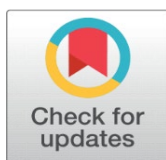
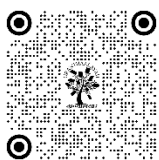


INGENIOUS NOMADIC EXPRESSIONS: DECODING THE SEMIOTICS OF LAMBANI EMBROIDERY

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ABSTRACT

The visual language and narrative of a traditional embroidery is par excellence. It carries with it folklores which have transcended from generation to generation with its exquisiteness. One such embroidery is of the *Lambanis* or the Banjaras, also referred to as the Indian Gypsies. Their embroidery connotes a semiotic system for communicating and interpreting various colours, patterns, stitches, surface embellishments and it has within it a hidden language that is made up of a collection of cultural symbols that communicate on various social and psychological levels.

Embroidery is a complete language connoting a semiotic system for communicating and interpreting various colours, patterns, stitches, surface embellishments. The *Lambanis* have inherited a rich folk tradition of embroidery with exquisite patterns and a voluminous stitch vocabulary. The surface additives added to their embroidery incorporate myriad elements like the mirror (shisha), shells (cowries), beads, applique work, rustic coins, and metal buttons. The exceptional and meticulous utilization of these create a story par excellence. The surface additives utilized in the *Lambani* culture connotes various aspects of their culture and though used as an extra element along with the embroidery their function is beyond ornamentation and carry several meanings.

This paper is an attempt by the researcher to understand, interpret and decode the reasons behind incorporating these surface additives in the embroidery to finally create a masterpiece. The paper also extrapolates on the researcher's travel experiences to various pockets of India where the *Lambanis* have settled and her inferences of their embroidery in terms of the embellishments, stitches, patterns, and finesse.

Keywords: Lambani, Embroidery, Textiles, Visual Language, Embellishments

1. INTRODUCTION

Textiles and clothes are arguably the most indispensable indicators of human life. Fabrics have been created on a large scale since the Neolithic period, when human society changed from being nomadic to settled and developed ever-complicated economic, administrative, and religious hierarchies. Naturally, textiles have played a significant role in these systems, serving as both material goods with monetary value and symbolic meaning. [Sokoly \(n.d.\)](#)

Historically it can be derived that textiles have by and large impacted human life. Right from being a source of personal expression to exploited human labor to an expression of artistry- textiles and clothing have played a predominant role in human lives. Textiles denote ideological values, human conditions, political affiliations, gender, culture and ethnicity or social status. Hence textiles and clothing are closely interlinked in human existence. Clothing can help one to identify groups and stratify social classes. [Hawley \(2012\)](#)

Apart from clothing the traditional textiles of a community are their identity markers and carry with them a legacy of beautiful motifs, patterns, stiches, and embellishments. The lexicon of embroidered motifs, stiches, colours, fabric has many connotations to ethnicity, age, and marital status. [Hawley \(2012\)](#)

[Nina Sabnani \(2012\)](#) has expressed that historically, embroidery was not valued commercially. It was made as a token of social exchange, as well as gifts for the fiancé's family, children, and in-laws. Embroidery frequently arrived before the bride was even there, so it served as an introduction and evaluation of the bride, showcasing her originality, wit, and devotion,

There are many embroideries which have enjoyed royal patronage, there are many which are just a fragment of the embroiderer's imagination, there are many which have received huge recognition and there are also some embroideries which have lost in ambiguity. [Kuper \(1973\)](#)

2. LAMBANIS: HISTORY

Pan India there are more than 500 tribal groups comprising 8.6% approximately of the total population of the country. One such tribe is the Gor Banjara which is identified ethnically by isolation, language, culture and traditions, festivals, cuisine, dance, and music. [Naik and Dhananjay \(2020\)](#)

This indigenous and nomadic ethnic tribe is also known as "Gor," "GorBanjara," "Lambani," "Lambadi," "Laman," "Sugali," " Labhan," " Gavaria," "Baldiya," " Shikhlijar," " Vanjar," " Baazigar," and "Gouriya." These names are used in different parts of the nation. They are mainly spread in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and West Bengal. Gor Banjaras have their own unique language, which is referred to as "Gorboli." This language is also referred to as "Lamni" or "Lambadi" or "Gormati" or "Banjari." They have their own oral literature and customs, but because there is no script for their language, they lack any sort of written literature. It has grown increasingly difficult for historians and social scientists to document their past due to the fact that their history and culture are not preserved in written form. [Naik and Dhananjay \(2020\)](#)

The beginnings and histories of *lambadas* and *Lambanis* are not very clear or well documented at all. Several ethnographers and anthropologists have been left with questions about the aborigines of this community as a result of the fact that this community is home to a number of legends and stories that have never been told or written down. [Rathod \(n.d.\)](#).

These hazy explanations have further muddled the comprehension of their historical transition, which is already confounded by the fact that there are numerous ideas and conclusions regarding their beginnings and evolution. In spite of this, one might make the case that this community has been going through a tough patch during the entirety of the concurrent processes of migration and transformation. The Banjara community has maintained its power over the course of several centuries, helping to shape and modify the trajectory of India's political history. [Nagaveni \(2015\)](#)

The *Lambanis* are one of the nomadic tribes of India, and they still wear some of the most ornate clothing. Nearly all of these communities arrived in Rajasthan, Gujarat, or the South of India via Afghanistan or Kashmir, and they have all modified their dress to make it easier to blend in with more diverse cultures. [Samiti \(n.d.\)](#)

They marched into the southern region in great part with the army of Muhammad Tughluk. And in order to provide his army with food grains, Aurangzeb utilized a sizable Banjara horde that worked for him. Beginning in the mid-18th century, the *Lambanis* gradually gave up their nomadic way of life, became a sort of seminomadic lifestyle, and started settling down on *banjar* land, which was in part wasteland in the proximity of the corresponding villages as well as forest tracts wherever it was available. This transition took place over the course of several centuries. They moved seasonally since they were always on the lookout for better opportunities and higher paying jobs. Outside of the city limits, they established themselves in a collection of little hamlets known as *Tandas*. [Rathod \(n.d.\)](#)

The East India Company was the one that initiated the construction of railways in British India in the year 1853. As a result of the British colonialism, they were stigmatized as criminal tribes, which caused them to be uprooted from their itinerant trade, culture, and social life. The hazy explanations provided by the community archaeologists have further compounded what was already a difficult task of getting a clear-cut understanding of the course of historical transformation. [Naik and Dhananjay \(2020\)](#)

3. THE LAMBANI EMBROIDERY

Many objects exhibit the influence of heritage. The *Lambanis* have inherited a vibrant folk needlework tradition. They are the inheritors of a unique set of stitches and patterns that are unmistakably their own and unrelated to the work of any other group. These embroidered design ideas, with their bold presentation and use of symmetry and play, readily fit into a current design ethos. Thus, using color, pattern, stitch, and ornamentation as a semiotic system of communication, embroidery serves as a language. [Kwon and McLaughlin \(2016\)](#)

The primary goal of embroidery was to adorn and beautify textiles that had previously been developed to suit the fundamental requirements of man, and the purpose of such embellishment was founded in the old beliefs and superstitions of the time. [Shrikant \(2009\)](#)

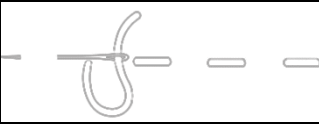

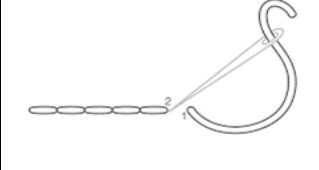

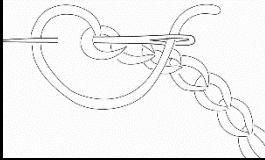



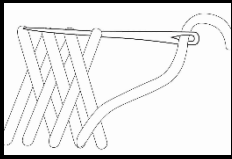

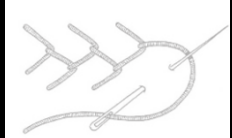

The women of the *Lambani* people have developed a distinctive form of needlework that features geometric patterns made up of squares, diamonds, and triangles. On top of brightly colored fabric, a variety of colorful stitches, including mirrorwork, beads, and shells, give them the appearance of being luxurious and festive. [Naik and Dhananjay \(2020\)](#)

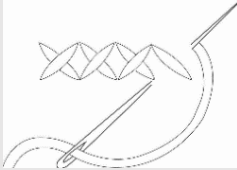
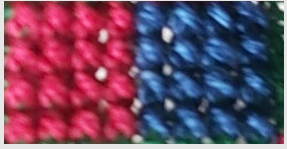
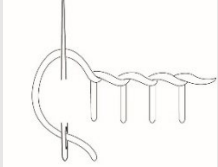

3.1. UNDERSTANDING THE STITCH VOCABULARY OF LAMBANI EMBROIDERY AND REGIONAL VARIATIONS

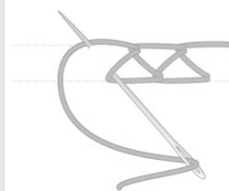



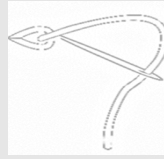

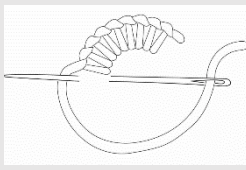

Samples were collected from *Sandur* (Karnataka), *Bijapur*, *Yellamma Tanda* (Telangana) and *Buriya* (Tamil Nadu). It was found that the artisan have started increasing *the* vocabulary of the stitches in most of the places. The researcher also tried to study the other embellishments used for embroidery like mirrors, shells, beads, coins, buttons, and tassels. It was found that there are regional variations in the *Lambani* embroidery in terms of stitches, nomenclature, and use of other embellishments such as beads and size of mirrors.

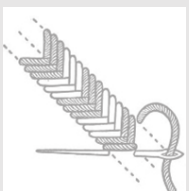

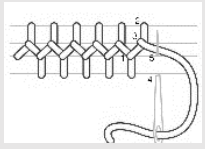

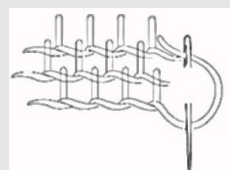
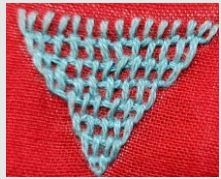
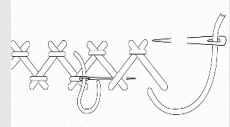

Table 1

Table 1 Common Stiches used for the Lambani Embroidery in the States of Maharashtra(M), Karnataka (K), Telangana (T) and Tamil Nadu (TN)

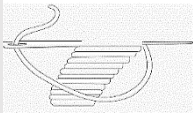

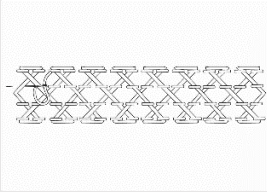

S. No.	Type of stitch	Colloquial Names region wise		Technical Drawing	Picture
1.	Running stitch	M	Poso teko		
		K	Poso teko		
		T	Poso teko		
		TN	Poso teko		
2	Back Stitch	M	Bakiya		
		K	Bakiya (Ulta Dora)		
		T	Bakiya		
		TN	Bakiya		
3	Chain Stitch	M	Vel		
		K	Vele		
		T	Vele		
		TN	Sangli		
4	Herring-bone Stitch (distanced)	M	Vadati Kaleni		
		K	Kalani		
		T	Kalani		
		TN	Kalani		
5	Herringbone Stitch (close)	M	Relo		
		K	Relo		
		T	Reyla		
		TN	Rela		
6	Feather stitch	M	Not used		
		K	Soniya Tang		
		T	Chind Tekka		
		TN	Ragi Stitch		

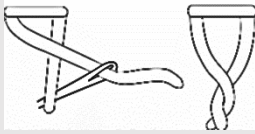

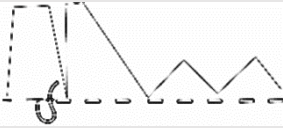

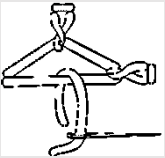

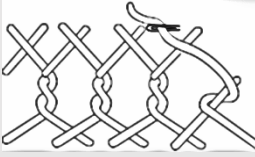

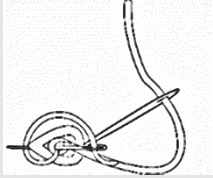

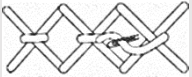

S. No	Type of stitch	Colloquial Names region wise		Method	Picture
7.	Cross stitch	M	Dhaniya		
		K	Kalyani		
		T	Kalani		
		TN	Kalani		
8	Buttonhole stitch	M	Kaajacha taaka		
		K	Khilan		
		T	Khilan		
		TN	Killan		

9	Closed feather stitch	M	Not used		
		K	Saada Jawliya		
		T	Zeenjani		
		TN	Leaf stich (colloquial name unknown)		
10	Closed feather stitch (variation)	M	Not used		
		K	Bermali Maki		
		T	Vatli		
		TN	Not used		
11	Laizy daisy	M	Not used		
		K	Pote		
		T	Pote		
		TN	Sangli		
12	Buttonhole stitch in circular form	M	Buriya		
		K	Buriya		
		T	Buriya		
		TN	Buriya		

S. No	Type of stitch	Colloquial Names region wise		Method	Picture
13.	Fishbone stitch	M	Matsyacha Kantyacha taanka		
		K	Angli		
		T	Maalikaanth		
		TN	Not used		
14.	Cretan stitch	M	Sasyar daant		
		K	Sasyadaant		
		T	Sasyadaant		
		TN	Not used		
15.	Buttonhole stitch in rows	M	Gaader		
		K	Jaali		
		T	Jaali		
		TN	Jaali		
16.	Herringbone with couching at the crosses	M	Kaleni		
		K	Kalyani		
		T	Teka		
		TN	Aanda		

Ingenious Nomadic Expressions: Decoding the Semiotics of Lambani Embroidery

17	Satin Stitch	M	Gadder		
		K	Gadri		
		T	Gaddar		
		TN	Gadder		
18	Quilting with interlacing (has many variations)	M	Vegarno		
		K	Vegro		
		T	Kalchi		
		TN	Vegaro		

S. No	Type of stitch	Colloquial Names region wise		Technical drawing	Picture
19.	Combination of back and cross	M	Maki		
		K	Maki		
		T	Maki		
		TN	Maki		
20.	Applique	M	Katta		
		K	Katta		
		T	Champa		
		TN	Katta		
21	Combination of back and cross and chain	M	Nakra		
		K	Nakra		
		T	Nakra		
		TN	Nakra		
22	Honeycomb stitch	M	Jawlya		
		K	Jawlya		
		T	Jawlya		
		TN	Jawlya		
23	Combination of stitches (Chain stitch and Lazy Daisy)	M	Pote		
		K	Pote		
		T	Pote		
		TN	Kodiya pot		
24.	Combination of stitches (Cross stitch with a couching at the cross)	M	Ektaangi kaleni		
		K	Aado dora		
		T	Aado dora		
		TN	Aanda		

Over a period the stitch vocabulary in the embroidery has increased with the introduction of many variations. Yet in spite of all these differences a *Lambani* embroidered piece is easily recognizable due to the various common stitches.

There are very few instances of figurative motifs, such as flowers, animals, or human shapes, appearing in banjara embroidery. The *Khandesh* region of Maharashtra is the one and only exception to this rule. In this part of the state, zoomorphic imagery was occasionally reproduced in brick and cross stitch. This approach works well with coarse weaves, but when applied to finer textiles, it can take on the appearance of weaving. When considering images of cross stitch, one should note the prevalence of checkerboard patterning and the abundant application of quincunx. [Kwon and McLaughlin \(2016\)](#)

The running stitch is yet another essential stitch that can be employed. Basic ways to vary this work include changing the location or color of the running thread itself, or utilizing a gridwork pattern made up of these stitches to provide interlacing. [Kwon and McLaughlin \(2016\)](#) which is colloquially known as *Vegro* or *Vegarno*. Based on the number of rows of running stitches it is know as *3-dora*, *5-dora*, *7-dora*, *9-dora*, *11-dora* and *13-dora*



7-dora



5-dora



13-dora

3.2. SURFACE EMBELLISHMENTS: RELEVANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE

In India, adornment plays an important part in a variety of ways, including to entice gods, for the purpose of community protection, to define ethnicity, to reveal the daily lives of a community and its history, and to disclose these aspects of the community's past. Even those who are disadvantaged or belong to lower castes can attain a sense of dignity and a valuable position in the social hierarchy through the use of adornment. The structure of rural India is permeated with adornment and ornamentation to a significant degree. [Fisher \(2006\)](#)

The parts of the garments that touch the breast and cover the reproductive organs are commonly embellished with embroidery, beadwork, mirrors, and metal elements. Because the dazzling surfaces deter the gaze of the malevolent eye and protect the wearer's fertility, these embellishments are common. [\(Rivers, Layers of meaning Embellished Cloth for Body and Soul, 2004\)](#)

The *Lambanis* use myriad embellishments to complement their embroidery which enhances the visual appearance and also adds to the density. Furthermore,

there is significant relevance of these embellishments as there are various reasons for the use of these along with the embroidery.

3.2.1. MIRRORS

One can observe extensive use of mirrors in the *Lambani* embroidery. It is one of the key elements used in this embroidery.

It is unknown when mirrors were first used in embroidery, but their use is widespread today. However, the protective qualities that they possess, when combined with the ancient talismanic connotations that are associated with embroidery, form a formidable alliance. Due to the fact that mirrors shine and reflect the sunlight, there are also strong connections to practices associated with solar worship and fertility. It is important to take note that the mirror embroidery is frequently positioned on dresses over the breasts and the reproductive organs in order to generate barriers that prevent nefarious forces from penetrating the body. [Rivers \(1999\)](#)

The small mirrors have a purpose in addition to their ornamental aspect; they shield the wearer from the ill effects of an evil eye and ward off evil spirits. When looking at older pieces, one will see that the mirrors have a small concave shape to them. In the past, these mirrors were produced by blowing glass into the shape of spheres, coating the interior of the spheres with a reflective substance, and then shattering the spheres. Round regions that are completely embroidered in a co-centric pattern can be found rather frequently. The same function is served by these other regions as by the mirrors. [Beste \(2017\)](#)

Because of the power that the mirrors possess, it is very important that they be positioned appropriately on the embroidery. Mirrors are frequently positioned in the middle of designs. They are also arranged in a quincunx pattern by the *Lambanis*. [Kwon and McLaughlin \(2016\)](#)

In *Lambani* embroidery, mirrors are used to strategically place within a geometric design or to create a focal point that is highlighted by the surrounding stitches. Either way, they serve to subdivide a pattern into areas and provide a point of interest. [\(Rivers, Layers of meaning Embellished Cloth for Body and Soul, 2004\)](#)



Mirrorwork from the Sample Collected from Tamil Nadu

3.2.2. COINS

Because people have traditionally held the firm belief that coins possess the power to cure illness and ward off evil, coins are frequently pierced when being used to make jewellery or when being sewn onto garments in conjunction with embroidery. This practice stems from the fact that people have always believed that

coins possess this supernatural ability. The tradition of a woman donning her dowry wealth as jewelry has led to coins being frequently incorporated with embroidery on the fronts of dresses. This is a result of the fact that women traditionally wear their dowries. [Paine \(2008\)](#)

In the Lambani embroidery coins especially feature in the head dress: *Chantiya*, the skirt: *Phetiya* and the blouse: *Kanchali*



Chantiya with coins: Beed, Maharashtra



Kanchli

Phetiya

Source Sabala Handicrafts, Bijapur, Karnataka

3.2.3. SHELLS/ COWRIES

It was commonly believed that shells had the power to ward off evil, aid in the control of the forces of nature, treat illness, and increase fertility. As a result, many sorcerers, healers, and priests utilized shells in their practices. Shells have played a significant role in the development of many different cultures. They were essential to the values of the economy, society, and the political system, and they frequently contributed to the religious and symbolic significance. [Rivers \(1999\)](#)

Cowries are used extensively in embroidery, particularly for headdresses and animal trappings, and are particularly popular in the accessory industry. In most cases, they are mass stitches or lines of stitches, but they form a symbolic design, such as can be found in the textiles used in the *Lambanis'* rituals. [Paine \(2008\)](#)

Cowries are not only valuable as a form of currency, but they are also regarded as fortunate and are frequently used to appease Laxmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth, particularly during the Diwali holiday. [Kwon and McLaughlin \(2016\)](#)



Sandiya (Animal Covering)

Source Yellamma Tanda, Telangana



Phulia Gala.

Source Personal collection of Mr. Manubhai Khavadiya, Banjara House, Delhi

3.2.4. BEADS

Beads and dangles made of lead are frequently incorporated into the embroidered textiles produced by the *Lambani* people. It is possible that the ritual songs that are sung to instruct the bride on appropriate behavior are related to the use of lead embellishments in dowry textiles, as lead is considered sacred by the *Lambani* people. According to the lyrics of the song, she will be "soft as lead" and will obey the older people. [Rivers \(1999\)](#)

Glass beads and tiny metal balls are also popular and can often be found lining the edge of the relatively small, embroidered bags. Lead beads are also stitched onto cloth brackets and anklets. [Kwon and McLaughlin \(2016\)](#)



Source Laoiji Naik, Deverakonda, Telangana

4. RESULTS AND DISUSSION

Field visits executed through snowball technique by the researcher to understand the traditional craft of embroidery which is the distinct feature of the textiles of the *Lambanis*. The simple yet elaborate embroidered embroidery of the *Lambanis* have always been very fascinating to the researcher and thus began the journey filled with anticipation and exploration. The researcher contacted Sandur Kushala Kala Kendra (SKKK), an NGO at Sandur, Bellary District Karnataka and scheduled a visit to SKKK followed by visits to Sabala Handicrafts, Bijapur, Karnataka. The researcher also visited Harappani, Beed, Maharashtra and also collected samples from Karnataka, Telangana and Tamil Nadu.

The informal interviews with the artisans helped the researcher to explore the various facets of the Lambani embroidery and also to understand and interpret the reasons behind the use of various element used in the embroidery. It also helped in regional construal of the embroidery and the embellishments. The observations can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Embroidery:** The basic stitches used in the embroidery is are till date intact and it defines the semiotics of the *Lambani* embroidery in terms of its identification. Yet regional variations could be found in the stitches especially with the used of brick stitch and cross stitch in the embroidery to form various structures as lozenges, zigzags, and diagonals in Maharashtra. The basic stitches are used in different ways to create new designs with a combination of stitches. Few examples from the samples collected from the various regions visited are as below.



Maaki Nakra Butty



Baan Nakra and Nau Daana Phundi



Jaali Butty

Source Yellamma Tanda, Rangareddy District, Telangana



Gadri Pote

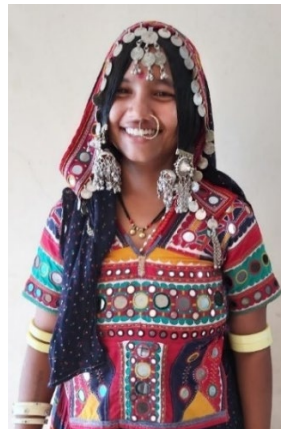
Source Mr. Ravi Kiran, Artisan, Karnataka



Pote Maki

Hence, it is evident from the samples collected that in spite of the regional variations due to migrations there has been a few minor changes in the stitch vocabulary whilst retaining the essence of the embroidery. There are permutations and combinations of the common stitches based on the region. Overall, the embroidery is more dense in Maharashtra and as one moves southwards there is less dense embroidery found currently.

2) **Mirrorwork:** The mirrors are used by the *Lambani* to ward off evil and it is considered auspicious. Regional variations can be seen as there is more use of circular mirrors in Maharashtra and Karnataka compared to Telangana where there is extensive use of rectangular mirrors.



Source Pawar Vasti, Beed, Maharashtra



Source Yellamma Tanda, Telangana

- 3) **Cowries/ Shells:** The cowries or shells play an inherent role in defining the *Lambani* embroidery and textiles and are elaborately used by them in the various textiles.
- 4) **Beads:** Lead beads are used extensively in Maharashtra whereas there is a vast use of white beads to fill empty spaces Telangana. The white beads are also sparsely used in Karnataka. It was observed that lead beads are also used in Telangana.

5. CONCLUSION

The *Lambani* embroidery, categorized as a languishing craft has not enjoyed much patronage due to lack of documentation and regional dispersion. The twists and turns of history and the rolling of the tides of time have not been able to strip this craft of its beguiling ethnicity. Women in the community would traditionally embroider garments, accessories (such as storage bags, covers, and pouches), and textiles that were intended for use in rituals as well as day-to-day life. The embellishments are filled with a rainbow of different colored threads, mirrors, cowries, and a variety of stitches.

The lovely art of embroidery practiced by the *Lambani* people, which is an essential component of their clothing and textiles, has withstood the test of time, transitions in the form of migrations, and social stigma connected to the fact that they stand out from the crowd due to the costumes they wear. The saddest part is that the younger generation is drifting away from the heritage and customs of its community. This is happening because young generations find it uncomfortable to work in the heavy traditional dress, and as a result, they have adapted to wearing casual dress, which is slowly dissociating them from their customs and heritage. Furthermore, the *Lambani* embroidered art is not a sustainable source of revenue for them, so they go to work as laborers for agricultural and building construction. Because of this, there is a great need for the reintroduction and rebirth of this captivating craft.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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