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Fate and collecting embroidery in India

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Abstract: An overview of the challenges and experiences the author had in 2005 while collecting embroidered textiles in India. This includes identification of some of the distinctive techniques used in India to enhance artistic expression on surface design fabrics.

Traveling to India and finding textiles to acquire that are far more than the proverbial “interesting,” for the dedicated collector is such a unique experience as there is no predicting what one will find. Textiles incorporating particularly distinctive techniques and seemingly always available suddenly are nowhere to be seen. Roaming the streets, by lanes, and alleys may turn up, and equally may not turn up, unexpected treasures. In short, whatever one’s intentions on a visit to India to acquire distinctive textiles, fate exerts itself. My 2005 trip to India encapsulated so much of what a collecting venture is like, namely filled with both expected and unexpected things as well as realization that the anticipated may or may not happen. Fate certainly manifested itself repeatedly, far more than on previous visits. Life, however, would be exceedingly boring if everything went according to plans and thanks to the intervention of fate, resulted in the acquisition of several important examples of the embroiderer’s art.

Not long after my arrival in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, I went to see Kanubhai, a dealer of antique textiles. While always a delightful visual and tactile experience, supplemented with cups of delicious tea, one never knows what he has for merchandise. This time precious little of his offerings caught my eye, and after a lengthy discussion about the virtues and merits of the pieces I found only three items that interested me. Two of them, a finely embroidered Parsi “tablecloth” (a generic term undoubtedly used whenever the original use of the object can not be determined, as who in his or her right mind would place such an elaborately embroidered item on a table and run the risk of staining or damaging it?) and a beautiful piece of Mochi embroidery (work traditionally done not with a needle but with a cobbler’s awl) with peacocks were both far too expensive. A third piece of raised embroidery on velvet using metallic gold thread, known as *chada* work, I felt needed additional consideration.

Kanubhai suggested I take all three on consignment and think about purchasing them. I left his shop knowing I really only wanted the Saurashtrian embroidered piece since it was a stunning example of raised embroidery on velvet, but all three pieces were in my bag. Compared to previous purchases from Kanubhai I felt fate on this trip was not being kind. Little did I know.

The Minnesota Studies in International Development (MSID) had asked me to do a site survey of its program, which placed interns in numerous locations in Rajasthan. The head of the program suggested the interns come to a workshop in Udaipur, and I could meet and interview them concerning their experiences in MSID. Fate again manifested itself on the way to Udaipur, for I had purchased a copy of the just published *Tana Bana: the woven soul of Pakistan*, a magnificent, albeit expensive, volume on Pakistani textiles, and took it with me to read on the ride to Udaipur. Thanks to distractions along the way, I left the book in the car and thus lost it. This certainly was disappointing since it was a Pakistani imprint and thus virtually impossible to replace in India. My seemingly negative fate on this trip continued as my hotel room turned out to be on a noisy major street with a commercial open-air wedding facility next door which generated loud music until at least midnight every night. My wish for a quiet, relaxing hotel was totally unfulfilled. Fortunately on an evening stroll the night before the workshop I stumbled upon a shop with a piece of *dankakaan* in its window. The distinctive Udaipuri surface design technique called *dankakaan* uses glue to make a design on the cloth, metallic powder is then placed over the glue, heat applied, and the powder on top of the glue gets sealed onto the cloth. (<http://purl.umn.edu/91245>)¹ Since it requires far more labor than block printing, production of it is limited; thus one is delighted to encounter a piece of this distinctive decorative technique.

The MSID workshop began the next morning and I had an aura of distress and foreboding as one of the interns phoned the previous day when he boarded his bus in Jodhpur, saying he anticipated getting to Udaipur around 2:30. That was the last we heard from him; calls hither and yon through the late afternoon and evening failed to reach him or get any news. After missing the workshop activities of the morning he finally appeared around noon, amazed that everyone was so worried. His account of what happened immediately put our minds at rest after such concern that something terrible had occurred. Sewa Mandir, the host agency in Udaipur for the workshop, has several locations in the city and nearby areas. The student had ended up in a Sewa Mandir site in

¹ The references to <http://purl.umn.edu/> take one to Umedia pictures of the item as found in the Paritosh Collection site of textiles collected by Donald Clay Johnson. The entire collection can be found at: Umedia.lib.umn.edu/node/88878

the countryside near Udaipur, unfortunately just outside the area for cell phone connectivity. Since he had told the auto rickshaw to leave when he alighted, he was stranded out in the countryside at the Sewa Mandir compound. Staff told him that next morning a car from the main office would come and take him to the site which was hosting the workshop, and kindly offered to put him up for the night. Since the country location didn't have a contact for the workshop, there was no way to convey the news he was safe and when he would get to the workshop. As might be expected the afternoon sessions of the workshop were far more productive since they lacked the worry and concern for a missing intern.

In the late afternoon during a workshop break, I noticed a small boutique across the street from my hotel. While speaking to the owner, I discovered he had some traditional textiles and asked if I'd like to see them. These included a Benares gold tissue sari, something I have long wanted. Since his price for it was 12,000 rupees I told him two knowledgeable Indian friends were coming tomorrow to take me to Nathdwara and if they agreed the price was appropriate I would buy the gold tissue sari. Awaiting the arrival of Shailesh and Vandana, I thus was filled with excitement and anticipation. A cousin, Usha, and her husband, Ashwin, also came along so Vandana and Usha accompanied me to the boutique, and I learned one of the ways Indian women evaluate heritage textiles. Vandana handed the sari to the owner and asked him to weigh it and report its gold content. Usha asked for the day's newspaper, checked the price of gold, and then asked for a calculator. She input the gold weight, multiplied it by the price of gold as stated in the financial section of the newspaper, and came up with the figure of 2,500 rupees for the value of the sari. I inwardly smiled realizing I was going to get the beautiful sari at a considerably lower price than had been quoted yesterday. Usha, ever the careful shopper, decided to do the calculation a second time, and the value of the sari jumped to 25,000 rupees more than twice the price stated yesterday. She did a third computation and yet again 25,000 rupees was the appropriate price of the sari. Sadly I realized the sari was suddenly more expensive than I was willing to pay, and most reluctantly had to pass on acquiring a beautiful example of distinctive Benares weaving.

We proceeded on to Nathdwara, the main center of the Hindu Vallabhacharya sect, arriving late in the afternoon. Admission to the temple is only at prescribed times each day, the first at 5 a.m. It was cool outside next morning at that early hour and the mantle of stars overhead far exceeded anything seen in urban skies. The *darshan* (viewing of the deity) being over, we headed down the still dark narrow lanes of Nathdwara to get a cup of

tea. Fate was hardly kind to me as along the way I stepped into a freshly deposited cow pie, only my second such experience in almost forty years of visiting India. Typically *chaiwallahs*, sellers of warm, delicious tea, have china cups and saucers, but yet again fate had some grudge against me as in railway stations and increasingly elsewhere, tea is served in unbaked clay cups which are thrown to the ground and broken after use. While this may be a more hygienic way to have tea, I have never liked it since the clay tends to stick to one's lips. The thirst for warm tea however won the day, and I quickly drank the proffered cup.

We then returned to the *dharmshalla*; I finished cleaning my sandal after my initial efforts in the dark lane of the city, and rested until midmorning when we returned to the temple for the next *darshan*. The temple offices were then open and after leaving our footwear outside, we got *prasad* (food from the God) to take to those in Ahmedabad who were unable to be with us at the temple. I had a shoulder bag, so the *prasad* was placed in it, and I guarded it as best I could from being crushed in the crowds of people who were at the temple for the midmorning *darshan*. The viewing over, we went outside where I found my sandals were missing. In visiting temples over 40 years this had never happened to me before. Seemingly to add insult to injury they were simple cheap, rubber thongs, nothing fancy, elaborate, or expensive, not to mention the fact one sandal probably had residual odors from the cow pie.

Ashwin kindly volunteered to take me to a shoe shop to get replacement footwear. What a walk, the paving stones of the street were cold as I walked barefoot on them. Along the way Ashwin observed that having something stolen sometimes is a blessing as all one's inauspiciousness is also taken in the theft. I silently told myself "sure," reflecting on how many negative things had already happened to me on this trip. We quickly got replacement footwear, returned to the *dharmshalla*, gathered our things, and began the drive back to Ahmedabad.

Next morning I went to Kanubhai's to return the two expensive items he had suggested I take on consignment as well as discuss a price for the *chada* work velvet raised embroidery piece I decided to get. (<http://purl.umn.edu/91483>) We quickly determined a mutually agreeable price over a cup of tea. While sitting on the floor as we drank the tea Kanubhai mentioned he had just gotten some embroidered items from Kutch, a district of Gujarat that borders Pakistan, as well as from Pakistan itself and asked if I would like to look at them. Having learned never to refuse a potentially fascinating possibility, I said I indeed would like to see them. Kanubhai pulled out treasure after treasure from a most unremarkable bag, my eyes as big as the proverbial

saucers. How could there be so many spectacular pieces in one bag? Oh thank you, thank you, thank you, sandal thief for removing my inauspiciousness. The bag emptied of its masterpieces of needle art, I then faced the daunting task of deciding which to buy.

Definitely I had to get the two Gujarati dowry bags made by brides as containers for their possessions when they moved into their new homes. (<http://purl.umn.edu/91162> and <http://purl.umn.edu/91031>) Brides wish to impress their in-laws and others with their embroidery skills, and the bands of numerous types of embroidery on both bags exhibited a notable variety of stitchery that publicly showed anyone watching the arrival of the bride in her new home how fortunate the family was to have such a talented newcomer. Two Pakistani (<http://purl.umn.edu/91931> and <http://purl.umn.edu/91985>) and one Indian Ahir (<http://purl.umn.edu/91930>) belts demonstrated the extremely fine embroidery used in small objects and needed to be added to the pile of definite purchases. Related to these works was an equally finely executed embroidered border (<http://purl.umn.edu/91932>) probably for a *choli* (women's blouse) that could not be refused.

The former Gujarati princely state of Bhavnagar was famous for its appliqué work. I had seen *torans* (decorative cloths placed above doors during ritual or ceremonial times), of such appliqué work, Kanubhai had a *sankhia*, a piece that not only covers the area above a door but also extends down the sides of the door and then thrusts out along the wall at floor level (<http://umedia.lib.umn.edu/node/88889>). The muted colors of Bhavnagar appliqué give the pieces great elegance. This piece in fact subsequently framed the text of the introduction to the Goldstein Museum of Design 2011 exhibition "Beyond Peacocks and Paisleys: Handcrafted Textiles of India and Its Neighbors" which exhibited surface design textiles in my collection. Two additional pieces (<http://purl.umn.edu/91477> and <http://purl.umn.edu/92054>), although only portions of larger garments, represented examples of other embroidery traditions. The stack of "must have" pieces grew to nine items, and there was one additional, absolutely spectacular piece from Tharparkar, the eastern most district of Sindh state, Pakistan. With no fresh water stream in the entire desert district, Tharparkar has the unfortunate distinction of being the least developed area in the entire state. That such exquisite embroidery (<http://purl.umn.edu/91987>) could be done in so depressed an area only made the piece more remarkable.

Clearly, now, discussion needed to start on the price of the ten items in the stack. Tea once again appeared, Kanubhai and I bantered back and forth about the qualities of each piece, he praising the unique aspects of each

while I was dedicated to pointing out defects and other things that might lower the price. Although a most animated discussion, alas for me, Kanubhai, much to my chagrin, clearly held the upper hand. We contested, we verbally sparred, but we could not agree on a price for the stack of textile treasures. Finally, admitting defeat, I slowly reached over and removed the Tharparkar embroidery from consideration, feeling most miserable in doing so. We soon reached a mutually agreeable price for the remaining nine items and I placed them in my shoulder bag. As so often happened when shopping at Kanubhai's, I did not have enough rupees with me to pay for everything, so I paid what I could and promised to return the following day with the remainder.

The transaction over, Kanubhai placed his arm on my shoulder and said what a wonderful customer I have been over the years, how he always enjoys my visits and feels I always select the best pieces. As a gesture of his appreciation for my being such a faithful customer, Kanubhai said he would like to give me an embroidered piece. He reached over to the stack of items rejected earlier and took one. I looked at it, felt honesty is always the best policy, and blurted out I didn't like that piece, particularly its colors. Surprised, Kanubhai looked at me and asked which piece I liked. I pointed to the piece we had haggled and haggled over. Kanubhai reached over, picked up the Tharparkar piece, and put it in my bag. I almost fainted! Oh, sandal thief, I feel so sorry for all the inauspiciousness you stole from me, since fate certainly is not just smiling upon me, but absolutely beaming!

And fate continued to favor me for when I returned the next day to settle my account with Kanubhai he said he had received a few additional things from Pakistan, and asked if I also would like to see them? Among them were three purses from the Pushtun community that lives on both sides of the Pakistan and Afghanistan border (<http://purl.umn.edu/91980>, <http://purl.umn.edu/91979>, <http://purl.umn.edu/91968>), and two from Baluchistan (<http://purl.umn.edu/91966>, <http://purl.umn.edu/91967>) the remote, arid Pakistani state on the Iran border. All five very fine embroidered works wonderfully document several notable Pakistani cultural traditions and thus naturally had to be acquired.

As my time in India was drawing to a close I went to the boutique Radhika Lalbhai ran from her home in Ahmedabad. Radhika traveled the length and breadth of India working with weavers and textile artisans to produce distinctive items that combine tradition with contemporary sartorial taste of Gujaratis. After producing distinctive fabrics for many years Radhika decided a year after my visit to retire and went out of business. Her boutique was always a delight, and one never knew what to expect. On this visit she showed me a piece that simply had to be

acquired, for she had worked with the Gujarati Khatri community, long known for its distinctive skills in the art of dyeing cloth, to produce a *bandhani* (tie-and-dye) *dupatta* (rectangular women's head/shoulder shawl) based on the traditional wedding *odhni* (square women's head shawl). The black and red colors, following the tradition of the Khatri wedding *odhni*, produced a vivid effect on the *gaji* silk. Knowing of my interest in traditional textiles, Radhika said although the *dupatta* only had tie and dye work she could send the piece to a special embroiderer who could enrich the *dupatta* with *badla* work, a flat metallic form of embroidery that looks as if the tiny "dots" are riveted on the cloth since the Khatri *wedding odhni* typically includes such metallic embroidery. I thought the suggestion brilliant and asked her to send the piece to the *badla* workshop so it indeed would include all the traditional decorative elements of Khatri wedding attire. The piece, although modern, very much draws attention to one of the most distinctive wedding garments in Gujarat (<http://purl.umn.edu/91173>).

Given the roller-coaster type of positive and negative things that happened on my trip, as I returned to Minneapolis I could not help but realize how kind fate indeed had been to me. In 2011, when the Goldstein Museum of Design exhibited textiles from my collection the curators selected seven of the items I acquired on this momentous trip, another indicator of the high quality and distinctiveness of the pieces. Seldom before had I acquired so many unique textiles on a trip to India.

