

Stitch on the Move,

Reema Gehi, pag. 12, Jun 14th 2015, Mumbai mirror

A social artist from Italy meets her match in Ambedkar Nagar's Banjara colony to tell the story of life in embroidery.

Ensnconced in the tony neighbourhood of Cuffe Parade is Ambedkar Nagar, home to 7,000 members of the Gormati Banjara tribe from Karnataka. Most of the men work at the near at hand Sassoon Docks, while some of the women make their livelihood as domestic helps.

But Sita Chavan, 37, adds to her family's income by preserving the nomadic community's textile legacy. She spends most of her day at a sewing machine in her cramped home, stitching the ghagra-cholighungat matha for the women of the tribe. On the day we meet her, she is dressed in a printed saree, its appeal nowhere close to the mirrorwork embroidery the Gormatis are famed for. "Unfortunately, we now reserve traditional wear only for big occasions," she says.

On one such occasion last week, she picks a white ensemble scattered with colours of the Indian flag. Together with husband Keshu and daughter Surekha, she is readying to make it in time for the opening of Italian artist Lisa Mara Batacchi's solo at Colaba's Clark House Initiative (CHI).

Soulmates (*Within Time*) partly tells the story of a craft Chavan and her ilk have mastered. On the mezzanine floor, an installation of tiny mirror pieces pay ode to this legacy. Two costumes, a collage of patchworks created using knitting and cotton strands (with intricate embroidery) gently stitched on plain cloth, hold pride of place at the alternative art space below. "I share an old tryst with textile," says the 35-year-old, giving Chavan a warm hug. More than a decade ago, Batacchi was pursuing a dream job as research and design assistant at luxury fashion houses, Prada in Italy and Vivienne Westwood in London. A "life-changing" Christmas break in 2003 to Cambodia had her reconsider her career. "I met the happy faces of kids who create these luxury clothes in abject poverty," she says. "I came back different. I couldn't go back to that desk again."

Batacchi quit fashion and enrolled at The Florence Academy of Arts, shifting her gaze to social art. "After seven years, I had the urge to feel fabric again," she says, gradually integrating textile into her work.

Recently, on receiving a grant from a reputed Italian institution, Batacchi chose to work in India. CHI curator Sumesh Sharma and colleague Zasha Colah, who had carried out a comparative study on the Banjaras of India and the Romas of Europe, back in 2012, suggested Batacchi work with the Gormatis in Mumbai.

One Sunday morning a month ago, Sharma and Batacchi arrived unannounced at Ambedkar Nagar, meeting a group of Banjaras who led them to Sita maushi. "Sita's mirrorwork and embroidery are quite extraordinary. She is Ambedkar Nagar's go-to artisan," says Batacchi, who eventually collaborated with Chavan on intricate embroidery on strands that made it to the exhibit.

Blogger Badshah Naik calls Banjara embroidery "strikingly different". In a post, dated 2010, he writes, "Featuring geometrics and eschewing the floral and animal motifs used in the

majority of Indian villages, Banjara embroidery is strikingly different. The viewer's eye is drawn to bold squares, triangles, circles and irregular shapes, all delineated in brilliant contrasting colours. All Banjara embroideries are designed for a nomadic life. These are multipurpose clothing and dowry pieces, not large wall decorations like those made and used by settled village people in most Indian regions."

Chair professor at the Rajiv Gandhi Centre for Contemporary Studies, Dr Chandrakant Puri, concurs. "The Banjaras have a unique dressing style. The women wear skirts and a short cloth drawn across the shoulders, usually red or green in colour. In the skirt border, double lines of cowries (shells) are sewn. Their blouses are embroidered and small pieces of glass are sewn into them. Strings of beads are worn around the neck. On their arms, they wear 10 or 12 bangles of ivory, lac or horn," he explains.

Now predominantly settled in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka and Maharashtra, the Banjara footprint in India is ancient. According to William Crooke in his book, *The Tribes and Castes of the North Western India* (1896), the first mention of the Banjaras in Muslim history was during Sikandar's attack on Dholpur in 1540 AD. Sion Koliwada resident Kiran Chavan, who belongs to one of 85 families that live in the pipe line house slum, defines his community's origins as "untraceable".

The 22-year-old student of Vasantdada Patil College of Engineering, says, "Our language Gormati is similar to Marwari, because of our association with Rajasthan. Nobody here ever discusses our origins, though."

"Originally," explains Puri, who is also Chairperson of the Indian Nomadic and De-notified Tribes Development Council, "they transported salt and grain on bullocks to distant places. In the process, they migrated to areas where business was flourishing, including Maharashtra and Mumbai."

The newer settlements in the city, including Kalyan and Badlapur, experts see as a result of migration on account of drought in Marathwada and Vidarbha. Mainstream history, reckons Puri, written often by privileged historians, undermines the origins, life and struggle of excluded groups. With the community's kids learning local Indian languages, their dialect of Goar boli, which doesn't have a script or recorded history, is gradually fading.

Caught in a moment of transition, Banjara culture then finds a fitting voice in Batacchi and Chavan's alliance.