

## THE EMPOWERMENT OF BANJARA WOMEN AND CONSERVATION OF COSTUME HERITAGE THROUGH THE CRAFT CENTRES OF KARNATAKA – A CASE STUDY

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**Abstract:** Empowerment of women is the vital instrument to expand women's ability to have resources and make strategic life choices. It is necessary to ensure the women that they are able to develop their full potential and share the benefits of the economic growth and prosperity.

The Banjaras occupy a special place among the nomadic tribal population of India. They have preserved cultural and folk arts from 2000 years. Its richness of culture and tradition is squarely traceable to its various performing arts and handicrafts. Banjaras are identified by their women folk through their unique artistic, richly embroidered attire which is a hereditary skill trained by their mothers, grandmothers, relatives etc., Their economies over centuries are subjected to drastic changes due to modernization. The traditional fervor is almost vanishing among them and such a stage has come that they will practice their crafts any more only if it is made for winning bread. This can be achieved by organized efforts through proper craft Centre's to naturally inherited skills among the Banjara embroideries.

Development of skills and training increases employability and income generating opportunities and it promotes sustainability in rural development and livelihood. In this regard the two manufacturing units situated in Sandur and Kaddirampura, both in Bellary districts of Karnataka State. The designers here are rendering yeoman's service to halt the erosion of the precious heritage and also working an engine for Women's Empowerment. Against this background this paper is a case study done on two craft training Centre's with the help of participatory appraisal method and interview.

**Key words:** *Banjara women, Costume Heritage, Craft Centre's, Women Empowerment.*

**Introduction:** There is increasing evidence that ensuring rural women's economic empowerment in the developing countries like India could deliver multiple dividends including poverty reduction increase food production and decrease child malnutrition health and hygiene and so on. Yet rural women and girls face several constraints that limit their social and economic opportunities resulting in their helpless condition and hinder development.

The Banjara occupy a special place among the tribal population of India. They have preserved cultural and folk arts for three thousand years. They have retained their dialect and also preserved their distinct culture, customs, age old traditions and their colorful costumes and embroidery. But, after the independence of India, gradually many changes have taken place in Banjara's living styles. They have reformed in their age-old traditions and costumes and started taking up education and economic activities due to governments' special facilities and privileges. Enormous changes brought about by various interventions and influences of modernity characterized by rationality, scientific temper, governmentality and market economy are also seemingly contributing yet posing formidable challenges to its costume based identity formations. Conversely, most of the traditional aspects are vanishing and shedding their traditional costumes fast. It's Richness of culture and tradition is squarely traceable to its various performing arts and handicrafts. Banjara's embroidery especially had

succeeded in gaining global attention during colonial regime itself. It is interesting to note that William Crooke noticed that though the colonial rule marginalized and vilified Banjara group, the aesthetic category of Banjaras did not decline in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, it rather kept reinventing itself on different terrains, in landscape community, groups, and not least, history. William Crooke in 1918 also has used a European lady to exposit the picturesque beauty of Banjara women's' dress and other accessories<sup>1</sup>.

The identity of Banjara Community lies in needle work. It is not only a foundation for aesthetic costume culture, a direction for fashion technology but also an engine for women's empowerment. To retrieve the space for Banjaras and their embroidery continues to be an uphill task in the age of globalization and fashion technology. The two manufacturing units situated in Sandur and Kaddirampura both in Bellary District of Karnataka state, India and the designers here, with the motto of empowering the women and preserving their heritage, rendering yeoman's service to halt the erosion of a precious costume heritage. Hence in this paper I have attempted to trace The Empowerment of Banjara Women and Conservation of Costume Heritage through the Craft Centre's of Karnataka

**Methodology:** This study is product of primary and secondary sources. Data collected from the books and articles and data generated by survey method, participatory appraisal method and interview

schedule has been used to write this research paper. Scope of this paper includes the role of two Banjara Embroidery centers where Banjara hamlets or Tandas are situated more in number.

**Conceptualization:**

**The Banjara Women:** The Banjara Women especially toiled hard and sweat as reckonable work force to match with the energetic souls of their male counterparts. This is the reason why E Thurston<sup>2</sup> rightly characterized their strength and inhospitable conditions under which they were put to work. His observation is worth noting: “Banjara Women drive the cattle and are the most robust we ever saw in India, undergoing a great deal of labour with apparent ease. Their dress is peculiar and their ornaments singularly chosen, they had to go in hill and forest tracks difficult to access”. These women have been playing a vital role in selling forest products to the city dwellers to generate income essential for their subsistence and family management. Their traditional pattern of dress and ornaments had capacity to attract buyers attention and generate demand for their products, their fascinating and fashionable attire and look have given a distinct identity to them and the community. In other words, this community is identified by the women at large.

**Costume Heritage:** A style of dress, including garments, accessories and hair styles especially as characteristics of particular country or people. Heritage can refer to practices or characteristics that are passed down through the years from one generation to the next. Signaling the ethnic membership Banjara Costumes are designed for a nomadic life style<sup>3</sup>. The Banjara Woman’s traditional dress is rich in art and esthetics. It’s complicated and delicate workmanship is vivid from the fact that their costume is stitched together of gaiety colored material. The cloths of the Banjara woman are indirect contrast to their hard life. They stitch their garments on their own that they have learnt from their mothers and grand- mothers, is a real traditional art of India, which is a precious folk art and great heritage of India.

**Women Empowerment:** This refers to the creation of an environment for women where they can make decisions of their own for their personal benefits. In this regard the two Craft Centre’s are aiming to revive the dying art on one hand on the other hand ensuring women empowerment.

**Brief Profile of Banjara’s Costume:** Thurston E. opined that, “Banjara dress is peculiar and their ornaments are singularly chosen that we have, we are confident seen women who have had 8 to 10 pounds weight in metal or ivory round their arm and legs”<sup>4</sup>. A French writer Theotouches observed that It is rather incredible, but true that the Banjara gypsy, sleeping

or walking carries ornaments weighing 10 to 12 pounds in spite of oppressive load, heavily embroidered garments, her movements are easy graceful and even stately.

The traditional dress consists of **Kaanchali**, the blouse or bodice, **Phetiya**, the skirt which falls below the knee and the head veil known as Pamadi or **Chantiya**.

**1. Kaanchali:** Kanchali is a word derived from a Sanskrit word ‘kanchuki’, the upper part of the body. First cloths by a Kaanchali. It is a colourful and back less bodice with short sleeves. The Kaanchali unlike the ordinary blouses is made up of several pieces of different color fabrics and each of these parts is richly embroidered with thread work, beads, tassels, coins, mirrors, bells etc. There are four flaps with mirror work fall upon the breast and shoulders. They were to protect the breast and the shoulders as the ladies were also wearing bows and arrows and they were warriors in times of danger<sup>5</sup>. The back of the blouse has cords, which are tied at the to keep the bodice tight. It should be noted here today in most of the female dresses. There is a cord to tie back.

**2. Phetiya:** This skirt consists of Lepo which is a thick cloth about 6 inches in width and long enough to round the waist. The whole band is richly embroidered with mirrors and beads. It has a cord for knotting by overlapping. The next piece of Phetiya is Ghero which is black or blue in colour attached to the Lepo is a patched cloth. The last part of Phetiya is called Lawan a border which is also decorated in different ways. Each piece is made separately by hand and then stitched.

**3. Chantiya:** The head veil is the covering piece which is tucked at the waist and taken from below the arm and is thrown over the head on to the right shoulder. This helps to cover the naked back. This veil has three pieces where one is attached to the cloth heavily decorated with mirrors and small bells. As this is heavy it helps to keep the veil over the head without falling and adds beauty to the costume.

**Role of the centers and its designers in promoting and preserving the languish art:** The Banjara Women of Ballary District have no source of income but work as daily labourers in sugar cane fields, caring for the family and tanning the Cattle. Another source of income is from the sale of Banjara embroidery costumes of low quality to the local tourist or foreigners. The traditional intricacy and quality of the craft as well as the diversity of the patterns, are slowly disappearing. Thus in order to improve the standard of living of skilled women the two Centre’s, Sandur Kala Kushala Kendra and Surya Garden are playing a conjured role bringing social and commercial benefits to the artisan settlement. They not only aim to revive ancient skills and to produce

meticulous work but also provide Lambani women with financial freedom and a sense of solidarity.

**a. Sandur Kushal Kala Kendra (Centre for Handicrafts) :** Sandur falls in Bellary district, North-East of Karnataka, India. Under the wise initiation of Mahalakshmi Ghorpadey, this centre is started in Sandur in 1980 is a source of strength and succor for Banjara woman and their art. Started with a humble embroiders. Now 335 artisans where 300 embroideres, 25 tailors, 10 weavers and 6 dyers are working in the centre. Wherein more than 300 Banjara women inhabiting around the centre are making use of the employment opportunities from the centre. The workmanship of the embroidery work has generated huge demand for ready wear textile companies. This centre has been given Intellectual property Rights in recognition.

Below mentioned are the different activities and number of artisans involved

**Earnings by artisans:** The lambani artisans are paid for their works on piece rate system and they earn about Rs. 3,500 – 5,500 per month which includes 12% PF contribution, 8.33% Annual Bonus and Rs. 2500/- worth subsidized ration on almost free of cost.

**Production and Turnover:** The Mirror and Embroidery handicrafts worth Rs. 80 to 90 lakhs being produced and sold per annum. About 20-30% of the production is being exported to different nations like USA, UK, Australia, Japan, Netherlands etc. In total there is a turn over of Rs.1 crore and above per annum.

**Shanthi Bai<sup>6</sup>:** Shanthi Bai is one of the major designers of this centre who started her carrier at the age of 16. An illiterate who took a training under a Christian missionary in tailoring which inspired her later to join the centre. Laila Tybaji an international designer recognized the talent of Shanti Bai gave a piece of cloth and the thread to prepare an innovatively deigned wall hanging for the national award competition. She very well won the award. Alongside she won national master craft award from Sweden and also DCH trainer award. When asked her about the Banjara women art, she emotionally said, “I have undergone lots of pain, insult, agony as born in a poor family, though an illiterate I had zeal of learning and creating novel. This centre gave me an opportunity to enhance my creativity. I want my fellow women to shed their inferiority and come out stand work so as to gain confidence to lead a descent life, send their children school and to empower themselves”<sup>7</sup>.

#### **Abroad Tours:**

- Ms. Shanti Bai and Ms. Gowri Bai & Ms. Parvati Bai artisans from Susheelanar Thanda, Sandur Taluk have developed an embroidered panel with the guidance of Ms. Laila Tybaji, Chairperson, Dastkar a Society for Craftspeople, New Delhi.

They were invited by Boras Konst Museum, Sweden and to participate in the opening of the show ‘Sites of Resources and a seminar related to the show. The event was held during 6-12 September 2003.

- Mrs. Shanta Bai had been to Barcelona, Spain for one month during the year 2004 to participate in the India Exhibition conducted by M/s Asian Heritage Foundation, New Delhi with DC (Handicrafts) grants.
- Ms. Gowri Bai and Ms, Shanta Bai have been developed the wall hanging with design input from Dastakar, New Delhi and demonstrated the piece by participating in the workshops conducted by Borus museum in Dakshina Chitra, Chennai and also in Sweden in the year 2003.
- Ms Gowri Bai Lambani artisan has been sponsored for the Dilli Haat Exposition at Trafalgar Square and the workshop at Nehru Centre, London UK during the period 16<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> June, 2005 by Dilli Haat & Dastakari Haat Samiti, New Delhi.
- Participated in Global Folk Art Market, Santa Fe, New Mexico, US continuously since 2006 to undergo marketing workshop and marketing of traditional lambani handicrafts. We have been received sponsorship for one Lambani artisan continuously for the three years viz., 2006 & 2007 for Ms Shanti Bai, 2008 for Ms Lakshmi Bai Megyawat and 2009 for Ms Gowri Bai.

#### **Achievements and Awards:**

- Ms.Shanta Bai has been won National Award for best craftswomen for the year 2000 and she has participated in the Indian fair at Barcelona, Spain during May 2004.
- Ms.Laxmi bai has been participated in the Indo-Pak design development work shop conducted by Asian Heritage Foundation, New Delhi under the grant scheme of DC(H). She has also participated in the International Design Development program conducted by DC (H), CCI and UNESCO recently in New Delhi.
- Ms Gowri Bai, Lambani artisan has been awarded National Award for Excellence in the field of KVI by Ministry of A & R, KVIC for the year 2006.
- Ms K. Seethavva, Lambani artisan has been awarded best Crafts person State Award by KSHDC, Govt. of Karnataka for the year 2004-05.
- The UNESCO has awarded us a SEAL OF EXCELLENCE certificate for the hand embroidered products produced by SKKK.
- All India Artisans and Craft workers Welfare Association , (AIACA) New Delhi has awarded us the Craftmark certificate for the mirror and embroidery handicrafts.

**b. Surya Gardens:** Surya’s Garden is a trust founded by Laxmi Naik in 2008 is a Banjara from Hampi in

Karnataka. It is an yet another handicraft centre started with the vision of empowering the women and preserving their heritage at Kaddirampura, Bellary District. Started in 2002 the centre started with a humble beginning comprising 8 needle workers. Today the centre employees over 80 embroiders grouped in 3 main teams at Kaddirampura, Seetharama and Mariyammanahalli Thanda's which are Banjara hamlets. The centre is based on fair trade which trains up the apprentice embroiders and provides threads and drawings of traditional patterns to help them ply their trade. The naturally gifted needle workers are paid for completed pieces also receiving a percentage from the proceeds on sales alongside free access to medical care.

**Laxmi Bai<sup>8</sup>** : The founder president and the proprietor of the Surya Gardens situated in Kaddirampura is also a Banjara Woman. Humble in education but excelled in her art, metamorphosed herself into an internationally recognized embroidery designer. Her life took a leap after she married a French man Jan. She got an opportunity in 2012 where Maiwa foundation has organized a major exhibition in Vancouver, Canada. Laxmi Bai was invited to inaugurate the exhibition and to conduct some sessions on Banjara embroidery. Her interaction with the participants in the exhibition helped in winning publicity, popularity and marketability of this art. Thenceforth the centre has been receiving pouring orders from Canada and elsewhere. Through this initiative Laxmi aims to revive ancient skills and to produce meticulous work. "Each piece that is produced is unique and the quality of embroidery demonstrates the vitality of the rediscovered motifs," Says Laxmi.

Apart from this employment oriented scheme, a small library of Lambani documents related with Lambani-Banjara culture and a systematic recording of traditional patterns has been initiated. The Trust gives work to around twenty-five Lambani-Banjara women. "We provide them with materials, and patterns and most of the ladies work from home at the moment. A part of the proceeds will be used to build a community workshop, a medical center for the embroiderers and a school for the children. This will provide Lambani women with financial freedom, a sense of solidarity as well as an assertion of their ancestral identity,"<sup>9</sup> she adds. Surya's Garden produces some of the most exquisitely hand embroidered and patch-worked products using only natural fibers and primarily natural dyes. they make one-of-a-kind hand-stitched panels for cushions, dresses, skirts, kurtas, trousers, bags and children's clothes.

She further adds, "There are 13 colours that are mostly used in Lambani embroidery, out of which; red and

blue are most common. The base cloth used is either cotton khadi or power loom fabric and is also dyed locally. Although most of the fabric is dyed using chemical colours, vegetable dyes made from Kattha, Rathanjot, Chawal Kudi, Pomegranate peel is very popular,"

**Conclusion** : From the foregoing, it may be derived that Banjara costume heritage blooming out of constantly pricking needle work, blood and brain of creative women is equally a vivid manifestation of modernity which itself is nothing but the reflection and continuation of a tradition. Banjara community and its costume art have concomitantly experienced a historic transition in pre colonial, colonial and post colonial phases. The pro active role and contribution of Sandur Handicraft Centre's workmanship in embroidery have won it a coveted Intellectual Property Rights (article 27 of TRIPS agreements origin of geographical indication.) and Surya Garden's of Kaddirampura in promoting and preserving Banjara's embroidery art are illustrious. These Centre's interventions not only helped in elevating a local art to global one but also aided in the economic empowerment and optimum utilization of creative human resources of the Banjara women. Similarly, the pioneering leadership given by two designers namely Shanthi Bai and Laxmi Bai in designing and developing of this art is not only admirable but also worthy of emulation. Westernization, sedentrisation, urbanization, education, cultural movement for Banjara community's political formation and ethnic identity, policies of the Indian government, globalization and fashion technology have proved to be major determinants in effecting changes in the patterns of this costume heritage. Shifts in using the materials are supplementary to the growth of this art. Community people's mad rush for using ultra modern costumes flooding in globalization inspired local markets however may hinder the future growth of this art in leaps and bounds.

#### **Suggestions:**

To halt the possible erosion of this art some following suggestions may be given:

1. Besides UNESCO's support and encouragement, various governments and global, national and local textiles companies should come forward to give orders for embroidery.
2. Still more number of centers in and around the Banjara hamlets may be set up to promote and harness the creative genius.
3. Banjara Embroidery Course may be promoted into a recognized a subaltern course into fashion technology.
4. Banjara community people besides the cinema actors have to play the role of the ambassadors in wearing and popularizing this rich costume to save this rich heritage from possible erosion.



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