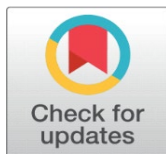
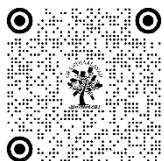


EMBROIDERED BISHOI SHAWLS OF RAJASTHAN: THREADS OF ITS HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

Rajasthan, the north-western state of India presents a great variety of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Owing to its unique geographical position in the country, the place is full of historic influences and wealth of art with reflection of cultural diversity along with considerable amount of overlaps in practicing rituals and mode of dressing. The state features a number of embroideries with unique traditions in terms of their costumes and textiles.

Amongst the different articles of adornment, the shawls of Bishnoi community of Rajasthan include varieties of tie and dye shawls or embroidered shawls or a combination of both. Growing globalization in the present day and time poses a considerable threat to the survival of traditional craft forms and hence the craft holds no past records regarding the origin of these Bishnoi shawls. Therefore, the objective of the study was to undertake a scientific exploration, of the heritage craft of these shawls which to trace and record the history and origin of the Bishnoi community embroidered shawls. The research under this paper takes an exploratory and descriptive method, both primary and secondary data were collected. Purposive sampling was adopted to visit antique collectors and museums and snowballing technique was used to advance the research further till primary Bishnoi respondents.

The study unveiled the opulent and alluring history behind the embroidered shawl which sustains the cultural history of the region in their style of motifs with distinct embroidery motifs illustrating the influence of embroidery from Central Asia.

Keywords: Bishnoi Community, Traditional Craft, Regional Embroideries, Shawls, Women Artisans

1. INTRODUCTION

The representation of this embroidery has changed over time. Its original meaning and symbolism have not disappeared, however new meanings and uses have emerged as the world is developing and hence globalization is changing our lifestyle, ways of living and fashion. It is stretching social, cultural, political, and economic activities across borders. The richest source of folk embroidery constituted the belt from Kutch and Saurashtra upwards through North Gujarat to Rajasthan and Thar Parker district of Sind in Pakistan. Rajasthan, the state of Northwestern India presents a great variety of intangible cultural heritage. Being

the largest state and having a unique geography, the place is full of historic wealth and art with reflection of cultural diversity along with considerable amount of similarities in practicing rituals and mode of dressing. In succession of this, the locality has succeeded in becoming familiar with domestic embroidery traditions which were used to ornament their own household textiles and costumes.

Invariably supportive of the arts, the rulers of Rajasthan gave grants of money and land to jewellers, goldsmiths, silversmiths, and embroiderers, encouraging them to produce items of the highest quality and originality. The kings and nobles utilized these in their homes to highlight the grandeur and majesty of their courts and therefore raise their stature. With silk, silver, and gold thread, clothing, tents, wall hangings, saddles for horses, elephants' accessories, and a variety of other items were embroidered. The work was completed using a variety of delicate stitches on cotton, silk, or velvet. The patterns were floral, geometrical, or mythological, and they resembled paintings in that they displayed court scenes or devotees worshipping at a shrine. Aside from this complex task, which was performed in nearly all courts, each region acquired its unique expertise. Using basic stitching and motifs inspired by nature and elements they were familiar with in their daily lives in their region, the ordinary people embellished clothing and other items of daily use. A distinctive style of embroidered shawls made by the Bishnoi community in the western part of Rajasthan was one of the state's little-noticed crafts. The patterns and designs produced show a specific character, but they do not acknowledge how globalization is transforming fashion, way of life, and lifestyle.

2. METHODOLOGY

Due to the exploratory and descriptive character of the research, both primary and secondary data were gathered. Since the craft is no longer practiced and only a small number of silent generation (born from 1925 to 1945) [Eallenfeldt \(2023\)](#) people in the community are aware of it therefore, three antique collectors from Bhuj, Barmer, and Jaipur using the purposive sampling technique were visited to examine their collection of shawls with Bishnoi embroidery. The number of shawls included in the sample for the analysis with the antique collectors was 60 shawls. Additionally, Snowball sampling was used to select the sample of the study, which included 9 Bishnoi women from Rajasthan's Barmer district who were 80 years of age and older. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview transcript and open-ended questions. Secondary data was simultaneously gathered through books, journals, blogs, and articles. [Nath \(n.d.\)](#)

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY

The data pertaining to the origin and history anticipates the involvement of Jat community of Thar Desert. Historians identified Jats as belonging to the Indo-Scythians or Indo Aryans [Malik \(2017\)](#). The nomadic zone of Central Asia, which stretched across the northern steppes from southern Russia to Manchuria, appears to have been divided into two distinct areas: one in the east, including Outer and Inner Mongolia, and the other nomadic hordes of Aryan stock known as Scythians in the east, which included South Asia up to the valley of Ienessi [Bagghi \(1955\)](#). As Gracia / Garasia Jats, the Dhanetah Jats, who had previously lived in the Halab region, migrated as a result of territorial pressure and primarily settled in Gujarat and Rajasthan. Their embroidery layout style was having similar influence with the embroidery of Arab women consisting exquisite, labor intensive embroideries

closely stitched patterns covering the cloth almost completely. Many academics believe that the Jat tribes that migrated to India and settled in Punjab, Haryana, and Gujarat brought with them the craft of phulkari from Central Asia. [Tayal \(2014\)](#)

Figure 1



Figure 1 Small Envelop Bag, from Hazarajat, Central Asia

Source Traditional Textiles of Central Asia by- [Harvey \(2009\)](#)

Figure 2



Figure 2 Uzbek Satin Weave Cloth Gavara Posh, from Samarkand, Central Asia

Source Traditional Textiles of Central Asia by- [Harvey \(2009\)](#)

Figure 3

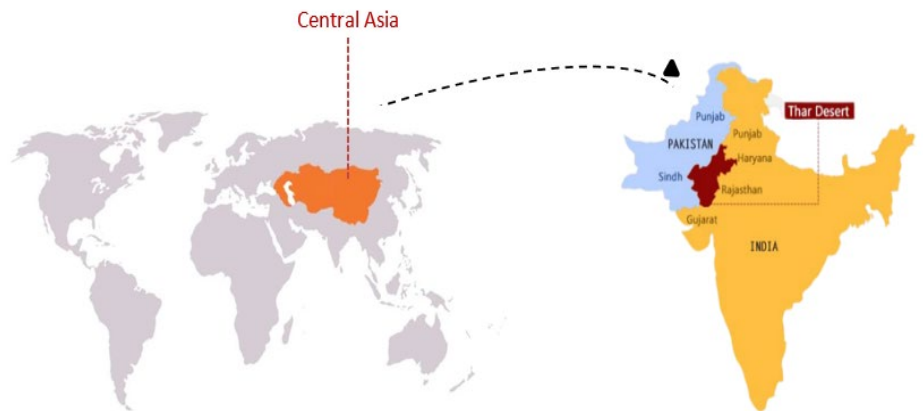


Figure 3 Migration of Indo-Scythians or Indo Aryans as Jats from Central Asia to Thar Desert and Neighboring States.

Source https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Central_Asia_world_region.png

Source <https://www.beautifulworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/thar-desert-map-1.jpg>

3.2. THE BISHNOIS: IDENTITY AND INFLUENCE

A wider range of social groups, including the Bishnoi sect formed by Guru Jambheshwar in 1458, were made possible by the confluence of early Bhakti and Sufi concepts with the region's earlier influences from Jainism and Buddhism. The Jats of western region transformed into the Bishnois, who are renowned for being excellent defenders of the environment and wildlife, by adhering to a set of 29 principles [Sinha \(2018\)](#). Due to the large-scale population displacement caused by the partition of India and Pakistan and the subsequent war in 1971 [Bose \(2017\)](#), many people who were familiar with embroidery left their hometowns, immigrated, and settled in the surrounding areas. As a result of these new contacts and exchange amongst them, it is assumed possible that new embroidery forms, such as geometric shapes for native motifs of flower, camel, khejri tree, peacock, and human figure were developed.

3.3. STUDY OF THE SHAWL

The antique samples from the collectors were examined on specifications of stitch type and length. The Bishnoi shawls shares elements with other northern western Indian embroidery. Balanced weave coarse cotton and wool fabrics were used as a base cloth which permits the women to count the threads and embroider on cloth. The base was black or red color dyed with natural dye sources. Bright colored cotton and woolen threads usually of yellow, red, green, pink, and blue were used for embroidering the different patterns on the base material.

Figure 4



Figure 4 Bishnoi Cotton Shawl

Figure 5



Figure 5 Bishnoi Wool Shawl

Figure 6



Figure 6 Bandhej Imitated Embroidered Shawl

The average dimensions of the Bishnoi shawls under study computed to length ranging from 200-210cms and width around 130-140cms made by assembling two pieces either through faggoting seam with fishbone stitch (Figure 7) or plain seam with simple running stitch (Figure 8). The elementary embroidery technique of Thar shawls follows the counting of warp and weft threads of the coarsely woven base cloth. Hence, the designs evolving is in geometrical form with dense floats of embroidery stitches covering the base fabric. As the embroidery was highly influenced with the thread work of the neighboring regions therefore the stitches used were mostly similar to soof, phulkari, kharek and kambiri work comprising of herringbone stitch, buttonhole stitch, double running stitch, running stitch, darning stitch, satin stitch and chain stitch.

Figure 7

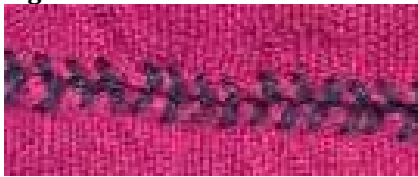


Figure 7 Faggoting Seam with Fishbone Stitch

Figure 8

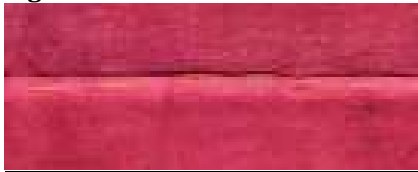


Figure 8 Plain Seam with Simple Running Stitch

The motifs on the shawl minutely represent the life of Bishnoi people. Each motif incorporated on the shawl was inspired from the values that the community holds dear. Hence, nature inspired motifs like peacock, camel, tree, human figures, and also religious motif in particular swastika, have been embroidered on the shawls. The trees motifs of these shawls distinctly represent the Khejri tree (*Prosopis cineraria*) also known as state tree of Rajasthan. Mirrors of varying sizes were also stitched to embellish their shawls. Traditionally the shawls are

prominently done with tie and dye for regular use, embroidered for trousseau or a combination of both technique; however, one more variation observed on field visit was an imitation of Bandhej done with double running stitch (Figure 6).

Figure 9

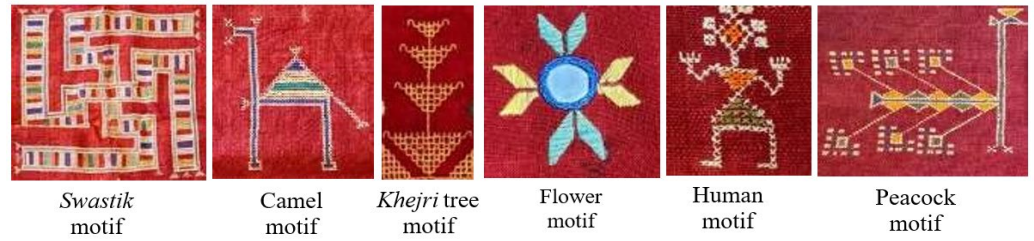


Figure 9 Motifs

4. CONCLUSION

Rajasthan's western region was where Bishnoi shawls were mostly worn. The migration of Indo-Aryans and Indo-Scythians from Central Asia as the Jat community, who eventually became the Bishnois, is what brought embroidery to the area. Due to Rajasthan's fast evolving textile culture, lifestyle, and globalization, the practice of giving these needlework shawls to the bride on their wedding as a folk custom of the community is no longer observed. According to survey conducted during the study it was noticed that, Bishnoi shawls are little recognized by the community member itself considered as virtually extinct from the community. As a result, the current study focuses on documenting the history and origin of the embroidery of Bishnoi shawl, which is a representation of a dedicated craftsman and aesthetics. The documentation will help to serve the database of these traditional shawls to upcoming researchers, designers, and fashion innovators.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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