

# Gongadi

The woolcraft of Telangana

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The entire Kuruma community for sustaining their breed, craft and knowledge against all odds.

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To Elana for introducing us to the language of the warp and the weft.

To the shepherds, spinners, weavers, kada-makers and farmers who have made this revival a reality.

Towards securing a future for the Gongadi.....

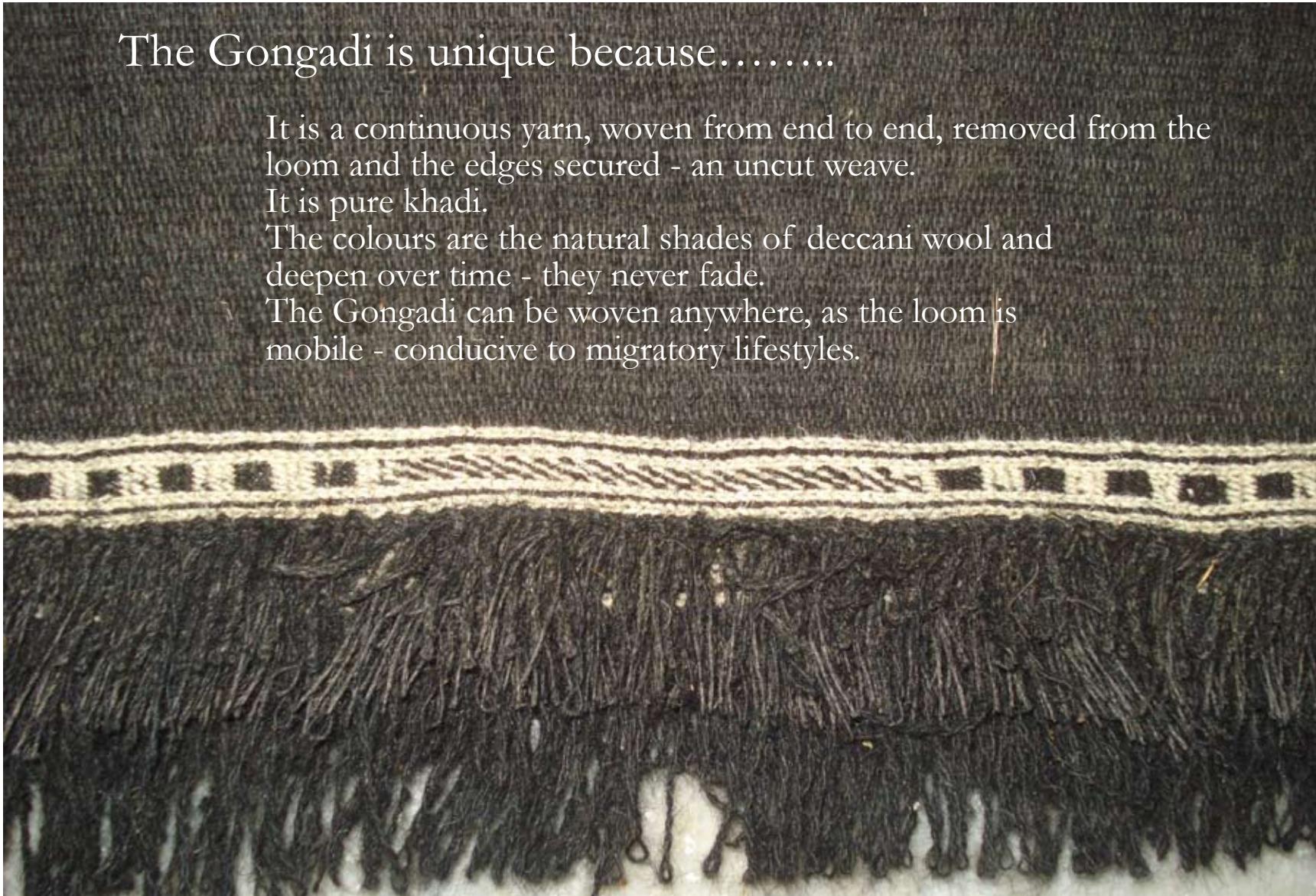
## The Gongadi is unique because.....

It is a continuous yarn, woven from end to end, removed from the loom and the edges secured - an uncut weave.

It is pure khadi.

The colours are the natural shades of deccani wool and deepen over time - they never fade.

The Gongadi can be woven anywhere, as the loom is mobile - conducive to migratory lifestyles.



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# Introduction

The gongadi is the traditional woollen blanket of Telangana, woven from the wool of the unique Deccani sheep. It is hand spun by women and subsequently hand woven by men. Geographically, Telangana is located within the Deccan plateau of south-central India and includes regions of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra and northern Tamil Nadu. It has a unique geological formation and now consists of large scrub plains and grasslands. It is home to traditional nomadic pastoral communities – the Dhangars, Kurumas, Gollas and Kurubas who have herded sheep for thousands of years. Shepherds of the region believe that they were specially created by the gods for the explicit task of rearing sheep - the Black Deccani. The gongadi was widely used by the village communities and continues to be an integral part of the Kuruma communities' culture, and remains a popular symbol of Telangana.

In pre-colonial times, people of the Deccan lived in an ecosystem that comprised a complex yet mutually sustainable relationship between agriculture, forest and pastoral activity. Villages practiced collective regulation of grazing lands. Policing of livestock and taxing pastoralists were absent in this region, which formed a part of the erstwhile Hyderabad State.

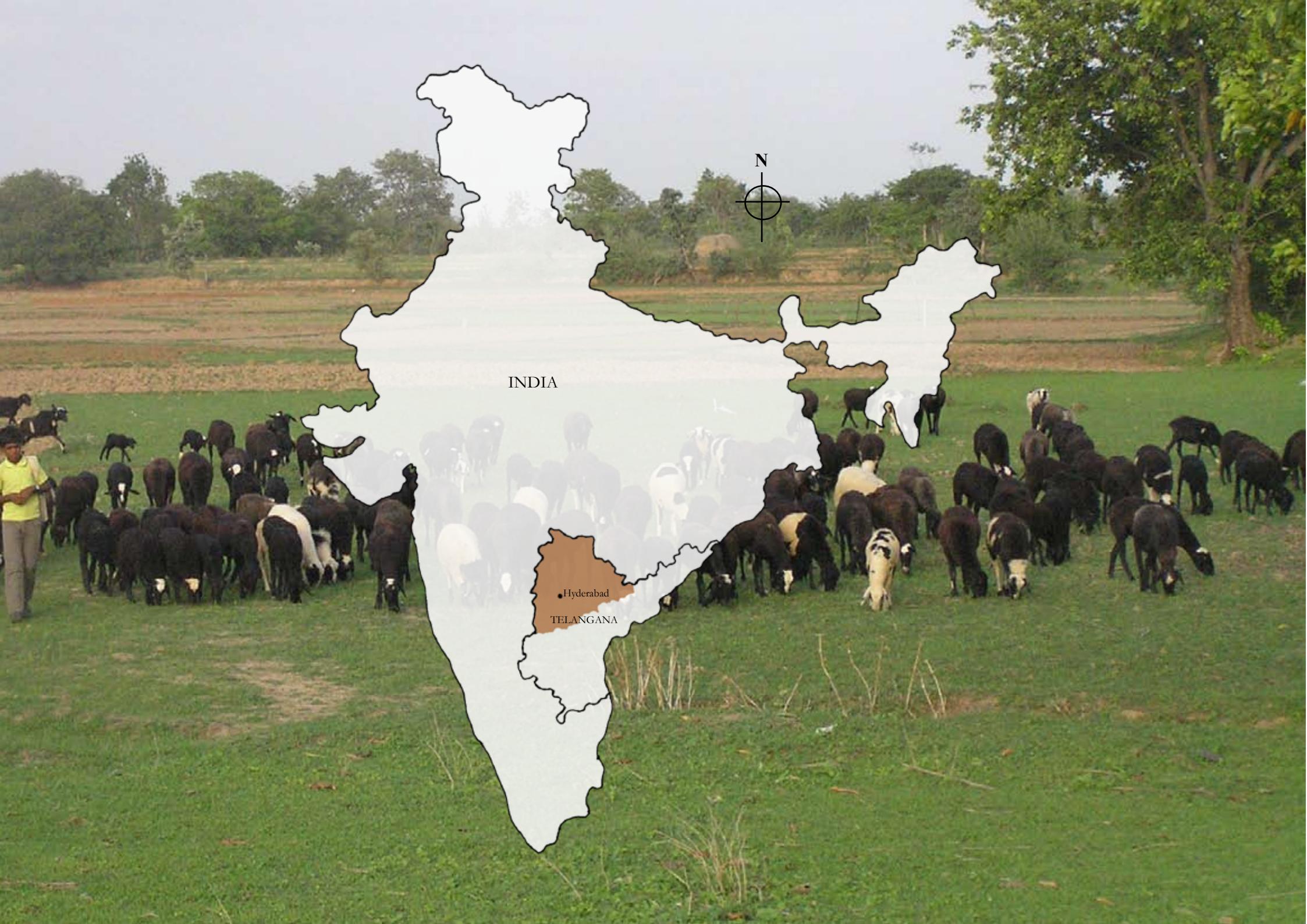
The British colonial state began to police livestock through notions of trespass, market control and forest regulation,

and under its influence, Hyderabad State introduced laws and taxes in the late nineteenth century to regulate livestock movements, markets and grazing. Scientific forestry rapidly shrunk grazing lands and denuded the livestock wealth of the State, resulting in reduced fodder and firewood, deterioration of soil and livestock health, destruction of livelihoods and increased pressure on the remaining land.

Post-independence, attitudes towards the pastoralists continued unchanged. Under land reforms, common grazing lands were distributed to the landless instead of confronting the landlords, thereby gradually dispossessing the larger community of peasants and pastoralists from their grazing lands.

Development of the Deccan meant bringing irrigation, expanding agriculture, replacing traditional dryland millets, pulses and oil seeds with non-food cash crops, establishing dairy programmes, replacing local woolly sheep breeds with hairy mutton varieties, and raising forestry mono-plantations on these pristine grasslands, thus reducing lands for cattle, buffalos, sheep and goats to graze.

The combination of all these factors resulted in dilution of the Deccani breed and loss of the wool craft. This book narrates the story of decline and revival of the Gongadi.



INDIA

TELANGANA

Hyderabad



# Location

Medak district, now recently re-organised into 3 smaller districts: Sangareddy, Medak and Siddipet, in Telangana State, is situated in the Deccan Plateau. The State is classified as a semi-arid, agro-ecological zone, with annual rainfall of less than 900mm. The original name Medak, was derived from *Methukudurgam* in which *Methuku* means 'rice' that was traditionally cultivated with water from ancient village tanks and open-wells.

Since the 1950s there have been strong political, social and cultural movements and struggle in the region for a separate state of Telangana<sup>1</sup> culminating in the formation of Telangana State in 2014. The survival of the gongadi of Telangana is symbolic of the continuing struggle by the people for autonomy over their land, resources, language and culture.



top: map of Telangana

opposite page: map of India showing the state of Telangana

<sup>1</sup> Bhushan, MB and Venugopal, N. 2009



*left: Medak Church*

## **Medak**

Medak is situated 100kms north of Hyderabad. It has 45 mandals and Sangareddy is the district headquarters. The other big towns include Jogipet, Narsapur, Siddipet, Dubbaka, Zaheerabad, Narayankhed, Gajwel and Ramayampet. The Kakatiya rulers reigned in this place in the earlier centuries. Before the Kakatiyas, Medak was ruled by the Devagiri Yadavas, and Hoysalas of Dwara Samudram. Medak district covers an area of 9,700 sq. kms of land. The population is approximately two and a half million. Agriculture and its allied activities form the major occupation of the people. The major crops include rice, jowar, maize, red gram and sugarcane.

Medak has a tropical climate and the summer is very hot and dry. The summer season extends from March to May. The south-west monsoon brings heavy rains, which last from June to September. Rains recede during October and November. From December to February it is winter. One-tenth of the district is forest, which extends to 97,093 hectares.

Medak district is adorned by many temples depicting fine architectural splendors. The Medak church, the single largest diocese in Asia and second largest in the world after the Vatican, is a priceless heritage.

The current status of the Gongadi:

### **Medak District:**

The village around Narsapur, Shivampet, Shankarampet, Yeldurthy, Regode once had a vibrant wool craft, but today most looms stand silent and the weaving of Gongadi has stopped. The revival of the Gongadi sustained by DGMPS\*, has encouraged women spinners to continue spin and some weavers located in Regode and Yeldurthyto return to weaving. The revival has also encouraged a whole lot of younger shepherds to return to the craft of making the kada. Several shepherds continue to rear the Deccani breed in Medak district, which has the highest population of pure Deccani sheep flocks.

### **Sangareddy District:**

Spinning the wool into yarn, and Gongadi weaving is concentrated in villages in Narayankhed and Jogipet mandals. Weaving is done only when there is no agricultural work. In some villages there are families that are completely dependent on weaving for their livelihood. They do not own any agricultural land and prefer to follow their family occupation, rather than working as daily wage labour.

\*Deccani Gorrela Mekala Pempakarla Sangham (DGMPS) is an organisation of shepherds that works to sustain their livelihoods, the black sheep and the Gongadi

