



# Unweaving the Gongadi

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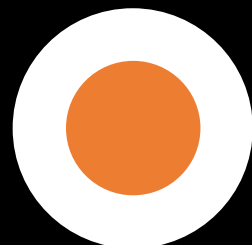
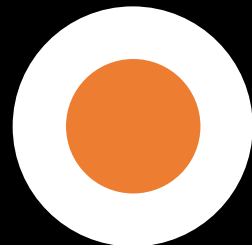
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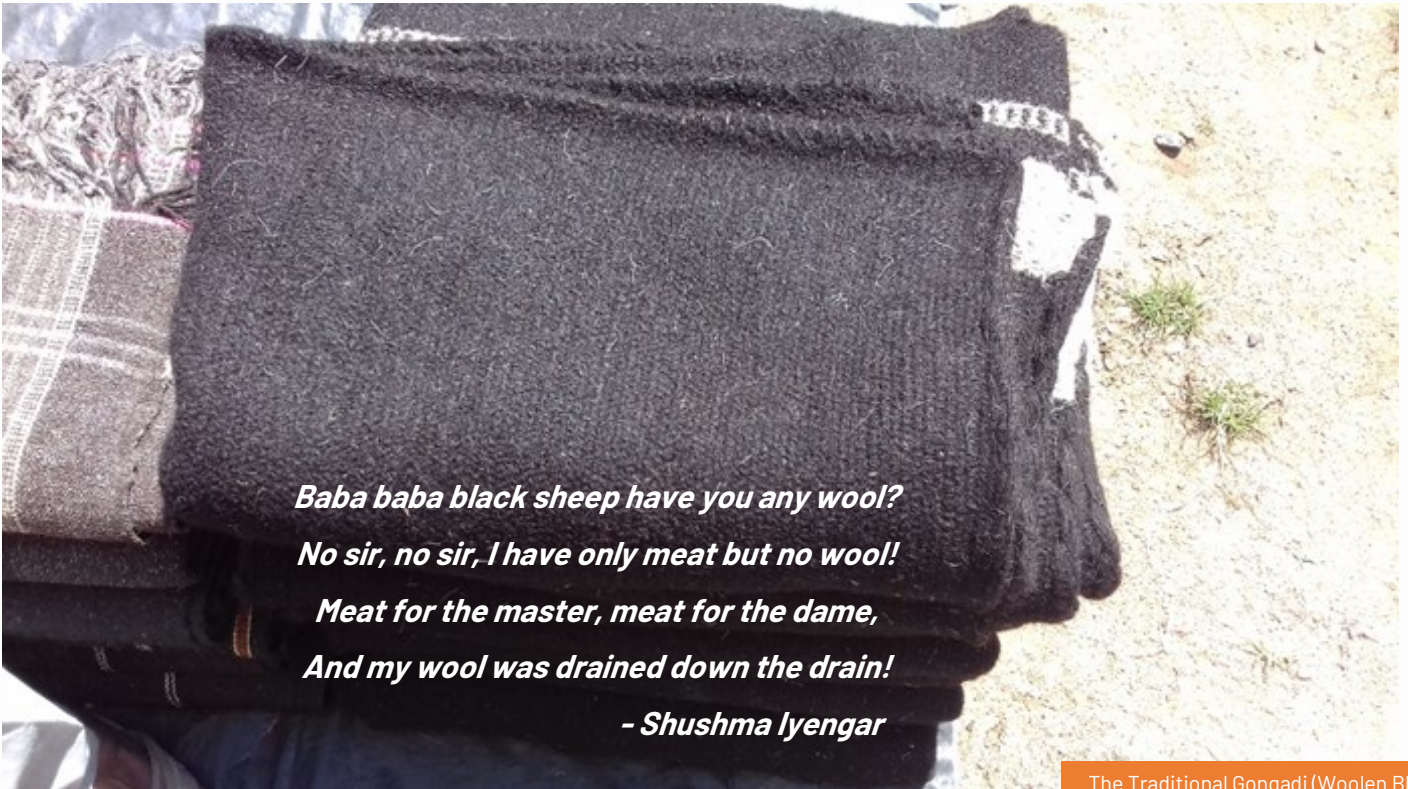
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# Unweaving the Gongadi



*Baba baba black sheep have you any wool?  
No sir, no sir, I have only meat but no wool!  
Meat for the master, meat for the dame,  
And my wool was drained down the drain!  
- Shushma Iyengar*

The Traditional Gongadi (Woolen Blanket)

## Introduction

Gongadi, (known also as Kambal) is the traditional woolen blanket woven by the indigenous Kuruma pastoralist communities from wool of the indigenous Deccani sheep (known locally as Nalla gorrae) breed found in the Deccan Plateau region including the Indian state of Telangana. The famous blanket has once served the Indian Armed Forces to beat harsh winters at the borders. The traditional gongadi is more than just a piece of woolen blanket for the indigenous Kuruma pastoral communities. The unique gongadi is not only the symbol of rich diverse traditional weaving culture of the Deccan region but also the pride and identity of the local indigenous pastoralist communities. The coarse woolen blanket is famous for its durability and versatility. The tough gongadi usually lasts for more than a decade and acquires this unique quality from the craft of hand weaving.

One of the unique natures of gongadi is that it does not fade but grows darker in time. The indigenous Kuruma weavers say that gongadi is so strong that you can lift a fully grown bull off the ground with it.

Many types of gongadi are woven by the traditional weavers of the local Kuruma community, which are as follows:

| S. No | Name / Rype of Gongadi (size in feet) | Cultural Significance   |
|-------|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1     | Pattela gongadi (12 x 8)              |   |
| 2     | Nalla gongadi (12 x 8)                | Considered auspicious by few and bad by few – depends on suitability to individuals |
| 3     | Kasara gongadi (12 x 8)               | Considered auspicious by few and bad by few – depends on suitability to individuals |
| 4     | Tella gongadi (12 x 8)                | Worn by only royals and saints  |
| 5     | Boori gongadi                         |   |
| 6     | Barigi gongadi                        |   |

*Note: Need further exploration*



The weaving craft of Kurumas is not limited to weaving just gongadi but also includes weaving carpets, bedsheets, stolls, scarfs, bags, etc. from wool. The traditional gongadi is produced organically, without using any dyes either natural or synthetic. Sizing of the strings is done using the paste of soaked and cooked tamarind seeds. The border/hem (Kada) of traditional gongadi is woven in many designs, which are as follows:

#### ***The Different Types of Border/Hem (Kada) of Gongadi***

| S. No | Local Name (Telugu) | English                |
|-------|---------------------|------------------------|
| 1     | Sada kada           | Simple border/hem      |
| 2     | Tummakaya kada      | Acacia tree border/hem |
| 3     | Allum madla kada    | Ginger border/hem      |
| 4     | Vepakaya kada       | Neem fruit border/hem  |
| 5     | Jonnagudla kada     | Sorghum border/hem     |
| 6     | Pattu kada          | Silk border/hem        |
| 7     | Chinna kada         | Small border/hem       |
| 8     | Nimmakaya kada      | Lemon border/hem       |

*Source: Patil, 2009*

It takes around three kgs of spun wool and a day for weaving gongadi. The traditional weavers of the local Kuruma community of Salkapuram village, Kalluru Mandal of Kurnool district in Andhra Pradesh weave two types of woolen blankets - the traditional gongadi (tough and coarse) and sawal / jaadi (relatively soft and smooth). Manufacturing of sawal / jaadi is a laborious and cumbersome affair – it takes six people (usually women) to wash it with hot water and polish it for over a week to get the desired softness and finish. The price of different types of handwoven woolen blankets at the local markets are as follows:

| S. No | Product type            | Required wool qty (Kg) | Price in INR / Piece   |
|-------|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1     | Traditional Gongadi     | 3                      | 2000                   |
| 2     | Sawal / Jaadi (normal)  | 3                      | 1000                   |
| 3     | Sawal / Jaadi (special) | 5-6                    | 3000 or (INR 600 / kg) |

## **Is Wool the New Cotton? - The Dying Tradition of Gongadi**

With the collapse of wool-based economy and decline in the population of Deccani sheep breed, the art and craft of weaving the traditional gongada had become a dying tradition. There had been a drastic decline in the traditional woolen blanket weavers as more and more weavers have been giving up the tradition – for instance, earlier there were 100 traditional weavers at Parla village and 60 at Salkapuram village, Kalluru mandal, in Kurnool district but there are only 3 left at Parla and 5 at Salkapuram village. Similarly only one weaver left at Gangapur village, in Narayankhed Mandal, Sangaredy district of Telangana. Also villages of, Amarachinta, Palamanchara, Pedda devulapuram, and Chinna devulapuram of Kurnool district had significant number of traditional wool blanket weavers, but none exist now.

With the decline in number of traditional weavers, the knowledge and skills associated with indigenous wool craft is near extinction. For instance, local women who were traditionally engaged in carding and spinning of wool are not doing them anymore. Almost the entire local Kuruma weavers have shifted to settled agriculture, taking up wage labour or migrating to cities in pursuit of better prospects, even if that means doing menial jobs. And the local shepherds have been replacing the dual purpose, woolen Deccani breed with hairy, non-wool breeds, such as Nellore and Ongole. Only a fraction of the traditional weavers are hanging on to this rich and otherwise dying tradition. There are multiple reasons for traditional weavers moving away from the craft.

A weaver couple weaving kada (hem) at Pebbair market, Gadwal.



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With the decline in number of traditional weavers, the knowledge and skills associated with indigenous wool craft is near extinction. For instance, local women who were traditionally engaged in carding and spinning of wool are not doing them anymore. Almost the entire local Kuruma weavers have shifted to settled agriculture, taking up wage labour or migrating to cities in pursuit of better prospects, even if that means doing menial jobs. And the local shepherds have been replacing the dual purpose, woolen Deccani breed with hairy, non-wool breeds, such as Nellore and Ongole. Only a fraction of the traditional weavers are hanging on to this rich and otherwise dying tradition<sup>[1]</sup>. There are multiple reasons for traditional weavers moving away from the craft.

A weaver couple weaving kada (hem) at Pebbair market, Gadwal.



<sup>[1]</sup> Mallick, A. 2017. Reviving the Ba Ba Black Sheep of Telangana: The Yarn of the Gongadi Blanket. The News Minute, 7 January, 2017.



## Narratives of the Shepherds and the Traditional Weavers

Shepherds complain that there is a lack of shearers to fleece the sheep. Earlier shearers (also belongs to Kuruma community) used to come to fleece the sheep but not anymore. A decade ago, shearers used to pay INR 5/- per sheep to the shepherd in return for wool – but things have changed now – The shearer charges INR 20/- per sheep to fleece, in addition the shepherd should also arrange for food and drinks for the shearer. This is considered as an economic burden by the shepherds. Now the shepherds themselves fleece their sheep and discard the wool – dump it either on road side, waterbody or on fallows. Earlier shepherds used to earn INR 100/- for fleece from 1000 sheep – there were local wool entrepreneurs who used to procure wool from the shepherds – the entire local wool market has collapsed since the local entrepreneurs' shutdown their business – nobody buys wool from the shepherds now. Consequently, the woolen Deccani breed has been replaced by the hairy, non-wool (Nellore and Ongole) breeds locally <sup>[2]</sup>.



Wool blanket traders at Pebbair market, Gadwal

for spinning (usually 3 kgs) of wool, which also adds to the expenses incurred by the weavers. Manufacturing the sawal/jaadi requires almost a week of through washing and rubbing of the blanket with hot water, which is usually done by women. The labour (usually for six days of six women) and labour charges for six persons not only makes the process of manufacturing a sawal/jaadi laborious but also less remunerative as the margin the weaver usually earns is very narrow. One of the biggest drawback of traditional wool blanket (gongadi) is that it is purchased only by the indigenous shepherd communities – others don't buy it – therefore the market and customer base is very narrow. The woolen blanket traders and local weavers regularly move from mandi to mandi (local market) and door to door to sell their woolen blankets.

Kuruma weaver arranging the strains before weaving of gongadi



Traditional weavers say that it has become difficult for them to make ends meet as handloom industry has become highly unviable. They say that unless the woolen blanket (sawal/jaadi) is sold for a minimum of INR 1000/- per piece, the woolen handloom industry may not survive for long. To make the wool handloom industry viable a weaver should earn a minimum wage of INR 300/- per day, as the weaver spends INR 120 – 150/- on an average per day to weave a woolen blanket. Usually, women of the community spin the yarn and charge around INR 250/-

## Impact on Employment and Household income of Kuruma Community

Manufacturing the traditional gongadi demands creativity and a lot of patience. The traditional gongadi requires 3 – 4 kg of wool and takes a month to finish. Weaving of the traditional gongadi involves both men and women. Women are involved in carding and spinning of wool, which takes up to 21 days to finish.

<sup>[2]</sup>Mithun, MK. 2018. Telangana government's sheep scheme pushing 'Gongadi' weavers to brink? Indian Express. 07th January 2018.

Women are also involved in giving finishing touches like weaving borders/hems (Kada), a laborious work which takes anywhere between 7 to 10 days. Men are involved in wrapping, sizing, making heads, and weaving using the handloom known locally as gunta maggam. Around 600 HHs of three districts of Medak, Sangareddy and Siddipet of Telangana are involved in gongadi weaving. Around 150 women are specialized in carding, spinning of wool and weaving Kada.<sup>[3]</sup> The retail price of traditional gongadi at the local market can be anywhere between INR 1200 – 1400, and a custom made one can fetch INR 2000 and above. Women does carding and spinning during the leisure hours of the day and they could earn



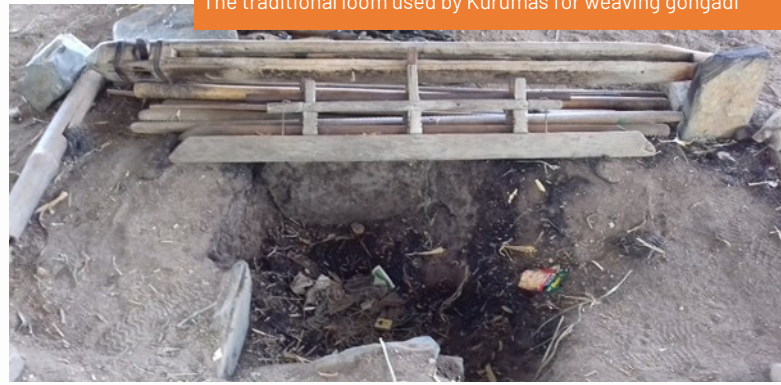
The Traditional Sawal/Jaadi for sale at Pebbair market, Gadwal

anywhere between INR 50 – 100 per day from carding/spinning. Men take between 3 – 5 days for weaving the traditional gongadi. The disappearance of gongadi can have a significant impact on local employment and HH income, especially for women. However, a detail study has to be conducted to estimate the real impact of gongadi on local employment, HH income and women.

## Impact on the Indigenous Pastoral Kuruma Culture

The traditional gongadi extends beyond the art and craft of weaving. It is intricately woven into the customs, traditions, culture and social fabric of the indigenous Kuruma pastoralist community. It is not meant to be covered by the shepherds for protection against heat and cold but it is a fabric that nurtures their rich legacy and culture. Gognadi is very sacred and holy for Kurumas. Either birth or death, wedding, ritual or festival, or any other

The traditional loom used by Kurumas for weaving gongadi



auspicious event in Kuruma community, they are incomplete without wool and gongadi. The disappearance of gongadi could prove very costly to the rich culture of the indigenous Kuruma community.

## Efforts for Reviving the Wool-based Economy in Telanagana

Few civil society organizations, notably [Anthra](#) and alliances like the [Food Sovereignty Alliance](#), India (FSA) has worked extensively on conservation of the Deccani sheep breed and reviving the gongadi and local wool-based economy. They have collaborated with the local traditional handloom weavers of Kuruma community and their associations - the Deccani Gorrela Mekala Pempakamdarla Sangham (DGMPS), of Peddagottimukka village of Medak district, Sri. Berrappa Swamy Sangham, of Gangapur village, in Naranyakhed mandal of Sangareddy district of Telangana, for reviving the local wool-based economy.

The Telangana state government also took up few interesting initiatives for reviving the handloom industry including the woollen handlooms. The state has announced around thirteen different schemes for the state handloom industry. Few recently announced such schemes are “Nethannaku Cheyuta Scheme” and “Telangana Handloom Weavers Thrift Fund Saving and Security Scheme (TFSSS)”, launched in 2017 and “Worker to Owner Programme” announced in 2018. The schemes provides fifty per cent subsidized raw materials (yarn, dyes etc), logistic support and also marketing facilities to powerloom and handloom weavers. The state is also considering geo-tagging of handlooms and powerlooms for enumeration of both handlooms and powerlooms in the State.

<sup>[3]</sup>MK Mithun, 2018. Telangana government's sheep scheme pushing 'Gongadi' weavers to brink? Indian Express. 07th January 2018.





The traditional wool weavers, of Kurnool district has received an amount of INR 50,000/- loan for investment. The loan is split in to subsidy worth INR 10,000/- and the remaining INR 40,000/- should be paid by the beneficiary to the bank on a monthly instalment of INR 2,500/-. The government of the former undivided Andhra Pradesh has provided a large shed with a capacity of 60 looms to the handloom wool weavers at Salkapuram village, Kalluru Mandal, Kurnool district. The local weavers have also bought a carding machine some three decades ago with the support of the former undivided Andhra Pradesh.

The carding unit is maintained by one of the six weavers left in the village. He charges around INR 10/- is for carding one kg of wool at the carding unit. The collected money is used for maintenance of the unit. The carding machine has the capacity of 300 kgs/day, however, people complain about huge amount of dust that comes out the machine during carding, which not only chokes the operators but also leads to pulmonary diseases. The occupational health hazards is something that lacks focus especially in the handloom sector.

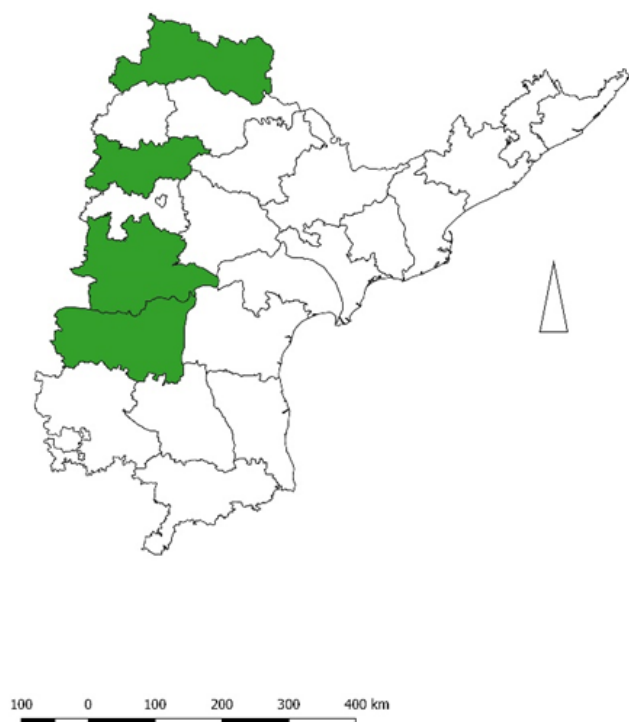
## Major Issues Looming Over the Loom

Many factors have been contributing to the decline of Deccani sheep breed, thereby affecting the local wool market and traditional gongadi-based economy:

1. There had been a shift from wool-based economy to meat-based economy,

2. There had been a strong push from the state towards meat production through subsidies,
3. Shepherds have been replacing their wool-breeds with meat-breeds in pursuit of higher income,
4. This shift has contributed to decline of the indigenous woolen Deccani sheep breed,
5. The availability of wool has decreased, thereby affecting the gongadi weaving tradition and the local handloom market,
6. Many artisans gave up the tradition of weaving gongadi as the market for gongadi diminished,
7. The traditional weaving and local wool-based markets have crumbled due to middlemen and interventions of the state, such as creation of wool-based cooperatives,
8. The shift of local barter system surrounding gongadi in to a money exchange system,
9. The supply of power looms to wool-cooperatives by the state has negative impact on the traditional handloom industry,
10. The availability of cheaper synthetic and shoddy winter blankets had a major impact on sale of relatively expensive gongadi,
11. The younger generation no longer want to inherit the gongadi weaving tradition as it does not seem to fulfil their aspirations, and
12. The shrinking of once vast commons, 4 restrictions on access to customary grazing pastures inside forests and shift in the cropping pattern from food grains to commercial crops (cotton), among others.

### Study Area of Pastoral Migration Routes in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh



## About the Study

A study on the socio-cultural and economic aspects of pastoral communities of the Deccan region was conducted by Sahjeevan and Center for Pastoralism based in Ahmadabad and New Delhi respectively, with the field support of Watershed Support Services and Activity Network and Revitalizing Rainfed Agriculture Network, during July – Sep, 2018. The pilot study was conducted at four villages of Chennapur, Sivampet Mandal, Medak district, Gangapur, Naranyankhed mandal of Sangareddy district and Adilabad district of Telangana and Parla and Salkapuram village, of Kalluru mandal of Kurnool district, of Andhra Pradesh. The resource persons have been selected based on the purposeful sampling technique. Around 60 persons (mostly sheep rearers and traditional weavers) of the indigenous Kuruma community have been involved in the study. Data (predominantly qualitative) was collected through focus group interviews and personal interviews, using open ended questions.

The study has also involved a visit to the livestock market of Pebbbar, of Mahbubnagar district of Telangana, one of the largest livestock markets in the state. The visit involves personal observations and interaction with sheep rearers and traders for data collection.

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