

# Bakhiya

*A Tale of Tiny Stitches*

JUDY FRATER

More than 50 years ago, when I first stayed in a Kachhi Rabari village, my host was Lachhuben Karna. She was 35 at the time and was considered “mature,” so she wore a plain black backless blouse, or *kapadu*, for everyday. But while the black fabric was plain, Lachhuben had embroidered fine white patterns along the neckline, center front, and raglan sleeve seams. The stitching was called *bakhiya*, and its patterns communicated *suhag*, a sign that Lachhuben’s husband was living and she was in a state of auspiciousness, good fortune, and happiness.



Photo by Judy Frater

Varnora, 2007. A Vagadia Rabari group on migration. Dhebaria and Vagadia Rabari subgroups continue to migrate with herds of sheep and goats today. Men take the herds ahead and women and children follow, carrying encampment belongings on camels.

## EMBROIDERY IN RABARI LIFE

Rabaris are nomadic pastoralists, originally camel herders, who today live throughout the Kutch, Saurashtra, and North Gujarat regions of Gujarat state, and in western and southern Rajasthan, India. Three subgroups of Rabaris inhabit Kutch District: Vagadias east of Bhachau, Dhebarias in central

Kutch, and Kachhis, west of the district capital Bhuj. Rabari women are renowned for their embroidery, a unique style characterized by dense chain and interlaced stitches, profuse use of mirrors in a variety of shapes, and a rich repertoire of accent stitches. Each Rabari subgroup practices a subtly distinguishable regional variation of the style.

When I began studying Rabari embroidery in Kutch, I was impressed by its intimate place in Rabari life. More than purely decorative, it was an obvious and important expression of Rabari culture. Embroidered clothing created and maintained distinctions of identity. The embroidered details of Rabari dress instantly conveyed the wearer's subgroup and status within that subgroup at a particular point in time.

Two broad principles are expressed in Rabari dress. The first is *suhag*—auspiciousness, good fortune, and happiness—which is related to youth. For happy occasions and in youth, women and men wear color and ornamentation. The second is relinquishing—for sorrowful occasions and as they age, women and men give up color and decoration. Women wear black in ritual mourning that can be traced to the legend of a king who died protecting Rabaris, and men wear white. For women, the concept of *suhag* is the overriding good fortune; becoming a widow is the ultimate sorrow.

#### THE REALM OF BAKHIYA

Bakhiya, backstitching with a single white sewing thread, is a less-known Rabari style, and perhaps the origin of Rabari embroidery. “Where did embroidery come from?” Harkhuben Bhojraj, a Kachhi Rabari matron of Bhopani Vandh, rhetorically asked. “We took needles and embroidered. Someone intelligent must have come up with an idea.”

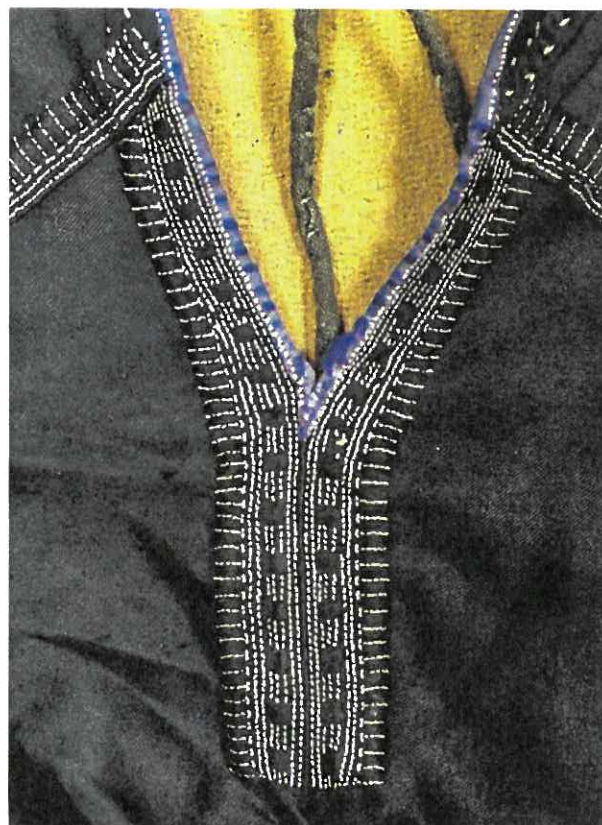
Rabari women created their own backless blouses, the only stitched garments they wore, cutting a simple no-waste pattern from a meter of fabric and handstitching the pieces together. Lachhuben Raja has a more practical explanation for how embroidery started. “First,” she says, “we did two lines of bakhiya along seams.” This reinforced the seams. “Then,” Lachhuben continues, “we made *devadi* (shrine motifs perpendicular to the seam). Originally this decorative stitching was done on the gussets on either side of gathers for breasts, to express good fortune. Adding two lines of bakhiya, we did *khadki* (windows) plus shrine motifs, then adding two lines of bakhiya, we did *makudiya* (ants), then adding two lines of bakhiya, we did *popti* (parrot-like symbols), then *ambo* (mango trees). That way patterns grew. You should have all different patterns for your blouses.”\*

Traditionally, young women's everyday blouses were made of colorful patterned fabric and

embellished with side strips and lower borders embroidered in the characteristic Rabari style, chain and interlaced stitching profusely ornamented with mirrors of different shapes in addition to bakhiya at the neckline and seams.

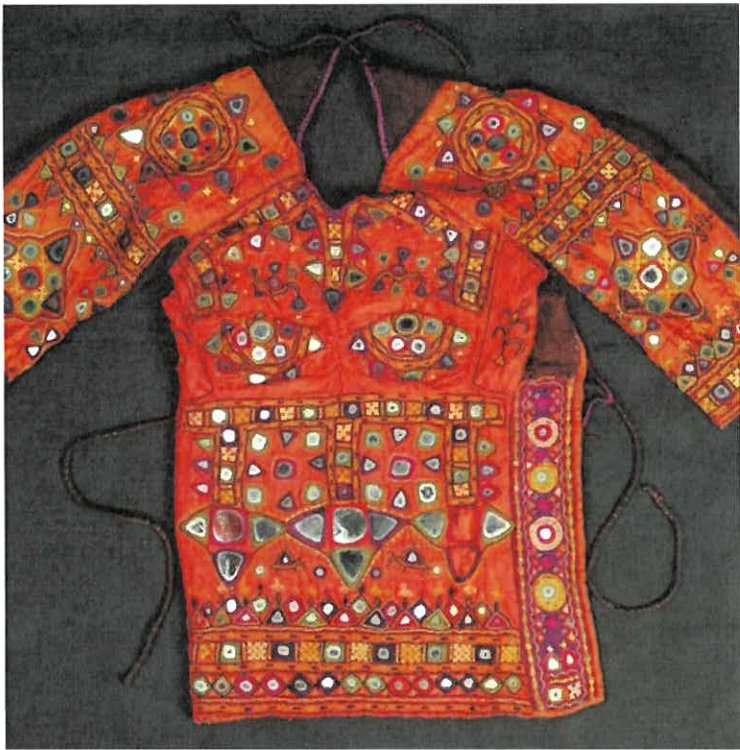
For festive occasions, young and mature Rabari women wore *kanchali*, colorfully embroidered versions of the traditional blouse. Examples of these festive blouses from the 1940s have bakhiya detailing along the raglan sleeve seams, but by the mid-twentieth century, women no longer stitched bakhiya on their blouses; the embroidery itself expressed good fortune, after all.

Elder Rabari women wear plain black blouses, even on festive occasions. Among Kachhi Rabaris, those whose husbands are living embroider bakhiya as simple vertical lines, giving up the cross at the top



Detail of an elder woman's *kapadu* (everyday blouse), Viyar, circa 1970. The *bakhiya* embroidery patterns of this blouse, *khadki* (window) and *devadi* (shrines) without crosses at the top, indicate that the wearer was an elder who had a living husband.

Photo by Ketan Pomal, L.M. Studio, Bhuj, courtesy of Kalra Raksha Museum



*Left: Kanchali* (festival blouse), Nakhatrana, circa 1940. For festive occasions, young and mature Rabari women wore fully embroidered backless blouses. Until the 1980s, conventional patterns and composition were used: circles at the breasts and shoulders, borders at the neck and belly, and ornament motifs on the arms.

*Right: Mourning kapadu*, Sanosara, circa 2000. If a member of a Rabari woman's family dies, she wears a black blouse in mourning. The *bakhiya* patterns on this example are *kareliya* (spiders) at the neck, *popti* (parrot-like) on the raglan sleeve seams, and *devadi* (shrines) that signify *suhag*, that the wearer has a living husband. The use of subtle color in addition to white and *bakhiya* motifs at the base of the center front are other innovations indicating that the wearer is young. Photos by Ketan Pomal, L.M. Studio, Bhuj, courtesy of Kala Raksha Museum

of the shrine worn by younger women. Widows wear only the original two lines of *bakhiya* without the shrine motifs that signify good fortune.

When a family member dies, Rabari women wear black, regardless of age. Mature and elder women wear black everyday blouses with *bakhiya*. Younger women who normally wear color add subtle colored embroidery at the sides to distinguish their black blouses from an elder's everyday blouse. Previously, young Kachhi women also wore plain red blouses with the aforementioned embroidery for mourning.

Among Rabari women of the Dhebaria subgroup, *bakhiya* was traditionally also used to express good fortune, but rather than shrine motifs along the center-front and raglan sleeve seams, the indicator was *mugro*, a tiny motif embroidered within *bakhiya* along the center-front seam.

Among Dhebaria Rabaris and in Lachhuben Raja's village, Bhopani Vandh, known to be the most traditional Kachhi Rabari village, *bakhiya* is also used for a man's festival *kediyun*, a fitted jacket with a densely

gathered peplum. The embellishment is considered *sobha*: beauty, reputation, and dignity. These jackets are white, and *bakhiya* decoration is multicolored with elaborate traditional and innovative motifs, including family names in Gujarati and English.

#### BAKHIYA OVER TIME

Expressing culture and identity, embroidery has evolved over the more than five decades that I have had the privilege of observing.

By the early 1990s, the women of Lachhuben Raja's Kachhi Rabari community were in a dilemma. A single income was no longer enough for a household. Women had to work to earn, and the impact was that they had little time to embroider for themselves. Forced to find ways to apportion their limited time for multiple tasks, they calculated their efforts. The Kachhi Rabaris creatively innovated on their tradition: they employed professional artisans to machine embroider garments and household decorations in a tight zigzag stitch that resembled the chain-stitched

outlines of motifs, and they added handstitched mirrors and details.

Innovation came more drastically to the Dhebaria Rabaris. In 1995, the Nath, a group of elder men who make community rules, banned the making and using of traditional hand embroidery, as they deemed it “too expensive.” At that time, young women were engaged in robust peer competition, making more and more imaginative, elaborate, and exquisitely executed embroideries for their dowries, and consequently, they could not complete their dowries and thus go to their in-laws’ homes until they were in their thirties. Weddings were becoming a woman’s realm, and the Nath’s solution was to take some control in the matter. Obeying the ban, Dhebaria Rabaris invented an entirely new art form. They machine appliquéd blouses with commercial ribbons and trim to emulate hand-embroidered ornamentation.

In both communities, women began to lose embroidery skills, notably the rich repertoire of Rabari accent stitches. Bakhiya was on the verge of being lost.

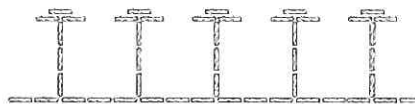
The word bakhiya is also used for simple sewing-machine stitching. As Kachhi Rabari women increasingly relied on machine-zigzag embroidery to substitute for chain-stitched outlines, they began to have the seams of their blouses decorated with simple machine stitching. Sewing machines could approximate most traditional bakhiya patterns, but they could not make the shrine motifs essential to expressing suhag.

“We added shrine motifs by hand,” Lachhuben Raja recalls. Twenty years later, she still hand-stitches the shrine motifs. “It looks good,” she says. “Rather—without the mark of suhag it would look bad. But bakhiya should be fine; it shows your capability.”

Sajnuben Pachan, a Dhebaria Rabari, is 20 years younger than Lachhuben Raja. She says that after the embroidery ban, bakhiya was still allowed, and women handstitched bakhiya along seams, including the mugro motif that signified suhag. Today they do bakhiya by machine; she herself uses machine bakhiya. “Only elders do handstitching,” she says. “And mugro motifs are no longer done.”\*

As for men’s festive jackets, they are machine stitched in bold, simple patterns, in either white or red thread.

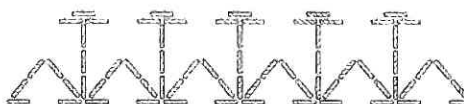
*Devadi (shrine)*



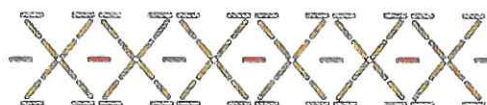
*Khadki (window)*



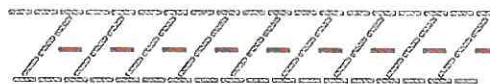
*Makudiya (ants)*



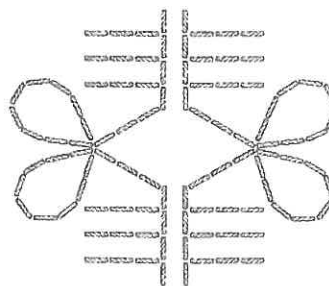
*Popti (parrot-like)*



*Ambo (mango tree)*



*Mugro*



*Bakhiya* patterns. Rabari women choose from several patterns traditional to the *bakhiya* style of embroidery. They enjoy variation, demonstrating their creativity.

#### EVOLUTION OF MEANING

Rabari culture has transformed rapidly and radically over the past half century. With changing needs of neighbors and shrinking grazing lands, Rabari men have left herding for driving cars and trucks, tending shops, or other employment. As women have begun to earn for their families, they have ventured beyond their own tightly knit communities to work in fields and urban homes. Girls

have become educated, taken professional jobs, and earned well. Lachhuben Raja's granddaughter Rani is a police constable in a town 132 kilometers (82 miles) from their village. Gaining financial and social independence, girls have begun to break engagements made in their childhoods by family elders and choose husbands through their own social networks.

Rabaris are merging into mainstream Kutchi culture. Nareshbhai, a Bhuj merchant who for decades sold cloth to Rabari clients, recently told me he now carries "general" fabrics. Asked why, he replied, "Rabaris have come into the general category!"

Dress and embroidery continue to articulate evolving Rabari life. The subtle, critical language of dress codes has opened up. Markers of a woman's status, *suhag* and age have lost relevance. Most women no longer embroider shrine or *mugro* motifs on their

blouses; while Lachhuben Karna wore black for everyday by the age of 35, Lachhuben Raja, at 70, wears red and maroon. Young widows don't wear black anymore, she notes. The consensus is it's okay to wear color.

Widows and elders traditionally gave up color and ornamentation in sorrow. Today, color is according to wish, according to Lachhuben Raja. Perhaps definitions of good fortune and sorrow have changed.

Surely there is a generation gap in perception. "We think it looks bad if a married woman doesn't wear the signifier of good fortune, *bakhiya* shrine motifs," Lachhuben Raja says. "But if the young don't agree, we can't say anything."

Embroidery has metamorphosed from the expression of details of identity to fashion. Rani used the embroidery of an entirely different community for her dowry. Her mother uses machine-embroidered renditions of the styles of still other communities.



Photo by Judy Frazer

*Kediya*, circa 1980. Traditionally, Rabari men wore a densely gathered jacket, the festival version embroidered in multicolored *bakhiya*, including the *devadi* pattern. In this example, names of male family members are embroidered in Gujarati on both sides of the front. From the collection of the author.

Photo by Nevada Wier, from Artisans by Design, courtesy of Schiffer Publishing



At age 70 in 2022, Lachhuben Raja enjoys being able to wear color on an everyday basis. Her appropriate choice is limited to red or maroon, with only self-texture pattern, but she no longer has to wear the black that women her age would have worn decades ago. She has her blouses embroidered with machine *bakhiya*, the fashion now, but she adds the traditional hand-embroidered *bakhiya devadi* that communicate *suhag*.

#### CYCLES OF FASHION

“No one knows *bakhiya* now,” Lachhuben Raja laments. “Young women say the shrine motifs are too hard to stitch.”

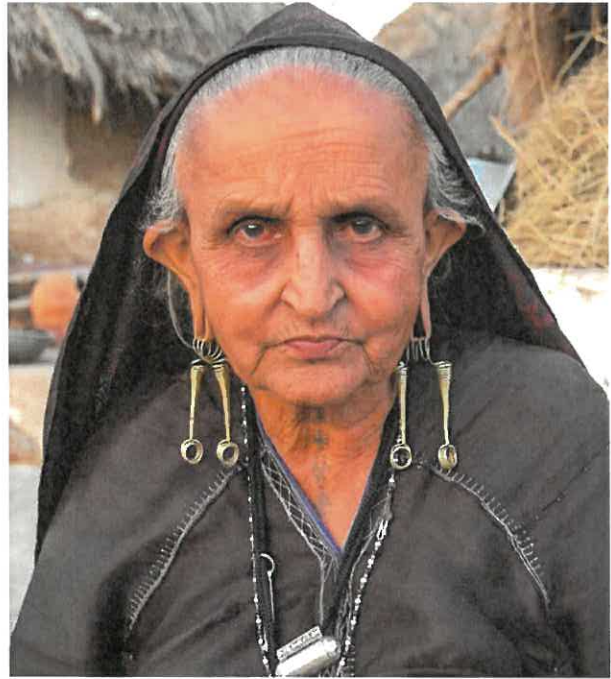
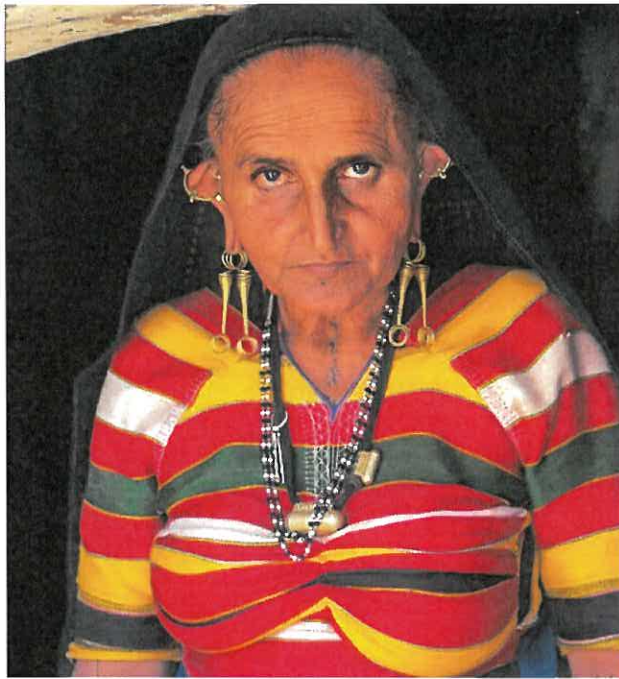
Besides that, women are more concerned with being seen from a distance. “We used to come close to a Rabari woman and see the *bakhiya* on her blouse and know immediately if she had a living husband,” Lachhuben Raja says. “For the last 30 years or so, women wear machine embroidery and ‘lace’ (rickrack and commercially made ribbon trims), which don’t need to be seen close up.” Recently, though, she adds, women are using more hand embroidery along with machine zigzag. She has seen fashions cycle back. “In place of white threads, women were using threads dyed in blueing. Now, white is back.”

“And we are using *kungari* and *bavaliyun* [two types of traditional interlaced stitching]!” Lachhuben’s other granddaughter Jassu yells from the back room.

Photo by Ketan Pomai, L. M. Studio. Bhuj, courtesy of Kalra Raksha Museum



Kapadu, Kukadsar, c. 1997: After hand embroidery was banned by the Dhebaria Nath in 1995, women created machine-appliquéd decorations that mimicked hand embroidery, while incorporating allowed *bakhiya* stitches. This early example features *bakhiya devadi* along the center-front seam with a *mugro* motif.



Photos courtesy of Judy Frater

*Left:* Bhopani Vandh, 1999. For a wedding celebration, Ramiben Rama wears a striped mashru blouse with handstitched fine *bakhiya* details. At about 50, she did not consider herself old enough to forgo color for festive occasions.

*Right:* Bhopani Vandh, 2008. Nine years later, Ramiben Rama wears the everyday blouse of an elder Kachhi Rabari woman, black with fine white *bakhiya* stitching at the neck and seams. The neck *bakhiya* is machine stitched. The handstitched *devadi* temple motifs along the raglan shoulder seams indicate that she has a living husband but has given up color.

“If the young like something, they can bring it back,” Lachhuben Raja says.

But for that to happen, good examples must be within view. Last year, Lachhuben Raja wished she still had her own dowry embroideries because traditional work was coming back in fashion. I had her *loran* set (festive door hangings) because neither of her daughters had wanted it. This year, I happily repatriated it.

Bakhiya embroidery epitomizes subtlety and patience. Appreciation of its fine detailing requires closeness and intimacy. As long as Rabari artisans have access to good examples of their cultural heritage, there is promise that when the time is right, this minute stitching style that grew from construction to elaboration will return to the Rabari repertoire. ❖

Visit our website at [LT.Media/Rabari-Embroidery](http://LT.Media/Rabari-Embroidery) to view more images for “Bakhiya: A Tale of Tiny Stitches.”

**Bakhiya** – fine white backstitching  
**Suhag** – having a living husband (or unmarried), a state of auspiciousness, good fortune, happiness  
**Sobha** – beauty, reputation, dignity

## NOTES

\*Lachhuben Raja Rabari and Sajnunben Pachan Rabari, personal communication, 2025.

## RESOURCES

- Frater, Judy. *Artisans by Design: An Odyssey of Education for Textile Artisans in India*. Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 2024.
- Frater, Judy. “Picasso Gets a Sewing Machine: A Conversation Across Generations and Communities, on Current Trends in Rabari Textile Arts.” In *Threads and Voices*, edited by Laila Tyabji. Mumbai, India: Marg Foundation, 2007.
- Frater, Judy. *Threads of Identity: Embroidery and Adornment of the Nomadic Rabaris*. Ahmedabad, India: Mapin, 2006.

Ashoka Fellow **JUDY FRATER** lived 30 years with artisans of Kutch, where she founded Kala Raksha Trust and Museum and the first design school for artisans in India, currently Somaiya Kala Vidya. She has been awarded the Sir Misha Black Medal for Design Education, the Crafts Council of India Kamla award, the Designers of India Design Guru Award, and more. Previously associate curator at the Textile Museum in Washington, DC, Judy is the author of *Artisans by Design*, *Threads of Identity: Embroidery and Adornment of the Nomadic Rabaris*, and *The Art of the Dyer in Kutch*. She writes and lectures extensively on textiles and craft.