

## Shared Heritage of India and Pakistan: A case of Gujharat and Ajrakh

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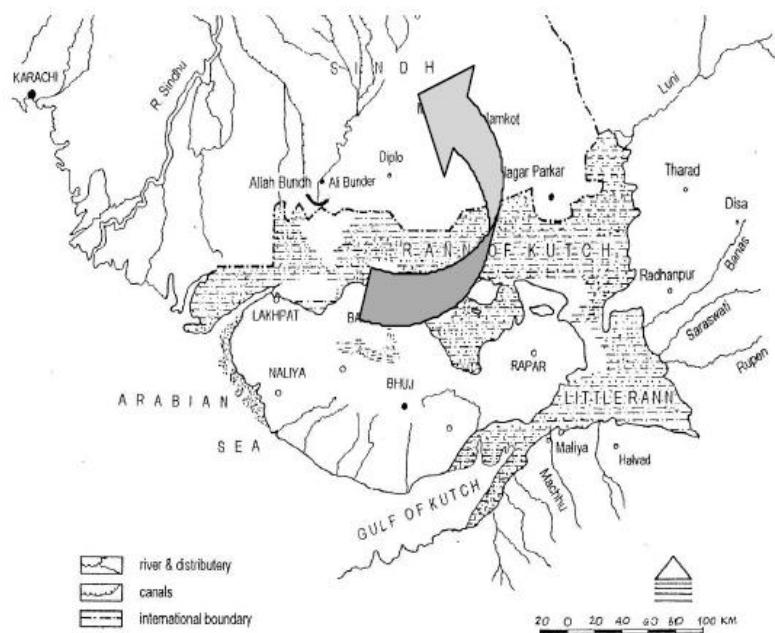
### Introduction

Kutch is a frontier district in the state of Gujarat in western India, situated on the border of India and Pakistan. Covering an area of 45,674 km<sup>2</sup>, it is the largest district of India. It is surrounded by the Great and Little Rann of Kutch on the North, South, East and the Arabian Sea on the West. In the beginning of the twelfth century Kutch was ruled by Chavda, Sama, Sanghar, Kathi and Solanki dynasties. From 1147 AD to 1947 AD Kutch was ruled by the Jadejas, whose ancestors migrated to Kutch from Sindh (now in Pakistan). Sindh is one of the four provinces of Pakistan. Located in the southeast of the country, it is the third largest province of Pakistan. Sindh is bordered by Balochistan province to the west and Punjab province to the north. Sindh also borders the Indian states of Gujarat and Rajasthan to the east and Arabian Sea to the south. The influence of Sindhi culture is very prominent in Kutch due to the history of migration of pastoralists as well as artisanal communities. The current paper aims to explore the cross border cultural relationships between local communities of Kutch, India and Sindh, Pakistan by critically examining their shared oral tradition of *Gujharat* and a significant traditional textile craft practice called *Ajrakh*.



**Figure1 Location of Kutch, India and Sindh, Pakistan**

Kutch and Sindh have very strong cultural relationships. Prior to the partition of India in 1947, during drought years the pastoralist communities of Kutch would migrate to Sindh where they could access both pastures and markets. While their livestock sustained in good lands of Sindh, many of them laboured in the fields of Sindhi farmers and used to get wheat in return as their wages which helped them sustain themselves. In those days there was no milk market. Milk was turned into ghee and sold in the villages of Sindh which also gave them additional income for their survival there. Such migration was more common amongst buffalo owners. Proximity to Sindh and socio-cultural similarity with it were additional reasons for preferring Sindh over other parts of Gujarat. Cattle pastoralists often preferred to go to Saurashtra as they had good relations with farmers who would give them shelter. There were also mass migrations to Sindh once every 8-10 years or so in times of severe scarcity and famines. (Bharwada 2012)



Map drawn by Charul Bharwada

**Figure 2. Sindh: Important Resource Region for Dry Years till the Indian Independence [1947] (Bharwada 2012)**

**Gujharat: The oral tradition of maldharis of Banni**

The Banni grasslands of Kutch is regarded as 'the largest natural grassland in the Indian subcontinent', and an area that is both socio-culturally unique and ecologically valuable. (Ramble 2019) Banni grassland is a home to more than 52 hamlets which are organized into 19 Panchayats, with a population of approximately 35000 - 40000 (including Pachcham), out of which 90% are Muslim nomadic pastoralists and 10% are Hindus (BPUMS 2010). They speak Kachchhi in Sindhi dialect. These communities have a long tradition of mutual trust, cooperation, interdependence and hospitality. The maldharis (pastoralists) of Banni have an intricate relationship with the biodiversity of the region. This interrelationship has manifested itself in the form of tangible and intangible elements which are now an integral part of the landscape.

*"A border region in the northern Kutch, where on one side of the international boundary lies the beautiful Sindh swinging in its cradle the ancient civilization of the Mohan-jo-Daro. On the other side lies Kutch and swinging in its cradle is the Dholavira, a part of Sindhu civilization, striving to meet its other half across the border. The cold winds of Thar bring messages of affection from Sindh to the people of Banni who have nurtured the Sindhu civilization and emerged as its custodians."*

(Mutwa, 2002 p. 1)

A unique form of oral tradition existing in Banni grasslands of Kutch is the Gujharat (or Guzaratu). It is a significant part of Sindhi folk literature and is considered a unique kind of oral tradition. Gujharat are traditional folk riddles spoken in Sindhi language and are generally based on the seven folk tales of Sindhi literature. These riddles include descriptions of the local flora and fauna, various elements of the surrounding landscape such as water, grasses, mountains, land, and also words related to activities associated with animal breeding. Traditionally, the maldharis of Banni would spend their evenings in the choupals (public gathering areas) and have sessions of saying Gujharatein, while the public would have fun by decoding them. When the maldharis would gather while their cattle herds grazed in the grasslands, or during other social gatherings such as weddings or on long winter nights around the bonfire, the Gujharat sessions would go on all night long, with all the villagers participating enthusiastically. Gujharat were generally used as a means of recreation and entertainment for the local pastoralists. Gujharat sessions would become even more interesting when maldharis from different communities would come together for

a session of Gujharat since they would bring in new riddles which would be more difficult to crack.

Gujharat are generally based on the seven folk tales of Sindhi literature such as Umar Marvi, Sasui Rehun, Leela Chanesar, Suhane Mehr etc. Every Gujharat is based on one such folktale. A single Gujharat may have 2 to 7 names of things hidden within itself. A simple example of a Gujharat : "Munhijo Naalo Naale Saan" (my name for name). This Gujharat hides within itself 2 names. The person solving the riddle has to first deduce which of the 7 folktales this riddle corresponds to. Then one starts guessing relevant names associated with the riddle. Once the correct name is spoken, the person who framed the riddle shouts, "Mari Vai" (oh, I'm dead) and translates the real meaning of the Gujharat in the local language, followed by general applause from the public. The above Gujharat is taken from Sasui Punhu, a folklore native to the region of Sindh, which contains in itself two hidden names - "Pyaaro" and "Punhu". Sasui Punhu, the love story is narrated by the lover, where she says: "my name, for name" meaning my love for Punhu.

This whole process of constructing and solving the riddles was, in itself, a means of recreation and entertainment for the local pastoralists. However, the original objective of this oral tradition has deeper roots. The main aim of this oral tradition was to educate the local maldharis about the different elements and resources found in the cultural landscape of Sindh. Since most of the maldharis did not receive any formal education, the mode of communication had to be oral, and in a way that would be easily accessible to the general public. Hence the riddles were based on the folk tales of Sindh, which were known to all the local villagers. The process would involve the audience to speak out all the different names for all natural resources or animals in the region, which would make the riddle interesting while at the same time educating the audience regarding the same. All the various aspects of heritage, natural or cultural, have been widely expressed through language, specially through the riddles in Gujharat. Due to intergenerational transmission over the years, Gujharats have also been able to preserve some early folk tales and have also recorded significant historical events in the region. It is due to this reason that this type of oral tradition is considered unique and one of its kind in the world.

Gujharat is currently not at risk of falling into disuse, rather it is being performed very extensively during community gatherings in Banni. It has also found new means of transmission through introduction of new technology like Whatsapp and other social media platforms through which the pastoralists can connect with members from their community across the border in Pakistan. Pastoralists across the border create new Gujharat and send them across via social media platforms. The pastoralists on the other side then try to decode them together. However, the community does feel that there is a need for promoting the oral tradition so that there is greater participation from the community.

Local Sindhi writers of Banni, such as Kaladhar Mutwa, who recognize the significance of this oral tradition, encourage the locals to continue practicing this tradition. Kaladharji also emphasizes that it is important to encourage the younger generation to participate in the Gujharat process and understand the nuances of this tradition. It is rural writers like him who have now started converting this oral tradition into a written form in order to generate awareness. In 2012, Kaladhar Mutwa interacted with various local pastoralist communities of Banni grasslands and did extensive research and compiled a list of Gujharat in his book titled, "Gujharatun". Since this is a unique form of oral tradition, there is a need for its recognition in the global platform. In 2018, UNESCO New Delhi, in collaboration with Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) undertook a project on inventorying of Intangible Cultural Heritage of indigenous communities of Banni grasslands of Kutch, where they documented in detail the oral tradition of Gujharat.

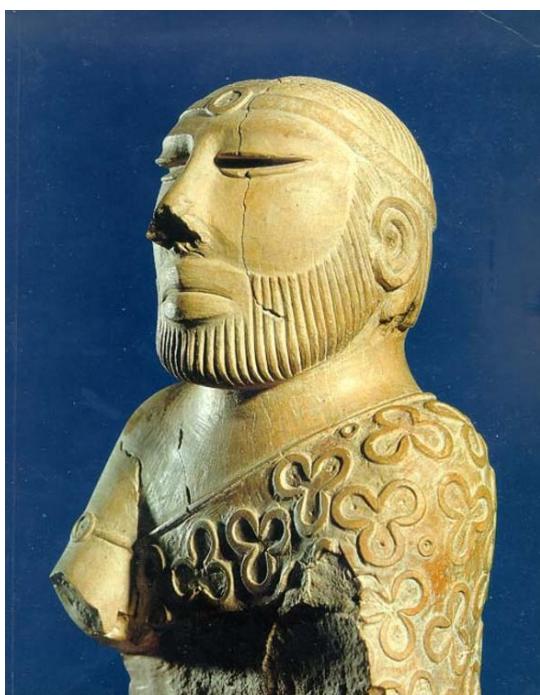
Writers and research scholars from both India and Pakistan have worked on documenting and creating an inventory of Gujharat. Late Doctor Parso Gidwani worked on Banni's folk literature. Sindhi Sahitya Akademi published his edited book titled "Gujharatum" in 1906. Doctor Betho Lalwani's "Baniya Jo Lok Adab" book was published in Kutch in 1929. The book also contains an article on Gujharat. . Sindhi writer and research scholar Baloch Nabi Baksh Khan also published a book on Gujharat in 1949.

Banni's local NGO, Banni Sindhu Seva Sangh (BSSS) has been working for the last eighteen years towards the development of folk literature of Sindhi language. In 2008, with the help of Gujarat Sindhi Literature Academy, BSSS organized a seminar on the topic "Banni's Folk Literature" in which an essay titled "Gujharat in Banni" was also included. Banni Sindhu Seva Sangh did a project on Gujharat in 2011 with the financial assistance of Indus Education - Puna under which a one day workshop was also held in Banni and meetings were held in different villages with the Sughads. It has also been published as book 2012 by Gujarat Sindhi Sahitya Akademi. In 2014, Banni Breeders Association organised Gujharat Kachehri or Gujharat gathering at night, in its annual cattle fair called Pashu Mela, which was also broadcast on All India Radio Bhuj.

The indigenous communities of Kutch and Sindh have an intricate relationship, which manifests itself in the form of intangible cultural heritage such as oral traditions and craft practices. In the next section the paper explores how a traditional craft practice of Ajrakh is practiced across both sides of the border.

### Ajrakh: the traditional textile by the Khatris of Sindh and Kutch

Ajrakh is a word synonymous with Sindh and Kutch due to the shared history between the regions. It brings a unique identity to the frontier lands across both sides of the border. Ajrakh, a textile craft practised in Kutch, India and Sindh, Pakistan is one of the earliest known textiles from the Indus valley civilisation (Pezarkar, 2017). The reflections of the textile can be seen on the statue of the King Priest wearing a trefoil pattern on his shawl which resembles the present Ajrakh pattern Kakkar meaning cloud (Figure 2). While the civilisation has seen its decline, the textile has travelled with time and is now known to everyone.



**Figure 3: King Priest from Indus Valley Civilisation**

**Source: National Museum, Karachi (Wikipedia Creative Commons)**

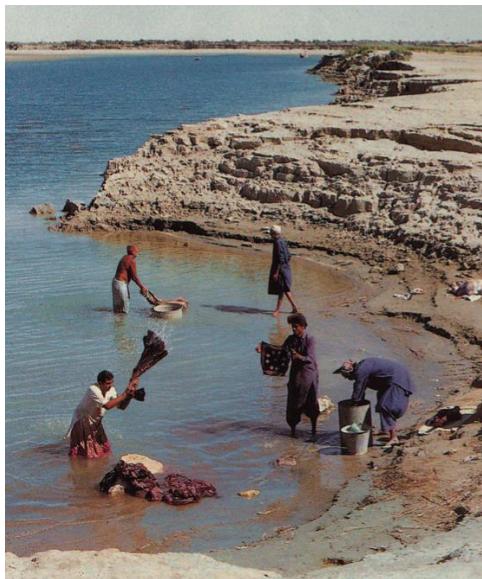
Ajrakh has been practised by communities known as the Khatris based along the Sindhu river in Pakistan. The art travelled to India on the request of the King of Kutch 'Rao Bharmalji' in the early 17th century when numerous communities came and settled in various parts of Kutch. The Ajrakh practitioners started to work on the banks of Saran river in Dhamadka which was known for its sweet water. With time, the natural sources of water began to dry up which forced artisans to find another place to practise the craft. As a result, after the disastrous 2001 earthquake in Kutch, a group of villagers searched for a new place which had water and was named as Ajrakhpur.



**Figure 4: Ajrakh textile (Source: Khamir)**

*"The Khatri are an artisan community in Kutch. 'Rang Utarna aur rang Chadhana', the art of adding and removing colour, has been their work for centuries. Originally from Sindh, the Khatri practise crafts like block print, batik print, tie and dye and rogan painting. There are both hindu and muslim Khatri in Kutch. Jokingly they often claim that at some point in history their ancestral lines converged."*

-Kachchh ji chhaap exhibition (Source: Khamir)



**Figure 5: Resist printing in Sindh**

Source: Sindh Jo Ajrakh, Noorjehan Bilgrami

The Khatris who populate the village originally hail from the Sindh province of modern Pakistan. As a community of block-printers, they have been practising the 3000-years-old art of Ajrakh. Abdul Raheman Khatri says that he himself is a ninth generation artisan. Even before Partition, due to water shortages in Sindh, his father, uncles and their families had moved over to Kutch and begun work. Today four of his children—Abdul, Ibrahim, Juneid and Rashid work with their father. The next generation has taken over. (Gopinath, 2017)

Ajrakh, like any textile, shared a unique relationship with water. Starting on the Sindhu river, the artisans have always worked in close proximity to the water sources. However, the lack of quality water remains a huge challenge for the artisans in today's time. "Water and good quality water is essential to the survival of Ajrakh," said Sufian Khatri, who is a ninth-generation Ajrakh craftsman (Rahmaan, 2019). The local organisation Khamir took an initiative to instal an effluent treatment plant (ETP) in Ajrakhpur in collaboration with artisans, local community members in 2007. As the water requirement was more, the on-going process of setting up a Common Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) by the government through the Northern India Textile Research Association (NITRA) has given renewed hope to the artisans of Ajrakhpur. The treatment plant has a capacity of recycling 1.5 lakh litres of water every day (Rahmaan, 2019).

Many stakeholders including the local organisations, government and educational institutions have ensured that the preservation of the art form is also documented and showcased in numerous ways to the public. Khamir, an organisation based in Kutch works for creating a platform for artisanal craftsmanship has taken numerous efforts to promote Ajrakh. The organisation has been successful in curating an exhibition 'Kachchh ji Chhaap' which traced the history of Ajrakh from Sindh to Kutch and afterwards in great detail. The work also acknowledges the shared history between India and Pakistan and is reflected in the narratives of the exhibition. Shrujan, another organisation has been seen advocating the craft Ajrakh through their museum exhibits called the Living and Learning Design Centre (LLDC), which equally appreciates and shares the common linkages of traditional heritage on the sides of the border. We have also witnessed exchange taking place between the two regions which has led to a positive relationship with respect to the cultural heritage practised by communities. Scholars like Noorjehan Bilgrami, designer and educator from Pakistan have worked on Ajrakh in great detail and can be seen in the book 'Sindh jo Ajrakh'. She has also visited Kutch and shares a great bond with artisans. On the other hand, many artisans from Kutch have visited craft communities in Sindh who are also related to them in terms of ancestral lineage.

## **Conclusion**

Kutch remains a melting point of cultures of various communities. One can find stories of Sindh everywhere and feel the appreciation for the craft there. The political boundaries may exist today between India and Pakistan however it cannot separate the relationship between Kutch and Sindh. For that remains alive in the stories and the cultural heritage of the region.

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