

The Banjara Community of India: Status, Problems and Prospects

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Abstract: India is known for cultural diversity. It is also called as a pluralistic society. Scholars have called India as an 'ethnological museum'. The country has several social groups which are governed by the Varna system. The Indian social order is primarily responsible for the deprivation, degradation and depression of a vast majority of indigenous people of India. The goals of social democracy and economic democracy have not been actualized even after seventy years of national independence. The dominant powers continue to rule the roost by abusing the caste power, muscle power, money power and political power. The indigenous people have been excluded from the mainstream of national development despite several constitutional protections, provisions and privileges. The central and state governments have also formulated certain policies and implemented specific programmes for the social and economic modernization, transition and development of the marginalized sections of Indian society. These initiatives have not really benefited the women and weaker sections of Indian society mainly due to lack of political will, social concern and discriminatory tendencies of the ruling class. The Lambanis had led a gypsy life in the past and primarily lived in the western Indian state of Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. They belong to Scheduled Caste in Karnataka state and backward caste in other states respectively. They are basically nomadic people from the Indian states of Rajasthan, North West, Gujarat, Western Madhya Pradesh and Eastern Sindh province of Pakistan. The status, problems and prospects of Banjara community in India are analysed in this article on the basis of an extensive review of relevant literature.

Keywords: *Banjara Community*

I. THE BANJARA COMMUNITY OF INDIA

Banjara is the biggest ethnic tribal group of India which is not a conventionally construed caste. They were basically the ethnic group which lived in forest areas (Banaj) and depended on trade (Vanijya) according to the Sanskrit terminology. The Banjaras are also known as Lamans / Lambara/ Labans/ Labhani/Lakhapati/ Lamanis/ Lavani / Laban/ Labhani Muka/ Laman / Lemadi/ Lamadi/Lambadi/ Lamani/ Labhana/ Lumadale/ Brinjar/ Bripari/ Banjari/ Pindari/ Bangala/ Banjori/ Banjuri/ Brinjari/ dhadi/ Gormati / Goola/ Gurmarti/Mukeri/ Sugali/ Sukali/ Kora/ Sugali/ Sukali/ Tanda/ Vanjari/ Vanzara/ Wanjari and Wanji. There are a number of historical evidences and landmarks which prove that the Banjara community was aboriginal and primitive tribes of Indian sub-continent.

They are basically divided into two tribes namely – Maturia and Labana. The name Laman is popular long before the name Banjara and the Laman Banjaras originally came from Afghanistan before settling in Rajasthan and other parts of India. The survey of literature on Banjaras Community clearly indicates that ample literature has been produced by the Western and Indian scholars. Yet the treatment of this problem is exponential. Issues like Semantics, Historicity, Location, Ethnicity, Categorization, Caste-clan Dichotomy and the

community's identity and inter face with different pre colonial, colonial and post colonial political settings continued to gravitate the attention for penetrative insights.

The Banjaras of India have a great historical legacy. They share common anthropological characteristics and historical features with the Romani Gypsies of the Eastern Europe and middle east countries. The Romani Gypsies, Lambanis and Banjara's history reveal the common fraternity (Rathod, 2008:10).

The Banjaras are also known as the forest dwelling tribal Indo-European speakers surrounded by more advanced Dravidian speaking communities. The tribal Indo-European speakers of south India are all nomadic communities such as Banjaras or Pardhis (Indian Gypsies) with known history of migration from Rajasthan to south India in recent centuries. Some researchers argue that, this is strongly suggestive of the Dravidians being older inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent, and that they have been pushed southwards, surrounded by or converted to Indo-European languages by later arriving Indo-European speakers. The Banjara community retains its influence down the centuries to shape and reshape the course of political history in India. The Banjara community considers itself as a nomad community. The Banjaras have spread across the country.

The Banjaras have been described as an endogamous group of trading nomads who are organized into territorial groups of Pattis, each of which has several classes known as endogamous units. Each clan is organized into several smaller groups called tandas, each comprising six to 20 families. The doctrine of collective responsibility operates among the members of the tanda. Although a family is the producing and consuming unit the tanda is the administrative unit in social economic and political matters (Vidyarthi, 1978:16). Various families within the tanda are bound by kinship ties which give security to the members and bind them in the rules obligations and expectations towards one another.

The Banjaras are the sturdy, ambitious people and have a light complexion. The Banjara were historically nomadic, keeping cattle, trading salt and transporting goods. Most of these people now have settled down to farming and various types of wage labour. Their habits of living in isolated groups away from other, which was a characteristic of their nomadic days, still persist (Naik and Naik, 2012:05). Their unique dress, heritage, customs and language distinguish them from the majority population, and they maintain a separate lifestyle. The Banjaras were the most important trader nomads. The Banjaras were basically traders of grain, salt, bamboos, firewood and other essential commodities. They keep moving from place to place in search of livelihood opportunities since they are the marginalized sections of Indian society (Travel, 2009:14). The people of the Banjara tribal community worship Hindu gods and goddesses.

II. THE BANJARAS IN THE ANCIENT TIMES

The migration of Banjaras beyond the borders of India in ancient times itself confirms their ethnographic spread. Their connection with the various dynasties helped them to achieve socio-economic and political mobility. The Banjaras believe that Mota and Mola who were in the court of lord Krishna were the ancestors of modern Mathuria Banjaras. The Banjaras share the same culture, language, customs, traditions and other practices across the country even though they are called by different names. The Banjaras had lived in the ancient times (6th century B.C) and migrated to Khyber and Bolan passes between 600 B.C. and 350 B.C. The Banjaras have their own mythological and historical account which suggests that their home land was somewhere in North Western India. The Banjaras were supposed to be the inhabitants of Pakistan and Baluchistan, the regions which formed an integral part of India (Nagaveni, 2014:04).

The Banjaras are the prominent component of ancient culture and history of India. Their history dates back to 5-6 thousand years. There are references about Gor Banjaras in the Greek civilization up to Harappa and Mohenjodaro. The presence of Banjaras dates back to 4500 years prior to Harappa civilization. The famous Indus civilization was built by the indigenous people of India on the basis of natural law of justice and human values. The Gor Banjara culture has made an impact on the ancient cultures of the world. Their world body is known as Roma Gypsies who were found in about 60 countries across the globe. There is almost 90% similarity as regards their language, costumes, lifestyle and food habits. The other Gorumshiyas in the world treat India as their homeland. The Banjara settlement is not called as a village rather referred to as Tanda only. Banjara Tandas are also found in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Gor Banjara tribe had devised rules for game when they used to hunt animals for food. Today they are still in vogue in some Tandas. The details of people engaged in trading by loading their goods on oxen since 4500 years ago are found. Banjaras were actively engaged in trade. The Banjara tribe is endowed with an ancient history dating back from wild gaming stage to right up to pre-Indus agrarian stage. The Gor Banjaras basically worshipped the nature since ancient times (Rathod, 2014:07).

The Sun, Wind, Fire, Water and the Earth were their gods. Dancing and singing are very much essential in their life. It is their forte of life. The Banjara ancient culture is reflected by the lifestyle, food habits, festivals, rituals, worship, use of cosmetics, likes and dislikes, dances, songs, language, clothing, literature among the Tanda life. The Banjaras basically constitute the backward section of the Indian society. They inherit all the tribal cultural characteristics and natural way of life.

III. THE BANJARAS IN THE MEDIEVAL TIMES

The Banjaras in India lead a gypsy life. The anthropologists have studied the origin of Banjara community which originally lived in the area between Bikaner and Bahawalpur, Pakistan. They were displaced after the defeat of Rajputs by the Muslim invaders. They had spread to Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and other states of India. The Banjaras accompanied the Moghuls as an ordinance corps in the conquest of the Deccan, and some of them later stayed back to continue trade, or whether they were already present as traders. The scholars have referred to the name of Banjara community which has been considered of great antiquity.

The Indian historian Kanitkar had given a detailed description of Banjara / Laman trade routes in India. He had noted that the India's trade both internal and external, had been in flourishing condition during the period 600 B.C. to 350 A.D. The Banjaras had served the King Shajahan when he led an expedition against the Sultan of Bijapur in 1630. The Bangi and Jhangi Naik were the two Banjara leaders who accompanied the Moghul army with 1,80,000 bullocks under the direction of Asaf Khan during their raid into the Deccan against the Bijapur. The first mention of the Banjaras is found in the history of Sikandar Lodi's attack on Dholpur in 1504 AD. The Banjaras accompanied different Muslim invaders of the country for their livelihood opportunities.

The anthropologists have noted that the Banjaras had come to the Deccan following the invasion by the armies of Aurangzeb. The nomadic caravan's established their link with the political structures of their days mediating through the military forces of various Islamic dynasties beginning with Khiljies to Mughals. The Banjaras were engaged in trading activity as a nomadic community. They also sold various types of grains and commodities from the growers and transported the same on the herds of bullocks to the market of the Khilji kingdom. The Banjaras were enabled by the price control mechanism put in place by the Ala-ud-din-Khilji to buy transport and sell commodities at stipulated price.

The Banjaras had come over to the Deccan as transporters of supplies or merchandise for the armies of Delhi emperors in their raids in the South early in the 17th century. They had come over to South India in five groups such as Rathod, Pamhar, Chouhan, Mola, Vadaty and Turi. The Rathods are the strongest and most widespread across the country. In the medieval period, the Banjaras had commercial transactions with Middle Africa, Tibet, Italy, Khyber, Afghanistan, China, Arab countries and America. Some of them had even settled down in foreign countries. They were the bridge between India and rest of the world from business transaction point of view until 1850s. In the 18th century they had also taken up service under the Maratha rulers of Satara, the Peshwas of Poona, the Nizam of Hyderabad and the British in the Mysore and Maratha Wars.

The Banjaras were also known as 'Karwaniyans' since they transported the food grains from the country side to the city. They had settled on the banks of Yamuna with their families. The Muslim rulers had made certain regulations to ensure the regular supply of food grains to the people. The trade and commerce flourished during the Mughal period. The Banjaras had traded in caravans and were continuously on the move carrying goods from one place to another (Russel and Hiralal, 1975:11). The Banjaras were also subjected to certain restrictions by the Allauddin's regime for the purpose of controlling the food prices distributed by the Banjaras. The task of transporting food-grains from the countryside was generally carried out by Karwaniyan or Banjaras who had 10,000 or 20,000 bullocks mainly for the purpose of trade.

The Banjaras had earned the trust and goodwill of the Mughal emperors and army when fighting in the Deccans and down south by their speedy transportation through the difficult and trackless terrain (Halbar, 1986:02). The Mughals rewarded them by granting them many immunities and privileges. As the Mughal emperors conquered southern India and strengthened their position up to the end of 17th century, some Banjaras stayed back in different parts of South India and the Deccans. Later in the 18th century, they took up the service under the

Maratha rulers of Satara and subsequently under the Peshwas of Poona and Nizam of Hyderabad.

The Banjaras had strong ties with the Marathas as well. They were his confidants when Shivaji went to meet Aurangzeb in Delhi. Peshwa too was helped by one Durgadas Banjara when he was attacked by the Nizam of Hyderabad while resting in Bhopal. The Peshwa brought Durgadas to Pune and hosted him (Rathod, 2014:08). The Banjaras had actively participated in the inter-local trade in the medieval period and supplied food grains, raw materials, textiles, silks, mules and other commodities to the people. They were specialized in carrying bulk goods. They also moved with their families over long distances, sometimes with thousands of oxen carrying food grains and other essential commodities for the bigger merchants (Self Study History, 2015:12). Their caravans moved under state protection for the supply of food grains to the army. The Banjaras had played a crucial role in the promotion of trade in the absence of both boat traffic on waterways and coastal trade along the seashore. The Banjaras flourished in the Sultanate and Mughal period from the north-west deep into the Deccan because they supplied essential commodities to the armies in the field.

IV. THE BANJARAS IN THE COLONIAL TIMES

The Banjaras were employed in the army by French, English, Nizam, Marathas in the same capacity. The Banjaras were deprived of formal education and training opportunities during the colonial rule. They had to indulge in crimes like robbery, dacoit, cattle lifting and kidnapping of children until the middle of the 18th century. The British rulers were unkind towards Banjaras due to their mistaken assumption. They could not continue for long with their trading marches as the British objected to their movements and supplying their wares to the local armies fighting against them. The trading activities of the Lamans also came to a halt with the introduction of the railways and roadways.

The British had notified the Banjaras as Criminal Tribes in 1793 along with other criminal classes and compelled to report at police stations and register their attendance. The situation became grimmer with the enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1897 (Halbar, 1986:02). It was a great social and economic disadvantage to the Banjara community when they were placed under some more restrictions after the enactment of comprehensive Criminal Tribes Act in 1924.

But the British accused Banjaras of looting war-stricken regions. Depredation of the enemy's country at the end of the war was a regular practice by armies at this time. During the colonial regime, the Banjaras who were economically self-reliant as traders had become the victims of predatory capitalism (Nagaveni, 2014:04).

The British authorities ill-treated the Banjaras and deprived them of their chief livelihood. Subsequently, the Banjaras had become financially vulnerable. The development of infrastructure and modern civic amenities had practically undermined the Banjaras economy (Varady, 1979:15). They had to settle down as agriculturists in the forested areas and greatly contributed to the expansion of agriculture in the eighteenth century.

The British forces resented the Banjaras monopoly in food grain transportation and treated them harshly, especially after the Mysore War. The three Karnatik wars between 1745 and 1763 four Anglo Mysore Wars between 1766 and 1799 and the Maratha wars, made the whole of the Deccan come under

the direct control of the British. In all these wars, the Banjaras were the main grain suppliers to all sides. Their services were acknowledged by all the imperial powers. They had particularly good relations with the Nizams, as they had served their armies from the times of Aurangzeb. The first Nizam employed them in large numbers during his early consolidation of the Deccan.

The Banjaras had become the worst victims of colonial mainstream Hindus and Muslim persecution and oppressive activities. The enforcement of Criminal Tribes Act (CTA), 1871 caused a death blow to the Banjaras. Their nomadic way of life was under threat from the 1820's onwards. But, there was a gradual realignment within different social spaces and the community lived under backward conditions before independence. Banjara is one of the biggest ethnic groups of India which is beyond the caste system in Indian Society (Pawar, 2007:06). It is a social group which primarily depended on transportation of food grains and other commodities on back of animals, hence the name Banjara was attached to them.

The colonial authorities expanded the communication facilities across the country especially through the development of railway transportation services. The Banjaras role as long distance bulk commodity transporters was almost curtailed by the colonial rule. The development of motorized road transport facilities gave new opportunities in the business of cattle dealing to the Banjaras. The advent in India of the long platform lorry enabled enterprising Banjaras to transport twenty or more bullocks and calves a couple of hundred miles in one day. This practically helped them to find livelihood opportunities in the country. The Banjaras have demonstrated their versatility by surviving several onslaughts against their way of life. They had entered the twentieth century with renewed vigor (Varady, 1979:15). They have successfully reconciled a desire to preserve their self-image with the need for a useful livelihood.

The Banjaras had settled in Karachi and Hyderabad in Sindh before independence. Their settlements are generally known as tandas (camps) which reflect their nomadic background. But, the Banjaras have a unique culture and their own language which are based on oral communication patterns.

They settled down in the southern or central area of the country and slowly loosened contacts with Rajasthan, and their original community. They also gradually adopted the local culture and adjusted with the local environment for their survival and development. The historians like Thurston and Grierson had documented in their works that the Banjaras were well known tribe of carriers and found all over western and southern India.

The 1911 Census of India indicates that Lamanis or Vanjari, Lambhanas and Sukalirs, Hanjaras, Banjaris, Brinjaris, Lamans, Lambadis, Labhans were one and the same. The Banjaras had also suffered economically because of deforestation, strict implementation of forest protection measures and declaration of forests as reserved forests. The Banjaras had to depend on sale of forest produce and pastoralist for their livelihood during the 19th century. They were also involved in agriculture and cottage industrial activities for their livelihood. During 1930s, Banjaras had ultimately settled down first as pastoralists and then as agriculturists, although agriculture had never been their occupation in their history. The men were primarily agriculturists and the women participated in cottage industrial activities before independence.

Before independence, the Banjaras had served many princely States and Rulers in the sub-continent. They had

actively involved in the trading and transportation of food grains, arms and ammunitions and essential commodities from one region to another since there were no sufficient transportation facilities in India like trains, roads and automobiles. The civil society had to depend upon the Banjara communities itself for supply of goods through pack bullocks, mules and camels and bullock carts (Rathod, 2008:10). The Banjaras had to move towards rural areas, hill stations and other remote areas in the absence of shelter. The Banjara community had engaged in trading and transportation of food grains, arms and ammunitions and essential commodities from one region to another. They contributed their mite for the development of trade relations and organization of civil supplies before independence.

V. THE BANJARAS IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE ERA

After independence, the Banjaras became an inseparable part of Indian democratic citizenry. The Government of India gave a human touch to the problems faced by the Banjaras. They received the reservation benefits in the fields of education, employment and politics. They were brought under the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Castes in different Indian states. Anyhow, some governments have recognized the socio-economic backwardness of the community, their contribution in pre-independence and post-independence of India, and offered constitutional relieves in the form of reservation in certain states. The Banjaras were listed in 1949 as one of the denotified communities after independence. In the post-independence period, the government reviewed the provisions of the Criminal Tribes Act, 1924 and repelled it in 1952. The Banjaras had become 'Denotified along with a number of other similar groups (Halbar, 1986:02).

The Banjaras were organized at the national level in 1953 under the banner of 'All India Banjara Seva Sangh'. Late V.P.Naik had played a crucial role in facilitating the development of a national network of Banjaras for their social and economic transformation in the post-independence era in accordance with the constitutional norms and guidelines. The Banjara community was reminded of their historical legacy and contributions for the development of the nation as prominent traders. The organization had called upon the Banjara community to educate their children, obtain reservation benefits and achieve social and economic transformation democratically. Series of national conferences were also held periodically by the national body to sensitize the policy makers about their backwardness and prepare grounds for their progress in the country. They were also entitled to constitutional safeguards, provisions and reservation benefits. They were recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in 1977. A new brigade of the community had also emerged to mobilize social action and political support for the development of the community in 1980s. By the end of the 20th century, the community had established its identity in Indian society (Hanumanaikar et. al. 2011:03).

They were classified as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and OBCs by the States and Union Territories according to the local socio-economic conditions. They normally live in tandas which are deprived of modern civic amenities. The Banjara community is not happy with their categorization under the above sections even though they constitute a homogeneous social entity (Rathod, 2012:09). The Banjaras are socially, economically and politically backward section of Indian society (All India Banjara Seva Sangh, 2007:01).

Their hamlets (Tanda) situated in the fringes of forest and vicinity of villages and cities are still pathetically neglected. Community people are reeling under in exorable poverty illiteracy, malnutrition, and ill-health, unemployment, under employment, seasonal unemployment and liquor addiction. The community people are bubbling with enthusiasm to include themselves in the system for the greater transition in the age of globalization and democracy (Nagaveni, 2014:04). In post independent period constitutional provisions coupled with union and state governments enactment and initiatives put in place for implementation have however given opportunity for the communities democratic elevation, transition and transformation. But the ground reality is different with respect to Banjara community.

VI. THE BANJARAS IN THE MODERN TIMES

The Banjaras are excluded from the mainstream of national life even after 70 years of national independence. A microscopic minority of them have received education, employment, leadership and other opportunities. There is visible democratic elevation, transition and transformation of the community. But, a majority of the people who live in hamlets (Tanda) situated in the fringes of forest and vicinity of villages and cities are backward in all walks of life. They are not blessed with adequate infrastructural facilities, civic amenities and other opportunities for their integrated development.

They have remained educationally and economically very weak in the modern times due to certain constraints. The Banjaras have established regional associations and national federation to fight for their rights and privileges in the country. The community has received political reservation across the country from Panchayat to Parliament under SC/ST/OBC quotas. The Banjaras of the country have also achieved limited educational progress (Singh, 2002:13). The Banjaras have to obtain the Constitutional special privileges in order to achieve educational and economic progress. They should also work with other backward sections of the society and capture the power at any cost.

Even after 68 years of national independence, Banjaras have not achieved considerable progress in India due to lack of political will and support of civil society. They are also physically and emotionally harassed by the upper class people. They are downtrodden people in the country who are educationally, socially, economically and politically disadvantaged. The Banjaras primarily belong to Dalit group in Indian society according to the constitutional reservation norms and provisions (Rathod, 2014:08). The Banjara lifestyles have changed to certain extent in the 21st century on account of progressive legislations, social networking and intervention of various stakeholders of their development. The community faces the uphill task of coming out of the vicious circle of poverty and backwardness manufactured by the system. The community has to go a long way in achieving the goal of absolute educational, social, economic and political transformation in India.

CONCLUSION

India is an 'ethnological museum'. The Indian social order is primarily responsible for the deprivation, degradation and depression of a vast majority of indigenous people of India. The Lambanis had led a gypsy life in the past and primarily lived in the western Indian state of Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. Banjara is the biggest ethnic tribal group of India which is not a conventionally construed caste. The new

democratic republic was made aware of its responsibility towards the welfare of Dalits and other weaker sections of society thanks to the revolutionary struggle launched by Ambedkar. They belong to Scheduled Caste in Karnataka state and backward caste in other states respectively. The present sociological investigation was carried out in Karnataka state to understand the social, economic and cultural conditions of Lambanis in the Hassan district of Karnataka state. There are several constitutional safeguards for the members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes which relate to the removal of the disabilities as well as positive measures to enable them to acquire a dignified position in the national life. The Banjara lifestyles have changed to certain extent in the 21st century on account of progressive legislations, social networking and intervention of various stakeholders of their development. The Banjaras community of India has not been brought under the common umbrella by the various stakeholders of national development. They should be empowered educationally, socially, economically and politically through participatory communication and development approaches in the new millennium.

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