’s home. Inside Nani’s one room home which she shares with perhaps six others of the family are steel utensils displayed like decorative pieces, a radio, an Usha sewing machine (her favourite possession, friend and provider) and a stack of *dhadkis* (colourful quilts made from leftover fabrics with saddle stitch embroidery). Nani cuts and patterns quilts in arresting geometric layouts. Using leftover or old fabric is something all villagers do, especially women, she tells me in chaste Sindhi.

Tailoring Language And Life

Sindhi my mother tongue helps me locate myself as a person with roots in the vast and sometimes confusing terrains and turns of life. Nani’s manner and accent in Sindhi is exactly like the one I heard in my family home and her idioms leave me perplexed and delighted. Nani has never been to school. But not only can she quote from the Koran as well as from Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif, but she can also stitch entire ensembles—tunics, long dresses and *salwars* without taking any measurements. All she has to do is look at the woman she is sewing for.

If Nani is a tailor-embroiderer-appliqué artist and “nada maker” par excellence, her son Bachaya Haroon, a young man in his late twenties, already a father of two young kids is the only gents’ tailor in the village. He makes *Pathani kurtas* and *salwars* for the men, even shirts if they need to step out of their traditional pastoral garb as Sindhi speaking Muslim herdsmen.

Important Yes, But Relevant?

Pacham has less than 20 homes. When we first visited, the strong stench of burnt firewood lit for cooking, the parched texture of Kutch’s arid earth and the languid mood of cattle grazing outside every hut was unmissable. Soon, a *rikebi*



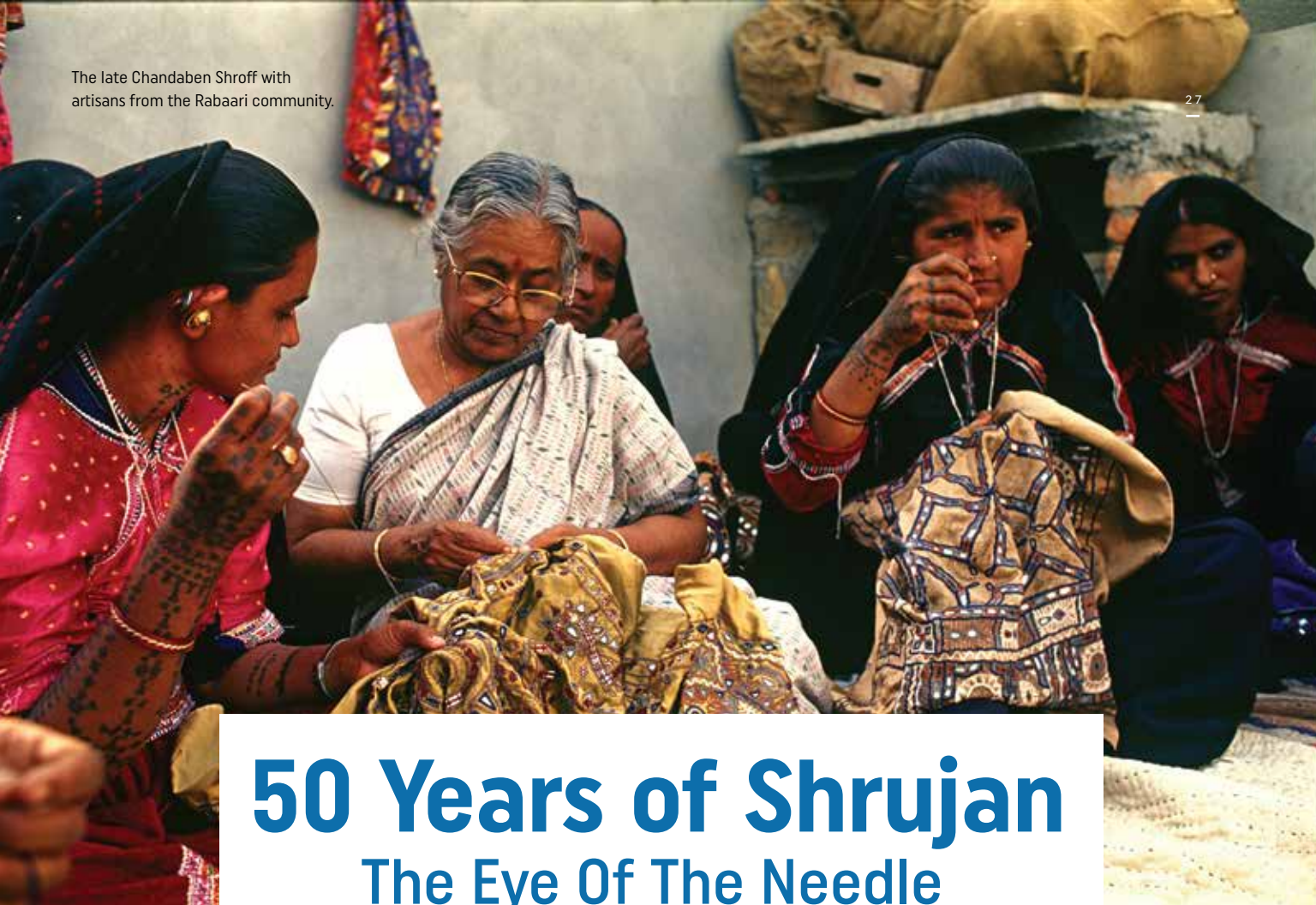
▲ **Top:** Nani’s daughter wearing a tunic tailored and designed by her.
Bottom: The Sindhi nada with a beaded tassel.

(saucer) of tea was offered. When the Haroon family learnt that I had been born and raised in Kutch, lemon water with sugar and salt was served as we sat on hand knitted charpoys in the verandah.

“You have to take me with you. I will make Sindhi *nadas* and *dhadkis* to sell in Delhi and earn a better livelihood,” insisted Nani, tearful as we readied to leave.

It is a question worth asking again. A patchwork quilt from recycled fabrics is one thing and perhaps it has a demand and a utility in city life and thus some relevance in stores selling artisanal wares. But what about the Sindhi *nada*?

It is a product without an identified buyer. ■



50 Years of Shrujan

The Eye Of The Needle

Among Kutch's most noted institutions, Shrujan that links artisanal skills with livelihood and entrepreneurial vision, began its 50 year celebrations from December 2019

By **Shefalee Vasudev**

Over 50 different kinds of embroideries practiced by 12 rural communities, spread over 120 villages with 4000 associated artisans are some of the statistical stitches of Shrujan. Numbers offer perspective. But Shrujan—Threads of Life, the well-known, Kutch non-profit founded by the late Chandaben Shroff in 1969 is really the saga of a region and its craftswomen realized through threads and embroideries. That fascinating intersection when an aspect of personal life becomes a livelihood promise. When women who practice certain needle and thread rituals for individual gratification or to fulfill customary domestic expectations are enabled to use the same activity to enhance their worth as skilled artisans and become wage earners.

This December, Shrujan which finds instant recall as a brand that sells fine Kutch embroideries on various products, turns 50. Chandaben's children, Kirit Dave, Ami Shroff and Dipesh Shroff plan to kick off the golden year celebrations with a four-day exhibition at Coomaraswamy Hall at the Prince of Wales Museum in Mumbai that opens on the 21st of

this month. While Dave and Ami work full time with Shrujan, as design and process interventionists, Dipesh, an industrialist- philanthropist has been the chair of the Shrujan board since Chandaben passed away in 2016.

What stares back in this golden year is the significance of the Shrujan Museum and the Living and Learning Design Centre (LLDC) in Kutch. A mindfully constructed, eco-positive, completely green building with chickoo and mango orchards surrounding it, a canteen that serves delicious local food and a beautifully curated store, the museum opened its doors in 2016. Once you step inside, the museum opens a riveting pastoral landscape, through photography, costumes, shawls, turbans, clay creations, musical instruments, embroideries, crafts, kitchen and storage items, footwear, audio-visual mounts and framed archives. It anthropologically narrates the lives and times of 12 Kutchi communities. Fabric mannequins dressed like Kutchi women from different communities—Ahir, Muthwa, Jat, Rabaris, Sodhas, Jadejas, among others—reveal a varying grammar of colour, mirrors,



Top: Young girls of the Ahir community in their traditional wear.
Bottom: Meghwaad Maaru community artisans doing embroidery work.

threads and beads in embroidery, contextualized through the life stages of a woman (childhood, adolescence, marriage and old age), birth, wedding and death rituals, lifestyle and religious practices. The space stokes aspiration to wear and own the embroideries displayed but because of its curatorial theme of life stages, it also becomes a reflection on human existence.

Kaki's Towering Influence

“My mother Chandaben opened a Pandora’s box when she started responding to the urgent need to uplift the downgrading of local craft that was creeping in,” says Ami Shroff. “The local women told her that the embroideries will live only till their grandmothers and mothers did, after that they would fade away as the interest of younger girls was dwindling.” That led Kaki (as Chandaben continues to be referred to), to plan a design centre that could document,

through photographs, notes and sketches, swatches and samples, the traditional work. She aimed for a refinement of the embroideries.

Kaki would travel across Kutch, spending hours, weeks and days with craftswomen to improve and improvise what they already knew.

In the early years, the Shroffs and designers who worked with them would find that local communities were rather cloistered—they barely knew about the crafts and skills of other communities even if they lived just 20 kilometres away.

Before And After The Bhuj Earthquake

The devastating Bhuj Earthquake on the Republic Day of 2001 that wiped away lives, livelihoods and entire villages was a complex inflection point. It triggered the reconciliation of nature with culture, forcing communities to think beyond the needle they would wield as a personal pursuit.

Poignant recollections come up. Until the old Shrujan store and campus building in Bhuj crumbled completely about six months after the earthquake, more than a few people risked their lives, along with Chandaben, says Ami, to retrieve embroidery archives, panels and books worth saving. That paved the path for the Shrujan museum.

About 2,200 women artisans worked with Shrujan before the earthquake. The number went up to over 5,000 within three months as the women sought to involve themselves in community activities.

Ami says that every spare second during the rebuilding of Kutch was spent by women artisans on embroidery. She remembers women, perched on the rubble, singing as they worked deftly on embroidery.

Shrujan created 560 master craftsmen over five decades. Among the karigar community, the names of Parmaben, Rajiben and Mahmudbhai keep cropping up when you talk about Shrujan in Kutch.

The Karigars' Wishlist

Through dialogues, design workshops, exchange of skills, the design centre (with no real roadmap initially to become a stationary museum), Ami says a karigars’ wishlist was created. They wanted to learn about enterprise, display, business and design, conserve their craft, improve it, were curious about what other communities did and were, for the first time, willing to teach it to students of craft or other learners outside their community. They understood that before a craft dies, someone must take over to sustain it and keep it going.

While embroidery is primarily practiced by women in rural communities, even men from the local communities despite



Top to Bottom: Mannequins dressed as traditional Kutchi women from different communities at the Shrujan museum; (L-R) Sariyaben, daughter of Parmaben and master artisan of Ahir Community and Parmaben, the senior most artisan at Shrujan; Aerial view of the LLDC building.

About 2,200 women artisans worked with Shrujan before the earthquake. The number went up to over 5,000 within three months as the women sought to involve themselves in community activities.

essentially being farmers or Maldhari singers and workers began identifying themselves as weavers, printers or dyers as Shrujan's work and worth spread.

Chandaben would go on to win the Rolex Award in 2006 as the first Indian laureate to win this prestigious award for enterprise given to innovative thinkers who shape future. The award opened possibilities of funding and research for Shrujan.

While the research and experimentation work in crafts other than embroidery had begun in bits and starts in 2003 and then 2007, it took many years for the LLDC and museum building to be ready. During that time Ami says that the veteran artisans of the region would drop by to ask if everything was under control. They felt a sense of belonging.

Fifty Candles And A Needle

The story changed slowly, stitch by stitch. While the construction of the museum and LLDC was complete in 2014, it would take another two years to ready the galleries inside as the right lighting for the conservation and display of crafts needed more funding.

Today LLDC is a research and design institute that welcomes crafts practitioners and students from any discipline to work and learn here. A new gallery added this year hosts displays and exhibitions beyond Kutch craft. It could be miniature paintings from Rajasthan or zardozi creations from different parts of North India and West Bengal.

Surely the Shroffs and Kaki's many legates across Kutch would define 50 Years of Shrujan in at least fifty different ways. But the point where it influences the story of Indian crafts and their revival-survival-sustenance in the post-Independence century is how Shrujan enabled the re-imagination--through market and meaning--of artisanal inheritance. Why embroidery so deeply sewn into the identity of Kutch crafts must survive beyond community, family and gender.

For those like us watching from the sidelines, Shrujan holds the gaze of course through its museum. But it also channels thought. You can see the eye of the needle. ■

Maldhari folk singers Hirabhai Marwada and
Mayanbhai Marwada in Birandiyara village.
Photo courtesy Sondeep Shankar.

The Search for Sindhu Closing Arguments

The Sindhu series brought a river of insights. Of lost and found cultural practices in Kutch. Of human imagination, unsung artisans and the colour blue
By **Shefalee Vasudev**

What does one end up with many pages of reporter's notes, scribbled in different personalised fonts that help a writer get the story's atmospherics and insights right? The flavour of food, the textures of textiles, the temperance or aggression of weather, the hues of land and forest, the width of smiles, the energies of people.

The Search for Sindhu series was inspired by lifestyle and fashion brand Good Earth's show 'Sindhu' mounted The Search for Sindhu: Closing Arguments last October in Delhi. The stories were on shared vocabularies of crafts and textiles on both sides of the border—India and Pakistan. Ajrakh was a centrepiece of this journey. As was an update on 50 years of Shrujan, one of Kutch's oldest crafts based organisations. So for closing arguments, here are bits and pieces from what add to the ever-growing "Sindhu" story.

Colour: In the land of *Bandhini*, *shibori*, *baatik* printing, Arjakh, numerous embroidery techniques practiced by local pastoral communities, handwoven woolen carpets, enamel-painted homeware and countless other crafts techniques, what colour can you pick as a symbol? The

black-red of the Rabaris? The parrot green-orange-fuchsia of Kutch's vibrant embroideries? The whites of the herder tribes? Or, the dazzling ombrés of beautifully dyed *Bandhinis*?

For me, it was blue of the locally used Indigo. Not only is it a part of the Arjakh vocabulary but the intensity and depth of the Indigo dye has also changed over the years. Dhamadka, the former centre of Ajrakh printing had been marked as a high-risk zone because of its high iron content even before the Bhuj Earthquake of 2001. Therefore, after the earthquake, those who study Kutch and its crafts see the relocation of large numbers of the Ajrakh printing community led by Ismail Khatri to Ajrakhpur as a pragmatic move.

Ajrakhpur sits on a sandstone belt, so the rainwater can percolate down and recharge the ground water with more speed. Water studies done by organisations like Khamir explain this scientifically. A CETP (Common Effluent Treatment Plant) installed by the North Indian Textile Research Association in Ajrakhpur recycles 1.5 lakh litres of water every day. Multiple recycles later, the water used for



▲ **Left:** Jaya Jaitly, founder and president, Dastkari Haat Samiti with the family of Mohammed Khatri in Dhamadka, Kutch.
Right: A woman making an appliqué bed cover.

dyeing is finally released to the fields. When you walk around in Ajrakhpur, the colour of the water in the puddles around is blue.

The Obscured Ajrakh Artisans: Besides the well-known Khatri, there are other persistent, enterprising and talented Ajrakh artisans in the region waiting to be discovered. Both by big retail business and by the media for better recognition. We had the honour of meeting two such artisans.

The 35-year-old Bilal Indrish Khatri of Khavda village belongs to a family which has been making hand-blocked, natural-dyed Ajrakh for the last 80 years. Bilal's Ajrakh creations have nuances that are distinct, the maroon and Indigo colours have strength and character, the blocks an uncanny mix of new and old.

The other is the 22-year-old Khalid Khatri who hand paints with natural dyes after he block prints a fabric. His "Ajrakh paintings" as he calls them. It is high time we also applauded the less known spokes of Kutch's crafts wheel.

Women Behind Kutch: "Long before Dhamadka village was easily accessible and before any kind of public facilities or even ladies' toilets were built, some extraordinary women from India's crafts community would visit and work with us to enhance Ajrakh designs and printing techniques," said Jabbar Khatri of Dhamadka.

The youngest son of famed master craftsman Mohammed Khatri, Jabbar continued to stay on in Dhamadka even after large sections of the Khatri community relocated to set up Ajrakhpur after the Bhuj Earthquake of 2001.

Jabbar bhai recounted with gratitude the guidance the community received from crafts experts like Jasleen Dhamija, Jaya Jaitly, Laila Tyabji and Archana Shah, the latter, the founder of Bandhej. "They would sleep on the carts we used to move yards of dyed fabric, eat with our families sitting on the floor with us and use the fields to change and freshen up. That was real, unforgettable dedication. Kutchi artisans owe them a lot," he added.

Judy Frater: Iyengar remembers English classes for artisans held in 2004 in the post-earthquake phase by an

American—a young man of Kutchi origin who had returned to his homeland riddled with the urge to help. However, the turning point as people across the region narrate was scholar, teacher and mentor Judy Frater. Her Kala Raksha Vidyalaya, a school to train artisans of Kutch changed the curve of growth. From *Bhujodi* weavers to *Bandhini* artisans to Ajrakh printers, Frater's school became a cradle of design aspirations for the younger generation of karigars. "There was a shift in their identity. It gave them confidence, assurance, the ability to deal with new markets, to collaborate with brands," says Iyengar. "They stopped looking at themselves as printers or labourers. They became complete craftspeople," she adds. Frater currently teaches local artisans at the Somaiya Kala Vidyalaya in Adipur.

Hospitality, Warmth, Poverty and Pride: We visited Niamat Bai's home in Zerarwadi village, a hamlet of 10 odd houses in the Banni region of Kutch to see embroidery techniques. Niamat Bai and her daughter Noori as well as most women in the impoverished hamlet earned some money through hand embroidery on yokes, drapes or fabric pieces as commissioned by local entrepreneurs or organisations. They all are also deft with appliqué work, working day and night between household chores to make "*dhadkis*" or appliquéed bed covers and quilts. The hamlet expressed poverty as well as pride. Niamat Bai and her family foraged green leaves from the forest around their huts and gave us a freshly cooked vegetable made with those leaves with chappatis hot off the clay pot. It was the most exceptional meal I had ever had. They shared their poor economic state and the inconsistency of craft collaborations. Yet they were grateful, they smiled, laughed and took photos with us.

It was like going back home.

The Search for Sindhu really became a reportage of local craft, Sindhi and Kutchi. In ceramics, textiles, music and food, seen through multiple cultural practices lost and found. Then there was human commitment and imagination. The will of local mentors to uplift artisans. Tales of colour, water, enterprise and creativity. A gushing river of insights. ■

THE VOICE OF FASHION TEAM

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THE <OICE OF FASHION

The Voice of Fashion published by IMG Reliance is India's first digital daily magazine on fashion and design. It tracks, defines and leads fashion conversations in India and about Indian fashion and retail globally.

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Primary Partner
Fabric of India (2018-2019)