

Threads of Indigenous Tradition: Lambani Handicrafts and the Preservation of Tribal Identity

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Abstract

India is a land of diversity that stands upright on the roots of unity. It might be the only nation on the globe where one can find the many cultures that people can imagine are available worldwide. The twenty-first century is witnessing many advancements in India, forcing the world to be argus-eyed at this nation of youngest people. Yet, indigenous India stays close to nature and strives to create an identity globally. Home to a large number of tribal people, known as Adivasis, India has the largest tribal population in the world, with 104 million people, constituting 8.61% of the total population of India. Engulfed within the vicinity of the term 'Adivasis' is another community of nomadic groups called 'Lambanis'—this group of people who trace their origin to pastoral communities that migrated to India centuries ago has positioned themselves as a group of courageous, vibrant, and skilled in unique handicraft. Despite their USP in handicrafts, their cultural heritage is on the verge of extinction. As a case-based study on Kadaganchi thanda of Aland taluk and Tari thanda of Shahbad taluk in Kalaburagi district, Karnataka, this research highlights the issues, concerns, and challenges in preserving Lambani handicrafts. By examining the cultural significance and economic impact of Lambani handicrafts, this study underscores their role in safeguarding tribal identity while fostering inclusive growth through Tribal-entrepreneurship and cultural sustainability.

Keywords: *Lambani handicrafts, inclusive growth, Tribal entrepreneurship, cultural sustainability*

INTRODUCTION

India is a land of diversity that stands upright on the roots of unity. It might be the only nation on the globe where one can find the many cultures that people can imagine are available worldwide. The twenty-first century is witnessing many advancements in India, forcing the world to be argus-eyed at this nation of youngest people. From the cloud-kissing sky-scrappers to the moon landing missions, from the deep-rooted E-technologies to the medicated advancements in health and science, from the best of entrepreneurial ventures to the global partnerships, India is garrulously taming the wanton world. Yet, indigenous India stays close to nature and strives to create an identity globally. Home to a large number of tribal people, known as Adivasis, India has the largest tribal population in the world, with 104 million people, constituting 8.61% of the total population of India. Connotations of the word 'Adivasis' are 'Atavika,' meaning forest dwellers. Vanvasi or Girijan is synonymous with hill people, which were used by the tribes of India. However, the term 'Adivasis' carried a specific meaning of being the original and autochthonous inhabitants of a given region that was coined especially for this purpose in the 1930s. Engulfed within the vicinity of the term 'Adivasis' is another community of nomadic groups called 'Lambanis'. They are also known as Banjara and Sukali and are located in different states of India. This community has various names in Karnataka, such as Lambarfi, Banjara, Lamani, and Sukali. This group of people trace their origin to pastoral communities who migrated to India from Afghanistan centuries ago. They are identified by their unique cultural heritage, which is marked by vibrant attire, elaborate embroidery, folk music, traditional dances, handicrafts, dialects, and rituals that are different from mainstream society. They have been historically the epitome of bravery, courage, patriotism, and indigeneity (Khandoba. 1991). The menfolk of this community were involved in various professions in different parts of the country, which gave them various names. They were said to be involved in selling salt (lavanah), and so were called Lavaniga which got transformed into Lamani and Lambani over time (Thurston,1975). In the olden days, this community was believed to have been merchants wandering from place to place doing business, and so were known as 'Banjara' meaning 'Merchant' (Khandoba, 1991). Lambanis are believed to have lived in forest areas and hence were called 'Vanachara'. Because

they reared and cared for herds of cattle, they were termed 'Sukalis' or 'Sugalis' (Khandoba, 1991). Though the men were traditionally involved in agricultural trade and pastoralism, the women were primarily engrossed in embroidery works.

Lambani embroidery is the art of surface decoration of clothes. It is a needlecraft done by the womenfolk of this community. The craft uses a vibrant range of colours to create intricate embroidery. The exclusivity of this art lies in its usage of thirteen colours, with red and blue being the most prominent ones (Gakhar, Shivani, 2010), which are derived from natural dyes extracted from plants, fruits, minerals, and indigo (Deeksha, 2019). The embroidery further uses only fourteen types of stitches viz., kilen, vele, bakkyia, maki, suryakanti maki, kans,tera dora, kaudi, relo, gadri, bhuriya, pote, jollya and nakra. and their unique combinations that follow geometric patterns of squares, circles, triangles, diagonal, and parallel lines. These varieties of stitches, when arrayed together, convert a simple fabric into a festive array of colours and designs in the forms of blouses called 'cholis' or 'kanchukis', embedded with square mirrors, metal bells (ghungroos), and coins, forming a strip called 'taagli'. The women also use a single large mirror surrounded by smaller ones, known as 'peti' at the lower end of their blouse. The affluence of the attire gets enhanced with the use of matching or contrasting 'odhani' or scarfs, decorated with mirrors, beads, ghungroos, cowries, and coins covering their head and tucked into the front of their skirt along complementary jewellery like necklaces, earrings, bangles, and nose rings. They also wear bangles covering their forearms made of ivory and horns of stag, which are now made in plastic since their sources are rare. Lambani art of hand-weaving, wearing ornaments, and their inclination toward bright clothes make them easily identifiable. Married women wear bangles large enough to fit the space between the elbow and shoulders. The spinsters do not follow this ornamentation. Their attires are made of a heavy quantity of textiles varying between two to five kilograms. Their dress includes a kanchali (blouse), Lunga or phetiya (skirt) made of stout coarse printed material, and an oni (head scarf), often embroidered and decorated with coin-like silver jewellery. Women normally wear silver ornaments like Baliya (bangles worn on upper arms), panchela (bracelets/bangles), karautiya (anklets), kardhani/kamarbandh (waist chains), har/cheed/kante/lallihar (necklaces), haasli/(necklaces made of coins), bhuriya (nose ring), kolda (ankle-rings), kniya (earrings), gogrichotla (hangings on either side of parted hair), winte (finger rings), gedi /mettalu (toe rings), and patli (necklace made of black beads and metal pendants). These ornaments are made of myriad weighty elements varying between 10-40 tolas of silver. Along with beautification, ornaments are intended to create a rhythmic tinkling sound when women walk, so hollow lead balls are filled in the jewellery. Lambani women use gold jewellery on special occasions. They wear bhooria (gold nose stud) at the time of marriage, and it also symbolizes honour of the marital status of women.

Lambani men, too, add to their exclusive culture. They wear a dhoti/chera on the lower part of the body, a kurta/angarkha on the upper part of the body, and a red or white colour pheta/safa (turban) on their head. Men in the Lambani community wear silver ornaments like halsari (necklaces), kada (bracelets), and bhuri (earrings).

Lambani community is recognized as a group of art lovers. They not only decorate their looks by wearing colourful fabric and jewellery but also tattoo their body with various motifs and designs. Tattoos are imprinted on hands, arms, legs, necks, faces, and backs using soot, charcoal, or plant extracts. The standard designs include dots, geometric patterns, floral motifs, and sacred symbols. Tattoos symbolize identity, wading of the evil eye, beauty, and spiritual beliefs.

Statement of the Problem

Lambani handicrafts are an expression of artistry and mark an identity to the entire community. These crafts hold social and economic importance as well within the community. The distinctiveness of this art is supported by intellectual property rights protection through Geographical Indication (GI) which has helped gain recognition beyond the community's horizons. The impact of the modern lifestyle and other job opportunities has been affecting the continuity of this art among the community's younger generation. Limited access to raw materials, poor marketing linkages, and dedicated hours of skilled labour hinder the attractiveness of this art. Research in the study on Lambani handicrafts aims to document traditional techniques, patterns, and motifs to ensure their preservation for future generations, help in identifying strategies to improve market access, and develop sustainable business models to enhance the economic viability of this art to help in adapting and adopting modern market demands, and create contemporary products without disrupting its traditional essence; help the artisans, especially the women to face challenges in the form of lack of recognition, inadequate pricing and competition from machine-made

products, creating tribal women entrepreneurs, empowering them financially, and boost up cultural identity of a region. This case-based research describes the problems Lambani artisans face in the Kalaburagi thanda and Tari thandain the Kalaburagi district of Karnataka.

Objectives of the Study

1. To discover reasons behind the fading of Lambani arts in Kalaburagi thanda of Aland taluk.
2. To examine the influence of handicraft production on the livelihood, economic status, and empowerment of artisans, particularly women in Tari thanda of Shahabad taluk.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since time immemorial, Lambani people have been passing on their Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) (Hess & Strobel, 2013) to their younger generation within their community, deeply inter-woven with their social and natural environment (Sahu, B., and Tiwary, A.R, 2024). Indigenous Knowledge System is specialized local knowledge, technical expertise, social norms, values, and conventions that have been developed and passed over generations verbally or through life's experiences (Agrawal, 1995). Crafts, songs, stories, and experiences reflect the rich cultural legacy of a community (Sillitoe, 1998). Indigenous Knowledge Systems protect cultural values and practices against modernization and globalization (Battiste & Henderson, 2005). UNESCO in its 2012 resolution set its precepts for preserving the intangible cultural heritage that is on the extinction threshold due to the adoption of modern-day practices by societies. Lambani artistry is an epitomic repository of cultural knowledge and historical memory (Narayan, 2019). Lambani women- the primary custodians of this art and skill ensure the passing down of the artistic legacy to their female heirs within their families and communities as a reflection of their historic saga (Gowda & Nataraj, 2017). Lambani handicrafts not only represent the unique identity of the community but are also a means to financial empowerment, enhance their household income, and improve their social strata (Mehta, 2019). In other words, the Lambani arts assert their cultural identity on the one hand and build economic independence on the other (Chawla et al., 2017). This art claims its peculiarity in the vibrant colours and symbolic pieces represented in various stitches and motifs reflecting the beliefs, values, and traditions of the Lambani community (Klamer & Petrova, 2007). Despite its beauty, this craft faces the challenge of being discontinued due to the time spent, efforts needed, and delicate intricacy of the skill. Commercialization of art and adaptation to market demands is sought to be a diligent way to rejuvenate its cultural integrity. Innovating handicrafts according to market requirements not only provides much-needed economic opportunities to the primary artisans but can also dilute cultural authenticity in an attempt to fit the art into commercial requirements (Frater, 2024). Yet, extending the horizons of the market for Lambani art is a medication for the sustainable survival of this craft (Sen 2018). Preserving these Indigenous factors is a continuous process of adaptation and reinterpretation of traditional motifs to ensure their relevance in the contemporary context (Gowda & Nataraj, 2017).

Study of Kadaganchi Thanda and Tari thanda

Lambani people usually dwell in locations that are away from the mainstream localities. They are community-oriented and live in clusters of small numbers varying from 250- 750, called "Thandas". Kadaganchithanda is a small group of 300-400 living in the Kadaganchi village of Aland Taluk in Kalaburagi district. Their community leader, referred to as "Nayak," heads the thanda. Mr. Laksman Chauhan is the Nayak of Kadaganchithanda. Tari Thanda is one of the oldest and largest thanda in North Karnataka. It is located on the outskirts of Shahabad taluk for the last ninety years and has a population of 3000 dwellers. Mr. Ravindra Naik is the leader of the community. The Nayak and a group of wise people lead the community in all matters of importance, such as societal well-being, political discussions, and religious ceremonies. This group resolves conflicts among its members and rarely approaches the police system. Lambanis are peace-loving and nature-dependent people. They are believed to have settled in places close to wild areas to make their livelihood by selling the produce from the forests. Over the years, younger generations of this nomadic community decided to live a settled life in the migrated areas. They adopted professions closely linked to nature, such as farming, animal (cattle, goats, sheep, poultry) rearing, and herbs and shrubs collection for personal and medicinal use. Having accepted settled domains, Lambani people adopted and adapted their cultural practices to the culture of the region in which they lived.

Every Thanda follows the universal system of speaking their own Lambani / Banjara language. Though this language does not have a script of its own, it adopts the script of the regional language to be written. In other words, Kadaganchithanda, located in Kadaganchi village, uses Kannada to communicate in written form, and any other thanda in Telangana uses Telugu to write Lambani language. Though being far from every other thanda, Lambani people have standard practices in following an androcentric system of society, praying to Goddess Bhavani as their main deity, performing all rituals in birth, marriage, and death as per the Hindu religion, and a strong belief in the teachings of the 18th C.E. Saint Sevalal Maharaj whose Jayanti is celebrated on 15th February every year. They celebrate all the Hindu festivals, Dussehra, Diwali, Ugadi, Holi, and Ganesh Chaturthi. The only difference one finds in each thanda is their food habits, which vary according to the crops cultivated in the regions. Else, their staple diet consists of daliya, bati (roti), saloi (made from the intestines of goat/sheep), ghuggari (boiled red gram), ragi, bajra, chicken, and green leafy veggies.

Kadaganchi Thanda

KadaganchiThanda of Kadaganchi village has adopted a life of convenience. Their main source of income is from working as labourers either in the fields owned by others or by migrating to bigger cities like Mumbai to work as labours. Both men and women have adopted similar income-earning practices. Their socio-cultural practices are followed by the community elders, and the younger generations have gotten used to society's general practices. The families no longer stitch their traditional attires. They purchase clothing and other products symbolizing their unique identity from a few vendors who make and sell in the selected weekly markets or fairs. Some of the selected markets are found in Aland and Shahabad. Women, who are the roots of Lambani culture, have stopped passing their unique art to their younger ones. Instead, they have accepted the convenient dress of contemporary society and have restricted their traditional wear, either during marriages or religious ceremonies. This change of thought, supported by the cost of acquiring the raw materials, time consumption for making each of the artistry pieces, a decline in demand for traditional products, and the physical and psychological stress that does not equalize the profit from the earnings, have stopped the women from continuing and commercializing their handicraft skills. Therefore, the people of Kadaganchi thanda have refrained from tedious hand-crafts to monetary-beneficial labour tasks.

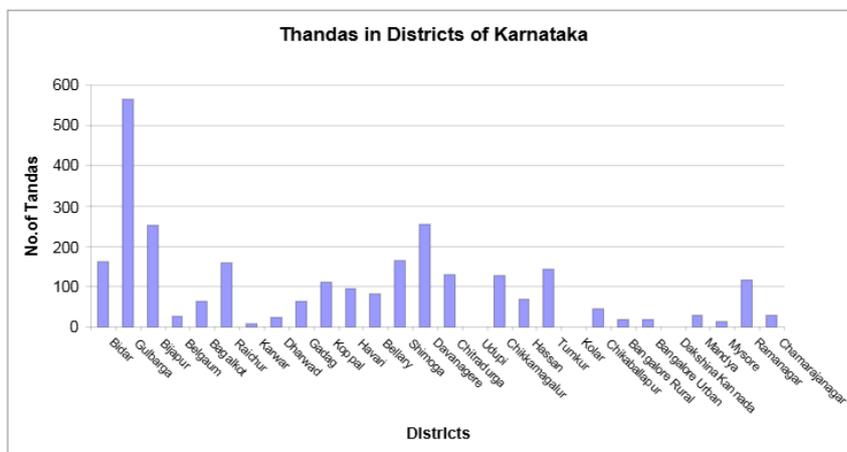
TariThanda

Tari Thanda, one of the oldest thandas in the Kalaburagi region, still upholds its age-old traditional practices. Around twenty families in this thanda are handicraft experts, catering to most of the needs of Lambanis of this region. They produce attires, jewellery, curtains, and many other products for daily use and carry them on their own to the weekly markets for sale. The expected profit margin varies from rupees 1000 to 2000. People from other thandas adhere to Shahabad markets to purchase their needs. The vendors sell their produce to the local residents from their own community and rarely venture out to sell their goods to other customers. They are ignorant of contemporary supply chain management and are self-reliant in procuring the raw materials and meeting the end-customer requirements.

Karnataka Thanda Development Corporation Limited (KTDCL)

The Government of Karnataka set up a wholly owned company, Karnataka Thanda Development Corporation Limited (KTDCL), in 2009, under the Companies Act of 1956 to develop infrastructure facilities and community halls for Banjara / Lambani community in Karnataka. This corporation is under the administrative control of the Social Welfare Department of the Government of Karnataka. The corporation is basically focusing on creating necessary infrastructure facilities like roads, drinking water, sanitation, street lights, self-employment, and group employment, and to create proper awareness and to enhance the morals of the people living in Thanda's and to protect the Banjara dialect and to promote and develop the script of the Banjara language, and also bring out a dictionary of the language to protect, preserve, and promote the rich culture of Banjara in the areas of language, customs, lifestyle, traditions, art and folklore, ethnicity, and costumes of Banjara's in thandas.

FINDINGS, SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION



Source: KTDCL Thanda List, 07.06.2022.

This research was exclusively taken up in the two adjacent thandas of Kalaburagi district. As the above picture shows, Kalaburagi is the land of most of Lambani thandas in Karnataka. A thorough survey revealed the many reasons for the fading of Lambani handicrafts among Kadaganchi and Tari thanda residents. Some of the findings are noted below:

1. The residents of these two thandas are relatively inclined to work as labours in the fields or in the more significant urban areas that fetch them larger monetary gains when compared to the time-consuming, tedious efforts in crafts creation. Women earn Rs.600/- and men earn Rs.800/- daily in the fields. Handcrafting of one costume takes up to 15 days, which fetches them a mere profit of Rs.1500 per piece.
2. Most family members have taken up seasonal migration to cities and rarely return home, making it hard to maintain their handicraft skills.
3. The elderly women alone are left to practice this skill as the younger lack patience and interest in learning the time-consuming processes.
4. Due to the change in their livelihood practices, this community has adopted modern-day wear that is cheaply purchased, conveniently used and does not highlight their belongingness to this tribal community.
5. Lambani handicrafts were traditionally made from handloom cotton, natural dyes, mirrors, ivory, horns of a stag, and the like, which now are rare, costlier, and hard to source. Artisans are using synthetic alternatives that don't maintain the craft's authenticity.
6. As is habituated, thandas are settlements beyond society's limits and, thus, are usually ignorant of the government's policies, training programs, and connectivity to urban markets.
7. The Lambani community is not trained to customize their products to match the contemporary attires and products. This limitation underscores the potentiality of Lambani handicrafts to attract customers beyond their brethren.

The above findings lead to the following suggestions:

1. Lambani handicrafts should be broadly viewed as an Indian art rather than the Lambani community art. The elderly citizens of the community can be approached to conduct inter-generational workshops where the skills of this handicraft can be taught to youngsters of various communities and not restricted to only Lambani people.
2. The artistry of this community should be encouraged only from the commercial point of view. These handicrafts will not get a broader market if their products are limited to their community.
3. The government should initiate centers providing raw materials needed for the Lambani products and help in enhancing the demand for handicraft products by providing incentives to malls that would house the handicraft sales, provide monetary benefits to trainees taking up this skill, and also encouraging the products display in exhibitions, trade fairs, export shows and the like.
4. Lambani artisans should be trained in customizing their artistic skills in making attires befitting modern society. For example, waistcoats, ghagras, chania cholis, headscarves, sofa-covers, chair-covers, and table-tops, to mention a few.
5. Innovation should be encouraged in using machinery and technology in making handicrafts that

would not only lessen the consumption of time but also increase profitability.

6. The Lambani clothing should be re-positioned as ethnic or traditional wear among the general public rather than festive wear limited to the Lambani community. When the demand for Lambani products increases, the community, too, will be attracted to learn back the dying art.

CONCLUSION

India's march towards a 'Viksit Bharat' is an opportunity to include the Indigenous sections of our society in the mainstream development programs. The Lambani community is positioned as a backward and uneducated labour class that stays secluded from the usual group of people. Though the younger generations of this community are venturing out to educate themselves and settling in contemporary employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, the tag of 'underprivileged people' is still stuck on them. As all successful tasks have a humble beginning, this community must also be resilient in crafting their skills, indigenous knowledge systems, and experiences. A hand that helps is better than a mouth that prays is a known proverb; the government, along with educated youngsters, should integrate programs that will alleviate poverty, enhance transport and communication facilities, create sustainable allied agricultural schemes along with animal husbandry, and provide finance services to the marginalized and vulnerable poor that will have a broader impact on the socio-economic wellbeing of this community. Lambani handicrafts are undoubtedly the cultural heritage of India that needs to be protected, nourished, and nurtured – not as an art of backward people but as a legacy of self-sufficient Indigenous citizens.

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