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I N D I A N

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THE MAGAZINE FOR BETTER LIVING

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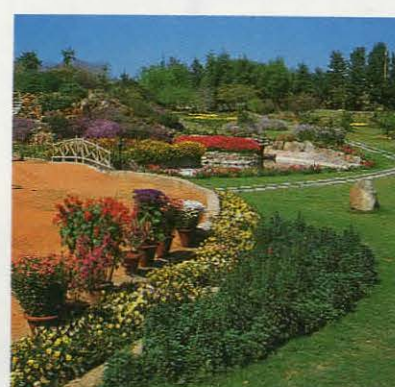
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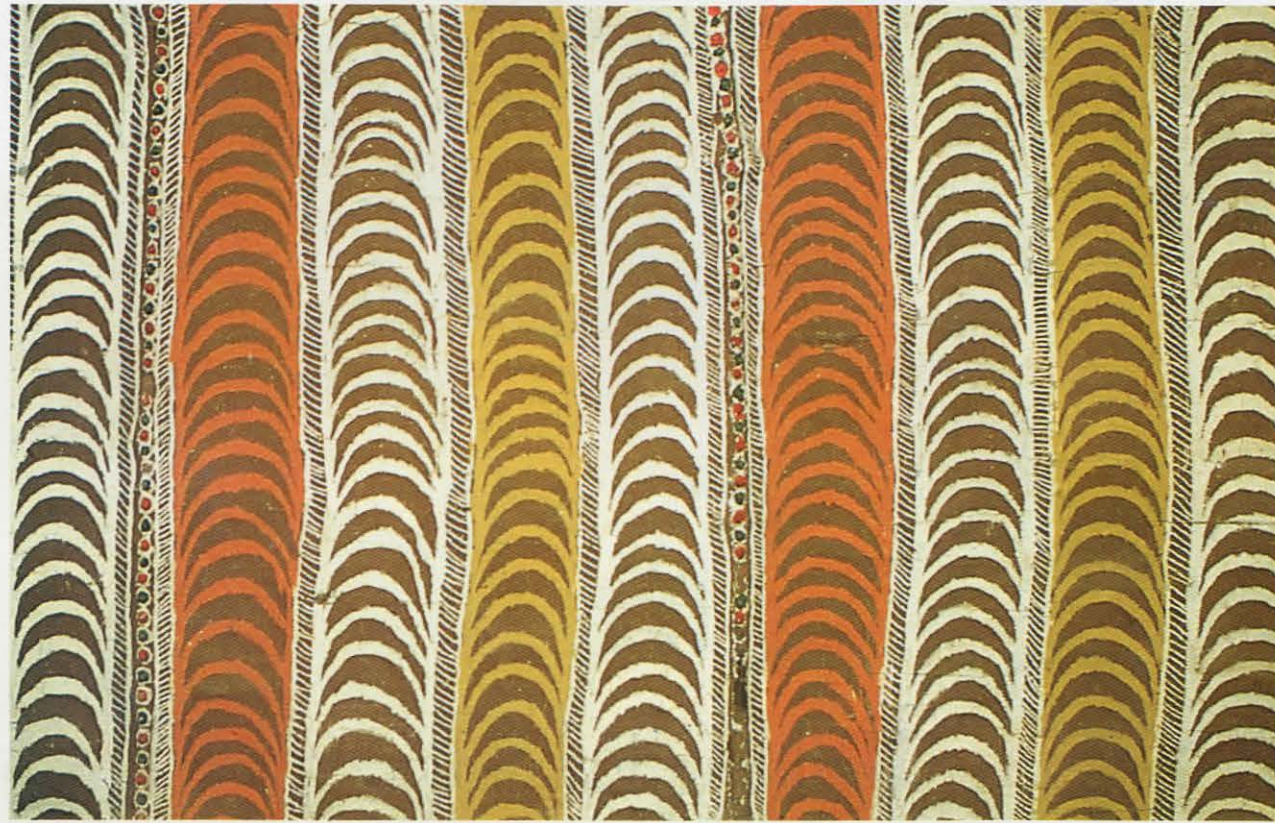
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Walls & Floors

The Living Tradition In Indian Villages

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JYOTI BHATT

WOMEN IN VARIOUS RURAL and tribal regions of India practise a kind of interior decoration which has its roots in ancient traditions and the basic human desire to make one's home look attractive. Some anthropologists believe that people look upon their houses as extensions of themselves. Sanskrit treatises include *Bhitti-Chitran*, or the making of drawings on the walls of houses, among the sixty-four skills that a cultured Indian woman is expected to master.

Drawings that village women make on walls are not mere decoration for them. They are essential rituals related

to various *vratas* and seasonal festivals. They believe that a house with beautiful drawings on its walls would attract the Hindu goddess of wealth, Lakshmi.

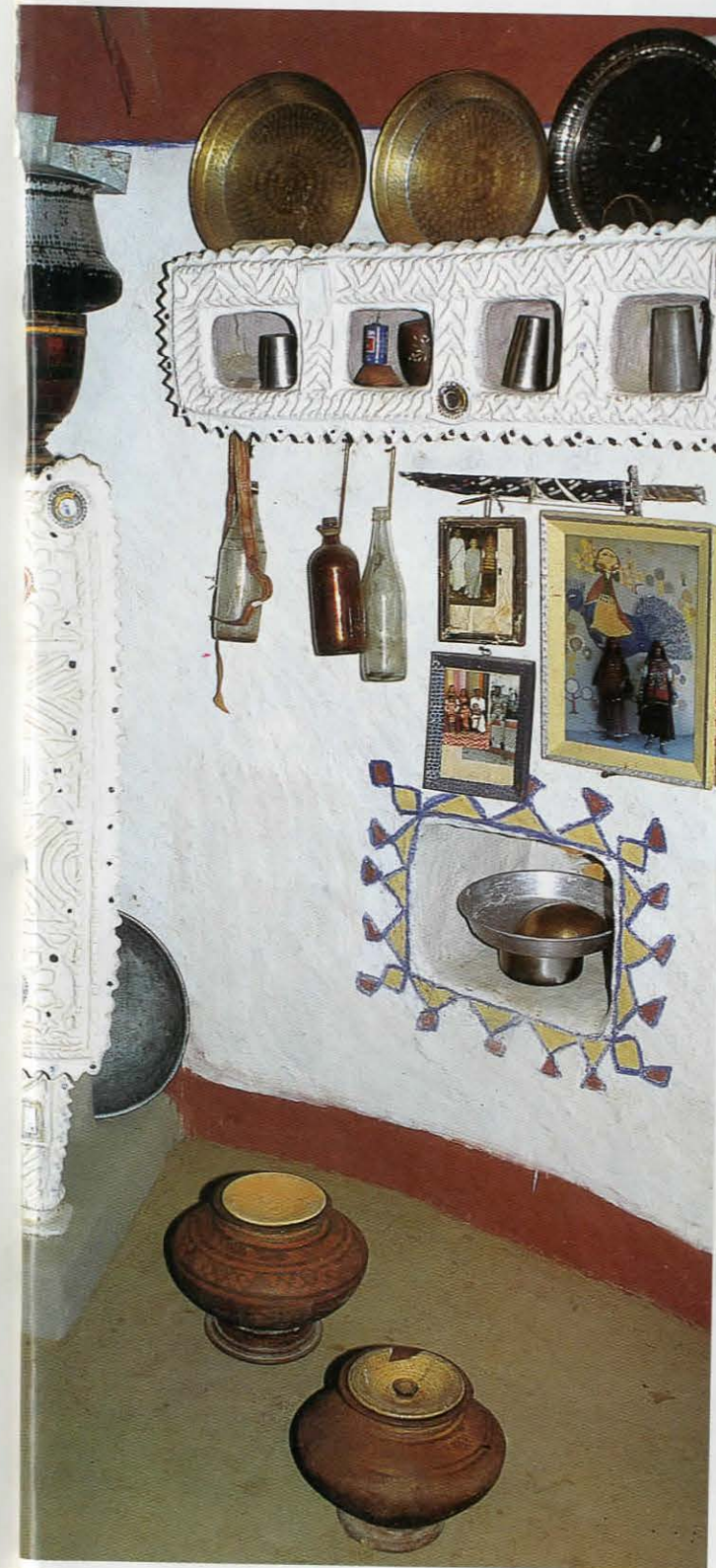
Village women in Punjab decorate the exterior walls of their homes, during Diwali celebrations, by drawing floral motifs on them. These drawings then remain on the walls until the following year, unless they are damaged by rain or repainted for a marriage celebration. It is an important family event when villagers lovingly decorate the walls of their houses with colourful drawings.

Women in Rajasthan's villages first replaster and whitewash the walls dam-

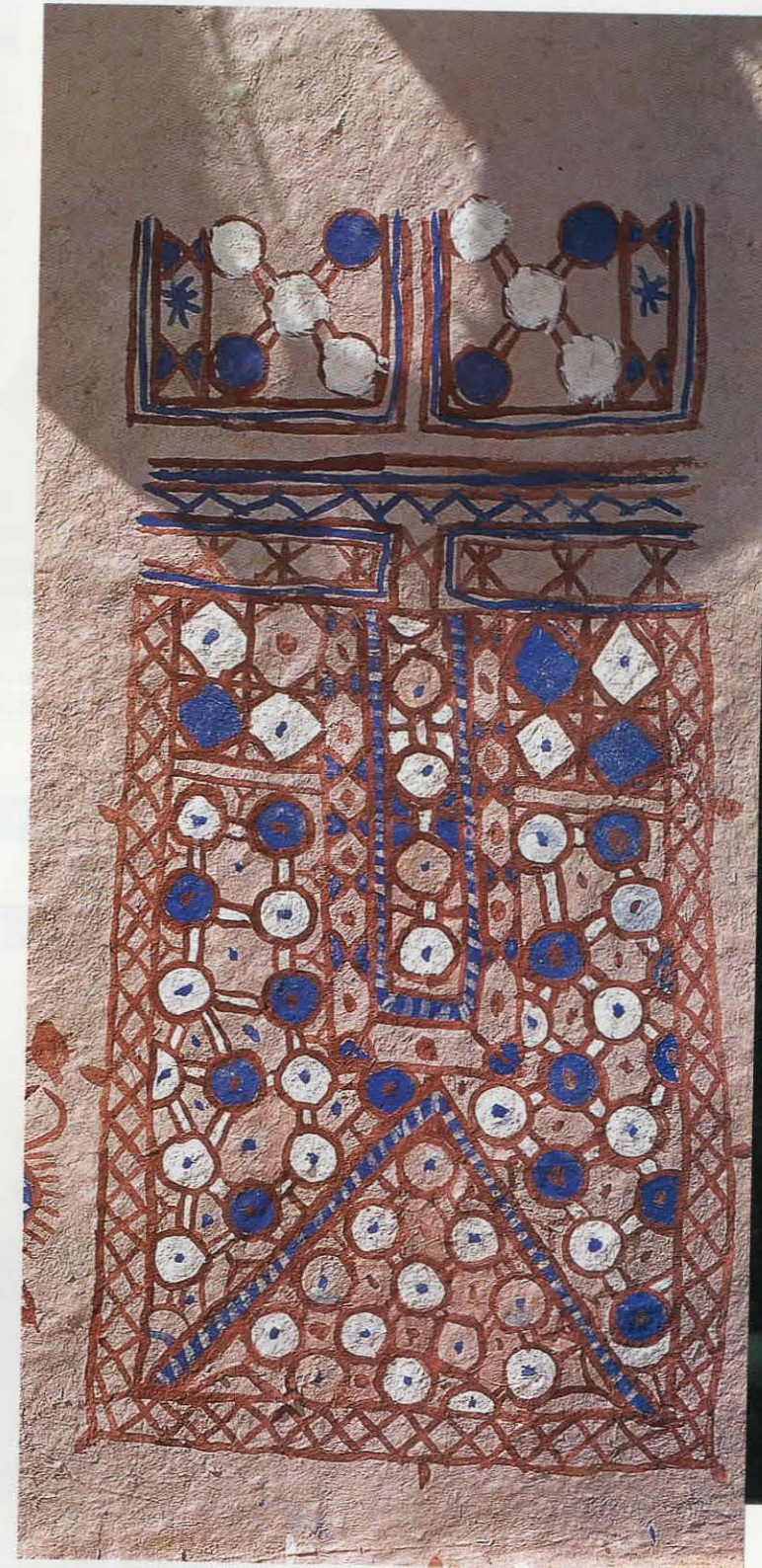
aged during the monsoon rains. Then the drawings are made with white clay or lime on the areas defined by a coat of cowdung mixed with *Geru*—a red clay containing iron oxide. They draw a large number of motifs learnt during childhood from their mothers. Though the basic motifs are repeated, their forms are improvised all the time.

There are several other occasions also when women draw images on the walls of their houses. Such images are sometimes symbolic but usually they are based on floral or geometric motifs. Birds and animals are also represented often as they are an integral part of village life and folklore.

Women in Uttar Pradesh make coloured drawings narrating incidents from stories related with *vratas* such as



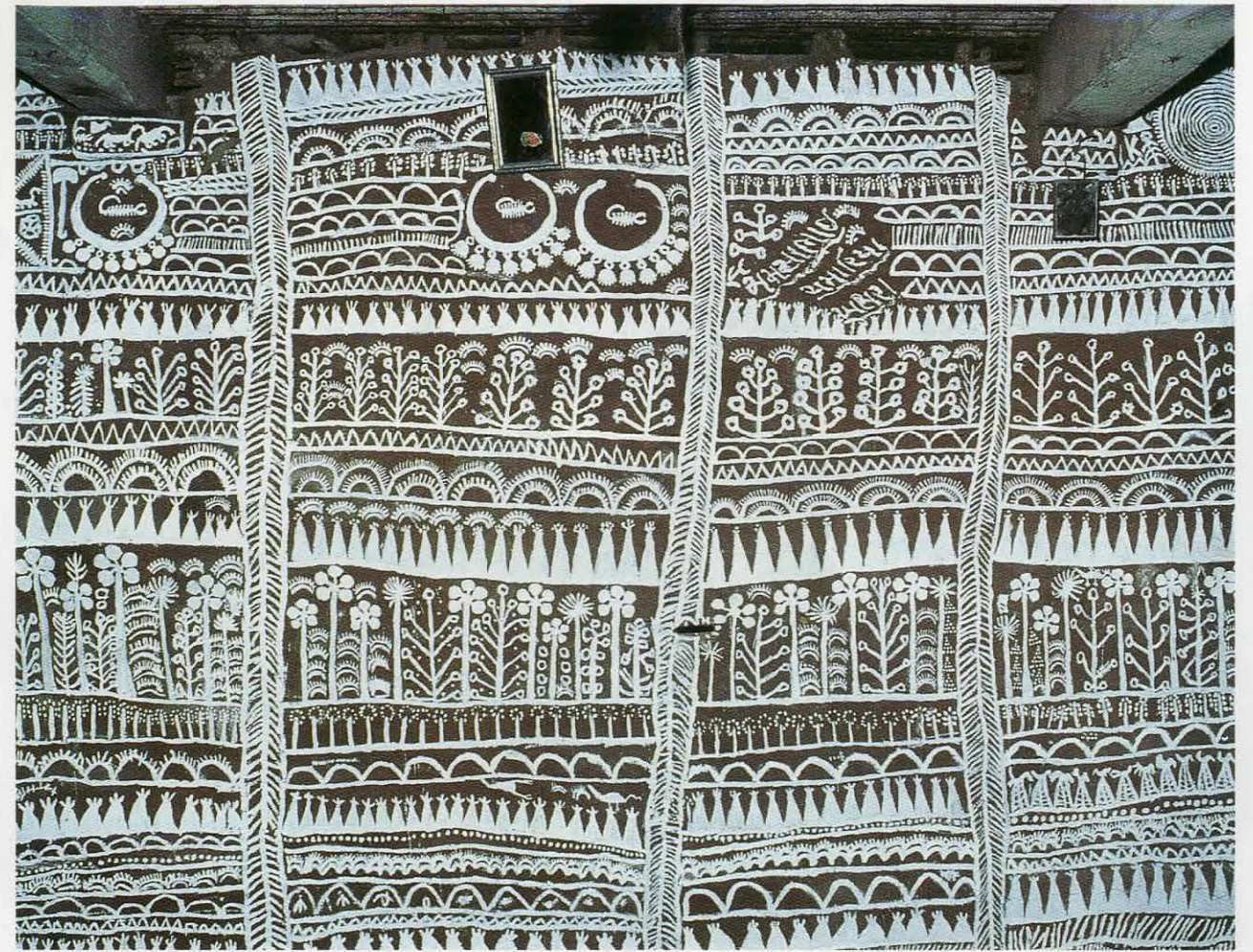
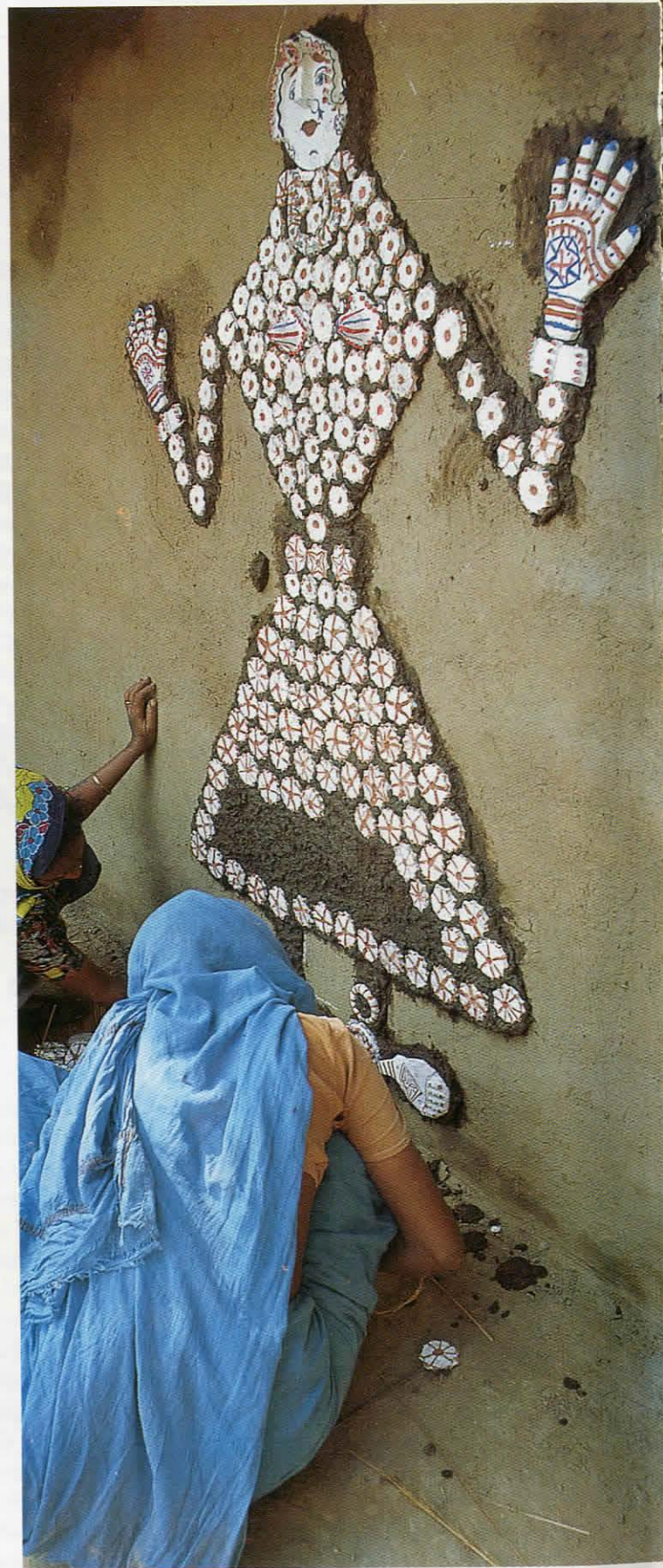
Interior of a village home in Kutch. FACING PAGE: Detail of a painted wall in a village house in Gujarat.



Detail of a wall decorated with embroidery patterns.



ABOVE: Bits of foil have been fixed to this *sanjhi* for added lustre. RIGHT: Women creating a *sanjhi* on the wall of a house in a Delhi village.



Interior walls decorated with patterns traced with ground-rice paste.

Karva Chawth and *Ahoi Ashtami*. Such drawings are drawn on whitewashed walls and then filled in with bright dyes. Twigs, which are beaten at the ends to form tufts, are used as brushes.

Young girls in Madhya Pradesh make *Sanjhi* in relief using cow-dung. Colour is added by sticking leaves, petals, seeds and coloured foil on it. *Sanjhi* forms are believed to provide shelter for the wandering souls of departed family members. Girls make new *sanjhis* every evening scraping off the ones made on the previous evening. This is done during the entire *shradha* fortnight when other rituals for ancestors are also performed.

Women in northern India make similar images of the goddess Durga. For this, initially, they make a required

number of small parts from clay and dry them in the sun. These are then coloured and stuck on walls with dung to form images of the goddess. These are worshipped by people during the nine days of the *Navaratri* festival.

Wall drawings everywhere are made with some device that serves as a brush. But in Orissa, women make the drawings by dipping their finger tips in liquid rice paste and imprinting patterns on the walls.

However, imprinting an open palm dipped in white pigment obtained from rice, clay and lime, or in different pigments, including turmeric and *kumkum*, is a widely practiced tradition in India. Warli women in Maharashtra stamp the

sides of their palms to make mango-shaped patterns.

Madhubani, in the Mithila region of Bihar, has become well-known for its wall paintings after the drought of 1968. It is believed that Sita was born in Mithila. The tradition of wall paintings in this region is practiced mainly by women of the Brahmin and Kayastha castes. Their knowledge of Hindu mythological stories gets reflected in the intricate details of their refined drawings. Thanks to the support from the Indian Government, this tradition has now become a craft that provides income to villagers in Mithila. Many women now make drawings on paper and textiles to meet the demand of the urban market.

The tribal inhabitants in South Gujarat, North Maharashtra and Orissa make



ABOVE: A village house in Rajasthan.

BELOW: Decorated entrance and niche in a house in village Sarguja in Madhya Pradesh.



simple drawings which have forms and motifs that may link them with the drawings found in 1988, in the prehistoric rock shelters in Madhya Pradesh during excavations. Rajawar women in Madhya Pradesh whitewash the walls in a series of several quadrangular divisions. Linear patterns are then made on the wet surface by scraping the surface with the fingers.

India has a vast variety of cultures with distinct ethnic identities. The different mediums, forms and colours people use for decorating their houses are also diverse. In Kutch and Saurashtra and other districts in Gujarat and Rajasthan, the walls are first decorated with patterns in relief, then white washed, painted and finally brightened up by sticking pieces of mirror and metallic foil on the surface. Colourful embroideries are also hung on the walls. ■