

India Perspectives

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Indian IT Industry: Setting new benchmarks

Gujarat's Embroidery

‘Marvellously Beautiful’

Text: Shaheen Perveen

Photographs: Shahid A. Makhfi

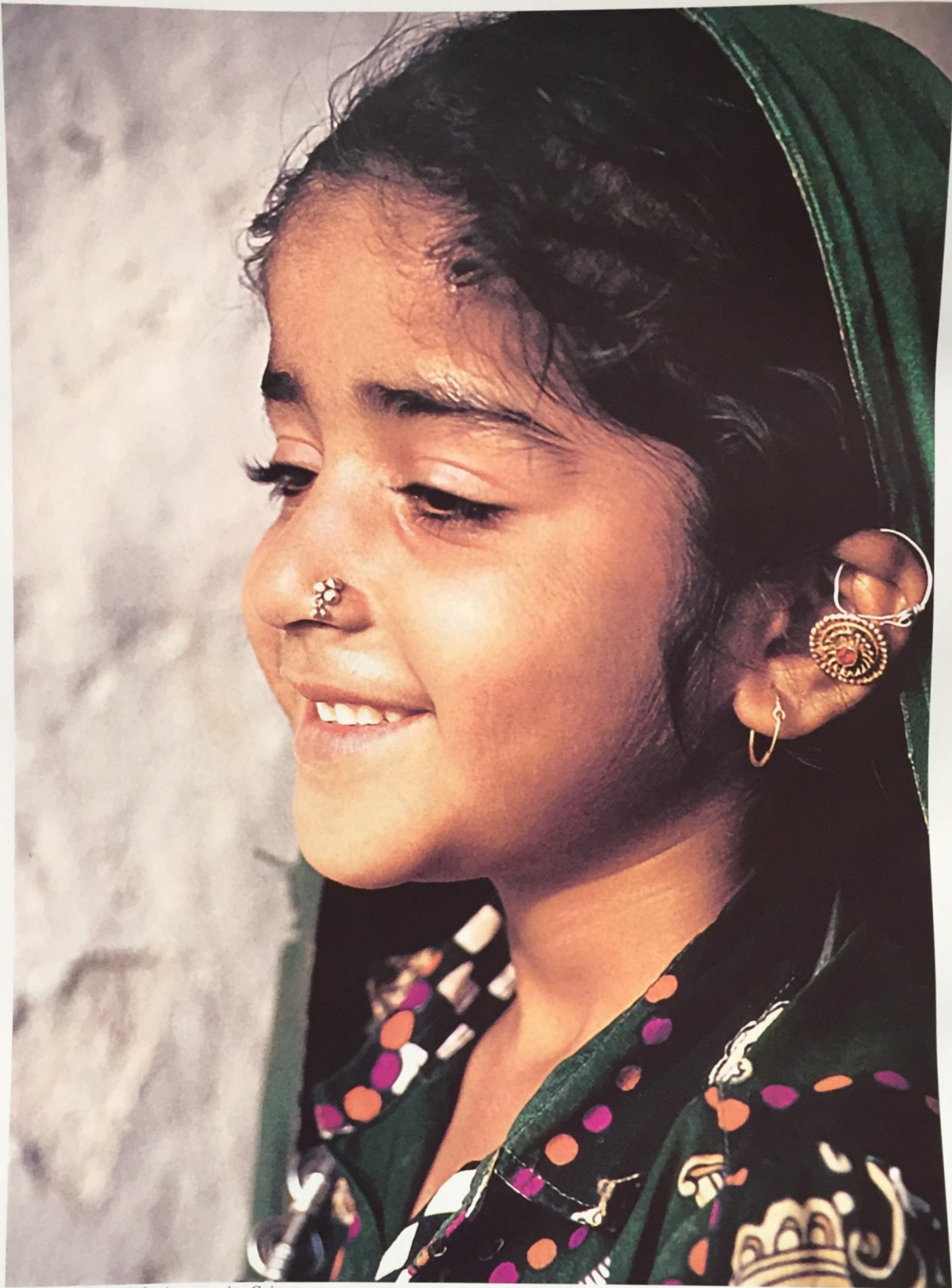
Gujarat's contemporary dress style is a cultural manifestation that has evolved over centuries and has remained a principal mark of identity and social cohesion. Though dress is indicative of one's position in social hierarchy, it is also one of the first indicators of identity that disappears in the process of cultural assimilation and racial mingling.

The ethnic embroidery in Gujarat is almost synonymous with Kutch, which was once a part of the trade route between Central Asia and the Far East. Given Gujarat's coastline and numerous harbours, it exposed the land to the outside influences. Some of the best and oldest textiles were created in Gujarat and they were in great demand in other parts of Asia. Old residents of Kutch still recount romantic tales of caravans laden with silk, pearls, carpets etc. traversing the Rann to reach the port cities. Exposure to the outside world had its effect on embroidery as well. The women of Kutch weave a magical world of colour and celebrate everyday life. Elements and traces of Baluch or Sindhi embroidery merging with those of the Kutch is well established. Marco Polo, writing about Gujarat said, "They also work here beautiful mats in red and blue leather, exquisitely inlaid with figures of birds and beasts and skillfully embroidered with gold and silver wire. They are marvellously beautiful things; they are used by the Saracens to sleep upon."

Embroidery in Gujarat is akin to ritual decoration and can be found everywhere. *Toran* is the most common embroidered doorway decoration with hanging flaps supposed to bring good luck. *Pachitattis* are hanged from the corners as a welcome symbol to the visitors. *Chaklas* are embroidered square pieces of cloth used as furniture cover, while *Bhitiya* is the impressive wall hanging. Mirror inset embroidery or *Abhala* has now become a part of the ethnic chic fashion world, where small mirror discs are fixed with closely worked silken thread. Usually



Rabari embroidery, Gujarat



A Kutch girl from Rabari community, Gujarat



Mutwa embroidery

the mirror work is done on a dark background with motifs like flowers, creepers, petals etc. Though the motifs are inspired by daily life happenings, ancient beliefs and rituals, they vary from place to place and are passed down the generations – from mother to daughter. It is not unusual in Kutch to find young girls, their mother and even grandmother sitting together to create the best of *cholis*, *ghagras*, *odhinis* (blouse, skirt and head-cover), bed spreads, bags, wall hanging and a variety of ornamental pieces for home decor. Until recently long hours were spent to create the best in embroidery for personal use but today things are somewhat organized and speedier in order to cater to the needs of the tourists as well. At a very early age the girls acquire embroidery skills, honed by generations, and with pride and patience they prepare their own trousseau.

Each community in Kutch has its own distinctive style of needlework. Geometric patterns of *Sauf* embroidery by the *Sodha* community appear to be the earliest extension of Iranian-Baluchistan influence. The time consuming needlework involves stitches on the base by counting every single thread that imparts a uniform, balanced look as if the design was woven on cloth. Sodha Rajputs migrated to Gujarat from Pakistan during the 1971 Indo-Pak war.

Ari embroidery is equally old and famous for its heavy work. Prepared with the help of an awl, it represents a cobbler's stitch which requires



Toran

considerable skill and practice. The sharper and finer the hook of the awl, the more refined the quality of the embroidery. This is done in silk, or locally made satin called *Gajji* or on a silky satin fabric *Atlash*. Ari embroidery was patronized by the royal ladies of Kutch who were fascinated by the Persian motifs like peacock and flowers. The garments with Ari embroidery are usually dotted with *bootis* (leaves) which round off with big ones known as *Nadir Shahi booti*.

Rabari embroidery is the most prominent work and widely available. The women of Rabari community wear black skirts with creative edges embroidered, and so are their profusely decorated veils with tie and dye patterns. A Rabari bridegroom's embroidered logcoat is worth a look. Even children wear heavily embroidered salwars and shirts. The Kutch Rabaris make use of mirrors of various shapes and sizes and therefore their works have a variety though they stick to minute chain stitches.

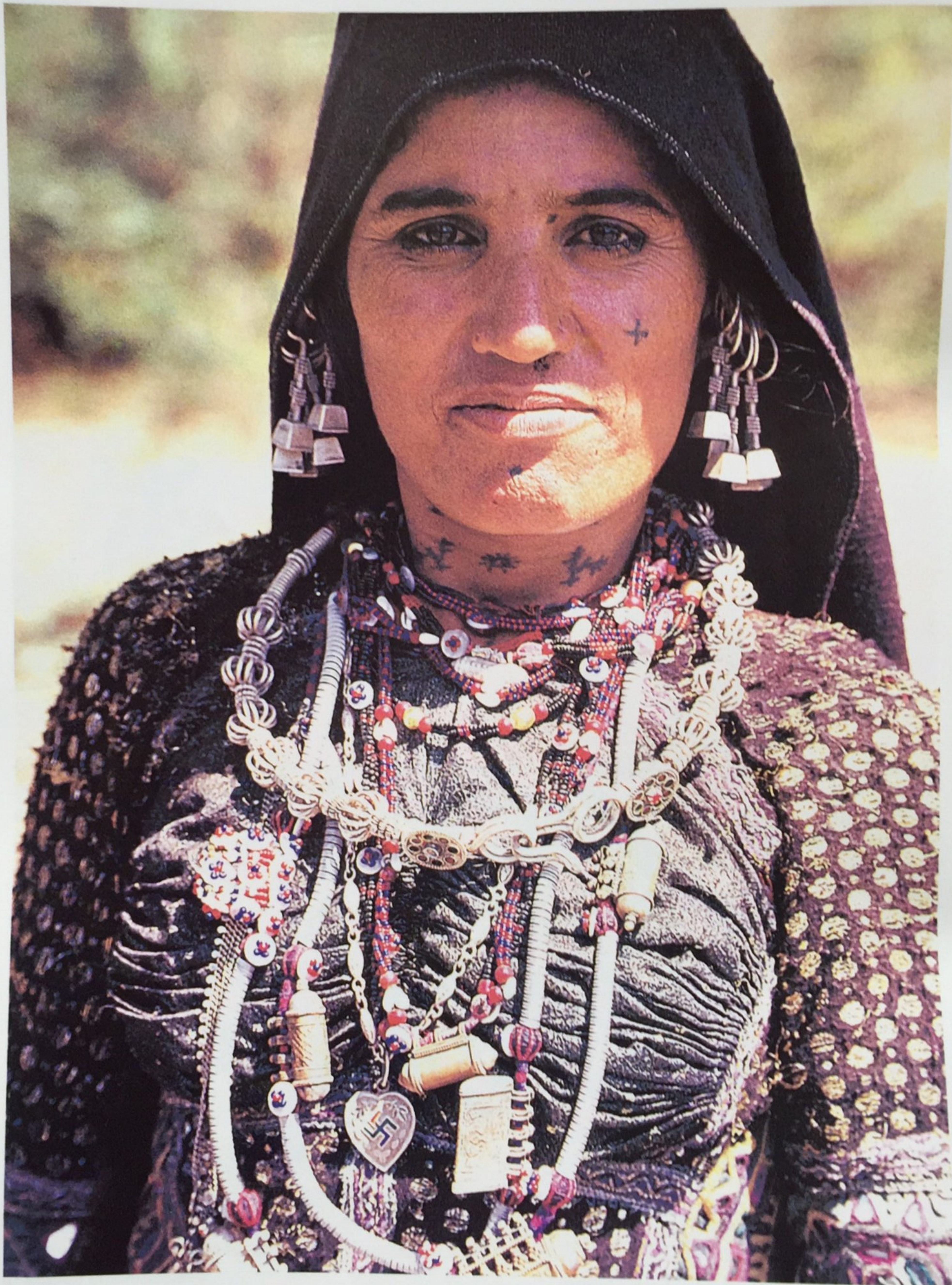
The finest embroidery with most intricate patterns created by the needle comes from *Mutwa* and *Jat* communities. The Mutwas, living in Banni, excel in all styles of embroidery and they work out the tiny mirrors with ease. Fine handspun cotton and quality silk is used in red, white, golden yellow, blue and black to develop patterns and booties interspread with birds and animals motifs. The Jats, who migrated from Baluchistan, are experts in inserting the smallest of the mirrors with utmost perfection, amidst pleasing colours and design that are usually geometric patterns.

The ladies from *Lohana* community in Banni create fantasy with silk thread thickly piled in deep orange, golden yellow, dark red and bright blue. The bootis are inset with mirrors, making use of chain stitch, buttonhole stitch, etc.

Applique or *Katab* is another form of decorative needlework, more pronounced in Saurashtra where



Children from Banni area of Kutch with embroidered clothes



Kutchi woman



Banni embroidery

women from the *darzi* (tailor) community prepare it for commercial use. Its origin relates to a tailor's wife who saved the cloth remnants in the shop, which finally created quilt covers, and other decorations. After all, nothing should go waste. Unlike the Pipli work of Orissa, here it is done in patchwork based on pieces of coloured and patterned fabric, which is finely cut to serve the motif and then stitched on to a plain background to produce quilts, curtains and wall hangings. Patchwork quilts from Kutch are worked upon by neat running stitches and are quite popular with tourists. The higher the pile of quilts, the higher the owner's status, for, it establishes his ability to accommodate a number of guests simultaneously.

Next to garments and home decors, a variety of decorations are created for the bullock, horses, camels and palanquins. Horn covers or *Shinghadiwas*, forehead covers, saddles, body hangings and neck ornaments for bullocks and camels are most popular. Leather embroidery is a later addition in the long list of marketable craft. Now embroidered *jootis* (shoes) of Banaskantha are quite popular along with a variety of leather products including bed spreads!!

The author is a noted freelance writer.