CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Students of Indian art and culture are, of late, drawn into detailed studies of the arts and crafts of the Indian village. This is only natural. The first studies in Indian art and culture were concerned with the privileged arts - the great monuments and archaeological specimens, their stylistic classifications, their iconography, their techniques, their ideas, background and the like. This, in turn, has led people progressively to the study of village arts as the stylistic and conceptual roots of some of these privileged versions are found in the unsophisticated arts and unsophisticated beliefs of the village. How much the idea of a temple comes out of a village shrine, and how much many of our complex philosophical concepts grow out of some simple beliefs has already been discussed by various scholars. This is particularly so in traditional societies. There, arts of various levels of sophistication coexisted and worked on each other. And so did thoughts and beliefs of various kinds.

There is another reason why there has been an accelerated interest in the arts of the village. The village arts have certain aesthetic features unique in themselves.
Although the village artists are less adept as profession­als than those who served the great patrons — and some are just untutored and naive housewives — their creations are no less lively and interesting, and in the light of today's aesthetic thinking they have qualities which are remarkable in themselves. One has only to compare, for instance, a folk icon of Ganesh embroidered by a Kanbi woman in her Ganesh-Sthapan with a sophisticated painting or sculpture of Ganesh that we see in the art-books (see Vol.III, Pl. 1 a, b). One cannot fail to see that the Ganesh-Sthapan has various aesthetic qualities and intricacies peculiar to itself and is no less a work of art than the other. A study of how such a work of art comes out of the simple and often untutored practitioners, in simple, often sordid, village surroundings, is naturally an interesting question. Till the other day, these were classed away as folk arts or minor arts and considered not quite worthy of study by learned scholars.

This is not to say that the crafts of India were not found interesting by certain scholars of a century or more ago. In fact, a great deal of information we have on the nature of crafts and their fabricational set-up comes from various scholars among the old British civilians and officers. We have only to mention the names of George C.M. Birdwood, E. B. Havell, Sir George Watt, J. F. Watson,
Amongst the early scholars one person who stands out distinctly is Anand K. Coomaraswamy. His abiding interest in the crafts and village arts came out of his strong belief that traditional arts were an indivisible body in which various forms fed on each other and his equally strong belief that the loss of such a tradition with the related arts will be a great loss to the world. So, he took pains to study these in depth and his 'Medieval Sinhalese Arts' (published in 1908) is still unsurpassed as a study of its kind. In it he documented
the various arts of Kandy, their forms, symbols and specialities and pleaded the cause of their conservation and also the conservation of the values that came with them.

However, Coomaraswamy and other craft and folk art enthusiasts, Indian and foreign, felt rather unsure about the possibility of their survival in the world of the future, which was getting industrialised quickly. For instance, Mrs. F. A. Steel came to the conclusion in her study of Phulkari embroidery of Punjab that an art like the Phulkari⁴ will be non-existent in a very short time. Others may not have stated it so distinctly but their pessimism was equally clear. Coomaraswamy who felt similarly also insisted that industrialisation should be contained in traditional societies though he should have known that this was a tall order. The total tone in most of such work is, however, one of pessimism.

In the changing society of today, there are only two realistic alternatives left to us - one is to foresee the extinction of these arts and crafts in industrialised society and to record and document them as comprehensively as possible for future reference and guidance. Another is to study the circumstances that helped the growth and development of such arts and examine whether such circumstances can be sustained within a changing society. It
would probably be wiser to do both, i.e., (1) collect and document the art and craft expertise in as complete a way as possible through written and visual means and (2) study the circumstances that help the development of these in quality and those that interfere with such a development.

Though, this is bound to be a huge task needing the coordinated effort of many, the work has to start somewhere on however modest a scale. This study of "the arts of the Kharak community" is conceived in this light.

The Kharaks are a peasant community living in the coastal belt of Bhavnagar district in Saurashtra (Gujarat State). I have grown up in this region and am familiar with the villages and towns where the Kharaks live; I noticed quite early a certain distinctiveness in the cultural artifacts made and used by the peasant and herding communities of the region. In fact, if one speaks of the ethnic arts of Gujarat State, Saurashtra will be found to be one of the richest repositories. While many peasant and herding communities share these arts, some who have been exposed to urban contacts or have been influenced by the new education and through these changed their ways of life, have given up or are giving up the use of these artifacts inspite of their cultural and aesthetic interest. The
Kharaks are, within this, a special case. The new prosperity of this peasant community has thrown them open to urban contacts but they, unlike some other groups, remain, nevertheless, conservative and continue their old pattern of life to a greater or lesser degree. So, this provokes one's special interest in the light of what has been stated in the previous pages. Secondly, the arts that the Kharaks practise and the artifacts that they use, though quite beautiful and interesting by themselves, are not necessarily the most spectacular specimens in those categories. They are, if one might say so, structurally simpler. So, a study of their arts is specially interesting as it affords a glimpse into the rudiments of the practice. So, in this study, an attempt is being made to record the various arts that the Kharak peasants practise and the various artifacts that they commission from local craftsmen, describe them in some detail, examine their fabricational and design structure and identify the factors that sustain or weaken their quality, on the one hand, and their existence, on the other.

In the available literature on the communities in Gujarat, their culture and their crafts, the mention of the Kharaks and their art are few and brief. Kharaks are mentioned as one of many aboriginals tribes in 'The
Statistical Account Book of Bhavnagar State. Subsequently, there is a brief mention of the Kharaks in the Kathiawar Gazetteer and in 'The Census Report of Old Bhavnagar State'. Only Enthoven provides more details regarding the origin and the history of the Kharaks, relying upon genealogical accounts. In fact, no authentic written record about the community and its history is available so far. Besides this, all references mentioned ahead do not have much information about their art-activities or their life-style nor do they discuss how these resemble or differ from those of their sister communities of the region. In most studies, the Kharaks are generally grouped under the Kambi (peasant) community in the region.

Similarly, there are many books in which information on the embroidery of Saurashtra is available to a greater or lesser degree, but despite the fact that Kharak embroidery has a special quality, it is rarely given any separate attention. Only a local scholar, Khodidas Parmar, in his book, "Saurashtra-nu-Lokbharat", has written a brief account of the embroidery of Kharaks. The wall-paintings of the Kharak have not been mentioned or discussed by any scholar so far.

The Census of India (1961) has published monographs on the crafts of Gujarat. Certain crafts which are
being practised at the door-steps of the Kharak homes are covered in this - for example, 'Patara Making at Bhavnagar', 'Ivory Work of Mahuva' and 'Brass and Copparware at Sihor'. Although, these monographs have much interesting and useful information regarding these crafts, their technique, relative economic details etc., not always is the information complete, especially if one is looking for details about the actual process of the craft. For instance, it is difficult to visualise clearly the various kinds of expertise that went into the carving methods of the wood carvers of Gujarat, after going through the monograph on the 'Wood Carving of Gujarat'. However, they do, sometimes, contain technical information as in the monograph on 'Patara Making at Bhavnagar', but the information given in this about the thickness of the wood planks used is patently undependable, as any one who has either watched the process or has some experience in the technique will easily spot out. This is not to depreciate their value; they do include reliable information. Though, some of these monographs have been helpful in this study, many craft topics necessary for it have not been covered by them. There is, for instance, no monograph on the bullock-cart making of the region, although this is a very interesting and spectacular craft. There are no monographs
on various other craft-activities, as the weaving of woollen blankets or the pottery of the region, or the Dyeing and Printing techniques of Mahuva and its surroundings. Neither is there any monograph on the wall-paintings or embroidery of the Kharak homes.

So, a large section of the information that comes into this study is from personal survey over the last six years. To have a clear enough idea of the household arts of the Kharaks and the changes that they have been undergoing such a long period of observation was inevitable, as both the wall-painting and the embroidery are done season to season. Most paintings done in one season get washed off the walls during the succeeding monsoon and the next season brings a crop of new painting. Similarly, adolescent girls of the community make their trousseau in the season and are married; in the next year, other girls follow. The survey has been of three kinds (1) photographic documentation, (2) documentation by drawing (copying), and (3) collection of information by personal interviews and questionnaires. The information so collected was utilized to get as clear an idea as possible of the arts and crafts of the Kharaks, their processes, background, etc. The arts that the Kharaks practise being ephemeral, their previous forms can only be conjectured upon, based on what the older Kharaks say.
Old wall-paintings are non-existent, since they are done on mud walls and renewed almost year to year. Old embroidered pieces are never treasured; their embroidered garments are always worn to tatters and thrown away. Doubtless, certain forms and methods have been transferred from generation to generation but it is conceivable that there have been changes in these as well. All discussion about the changes in the arts and crafts of the Kharaks is based on the discreet use of such information. For instance, in the arts that they practise the various functional arts and crafts that they patronize have also changed to some extent; here again, in the absence of periodical studies of these in depth and detail, the same method has had to be followed.

However various publications related to this area of study have been of considerable help. 'Medieval Sinhalese Art!' by Coomaraswamy has already been mentioned; for breadth and method and committed exposition of a total craft scene, be it of another country, it is still an inspiring book. This book, however, does not get into a detailed documentation of craft processes, though it does document craft objects, and their form and design, to a considerable extent. With the kind of objective as has been outlined in the beginning of the chapter, documentation is of major importance in this work, especially that of object forms
and their fabricational process. In this, one book that has been strikingly useful is the 'Rural craftsmen and their work' by Eberhard Fischer and Haku Shah (published in 1970). This is probably the only book in recent times on the Indian crafts scene that attempts to describe in detail the working of rural craftsmen - in this case of the Mer village of Ratadi. The book covers various crafts, both professional and non-professional, like wall-painting, clay-relief-making, quilt-making, embroidery, cord-and-rope-making, wood-carving, stone-carving, shoe-making and the like. Although the Kharak arts of 'alekh' and 'chitar' and embroidery are different from the varieties described in this book, the method has been educative.

There is hardly any publication on the village wall-drawings or painting of this region or for that matter, any other village complex in India. However, some articles on the wall-drawings of various Indian villages, of variable scholarship, have appeared in certain journals and books. For example, "Wall-Painting by Punjab Peasants" (1965), "Design in Rural Life" (1967), "Murals and Mosaics from Villages around Delhi" (1967) and "Karva Chauth", all written by P. N. Mago, in 'Design', the one on 'Sarora Pictographs' by Verrier Elwin in Marg (1962), or on "Murals
on mud-walls of Rural India* by R. N. Fabri in 'Lalit Kala Contemporary (1969). One also finds certain references to wall-painting and ritual decoration in some books like "Indian Jewellery, Ornaments and Decorative Designs" by Jamila Brij Bhushan (1976), and "Arts and Crafts of India and Pakistan" by Shanti Swarup (1957). To a limited extent the comparison of these various forms has been useful.

There is some information on the embroideries of the region in various books like "The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon" by A. K. Coomaraswamy (1964), "Handicrafts and Industrial Arts of India" by Rustom J. Mehta (1960), "Indian Embroideries" by John Irwin and Margaret Hall (1973), "Textiles and Ornaments of India" by Pupul Jayakar and John Irwin (1954), "Handicrafts of India" by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1975). However, as already mentioned, these books do not present Kharak embroidery as a special area, inspite of its special features. In 'The Embroidery and Bead Work of Kutch and Saurashtra', Shri Nanavati, Vora and Dhaky have tried to classify the embroidery of the region in schools, which has its own limitations. The book has some valuable reproductions in both colour and black and white of the embroideries of Saurashtraian peasants and herdsmen like Kanbis, Mers, Satwaras, Kolis, Bharwads, Rabaris, Charans, as also of other communities as Kathi, Garasiyas,
Molesalam Rajputs, Mahajans, etc. They also describe various categories of the embroidery of Kutch, like those of the Mochis, Lohanas and Jats. Together they give some kind of background of the image variations in these, depending on regions and communities. However, this book offers very little by way of information of technique, tools, etc. "Embroideries of India" by Irwin and Hall, which is a catalogue of embroideries in the Calico Museum of Textiles at Ahmedabad is useful in another way. John Irwin and Margaret Hall give a kind of historical perspective to the various kinds of embroidery identified; they present some information on the basis of literary references and object analysis, both of which are useful. Occasionally, certain details of information are not quite dependable, but, on the whole, the book is well researched. There is, however, very little information in this on Kharak - and even other - peasant embroidery. The items covered in this study are mostly the professional categories. The non-professional items covered are mostly Kathi and one Kanbi. This book has information related to embroidery techniques and the description of each item is complete as museum catalogues go. The book 'Saurashtra-nu-Lokbharat' by Khodidas Parmar makes some mention of Kharak embroidery but not much. This book itself is more concerned with the relationship between folk motif and folklore and some points he makes in this regard are of interest. But
the book does not methodically document any special area, or offer complete information on it; though it does have some general information on ground-cloths, accessories, stitches, colour-combinations, motifs, image and characteristics. The book by Rustom Mehta mentions the embroidery of Saurashtra and Kutch but the information is very summary; and not always dependable (as when he states that the embroidery of Sindh, Kutch and Saurashtra are all of the same kind, while they have, in fact, many distinctive features). This book also contains other inaccuracies.15

Apart from these, there is very little literature on the village arts and crafts of the region. Some of the Census monographs16 have some information on certain of the local crafts, if not the village arts. Some of this information has been useful. The other books, mentioned in the comprehensive bibliography have in some way or the other, helped in giving me a perspective on the place of arts and crafts in the society, its problems, its structure and the like. The main thesis, however, depends mostly on surveyed information, especially in the areas of Kharak painting and embroidery, and certain crafts like bullock-cart making, etc. The descriptions and discussion are on the basis of the visual documents collected and the information gathered on these through personal contact.