

Chapter 12

Stitching Identity: The Cultural Significance of Embroidery in Marwada Meghwal Community of Kutch

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Introduction

The Marwada Meghwal community, located across the North-Western belt of India and Pakistan, exemplifies a rich cultural heritage intertwined with historical and socio-economic resilience. Predominantly settled in the Kutch district of Gujarat, this community is renowned for its exceptional embroidery skills, which are a significant aspect of their cultural identity and a crucial source of livelihood.

The Marwada Meghwal community, originating from Sindh, migrated to Kutch, bringing the art of handloom weaving and embroidery. The community traditionally resided in small hamlets of round mud-brick huts adorned with colourful geometric designs and detailed mirror inlays. This cultural background influences their craft practices, settlement patterns, and architectural styles, reflecting a deep connection between their artistry, cultural identity, and way of life.

The Marwada Meghwals, historically marginalised and positioned at the lower end of the caste hierarchy, have navigated numerous challenges over centuries, including socio-economic exclusion, environmental vulnerabilities, and the pressures of globalisation and urbanisation. Their journey from historical marginalisation to contemporary resilience offers profound insights into cultural preservation and economic adaptation dynamics.

The region of Kutch, characterised by its arid desert landscape and diverse cultural mosaic, provides a unique backdrop to the Marwada Meghwal community's story. Kutch's strategic geographical location, bordering Pakistan and encompassing a vast unbroken coastline, has historically facilitated trade and cultural exchange, shaping the socio-economic fabric of its inhabitants. The region's cultural diversity is further enriched by the various ethnic groups that reside there, each contributing distinct traditions, customs, and skills. This multicultural environment has played a pivotal role in preserving and evolving over 40 styles of embroidery, each with its own history and significance.

This research explores the embroidery tradition within the Marwada Meghwal settlement in Ramdevnagar, examining the history, motifs, techniques, and materials used in their embroidery practice. By delving into the intricacies of embroidery, the study unravels how it serves as a significant cultural touchstone for the community, reinforcing cultural bonds and resilience despite contemporary shifts in embroidery styles.

Current Scenario and Problems

Exploring the Marwada Meghwal community's history and cultural heritage is rooted in a complex socio-economic and environmental context. Several pressing issues have emerged as critical factors influencing the community's current situation, forming the basis and rationale for this research. These multifaceted issues encompass socio-economic marginalisation, cultural preservation, environmental vulnerability, gender inequality, legal rights, and health disparities.

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Socio-Economic Marginalisation

The Marwada Meghwal community has historically faced significant socio-economic marginalisation. Positioned at the lower end of the caste hierarchy, the Meghwals have been systematically excluded from accessing education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. This marginalisation has resulted in a cycle of poverty and limited socio-economic mobility. By examining the socio-economic conditions of the Meghwals, this research aims to highlight the structural barriers they face and propose targeted interventions to enhance their socio-economic well-being.

Cultural Preservation and Identity

Rapid urbanisation, globalisation, and environmental changes pose a significant threat to the cultural heritage and identity of the Marwada Meghwal community. The unique cultural practices, particularly their renowned embroidery traditions, are at risk of erosion. These cultural elements are essential for maintaining the community's identity and promoting cultural diversity and heritage in the broader societal context. This research seeks to document and analyse the cultural practices of the Meghwals and explore how these traditions can be preserved and revitalised in the face of modern challenges.

Environmental Vulnerability and Livelihoods

The arid conditions of the Kutch region make sustainable development and resilience-building initiatives critical. This study examines the impact of ecological changes on the Meghwal's livelihoods and explores sustainable practices that can mitigate these challenges. By focusing on environmental sustainability, the research aims to contribute to developing strategies that enhance the community's resilience against ecological shocks.

Gender Inequality and Empowerment

Gender disparities within the Marwada Meghwal community further compound their socio-economic challenges. Women in the community often have limited access to resources and decision-making roles, restricting their opportunities for empowerment and socio-economic advancement. Addressing gender inequality is essential for promoting holistic community development. This research highlights the roles and contributions of women in the Meghwal community, particularly in the domain of embroidery and cultural preservation, and advocates for initiatives that support women's empowerment and gender equality.

Research Questions

Based on the identified challenges, this research seeks answers to two primary questions.

1. How do the socio-economic challenges and opportunities the Marwada Meghwal community faces influence the preservation of their cultural heritage and traditional crafts?
2. To what extent do their adaptive strategies, including the practice of traditional architectural techniques like bhunga houses, contribute to environmental resilience and sustainable livelihoods?

Hypothesis

Despite facing socio-economic marginalisation, environmental vulnerabilities, and cultural challenges, the Marwada Meghwal community has thrived and made a significant presence in society, particularly through its unique crafts and embroidery traditions. We hypothesise that the community's rich cultural heritage, embodied in their crafts and embroidery, has become a local and international symbol of resilience and identity. Through their craftsmanship and cultural expression, the Marwada Meghwal community has not only preserved their heritage but has also garnered recognition and appreciation worldwide, contributing to their socio-economic empowerment and cultural revitalisation.

Research Objectives

The objective of our research is:

1. To examine the historical and contemporary socio-economic challenges the Marwada Meghwal community faces to understand the context in which their cultural identity has evolved.
2. To explore the cultural heritage and traditions of the Marwada Meghwal community, with a specific focus on their craftsmanship, embroidery techniques, and artistic expression, to assess the significance of these cultural practices in shaping the community's identity and resilience.
3. To assess the impact of the Ramdevnagar's Marwada Meghwal community's cultural identity, particularly through their crafts and embroidery, on local and global perceptions, recognition, and appreciation of their cultural heritage, and to explore the implications of this recognition for the community's socio-economic well-being and cultural revitalisation.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the socio-economic, cultural, and environmental dynamics of the Marwada Meghwal community. The research questions focus on understanding the community's historical marginalisation, cultural preservation efforts, environmental vulnerabilities and gender inequalities. The variables measured include socio-economic status, cultural practices, environmental impacts and gender roles.

A case study approach was used, centring on the Ramdevnagar cluster, a small, interrelated community, to gather in-depth and context-specific insights.

The Figure 1 below details the methodology followed for this research paper.

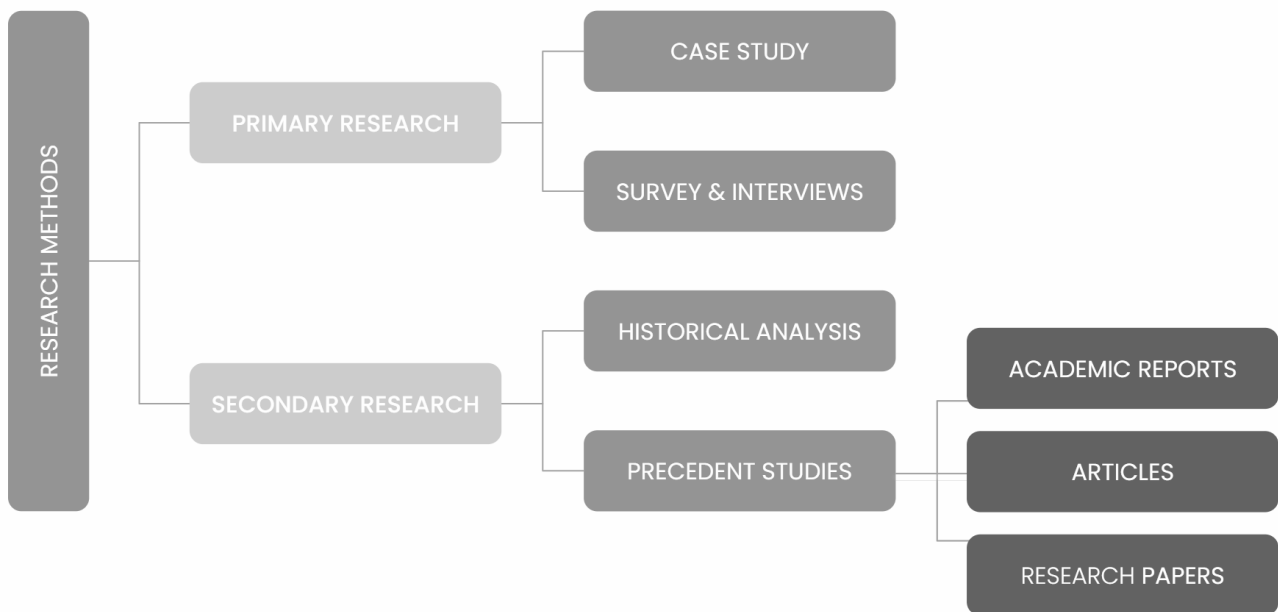


Figure 1: Research Methodology (Developed by author)

Participants

The study focused on the Ramdevnagar cluster in Kutch, which consists of 20 families comprising approximately 100 members, including males, females, children, and the elderly. The entire village is involved in craft activities, making it an ideal microcosm for examining the Marwada Meghwal community's broader issues. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants for a detailed study, ensuring representation across different age groups, genders, and roles within the community.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using multiple methods to ensure richness and triangulation.

- Participant Observation:** Researchers lived within the Ramdevnagar cluster for four days, observing daily activities, cultural practices, and social interactions. Field notes were taken to capture contextual details and nuances.
- In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 community members, including women artisans and elders involved in embroidery. The interview guide covered historical narratives, socio-economic conditions, cultural practices, environmental impacts, gender roles, and craft contemporisation.
- Document Analysis:** Historical records, government reports, and community documents were reviewed to provide additional context and validate findings from primary data collection.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards to ensure the rights and well-being of participants.

- Informed Consent:** Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.
- Confidentiality:** Personal information was kept separate from the data used in the analysis to prevent identification.

Limitations

Several limitations were identified in this study:

- **Sample Size and Generalizability:** The focus on a single cluster (Ramdevnagar) may limit the generalizability of the findings to all members of the Marwada Meghwal community or other similar communities.
- **Self-Reported Data:** The reliance on self-reported data in interviews and surveys may introduce bias, such as social desirability or recall bias.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Despite efforts to build trust and rapport, cultural sensitivity issues may have influenced participants' willingness to share certain information.
- **Environmental Constraints:** The arid and remote nature of the Kutch region posed logistical challenges, potentially limiting the scope and depth of data collection.

This study aims to provide a robust and nuanced understanding of the Marwada Meghwal community's socio-economic and cultural landscape by addressing these limitations and adhering to rigorous methodological standards.

Overview of Kutch

Kutch district is the westernmost part of Gujarat and the second largest district in India, bordering Pakistan. It is a massive, thick peninsula between the great deserts of Sindh & Thar and the Arabian Sea. It has an area of 45,000 square km, covered mainly by the salty marshlands of the Rann. Kutch is predominantly an arid desert and resembles other such deserts worldwide. (Hardy, 2012)



Figure 2: Location of Kutch in Gujarat, India & the historical trade routes

The landscape of Kutch, when seen from the road traveller's point of view, comprises large tracts of desert land stretching endlessly into the horizon. Occasional green fertile patches and thorny desert shrubs are interspersed with the multiple dry river beds and gorges. The desert region lies towards the north and northeastern part of Kutch, called Motu and Nanu Rann. Kutch has an intermix of a variable and rather hostile geography.

The grasslands are located in the northeastern areas. Most of the fertile stretches of land are located in the southern coastal part. The rest of the territory is an arid tableland, a semi-desert that stretches from east to west as low rocky hills are scattered among the beds of rivers and streams, which are almost perennially dry.

Another key geographical aspect of this region is the fault lines. Kutch is believed to be sitting on six major fault lines, and seismologists have discovered a seventh hidden fault line in northern Kutch, which triggered the devastating 2001 earthquake in Bhuj.

Kutch and its communities

To gain a broader cultural perspective, it is essential to understand the surrounding settings that led to the various occupational and trade practices in this region. The vast, unbroken coastline was a crucial factor in developing shipbuilding as an occupation. It led to trade and commerce with numerous countries and also shaped the attitude of the native Kutchi's to evolve into astute tradespeople. The geographical position was vital as it led to isolation

from mainland India and yet connectivity with foreign countries. As a result of this irony, Kutch was largely uninfluenced and remained culturally intact.

The presence of large quantities of salt naturally set up the salt trade. Banni grasslands afforded to rear sheep, cattle and camels, the products of which were put to suitable use. Surplus milk was converted into *pedhas* and *mawas*, a regional speciality.

Harsh climatic conditions created a strong sense of brotherhood and bonding among the members of the different communities. Travelling large distances was customary, and for such reasons, camels were reared and clothing altered accordingly. The terrain and climate were the foremost perpetrators in setting up trends, which, over a period of time, came to be recognised as culture and tradition. (Hardy, 2012)

The region's unique cultural landscape is characterised by blending different art forms, music, and dance styles, reflecting the influences of migration from Sindh and Northern India. The first migrant settlers had emigrated from Persia and Afghanistan because of Alexander's invasion. In search of safer pasturelands, these communities crossed Sindh, Pakistan, settling in parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat.

Kutch is inhabited by various communities, including the Maldharis, Vankars, Muslim Khatri, Meghwals, Ahir, Garasia Jat and Rabaris, each with their unique traditions, customs, and skills. These communities have maintained their distinct identities through their traditional dressing styles and practices of crafts like weaving, dyeing, printing, bandhani (tie-dye), leatherwork, pottery, woodwork, and metalwork.

This cultural diversity has resulted in the development of over 40 styles of embroidery, each with its own distinct pattern, colour combination, history, and significance, making Kutch a paradise for art and craft enthusiasts. Every community has a different embroidery technique and various motifs and designs contributing to their visual identity. Even a person's social status can be identified through the embroidery they wear.

Only a few of the 40 various embroidery styles are extensively practised in the region. Famous embroidery styles are Soof, Kharek, Paako, Neran, Rabari, Ahir, Mukko, Garasia Jat, Bavaliya, Aari, and Mutawa. It is characterised by its use of bright colours, mirrors, beads, and intricate and extensive motifs. The primary colours used are green, indigo, deep red, black, yellow, and white. Kutchi embroidery, typically done on cotton or silk fabric, is done with silk or woollen thread and delicate stitches to produce detailed and elaborate patterns.

Figure 3 describes some of the migrant communities of Kutch and the embroidery styles they practise.

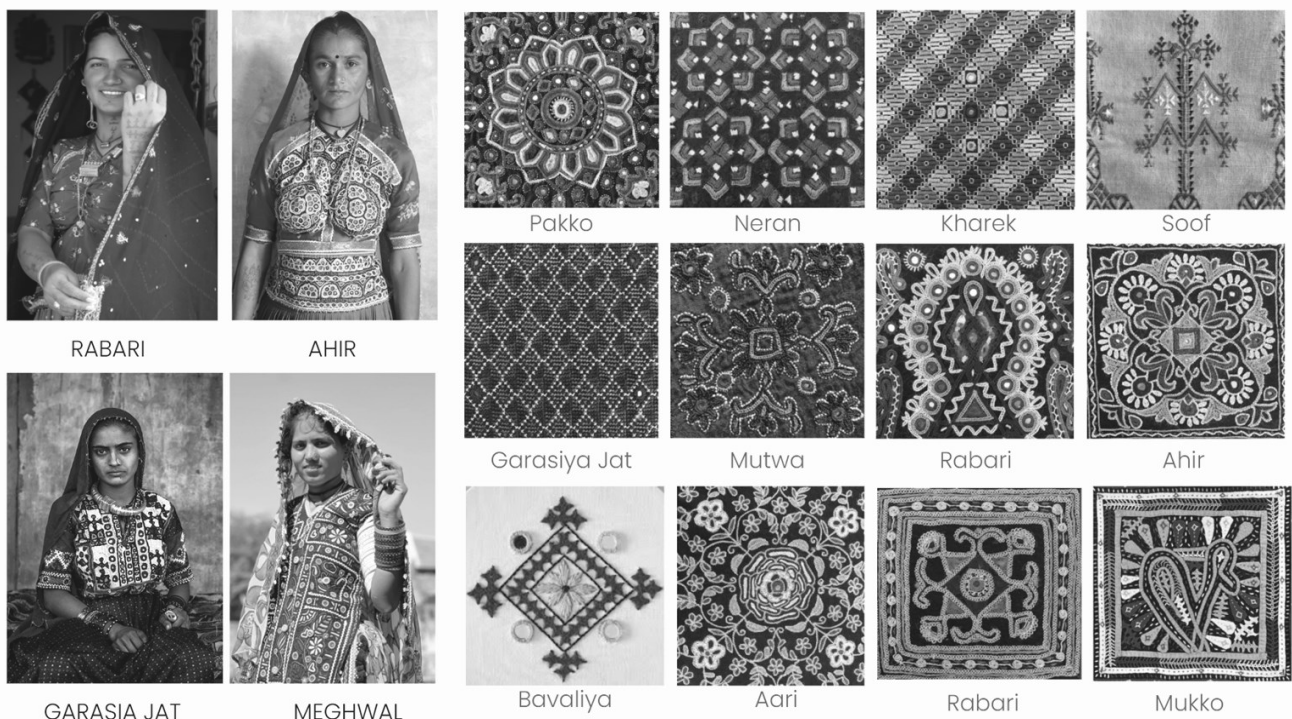


Figure 3: Communities of Kutch and their embroideries

Motifs - The motifs adopted by the selected communities indicated the natural and everyday objects applied by the artists, such as human figures, animals, birds, flora, and fauna, which were a primary source of inspiration for all of the embroidery. Vibrant hand-worked motifs are influenced by Mughal-style architecture, Persian patterns with basic geometric elements, rural and family life, including the sun, scenery, trees, flowers, peacocks, and camels. The embroidery motifs and clothing styles identify the wearer's social status, age, marital status, or ethnic tribal region. (Frater, 2016, 22)

Stitches - The most common stitches used in embroidery include running stitches, herringbone, satin, mirror, and fine chain stitches. Over time, embroidery styles have changed. Tiny buttonhole stitching is beautifully embedded in the bits of the mirror. When the artist gets inspired, buttons, tassels, shells, and beads are added for a unique impact, making the piece unique.

Kutch and its crafts

Kutch is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and diverse traditions. The region's unique position as a border state and a historical trade route has resulted in a melting pot of cultures from the north, west, and east, influencing its crafts and cultural landscape.

Kutch's cultural fabric is woven from the traditions of various communities, each contributing to the region's vibrant and dynamic identity. This diversity is reflected in the region's crafts, which have evolved over centuries, incorporating influences from the ancient Harappan civilisation to contemporary innovations.

Kutch's harsh, dry climate has necessitated a creative approach to resource utilisation. Communities have learned to balance their needs by transforming available resources into practical and artistic products. This ingenuity is evident in the vast array of crafts that flourish in the region, forming the core of Kutch's cultural and economic life. In Kutch, the craft is connected to the many interconnected communities through commerce, agriculture, and pastoral farming.

Crafts practised in the region are Ajrakh Block Print, Bandhani, Embroidery, Weaving, Leather Art, Lippan Art, Lacquered Wood, Rogan Painting, Wood Carving, and Pottery. Amongst all the crafts, embroidery has become one of the most popular crafts.

The Marwada Meghwal Community

The Marwada Meghwal community, also known as "Meghwar," "Megh," "Meghwal," or "Meghval," has a rich history rooted in the cultural and spiritual landscape of the North-Western belt of India and Pakistan. Derived from the Sanskrit words 'Megh,' meaning cloud or rain, and 'War,' signifying those who pray, the name "Meghwal" reflects the community's deep-seated association with rain worship and their spiritual heritage.

The Origin and History

The origins of the Meghwal community are contested in debate and layered with mythological and historical narratives. One prominent legend traces their lineage to the 'Megh' rishi, a sage known for rain worship, highlighting the community's ancient spiritual practices. Another oral narrative suggests they were born from the feet of Lord Brahma, a symbol indicating their historically lower position within the caste system.

Before 1971, the Meghwal community was scattered across regions from Rajasthan to Sindh. The Indo-Pak War of 1971 triggered significant migrations, leading to a notable concentration of the community in the Kutch region. Today, most Meghwal clusters reside in Gujarat and Rajasthan, although their historical presence spans Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Kashmir, Mumbai, and Pakistan. Historical documentation suggests that the community may have migrated initially from Sindh and settled in various regions over time. (Dhali, 2007)

A distinctive aspect of the Meghwal history is their renowned proficiency in embroidery and threadwork. Oral traditions and legends speak of a Muslim man from Pakistan who imparted the art of threadwork to a cobbler (*mochi*) community. This skill, honed over centuries, allowed the Meghwals to embellish royal apparel and artefacts from the 16th century onwards, earning them a place in the region's cultural heritage. The dispersal of the Meghwal community into smaller clusters across the North-Western belt of India was partly due to the patronage offered by regional rulers during this period.

The Social Construct of the Community

The social structure of the Marwada Meghwal community is intricately linked to the caste system that prevailed in 16th-century India. Traditionally positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy, just above the *Bhangis*, the Meghwals experienced social exclusion not just from upper-caste Hindus but significantly from the Muslim community.

A unique form of patronage characterised this social dynamic. Unlike typical land-based patronage relationships, the Meghwals depended on Muslim pastoralists, who relied on Meghwals for specific services, mainly dealing with dead animals. Meghwal men served as '*hataar*,' disposing of carcasses—a task shunned by Muslim men. In return, they received gifts like grains, clothing, and other essentials. This occupation, however, reinforced their marginalisation, cementing their position at the lower end of the social ladder. (Helia, 2017, 27)

The Meghwals' relationship with the Muslim pastoralists was complex, marked by dependency and cultural exchange. They shared the Sindhi language with the Muslims of Banni due to their close association with the Marwari dialect, reflecting their migratory history driven by famine, war, and search for livelihood. Despite varying historical arrival timelines, all Meghwal clusters maintained ties with Muslim pastoralists.

In their journey to overcome societal stigma, the Meghwals gradually abandoned the practice of '*hataar*' to seek more respectable occupations. This transition, though challenging, was a step toward shedding the label of untouchability and achieving social acceptance. The community faced increased costs for raw materials as they began outsourcing leather, but their determination to move beyond traditional roles was strong.

Meghwal women played a pivotal role in this socio-economic shift, diversifying into embroidery influenced by neighbouring Muslim communities. Their embroidery work, rich in motifs and stitches, showcased a blend of cultural influences and became a significant economic activity.

Unlike their Muslim pastoralist counterparts, the Meghwals became an outward-looking community, engaging actively with neighbouring regions and embracing cultural tourism. By capitalising on their historical and cultural heritage, the Meghwals showcased traditional music, embroidery, and artefacts, attracting visitors and transforming societal constraints into opportunities for economic and social advancement. This strategic engagement not only helped preserve their cultural identity but also helped them gain financial independence and social mobility.

Case Study of Ramdevnagar, Bhirandiara

The Meghwal Marwada community of Ramdevnagar, primarily located in the village of Bhirandiara in Gujarat's Kutch region, is well-known for its unique cultural practices. This community migrated from the Sindh region 200 years ago and resettled in parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat (Trivedi, 1961, 1-3). The Ramdevnagar cluster, isolated and disconnected from the outside world, consists of a small village of about 20 families, all related to each other. Here, craftsmanship begins from building their homes to sustaining their livelihoods.

Traditional Architecture and Living

The community resides in the iconic bhunga houses, which are traditional cylindrical structures with conical roofs that symbolise their community identity. The exterior walls of these bhunga houses are painted with embroidery-inspired motifs and patterns, while the interiors are adorned with lippan art. The intricate geometric patterns are crafted using a mixture of mud, camel dung, and natural dyes. Despite limited access to electricity, the reflective property of lippan art's mirrorwork ensures adequate lighting, while natural materials maintain cool interiors, vital for survival in Kutch's scorching heat.

Gender Roles and Daily Life

In Ramdevnagar, men and women have distinct roles. The girls and women start their day at sunrise, collecting and storing water, cooking, and completing household chores. By the afternoon, the women gather in their verandahs to embroider together, making it a part of their daily routine. Meanwhile, the men handle leather craft making and running the craft store.

The crafts practised in the Ramdevnagar cluster include leather making, primarily done by men, while women handle embroidery, lippan art, jewellery making, beadwork, and toy making. Meghwal embroidery, in particular, is not just a form of art but also a means of livelihood for the community members. Traditionally, embroidery was practised for personal use, with women embroidering garments like "*Kanjari*," "*dupatta*," and "*Ghagra*." However, embroidery has evolved with changing times and is now applied to various products such as waistcoats, purses, and shoes to cater to market demands.

Traditional Attire and Jewellery

One of the most distinctive garments worn by Meghwal women is the "Kanjari," a blouse intricately embroidered with geometric patterns, floral motifs, and mirror work, often paired with a colourful "Ghagra" (skirt) and "Odhani" (dupatta). Jewellery holds significant cultural and social importance for women, symbolising their marital status, prosperity, and identity within the community. Common jewellery items include "Borla" (maang tikka), "Nath" (nose ring), "Bangles," "Earrings," and "Necklaces."

The Embroideries and Crafts of Ramdevnagar

The practice of embroidery is highly significant in the cultural identity of the Meghwal Marwada community in Ramdevnagar. Embroidery serves as a means of livelihood and a way to preserve and express their rich cultural heritage. The community practices four distinct types of embroidery: Pakko, Khaarek, Neran, and Bawaliya.

Pakko Embroidery

Pakko embroidery features solid, symmetrical designs with floral, animal, and bird motifs. Outlined with double or chain stitches and filled with square chain stitches, it includes mirror work using a buttonhole stitch. This style highlights the Meghwal Marwada community's intricate craftsmanship and cultural storytelling.

Neran Embroidery

Neran embroidery, named after the Kutchi word for "eye," includes triangle-shaped, eyebrow-like motifs. Geometric designs are outlined with double satin or chain stitches, filled with square chain stitches, and feature mirrors set with buttonhole stitches. This style showcases meticulous geometric patterns and the artisans' precision.

Khaarek Embroidery

Khaarek embroidery is known for its geometric compositions created through a thread-counting method. Black square outlines and single-colour fills result in precise, symmetrical patterns. This technique emphasises the technical skill and attention to detail of the Meghwal Marwada artisans.

Bawariya Embroidery

Bawariya embroidery, though less documented, represents another unique style practised by the community. It features distinct motifs and techniques, adding to the diverse embroidery traditions of the Meghwal Marwada. This style underscores the community's rich artistic heritage and commitment to preserving various craft forms.


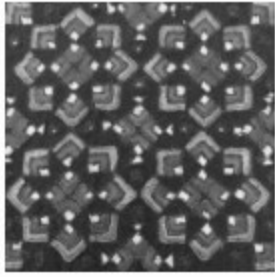
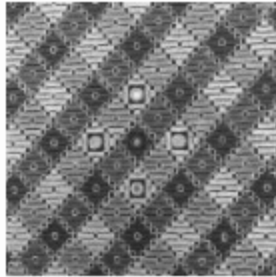
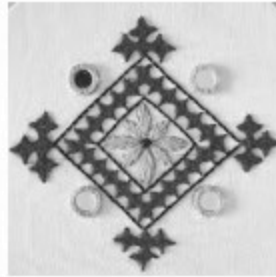


			
Pakko Embroidery Motifs	Neran Embroidery Motifs	Kharek Embroidery Motifs	Bavaliya Embroidery Motifs
			
The embroidery patches used on the leather bags are a fusion of Pakko and Neran embroidery styles.	The Lippan work on the interiors of the Bhunga houses is inspired by the motifs of Kharek and Bavaliya embroidery styles.		

Table 1: The embroideries and crafts of Ramdevanagar

Marriage Traditions and Dowry

Girls in the community generally marry by the age of twenty. From childhood, they are taught the art of embroidering their dresses for marriage. The girl's mother also contributes by making quilts as gifts for her daughter. The concept of dowry in the community ensures that the girl is equipped with everything she needs for the first few months of her new life with her husband, including clothes, quilts, footwear, jewellery, utensils, and household items.





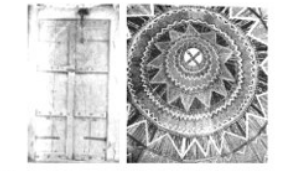







The Past and the Present

A comparative analysis between the Marwada Harijan wada of 1961 and the present-day Ramdevnagar settlement in Bhirandiara reveals significant resemblances between the Marwada Meghwal settlements. Despite increasing urbanisation and globalisation, the community has maintained its cultural identity. They continue to practice vernacular architecture, from creating *vandhs* (raised platforms or plinths) for their bhunga houses to crafting wooden carved doors, painted ceilings, and exterior walls. The attire and jewellery of the community have remained constant, with their garments becoming more heavily embroidered over time. They continue to practice the same types of embroidery, with floral and geometric motifs adorning the women's and girls' kanjaris.

Observation, Analysis and Discussion

The Marwada Meghwal community in Ramdevnagar offers a compelling narrative of cultural preservation, economic resilience, and environmental adaptation, illustrating how the community has navigated the complexities of urbanisation and globalisation while maintaining its distinct cultural identity.

Table 2 & 3: A comparative analysis between the Marwada Meghwal communities of the Marwada Harijan wada of 1961 to the Ramdevnagar craft village in 2023

The Marwada Meghwal community of Harijan Vandh in the year 1961	The Marwada Meghwal community of Ramdevnagar in 2023	The Marwada Meghwal community of Harijan Vandh in the year 1961	The Marwada Meghwal community of Ramdevnagar in 2023
 <p data-bbox="167 542 459 586">Traditional vandh (group of bhunga houses) built on a common platform in the Marwada Harijan wada.</p>	 <p data-bbox="481 542 767 586">This community still practices the conventional practice of building bhunga houses on a common plinth (platform).</p>		
 <p data-bbox="167 779 459 797">Wooden doors and painted ceilings of a Bhunga house</p>	 <p data-bbox="481 779 767 797">Painted ceilings of a Bhunga house</p>		
 <p data-bbox="167 1021 459 1034">The patterns and motifs are painted on the walls of Bhunga houses.</p>	 <p data-bbox="481 1021 767 1034">The community still paints floral and geometric motifs on the walls of their bhunga houses.</p>	 <p data-bbox="785 1021 1093 1034">The Jewellery and attire of the Marwada Meghwal community of the Marwada Harijan wada.</p>	 <p data-bbox="1099 1021 1407 1034">The jewellery and attire of the Marwada Meghwal community of Ramdevnagar craft village.</p>

Cultural Preservation Efforts

- In Ramdevnagar, the Marwada Meghwal community has taken proactive steps to promote their traditional crafts, which include embroidery, beadwork, lippan (mud and mirror work), and leather crafts. These crafts are integral to their cultural heritage and serve as a significant source of income. The establishment of artisan shops has provided a platform for the community to market and sell their handmade products, ensuring the economic viability of these traditional practices.
- A critical aspect of cultural preservation in Ramdevnagar is the transmission of craft skills from one generation to the next. Mothers teach their daughters the intricate art of embroidery, fostering cultural pride and continuity. This intergenerational transfer of knowledge is crucial for sustaining traditional craftsmanship and has been bolstered by community initiatives that support and celebrate these skills.
- Despite the influences of urbanisation and globalisation, the Meghwals in Ramdevnagar continue to prioritise cultural practices and rituals. Festivals such as Navratri and Diwali are celebrated enthusiastically, reinforcing their cultural values and communal bonds. These celebrations also provide opportunities to showcase their crafts to a broader audience, blending cultural preservation with economic activity.

Thriving Amid Socio-Economic Change

- The community has diversified its income sources by embracing innovative livelihood strategies and entrepreneurial ventures. Traditional crafts have been reimagined to appeal to modern markets, both locally and internationally. Developing value-added products and adopting new technologies in conventional crafts have enabled the Meghwals to tap into niche markets, enhancing their economic stability.
- Women play a central role in Ramdevnagar's economic life. They are primarily responsible for producing crafts and balancing domestic duties with income-generating activities. This division of labour, where men focus on sales and marketing, highlights the community's reliance on women's contributions to sustain their livelihood and preserve cultural practices.
- The community has leveraged its cultural assets to achieve economic empowerment and social inclusion. By capitalising on the uniqueness of their embroidery and craftsmanship, the Meghwals have secured a steady income and elevated their social status within the broader socio-economic landscape.

Overcoming Environmental Vulnerability

- The Marwada Meghwal community's continued use of bhunga houses is a testament to their environmental adaptation. These circular, mud-plastered houses suit the local climate, providing natural insulation against extreme temperatures. This vernacular architectural form helps mitigate environmental vulnerabilities and preserves an essential aspect of their cultural heritage.
- The community's approach to sustainable living is reflected in their craft production processes, which often utilise locally sourced materials and environmentally friendly techniques. This sustainability is crucial in maintaining the ecological balance of their surroundings and ensuring the longevity of their traditional practices.

Conclusion

This research has provided valuable insights into the Marwada Meghwal community's rich cultural heritage, socio-economic challenges, and adaptive strategies. Compared to their Muslim pastoralist counterparts, the Meghwal community emerged as an outward-looking community, engaging with neighbouring regions of Gujarat and Rajasthan. Where the pastoral community refrained from engaging with the tourists or openly celebrating their culture, the Meghwals leveraged their historical and cultural heritage. They took benefit of the societal construct to capitalise on cultural tourism, showcasing their traditional music, embroidery, and artefacts to attract visitors to the region. The Meghwals have transformed societal constraints into opportunities for economic and social advancement.

It is imperative to acknowledge that while the Marwada Meghwal community is predominantly women-led, with the majority of crafts produced by women, their male counterparts play a crucial role in community outreach and sustenance. The interdependence between genders within the community has been integral to their resilience and establishment of cultural identity through their embroideries. This collaborative effort and mutual support propelled the community forward, enriching the cultural landscape and inspiring admiration for future generations.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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