

ART AS IDENTITY: Social mobility through traditional textiles in Kutch

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Abstract

Art practice is also a way by which a community constructs its identity. This has been seen in the case of Maru Meghvals women artists of Kutch, Gujarat, who migrated to India in 1972 from Pakistan. Refugees who were also of low caste, they carved their identity as a community of crafts persons who specialized in a special kind of embroidery called *suf*. The practice of *suf* embroidery was not a commercial enterprise initially but necessity to survive paved the way for commerce as well as identity. The earthquake of 2001 brought new challenges and the women went beyond commerce to narrate their tales of survival in the form of narrative scrolls made with appliqué and embroidery. These narratives included the earthquake, partition and migration, protest against power plants etc. We told this narrative in the form of an animated documentary. Using the art of appliqué and embroidery the film follows four voices as they share their personal journey towards self-determination, as a collective and as individuals. In this paper we discuss the relationship between, art, commerce, media and their role in the construction of identity.

KEYWORDS: Art practice, identity, appliqué and *suf* embroidery, caste, community and individual

Introduction

"Who are you?" is a question inevitably asked of a stranger in Gujarat, India. The questioner does not want the name; s/he wants to know the caste of the stranger. The Hindu concept of caste, both intriguing and compelling is an association to an ethnic group, an immutable identity by birth. A critical aspect of this social system is the predominating factor of social hierarchy.

Gujarat is amongst several other states in India that has a complex caste system that cannot be simply explained by the classical *varna* system. There are numerous *jatis*(castes), which according to Manu evolved out of intermarriages between the four *varnas* (Dumont, 1966,

1988). However, the *varna* system itself has been a much debated subject which is beyond the scope of this paper. What is significant and essential to understand is that the *jatis* relationships represent the way society functions while *varna* signifies a ritual ranking, therefore the caste and sub-caste actually indicates the real status (Thapar, 1975). Further the caste is recognized by society at large and the sub-caste by the particular caste of the individual' (Ghurye, 1969). For example, a person in India may say they are Brahmins, but amongst Brahmins they may identify themselves as a particular sect of the Brahmin community.

In Kutch, the desert district of Gujarat, people don't often have to inquire about identity. Dress proclaims it all. In this virtual cultural island, distinct traditions have been maintained remarkably over generations. In traditional South Asian society, a person first belongs to a region, then to a caste, a family, and finally exists as an individual. In Kutch, people read the cut and colour of garments, and especially the printed or embroidered embellishment, to identify the wearer's caste and, within that, his or her age and marital status, and sometimes even more. The stitches, colours, motifs and patterns of an embroidery styles thus eloquently express this cultural identity. Embroidery is more than simply technique. It is a historical document and a social marker.

Kutch and Maru Meghwals

Kutch is part of the great Thar Parkar, a culturally contiguous desert area that spans parts of Sindh, Pakistan, and parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat, India (Untawale, 1974). The political boundaries were created with the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 and sealed only sometime in the 1960s. Historically in Sindh, among the Hindus, the dominating high caste Rajputs forbade low caste Maru Meghwals, whose profession was leatherwork and weaving, to wear the valuable metallic brocade clothes that they cherished. Legend has it that this very proscription motivated Maru Meghwal women to invent *suf* embroidery to embellish their otherwise simple fabrics. Counted on the warp and weft of the cloth, *suf* implies that they understood fabric structure, just as weavers would have. The embellishment was so beautiful that it was subsequently learned by other castes, including the Rajputs. Traditionally, embroidery was assigned no commercial value. It was part of a social exchange, created as personal adornment, and gifts to children, family, the fiancé and in-laws. Often, embroidery was received before the bride was met, so it introduced and evaluated her, demonstrating her creativity, intelligence and love. Innovation was essential, and an artisan understood where and how she could vary her work. Each piece was by design unique and embroidery style conveyed not only region and community; community members could also distinguish an individual's work like handwriting. Driven by exposure and innovation, the living traditions always evolved over time. But localization of trends insured that that visual expression of group affiliation remained clear.

Identity may be seen as 'fixed and transhistorical', but it can also be 'fluid and contingent' (Woodward, 1997). Moments of crisis, political upheavals and natural disasters have historically provided gaps and opportunities for reinvention, reorganization and social mobility.

The recent history of the Maru Meghwals of Sindh provides such an example. The Hindu Maru Meghwals migrated from Sindh to Kutch, and in the period of transition and relocation found opportunities for social mobility. The interesting feature of their case is that they used their art to challenge caste's rigidity, manipulate their identity, and raise their social status. As we shall discuss later, the crisis of relocation, followed by the trauma of a

massive earthquake, and the information revolution following the earthquake impacted the artisans, and offered opportunities for significant changes in their art and identity.

The Crisis of Relocation

After the 1947 partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, Hindus of various castes lived as minorities along the southern regions of Sindh. Years later, after the 1971 Indo-Pak war, a portion of the land they occupied was captured by India and subsequently returned. Consequently, many Hindus migrated across the border as refugees in 1972. To the people of Kutch and Rajasthan, the similarities of the refugees' dress far outweighed any subtle distinctions, and all were dubbed 'Sodha,' the lineage of the Rajputs who dominated the immigrant population. In the new context the meaning of the caste name changed. In Kutch, 'Sodha' came to mean recent Sindhi immigrants (as against those who migrated in 1947). Doubly vulnerable as refugees and members of a low status caste, the Maru Meghvals took advantage of being unknown to raise their social status.

To further differentiate themselves from existing Meghval groups, which in fact were linguistically and culturally less related to them, their women removed their *balaiya*, (characteristic white bangles worn from wrist to elbow).

The migration also coincided with a growing interest in using traditional embroidery for commercial purpose. Commercial embroidery was a good option. In many traditional societies social constraints prohibit women from going out to earn through manual labour such as construction, agricultural or drought relief work. The Maru Meghval women were particularly secluded. Lack of education precluded other livelihoods. Embroidery could be adjusted into essential household work. By 1980, when the communities were able to move from refugee camps to permanent village settlements, the *suf* work they had brought with them from Sindh had been popularized and the women were earning regular incomes. The identity of *suf* embroidery was known far more than that of the artisans who made it. The traditional dress of these artisans had opened an opportunity to be perceived as a separate caste of higher status in the new regional context. Now, their art concretized this identity and advanced it. The Maru Meghvals identity began to be associated with their embroidery style rather than with their caste.

By the 1990s commercial production of embroidery had increased. Several NGOs, and many commercial traders were providing work to hundreds of artisans. Money, exposure, and new fashion accelerated changes in cultural identity. Commercial work targeted urban and international markets. Designers intervened to make traditional embroidery "less ethnic," manipulating motifs, patterns and colours with little knowledge or interest in styles. Concept was separated from execution. Traditions were diluted. In this embroidery, personal identity and creativity were out of the question. Deeply aware of their position in the social hierarchy, artisans were not accustomed to critiquing such situations. They were in awe of power and grateful to get work. Commercialization insidiously eroded the artisans' sense of aesthetics and self worth. Perfected, decorative renditions of tradition were selling as fashion. So, artisans felt these were 'better.' Ironically, in the eyes of Hindu society, the caste status of Maru Meghval artisans was rising, but in some ways their own cultural identity and self esteem were devalued.

In 1991, one Maru Meghval artisan, Dayaben, spoke up. She wanted more wages and more volition in her embroidery work. On her initiative, with an American scholar and Dayaben's educated brother, Prakashbhai, the social enterprise Kala Raksha, Preservation of Traditional

Arts, was established in 1993, as an alternative to existing commercial enterprises. Kala Raksha focused on the artisan as designer-creator (Figure 1). Through the organization, women artisans tentatively ventured outside, created innovations for the contemporary market, and began to earn wages that they themselves determined. With the forming of the trust, the artisans took the onus of preserving and promoting their art through commercialization and cooperation amongst several communities.



Figure 1. Kala Raksha artists at work

The Trauma of the Earthquake

In 2001 a massive earthquake devastated Kutch. For months artisans were camped outside their homes. The disaster destroyed, but also brought new opportunities. At this point, two people independently asked the artisans of Kala Raksha to portray their experiences of the earthquake in narrative work. Although the concept of personal expression was unknown, Kala Raksha agreed to experiment. What they evolved had no precedent. Nor did Kala Raksha impose stylistic concepts nor offer any guidance — except the rule that no one copies. The women developed their individual design vocabularies, syntax and grammar, firmly based in traditional roots, yet taking fresh twists. Thus, the women artisans ventured into another world, as artists. One proclaimed; "We could only do something like this because the earthquake affected us so profoundly."

Once they had begun to develop their styles, the artisans preferred to do narrative work directly, as they do with traditional work. They neither draw nor use templates, but work from imagination to cloth. Most important, this allows the stories to evolve. Women begin with a basic concept, and develop it through continually identifying and solving design problems. In an increasingly artistic vein, Babraben describes the process, "We know a subject, but we have to think how to show it. We have to plan first. Thought takes time." The desire to express motivates learning how to structure thought.

As the artisans gained confidence in narrative expression, they realized they had a lot to say (Figure 2, 3). Most significant, the new focus on the art of craft automatically generated strong feelings of engagement of artisans in their work, and the artists immediately knew that this body of work was valued in a different way. The sense of personal expression and ownership grew and with it a sense of an individual identity.

The earthquake and its aftermath of cultural industries had increased the competition in the craft market, and the labour wages of industries lured artisans. Despite so much effort, the wages and social status of artisans were still equated with labour. Yet artisans' innovations within their own traditions demonstrated vibrancy and an understanding of art and design.

Kala Raksha returned to the challenge of maintaining cultural identity and increasing value for craft, with the understanding that the artist is the steward of tradition. It encouraged the artist to reach out to a wider world through exhibitions, travel, media and web presence.



Figure 2. Women's Health by Meghiben



Figure 3. Meghiben Meriya

The Information Revolution

The era post earthquake ushered in the third major change: the information revolution. Increased possibility and choice- coupled with the revolution of the cell phone- altered the hierarchy of identity. Now, the concept of the individual emerged. The cultural evolution of a stronger individual identity created a space for the concept of intellectual property. Kala Raksha's narrative line has encouraged artisans to develop their unique expressions within traditions. The project eventually accesses intellectual property for development and greater value.

At the same time the narrative genre was being developed, Kala Raksha began another initiative with an ultimately similar goal. Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya, the first institution of design education for artisans, began in 2005. In its year long program, artisans learned to view their work objectively, to innovate consciously for distant markets, and to find their own individual styles of expression. The program generated an unprecedented sense of pride and need to share. Being a part of Kala Raksha changed artisans' attitudes and sense of identity. They developed pride in being an artisan, and then pride in tradition and cultural identity, and finally a sense of themselves as individuals. This gave them credibility and the confidence to speak about their work and commission a film to celebrate their new art forms.

The Stitches Speak

The idea of making the film came from the participants. They had to their credit a couple of live-action documentary films in which some of the artisans had participated. This had brought home the notion that, in a film, participants can speak for themselves. So far they had told their stories in cloth, but the cloth did not have a voice. Voice provides the time-

dimension to the spatiality of cloth – it charts out routes and paths which the eye, as well as the camera can follow and navigate. The voice releases the memory and thoughts stored in the images.

The embroidered cloth became a way of constructing their identity in which we were invited to participate. Thus began a year long journey in which we collaborated for an animated documentary, where the artists told the stories in their own voices and through their medium of embroidery and appliqué. So it was not them in person, but their creations that came alive in their own voices. It is the voices which animate the embroidery. The film attempted capturing this animation.

An ethnographic approach was adopted although the time spent in the field each time was no more than a week at a stretch. However, a close contact was maintained via cellular phone, which helped understand the multiple perspectives of the participants.

The attempt was to tone down the 'otherness' through participation. Inherent in the notion of recording with a camera is the subject position where one is the observer and the other observed. But in this case the camera was not used just as a recording tool; it was a means to move the narrative elements that were constructed together.

Coming from a background in creative work we together shared an understanding of time and space, of image-making and storytelling. We did not alter the images and neither did we interfere with the orientation of the images in the cloth and animated them in the way they were depicted (Figure 4). Some figures walked sideways, some upside down and some were mirrored as in the case of the bullock carts. We worked with memory and multiple narratives of several artists who shared their life stories. The challenge lay in how to represent and preserve the plurality of voices without losing the thread of the narrative.

The objective was not to make any truth claims to represent "reality" but rather offer versions of reality as experienced, because all interpretation it would seem is "an expression of our own consciousness" (Pink, 2001). In the process of bringing together the various perspectives, we too interpreted the narratives and the visuals in our own way.

Film as a medium has the sense of immediacy, a notion of 'now-ness' that allows the viewer to virtually experience presence of the voices. It can also create a sense of tactility, evoking the sense of touch (Marks, 2000). The imagery embroidered in the cloth was both visual and sensorial that lent itself to film animation. The invocation of touch made the virtual experience more immediate. Film also allows for the individual to be framed and identified. In this case they were identified by their embroidery and voice.

The cinematic movement in the film was motivated by the way they told their stories moving and turning the cloth, mimicking a travel through time. Time itself is indefinite in terms of past present or future. When the women described the event that took place in the past they pointed at that part of the embroidered cloth and said here is when we are travelling towards the border. The cloth became a territory, a map where they moved about with words. At times they described the image they were pointing at to explain the procedure of making, and other times the image served as a mnemonic as they would recall an event that the image invoked. The embroidered image thus evoked multiple times of present and past. In this case the narration is imitative of cinema, where in the Deleuzian sense the time image is 'a co-existence of distinct durations, or of levels of duration; a single event can belong to several levels: the sheets of past coexist in a non-chronological order' (Deleuze, 2005).

This negotiation of multiple times, inspired us to structure the script as a conversation piece that allowed us to freely navigate across different spaces and time and allowing the individual voices to be heard. The emergence of an individual identity is reflected in the manner in which the characters are revealed. The figures in the beginning of the film are similar and

non-recognizable, and emerge as recognizable individuals towards the end; in the same way as the journeys of these artists.

When the artists saw the film, they looked keenly. And then, slowly, they smiled. The film invoked self-reflection and added value and credence to the stories. The animation helped them see the movement of their imagination. They said it helped them believe in themselves, validating them as artists.



Figure 4. Still from the film, The Stitches Speak

Conclusion

The emergence of artisans as individuals and artists perhaps heralds a future in which social hierarchy plays a less restricting role. Beginning with the case of the MaruMeghvals, art took an active role in not only in constructing an identity but also turning moments of crisis, trauma and relocation into opportunities for self-determinism. Kala Raksha furthered this process by renewing and nourishing the kernel of individuality that had always been there, and encouraged the growth of self-esteem. It enabled the subtle personal expressions of traditional work that could be read by community members to flourish. Individual nuances became clearly visible to a broader audience, and valued.

The joint creation of the film, *The Stitches Speak*, celebrated this development and the emergence of the individual voice. Identities may be given, imposed or claimed and, as we have seen, are fluid and flexible. In the case of the Maru Meghvals, artists claimed their community and individual identities through their art. We may thus conclude that there is a strong relationship between, art, commerce, media and their role in the construction of identity.

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