

Wedding Gifts in India

Vahani Belts from Kutch

CHITRA BALASUBRAMANIAM



Vahani. Kharek and shisha embroidery. The ends, called *dori*, are made of silk threads that have been joined to form a loop. 34 x 2½ inches (86.4 x 6.3cm). Collection of the author.

Photographs by Chitra Balasubramaniam.



Vahani. Soof embroidery. The ends, called *dori*, are made of thick cotton thread. 26 x 2 inches (66.0 x 5.1cm). Collection of the author.

A *vahani* (money belt) always brings to my mind tales from *Arabian Nights* that included descriptions of wads of money and precious stones being cleverly concealed in a belt. The belt, looking unexceptional to any onlooker, had openings in the sides to conceal valuables. One Indian tradition of the Sodha people from Kutch involves just such a belt.

Several years ago, I wrote a magazine article about an expert soof embroiderer. When I met with her to give her a copy of the magazine, she showed me a beautifully embroidered *hindoni* (the traditional head rest used to balance a pot of water for carrying). Our conversation then turned to other traditional embroidered items, particularly ones used for weddings. When she mentioned vahanis, I was intrigued. A bride-to-be would embroider a vahani to be given to the groom with other wedding gifts. When I asked if she had an example of a vahani, I

received a vague reply and chose to leave it at that. Then one day, an acquaintance of hers delivered a package to me. Among other items were the two meticulously embroidered vahanis shown here.

The embroidery on a vahani depends on the whims of the embroiderer. It can be soof, kharek, or a mix of both, often with sequins and/or shisha (mirror) embroidery added. Although the origins of soof embroidery are not clear, soof embroidery is indelibly linked to the home and family customs of the community. The geometric patterns are worked



Top: Vahani, showing the reverse side. Soof embroidery. 26 x 2 inches (66.0 x 5.1cm). Collection of the author.

Above: Vahani, showing the reverse side. Kharek and shisha embroidery. 34 x 2½ inches (86.4x 6.3 cm). Collection of the author.

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in surface satin stitch from the back. The embroidery is so fine that one can barely see the base of the cloth, let alone count the stitches. In kharek embroidery, the outline is drawn in black running stitch and then filled in with satin stitch. The word “kharek” means literally “fruit of the date palm,” and the motifs resemble dates. Typically, the reverse side of a vahani is embroidered in similar looking but different designs and colors.

These vahanis are a part of the tradition of the Sodha people, who came from Tharparkar, Sindh, in Pakistan into India during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War. I treasure them. ❖

CHITRA BALASUBRAMANIAM of New Delhi, India, is a freelancer who writes about arts, crafts, design, textiles, and jewelry. She is particularly interested in documenting and reviving traditional crafts, as well as innovations that give new life to those crafts. She is an ardent collector of textiles and the author of *An Introduction to Traditional Hand Embroideries of India* (New Delhi, India: Chitra Balasubramaniam, 2014); available at www.smashwords.com/books/view/402933.