



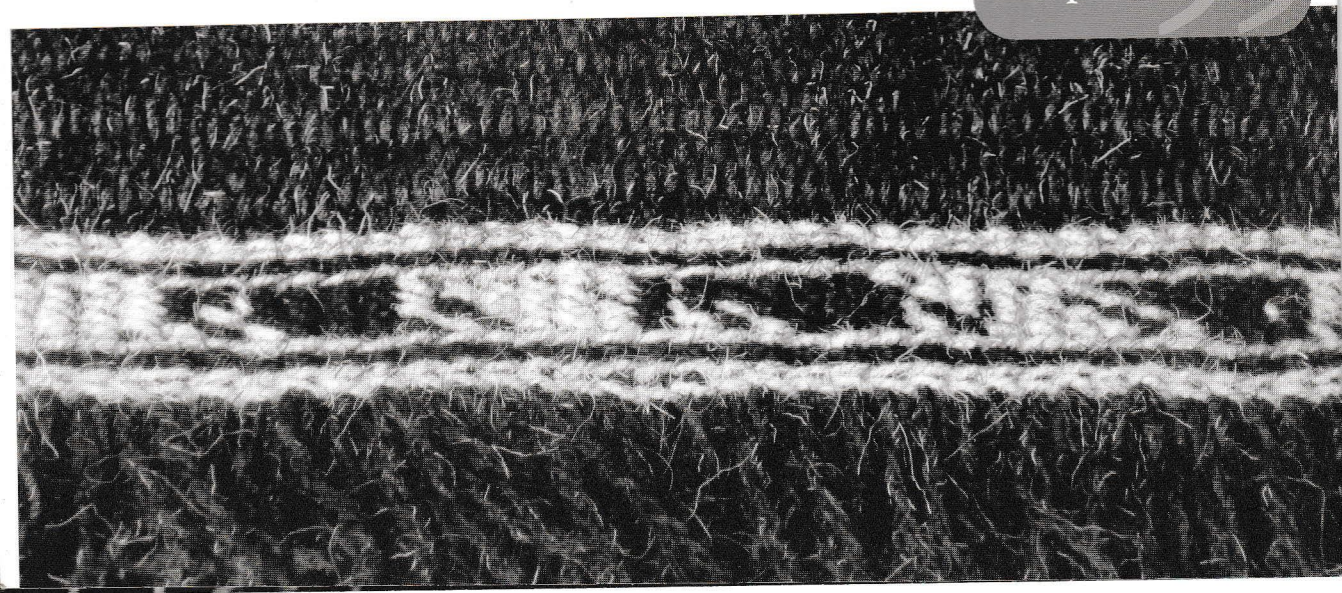
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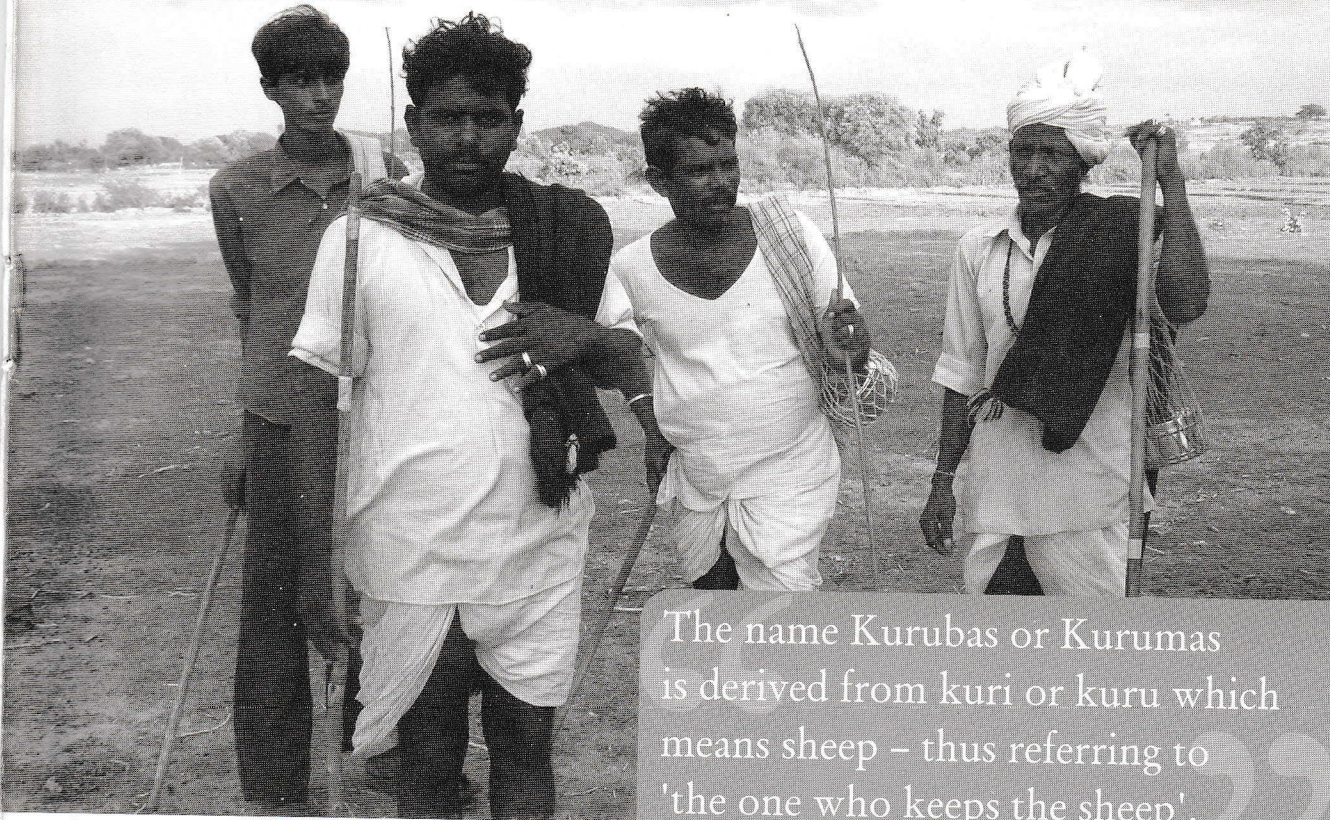
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Gongadi and Nalla-Gorre

The “*Gongadi*” is the traditional woolen blanket of Telangana, woven from the wool of the unique Black Wool Deccani sheep breed. Geographically the Deccani breed, derives its name from the semi-arid Deccan, and is spread across the 4 states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra and parts of northern Tamil Nadu. The scrub plains and grasslands of the Deccan region, characterized by cycles of normal rainfall followed by drought, have ideally suited pastoralist livelihoods, which emerged in this region thousands of years ago. The sheep, which is locally called “*nalla-gorre*”, is ideally adapted to the ecological and climatic conditions of Telangana, providing a livelihood to a wide range of farmers, shepherds and craftspeople. The breed was selected by shepherds over the years, for its tolerance to drought and fodder shortages, capacity to migrate long distances and ability to endure the large diurnal temperatures and seasonal variations of this region. The wool protects the breed from sun, wind, cold and rain. According to traditional description there are seven different shades of wool, termed as *Nalla/Nalupu* (black), *Barrigi* (reddish brown), *Neeli* (ash), *Jalla* (whitish-black), *Kassera* (dark brown), *Burugu* (yellowish white), *Tella* (tella).

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The name Kurubas or Kurumas is derived from kuri or kuru which means sheep – thus referring to 'the one who keeps the sheep'.

The Kuruma Community

The original custodians of the breed (according to oral histories and literature), are the Kuruma community, known as the Kuruba in Karnataka and Dhangar in Maharashtra. The name Kurubas or Kurumas is derived from kuri or kuru which means sheep – thus referring to 'the one who keeps the sheep'. Their stories narrate how the gods Mallanna and Beerappa, created the black wool sheep, and assigned the community with the specific task of its care, as also taught them the skill of the woolcraft. Most Kurumas believe that Mallanna was the first person to weave a gongadi and that is why they take pride in being weavers.

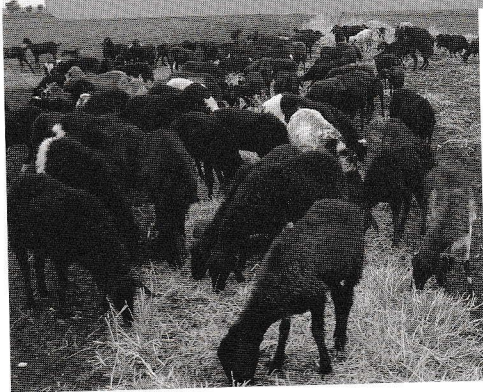
Today, sheep rearing has cut across these earlier rigid boundaries of caste, as too have traditional shepherd communities become agro-pastoralists- cultivating land and rearing sheep.

The Wool and the Craft

The gongadi, also known as kambali, is a blanket woven from handspun wool. The wool is obtained from the Deccani sheep. Women traditionally hand-spun the wool into yarn, which men hand-wove into the Gongadi. It is woven, on a pit loom called gunta maggam. Most gongadis are woven using the black wool as this is the dominant colour. Occasionally other colours like white, grey, beige, ash are used. Gongadis are woven plain, but different warp patterns are evident in some of the older gongadis.

Traditionally the design of a gongadi is very simple. The gongadi is considered inauspicious without the white line called sulupu/bane. They vary from a single yarn to nine yarns in the warp. The beauty of the gongadi is that each village has its own

The wool is obtained from the Deccani sheep.



way of measuring. The local measure is in terms of pogu (warp) and punjas. A punja is a section of the warp. To illustrate, in village Saipet the gongadi measures 14 punjas, and Gangapur village gongadis measure 10 punjas. This translates to an average gongadi being 115 inches long and 50 to 52 inches wide. If it is folded and stitched, the length is reduced to half: 3 kgs of carded quality wool is required to weave a gongadi. 1 kg of yarn requires 1.5-2 kg of raw wool, obtained from 6-8 sheep (more raw wool per sheep is obtained in winter than in summer). The gongadi has a kada or a woven border on the edge. The kada is either made from wool or cotton yarn. The gongadi, folded into half, and stitched on one side is known as Venukuttu.

The stitched gongadi forms a bag like structure, which is used to carry food and grains. A small sized gongadi, which is woven at the birth of a child, is known as the puttu gongadi.

The Gongadi was widely used by the village community and continues to be an integral part of the Kuruma communities' culture, and a popular symbol of Telangana. It is used in multiple ways and also holds a special place in all religious rituals and ceremonies of the Kuruma community. Shepherds are always seen with a gongadi on their shoulder, whether while grazing their flocks, visiting the market, meeting relatives or attending weddings.

The Loom

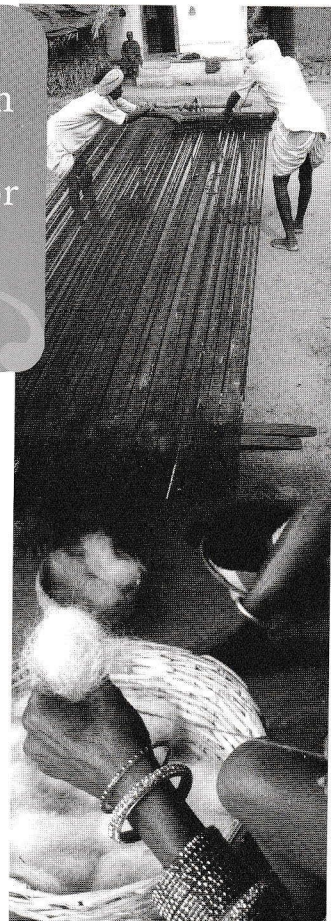
The loom is perfectly adapted to pastoral migratory conditions, and can be assembled any where. The structure of a half heald loom known as gunta maggam, used for weaving the gongadi, is very simple. Gunta means a pit and maggam is the loom. It consists of two main beams on which the warp is stretched. The beam on which the woven gongadi gets wound is called donlu. Stone slabs on both sides

support the donlu. The end beam of the warp is tied with a rope to another small beam. A boomerang shaped wooden stick known as vankara karra is tied with one end of a rope and is taken around the small beam and back through the vankara karra to the tree stump known as

cheyyagutam, next to where the weaver sits to weave. From here he can adjust the warp by loosening this rope as the gongadi gets woven and the donlu is rotated to take in the fabric. The heald shaft beam called achchu is used to change the shed by pulling the jantera. There are two lease sticks, one placed between the heald shafts and the jantera and the other, behind the jantera. This lease stick is called pandlabaddha and has lines carved on it, to keep the yarns in place and to ease the warp movement. The begu is used to beat the fabric as it is woven, to keep the weft yarn in place. In the centre of the warp there is another beam to keep the warp stretched tight and prevent it from sagging.

An adjustable wooden temple called chedugattya/sedugatte is used to keep the woven width in tension for an even edge and to prevent shrinkage. The weaver sits in front of the donlu beam, inside the pit that measures 2' x 3' in the ground.

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Kada

The gongadi has a simple layout. It is aesthetically very appealing. The main embellishment in a gongadi, is the kada which forms a border at the edge. This adds beauty, keeps the edges from fraying and secures them for a very long time. The kada is a complex hand weaving technique involving immense specialized skill and creativity. The threads are interlaced with the warp yarn to form patterns. There are many different kada patterns such as "Vepaku kada" (Neem leaves), Jonnagudla kada (jowar seeds), Thummakaya Kada (acacia nilotica pods), Nimmakaya kada (lemon), Nagetichallu kada (ploughed field)", which depicts the ethnic, spiritual and emotional connection of the shepherds to the crops, leaves, flowers, trees and landscapes of the Deccan. A kada varies from 0.75 inches width, to complex patterns that are 2 inches wide.

The decline of the breed and the Gongadi

The breed was rapidly diluted, via government policies begun in the mid-nineties, to introduce the heavier and faster growing hairy non-wool Nellore breed of sheep, originating from coastal Andhra, into Deccani flocks. The demand for Deccani wool, once popular in local markets and sought by the Indian Army, where coarse blankets were supplied, collapsed by the late nineties under India's policies to liberalise its markets, which led to massive international dumping of subsidized wool and the local production of cheap synthetic-“shoddy wool” substitutes. The sudden drop in demand for wool, and simultaneous policy changes that favoured massive export of live-animals as meat, from India to the Middle east and Southeast Asia, has created a market environment within which the “black sheep” has to fight for its survival. The impact of such policies resulted in a 'mixed breed' sheep that had more hair than wool that could no longer be spun into yarn. Associated with the loss of the breed, has been the erosion of people's knowledge, skills and the near extinction of the wool crafts.



The Revival

The revival of the gongadi, is an outcome of Anthra's support to villagers to organise into sanghams (collectives) through which they can work together on the myriad challenges that involve the conservation of a breed and a craft, from defending their rights to graze, protecting forests, community grazing resources and water bodies, promoting animal health and sustainable agriculture; to rediscovering the knowledge of the Deccani. The latest in the series of threats is the proposed urban takeover of their villages, which are to be brought under the jurisdiction of "Greater Hyderabad Metropolitan City".

One such collective, the Unni (wool) Sangham is concentrating on the process of reviving the gongadi craft. The Unni Sangham purchases the wool from Deccani sheep rearers, which is carded and then given to women to spin, and then to weavers and kada specialists to create the final product. The survival of the craftspeople, the gongadi, and of the Deccani sheep are entwined with one another – much like the gongadi's warp and weft.

This initiative in Medak district, to infuse new energy and vibrancy into this ancient wool-based livelihood, has become an important catalyst in stimulating not only the shepherds' interest in further development of the Deccani breed but also the weavers' interest in creating new designs. The re-weaving and revival of the gongadi is a collective effort of shepherds, spinners, weavers, kada specialists, herbalists, veterinary scientists, folk artists, ecologists, designers, healers, and farmers, that will hopefully lead to sustainable and creative livelihoods for the women and men of Telangana.



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