

[Tribal Art](#)

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India's indigenous tribal crafts on exhibit in London.

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For two decades, artist Jaya Patel has put forth relentless efforts to bring the ethnic arts and crafts of India's poverty-stricken and grossly neglected tribal people out of the remote jungles and forests into greater international recognition and marketability. Her own specific field of interest and primary passion is pottery. With an impressive career spanning 22 years, she became the driving force in opening a showroom cum exhibition in London in August, 1994, that showcased a spectacular display of 800 pieces of beautiful Indian ethnic art. The show included: metal jewelry, oxidized work, inlaid work, sculptures and textiles from Gujarat; saris and paintings of the aboriginal Warali tribe from Maharashtra; stone sculpture and terra cotta from Kerala; embroidery and leather items from Bengal; furniture, miniature paintings, and fabric prints from Rajasthan and tribal jewelry and sculptures from Madhya Pradesh. And much more.

Meeting Patel is an experience. Shy, soft-spoken and her untalkative external demeanor hardly reveals the willpower and the relentless zeal with which she pursues her projects. Her extensive and ingenious work in 1979-80 with the Adivasi tribe, the Rathwas, in the remote jungles of Chhota Udaipur especially illustrates this single-minded devotion to her mission. After a chance hearing about a vague lead on unusual earthenware, she embarked upon an expedition to find the tribe that made the artifacts. For several months she combed the area via bus and trekked through dense forests. Her search succeeded in locating the community of the aboriginal Rathwas in forests surrounding the village Devhat. They make a special ochre glazed pottery.

She stayed with them, learned their dialect, and worked shoulder to shoulder

with them creating pottery not only in traditional functional designs, but also teaching them new techniques like firing, introducing new shades of brown, black and maroon for glazes as well as new motifs. Observing that they did not have any means of storage, she taught them to create six-foot-tall kothis to store grain and clothes. "I encouraged them to form a cooperative society to market these wares, and I roamed from emporia to emporia in cities to obtain orders for this unique pottery. Exhibitions only create interest. We needed permanent orders for this art to survive," Patel reasons.

Recently, Jaya visited the US to consult with world renowned designer Giorgio Armani about some ethnic motifs and art work for a clothing line he intends to design. "My association with him and his wife Pamela goes back many years," Patel relates. "They have a house and workshop in New Delhi. I have taken my team of tribal workers to the Armanis many times for art projects lasting several weeks, each time making sure that the tribal artists get above average remuneration from the American designers," she quipped.

Even the prestigious department store Harod's of London employs her as a consultant to check the quality and authenticity of the items which they buy for their collection of exclusive, wearable art work.

"For two decades, I have worked closely with the various tribes in Gujarat and other states, in guiding and developing their art and craft-stone carvings, embroidery, weaving and pottery-and organize exhibitions for them," she shares. "I aim at enhancing the quality without disturbing the original form, technique and colors, which is their art's uniqueness.

"In 1982, when Asiad (the Asian Olympic games) opened in New Delhi, I was summoned to create the Gujarat pavilion." She earned a gold medal for the exhibition building's exterior.

In 1991, she was given a major position in the colossal Cultural Festival of India organized by the Bochasanwasi Swaminarayan Sanstha in New Jersey, taking charge of the India Village and directing a team of 100 craftsmen demonstrating rural arts. As we spoke, Patel was eager to share some of her intense and intimate spiritual experiences. In her mind, art and spirituality merge to lend almost a mystic

significance to all her projects and endeavors. After working for over 20 years in the field of India's ethnic arts, she suddenly started getting visions of Satya Sai Baba. "I vividly recall that afternoon in 1992, when I first envisioned Baba, whom I had never seen before. I was sitting in a lonely corner of the Mandir restaurant in London when all of a sudden, I saw Satya Sai Baba walking toward me and he said, 'Why are you sad? I want you to have inner happiness. In your own way, you are contributing to Hindu dharma. You can worship any God, but I am with you, always.' Visions came more often after that."

Daughter of religious Gujarati parents—a rich farmer father and a mother who was very cultured despite not being able to read or write—Patel was born in Vasod, and grew up in Artand, Gujarat. "During my earlier college days studying liberal arts at S.N.D.T., Bombay, I had a chance to become quite friendly with the cricket star Vijay Merchant. At that time I was a national champion in table tennis and basketball. Actually, he was the one who saw art, not athletics, in me and prompted me to join the College of Fine Arts in Baroda. After obtaining her degree in ceramics, Patel went to work for the State Design Center under the auspices of Cottage Industries, Ahmedabad, eventually becoming the head of that department.

Editor's note: Indigenous craft traditions, once threatened, are on the rebound, thanks to people like Jaya Patel, people who do more—in her case much more—than speak of the need to preserve the cherished arts of the past. Desires for one-of-a-kind outfits have supplanted the me-too consciousness of the last two decades. Wearable art is driving the industry to bring craftsmen out of obscurity. Today chic boutiques are importing originals from Africa, South America, China and India. Many on the subcontinent are reaping the benefits of the trend, as India rediscovers that there is value—esthetic, cultural and monetary—in the folk and village arts.