

THE BANJARA COMMUNITY IN KARNATAKA; STATUS, PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS.

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Abstract: There are many diversities in India as it is pluralistic society. Amidst this diversity it is claimed that India is unified and as got unity in diversity. When we browse through the pages of history with reference to India that over the years the contribution of indigenous population to National Socio Economic development has been considerably disregarded. Our country was subject to foreign invasion for many centuries. Those who conquered India became our rulers and introduced their own system in the form of political administration. The need and importance of local population was relegated. However, some communities swam with the current, made their presence, earned livelihood and found settlement across the country. Once such community to reckon with is the Banjara or the Lambani community. According to scholars, historians and researchers people belonging to this community have settled spreading across sixty countries. Yet there is no International bond or link among the people of this community as they have comfortably mixed with the natives. It is true that the people of Banjara community are basically nomadic traders in nature having established permanent base in India. They came to our country from Afghanistan and Pakistan and are known for Gypsy life. They shifted their settlement from one state in India to the other along with the movement of Mughal, Muslim, Maratha, Peshwa and Nizam armies. Reports also revealed that the Banjara community is one bigger unit in the ethnological museum of India and the Banjara Community has been able to retain its distinct identity in terms of culture, tradition, rituals, costumes, language, festivals etc., Strangely enough the Banjara people have always preferred to live in groups in a particular area popularly known as Lambani or Banjara Tanda. They have not allowed families of other communities to live within the limits of Tandas. Although few persons of the community have gained political leadership by and large the community is illiterate being victims of acute poverty, misery, unemployment and self-imposed inhibition. They have been subject to religion and caste based exploitation by

other socially better of communities. The people particularly women are vastly unemployed and the Tandas are subject to deprivation of facilities. In this article an attempt is made to theoretically analyzed and evolution and living condition of Banjara community in general and women in particular in Karnataka with broader reference to India. It is established that the legal protection under the provisions of Constitution of India have not benefited the community to the considerable extent. It is only in the recent past that the younger generation of this community has been able to have access to modern education at all levels. Some special privileges have been extended to this community. For instance, while the community gets the benefits provided to Scheduled Caste in Karnataka State the Banjara Community has been treated as Backward Class in many States of India. It is expected that both the Government of India and State Governments have to enforce rigorous policies to promote the development of Banjara community in general and women in particular. Strong political view is required to bring them to main stream of public life.

Keywords: Nomadic traders, Banjara community, Tanda

INTRODUCTION:

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. One of the well-known tribal communities in India is the Banjara community. This community is considered to be the conventional or traditional ethnic group. Once upon a time this community had its inhabitation in forests and found livelihood with whatever was available to them there. This community is not a caste. The community is spread all over the country including Karnataka. In the state of Karnataka people belonging to Banjara community are found in all the districts. In some districts they are found in large number. In the past they depended on petty business and they were required to carry from one place to the other for sales. They always prefer to live in an area or group of their own. We have many such inhabitations of Banjara people in Karnataka and each of these locations is popularly known as ‘Tanda’

Tandais a place in which the inhabitants are only people belonging to Banjara community. He even today there are pure tanda’s with Banjara people only. Only in the recent past in small tanda’s one or two families belonging to other casts have started living. However, people belonging to banjara community their special identity on account of

which the community is rightly called the Ethnic group. There are different names to this community and these names have emerged from time to time. For instance, a few other names of Banjara community are Lamanis/ Lavani / Laban/ LabhaniMuka/ Laman / Lemadi/ Lamans / Lambara/ Labans/ Lakhapati/Lamadi/Lambadi/ Lamani/ Labhana/ Lumadale/ Brinjar/ Bripari/ Banjari/ Pindari/ Bangala/ Banjori/ Banjuri/ Brinjari/ dhadi/ Gormati / Goola/ Tanda/ Vanjari/ Vanzara/ Wanjari and Wanji.Gurmarti/Mukeri/ Sugali/ Sukali/ Kora/ Sugali/ Sukali. It is told that the word Banjara has come from the word 'Banik' or 'Vanik' which means trade or business. People belonging to this community were carrying on business for livelihood. There are some distinct features of Banjara community.

The Banjara's preferred to live in a group with their own kiths, kins and relatives. They speak a particular language which is a mixture of many languages such as Sanskrit, Hindi, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Konkani etc., The Banjara community as retained its ethnic culture by celebrating festivals which are specific to Banjara community. In the recent past they have identified themselves with tradition and culture of people of other communities who live close by. It is also said that Banjara people are gamblers and bring alcohol without any hesitation during festivals and other events. It is surprising to note that both men and women drink together. The specialty of this community is both men and women sing songs and dance together. This is purely tribal in nature. All these factors have given distinct and separate identity to this community. When we look at the origin of this community there is ample testimony to consider Banjara community as one of the oldest aboriginal, conventional and primitive nomadic tribal communities. There is historical evidence that one group of Banjara community moved away from Afghanistan and came to India. The first settlement of Banjara community was in the state of Rajasthan and gradually spread to other parts of the country. Thus over country is proud to be the house of this primitive and aboriginal community. In most of the states in India the Banjara community has got reservation under the provisions of the Constitution of India.

In Karnataka State the Banjara Community has been given the status of Scheduled Caste. Plenty of literature is said to be available for study about the life and condition of Banjara community. This literature has been produced from time to time by Indian as well as Western scholars, researchers and academicians. It is also said that Banjara community lives in many countries of the world but they is no inherent relationship among the Banjara people in different countries. The community has been able to establish local identity. This implies that the Banjara community shares and enjoys native culture and tradition of the

country or the state that it lives in. It is a widely accepted fact that the people belonging to Banjara community share common anthropological characteristics as well as historical elements with the Romani Gypsies of two places namely Eastern Europe and middle east countries. Scholars connected with Banjara community consider the issue of Banjaras as semantic in broader sense. These issues are connected with location, Historicity, Categorization, Ethnicity, Caste-clan Dichotomy as well as the identity of community in addition to interface with various pre-colonial, colonial as well as post-colonial political as well as social settlements. This just proves that the Banjara community has undoubtedly quite rich historical legacy in our country.

One of the scholars by name Rathod, after in depth research study concluded that there must be common fraternity among the Romani Gypsies. Another view point about the Banjaras is that the Banjaras or the Lambanis are popularly known as dwellers or inhabitants in forests in Indo—European region. It is surprising to note the Lambani speaking community is overwhelmingly surrounded by people who speak Dravidian Language. History reveals that the Banjaras living in South India are said to be belonging to nomadic tribes and their shift to this region is not very old. Researchers and Scholars opined that they found their inhabitation in this region in recent centuries. Other scholars are of the opinion that the Dravidian culture is much older than that of the Banjaras. However, the Banjaras, after moving to different parts of India, have been able to adjust and mix with native Indians as almost like localities'. This is really commendable. The Banjaras population is fairly large and united. That is why the community has been able to exert its influence in National, State and Local Politics in our country. The community has created political leadership in some persons who have not deviated or moved away from the interest of the community.

In other words, the community is a strong supporting political force to any party in India. The Banjara people take pride in declaring them as nomadic tribe. Over the period the Banjara people have spread across the country and have settled in almost all the states. They have been traders who are nomadic in nature. Therefore, they have been rightly regarded as endogamous nomads involving trading. Consequently, they have been successful in creating or establishing territorial communities in all regions. When they were able to establish territorial inhabitation they formed small groups of Tandas. In the beginning these Tandas comprised of eight to twenty-four Banjara families. Gradually many more families joined or moved to these locations. Presently there are some Tandas in Karnataka State which consists of more than two hundred Banjara families. There is one

such Tanda in Shivamogga District known as Kunchenahalli Tanda. It has accommodated about two hundred forty Lambani families and as not given space for penetration by families belonging to other communities.

The Tanda is developing in such a way that the chosen or selected leadership retains final or ultimate Authority in making political decisions. It operates as Local Administrative Authority, maintains internal ethnics system and takes decisions in the best interest of the community. People in the Tanda give due respect to the decisions of Tanda leadership which serves as a strong bond of unification. In fact this element has been considered as the strength of Banjara community irrespective of the fact where it has established its settlement or found inhabitation.

It is strangely surprising to recognize the fact that there is close relationship among all families living in a Tanda. By and Large there is no internal dissension or difference of opinion. All are them live as one family and share happiness and sorrow together. They do not allow any person of their community being attacked or handled by others. People belonging to this community are said to be adventures, ambitious, sturdy and are prepared to perform for the sake of the community. It is also revealed that people of this community have light complexion. There are instances that in the past the nomadic Banjara's breeding cattle and carried out business moving from one place to the other. The women and the younger once in the family lived at home in the absence of men who were away from house for business or some other activity. However, with the passage of time they gave up keeping cattle's and put an end to nomadic trading habit. They live in their settlements and prefer to work as wage earners by performing physical labor. Many of them have found earning as farm workers. They live in separate communities as exclusive or independent or separate group without allowing others to live with them. This tendency continues even today. They are known to maintain a distinct or separate life style with their unique heritage, culture, life style and language. Needless to say this creates very strong bond or relationship among people belonging to Banjara community. When they were nomadic tribe people there main activity was trading. They sold items like grains, firewood, salt bamboos etc., The Banjara people were compelled to move from one territory to the other in search of livelihood as they were subject to exploitation by others. In other words they could be treated as marginalized section of society always at the receiving end from upper classes in society.

HISTORIC LEGACY OR EVOLUTION OF BANJARA COMMUNITY: The people belonging to Banjara Community are not confined to our country alone. Studies and reports on Banjara community presented in the past revealed that the people were migratory in nature and they found inhabitation in different countries of the world. This is in precise the ethnographic spread of Banjara community across countries. One positive element of Banjara community was that it did not consider its self as a separate entity or independent group. It very easily associated with local communities and comfortably mixed with others and developed good social contact. They were successful in developing contact with many dynasties and attempted to clinch political existence. There is a strong belief amount the people of Banjara community that they are ancestors existed in the kingdom of Lord Krishna. These persons were Mota and Mola who are supposed to be the oldest reference to Banjara community. The Banjara community is known by different names across the country. However, there are some uniformity or common things among them in terms of culture, tradition, language, customs, rituals and such other practices. It is reported that there is historical evidence that the Banjara community lived during 6th century B.C. and migrated or moved to Khyber and Bolan passes somewhere around 350 BC. History further provides evidence about the mythological and historical proofs that the Banjara community is supposed to have lived in and around North Western parts of India. During those days the present Pakistan and Baluchistan were integral parts of our country and the Banjara communities were supposed to have found inhabitation in these regions. It is regarded as that the Banjara community occupied a prominent position in terms of ancient culture and Indian traditions.

Other studies about Banjara community reveal that Banjara people lived six thousand years' ago. Their existence was found spread over Greek civilization on one extreme end and Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro on the other. This is a clear testimony of the ethnographic spread of Banjara community across the globe. It may be noted that our own Indus valley's civilization was built keeping natural law of justice as the basis and the natives or the indigenous people have made substantial contribution to Indus valley civilization. There is no dispute about the influence had by Gor Banjara culture on the traditional ancient culture of this universe. The Roma Gypsies have been regarded as the world body of Banjara people and they had inhabitation or settlement in around 60 countries of the world. Scholars and Researchers have held the view that they have very great similarities in food habits, language, costumes and traditions. India has been considered or regarded as home land of Gorvamshiyas. There is no single evidence in which the inhabitation or settlement of Banjara community being called a village. The settlement or locality is always called Tanda. Even in many parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan the Banjara Tandas can be found. Hunting of animals for purpose of food was considered as an entertainment game while people of Banjara community. These people develop a system for hunting and the rules of the game were framed or formulated by Gor Banjara people. Even today, studies point out that, these rules are followed and practiced in many Tandas. As far as trading is concern there are evidence to prove that items were loaded on tamed oxen by traders of Banjara community 4000 years. According to some researchers there are evidences to indicate that the Banjara people lived through historical wild gaming stage to right up to agrarian stage which was a prelude to Indus Valley civilization. There was no idle worship by Banjara people in ancient time. However, historians indicate that the dominant Gor Banjaras communities were the worshippers of Nature in ancient times. Their main gods of worship in the past were five main elements of nature such as Sun or Surya, Wind or Vaayu, Fire or Agnee, Water or Jala and the Earth or Pruthvi. In the beginning they used dancing and singing as a prominent means to appease gods. Gradually dancing and singing became an integral part of the life style of Banjara community and over the years they were able to develop a special kind of dance and music which specific and particular to Banjara community. The Tandas celebrate special festivals and rituals which provide distinct existence to Banjara community. Basically the Banjaras are non-vegetarians and consume alcohol or local liquor profusely. In all festivals both men and women drink and dance together their own special music. In all most all parts of the India the Banjara community is said to be belonging to the Backward Community or Tribe or Scheduled Caste. This is one of the communities which inherit past legacy in the form of characteristics of tribal culture in addition to natural way of life.

THE LIVING CONDITIONS OF BANJARA COMMUNITY DURING MIDDLE AGES OR MEDIEVAL PERIOD.

It has been observed that people belonging to Banjara community lead a kind of life which is universally regarded as gypsy life. According to the studies conducted by anthropologists it is found that the original inhabitation of Banjara community was in Bikaner and Bahawalpur, Pakistan. The Banjara communities were forcibly displaced from their original settlements when Rajput's rulers were defeated by The Islam or Mohammedan or Islamic invaders. They were displaced after the defeat of Rajput's by the Muslim invaders. There was no option for them other than shifting their settlement to other states in India such as Haryana, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh etc., While some persons in Banjara community continued to live as traders a faction of this community went along with Moghuls Emperor as corps in the ordinance in the conquest of Southern India or Deccan. According to some admirers of Banjara community and culture consider that the name Banjara community has antique value because of its ancient historical legacy and settlement accounts. In the writings of famous Indian historian Kanitkar there is description about the trade routes as well as trading activities of Banjara or Laman traders.

According to him the volume and value of trade in India, both domestic and foreign was in to very good shape during the period of 600 B.C. to 350 A.D. In the year 1630 A.D King Shajahan fought a war against the Sultan of Bijapur. In this expedition some people belonging to Banjara community became a part of the contingent of king Shajahan. In other words, the Banjara people found their fortune by supporting King Shajahan and earned his goodwill. The Moghul emperor fought a war against the Sultan of Bijapur as a part of Deccan conquest. It is recorded that two popular leaders of Banjara community, Bangi and JhangiNaik led the platoon of 1,80,000 bullocks in this expedition Which was led by Asaf Khan.

There are recorded evidences in history that when Sikandar Lodi's fought a war in 1504 AD the Banjaras were very actively involved themselves in support of Lodi. The Banjara people had a feeling that it was no wrong to associate themselves with Muslim invaders as it was essential for their survival and opportunities of livelihood. The Banjaras moved in large number to Southern part of the India when Aurangzeb began to conquer the rulers in South India. Thus people of Banjara community were able to establish close association with Muslim invaders and kings whenever they fought the Mughals. This link gave them political strength and identity. Thus the Banjaras could develop close link with most of the Muslim Dynasties right from Khiljis to Lodies. When there was no war the

Banjaras were engaged in trading activity and carried grains and other items on herds of bullocks to different places. During the rule of Ala-ud-din-Khilji the Banjaras traders gained a lot by taking the benefit of the price control of Ala-ud-din in which they could sell commodities at stipulated prices. They had regular or permanent business in the form of supply of commodities to army camps or military groups situated in the South. The Banjaras moved to Southern part of India in Six groups. History reveals that the Banjara people to moved to South were the Pamhar, Rathod, Mola, Chouhan, Turi and Vadatya. Among these six groups the Rathods are supposed to be most powerful and strongest spread across the country. According to historians the people of Banjara community during the middle ages had trade contact with different countries like Tibet, Italy, Khyber, Middle Africa, China, Afghanistan, Arab countries and America. A few Banjaras moved abroad and took permanent settlement in those countries. Such Banjara people acted as link between India and those countries for purpose of trading activities and this continue until around 1850 A.D. During the 18th century the Banjaras developed political contact with many other dynasties such as the Peshwas of Poona, Nizam of Hyderabad, the Maratha rulers of Satara, the and the British in the Mysore and Maratha Wars. They were engaged in the Military services of all these rulers when they fought war with enemy rulers. The Banjaras were in the habit of transporting food grains for trading purpose from rural areas to Urban places and for this reason they were popularly known as ‘Karwaniyans’ implying nomadic traders. In the North they had found settlement on the banks of river Yamuna. The Muslim rulers had entered in to agreement with them for contractual and regular supply of food grains and other items needed by the Army. This was enough to the Banjara people to have flourishing trade during the regime of the Mughal and the Muslim rulers. Allauddin’s Khilji during his rule wanted to have control on the prices of food grains. Therefore he introduced some legislation and imposed them on the Banjara traders to sell the items and predetermined stipulated prices. The Banjaras transported food items from villages to towns for which they maintained about 10000 bullocks.

The Banjara people had gained the trust of Mughal and Muslim rulers in two ways. Firstly, when they took the side of these rulers they fought the war with great royalty and secondly they transported food grains to the army camps at times of difficulty even on unmarked terrains and unprotected dangerous routes in order to ensure regularity in supplies. This was appreciated by all the rulers. Some Mughal rulers issued orders to give protection to Banjaras and extended some special benefits. It is well known fact the Mughal rulers fought battles with rulers in South India. The Banjara army men who came with these rulers settled in different parts of South India after the completion of war.

In the subsequent years the Banjara people served in the Army contingent of Peshwas of Poona, Nizam of Hyderabad and Maratha rulers of Satara. In addition, the Banjara people maintained close contact with Maratha rulers. They were in very close trust with the great Maratha Ruler Shivaji and this became evident when he went to meet Aurangzeb in Delhi. It is reported that the Peshwa was once supported and assisted by a Banjara by name Durgadas. This incident occurred when the Nizam of Hyderabad had attacked the Peshwa. As a reward to this Durgadas Banjara was given royal honour when he was brought to Poona by the Peshwa. However, the Banjaras never gave up trading activity. Even when they were associated with Peshwas, Nizams and Marathas they continued trading as they did before. There was some addition to the old items they traded. The new additions were textiles, and silks materials. When situation warranted they were prepared to move to far off places without any hesitation carrying food grains and other essential items on the backs of thousands of oxen. When this movement was supposed to consume long time they took their families with them for safety and affinity. They received royal patronage in the sense that the rulers gave them full protection while items were transported from place to the other, more particularly to the army camps. They made use of boats for purpose trading activity. They even performed coastal trading wherever water ways provided opportunity. As a result of trading the Banjaras enjoyed a fair amount of prosperity.

THE BANJARAS IN THE MODERN TIMES: Let us now know some information about the Banjara communities being found across India during the post independent period. Although the Banjaras had established their political strength in the medieval period they remain excluded from the main stream even after 75 years of India's independence. They have preferred to live in isolation in various parts of the country. This came to be known when people tried to study the whereabouts of the Banjara community. The Banjaras lived in Tandas and attitudinally they are quite active with all other persons in India.

The Banjaras are socially backward. Only a small percentage of Banjara community has flourished with the acquisition of modern life, education, social status and political leadership. Among these only the small minority is performing whole sale business and transportation. The large segment of the Banjaras still stay back in Tandas with vast illiteracy amidst poverty and liquor. The Banjara women were traditional

costumes for some time only during festivals and wedding occasions. From the visit done to many Tandas it is found that the Banjaras do not allow people of other communities to live within the group that is Tanda. They have given up trading. They have developed aversion to livestock breeding. They prefer to work as daily wage earners in Agricultural lands as coolies. Drinking alcohol is almost like daily ritual as both men and women consume liquor in large quantity. They do not prefer to move out of Tandas for livelihood.

BANJARAS IN KARNATAKA:

The older generation is devoid of education. Although women earn wages as laborers else where they enjoy poor status at home. Like in other communities there is dominance of male at house hold level in Banjara community. The rate of literacy among the older generation of Banjaras is very low. The modern generation of Banjaras has been brought to schools thanks to the efforts of Government as well as voluntary organizations. In modern India the Banjara people have been provided with reservation facility in education, Jobs and Promotions. For the benefit of Banjara boys and girls' community hostels have been built in almost all towns and cities across the country. Education is free, food and accommodations are freely available in hostels and young Banjara boys and girls are getting education now. This is a satisfactory indicator. It is commendable that the Banjara girl have been permitted by the community to live in hostels for purpose of education. We now find that many young boys and girls in Tandas of Shivamogga District, Dakshina Kannada District, Hassan District, Mandya District, Bangalore District have found placement in government Offices, Schools and Colleges, Police Department, Forest Department, Industries both in the public and private sectors. For instance in Hunasodu Tanda in Abbalagere Village in Shivamogga Taluk there are 64 families. 31 boys and 24 girls have become graduates. 2 boys have become Engineers and there are 3 Diploma holders. Among girls 3 have studied up to B.E. and one has studied B Pharma. Most of the girls are working as teachers in private schools. Only three girls are working in government schools and two girls are working in BPO. In another Tanda which is located between Shivamogga and Sowlanga there are 240 families. Among the older generation there are 3 post graduates, 9 graduates and 7 diploma holders. Among women of the older generation only 7 have studied upto matriculation and 2 are graduates who migrated to this tanda known as Kunchenahalli Tanda after marriage. In the present generation boys and girls of this tanda are fairly well educated. Among boys there are more than 80 graduates

of which 4 have studied medicine, 11 have done engineering. These boys have preferred to go to cities for jobs. Among girls there are 39 graduates of whom 2 have done medicine and 7 have done engineering. More than 13 girls have been working as teachers in Government Schools and many others in Private Schools. Only a few of them have gone to banking service and other departments. One boy from this tanda has cleared State Level Civil Service Examination.

Similar trend is noticeable in most of the Tanda's in Karnataka State. The younger generation of boys and girls are receiving education and taking jobs. But the large majority is either illiterate or as low level of literacy and stays back in Tanda's amidst acute poverty and wide spread unemployment. Most of the families do not possess land for cultivation. Very few families possess land ranging from half acre to 2 acres. Tanda's have received water and electricity facility, concrete roads have been built and drainages have been constructed. SamudayaBhavana also been constructed. All has been done with the efforts of the State Government. But we do not find much improvement in the Standard of Living in Tandas. Majority of the houses are tile roofed. Some of them have zinc sheet at the top. Only those houses constructed in the recent past have RCC roofs. All most all the houses have television connectivity and cell phones are popular use. But what is surprising is there is no primary health centre in any of these Tanda's. They are away from Police Chowkey or Police Station. They have limited public transport facility. For high school education and onwards both boys and girls have to move way from Tandas as there is no facility in Tandas. Life is quite miserable. Tandas have become Vote Banks. The condition of women is highly deplorable. There is male domination. The rights of women have been suppressed. In the recent past some women of Tanda's have become members of Women Self Help Groups. Yet they have limited freedom.

The Banjara community in Karnataka State has got legal protection in the form of Reservation in accordance with the Provisions of the Constitution of India. They have got political reservation in the form of seats right from Local Self Government i.e Panchayath to National Government i.e. Parliament. The younger generations have risen to high standing in government service and in private corporate bodies, of course in small number in comparison with other communities. Only a few women, restricted to single digit, have made their presence in State Politics. Some women have found place in local self government largely on account of political reservation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: With all this changes the standard of living of Banjara community has not registered substantial rise even after 7 Decades of Independence. They are marginalized and exploited communities inflected with high degree of poverty, misery and illiteracy. Restriction on freedom to women in Banjara community is a dissatisfying element. The voluntary organizations have to work with this community to create awareness in them and bring them to mainstreams of public life. Special provisions must be made by the government at least to develop Handicrafts, Poultry forming, dairying in Tandas to create employment opportunity as well as to raise income levels. Greater freedom as to be granted to women in order to empower them. Better health services have to be created in Tandas. Job training Centers for women must be setup by giving both financial and market support. Unless this is done it is very difficult to improve the living condition of Tandas as well as Banjara communities.

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