



WOOL, WORSHIP, AND WEFT: CULTURAL SEMIOTICS IN THE DHABHLA WEAVE OF KUTCH

Arooshi

Department of Design, Banasthali Vidyapith, Jaipur.

Dr. Neeraj Rawat
Sharma*

Department of Design, Banasthali Vidyapith, Jaipur. *Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT The Dhabhla weave of Kutch, Gujarat, is recognized as a lesser-known woolen textile tradition, deeply rooted in spiritual, symbolic, and cultural significance. Traditionally created by the Vankar weaving communities and used by the Rabari pastoralists, these textiles are valued not just for their utility but for the layered meanings woven into their motifs, colors, and ritual applications. This study investigates the semiotic dimensions of the Dhabhla weave through ethnographic fieldwork and visual-textile analysis. It focuses on how these embedded symbols are understood by both weavers and users, how their meanings have transformed over time, and what these shifts suggest for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. With evolving markets and the rise of contemporary design collaborations, the research also considers the effects of cultural translation, design intervention, and the potential dilution of symbolic content.

KEYWORDS : Dhabhla, semiotics, Kutch textiles, Vankar, Rabari, cultural symbolism, Indian handloom, indigenous knowledge, pastoral craft, heritage weaving

INTRODUCTION

India's handloom traditions are not merely artistic expressions but living embodiments of cultural, ecological, and ritual knowledge. These textile practices, often transmitted orally and through embodied labor, are deeply intertwined with the identities and cosmologies of the communities that sustain them. Among these traditions, the Dhabhla weave of Gujarat's Kutch region stands out as a lesser-documented yet culturally significant woolen textile. Traditionally woven by the Vankar community for Rabari and Meghwal pastoralists, the Dhabhla served not only as a garment but as a symbolic artifact—used in rituals, associated with protection, and layered with narratives of community, belief, and belonging. This paper seeks to investigate the cultural semiotics of the Dhabhla weave, examining how motifs, colors, materials, and contexts of use function as visual texts. Through ethnographic fieldwork and visual analysis, it further explores how these meanings are being reinterpreted amid contemporary shifts such as design collaborations, market demands, and the pressures of cultural commodification.

This paper undertakes an analysis of the cultural semiotics embedded within the Dhabhla weave, with a focus on how motifs, materials, and contexts of use are constructed and perceived as carriers of meaning. Grounded in semiotic theory and material culture studies, the inquiry is framed by the following research questions:

- What symbolic systems are embedded within the Dhabhla weave?
- How are these symbols interpreted by artisan and pastoralist communities?
- In what ways are these meanings being reshaped through design interventions and the pressures of market-driven transformation?

Literature Review

1. Semiotics And Material Culture In Textile Studies

The study of cultural meaning embedded in textiles has been shaped by foundational theories from semiotics and material culture studies. Barthes (1967) conceptualized textiles as systems of signs through which cultural codes are communicated, framing clothing and fabric as forms of non-verbal language. Building on this, Appadurai (1986) proposed that objects—including textiles—acquire meaning through their social life, circulation, and usage, while Miller (2005) emphasized the role of material culture in shaping identity, memory, and everyday experience. These frameworks provide critical tools for interpreting how meaning is embedded in and extracted from textile practices such as the Dhabhla weave.

2. Indian Textile Traditions And Symbolic Systems

Within the Indian context, textile traditions have been understood as deeply rooted in ecological, ritual, and caste-based structures. Dhamija (1995) highlighted the symbolic and social dimensions of Indian handlooms, while Jain (2012) documented the aesthetic and technical systems of historical weaves across regions. The region of Kutch has been particularly noted for its rich craft ecology. Frater (2010) examined the intergenerational transmission of knowledge among artisan communities in Kutch, illustrating how oral narratives,

embodied learning, and ritual performance act as conduits for cultural continuity. Although specific scholarship on the Dhabhla is limited, existing literature suggests that this weave shares several symbolic and ritual attributes found in other Kutch-based traditions.

3. Contemporary Transformations And Cultural Reconfigurations

Recent scholarship has critically examined how globalization, market integration, and design intervention are reshaping traditional crafts. Wilkinson-Weber (2005) analysed the restructuring of artisan identities and the transformation of value systems under the influence of state and market forces. Kuldova (2016) further explored how collaborations with fashion and luxury industries have altered the expression and reception of traditional crafts, often raising concerns about the dilution of symbolic authenticity. These perspectives inform the present research in understanding how the symbolic meanings encoded in the Dhabhla weave are being reconfigured in contemporary contexts.

These perspectives have been adopted in the present study to consider how the symbolic meanings within the Dhabhla weave are being reshaped through design interventions and commercial pressures.

Methodology

A qualitative, ethnographic methodology was adopted in this study to investigate the cultural semiotics embedded in the Dhabhla weave. A multi-method approach was utilized to gather insights into the symbolic dimensions of the textile from both producer and user perspectives.

- **Ethnographic Fieldwork:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with **seven Vankar weavers** and **four Rabari users** across selected villages in Kutch. These conversations were guided to elicit interpretations of motifs, materials, and ritual associations. The insights provided by participants were recorded and later thematically analysed.
- **Visual Textile Analysis:** A visual examination was carried out on **twelve traditional** and **five contemporaries Dhabhla**. The textiles were analysed in terms of weave structure, recurring motifs, color schemes, and overall design composition to trace patterns of symbolic continuity and adaptation.
- **Semiotic Analysis:** Recurring visual elements were decoded using principles of visual semiotics. Particular attention was given to how symbolic meaning has been constructed, transmitted, and transformed within the textile language.
- **Documentary Review:** Secondary data was drawn from **NGO records, field documentation, and museum archives**. These sources were consulted to situate the Dhabhla historically and to understand how it has been represented and interpreted within institutional and curatorial frameworks.

Through these combined methods, a layered and culturally situated interpretation of the Dhabhla weave was enabled, offering insight into its evolving role as a bearer of identity, ritual, and heritage.

Research Methodology – Dhabhla Weave Study

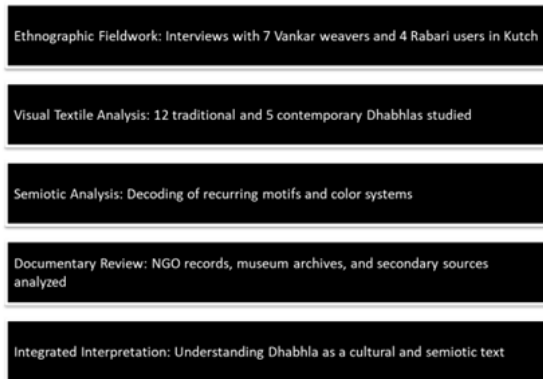


Figure 1 Research Methodology Flow For Dhabhla Weave Study

The Dhabhla As A Cultural Textile

The Dhabhla has been identified as a textile imbued with deep cultural significance rather than regarded merely as a utilitarian object. It has been traditionally woven on pit looms using coarse sheep wool, and its applications have been observed across multiple cultural domains. It was incorporated into dowries, offered in spiritual rituals, and employed as a protective layer by travellers and pastoralists. These diverse functions indicate that the Dhabhla has been embedded within both the sacred and the everyday lives of its users.



Figure 2 - Traditional Dhabhla with Hodathiyo and Choumukh Motifs

Among the Rabari community, its use by men has been consistently emphasized. It was worn draped across the shoulders and has been perceived as a symbol through which masculinity, mobility, and spiritual identity were expressed. The customization of motifs and density—often based on the specific preferences of individual patrons—was reported by weavers, suggesting that social identity and symbolic meaning were encoded into each textile.



Cushion Cover (Acrylic Wool)

Figure 3 - Contemporary Adaptation: Cushion Covers

These cultural roles align with semiotic frameworks, wherein textiles are understood as sign systems (as proposed by Barthes, 1967). The Dhabhla has been interpreted as a medium through which social meaning was communicated and embodied. In accordance with Appadurai's (1986) notion of the "social life of things," the Dhabhla has been seen as operating at the intersection of the material and the spiritual. Its continued association with protection, memory, and ritual—described by both weavers and users—suggests that it has functioned as a mnemonic object, preserving intangible heritage through its material form (Miller, 2005).

In contemporary contexts, the Dhabhla has been increasingly subjected to design intervention and market expansion. While these developments have been perceived by some artisans as opportunities for cultural continuity, concerns have also been expressed about the dilution of symbolic content when motifs are reproduced without contextual grounding. Thus, the meanings embedded in the Dhabhla are seen to be undergoing transformation—negotiated between preservation and adaptation.

Motifs And Their Meanings: A Semiotic Analysis

The findings of this study reveal that the Dhabhla weave encodes a layered system of cultural symbolism, expressed through both motif and color. A range of recurring visual elements were identified in the textiles studied, including *Hodathiyo*, *Choumukh*, *Dholki*, *Dhungalo*, *Latth*, *Chokadi*, *Dhandha Mutarno* (also referred to as *Ladhar* or *Vankiyo*), *Sathkhani*, *Undhi Sathkhani*, *Sachchi Kor*, *Panchako*, *Miri*, *Chhad*, and *Popati*. These motifs, observed across both traditional and contemporary Dhabhlas, were described by weavers as more than ornamental—they were perceived as symbolic texts, deeply embedded in the cosmology and daily life of artisan and pastoralist communities. For instance, *Choumukh* (meaning "four-faced") was interpreted as representing divine omnipresence or cardinal orientation, while *Latth* and *Chhad* were associated with agricultural and architectural references, symbolizing protection and groundedness. Similarly, *Sathkhani* and *Undhi Sathkhani* were noted to appear predominantly in ritual Dhabhlas, indicating a visual syntax tied to ceremonial functions.



Figure 4 - Weaver Demonstrating Traditional Techniques

Color also emerged as a central semiotic layer within the Dhabhla tradition. Black was consistently associated with strength and masculinity, but also invoked themes of mourning and spiritual protection. Red was linked to fertility and marriage, making it prevalent in dowry-related Dhabhlas. White, conversely, was seen to denote purity and divinity, frequently used in textiles offered in religious or spiritual contexts. These interpretations were supported across multiple interviews and visual analyses, suggesting a shared cultural logic around chromatic symbolism.

Such findings align with Barthes' (1967) theory of semiotics, in which textiles are framed as sign systems capable of conveying layered cultural codes. The motifs and colors in the Dhabhla thus function as visual lexicons—mnemonic devices that preserve intangible knowledge systems within material form (Miller, 2005; Appadurai, 1986).

However, the study also found that the symbolic density of these motifs is increasingly vulnerable to erosion. As design interventions and commercialization introduce Dhabhla motifs into fashion and lifestyle products, their original meanings are often decontextualized.

Several weavers expressed concern that motifs are being appropriated aesthetically, without regard to their cultural or ritual significance. This echoes the critiques of scholars such as Wilkinson-Weber (2005) and Kuldova (2016), who argue that market-driven transformations in craft traditions can lead to the dilution of symbolic meaning and artisan autonomy.

In conclusion, the Dhabhla weave operates not merely as a textile product but as a semiotic archive—a woven form of cultural memory and identity. The motifs and colors embedded in it are not only reflective of aesthetic choices but are constitutive of a worldview. While the weave continues to adapt to contemporary contexts, the safeguarding of its symbolic grammar remains crucial to preserving its cultural integrity.

Ritual Use And Symbolic Function Of The Dhabhla

The Dhabhla was found to be embedded deeply within ritual and spiritual practices across Rabari and Vankar communities. It was observed that the textile was traditionally used during wedding ceremonies, where it was either worn or included in dowry exchanges. During childbirth, newborns were laid upon the Dhabhla as a means of symbolic protection and blessing. In pastoral rituals, such as animal blessings, the Dhabhla was utilized to invoke wellbeing and divine Favor. Similarly, during temple pilgrimages, it was draped over the shoulders of devotees, marking the journey as sacred and imbuing the wearer with a sense of ritual sanctity.

Through these applications, the Dhabhla has been interpreted as functioning not merely as a garment but as a ritual object—one that materialized belief systems and encoded social and cosmic order. The textile was perceived as a form of "woven scripture," wherein pastoral cosmology and spiritual values were inscribed through motif, color, and use. These findings support the perspective that textiles, when examined as cultural artifacts, can be seen as active agents in the transmission of intangible heritage. This interpretation aligns with theoretical frameworks from material culture studies, in which objects are viewed not only for their form but for their performative roles in shaping and preserving collective memory (Miller, 2005; Dhamija, 1995).

Changing Contexts - Market, Memory, And Meaning

Findings from field interviews and visual analysis suggest that the contemporary repositioning of the Dhabhla weave is being shaped significantly by urban craft markets and design collaborations. Traditional motifs and weaving techniques have been increasingly repurposed into modern lifestyle products such as stoles, cushion covers, and jackets. While these adaptations have generated new income streams for artisan communities, they have also introduced a shift in the semantic and ritual dimensions of the weave.

In many cases, motifs are extracted from their original ritual and cultural frameworks and redeployed for aesthetic purposes, often without accompanying contextual knowledge. This dislocation has resulted in a dilution of symbolic meaning, where sacred and socially embedded symbols are commodified as decorative elements. Such transformations echo broader concerns raised in material culture studies, where the recontextualization of traditional crafts within global markets has been seen to disrupt systems of meaning, identity, and continuity (Kuldova, 2016; Wilkinson-Weber, 2005).

Table 1- Symbolic Functions Vs. Market Adaptations

Traditional Function	Contemporary Product	Shift in Meaning
Used in weddings	Stole	Aesthetic use, meaning detached
Protective layer for newborns	Cushion cover	Functional use, symbolism omitted
Temple pilgrimage cloth	Jacket	Design retained, sacredness lost

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study has recontextualized the Dhabhla weave as a material expression of intangible cultural heritage—far exceeding its function as a utilitarian woolen textile. Through the application of ethnographic fieldwork and semiotic analysis, the weave has been shown to encode complex layers of meaning rooted in pastoral cosmology, ritual practice, and ancestral memory. Motifs, color systems, and modes of usage collectively function as a visual-textile language, materializing

identity, spirituality, and ecological relationships.

The Dhabhla has traditionally operated as both a sacred object and a mnemonic device—used in life-cycle ceremonies, protective rituals, and devotional contexts. However, findings also indicate that with the rise of urban craft markets and design collaborations, many of these symbolic systems are being selectively abstracted or diluted. While such transformations offer economic opportunities and expanded visibility, they also risk displacing the embedded meanings that give the Dhabhla its cultural specificity.

Preserving the semiotic richness of the Dhabhla thus emerges as a critical imperative—not only for the sustenance of artisan livelihoods, but for the continuity of cultural consciousness. Efforts toward safeguarding this heritage must go beyond aesthetic preservation to include context-sensitive design, community-led documentation, and interpretive education. In doing so, the Dhabhla may continue to serve not only as a cultural product, but as a living archive of identity, memory, and meaning.

Author Contributions

The study was jointly conceptualized by Arooshi Mogha and Dr. Neeraj Rawat Sharma. Fieldwork—including ethnographic interviews, motif documentation, and image collection—was conducted by the first author. The manuscript was prepared, and data were analyzed by the same. Dr. Neeraj Rawat Sharma provided theoretical guidance, methodological support, and critical revisions. Final approval of the manuscript was given by both authors.

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