



CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

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The human impulse towards expression of feelings through art is universal. One such expression is the art of embroidery. It is an expression of self, rendered with patience and hard work. It is an art rightly described as "painting by needle". The artisans embed lively expression through exquisite patterns and motifs on the fabric that often whispers tales of love and affection. Embroidery incorporates respect for diversity, creativity and non-verbal communication. It also has a sentimental and emotional value particularly for displaced populations, who use embroidered garments as an expression of national and local identity and pride. Embroidery ties together many elements of cultural heritage, such as music, rituals, oral traditions, handicrafts and symbolic expressions. It is a language, a semiotic system for communicating through color, pattern, stitch and embellishments.

Traditional Indian arts and crafts are truly in a league of their own and their beauty extends to various levels. There is the physical beauty which is purely aesthetic and on a deeper level, the Indian traditional arts are fascinating because they depict a socio-cultural narration. Through their forms and motifs, they tell stories and sagas. The vivid detailing and use of symbolic elements add layers of meaning. The vicissitudes of history and the tides of time have not robbed the enchanting diversity, rich landscape and beauty of Indian embroidery.

Indian traditional embroidery has an opulent cultural heritage and significant national artistic creation embedded in many years of tradition. The principal bearer of the art of embroidery are woman artisans closely related to the old traditions of her environment, for years carried on the knowledge and experience from one generation to another which is actually characteristic for the entire national culture.

Travelling the vast span of India one can explore a myriad form of ethnic embroideries which have found an expression among the tribal, folk and royal culture alike. Every element used in these embroideries speak volumes of narratives which led to its evolution with the use of stitches, threads, colors and other elements.

The women of India are known for their embroidery and sewing skills. Their needlework provides insight into not just their daily lives but also their cultural and historical backgrounds. With their needlework, women form bonds with people all around the world, which can lead to increased access to resources and new business prospects. The story behind the stitches is both a parable and a paradox as India enters a period of high-tech industrialization and globalization; craft traditions offer a novel mechanism for rural women to enter the economic mainstream for the first time, but they also carry the stigma of inferiority and backwardness. In India, making art is not a means to an end. This is how rural women conquer the hard desert environment and the limitations of their small income, freeing themselves from dependence and the monotony of agriculture and domestic labor. It's a creative strength that she possesses and a reflection of who she is as an individual, as well as a uniquely feminine and cultural expression of who she is **(Taiyabji,2003)**.

Embroidery was used to decorate textiles already made to suit man's basic necessities, based on ancient superstitions. Embroidery pattern was anchored in belief, life, and social customs. Hence, embroidery was used for identification. An informed observer may tell a woman's village and status from her dress. One can distinguish a needlework from different locations by analyzing the item being stitched, its cut and fabric, and the embellishing materials, stitches, motifs, and styles, especially if they are unique. Large groups of embroidery can be identified, but the maverick will always remain elusive **(Askari & Crill, 1997)**.

Many indigenous communities in India are still on the move as they seek to meet their biogenic requirements (such as food, clothing, and shelter) by various means (such as hunting, farming, herding, etc.). Thus, the term "nomadic tribes" is often used to describe them. Nonetheless, the characteristics and root reasons of nomadism among India's indigenous peoples are unique. Where exactly all the nomadic peoples came from is a mystery. There are a few mentions to these peoples in ancient Indian texts. Nonetheless, the reasons for their nomadic lifestyle have evolved over time **(Ghatage, 2006)**.

Native and migrant people from all over the world have all contributed to India's craft legacy. Following settlement/migration, their skills continued to produce indelible master pieces inspired by their surroundings and made with indigenous materials (Dholakia & Pandya, 2013).

One such community is that of the *Lambanis*, known for their conspicuous costumes with an interplay of colors and stitches and their hairdo which cannot be surpassed without catching one's eye. Their distinctive embroidery is even more than community markers. They are a language with each element of the embroidery expressing a meaning or a symbolism.

The *Lambanis* (a.k.a. *Lambadis*, *Romanis*, *Banjaras*) are the nomadic tribes of India. They go from place to place in search of a livelihood. They are said to be the descendants of the Arya Roma gypsies of Europe, who migrated through the Central Asia and Afghanistan before arriving in the deserts of Rajasthan. Trading in salt and grains facilitated their move to states such as Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. They have their own language, culture and a unique social structure irrespective of the fact that they have now dispersed to various regions in India.

The wandering gypsies or the *Lambanis* in their elaborate and colorful costumes have always been very intriguing and full of speculation. Profound mystery shrouds their existence in terms of their costumes, hair style, jewelry, occupation and cuisine. Conspicuous everywhere they travel, they carry with them narratives of their existence and sojourn. *Lambani* community is one among the twenty-seven primitive tribes found in India, which is classified as a nomadic tribe. Embroidery is intrinsic to the traditional costumes of the nomadic *Lambani* community. Traditionally, women of the community embroidered their costumes, accessories like storage bags, covers and pouches and fabrics meant for rituals and daily use. These clothes were designed especially for the protection from harsh climate in deserts, forests and to distinguish them from others.

Picturesque and vivid *Lambani* embroidery eulogizes creativity and imaginative fervor executed on any piece of textile. This embroidery is a spontaneous composition with vibrant colors and graphical motifs which add in a variety and amassing spirit to any product. It is a plethora of square, triangular and circular patterns. Linear

abstraction filled in with intricate stitches and mirrors are simply created reflecting the observant and exceptional nature of a *Lambani* woman. The embellishments are replete with colorful threads, mirrors, coins, cowrie shells and stitches.

The soul of the *Lambani* costumes and textiles is the embroidery which is painstakingly done for months together, to assemble the dress. Every element used in the embroidery speaks a symbolic language and renders its significance in the embroidery. People have assigned meanings to these materials used in the embroidery based on their unique features and the powers these substances therefore suggest. The mirrors used in the embroidery are strategically placed in a geometric design or are isolated and accentuated by surrounding stitches. The rationale for the use of mirrors is consistent across many tribal communities – they are primarily auspicious and defensive. They ward off the evil eye, reflecting it back on the sender. *Lambanis* tend to use large mirrors, which complement their bold geometric patterns.

The cowries are considered auspicious and are frequently used to propitiate Laxmi, the goddess of wealth. There has been a persistent belief in the power of coins to heal and avert evil, so they are often pierced to make jewelry and to stitch onto clothing in conjunction with embroidery. The custom of woman wearing her dowry wealth as jewelry has led to coins also being frequently incorporated on the dress and the headgears. Appliqué technique is other form of technique used by them to create patterns.

The beautiful costume and the craft of embroidery of the *Lambanis* which is an integral part of their costume has survived the waves of time, transitions in form of migrations and social stigma related to their conspicuous presence due to their costumes.

The *Lambani/Banjara* were an ancient nomadic tribe of India with a unique habitation, history, culture, religious and social practices, festivals, language, folklore, dress, governing system, and understanding of death, sin, and salvation. The Thanda people assisted the *Lambani* people in keeping their traditional and cultural practices untainted by outsiders. *Lambani* had migrated to Europe through Asia Minor and Greece at various times and for various reasons. By branding them as criminals, British colonialism had uprooted them from their nomadic trade, culture, and social life. Many

tribal characteristics, cultural and social practices have changed dramatically. Due to severe poverty, the Banjara were forced to migrate to cities, where they were exposed to modern culture, language, lifestyle, and living systems, which had an impact on their tribal life (**Babu & Rao, n.d.**).

Lambani/Banjara, the wandering nomads are becoming rare now. Most northern and western Indian groups became sedentary in the early British Raj and in the middle and south over the previous 100 years. Hindu society forbade them from interacting with the locals. Sedentary *Lambani* were forced into low-wage occupations and social marginalization. This united them and protected their traditions but did not help their living. When roads, train lines, and other large construction projects were needed to modernize India's infrastructure, mobile laborers had to return to the construction sites. Many groups had to partially return to their tents since the brave and hardworking *Lambani* were used to traveling and were still outcasts in many places where they were refused all rights and privileges. Seasonal laborers on highways, mines, and heavy industry sites keep some *Lambani* families moving. Most reside in *Tandas* outside communities and work as migrant laborers on construction projects in many cities (**Krása, n.d.**).

The *Lambani or Banjara* are an Indian tribe who live primarily in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and northern Karnataka. The language spoken by the *Lambanis* resemble to be originated from Rajasthan. The *Lambanis* live a nomadic existence. They used to live in forests, but now they migrate from place to place. When there were few or no roads, they carried grain and salt on their backs, as well as bamboos and firewood. Previously, the *Lambani* were thought to be grain suppliers to armies. *Lambani* women are dressed and decorated in unusual ways. As far as the written history is concerned, banjaras have been visible on the Indian scene for more than seven hundred years. However, there are a number of unheard and unwritten live stories from this community's history. Many ethnographers and anthropologists are wondering who the aborigines of this community are? (**Rathod, n.d.**).

A *Lambani* can be described as visible but shrouded in mystery. The *Lambani* women can be seen working on fields and construction sites, conspicuous with their presence through their amazing jewelry, stunningly crafted, embroidered attire, and a distinctive hairdo. Furthermore, there is very little data on their craft and only a few

mentions in a few sentences in a few books on textiles. Their elaborate costumes, which include huge skirts, exotic jewelry, and gorgeously embroidered blouses and veils, are what distinguishes this community. It is an essential component of their cultural identity. Within a community's similarities, there are markers that distinguish a person's status. In some ways, this community resembles the pastoral nomads of western India, the *Rabaris* (Kwon & McLaughlin, 2016).

Today, the *Lambanis* are dispersed throughout India under a variety of religions, names, and occupations. Modern myths associate them with European Roma, who share the same ability for adaptability and separation. They are also not completely unknown to fashionistas, as their beautiful textiles and jewelry are the source of those elaborate appliques with mirror fragments that adorn Indian restaurants. Banjara textiles, unsurprisingly, are all about signaling and maintaining identity. Women continue to wear rich, vibrant embroidery and jewelry, with each element correlated to regional origin and marital status; male attire is blandly non-distinctive in comparison (Maiwa, 2019).

The *Lambani* community has a long history as ancient India's aborigines. *Lambani* history begins soon after the initiation of the profession of animal husbandry. *Lambanis*, who had originally possessed Aryan cultural traits, had made animal husbandry and abandoned their primary occupation. They used to emigrate for business purposes, transporting their goods on cattle. They lived in forests, deserts, hills, and mountains and kept various weapons as a defensive means to protect themselves and their cattle; they were physically well built, masters of prowess, and stuffed with tolerance. Despite living in different states, they share the same attire, language, and cultural community (Naik & Dhananjay, 2020).

As a result of modern design culture's growing interest in eco-friendliness and sustainability, traditional textiles are once again enjoying a renaissance in the world of high fashion. Yet, due to limited availability, such materials now contribute very little to design culture. Also, traditional textiles also contribute to a region's unique identity through its design and commercial possibilities, as well as through the value of crafts, the production of collective memory, social responsibility, intergenerational equity, and sustainability (Kipoz & Hamam, 2014).

Lambani embroidery, also known as the Banjara embroidery has struggled for its existence from times immemorial. As these Banjaras or the *Gormati* people are nomadic tribes they are constantly on the move and there is not much awareness regarding their craft of their embroidery which has a rich vocabulary of stitches and which is a beautiful amalgamation of rich and vivid colours. The interplay of colours and the linear embroidery is mesmerizing but has not yet received the much-deserved recognition and does not stand close to the other rich embroideries of India. The *Lambani* embroidery was earlier only restricted to the Women's Costumes and household articles but now efforts are being focused towards producing commercially viable products and also offer an array of choices. Since the women in the household used to embroider the articles of daily use they are well equipped with the skill of embroidery.

They call their language *Gor Boli* and they call themselves *Gormati* people. The embroidery traditions among these groups are still strong and each possess a set of designs and stitches very distinctive. Like a language or a regional accent, clothing and embroidery flag identity. Although declining in number, Banjara women continue to make and wear traditional dress. The materials used constantly evolve and change based on what is appealing and what is available.

1.1 Research Questions

The ornate *Lambani* embroidery is deeply embedded in the lives of this nomadic community, who can be found Pan India. There has been meagre documentation done especially towards the embroidery of this community. Hence it has been a catalyst in adding to questions regarding this embroidered craft and its evolution.

- 1.1.1. How has the migrations and transits and the cross-cultural interactions affected the *Lambani* community?
- 1.1.2. What are the reasons for the *Lambani* embroidery to get categorized into a languishing craft?
- 1.1.3. What are the changes in the costumes, textiles and the stitch vocabulary due to regional settlements?
- 1.1.4. Will Design Intervention and Product Development contribute towards revival of the languishing craft?

1.1.5. What could be the effective strategies for creating awareness and acceptability towards the *Lambani* embroidery?

1.2 Rationale of the study

The study is useful in interpreting and appreciating the cultural philosophy of the *Lambani* embroidery and its semiotics. The research elucidates valuable information on evolution of *Lambani* embroidery and its stitch repertoire. As they say time and tide waits for none, it has affected and brought changes to these ethnic communities and culture tremendously in every aspect. No one is barred from accepting this evolution in terms of social structure, technological influences, dilution of the culture and furthermore. Hence a need was felt for an in-depth understanding of the *Lambani* community especially focusing on their etymology, evolution, migration and changes in the costumes and textile in terms of embroidery. The study intends to introduce the aesthetic values of the cultural heritage belonging to Lambani community by establishing the original identity through their traditional embroidery. Furthermore, it aims to discover the extent to which modernity and migration has influenced the embroidery of the *Lambanis* within the core of tradition and the challenge of the sustenance of the traditional stitches as it is coined as a languishing craft. The study also focusses on product development and skill upgradation to understand the concept of smart designing. It also intends to expose and train the artisan to have confidence in utilizing the traditional embroidery to create a range of innovative products which while adding a contemporary and commercial value can still retain the visual identity of the traditional embroidery. Furthermore, the study also intends on designing garments and products from the perspective of substantiality. Moreover, there is very little documentation of the stitches used in the *Lambani* embroidery in their colloquial dialect.

Marketing and promotion of the artisan products aids in creating awareness regarding the products. With the advent of virtual platforms, it has further accelerated the process of marketing these products to a larger segment of consumer. Hence various mediums such as a digital platform and social media will help awareness regarding the craft, help in building a brand and also help in developing a sustainable strategy for the artisans to get perennial benefits from the craft.

1.3 Objectives of the study

The specific objectives of the study were structured as follows:

- 1.3.1 To understand and interpret the *Lambani* textiles focussing on the embroidery.
- 1.3.2 To study the repertoire of stitches used in *Lambani* embroidery and the regional variations in them.
- 1.3.3 To develop an innovative range of products for commercial purpose.
- 1.3.4 To train and empower the artisans towards design and skill up-gradation.
- 1.3.5 To evaluate the developed products in terms of product preferences, attributes of uniqueness, acceptability and market viability.
- 1.3.6 To suggest tenable strategies for promoting and propagating the embroidery.

1.4 Hypotheses of the study

1.4.1. Hypothesis I

H₀: There is no association between placement of design and age, gender, and occupation.

H₁: There is association between placement of design and age, gender, and occupation.

1.4.2. Hypothesis II

H₀: Overall look of product (tunics) with respect to ideal product parameters is not appealing.

H₁: Overall look of product (tunics) with respect to ideal product parameters is appealing.

1.4.3. Hypothesis III

H₀: Idea of designing contemporary lifestyle products with traditional *Lambani* embroidery is not appealing.

H₁: Idea of designing contemporary lifestyle products with traditional *Lambani* embroidery is appealing.

1.5 De-Limitations of the study

The study is limited to only four states of India: Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana and Tamil Nadu.