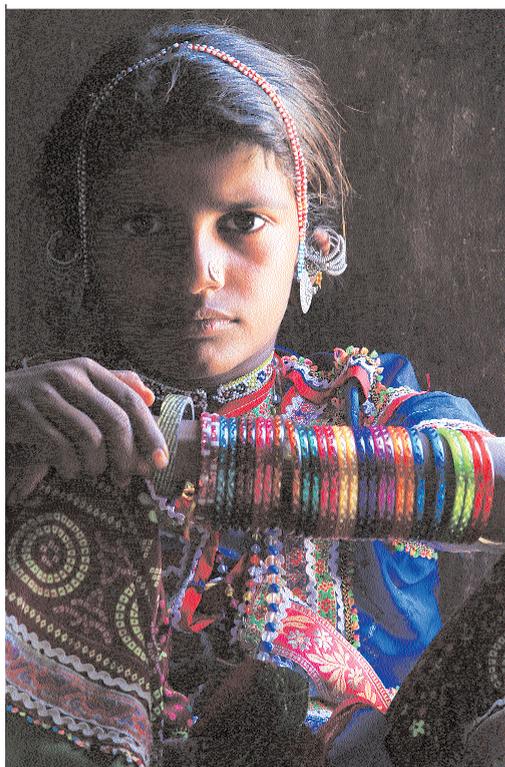


THE MEGHWARS

The Meghwars are spread across Kutch, from Dholavira in the east to Lakhpat in the west. They are, however, concentrated in the Banni grassland, which is spread out over 4,000 square kilometers between Bhuj in the south and the Great Rann in the north. Over the centuries, the Banni has attracted pastoral communities from as far as Sindh (in today's Pakistan) and Rajasthan. The Banni grass makes for excellent fodder which has led many Maldharis (*mal* is a generic term for livestock) to migrate and permanently settle in the grassland

FACES OF KUTCH

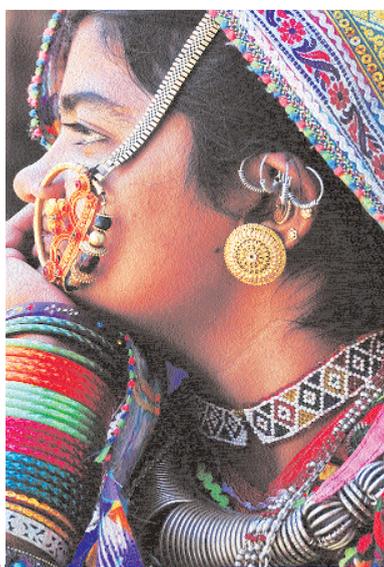
In this westernmost corner of India live a few communities which have long had little to do with outsiders. **Amit Ranjan Rai** has come to know three — the Meghwars, the Rabaris and the Muslim Jats — and they have offered him privileged access with his camera



▲ A girl from the Banni grassland is seen in the detailed attire common to this tribe. Girls start learning embroidery from an early age. It is not uncommon to find them seated in groups and honing their embroidery skills on cloth



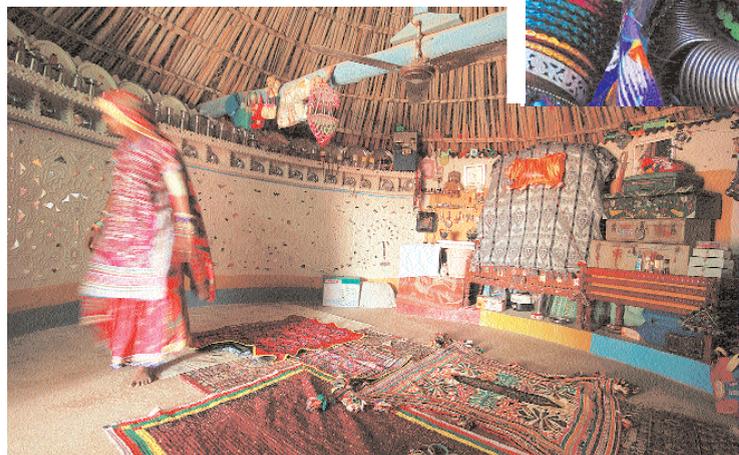
◀ While their mother prepares the spicy, turmeric-stained, dry rice dish called *khari bhaat*, the children peek into the kitchen from a hole in the mud wall. The sumptuous dish, often garnished with pieces of mutton, is cooked over stacks of wood



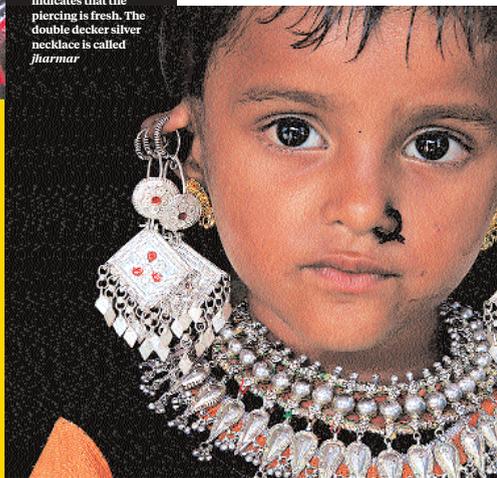
▼ A girl decked in silver finery that is symbolic of the Meghwars. It is common for women to sport as many as five to six piercings in each ear. The black thread ring around the child's nose indicates that the piercing is fresh. The double decker silver necklace is called *jharnar*

▲ In spite of some of the trappings of the modern world disrupting the tribal life, a wedding remains embedded in age-old customs. Alliances are decided by parents and the bride and groom often meet for the first time only on the wedding day. That seems to matter little, however, from the looks of the happy Meghwar couple

▼ Meghwars live in cylindrical mud houses called *bhungas*. Intricate mud patterns and mirror work mark the walls. Utensils line the top deck of the hut — a reminder of the extent of dowry brought in during the wedding

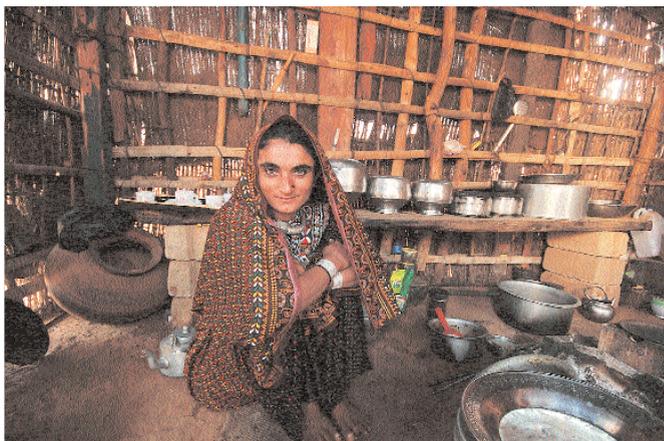


▲ Newly married women are expected to adorn themselves liberally for up to a year after the marriage. The centrepiece of their elaborate get-up is the nose ring, over three inches in diameter and studded with rubies, emeralds and sapphires. The neckpiece, called the *varla*, can weigh up to a kilogram

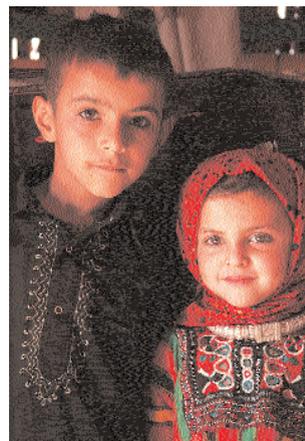


THE JATS

Jat, a tribe of Muslim herdsman, lived in the Halab region of Iran some 500 years ago. Facing territorial pressure from feudal landowners, they set out in search of new grazing lands. The exodus took them to Sindh in Pakistan some 400 years ago and eventually to Kutch and Gujarat. The Jats in Kutch today can be classified into three distinct sub-groups: Garasia, who took up farming; Danetah, the largest Jat subgroup of those who remained herdsmen; and Fakirani (from *fakir*), who became holy men devoted to the study of the Quran. Today, the Fakirani Jats (featured here) are primarily cattle and camel breeders and live in the western coastal regions of Kutch. The Jats are Sunni Muslims and never marry outside their community



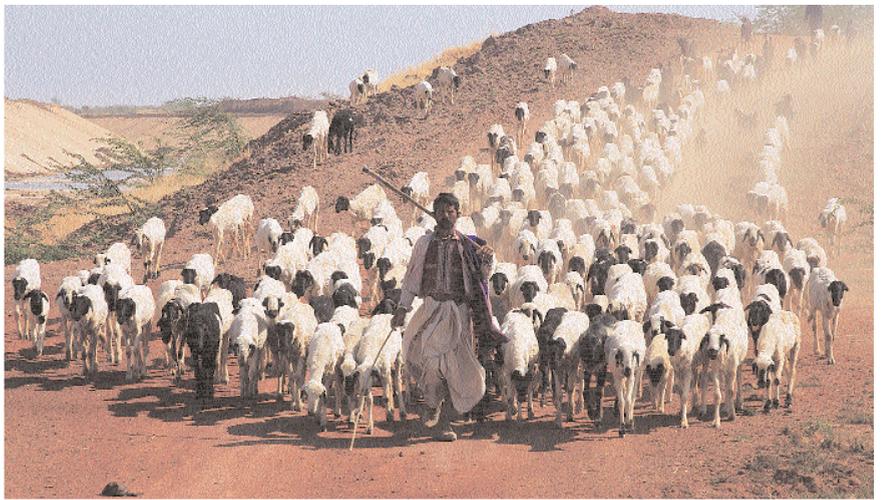
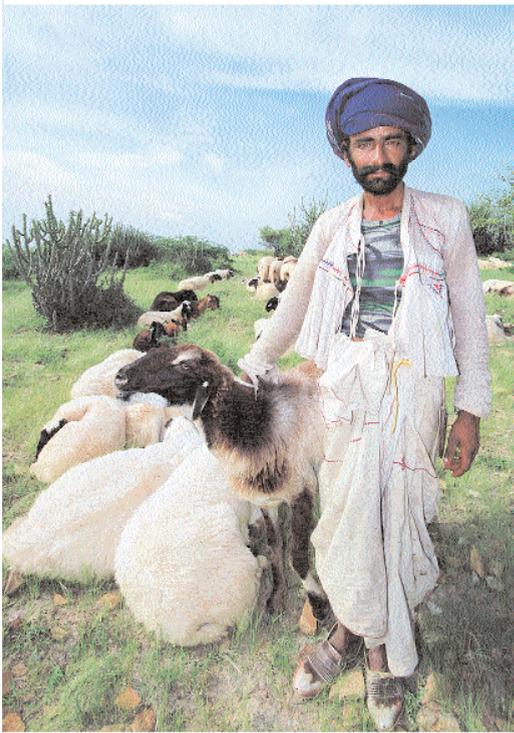
▲ A Jat woman in a reed-hut kitchen. The kitchen, in its austerity, is representative of the Fakirani's 'frugal lifestyle



▶ A young brother and sister. Notice the girl's embroidered top over traditional Mashru silk cloth. Even young girls, say four or five years old, wear embroidered tops and silver necklaces

THE RABARIS

The Rabaris are one of the most prominent nomadic tribes in Kutch. Like other pastoral tribes, their initial motivation to migrate to Kutch from their haunt, the Thar in Rajasthan, was the search of grazing land. Geographically, the Rabaris in the Kutch area are divided into Kachchi, Dhebaria and Vaghadia subgroups. Several of the Kachchi Rabaris are today settled and do farming. However, others continue to roam the land for close to nine months in a year in search of feed for their livestock. The Rabaris consider themselves descendants of Sambal, a mythical being created by Lord Shiva to look after the camels



▲ Herding of sheep and goats for wool and milk is most common to the Rabaris of Kutch. The size of herd and extent of movement depends on the environment of the region. They usually travel during predetermined, regular seasonal cycles designed to meet the needs of their herds

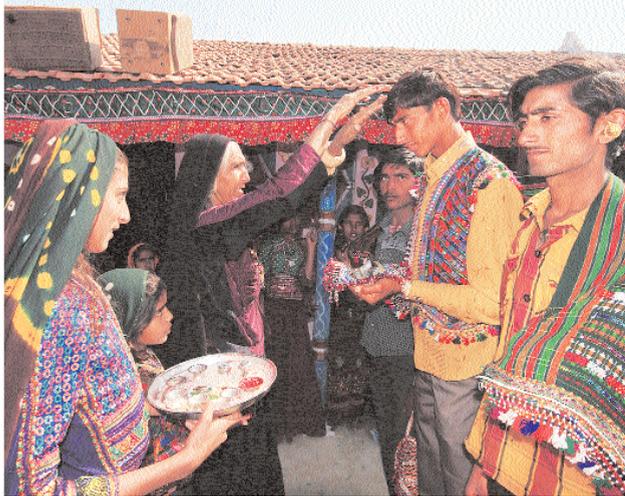


▲ Most Rabari women are covered from head to toe in a wave of black. This symbolises mourning for a king who, they claim, died for them centuries ago. The material used is wool, which brings out their affinity with Lord Krishna. The heavy block of an armband, called the *muthia*, is carved out of ivory



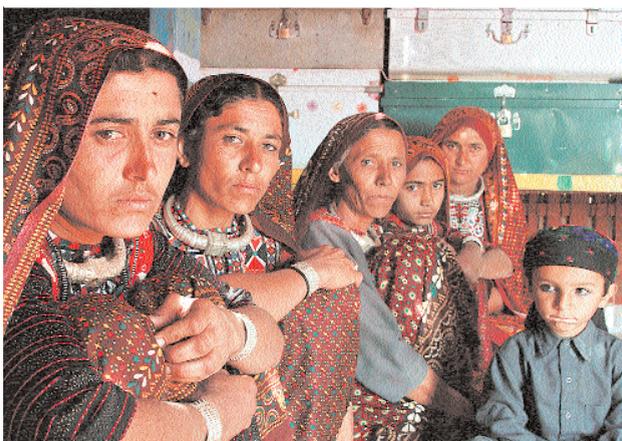
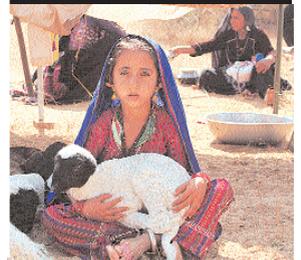
▲ Scene at a Rabari house. The hulla balloo is misleading, since for close to three-fourths of the year, the houses are abandoned for the vast open. During the nomadic living, an elder of the family stays back to look after the house

▼ An elder of the family blesses the groom before he sets out for another village to be married. It is customary for the groom to seek blessings from several houses in the village in preparation for the auspicious occasion



▲ A Vaghadia Rabari all set to begin his journey. In this traditional gear, the front of the shirt is embellished with jacquard ribbon strips. Other essentials are the turban (called the *patori*) and the blue lower garment (the *pachhedhi*)

▼ The Rabaris tend to stay at one place for a few days before they move on. In the picture, a girl sits with her lamb at one such temporary abode



▲ Fakirani Jats live in reed huts. Compared to other Jat tribes, they possess little wealth, with their lives marked by abstinence. This follows from their association with the fakir tradition

▲ A group of Fakirani women agree to be photographed after much cajoling. The Fakirani Jats, more so than the other tribes, are highly conscious of the way they are represented in the outside world

▶ A Fakirani Jat girl with intricate work on her *churi*, the heavily embroidered blouse. The patterns, motifs and colours in Jat embroidery differ according to the age and marital status of women. Most Fakirani Jat women adorn themselves with a heavy single-piece silver necklace

