Experiencing the Banni through Hodka

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(Extracted from a case study for Vikalp Sangam by the author)

Photo by the author Village or rural tourismthat showcases rural culture and brings economic benefits to the communities received a major thrust under India's 10th Five Year Plan and was accorded priority. One of the initiatives to support this was the Endogenous Tourism Project (ETP), a joint venture between the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India (MoT, GoI) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).This four-year project (2003-2007) involved the selection of 36 rural sites as pilot projects for rural destination development in the context of tourism. The underlying principle of the initiative was, "creating income generation strategies that leverage pre-existing local skills, is therefore 'endogenous' in nature. Thus, both rural communities and tourists would stand to benefit from the initiative". Endogenous or 'transformative' tourism aimed to broaden the traveler's horizon by transforming perspectives and promoting a mutual environment of appreciation and learning between the local community and visitors. One of the projects was established in the Banni area of Kachchh in Gujarat, a unique grassland habitat in the desert. The primary residents of this area are the Maldharis (cattle breeders) or Baniyaras who all practice Islam. Banni has 34 villages inhabited by approximately 5,500 families. Some of Gujarat's finest embroidery and leatherwork comes from the Banni area. In contrast to the stark landscape or perhaps to compensate for it, the embroidery is in bright vibrant colors and extremely intricate in nature.Hodka, in the Banniwas established about 300 years ago by what is called the 'Halepotra' clan. In 2004, Hodka was shortlisted by the then District Collector, to be considered under the UNDP's ETP.Kutch MahilaVikasSangathan (KMVS) was considered as the nodal agency for the same/project, with support from Sahjeevan, an NGO that had been working in this region since 1991. A site, an old dried-up pond that belonged to the *Jhuth Gram Panchayat* (representing all the 13 villages of the area) was selected for this initiative.

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