

KAPADAGANDA: A Cultural Symbol Of Dongaria Kandhas Of Rayagada District, Odisha

Jagannath Mohanty

*Research Scholar, Department Of Anthropology And Tribal Studies (PPRACHIN), Sikshya O' Anusandhan,
Deemed To Be University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, Bharat*

Jagannath Dash

*Professor Emeritus, Department Of Anthropology And Tribal Studies (PPRACHIN), Sikshya O' Anusandhan,
Deemed To Be University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, Bharat*

Abstract:

Material products of science and technology are nothing but products of thousands years of searching, discovery and experimentation. Discovery of items of basic needs like food, cloth and shelter upto space, nuclear energy and missile etc. stand as testimony to this long march of mankind. Each product of civilisation has a history of its evolution that begins with 'primitivity'. In this perspective, the present pattern of tribal clothing, with the help of primitive textile technology, had begun with the wearing of leaves, barks, animal hides and skin which had evolved through ages with onward discovery and use of cotton, silk, fur, wool etc. along with methods of weaving and embroidery. All tribal communities are no exception to this.

In the present article, focus centres around the art and craft of clothing of Dongria Kandhas (A Vulnerable Primitive Tribe of Odisha).

Keywords

- 1) PVTG - Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group.
- 2) Dongria Kandhas - Kandhas residing on Dongar, means 'Mountain'.
- 3) Kapadaganda - Colourful cloth/scarf with embroidery.
- 4) DKDA - Dongaria Kandha Development Agency (A special agency meant for development of Dongaria Kandhas, a primitive tribal group of Odisha).

Date of Submission: 27-03-2026

Date of Acceptance: 07-04-2026

I. Introduction

Each nation, state, institution or individual has a socio-cultural identity and status of their own. It is distinguished "primarily" through their customs, social norms, traditional dress/dressing patterns etc. As per authors like Anand Coomaraswamy (1909) upto Nichola Bernhard (1991), garments of India were civilisational marks which were exported to China, Afghanistan, Tibet in ancient India, to Turkey and Arabian countries in medieval period and to England in British period. Quality of Indian textile was so good that British aristocrats were preferring to wear them. But this tradition was destroyed by Britishers to save textile industries of England. Despite negative attitude of the Britishers, Indian weavers and their craftsmanship survived the test of time, before and after independence of India. This is quite visible in riverine/coastal areas.

Paradox is that very few scholars have tried to know and research as to what was the 'dress' and dressing pattern of original inhabitants residing in dense forest and hilly areas of India in pre-independence India. Curious questions come to mind about 'primitive tribals' as to when they started putting on dress for first time, the types of their dress in different time, when they discovered cotton and how could they know its processing to produce cloth etc.

With this curiosity, as a researcher, field study was taken up in villages like Khambesi and Khajuri of Dongaria Kandha of Bissamcuttack Block of Rayagada district of Odisha.

II. Background

As per 2011 census data, Kandha tribe is the largest tribe in state of Odisha, who are spread more or less over all 30 districts of the State. But majority of Kandhas reside in districts like Rayagada, Kandhamal, Kalahandi, Koraput, Bolangir and undivided Ganjam of Odisha. As per anthropologists, Kandha tribe is categorised into 3 main groups namely Dongaria Kandha, Kutia Kandha and Desia Kandha. Among above 3 groups, Dongaria Kandhas and Kutia Kandhas are categorised as PVTG (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group). Dongaria Kandhas reside on Dongar (mountains) of Niyamagiri hill range. Kutia Kandhas reside on hilly areas of Kandhamal and

Kalahandi districts. Rest others are spread over all districts of Odisha and reside in foot hill areas upto river belts. Dongria Kandhas use 'Kuvi' language that belongs to Dravidian language category. This language is influenced by 'Telugu' language of Andhra province. Out of total Kandha population of 16,27,486 (2011 census data), Dongria Kandhas are only 10324 spreading over 104 villages of 7 Panchayats covered under 2 (two) DKDAs (Dongria Kandha Development Agencies), Chatikona and Parsali (Data compiled by SCSTRTI, Govt. of Odisha).

It may be mentioned that Dongria Kandhas were known for their distinct life-style, dress, ornaments, dance, music, and youth dormitory etc. They were once infamous for their Maria Festival (Human sacrifice festival). They still believe in Nature Worship, totemism and sorcery. For last 30 years, they are in a state of panic out of fear of evacuation due to industrialisation and naxal presence. But they have not forgotten their customs and culture amidst panic of death threats.

III. Objective

In this brief article, out of many interesting aspects of Dongria Kandhas, main focus is on their dress and traditional dressing pattern which are simple, colourful but 'primitive' and continuing. They love dress, colour, motifs and embroidery. This article focus mainly on their 'scarf' which they call *Kapadaganda* (colourful scarf). So, main objective of this article is to find out the main contents and dimensions of colourful embroidery of Dongria scarf.

IV. Literature Review

Though art and craft of 'Tie and Dye' is one of the oldest form of artistic expression of human beings, its literature was mostly limited to oral literature than written literature of concerned ethnic groups. Of late, a few written literature is available in centre/state approved languages. These written literature is mostly confined to present features of the products from point of view of fashion than to its history and evolution. So, main source of information about customs of tribe is oral literature based on field experience.

Indians were accustomed to weaving by village based weavers and their handlooms for thousand years. After excavation in Indus Valley Civilisation and pictures seen in rock arts and murals of Ajanta/Ellora, it came to light that ancient gods/goddesses, kings/queens/soldiers etc. were putting on different clothes since 2000 B.C. Even rock art in tribal areas show that human beings were putting on dress, during hunting and meeting the important persons. It implies that tribals were capable of making dress out of bark, leaves, animal skin and gradually moved towards cotton and weaving.

The natural talent of Indian weavers was recognised by great archaeologist/historians like Anand Coomarswamy in his book 'Indian Craftsman' (1909) in which he has mentioned about 'Tie and Dye' craftsmanship of tribal people of India. In Chapter-IV of this book E.V.Havell has mentioned "The important part which craftsman, more specially the oriental craftsman, have always played in world history, as missionaries of civilisation, culture and religion, is not recognised by bookmen. He and Coomarswamy have mentioned about tradition of exporting of Indian cloth to outside countries through sea-route.

In his book "Living with Folk Art : Ethnic Styles around the World" (1991), Nicolas Barnard has drawn attention to production of varieties of smooth and fine clothes by Indian weavers and their export throughout ages. He mentions about the recognition of Indian Textile/Handlooms by Britishers who tried their best to cripple weavers and handlooms to save their textile industries in England. For the first time, Mahatma Gandhi recognised importance of weavers/handlooms in rural economy and popularised Charkha and weaving as a part of daily life that became a vital part of freedom movement in India. But there was no mention about the tribal weaving and weavers of India by Indian authors in pre-independence era.

So far as craft of weaving of Kandha is concerned, there is no literature available prior to the year 1821. This year Sterling, a British Officer, while reporting about Paik Rebellion (1817) and Kandhas, mentioned about 'half-clad Kandhas coming to meet him'. The famous book 'M memoir of Life and Character of Campbell' by J.Campbell (1936) has mentioned about 'half-clad Kandhas' with feather cap." Lt.J.P.Frye, in his report 'Dialogues and sentences in Kandh language' (1857) mentioned about Kandha chieftains wearing clothes from waist below with coloured fringe and coloured scarf. During Kandha festivals, they were also wearing this with a 'cap' with feathers fixed on it. From 1872 onwards, researches were taken up by E.T.Dalton, Thurston, Russel/Hiralal and others on caste and tribes of India in which there are mentions of small and medium size clothes and scarfs of Kandhas.

In 1946, famous Odia novelist, Gopinath Mohanty published his masterpiece 'Amrutara Santan' based on 12 year-long field observation and interactions in Kandha areas of Koraput and Kandhamal districts (undivided) of Odisha. He has mentioned about '*Kaupuni*', '*Dhoti*', '*Luga*', '*Kurta*' worn by Kandhas along with varieties. Verrier Elwin, in his book "Tribal Art of Middle India : Personal Record" (1951) has published photographs of 'half-clad' Kandha men and women. Barhara Boal, in her book 'The Kondhs' (1982) has mentioned about '*Dhoti*', '*Kurta*' of Kandha males. For the first time, photos of full-clad Kandha male and female in their

traditional colourful dress are found in the book "The Kandhas of Orissa : Their socio-economic-cultural life" (1982) by N.Patnaik and P.S.Das Patnaik. SCSTRTI, Bhubaneswar, Odisha) has published some booklets/leaflets about Kandh dress, and embroidery since 1982.

The purpose of mentioning those facts, out of available written literature, is that, Kandhas knew weaving and wearing clothes prior to 1817, year of Paik Rebellion against British rule in Odisha. But there are frequent mentions of *Luga, Dhoti, Kurta, Kaupuni, Kapada* in folklores of Kandhas. They had a history of weaving and weavers spread over 200 years. In this tradition of weaving and costume, *Kapadaganda* (colourful embroidery on cloth) occupies a special place as it is the symbol of identity of Dangria Kandhas.

Kapadaganda as an art and craft, has a history and evolution that needs research. Questions come to mind as to how a primitive tribe perceives weaving and embroidery with colourful motifs and flawless designs. Out of many questions in mind, the present article focus to find answer on (1) concepts of Kandhas behind each motifs and design of *Kapadaganda* (2) What is aesthetic and social value of *Kapadaganda*, (3) Has *Kapadaganda* any market value?

V. Methodology

To find answers objectively to above questions, field work had been undertaken during February 2024 and September 2025 in villages like Khambesi and Khajuri of DKDA, Chatikana of Rayagada District. These two villages are taken up as 'sample' villages as both villages are having better Kandha population who are vocal and active in festivities. To collect primary data, methods of questionnaire, interactive discussion and observation were used. Help of Jani (priest), and Govt. field staff were also taken to interpret typical Kandha language used by women. During preliminary discussion, in both villages 16 women (from village Khambesi) and 8 women (from Khajuri) active in embroidery, volunteered to co-operate in discussion.

As per field data, out of above 24 Dongria Kandha women, 10 were in age group of 20-25 years and rest were in age group of 30-60 years. In this group of 24, Kudwei Kadraka (Khambesi) and Sindhe Wadaka (Khajuri) were above 60 years and knew both weaving and embroidery. It is found that women above 30 years are almost without any formal education and those who are below 30 have not passed Matriculation (Std-X). They know embroidery only.

History Of Kapadaganda

Word "*Kapadaganda*" consists of two words like 'Kapada' means 'cloth' and 'Ganda' means 'embroidery'. Initially this word was used by Dongaria Kandhas to mean 'colourful scarf'. But now, they use it for wearing clothes, door screens, table cloth also. As per version of Kudwei Kadraka and Sindhe Wadaka (above 60 years), they learnt embroidery from their grandmothers, mothers and other elderly women of villages. This was a part of their household work. They learnt this art and craft by imitating elderly women in leisure time and even in dormitory. Cooking, embroidery and tattoo were binding on women before marriage. Now-a-days, they have stopped weaving cloth because required cloth is available in market. So, they focus on making the cloth more 'colourful' and 'designed' through embroidery than on producing clothes.

As per these elderly women, their mothers and female guardians were asking them to start with straight lines and then to go for small circles and triangles (*Kandaka*) without knowing their meanings. Later they came to know that small triangles symbolise 'axe' and bigger ones symbolise 'Soru Penu' (mountain gods/goddesses). After 2-3 years of training, they were trained to knit leaves, eyes, straight lines including borders and other decorative motifs. In short, there was no formal training for "*Kapadaganda*" but learning by imitation to develop the art and craft of Kandha embroidery.

Now-a-days, each clean place of villages of Dongaria Kandh is a training centre for learning the art/craft of Kapadaganda as it has a market now and this has been conferred G.I. tag by Govt. of India in 2023. Foreigners purchase this more and more. And this is one of the main attraction in State and National level exhibition-cum-sale also.

Features Of Kapadaganda

- [1] 'Rekti Kapadaganda' or in short, Kapadaganda is a combination of words like 'Rekti' means designed, *Kapada* (means cotton cloth), and 'Ganda' means colourful scarf. It is art and craft of embroidery.
- [2] It is especially done by women folk of Dongaria Kandha society. Males have no role in it except wearing it in different festive occasions.
- [3] Kandha women, who are interested in this art and craft, purchase clothes, needles and coloured threads from nearest local market. Cloth is required to be coarse but smooth. 4 (four) types of needles in range of 6", 4", 3" and 2" are required for embroidery work. Previously threads and clothes were made and coloured by women themselves through a lengthy process which they mastered over years. Now they purchase clothes from market but do the embroidery only.

- [4] Main colours used for Kapadaganda are *Kambit* (red), *Hinga* (yellow), *Sanja* (green) and *Kaditi* (crimson). Twenty years back women were using only deep red and crimson coloured threads. But now-a-days, they use all above 4 colours.
- [5] As per Dongria women, red colour is meant for Dharani Penu, the symbol of purity and fertility and this Penu is heart and soul of their society. Yellow colour gives impression of good and ripe harvest, purification, and amity. Green symbolises forest and agriculture. Crimson colour is used to make 'Kapadaganda' more impressive.
- [6] The standard size of Kapadaganda is 6'-5" x 4'-5". By needle work, first borderline of colour is knitted and after the rectangular bordering is complete, it is divided into 3 parts by knitting. With this, blueprint is ready.
- [7] It is observed that the entire embroidery is done without using any pencil, scale or sketching. It is the art work of women's hand and fingers.
- [8] Design of Kapadaganda is followed as if, it is their place of worship. (called '*Kudilinga*' or '*Handenikudi*') of Dongria Kandha society.
- [9] After preliminary outlines of a rectangle on Kapada, embroidery of 'hanging threads' and its 'tufting' (called '*Treyan*') is done on lowest part and uppermost part of Kapadaganda. Then real embroidery begins from the lowest part of the designed rectangular area.
- [10] The lowest part bordering is called '*Keri*'. It is seen in Kapadaganda that either it is perpendicular or vertical straight lines of different spaces depending on fine sense of women. It is also found that young girls do some small circles in space meant for '*Keri*'.
- [11] Above craftwork of '*Keri*' is complete, different types of bordering start above '*Keri*'. This bordering above '*Keri*' area, different types of parallel line '*Jeri*', *Hapuka Keri*, *Remang* etc. which are knitted. *Jeri* is tilted parallel straight lines with half-inch gap on both sides of dividing straight line called *Hapuka Keri*. Head part of each parallel straight line of '*Jeri*' meet each other on '*Hapuka Keri Line*' keeping equal distance horizontally. *Remang* is vertically parallel small straight lines. Knitting '*Jeri*' and '*Remang*' depend on sense of beauty of craftswoman.
- [12] After completion of bordering (*Keri* or *Jeri* or *Remang* type), 50 to 60 number of 'inverted triangles' are knitted which is called '*Karpi*' in Dongria Kandha language. '*Karpi*' means 'axe', which is the traditional symbol of Dongria identity that speaks of fearlessness, freedom, and prowess and attitude of sacrifice to satisfy Mother Earth (*Dharani Penu*).
- [13] After knitting of '*Karpi*', women go for 50 to 60 nos. of '*Kandaka*' (triangles) above it. This is just opposite of '*Karpi*' (head angle remains upward). '*Kandaka*' is symbol of '*Soru Penu*' (mountain gods/goddesses) who are believed to be protectors against enemies, diseases and evil souls (*Duma*). They are also given tuber, fruits and fuelwoods and other life saving materials.
- [14] Above '*Kandaka*', several *Karli Karpinga* (leaves) of different colours are knitted in line symbolising forest and trees.
- [15] Above lines of '*Karli Karpinga*' (leaves), few '*Karpina*' (circles within circle having one centre) are knitted which symbolises Sun God (*Dharam Devta*) and empty space gives the impression of '*Haru*' (cultivation on mountain) 3/4 sub-sections inside middle section (*Bata* or *Wata*) of Kapadaganda give the clear impression about the basic concepts of socio-religious life of Dongria Kandhas, even if, it is embroidery or wall paintings and embroidery has almost the same motifs of 'Place of worship (*Kudilinga*) of Kandhas.
- [16] Above this section, the uppermost section has the same design and motifs as the lowest part of Kapadaganda.

VI. Findings On Field Work

- [1] After detail discussion with the target group in respective villages, it became clear that entire embroidery by Dongria women about Kapadaganda is nothing but reflection or extension of their concept of Nature Worship. Different manifestations of Nature like earth, forest, trees, mountain, sun etc. find place in Kapadaganda which has been used in festivities, worship and socio-religious-cultural functions even in love affair to marriage.
- [2] It is observed that there is no difference in art of wall painting and craft of embroidery of Dongria Kandhas which is combination of nature worship, aesthetic expressions and happiness.
- [3] Their capacity to imitate, learn and improvise is very slow due to lack of exposure and containment.
- [4] Craft of Kapadaganda, after conferring of the G.I. tag on it, has enhanced zeal and production of this scarf in better way and numbers also. It is becoming a good source of livelihood to young married and unmarried women. They join training camp and like innovation, imprisonment and variety also.
- [5] As non-tribal women of these tribal areas and fashion designers have shown lot of interest in Kapadaganda, there is apprehension that this PVTG women will lose in competitive market.

VII. Conclusion

It is observed in the area of Dongria Kandhas, traditional crafts of terracota, pottery, woodcraft, ironcraft, weaving etc. have been absorbed and improved by non-tribal of this area. It is because PVTG are slow learners due to their fixed concepts and lack of exposure. There is every possibility that art/craft of Kapadaganda will be easily adapted by non-tribals and fashion designers. So, Dongria Kandhas should learn to speed up learning and training to compete in market. TDCC, Odisha should take care of this aspect. Otherwise, this art and craft will be finished and so the Dongria Kandhas.

Jagannath Mohanty
Professor Jagannath Dash

Reference

- [1]. Boal, Barbara. M – The Konds : Human Sacrifice And Religious Change, Published In 1982.
- [2]. Campbell, J – Memoir; The Life And Character Of Campbell, Published In 1936.
- [3]. Coomarswamy, Anand – Indian Craftsman, Published In 1909.
- [4]. Dash, R.N. – (Edited) The Art And Craft Of Kandhamal, Published In 2006.
- [5]. Elwin, Verrier – Tribal Art Of Middle India : A Personal Record, Published In 1951.
- [6]. Kar, D.P. – The Weaving Art Of Orissa, Published In 2006.
- [7]. Mohanty, Gopinath – Amritar Sanatan, Published In 1946.
- [8]. Nicola, Bernhard – Living With Folk Art : Ethnic Styles From Around The World, Published In 1991.
- [9]. Ota, A.B – (Edited), Art And Craft Of Tribal, Odisha, Published In 2015.
- [10]. Ota, A.B. – Tribal Atlas Of Orissa, Published In 2017.
- [11]. Parija, Raja – Textile Tales Of Tribal Odisha, Published In 2021.
- [12]. Patnaik, N And Das Patnaik, P.S. – The Kandhas Of Orissa : Their Socio-Economic And Cultural Life, Published In 1982.
- [13]. Rath, Raghunath – Kandhas And Kandhamal, Published In 2010.