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**‘Desert Chic’ on the British high street:  
the commodification of Indian hand embroidery**

**Through the eye of the needle**

Indian embroidery has enjoyed something of a resurgence on the British high street in the past few years. It adorns soft furnishings, garments and accessories and is part of a notable decorative trend that eschews the “ethnic look” of the hippy era (1960s and 1970s) and espouses a post-modern eclecticism. Apart from companies such as Monsoon, East and Toast which have long-included blockprints, tie-dyes, embroideries and beadwork in their collections – the likes of H&M, Zara and Topshop and discount store, T.K.Maxx, have all embraced the trend. (fig 1) A brief survey of the UK high street reveals a considerable range of products that are to a greater or lesser extent decorated with Indian embroidery, although the consuming public may not appreciate the labour involved, as model Erin O’Connor, observed in an interview in 2010:

“The thing is, when you see an article – whether it be a bejewelled pen from Monsoon, or a top in Gap that requires embroidery – you almost don’t believe that it is made with a pair of very determined hands, and that it is time-consuming and that each garment in a sense is bespoke... There’s not much to make us aware of women using their hands and their heritage, is there?” (Siegle 2010: 58-59)

To a casual observer these goods might appear ‘much of a muchness’; vaguely “ethnic” and “crafty” and part of a broader, cosmopolitan style that has seen Indonesian ikats, Mexican tiles, Turkish kilims, *tajines* from Tunisia and Central Asian *suzani* become staples of British fashion and interiors. But closer examination of some of the embroidered goods for sale on the high street reveals the complexity of the trade, reflecting amongst other things, the effects of globalisation, cultural exchange, and economic and social development. While it is not within the scope of this paper to present a comprehensive survey of contemporary Indian embroidery, key aspects of its production and circulation are identified, and also of its abiding presence in cultural exchange notably between India and the UK.

**Desert chic**

In order to steer a coherent narrative path, I have chosen to focus on a single embroidered

garment – a jacket that was part of the fifth Kate Moss for Topshop Collection, Spring/Summer season 2008. (figs 2-3) Unlike many of the products available on the British high street that are hand embroidered, usually in a generic ‘Indian’ style without being too overtly ‘ethnic’, the Topshop jacket faithfully copied not only an ethnic style of embroidery (albeit translated into machine stitching) but also reproduced a rural style of garment, that of a *kediyun* or smock worn by Rabaris, who are migrant pastoralists in Kachchh district, Gujarat. I had originally spotted the jacket in the press: it featured in the colour supplement of *The Observer*, a “serious” Sunday paper and also the popular weekly fashion magazine, *Grazia*, in May 2008. It attracted my attention because I have worked with Rabaris since 1991 and their textiles and dress were the subject of my PhD. (figs 4-7) Made of pinstriped cotton in Turkey, the jacket (and matching shorts) was decorated with machine embroidery and sold at selected London stores and online for £65.00. Topshop staff at the flagship store, Oxford Circus, said that like all Kate Moss pieces, it had sold out within 3 days of the collection going on sale (early May 2008) although it was available online for slightly longer. Its re-sale value is now estimated to be between £300-500. Desert chic is hot. According to the florid description on the Topshop website, the jacket was part of ‘a collection of pieces that channel the bohemian traveller, referencing Ibiza, Miami, India and beyond’, the promotional hype alluding obliquely to orientalist tropes. The aspirational exoticism of the whole campaign was personified by Kate Moss – she was an icon of ‘boho chic’ at the time – and her wardrobe was cited as an influence on the collection, as well as that of her daughter, Lila-Grace ([www.katemosstopshop.com](http://www.katemosstopshop.com)). In fact, Lila Grace’s ‘mini mirror dress’, which was illustrated on the website, brings us directly back to Rabaris, as it was actually a Rabari child’s smock known as *jhuli*. (fig 8) Later that year, I showed some of the images to a cluster of Rabaris in Anjar, Kachchh; they were amused to see what the younger ones thought of as “old-fashioned” menswear presented as Western women’s fashion. Contemplating the price, they offered to come up with a bundle of “real *kediya*” for less than £65 each... the ever-entrepreneurial Kachchhis.

#### **400 years of cultural exchange**

The Topshop jacket illustrates a number of things: broadly speaking, it is evidence of globalisation; its inspiration reflects the post-modern ‘cult of celebrity’ as well as the post-colonial appropriation and re-appropriation of Indian material culture in the UK and India. Above all, perhaps, it reveals the persistence of commercial and cultural links that have

existed between India and the UK for nearly 400 years, surviving even the political rupture of Indian Independence in 1947. In this respect, it embodies the enduring influence of Indian textiles and dress on British fashion which can be traced back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the introduction of chintz – painted cottons from the Coromandel coast – to Britain (and other parts of northern Europe) revolutionised the fashions and furnishings of the day (see: Crill 2008). Chintz became an essential of patrician interior décor and fashions; the noted 17<sup>th</sup> century diarist, Samuel Pepys wore a *banyan* or ‘Indian gown’ of chintz at home, a sign of affluence and sophistication, that ‘set the tone for three centuries of dressing up’ (Breward 2010: 125). During the same period, embroideries exported from western India through the port of Cambay (modern Khambhat, Gujarat) featured prominently in East India Company ships’ manifests; many were designed for use in conjunction with chintz in the homes of wealthy British consumers. Made by Mochi (cobblers’/leatherworkers’ caste) embroiderers, most of whom were male, these embroidered hangings, bed curtains and coverlets were distinguished by the extensive use of fine chain stitch, worked in silk on a cotton or silk ground with a hook (known as an *ari*) as well a needle.

But in contrast to chintz and Mochi embroideries - both products that were made for sale by professional craftspeople - the embroideries of Rabaris are made by young women for their dowries and for close kin; use is confined to the family (see: Irwin and Hall 1973; Elson 1979; Edwards 2011). (fig 9) This prompts the question, how did a Rabari child’s smock from Kachchh end up in Lila-Grace’s wardrobe in London? Based on research I’ve carried out in India since 1991, sales of Indian dowry embroidery can be traced back to the 1950s. In the particular instance of Rabari embroidery, its commodification was accelerated after 1995 when the Dhebaria subgroup banned embroidery as part of social reforms implemented by the community council from the early 1990s onwards (see: Edwards 1996 and 2003). However, a longer historical view of the social context of Gujarat reveals the influence of craft development policies initiated by the government of the new nation-state after independence in 1947.

### **New sumptuary laws**

In April 1995 the governing council of the Dhebaria Rabari community of Kachchh revised the caste rules governing dress, dowry and marriage; they banned the making and use of embroidery (see: Sri Rabari Samaj 1995). The Vagadia subgroup followed suit a few months later. [1]. Among Dhebarias, in common with other groups in western India, the custom of

dowry featuring an embroidered trousseau was part of the process of marriage, and embroidered dress was an essential part of their visual identity. (fig 10) It could be said that sight is the primary sense in India; the concept of *darshan* (lit. ‘seeing’) associated with the auspicious visual exchange that occurs when a Hindu views the image of a deity underpins a wider emphasis on the visual, not least on personal appearance (see: Eck 1996). Thus the embroidery ban was an emphatic public signal that change was afoot and the Dhebaria council meant business. Many of the women grumbled that clothes without embroidery were ‘widow’s weeds’ and inauspicious according to their Hindu beliefs; but any active dissent was quashed either through a system of fines - five thousand rupees for a first offence – or by more drastic means. One repeat offender, a dapper man who insisted on wearing a smock embroidered by his wife, was thrashed and stripped of his finery; the tattered remnants of his smock tied to the gates of the *samaj wadi* (community compound) in Anjar, flagged the consequences of dissent. (Personal communication, Arjanbhai Rabari, 21.6.97) Overnight, thousands of pieces of embroidery effectively became redundant. Resigned to change and familiar with the embroidery trade that had developed in rural India since the 1950s, many families simply sold their embroidery; by the end of 1995, the antique textiles market in India was flooded with exquisite examples of Dhebaria handiwork. Dealers had their pick of heirloom pieces which went for bargain prices and container loads of embroideries left the district, as one Rabari commented at the time: “What has the Dhebaria community got out of it? They have lost their own gold” (Personal communication, Vanka Kana Rabari, 26.6.97). An established trading network linked Kachchh to Ahmedabad, Mumbai, Goa, Udaipur, Jaipur and Delhi – the mercantile centres at the heart of the trade – where dealers had access to tourists, foreign dealers, private collectors and museum curators, who would pay premium prices for old embroideries. (fig 11) This then was the route taken by a Rabari child’s smock from Kachchh to London; a journey that transformed it into Lila Grace’s ‘mini mirror dress’ and introduced Rabari style to the British high street. But why did Dhebaria Rabaris introduce the embroidery ban?

### **The cost of culture**

The embroidery ban, also other changes to the system of marriage, was devised and implemented by a small cadre of senior Dhebarias, led by Arjanbhai Rabari – all well-respected in the community. The reformers’ zeal was motivated by concern about the increasing level of debt incurred due to dowry by numerous families, as Arjanbhai reflected

in an interview in 1997: ‘According to my calculation they [families] used to spend 70,000 rupees on embroidery for each girl; this is not a small amount... If a father has four daughters, think what money he is spending... Five or six of us decided that like Gandhi who was starved and beaten and went to jail for the independence of the country, in a similar way to abolish this sin [dowry embroidery] from society, we would go through the same process; we were prepared for that... But we have lost as well as gained because our culture goes’ (Personal communication, Arjanbhai Rabari, 21.6.97)[2]. Banning embroidery – one of the main components of a dowry – would free the community from a pernicious cycle of debt, in addition to which it would bring Dhebarias into line with Indian law. The Dowry Prohibition Act had officially outlawed the custom in 1961; however, dowry remains widespread throughout India and is evident at all levels of society. The custom is the subject of an ongoing national debate. (see: Menski 1998) The inflation of both dowry and bride price had brought the Dhebaria community to the brink of financial and social catastrophe by the 1990s and the ‘conspicuous consumption’ of embroidery seemed to symbolise all that was off-kilter (Veblen 2007: 42-59). After independence, the three subgroups of Rabaris in Kachchh had started to sedentarize; the government viewed pastoral nomadism as an outmoded form of production and introduced strategies that encouraged, if not compelled on occasion, nomads to settle (Gooch 1998: 42). The issue was forced in the 1960s when the industrialization of agriculture – known as the ‘Green Revolution’ – dramatically changed old patterns of land use, and in effect barred Rabaris’ access to sites for fodder and water on which they had long-relied (Gadgil and Guha 1992: 183). An already precarious way of life became increasingly arduous but Rabaris, seeking other ways to make a living found themselves barred from many jobs because of their illiteracy; outside the community, their embellished dress symbolised backwardness and resistance to change. Determined to escape from the social margins of modern India, the Dhebaria council devised a development scheme to address the community’s problems. It prioritised the lack of education and the process of marriage. A residential school was established in Anjar in 1993, to provide continuity of education for Rabari children especially those whose parents were still making the migration. It initially provided primary level education but added a secondary facility in the mid-2000s. Supported by a trust known as the Shri Dhebar Sarva Seva Vikas Mandal Anjar, the school model has been replicated at four other sites in Kachchh and the number of Rabaris with a basic education has started to rise. Girls’ education which lags behind that of boys is now being targeted; in August 2011, Dhebaria President, Hirabhai Rabari spear-headed a month-long

*rath*, or campaign, to raise awareness of the need for girls' education, that took him to every village in the Dhebaria community. (Personal communication, Hirabhai Rabari, 26.8.11) (fig 12)[3]. In the period following the 1995 ban, Dhebarias have ceased to wear embroidery but the impulse to decorate clothing has proved irrepressible; at the annual marriage festival of *Janmashtami* (Krishna's birthday) the exuberant use of metallic braids, sequins, lace, synthetic brocades and velvets marks the attire of the assembled throng. (fig 13) The use of synthetic fabrics and industrially-made haberdashery is symptomatic not only of the embroidery ban but also of changing fashion; upwardly mobile communities such as Ahirs and Kanbi Patels, who are Rabaris' near-neighbours, eschew embroidery because it is perceived as old-fashioned (Tarlo 1996: 202-250). Despite having ceased to wear embroidery, many women in Kachchh still make it, mainly for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in the craft development sector. Since the advent of commercial embroidery in the late 1960s, it has gradually become an important source of income for women especially in the rural areas of Gujarat, and has transformed thousands of women into professional artisans. The rise of commercial embroidery based on the dowry traditions of Rabaris, Ahirs, Kanbis, Mutwas, Jats, Node and a host of other castes is an aspect of the nation-building policies of the first independent government led by Jawaharlal Nehru (r.1947-1964); the craft sector would provide employment compatible with a society that was still primarily agrarian, and craft products – distinctively Indian - would help to build the nation's exports.

### **Crafting the nation**

The All India Handicrafts Board (AIHB) was founded in 1952 to co-ordinate craft development across the subcontinent, to preserve traditional crafts by generating new markets; exhibition-cum-sales in major cities such as Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata, raised awareness of craft and the handmade, including embroidery, started to be seen as “cool” (McGowan 2009: 198-203). In the eyes of the urban elite, embroidery was “collectable”. The interest was taken up by foreign visitors, too, in the 1960s and 1970s when many first came to India on the “hippy trail”. Regional craft organisations followed the establishment of the AIHB; in 1973, the newly-founded Gujarat State Handicrafts and Handlooms Development Corporation (GSHDC) was charged with ‘making handicrafts marketable and preserving the traditionality of these crafts’, and an early initiative was to link craft development to tourism (GSHDC n.d.: 2). A niche tourist market had been established by the late 1980s in Gujarat,

for specialist tours focused on craft and textiles; Ahmedabad and Kachchh became essential stops on the itinerary of tours led by organisations such as the Embroiderers' Guild (UK) and the Textile Museum, Washington D.C. Ahmedabad, the commercial capital of Gujarat, is home to a number of antique textiles dealers, a few of whom have been organising bespoke tours to meet village craftspeople for special (read “wealthy”) clients since the 1950s. (Personal communication, Nazeer Weldingwala, 18.8.01). These dealers were familiar with the villages as they, or their scouts (*pheriyo*), used to scour the villages of western India, bartering steel vessels as well as cash for embroideries (Tarlo 1997 : 53-84). In many rural communities such as Rabaris, subsistence was the order of the day, and the sale of a few pieces of embroidery represented a lifeline when drought had taken their animals and withered their crops, as an elderly Ahir woman from Kachchh recalled: “Selling embroidery was like winning the lottery; we got lots of money for it without doing hard labour. We used it for our homes and our cattle”. (Personal communication, Sariyaben Ahir, 23.8.03)

Described by NGOs working in craft development as ‘hardship sales’ or ‘distress sales’ – this trade along with changing fashions in rural dress has seen a good deal of the dowry embroidery produced in Kachchh sold and much of it has gone overseas as tourist mementoes, or acquired for museums or private collections (Personal communication, Pankaj Shah, 13.7.02). Cause for concern as early as the 1960s, the exodus of hand embroidery from Gujarat was not thoroughly addressed until much later when NGOs started to combine income generation activities with cultural preservation, mainly by providing women with paid work as embroiderers. Active in this respect are the Shrujan Trust founded in 1968-69, Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS) established in 1989, and the Kalaraksha Trust set up in 1993 - all based in Kachchh. Local traditions of embroidery have been adapted for products that to suit the needs of urban consumers; the work is regular work and accommodates social conventions such as *purdah* (seclusion of women) and the women’s domestic responsibilities, notably child care and fetching water which can take several hours a day. These interventions have seen many Kachchhi women emerge as professional artisans, in addition to which, they have also benefited from training in literacy and health care; some have taken supervisory roles in the organisations, and others have emerged as gifted designers able to interpret and adapt traditional styles for contemporary usage. [4] The kudos afforded by their professional status is due in no small part to their earning capacity, which has shifted local perceptions of embroidery as a domestic “time-pass” (hobby) to an appreciation of its economic potential. (fig 14) Having regular work has enabled the women

to build *pukka* (strong) homes, to educate their children and to pay for health care when necessary. In the harsh environment of Kachchh, afflicted by natural disasters on a biblical scale and bound by social conventions, these are considerable achievements (see: Anjirbag 2010). On a global scale, Kachchhi embroidery has been exhibited in Europe, North America, Australia and Japan and also sells throughout the West where the expanding market for embroidered garments, accessories and soft furnishings devours whatever the women produce. (see: Kwon and Raste 2002) In contemporary Indian embroidery a number of things intersect: women's development; rural uplift; and notably, commerce and culture. Women from many communities, including Dhebaria Rabaris, have lately come to see embroidery as a serious career option.

### **Endnotes**

[1] There are 3 main subgroups of Rabaris in Kachchh district, Gujarat; Dhebarias in the east of the district, chiefly in Anjar *taluka* (division of district); Vagadias in the north-eastern talukas of Bhachau and Rapar; and Kachhis in the central and western *talukas* of Bhuj, Nakhatrana and Lakhpat.

[2] At the time of the interview, the average daily wage for a farm labourer (work done by many Rabaris) was about fifty rupees a day, thus a dowry costing seventy thousand rupees represents one thousand four hundred day's work, or over three and a half year's work.

[3] A donation of 12% of all sales of my book, *Textiles and Dress of Gujarat*, will go to the Shree Dhebar Srava Seva Vikas Mandal Anjar in support of girls' education.

[4] It has proven difficult to obtain precise figures for women working for NGOs in Kachchh at any one time as the numbers fluctuate week-by-week. But in interviews with staff at Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS) and Shrujan Trust in 2002, KMVS estimated that they had about four thousand members and Shrujan over three thousand. Chandaben Shroff, founder of the Shrujan Trust, emphasised that they had trained over 18,000 women since the trust was established (1968-69). (Personal communication, Chandaben Shroff, 12.7.02)

NB An earlier version of this paper was published in Breward, C., P. Crang and R. Crill (eds)(2010), *British Asian Style*. London: V&A Publishing, pp. 30-43. This version has been updated and new material added.



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### **Interviews**

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Vanka Kana Rabari, dealer in Kachchhi embroidery, 26.6.97.

Kantibhai Ros, Principal, Rabari Ashramshala Anjar, 26.12.08.

Nazeer Weldingwala, dealer in antique textiles, 18.8.01.

Sariyaben, Ahir embroiderer, 23.8.03.

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fig 4: Dhebaria Rabari with sheep and goats



fig 5: Dhebaria Rabaris wearing *kediya* (smocks)



fig 6: Dhebaria Rabari *kediyaun*. Private collection



fig 7: Detail of embroidery, front of *kediyaun*. Private collection



fig 8: Vagadia Rabari boy wearing *jhuli* (child's smock)

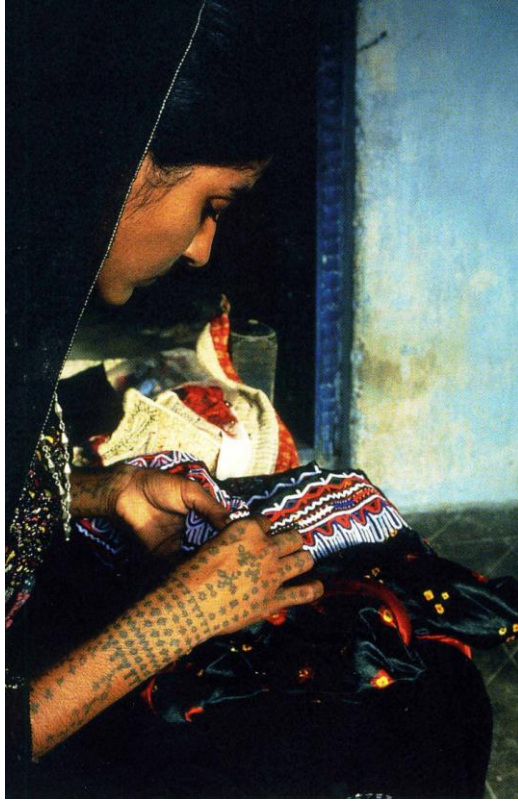


fig 9: Dhebaria woman embroidering a blouse



fig 10: Vagadia Rabari women @ wedding, mid-2000s



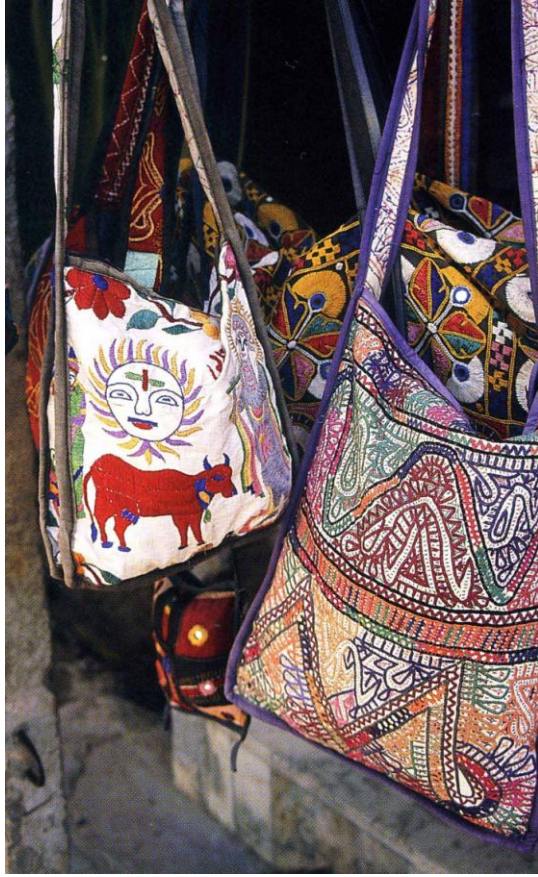


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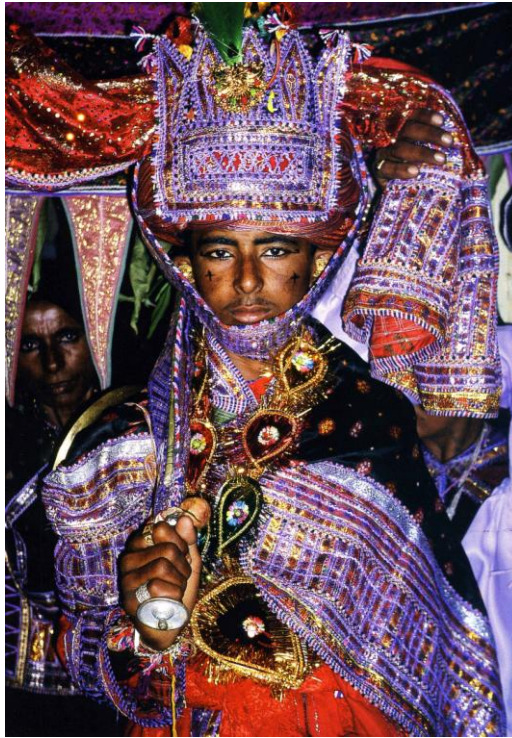


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