



Fig.12.1 : An embroidered Animal face covering mid 20th century. It was made of two or rather three geometric shapes roughly – one a rectangle measuring 12 inches by 9 inches, which was to come on the neck of the horse, and the other was a band – 8 inches by 3 inches, and then a triangular piece which was made of three strips of approximately 3 inches by 1 inch and then joined to a rhombus – 3 inch square. The three separate strips, that join the diamond/rhombus, leave two openings for eyes
IICD, Jaipur, Acc. No. Tex/Emb-Horse/815
Image courtesy: IICD, Jaipur

An Embroidered Adornment for the Oxen : A Masterpiece of Banjara Embroidery

Toolika Gupta

A textile object, Fig.12.1, belonging to the Archives of the Indian Institute of Crafts and Design (IICD), Jaipur, caught my attention. The object had a lot of cowrie shells and mirrors tucked on it, like in the Kutch/Rabari or Ahir embroidery. It was a strange object with amazingly intricate embroidery, which would fall into the categories of applique, reverse applique, Banjara embroidery, mirror work, metal work, and cowrie shells too. The style of embroidery was the Lambadi/Lambani style of work, close to Kutch style, but the cowries made it look more Rajasthani or Decani in style. Therefore, identification of the object remained a puzzle.

The object brought to mind these various questions. How old would it be? Where did it come from? What was its use and who made it? were some of the questions that plagued me. I began picking up the books to read about this particular style of work. This object came in to IICD in 2002, it was donated by a vendor from New Delhi. The accession number read: Tex/Emb-Horse/815, thus it had to be associated with a horse. But then who were the tribes who would have embroidered it and would they have domesticated horses or oxen? Some felt that the textile belonged to Gujarat, for the generous use of mirrors (*aarci/aarsi*). As Anne Morrell points out that the wandering tribes, Banjaras, during their travel through Gujarat, Rajasthan and the Deccan, spread the use of cowrie shells and beads in embroidery.¹ In fact, the mirrors were also used for talismanic purposes, to ward off the evil, as Sheila Paine points out: "A talismanic role is also played by cowrie shells, red seeds, old zips, white buttons, silver trinkets, sequins, bits of watch chain and dangling triangular amulets, as well as by tassels and pompoms, especially in the embroideries of Indus Kohistan."²

Though the embroidery resembled that of the Kutch tribes, but the *ahirs* of Gujarat do not use cowries. These are mainly used by the Rajasthani and Deccani nomadic tribes. This particular object was a marvellous piece of embroidery. It had a rather colorful composition. And, when you hold it, as it is supposed to be held, one can at once see that it is an embroidered face cover for a horse or an ox. It has a band for the head, the fabric is cut out where eyes are, like any mask, for the wearer to see. The rest of it has big mirrors embroidered on it. It has clusters of cowrie shells in the center, as well as along metallic tubes on the sides falling on the ears of the animal, Fig.12.3.

The textile was made with a lot of thought and care, to cover the head of the animal, and quite a part of its neck. The base fabric was *khaddar*, coarse cotton from an old fabric that had been upcycled. It was made of two or rather three geometric shapes: a rectangle measuring 12 inches by 9 inches, which was to come on the neck of the horse, and the other was a band measuring 8 inches by 3 inches, and then a triangular piece which was made of three strips of approximately 3 inches by 1 inch and then joined to a

rhombus of 3 inch square. The three separate strips, that join the diamond/rhombus, leave two openings for eyes. Each strip has three mirrors fixed on it.

If we only refer to the front part of the fabric, with three strips being joined to the diamond/rhombus, we can immediately see that it is for an animal, and that it is not a *toran* or a *chakla*. Such an image has been published by Kwon and McLaughlin, and they call it a face cover for the oxen.³ The three images in the book have similar embroidery and edging with cowries. Metal tubes have also been used.

Almost eight mirrors on either side on blue base, with white appliqued sides, look as if like a fabric is pulled for a tent and casting a shadow. That is the typical style of applique done in Sind and Barmer. The mirror work was done with such intricacy and finesse that not a single thread went astray. The herringbone stitch with multiple colours, on two coloured strips of fabric, creates added charm. The chain stitches to create outlines and the small ties that were looped at the edge were all finished with great intricacy. The neat buttonhole stitch, the use of white metal trinkets and the embroidery of cowrie shells, was a feat in itself. The consistency of neatness is amazing. Attaching almost sixty - sixty-one mirrors with the neatness and a colour combination to make it so vibrant made the animal almost come alive in front of me. I was wondering what a lucky horse or ox it must have been to be so beautifully decked. Nearly hundred cowries were added to beautify the piece. Today when we talk about sustainability and upcycling, don't we see what we have lost there? These were skills our tribes possessed. A few pieces of worn-out old fabric, with some yards of yarn, ingenuity, glass, trinkets, cowries and the craft of nimble fingers, could turn this old rag into an article of great beauty, used for their animal companions. As Usha Srikant points out, there is no particular motif in this but they are centered around geometric shapes, lines or organically designed patterns.⁴ The back of this piece is an old fabric, reinforced by layers of blue and maroon fabric, appliqued with white fabric.

In her book *Threads of Identity, Embroidery and Adornment of the Nomadic Rabaris*, Judy Frater discusses in detail the lineage and the embroidery of Raikas and Rabaris, but she does not mention the use of cowries. A lot of similarities exist in terms of the stitches mentioned by her and those used in this animal face-cover but evidently this did not come from Gujarat. After speaking to a few people from Gujarat, it was brought to light that the use of cowries is more in Rajasthan-Sind area or in the Deccan, where the Banjaras moved as traders, and then settled once the British created the railway system.⁵ Shiela Paine mentions that the Banjaras embroider bags for marriages and animal regalia too, and that these are edged with cowrie shells.⁶ Kwon and McLaughlin talk about the wandering tribes who moved as traders and had lots of bulls/oxen that carried wheat/salt, etc. The cattle were the main stay of these traders and they owned them, though sometimes, kings would also grant these tribes with horses. So most likely, this textile looks like a face-cover for an oxen, inspite of the details existing against the IIDC accession number. Nevertheless, this masterpiece of Banjara embroidery, most likely comes from the Lambadi/Lambani tribes, who have now settled in the Deccan plateau.



Fig.12.2 : Showing a portion of the object that contains, intricate mirror attachments, applique work, chain stitch crisscross stitch, darning stitch, button hole stitch and cowrie shells attachment, detail of Fig.12.1



Fig.12.3 : Trinkets in white metal they look like a part of jewellery used by the embroiderer. This part will go on the ear of the animal, detail of Fig.12.1



References

1. Morrell, Anne, *The Techniques of Indian Embroidery*, Colorado, USA, 1995, pp.105-106.
2. Paine, Sheila, *Embroidery from India and Pakistan*, Seattle, USA, 2001, pp.12-13, 17, 18, 32-33.
3. Kwon Charlotte and McLaughlin Tim, *Textiles of the Banjara – Cloth and Culture of a Wandering Tribe*, London, UK, 2016.
4. Shrikant, Usha, *Ethnic Embroidery of India*, Mumbai, India, 1998, pp.29-40, 47.
5. Frater, Judy, *Threads of Identity, Embroidery and Adornment of the Nomadic Rabaris*, New Jersey, USA, Ahmedabad, India, 2003.
6. Paine, *op.cit.*

Bibliography

Sharma, Vidhi, 2012, *Banjara Hues* (unpublished diploma project report from Indian Institute of Crafts and Design, Jaipur).

TOOLIKA GUPTA, Ph.D., a researcher in the field of dress and textile, design and craft, started her career as a designer, more than 25 years ago. At present she is the Director of the Indian Institute of Crafts and Design, Jaipur, India; Chairperson of the Textiles and Clothing Research Centre, Delhi, and the President of Alliance Francaise of Jaipur. She is on the board of CII's National Design Committee since 2018. director@iicd.ac.in