



INDIA
GUJARAT

**I WALK WITH
THE NOMADS**

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Some Rabari Vagadiya families on the move during the monsoon season in the Kutch district, an area of Gujarat, the Indian district on the border with Pakistan.

I walk with the nomads

- ▶ Researcher Elena Dak accompanied for two months, between 2017 and 2018, the Rabari Vagadiya herders in the Kutch district in northwest India
- ▶ The Rabari Vagadyia herders are among the planet's few remaining examples of peoples that can genuinely define themselves as nomads
- ▶ Their migration routes increasingly collide with with man-made or industrialized areas, and involve long journeys alongside motorways and camps in the vicinity of large factories
- ▶ The families with which Elena lived and travelled represent the last generation of nomads in this part of the world

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Elena Dak examines a wound on the foot of Teju Ben, during the Rabari migration in Kutch district.



Researcher Elena Dak with a lamb at the camp of the Rabari families on their migration in Kutch district.



The Rabari Vagadiya caravan led by Pachan crosses the railway line that connects Mumbai to the port of Gandhidham.



Researcher Elena Dak outside her tent at the camp of the Rabari families on their migration in Kutch district.

Elena Dak is a researcher who is particularly interested in those nomadic populations that are experiencing a rapid transformation. *"Anthropology is a discipline that requires two specific actions: departing to reach the populations that are subject of the research and writing about them. When the population in question are nomadic herders, the passion and desire to learn about them leaves us with just one option – quite literally to follow in their footsteps and walk with them."*

After various experiences in Africa, in which she joined a group on a Tuareg caravan in Niger, travelling 1,200km with them on foot through the sands of the Sahara to reach the saltpans in Bilma, and having accompanied the Woodabe herders in Chad during their migration, Elena headed to India to meet with the Rabari nomads. *"Once again I found myself departing, taking my first steps with a group of migrating herders. It isn't easy to establish a rapport but this time it was even harder than usual. The herders seemed to be struggling to tolerate my presence."*

The Rabari are a group that live on the border between Rajasthan and Gujarat in northern India. In the first months of autumn, some groups leave their villages to head towards more verdant pastures on a migration that will keep them away for many months.

Elena's job, renamed Chandni (full moon) by the families in migration, was to fully share their lifestyle, to testify the resilience of a population that is trying to maintain its nomadic tradition in today's India, a society in rapid evolution and with lifestyles that are hard to reconcile with the survival of this archaic way of life. Over the two months she spent with them, Elena realised that she was witnessing an epoch-marking change and that she was, in fact, walking with the last generation of nomadic shepherds in this part of the world.

"When they ask me why I follow the nomads I never have an immediate answer ready nor the right answer. During the evenings around the fire, in the darkness that I choose to inhabit just outside the cone of light, I ask myself the same question. Undoubtedly more important than anything else is the desire to be there, attempting to creep into their lives, experiencing their lifestyle and then describing it. For sure, the steps taken by the Rabari are those of feet used to the dust and now forced to walk on the roads and it is in this discrepancy between sand and tarmac that I attempt to investigate their nomadic lives."



Elena Dak leads a camel belonging to one of the Rabari families migrating in Kutch district.



The map of Gujarat indicating the path the Rabari families will travel during their seasonal migration.



The encampment of Abu Bai and Walla Bai's families, surrounded by their sheep.



Researcher Elena Dak travels on foot with Rabari families on their migration in Kutch district.



Researcher Elena Dak takes notes at the camp of the Rabari families on their migration in Kutch district, an area of India's Gujarat region bordering Pakistan.



Elena Dak shows members of a Rabari family some photos on her phone during the migration in Kutch district.



Researcher Elena Dak gathers wood for the camp of the Rabari families on their migration in Kutch district.



Researcher Elena Dak travels on foot with Rabari families on their migration in Kutch district, an area of India's Gujarat region bordering Pakistan.



Arku Dawabai and Arku Nagi, two Rabari Vagadiya women, collect water from a cistern situated in the courtyard of a factory under the curious gaze of workers.



Elena Dak with a lamb belonging to one of the Rabari families on migration in Kutch district.



Elena Dak carries wood to the camp of the Rabari families on their migration.



Nagji is shearing a sheep from his flock on the transhumance in the Kutch district.



Researcher Elena Dak leads a camel belonging to one of the Rabari families migrating in Kutch district.



Researcher Elena Dak wearing Rabari dress at the camp of the Rabari families on their migration in Kutch district.



A child during the monsoon season transhumance in the Kutch district.



Elena Dak walks during the monsoon with the Rabari families on migration in Kutch district.



Ramai, a Rabari Vagadiya woman, in a camp during the monsoon in the Kutch district.



Elena Dak prepares a *roti* (flatbread made from millet) at the camp of the Rabari families on the migration in Kutch district.



Elena Dak walks with the Rabari families on migration in Kutch district.



Overnight camp of the Rabari Vagadiya families of Abu Bai and Walla Bai near the village of Lakadia.



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