

## **Chapter 6**

### **Reviewing the Centre-Peripheral Relationship of Kutch**

#### **Defining Kutch as a Periphery:**

Kutch has remained distant from the rest of India for a very long time. It, not only remained at the extreme west of the country but also remained aloof from the mainland due to its unique topographical feature- of salt-encrusted wasteland- the Rann. It is one of the largest districts in the state of Gujarat, but unlike Gujarat which is an agrarian land, Kutch owns only a small portion of cultivable land. Its ancient inhabitants were the Ahir communities and tribes who were predominantly into cattle rearing and small irrigation. Interestingly, the wild-asses survived in this small vegetation, and so did the migratory birds (flamingoes) who enjoyed the salt-marshland. Geographically, this arid land is placed within the seismic tract of India. This means structurally this land is weak and under constant tension and compression. This causes frequent tremors on the land, resulting in further distribution of population and ruined settlements. But over time, they rebuilt to survive once again. The greater benefit the people see in this land against such odd terrain is undoubtedly a long stretch of coastal line, which connects with the world outside rather than the inside. This gives Kutch a unique structure that differs from the rest of Gujarat. History from time and again, starting from early civilization to the recent past, reveals that the people of Kutch always looked for substances in the sea than the land. For all these reasons the land remotely operated without having to engage with the mainland, and for centuries together Kutchi pilots and merchants celebrated their partnership with the outside land especially Zanzibar, Arabia, the Gulf, and with the peninsulas across India. Nevertheless from 1500's inland favors with the imperial courts increased, and the Raos realized the need to establish a close affiliation.

As discussed in the first chapter, the Imperial rulers of Gujarat always saw benefit in controlling the western coast of India for commercial and trade benefits, and Kutch was no different for them. But the Raos of Kutch had a greater ability to successfully negotiate with them in good favors. As a reminder of their friendship, these Rao's would visit the imperial court, offering expensive gifts, and in return gained confidence over their mainland threat.

Around the second quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, instability in Delhi led to a decline in the power structure in the politics of Mughal courts, and the Rajputs of Rajasthan who since long had been subdued before the Mughal, got a new political position. This subjugation gifted Marwar the benefit of being appointed as Viceroys for Gujarat on behalf of the Mughals. It is this inland connection of Kutch with the imperial courts, which altered its cultural relationship. Exactly when Abhai Singh (r. 1724-1749) of Jodhpur and Rao Desalji of Kutch visit each other is uncertain, but we know for certain that Maharaja Abhai Singh, was appointed *subahdar* of Gujarat from 1730-1737, and he stayed in Gujarat till 1733. It must be one such visit that matrimonial ally with Abhai Singh's son Ramsingh was committed with the princess of Kutch. And briefly even Abhai Singh's brother Bakhat Singh was granted the Subahdar post by Mughal prince Ahmed Shah (r.1748-1754).

Yet another intervention happened when prince Lakha announced his intention of taking service with the Maharana of Udaipur. This happened as a clash with the Maharao Desalji for cutting down his allowances, which he was inclined to extravagant spending. Although reconciliation was arranged and the prince returned to his homeland. This visit seems like a turning point in Kutch's history as now the impulse to relatively grow large as a centre developed in the mind of the young prince Lakha. Lakha was struck by the flamboyant lifestyle of the Udaipur court, that he was too anxious to come to power that he murdered the Maharao's most trusted minister Devkaran Sheth around 1738 and assumed full power of the court by confining Maharao into his quarters, by 1741 A.D. Young ministers were appointed at the court and senior courtiers sent across different part of Kutch. His authority was mostly accepted across Kutch Jagirs, except there was some resistance at Mandvi.

### **Kutch raising as a new centre:**

At Udaipur, the prince probably saw a flamboyant cultural centre. A thriving trade town with all extravagance and comfort lifestyle. An economic boom that was decisively shaping the social and political relationship, which also had a place for art practice within social and historic moments. Soon a transition happened in the state of Kutch. He realized the need for his land to improve as a cultural centre. To his good fortune, the great treasury of Maharao Desalji was now being spent by Lakhpatji to mark Kutch as a great centre for art and learning. As an amateur and impatient patron, he was probably not very rigid with his clients' innovative production, rather embraced every form as a cultural product. Be it the innovative industries

set by Ramsingh Malam like- Iron foundry, Glass foundry, tile factories, or the enameling and clock-making workshops. Kutch suddenly started reflecting as a cultural industry for the mainland skilled workers which invariably resulted in immigration. Silversmiths, goldsmiths, and tape makers were invited to Kutch, or rather flocked to Kutch as a result of the cultural boom. Understanding the taste of Raos even the merchants who traveled across returned with expensive gifts for the Rao, which now become the collective pieces decorating the palace walls. What got overshadowed by the significant industrial growth was probably the painting tradition which happened in an isolation with a small group of armatures.

This sudden momentum and progress did pour in a large number of people to look for a promising future under the Raos. But unfortunately, patronage and investment could not survive beyond a hundred years. The growing pirates at the coast brought the progress of the state to a halt. Some painters continue to survive by contributing to the mural tradition which had gained popularity by this time. The affluent merchant class by now was making a statement in society by commissioning artworks in their residences. The wall of many residences, temples, and schools were now getting profusely painted with frescos. Of course, what inspired these affluent traders must have been the painted Havelies at the pilgrim centre of Nathdwara, which was frequently visited by the merchants.

By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, survival was the key for these artists but just then a new challenge was placed before the artist by the English men. They wanted the lives of people documented so that they could carry them back home as souvenirs. To execute these works the artist even up their skills to the new trend of drawing and watercolouring. But time and again, the patronage could not meet the needs of the artist so many moved out for better prospects.

The rapid industrialization and growth of Mumbai in the second half of the nineteenth century must have been yet another reason why people out-migrated. This was the time when the city of Bombay was proving to be a promising land to look for a good living. A weaving and spinning company were established in the year 1854. Large textile industries grew up in and around the city of Bombay. The Bombay shipping and Iron shipping companies started in 1863 to make Indian merchants free from the British. It had many additional facilities which a modern city could offer, like the University of Bombay (1857) which was the first modern institute for higher education to be established in India, rail connectivity, water, and electricity facility. It is obvious that the adventurous businessmen of this land now moved to bigger cities

or abroad for better opulence changing the socio-economic structure of the people residing in this area.

The next major shift happened another fifty years later, with the impact of Indo-Pakistan conflict, which resulted in the migration on a large number of Muslim populations. Of our familiarity, the Kamangar communities also move out during this period. Infact the district of Kutch even attracted pointed attention after independence on account of the border dispute between India and Pakistan, regarding sovereignty a certain part of Kutch. In 1965 this dispute flared into an armed collision. Which got settled by parting away the provenance of Sindh which was formerly under British India.

As capitalism and culture cannot escape each other, along with the out-migration of its people in large numbers, the city lost its cultural charms. A relational impact of all of these factors has directly affected the painting tradition in Kutch.