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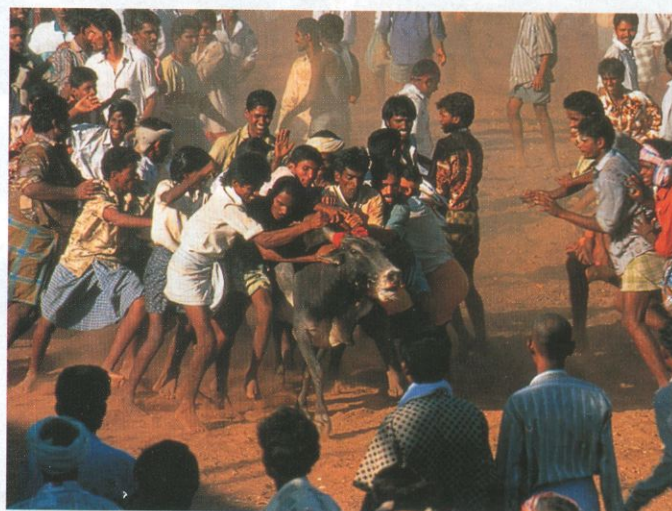
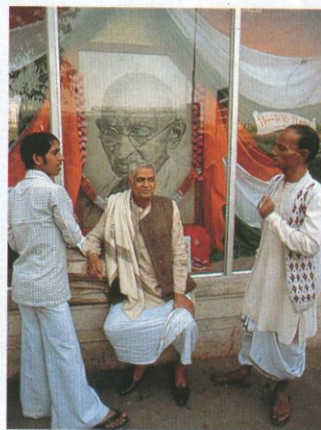
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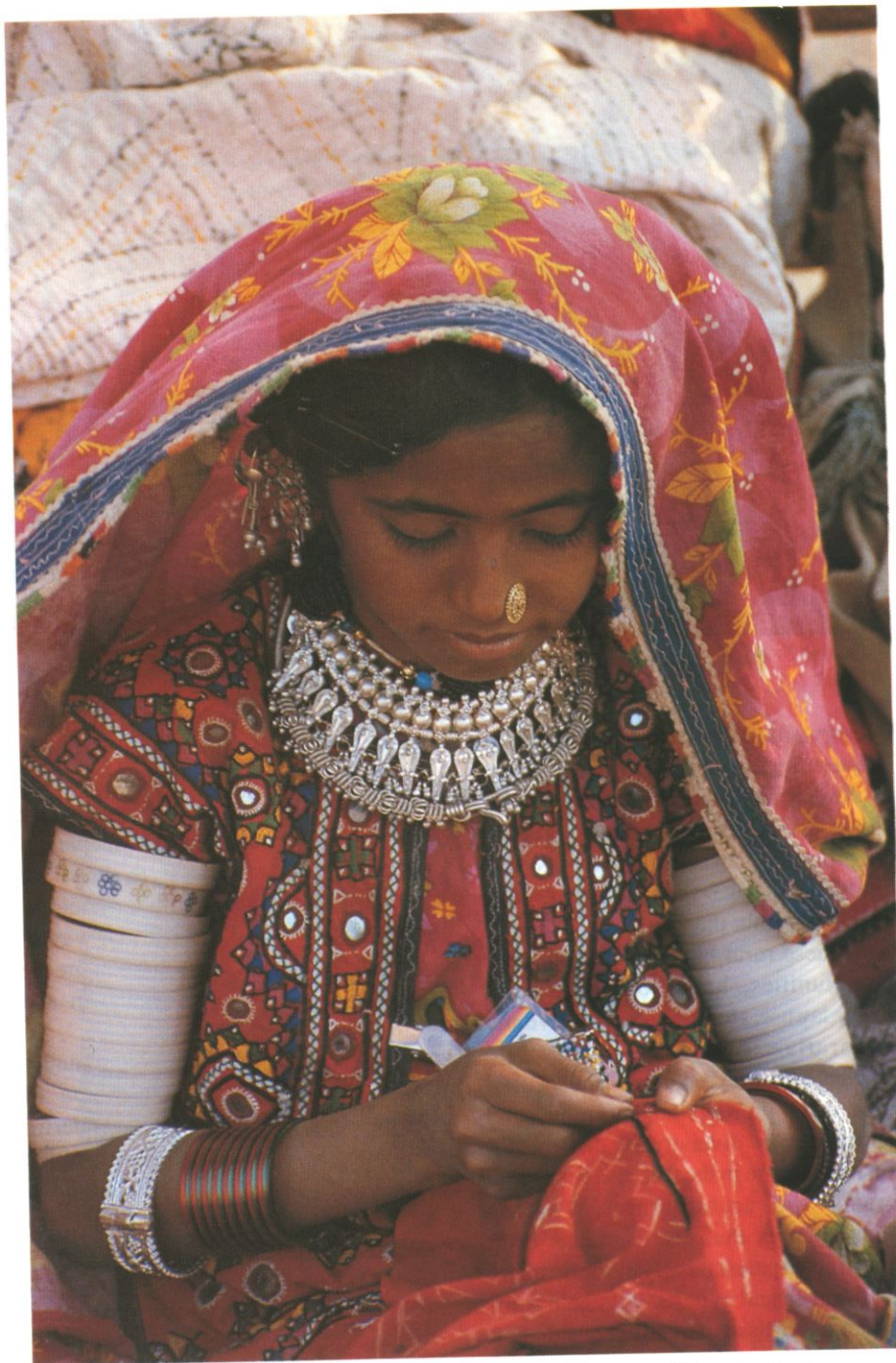
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SHILPGRAM Arts and Crafts Village

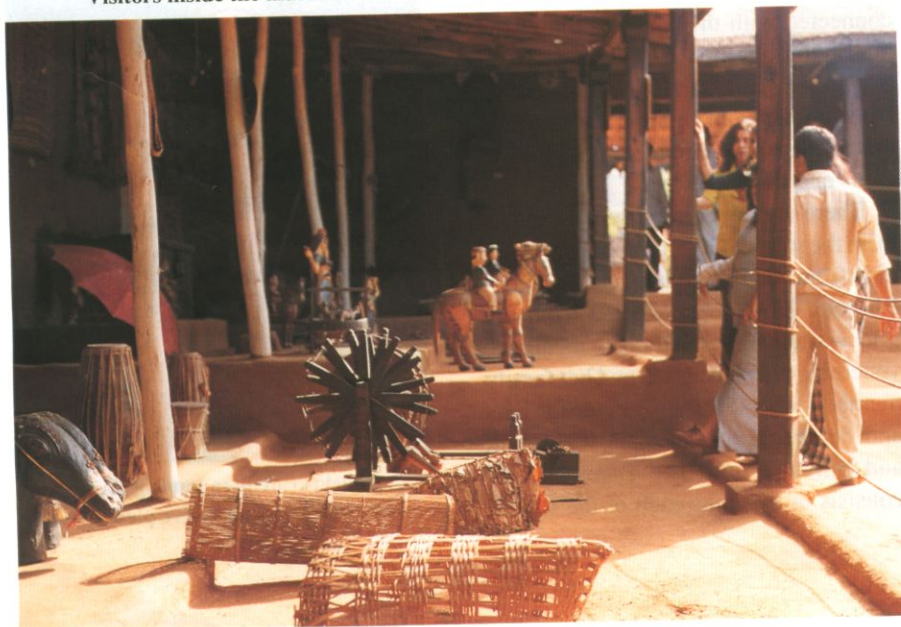
Text and photographs:
Nihal Mathur

*Three kilometres away from
Udaipur city is a hillside designated
a wasteland in government records.
In that stony, sand blown, treeless
land, few could once imagine a living
ethnographic museum, the
Shilpgram.*



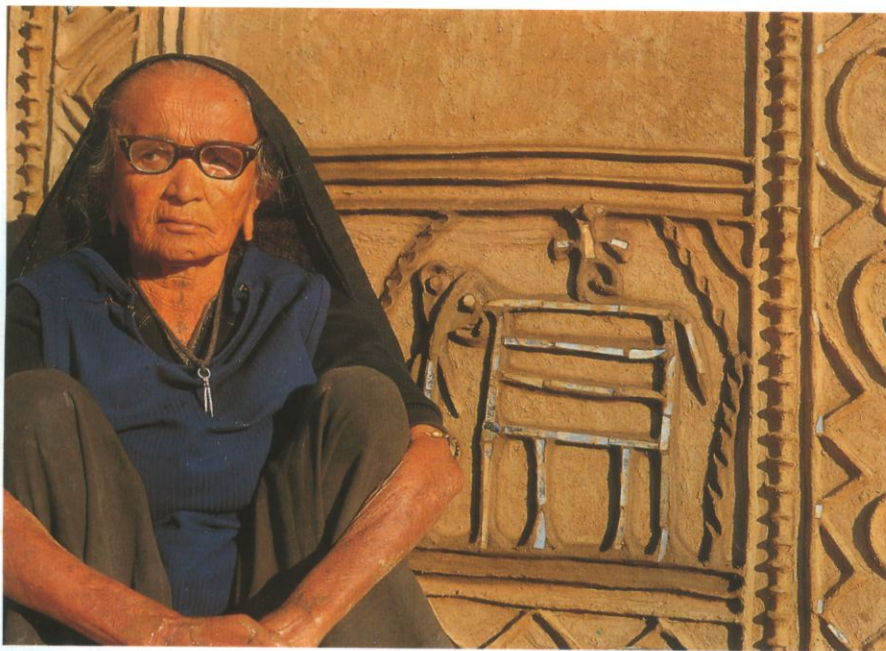
Famous for their embroidery, a Rabari girl stitches a traditional pattern

Visitors inside the museum



At the main entrance, Qaiyum, the Booking Clerk, welcomed me as one of the family and let me inside without an entry ticket. Seeing me unexpectedly after a long time, Akbar and Bhairu Lal Dhabai came up to receive me with a warm and firm clasp of hands. It does feel a bit like a homecoming each time I visit the Shilpgram or the Rural Arts and Crafts Village in Udaipur.

One of the seven, the West Zone Cultural Centre (WZCC) was established by the government in 1986. Comprising the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Goa, the WZCC is involved with the promotion and



Portrait of the venerable Hansu Ben in the background of mud and mirror work that she has painstakingly recreated

preservation of the art and culture of the western region of India.

Shilpgram contains representative huts from the member states, incorporating traditional architectural features of different ethnic groups residing within the Zone.

It these rural huts of folk and tribal communities, household articles of everyday use, along with votive and decorative objects and lifestyle implements are featured. The central idea is to present the enormous and extraordinary diversity of design and aesthetic sense in the folk and tribal arts, crafts and architecture. What is significant is that each hut has been constructed painstakingly by the dwellers themselves and in parts, with help from traditional artisans. Creative consultancy was provided by eminent designer and artist, Haku Bhai Shah.

I had a lot to learn from Haku Bhai who showed me that as symbols of civilization, crafts represent a people's skill to create beauty and excellence from available natural resources. The enduring strength of the crafts lie in the fulfillment of basic necessities of life - whether of utility or ceremony. Rhythms of day to day existence are translated by the artisan into a simple design of a basket or an intricate pattern of a textile. Passed from father to son, mother to daughter, in unbroken continuity, crafts are the true inheritance of our 5000 years of history.

Today, in the closing years of the 20th century, rapid industrialization and

growing consumerism, telecommunications and satellite television, not only seems to endanger this precious heritage but also bring about far reaching changes in our traditional lifestyles that are spiritually and ecologically harmonious. In depicting the folk and tribal way of life, the Shilpgram seeks to celebrate the genius of the ordinary craftsman and wisdom of the rural people.

Representing the weavers community from Marwar, the desert region of western Rajasthan, are two wonderful structures named after their respective sand bound villages of Rama and Sam. "The beauty of the two huts are that they are built entirely from natural materials of the Thar whether it is stone, mud, wood or grass. And what's amazing is that these huts remain cool in summer heat and warm in winter cold" said Karan Singh Nahar, former Administrative Officer of the Centre, who was intimately connected with the construction of the huts in Shilpgram. Also from Rajasthan is a potter's hut from the village called Dhol, not far from Udaipur and two huts that represent the tribal communities of Bhils and the Sehariaiyas.

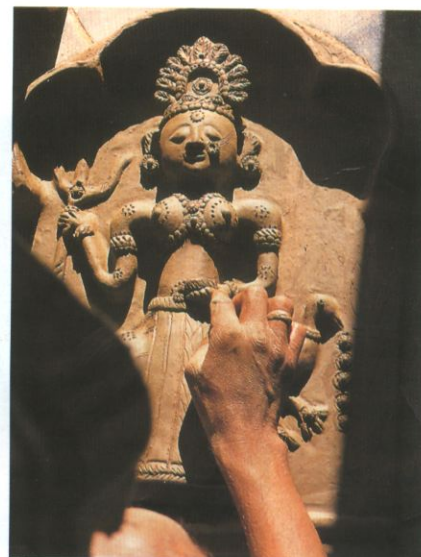
There are seven representative huts from the state of Gujarat. A cluster of six huts from the Banni area and one from Bhujodi, have been selected from the arid wastelands of Kutch. I recall the venerable old Hansu Ben and her family members who so lovingly made the huts and decorated the interiors with earth and mirror work. The Banni cluster consists of two huts each of the Rabari

Harijan and Muslim communities famous for their weaving, embroidery, bead and mirror work, and wood and rogan work.

Well known for its votive horses, Lambdia village near Poshina in north Gujarat is represented with a potter's hut at Shilpgram. Adjoining the potter's workshop is the weaver's hut from village Vasedi in Chhota Udaipur area in western Gujarat. Two huts represent the Dang and Rathwa tribal communities of southern Gujarat. In addition to these, there is an ornately carved wooden house from Pethapur near Gandhinagar which serves as guest house for visiting artists.

Selected after an exhaustive survey of the Konkan coast of Maharashtra, the Koli hut is from a seashore hamlet in Raigad district. Close to the Koli stands one from Kolhapur - representing the leather chappal craftsmen from southern Maharashtra. From Thane district in northern Maharashtra is a Warili hut replete with its wall paintings. The tribal agriculturalist community of the Kunbis is also represented along with two huts of the Gond and Maria tribal communities from eastern Maharashtra, famous for their *dokra* work.

From the state of Goa, there are five representative huts. A potter's hut from Bicholim stands in close proximity to what is technically termed as a Hindu mainstream hut made of local laterite stone. From the lush green taluka of Canacona is a typical hut of the Kulumbi tribal agriculturalist renowned for their grass and cane weaving work. "We also wanted to depict a traditional fisherman's



A Molela craftsman putting finishing touches to a votive plate



Close up of wooden toys from Bassi, Udaipur

hut from Goa but to our dismay we found that mechanization of the fishing industry had completely changed the lifestyle of the people" said Shurveer Singh of the Centre, adding, "Eventually, we found one upstream the Mandovi river and brought it to Shilpgram, lock, stock and barrel; a boat and a three mile long fishing net included!" It is indeed a strange sight to see a forty feet fishermen's boat stuck onto the undulating hillside of Shilpgram. How such a big boat was transported in one piece from the Mandovi riverside is a story Shurveer is happy to recount to anybody who cares to listen.

Besides the huts that exhibit the day to day living artefacts there is also an open gallery and a museum facility specially designed to house the not so common works of folk and tribal arts and crafts. Huge terracotta items like the *Kothis* or grain storage containers, large dowry chests, the extraordinary variety of textiles and costumes, the exquisite embroidery and ornate wood and metal work objects are also put on display. "We have a very large collection of masks from all over India which we shall soon be displaying in a separate Mask Museum which is under

construction" said Bhupendra Kothari, Incharge Stores. "Here in Shilpgram we have hundreds of thousands of items from rural world on display, from a small piece of camel's nose- wood to a water drawing Persian wheel!"

Evoking the rural ambience are folk shrines, tribal totems, and votive sanctuaries that dot the landscape. But nothing is more evocative of rural life than music dance and drama that are integral to folk and tribal existence. It is here the visiting artists perform on a day to day basis or in an orchestrated manner during festivals.

Over the years, the *Shilpgram Utsav* has become an annual event when a 10 days festival is held from the first to tenth of December each year. Approximately 500 craftsmen and performing artistes from all over the country are invited to display and demonstrate their art and craft. It is during the *Utsav* that another feature of Shilpgram - the Amphitheatre, with a seating capacity of 4000 people, is activated each evening with a programme of thematised performances that last well into the night.

Yet another feature of the Shilpgram that draws the crowds is the crafts bazaar

which is organised periodically on much the same lines as that of the traditional *haat*. During the *Utsav*, almost 200 craft stalls are arranged on both sides of the pathways where craftsmen from all over India come to exhibit, demonstrate and sell their hand crafted products.

However, on any given day, the visitor can see 35-40 craftsmen and performing artistes at Shilpgram. "This is an on-going programme at Shilpgram where we invite these craftsmen and performing artistes for a period of 20 days" said Nimmi Raj who is responsible for programming at Shilpgram "Efforts are made to call new and different people each time."

So the rural arts and crafts village has become an educative and enriching experience.

"Shilpgram represents our cultural roots" said C L Meena, the Director of the WZCC, adding "not very long ago, most of us city dwellers were living a rural existence, much like what we have exhibited at Shilpgram."

Needless to say, he would truly like the visitor to feel at home in Shilpgram.

The author is a freelance writer-photographer.