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A review study on Banjara embroidery of Maharashtra

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Abstract

Traditional craft is often associated with intangible heritage. Behind each crafted object lie stories on how a particular culture has lived and flourished depicting their rich heritage. Traditional heritage is a living body of knowledge that is developed, sustained and passed on from generation to generation within a community, often forming part of its cultural or spiritual identity. Banjaras in Maharashtra is famous for making exquisite embroidery that reflects their cultural values, regional sensibilities, beliefs and identity. Banjara embroidery is a poem in multicolor, written with needle having long, rich and complex history with indigenous design vocabularies. Though this craft has its own origin and distinction with rich embroidery work, no attempt has been made so far in an organized manner to preserve the craft and for establishing arts and crafts centers as has been done for other traditional communities in India. This study thus focuses on documenting the lesser known craft of embroidery as done by Banjara people of Maharashtra before it gets extinct or completely forgotten.

Keywords: banjara, embroidery, sustainable, Maharashtra, tanda

1. Introduction

The Banjaras are the gypsy people having a great history which dates back more than 500 years tracing their origin to their original homeland of Rajasthan. As per the most popular belief, Banjaras were responsible for carrying on the important task of transporting military supplies for the Mughal army and other household commodities to different parts of the country. They fulfilled the important work of communications and means of transportation in those days. As per Edgar (1909) the term Banjara literally denotes a profession of transportation and does not indicate any particular caste or race. He also mentioned that Banjaras seldom or never mix with other tribes and used to travel great distances along the length and breadth of Indian subcontinent. The Banjaras, being nomads for centuries prior to the British advent in Indian sub-continent use to carry food grains from one corner of India to another but after the dawn of British rule, the demand for their transporting commodities gradually dwindled. The change occurred due to the introduction of railways and automobiles which made these Banjaras settle in various parts of the country engaging themselves in occupations like cultivating small pieces of lands. Today, they work as labourers on road and building construction and are also engaged in animal husbandry and poultry farming. A large number of Banjaras resides in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra. Many Banjaras have settled in parts of Northern Karnataka, and are also known as Lambanis, Lamani, Labhan and Sugali etc. The Banjaras now inhabits small settlements known as Tandas, a name originally applied to the caravans they used when they led a nomadic life.

Banjaras are very aesthetic people and their entire life's philosophy of being carefree and happy is reflected on their dresses and ornaments. The term costume did not only mean the dress but it was a collective word which was derived from the word customs and includes the dress as a whole with Jewellery, hairstyles, headdresses, footwear and other accessories. The costume of Banjara women is embroidered with bright rainbow-colored fabrics covered with a mosaic of patchwork and mirrors. The color and embellishment of these embroidered textiles reflects their love of life evolved across the centuries to suit local climatic, social and cultural conditions. Traditionally, this embroidery is done elaborately on personal items of girls to be married, on different household accessories and also for adornment of domesticated animals.

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Banjara embroidery is usually combined with mirror work to produce a unique narrative that has evolved over time. There was no mass production and commercial exploitation of these items, and the craft was solely pursued for domestic or household purposes only. Though the tandas are established a long time back but there is very scattered written records and description of them available. The tandas in Karnataka have received enough attention but the Banjaras residing in various parts of Maharashtra are still living the life of oblivion with no major attention given and due to which this craft is gradually vanishing. The Banjara women of Maharashtra, are holding steadfast to their ancient tradition but no attempt has been made so far in an organized manner to preserve the craft and for its commercial exploitation by establishing arts and crafts centers as has been done for other traditional communities in India.

2. Banjaras in Maharashtra

In Maharashtra, the Banjaras are spread prominently in Khandesh, Vidarbha and Marathwada regions and to some extent in Solapur district. There are approximately 15 tandas in Khandesh taluka and three Villages in Jalgaon district viz. Ichchhapur and Ghodegaon in Challisgaon tahsil and Vasantnagar in Parola tahsil where banjaras resides. These Banjaras are involved in the buffalo rearing, farming and working as labourers for their livelihood whereas, the women folks are engaged in Banjara embroidery as a household art. It is estimated that these tandas have a limited number of people, engaged in the art. The name of the few tandas is

Gondhej Tanda, Dharmapuri Tanda, Dabunaik Tanda, Kewla Tanda, Kashiram Tanda, Mahadev Tanda, Ramnaik Tanda, Poma Tanda, Gananyak Tanda, Dharmapuri Tanda, and Gulabwadi Tanda.

A unique facet of the costume of the Banjara woman is its elaborate embroidery which is usually combined with mirror work to produce the glitter and colour that are integral parts of the Banjara costume. The costume of the Banjara women which reflects their love of life comprised of Lehenga, Choli and Odhni. Today, the Banjara women especially the elder generation consider their tradition close to their hearts and they wear their traditional costumes daily and engage in the production of their requirements of garments and other items themselves. The younger generation however, generally considering their traditional costumes unfashionable has switched over to the modern dresses like saris, skirts and blouses.

2.1 Banjara embroidery

The Banjara embroidery involves needle work on small pieces of cloths which are later joined together to make the finished products. As mentioned earlier, the Banjara females alone are practicing this craft and they are engaged in this work in their leisure time after finishing their household chores. Their work is sought after for using the unusual technique of sewing hundreds of small mirrors into the compositions. Each embroidered piece depicts an aspect of the Banjara myths and stories.



Fig 1: Banjara embroidery samples

3. Banjara Embroidery: The Banjara embroidery is an amalgam of pattern darning, mirror work, cross stitch, overlaid and quilting stitches with patchwork and appliqué, done on loosely woven dark blue or red handloom base fabric. They create decorative embroidered patterns on their attire with just a simple needle. A total of fourteen types of stitches are used in Banjara embroidery, namely: Kilian, Vele, Backyad, Maki, Suryakanti Maki, Kans, Tera Dora, Saudi, Relo, Gadri, Bhuriya, Pote, Jolly and Nakra. Many stitches, works as squares, circles, triangles, rectangles, diagonal lines, and parallel lines, thus adopting a geometric pattern. The fabric becomes a festive display of colors and patterns on its surface as several lines of various stitches are arrayed

together. Interestingly, Banjara embroidery sometimes uses smocking stitch styles, usually used in Europe on children's dresses. These embroidery stitches are finally embellished by the profuse use of beads, small cowrie shells (sea shells), mirrors, metal buttons, ghungroo, and even low denomination coins which are held together in a garland of stitches that embellish the edges of the piece. The stitches are subtle and close to each other with a wide variety of colored threads. One of the key feature of the appliqué work are making of small triangle shapes with small pieces of clothes with the sides being neatly turned in. These appliqué triangles specially feature as borders and create a charming pattern.

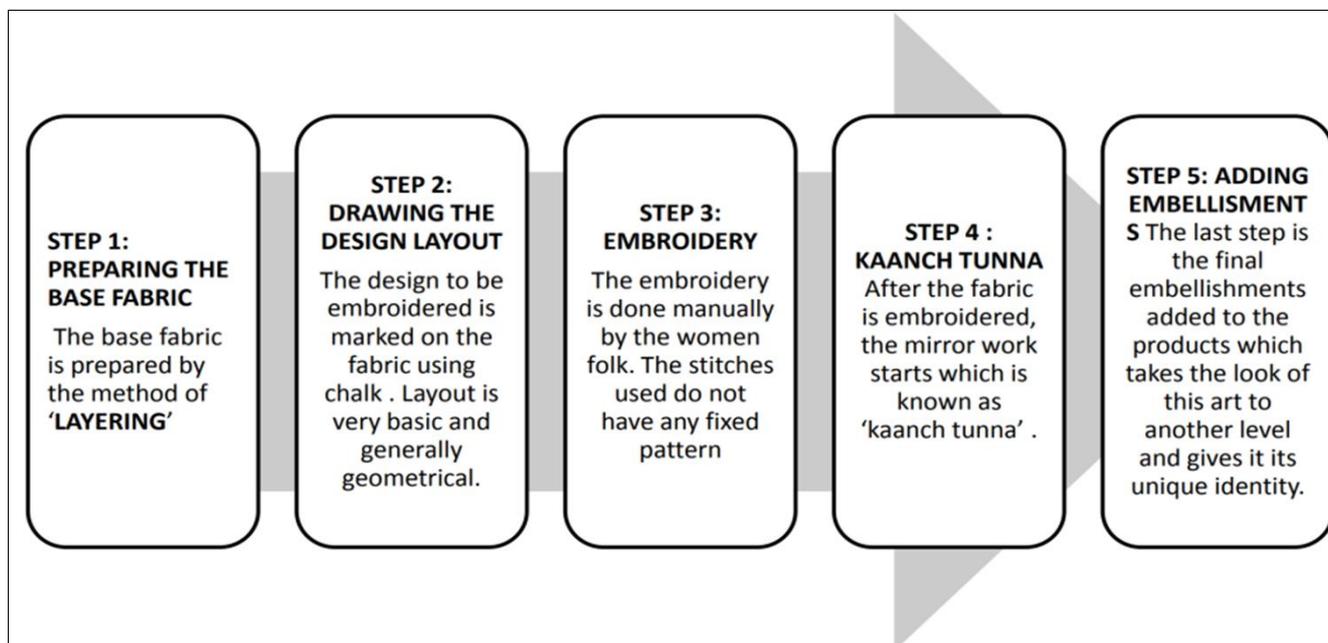


Fig 2: Steps followed in the Banjara embroidery work

There are a range of products produced by using Banjara embroidery

- Phetia or the skirt is generally of red and blue colour in coarse cotton cloth. Phetia is embroidered profusely on the border and tied on the waist covering half of the body below the waist. The Phetia worn by Banjara women comprises of four parts and the top belt portion is known as lepo. It serves as a cloth belt attached to the main portion of the skirt known as ghero. Ghero is the main portion of the phetia and Banjara women exhibit their skill of embroidery and appliqué with varied motifs on it. The portion below ghero is known as sabab for which a fine textured cotton fabric is used whereas the last portion of the skirt is known as lawan which is also a masterpiece of exquisite embroidery work. The skirt usually reached upto the ankle thus giving a glimpse of all the ornaments worn in the feet. The skirt is quite different from the ghagra in a manner that it had a wide belt of intricate patchwork design resting over the waist. Small round mirrors are also used to adorn the skirt including the belt giving it a very vibrant look. Phetia is either pleated or gathered up at the waist and on the right side of the waist, hung a cord which is used for tying up the phetia and is ornamented with cowrie shells and beads.
- Kanchali/ kanchidi is worn as an upper garment of the body. It is a close fitting garment which covers the breasts of the women leaving their backs bare, where it is tied with cords. The ends of the cords are ornamented with cowrie shells, beads and tassels called phoonda. A typical kanchali if observed closely has many distinguished features as compared to other ordinary blouses. Kanchali is rich in embroidery with heavy needle work and is generally red in colour. The front part is the main portion of a kachali and it consists of three parts viz. chhati, peti and Bahi.
- Chatiya is a veil which measures about two and a half in length and one and half meters in width. It is draped in such a way that it provided an effective cover for the upper body and also covered the back of the wearer. One end of the chatiya is tucked in the phetia at the left side, went over the head and hung loose on the right shoulder. It is also made of same coarse cloth as the phetia and has

an elaborate border adorned with beads, mirrors, ghungroo and embroidery. The maximum embellishment on chatiya is done on the part where the veil covers the head and the forehead to make a frame around the face.

- Zolana is a bag with exquisite embroidery work and a long strap to hang it over the shoulder. The zolana is embellished with cowrie shells, pom poms and tassels made of colorful woolen yarns on the edges.
- Ghalna, (gala- phulia) is a headgear, with a pot ring and an embroidered panel that hangs down at the back side of the head. It is heavily adorned with mirrors and coins.
- Chunchi is a small bag containing 3 or 4 pockets used to keep betel leaves, betel nuts and tobacco etc.
- Khalchi is a square shaped bag which is used in the kitchen to keep the bread (Bhakari).
- Darani is a small piece of fabric artistically decorated with embroidery work, used in household to cover the dough of wheat ready for making chappati during festive occasions.
- Gadano is a a square piece of fabric which is used as a dish cover for drinking water pots and dishes containing eatables. This is generally made to be used during festive occasions and marriage ceremonies.
- Pat is a board game which is made on fabric with the use of embroidery and appliqué work. Different games like chess are made on it to be played by women as an indoor game in their leisure time.
- Kothali is a small bag used for keeping money, other personal belongings and the raw materials required for the embroidery work. This bag is used generally by older women.
- Kothalo is a sack like big shopping bag with minimalist quilting work and embroidery. This bag is used while the Banjaras go out for shopping.
- Chandiya is a triangular piece of cloth very heavily and intricately embroidered for decorating the forehead of bulls.



Fig 3: Banjara women wearing traditional costume and jewellery
Pic courtesy: <https://in.pinterest.com/pin/355995545529974589/>



Fig 6: Chandiya is a triangular piece of cloth for the forehead of bulls



Fig 4: Gadano, which is used to cover drinking water pots



Fig 5: Ghalna (gala-phulia) is a headgear, with a pot ring and an embroidered panel

Apart, from the costume, jewellery worn by Banjara women is also of great importance and is an integral part of the women's costume. The Banjara women are fond of ornaments which are part of their everyday costume. The Banjaras favoured valuable metal like silver, brass, bell metals, mix of five metals (panchdhatu) and stones for jewellery. They had distinctive ornaments for specific functions also.

4. Scenario at present

Banjara embroidery follow the process of passing on the knowledge about the craft from generation to generation by word of mouth and by the process of being involved in the activity right from childhood and therefore, there is no documentation of design or process. The Banjaras residing in Karnataka are in the process of getting uplifted but the Banjaras of Maharashtra is still living in oblivion due to lack of availability of sufficient facts and figures. As Grobar, (2017) points out that a key weakness in measurement of exactness in handicrafts sector is non-availability of data. This craft is still been practiced as a household art and there have been practically no efforts to bring it to the mainstream. Moreover, currently the textile and craft sector carries the stigma of inferiority and backwardness, and is viewed as decorative, peripheral and elitist. This is compounded by the Government's treatment of crafts as a sunset industry, which has resulted in a lack of well-developed policies and programs to protect and strengthen the ecosystem for artisans.

The reason specific to Banjara embroidery is further compounded by the lack of cohesiveness amongst the artisans, who tended to live in the secluded pockets and resist any offer of assistance from an outside agency. All the artisans living in the tandas belongs to the unorganized sector as they do not have a common channel or place to buy their raw material, to showcase their products and also to discuss their potential problems. On the positive side, the artisans of the tandas have heroically always hold on to their ancient beliefs and practices which give them strength and identity and a sense of pride and have not lost their skill of specialized art. But on the other side it is very essential to propagate this art with an objective of preserving this exquisite craft.

There are some NGOs working with Banjaras to help preserve their ancient needlework tradition but that is also unorganized and order based. The Banjaras have been encouraged by NGOs to create their traditional embroidery on products that would appeal to an urban client. The need of the hour is to recognize, and incorporate ways of overcoming, various

inherent limitations of raw materials, material sourcing, design and product interpretation capabilities, processes and skills, thus aiming towards achieving a more sustainable channel. This craft is in need of an intervention on a large scale as it will not only provide employment to artisans of Banjara crafts, but people from non-craft base also earn their livelihood by associating themselves with this craft.

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