

## **The History of Banjara Tribal People**

### **Introduction**

In the first chapter the researcher has brought out the general-local geographical, social, cultural, and socio-economic background of Bagepalli Taluk and how Banjara people were placed in this area. This chapter has focused on the descriptive history of Banjara, their culture, religious practices, social-cultural and political Thanda governance, their geographical spread and . Banjara history which traces back to ancient times to pre-Indus river civilization was buried and not known to the world as no written documents written. Their history was unearthed by using fables and fictions, stories, songs, memories, census reports, and ethnographic writings, travelogues, interviews, questionnaire and other local sources are used to construct their history. Therefore in this chapter by using various available accounts the researcher has dealt with the historicity of Banjara and thereby providing a way to the future investigation.

### **1.1. Origin and Background**

The Indus river civilization was the world's oldest one and many nomadic tribes have once lived here. The Banjara tribe comes under the family of Indo-Aryan race speaking a language similar to that of Sanskrit and Hindi. The origin and background of Banjara was not well known not preserved due to their nomadic nature and illiteracy.<sup>1</sup> There are differences of opinions among the historians of their original birth place, their settlements within and outside India. Syed Siraj Ul Hasan gives the account of the origin of Banjara, probably a story passed on:

The Banjara claim to be descended from Mota and Mola, the two brothers who tended Sri Krishna's cows. From Mota sprang the ancestors of the modern Marwaris, Mathura Banjaras and Labhanas. Mola having no issue, once visited a prince's court with his wife Radha, and there exhibited gymnastic feats, in which he was an adept. The Prince was so pleased with Mola's skill and so charmed with Radha's beauty and grace, that he gave them, as reward, three infant boys of

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<sup>1</sup> In the modern times a few Banjaras in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Maharashtra have become well educated and working as teachers, doctors, Police, administrators, MLAs, CMs and other services both in government and private sectors. Prithviraj Chuhan, CM of Maharashtra, B.T. Lalitha Naik poet from Karnataka, BalaramNaik MLA in Andhra Pradesh, Tanaji Rathod, Managing Director, and Karnataka are few to name. Mothiraj Rathod, an authority on Banjara history, Professor Gaurishankar who has done an extensive study on Banjara people has presented Banjara as tribal people. See. Mothiraj Rathod, "Ancient History of Gor Banjaras", <http://www.banjaratimes.com/18022/55822.html> (21.8.2012).(hereafter Mothiraj, "History of Gor Banjaras")

different castes.... Their progeny have been collectively known as Charan Banjaras.<sup>2</sup>

The Banjara tribe was divided into five clans viz., 1) Mathura, (2) Labhani, (3) Charan, (4) Dhadia; a fifth class Dhalias or Banjari Mongs were added to each clan as musicians, although their touch was considered as impure by other clans.<sup>3</sup> Cumberlege points out that the Matura Banjara, who trace to Mathura in upper India are called Hindustani Brahmans who wore sacred thread and do not eat meat but learn Vedas like any other upper caste.<sup>4</sup>

Among all others clans, the Charan Banjara formed a majority in south (Nizam territory and Bombay provinces) and they were divided into five exogamous clans - (1) Rathod, (2) Panwar, (3) Chavan, (4) Vaditya, and (5) Tori.<sup>5</sup> From head of the each clan the lineage flows down. Rathod had seven sons,<sup>6</sup> Panwar had twelve sons,<sup>7</sup> Chauvan had six sons,<sup>8</sup> Vaditya had thirteen sons,<sup>9</sup> and Tori (Tamburis) had six sons.<sup>10</sup> The Charans and their descendents were most notorious for highway robbery and dacoiti and also had involved in agriculture and cattle breeding. The Banjara who were uprooted from their trade by British government were forced to such crimes which invited the wrath of British. Tanaji Rathod mentions that “to curb the criminal activities, the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 was promulgated under which Banjara community was notified as criminal tribes under the act.”<sup>11</sup>

In Deccan, of the five original Charan Banjara clans, Rathods and Vaditiyas are chiefly found, especially in Nizam's Dominions, Marathwada districts and Karnataka. In AD 1630 Asaf Jah, who campaigned against Bijapur, brought these Banjaras to south under the

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<sup>2</sup> Syed Siraj ul Hassan, *Castes and Tribes of the Nizam's Dominions*, Vol. 1 (Gurgoan, Vintage Books, 1990), 17. (hereafter Hassan, *Castes and Tribes in the Nizam*, Vol. 1)

<sup>3</sup> Subhadra Channa, *Encyclopedia of Indian Tribes and Castes*, Vol. 2, Bangali- Bhavini (New Delhi: Cosmos Publications, 2004), 353. (hereafter Subhadra, *Encyclopedia*)

<sup>4</sup> Russell and Hiralal, eds., *Tribes and Castes...*, Vol. I, 171.

<sup>5</sup> Hassan, *Castes and Tribes in the Nizam...*, Vol.1, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Bhukiya, Aloth, Jatoh, Dharmasoth, Banoth, Mukhale, Mohan and from Bhukiya derived Dungavat, Khimavat, Ramavat, Dhegavat, Khetavat, Kharamtot and Nenavat, the descendents of these have the Rathod gotra. See. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, Vol. II, 153.

<sup>7</sup> Jharbala, Amgoth, Lolasawath, Vinjarawath, Tarbani, Khotbani, Goramu, Bani, Ayoth, Lodhi, Moyangani, Chaboloth. The descendents trace to Panwar gotra. See, Syed Siraj ul Hassan, *Castes and Tribes...*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Kora, Sabhavat, Moodh, Kheloot, Paltya, and Lavadya. The descendents of these trace to Chauhan gotra.

<sup>9</sup> Badavat, Boda, Ghogalot, Dharavat, Ajamera, Tera, Meravat, Malot, Lakavat, Lunavat, Barot, Hala and Kunasi. They trace to Vaditya as their gotra. See.. Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, Vol. II, 154.

<sup>10</sup> Ratnavat, Bhat, Seravat, Dhavat, Bajiput, and Rudhavat. The trace their origin to Tori gotra

<sup>11</sup> Tanaji Rathod, “Banjaras, the Forgotten Children Of India: History unearthed” in <http://banjarathanda.com/images/wp-banjara-forgotten-childern-of-india-to-ktdc.pdf> (31.8.2012). (hereafter Rathod, *Banjaras, the forgotten children*)

leadership of Bhangi and Jangi to supply food grains to his army.<sup>12</sup> British army used them for supply of food and be the guide in the forests on their war against south India.

### 1.1.1. Etymology of the Word *Banjara*

Syed Siraj mentioned that the name “Banjara” is derived from the Persian word “Berinji Arind” meaning ‘dealer in rice’; and also the Sanskrit words “Baniij,” “Baniya” and “Banajiga” all referred to ‘a merchant’; they are also called by other names, such as “Lamani” which means in Sanskrit *Lavana*-salt; *Labhans* are the salt carriers, hence they were known as Lambada, Lambadi, Lambani or Banjara.<sup>13</sup> K.S.Singh mentioned that ‘the Lambadis are also called Banjara, Brinjari or Banjari, Boipari, Sugali’<sup>14</sup> and they are well known tribe of carriers of salt and food grains on the packed bullock caravans.

The Banjara men and women are addressed as Ghor Mati and Ghor Dasi respectively, and they address to non-Banjara as Khor Mati.<sup>15</sup> The names ‘Go-r’ was given for they were tending and rearing oxen/cows and were known as “Gor Banjara.” In Karnataka Banjara are well known as Lambani/Lambadi.

They are also known as ‘Gypsy’ for these migrants came from the East, may be from Turkey, Nubia or Egypt or any other eastern places, hence were called “Egyptians” or “Gyptians” from this came the name “Gypsy.” There was yet another etymology originated in Persia that when the locals asked the migrants from where they have come from? They replied “Punjab-say -- from Punjab, later heard as Jab say, Gypsy. The locals took Gypsy to mean from Egypt, a known country to them.<sup>16</sup> All analysis by historians, anthropologists and social scientist link the Roma Gypsies with Indian origin.

### 1.1.2. Historical Development

Motiraj Rathod in his book “Ancient History of Gor Banjara” writes that Gor (Banjara) were one of the ancient community, dating back to 5-6 thousand years BCE and there are references about Banjara in Greek Civilization leading up to Harappa and Mahenjodaro civilization and it is probable that Gor must have been the possible originators of Indus valley civilization to which documents are available.<sup>17</sup> Tanaji G.

<sup>12</sup> Hassan, *Castes and Tribes...*, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>14</sup> K. S. Singh, *People of India-National Series Volume II: The Scheduled Castes*, Revised Edition (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 123-124. Banjara also known by various names and few of them are as *sugali, laban, wanjara, ghor, Lamani, Lambadi, Lambani, adavi sugali, banjari, gypsy, kora, gormati, tanda, naik*, (hereafter Singh, *People of India*, Vol. II)

<sup>15</sup> Iyer, *The Mysore Tribes and Castes*, Vol. II, 135.

<sup>16</sup> Rathod, “Banjaras,” (22.11. 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Mothiraj “Ancient History of Gor Banjaras,”. Further Mothiraj says the Gor Vamshiya world body is known as “Roma Gypsies” and there is almost 90% similarity in regard to their language, costumes, lifestyles and food habits. In an informal talk on July 11, 2012, Kirstin Neumann, a German Religion and Philosophy

Rathod opines that Banjara had engaged in trade since the pre-Indus times, but by the invasion of new races such as the Aryans, the Persians, the Kushans and the Huns, their history might have been buried during Indus valley period and there are numerous references and proofs found in Vedic period about Banjara settlements in and around Indus Valley.<sup>18</sup> According to Sir H. Elliot, the original Banjara is said to have its origin in the sub-mountain tract from Ghorakpur to Haridwar, the North West provinces that use to come annually to the Eastern states with letters to buy grains for sale. He further asserts that in Dasakumaracharita there is a mention about Banjara but this view was dismissed by Conwell saying that the name did not occur in the original text of Dasacharita.<sup>19</sup> Iyer mentioned that the majority scholars agree to assign the origin of Banjara to North India, probably Marwar as their original home and they claim to be Kshatriyas and to be descended from Rajput ancestors.<sup>20</sup> Abbe Dubois says that Lambadis (Banjara) have more similarity with Maharattas than any other nation and from this these might have descended.<sup>21</sup>

According to Crooke's Berar<sup>22</sup> Census Report (1881), the first census to hold in India, says that Banjaras are supposed to be the people mentioned by Arian in the fourth century BCE. Leading a wandering life, dwelling in tents and letting out their beast for hire to carry burdens; but nothing was mentioned about the name Banjara and for the first time the mention of Banjara was found in Muhammadan history when Sikhthar attacked on Dholpur in AD 1504.<sup>23</sup> General Briggs writes in 1813 about Banjaras that the first mention of Banjaras of Deccan on historical record is to be found in the work written by Mohamed Kasim Ferista's "A History of the Rise and Progress of the Mohamedan Faith in the Country of Hind", at Bijapur court in about AD 1417, when Khan Khanan, brother of Feroje Shah Bhamni seized the packed bullock of Banjaras, the grain merchants.<sup>24</sup> Tanaji G Rathod, on the basis of their most primitive life in the State of Andhra Pradesh was initially thought to be Dravidian origin, but originally they all trace to Rajput tribe of North India,<sup>25</sup> and Pundit Gourishankar concludes that Banjara claim to be Kshatriyas.<sup>26</sup> Historically Banjara were the only tribe in India who carried out the business on packed bullocks which no other people practiced.

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professor at TTS, Madurai, also testified that the gypsies who are known as Roma Gypsy living in parts of Germany resembled with Hindustani (Banjara) language, food, social life, living system, customs and culture.

<sup>18</sup> Tanajai G Rathod, "Socio-Economic Issues of Banjara Community: Redefined Strategy for Development", <http://www.banjaratimes.com/303901/342301.html> (21.8. 2012).(Rathod, *Socio-Economic Issues of Banjara*)

<sup>19</sup> Subhadra ed., *Encyclopedia...*, 342.

<sup>20</sup> Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, Vol. II, 136.

<sup>21</sup> Dubois, *Character, Manners, and Customs...*, 338.

<sup>22</sup> Berar is the present Nagpur region which was the junction of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. See Appendix II, No.1.

<sup>23</sup> Russell and Hira Lal, *Tribes and Castes*, Vol.I, 163.

<sup>24</sup> Iyer, *The Mysore Tribes and Castes*, Vol.II, 138.

<sup>25</sup> Rathod, "Banjaras, The Forgotten Children" (31.8.2012).

<sup>26</sup> Mothiraj, "History of Gor Banjaras," (21.8.2012).

## 1.2. Geographical Spread of Banjara

The North India or the Indus valley experienced a sequel of invasions by the various rulers. The Aryans, priestly groups regarded the Aryan life more precious than non-Aryan lives. So they did not engage in battle against the enemies, instead troops were assembled from non-Aryans and made the honorary members of Kshatriyas, a warrior caste. From among non-Aryans some were Lohars and Gujjars, some were Thandas (Banjara), some Rajput and some Sidhis (Sindhis/Sinti). This composite army took along the Banjaras to fight, provide food and some as captives. Subsequent invasions and captivities by the invasions the Banjara have scattered around the world. Having their origin in Rajputana in Northwest or North India, in due course of time have migrated to Middle East, North Africa, Europe, Russia,<sup>27</sup> and Spain and other parts of the world. After the process of colonization and end of wars Banjara forgot their home in North India and settled down where ever they went.

The early history and the spread of Banjara to various countries remained a speculative. It was believed that they left their home land, the northern India, beginning as early as in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. However the most migrations began in the 11<sup>th</sup> century during the Mughal invasions on North India or North West India. They were taken as captives, musicians, horse breeders, labor force and food suppliers. They crossed across Iran into Asia Minor and into Byzantine Europe in the 14<sup>th</sup> century through the Greece. After a halt of about 100 years in Greece in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century they had reached Russia, Scandinavia, the British Isles and Spain.<sup>28</sup> Through Balkans the Banjara entered into Europe, mainly concentrated in Romania and Hungary.<sup>29</sup>

The Roma Gypsy and Indian Banjara (Gypsy) have almost 90% of similarities with regard to the language, costumes, lifestyle, and food habits, settlements between Roma Gypsy and Indian Banjara (Gypsy). a team of Genetic scientist have studied the genomes of 13 different Romani groups in Europe and have confirmed their North-West Indian origin.<sup>30</sup>

Within India there were large migrations within India and majority spread to southern States, viz., Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra. According to “Bhatkya

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<sup>27</sup> Robbi Francovich, ed., *The Banjara Gypsies of India: 30 Day Prayer Guide* (Hyderabad: the Editor, 2002), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Rathod, “Banjaras, The Forgotten Children,”(31.8.2012).

<sup>29</sup> See Appendix II, No. 2 for the route of Banjara migrations. The Gor Banjara tribe is found in about sixty countries and their world body is known as Roma Gypsy. The Indian Banjara (Gypsy) and Roma Gypsy trace their origin to same dependence or ancestry.

<sup>30</sup> *The New Indian Express, Madurai*, 11 December 2012. P.8. Also see *The Hindu, Madurai*, 10 December, 2012, P. 12.

Vimukta va Tyanche Prashna” an independent agency, the total Banjara population of India stands above 6 Crore,<sup>31</sup> scattered in various states of India.<sup>32</sup>

### 1.3. Social Life of Banjara Community

The unique community life, language, religious customs, festivals, and ceremonies marked the socio-cultural life of Banjaras. Predominantly Banjara maintained a unique and separate tribal identity.<sup>33</sup> They claimed to have descended from Rajput ancestry from Rajasthan region. Though they have all tribal characteristics after classification of these DNTs they were included under various caste categories and in Karnataka they came under SC category. This uprooted their tribal identity and displaced them from their forest rights.

Banjaras, unlike any other people have a unique tradition of socio-cultural life, Thanda settlement, dress, language, festivals, gods, customs and manners as independent of public life. Dubois rightly pointed out that, “The Lambadis form a caste entirely distinct from the rest of Hindus being wholly different from them in religion, language, manners, and customs.”<sup>34</sup> Mothiraj writes that Gorvamshiya(Banjara) had a unique culture, independent public life, unique tradition of livelihood, and much evident in their lifestyle, food habits, festivals, rituals, worship, likes and dislikes, dances, songs, languages, clothing and Thanda life.<sup>35</sup> Nagarjuna Sagar in Nalgonda district of Andhra Pradesh is said to be the origin of Banjara dance and other cultural practices.

Banjara does not follow the caste system, rather have a clan system. However they follow Hinduism in their practice of religious and social life. During Deepavali and Holi Banjaras sacrifice goats to deities and go from house to house, dancing and receiving alms. The social and cultural life of Banjara distinguished them from other people.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> **The Banjara population in various states with reservation categories are: Karnataka SC 95 Lacs, Andhra Pradesh ST 85 Lacs, Maharashtra VJ-A 80 Lacs, Uttar Pradesh OBC 65 Lacs, Madhya Pradesh OBC 55 Lacs, Rajasthan (now SBC) 45 Lacs, Gujarat OBC 50 Lacs, Delhi SC 30 Lacs, Tamilnadu VJ 30 Lacs, West Bengal OBC 20 Lacs, Himachal Pradesh SC 25 Lacs, Bihar ST 29 Lacs, Orissa ST 20 Lacs, Kerala OPEN 10 Lacs, Haryana OBC 10 Lacs, Punjab OBC 20 Lacs, Jammu & Kashmir OBC 8 Lacs and Arunachal Pradesh OPEN 7 Lacs.** Shankarrao Kharat, Bhukya vimukta va Tyanche Prashna, Banjara Clender-2007, [http:// en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_States\\_and\\_territories\\_of\\_India\\_by\\_Population](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_States_and_territories_of_India_by_Population) (27.8. 2012). See Appendix II, No. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Singh, *People of India...*, Vol. II, 127-128.

<sup>33</sup>The East Asian Consultation held in Philippines, defined a tribal community as forming a “group of people generally constituting a homogeneous unit, speaking a common language, claiming a common ancestry, living in a particular geographical area, generally lacking in scientific knowledge and modern technology and living a social structure based on kinship.” They also maintain a tradition and inter-functional community. Tribals want to be self-sufficient in their cultural life and stay outside the main stream national life. See, Stephen Fuchs, *The Aboriginal Tribes of India...*,24-25.

<sup>34</sup>Dubois, *Character, Manners, and Customs...*, 339.

<sup>35</sup>Mothiraj, “History of Gor Banjaras,” (21.8. 2012).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

### **1.3.1. Banjara Settlement/Thanda**

The settlement of Banjara in camps outside the non-Banjara habitations was called Thanda/encampment. It was their exclusive characteristic to live in “Thanda” which they acquired from the days of their nomadic life. In the modern times though have settled still continued to live in Thandas. The traditional house of Banjara looked very different from other non-Banjara house which is naturally built and easily dissolvable. As they have been assimilated into the main stream society government is providing permanent houses.<sup>37</sup> The social life settings of Banjara was still experienced and visible in present day. Some peculiarities of Banjara settlements are given here.

### **1.3.2. Community Life**

Banjara people live in “Thanda” keeping a distance from non-Banjara people. The community was held above the individual interests and “Naik”(head of the community) led the community both in matters of socio-political and religious life. The kinship and clan or sub-clan relationship enhanced the strong sense of communitarian life.<sup>38</sup>

### **1.3.3. Banjara and Non-Banjara**

The Banjara settlement was a sign that they did not mixed with others. Banjara lived outside the villages in camps keeping the distance from other non-Banjara people. This helped them to preserve their unique socio-cultural life, language, dress, the songs and religious life. However the introduction of modernism and rise of poverty among Banjaras forced them to mingle with others.<sup>39</sup>

### **1.3.4. Thanda Jury Board-Nasab**

The political organization of Banjara tribe was headed by the Naik/chief for the disciplinary and juridical matters of the community. Naik is the head of the both spiritual and secular matters of the Thanda and governs his people standing in front. Each *Nangar* or Thanda was under a headman or Naik and this post could be mostly hereditary but sometimes people chose able person. The Thanda council is called *Nasab* or Thanda judiciary, dealt with matters related to adultery, rape, elopement, and family settlement. It also has got the power to impose fine and punishment to the offenders.

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<sup>37</sup> The house was built in a round shape with a tiny single entrance made with bamboos, without windows, made up of mud walls and thatched roof. This is also called *Jhumpada*. Some houses are in square shape, with single entrance and a small ventilator, build with mud and stone walls and thatched roof. It is used for cooking, sleeping and to accommodate guests, and store house, keeping household things. Hygiene is rarely given notice as their cattle also share the sleeping passage in the house.

<sup>38</sup> See, Appendix IV, Diagram 7.

<sup>39</sup> See, Appendix IV, Diagram 8.

Thanda Jury Board is headed by Naik, and Karbhari who gives valuable suggestion to Naik for wellbeing of the Thanda.<sup>40</sup> Normally there was no practice of going out to register cases in Police station or trial in courts; all cases are dealt within the Thanda judiciary which saves time, money, and reputation.

### **1.3.5. Social Practices**

#### **1.3.5.1. Marriage**

Banjara tribe was divided into four clans, namely, Rathod, Pamhar, Chauhan and Vaditya with a number of sub-clans within them. Each of this clan was exogamous and cannot marry within the same sub clan as they are considered as brother and sister. A man can marry his sister's daughter, mother's brother daughter. Banjara man cannot marry maternal uncle's or anti's daughter, such is considered as incest. In Banjara tribe usually as soon as the girl reaches puberty she was given in marriage. For girls the age will be 14-16 years and for boys the marriage age was 17-20 years. A non-Banjara girl will be taken in marriage but a Banjara girl will not be given to a non-Banjara boy. Normally the marriage continued for three to seven days, but due to increasing expenses it was reduced to three days. Apart from marriages held with general consensus other types of marriages were also present.

#### **1.3.5.2. Types of Marriage**

##### **1.3.5.2.1. Marriage by Service**

If the girl's father did not had a male heir or son being incapable of managing the family the betrothed groom would go to father-in law house and serve. In return the boy will be given the girl in marriage and a portion of the property from the father in-law. Thereafter the boy no longer attached himself to his father's house or property.

##### **1.3.5.2.2. Marriage by Exchange**

In this marriage both the parties will give and take the bride. In this type of marriage normally dowry is not given, rather brides are exchanged. This is a good practice since it reduces the burden of dowry and over expenditure in marriage.

##### **1.3.5.2.3. Marriage by Elopement**

The boy and girl who fell in love and whose parents could not agree in marriage usually eloped. After certain period is lapsed they will be brought before the *Nasab* and *Dand* (fine) is paid to the girl's father. They will be allowed to live as husband-wife in the Thanda.

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<sup>40</sup> Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, Vol. II., 174.



#### 1.3.5.2.4. Widow Remarriage

In Banjara society a widow is allowed to marry either the younger brother of the deceased or any suitable person in the same clan. If no suitable person is available she can marry from other clan, but within the Banjara community. But this kind of marriage is done in a temple

#### 1.3.5.2.5. Marriage Symbols

The Banjara marriage was performed by the community priest or the Naik. However due the influence of Hinduism the Hindu Brahman priest performed the marriage in front of the bride's house. The marriage symbols are upper arm rings (Chuder Baliya), Pendants (Ghogri), and Thali.<sup>41</sup>

#### 1.3.5.3. Polygamy

Polygamy was allowed but monogamy is a norm but on certain grounds such as childlessness, sick wife, only girl children were born, and any widow of a near relative left without care, then the man was allowed to marry for the second or third time keeping all wives with him. In the recent times this system has diminished among Banjara due to non-availability of women and also risen awareness on health problems.<sup>42</sup> In recent times the awareness on social and health problem, and decline in girl child ratio has caused decline in its practice.<sup>43</sup>

#### 1.3.5.4. Use of Intoxicants

Liquor, *Bhang*, hookah, beedi, tobacco, and chewing beetle nut/leaf, have been part and parcel of Banjara life. Without liquor no Banjara programs were held.<sup>44</sup> Banjara women and men brewed the alcohol at their homes and in nearby hills. Because of the use

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<sup>41</sup> Due to the influence of modernism and frequent interaction with non-Banjara there are changes in Banjara marriage. In many places most of the traditional dress, traditional ornaments, Banjara drum, musical instruments, procession on bullock or horse, time and span of marriage have disappeared.

<sup>42</sup> Today many Banjara men and women have educated children and they know about the HIV/AIDS which transmits through sex with multiple men/women. Urban migration, self-help groups, some government schemes all have contributed in discouraging polygamy. Churches also discourage polygamy in the church.

<sup>43</sup> See, Appendix IV, Diagram 9.

<sup>44</sup> During good and bad times, regular routine life, festivals, rituals, conflict settlements, and any occasions alcohol, beedi, bhang, beetle leaf and nuts were integral part of the people. See Appendix IV, Diagram 10.

of intoxicants poverty, debts, health problems, bonded labor and illiteracy prevailed among them.<sup>45</sup>

### **1.3.5.5. Sorcery, Magic/Charms**

Before venturing into any works Banjara people invoked their ancestors for fruitful result in their journey, robbery, work or family and for fortune. They had also used magic, charms, and sorcery for both good and bad purposes. Especially for healing the Banjara witch doctor was highly consulted.<sup>46</sup>

### **1.3.6. Place of Women**

Banjara women were not strictly subordinated to men and at the same time not fully free. Women were allowed to divorce, remarry, and also if unjustly deserted she will be given half the portion of husbands property. Women also involved in agriculture, animal husbandry, collection of firewood, cattle breeding, and they contribute to the income of the family by making liquor. The women can participate in social, religious and political activities but only men have the voice and perform the ritual ceremonies.

The Thanda *nasab* was male hierarchical and women were not allowed to head the Thanda. The property and succession in the family devolves upon the eldest son. In the modern times due to the influence of outside society, modern education and contact with outside world the role and place of women was changing and women have been given a good place.<sup>47</sup>

## **1.4. Banjara Cultural life and Practices**

Banjara people have a unique cultural life and practices that differentiate them from others. The language, food, dress and ornaments, art and dance, body tattooing and ceremonies formed the cultural world of Banjara people. The influx of modern life style and growing contact with non-Banjara world had affected the Banjara cultural life.<sup>48</sup>

### **1.4.1. Language**

The language of Banjara is known as “Gor boli” “Gor mati Boli or “Brinjari,” an independent dialect. The dialect spoken by Banjara/Roma Gypsy falls in the category of Indo-Aryan language. Robert Caldwell writes that “the Lambadis, the gypsies of peninsula,

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<sup>45</sup> In the long ministerial experiences of the present researcher among Banjara in Bagepalli and neighboring places majority converts came seeking relief from alcohol and other bad habits. Chinna Jamla Nayaka was baptized before any conversion experience for hoping that he would leave his heavy drinking habits. Interview with Chinna Jamla Nayaka, Maddyreddypalli, 23 December, 2012.

<sup>46</sup> See, Appendix IV, Diagram 11.

<sup>47</sup> See, Appendix IV, Diagram 14.

<sup>48</sup> See, Appendix III, Diagram 12.

speak a dialect of Hindustani.”<sup>49</sup> The dialect was spoken since the pre-Indus period in Gor provinces of Afghanistan, Baluchistan, Sindh, Punjab, Gujarat, Kethewada, Harappa and Mahenjodaro.<sup>50</sup> Banjaras can easily understand the Hindi and Sanskrit language as about 90% words resembled with ‘Gor boli’.<sup>51</sup> Gor Boli was spoken within the family and kin groups, and the regional/local languages were used to communicate with others.

#### 1.4.2. Food

The traditional food of Banjara people were *Daliya* (mixed cereal), *Bati* (roti), *Saloi* (made from goat or sheep or pork blood and intestines), and *Ghuggari* (boiled cowpea, red gram, land gram etc.) and occasionally rice is used. ‘Patali baati’ was made from quality wheat or bazra or ragi and eat with chicken curry or boiled green leaves. They were found of non-vegetarian food except beef.<sup>52</sup> The Banjara dogs were famous for hunting the wild animals.

#### 1.4.3. Dress

The Banjara women wore a colorful dress with rich embroidery, jewellery and mirror patch works. Their dress include *Phetiya* (the skirt), *kanchali* (blouse), *Kurta* (the top), *Chantiya* (the veil). The ornaments used were: *Baliya*(bangles), *Kasautiya*(armlet), *sadak*(skirts decorated with draw string), *Gagri/topli*(clips worn by married women), *Pawlar Haar/Haasli*(the necklace made of coins), *Bhuriya* (nose ring), *finger rings*, *Ghoogri-Chotla*(metal flowers and balls suspended from the hair), *kolda*(leg ankle rings), which were different from others. Banjara men wear *Dhoti*, *Kurtha or long shirt* and *pagadi* (turban) with multiple rounds. However, due to the influence of modern developments there is a gradual change taking place in their dress and ornaments of Banjara women.<sup>53</sup>

#### 1.4.4. Art and Dance

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Caldwell, *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian family of Languages* (New York: Orient Longman, 1974), 43.

<sup>50</sup> Mothiraj, “History of Gor Banjaras,” (21.8. 2012).

<sup>51</sup> The language of Romani Gypsies and the Banjara find route in Sanskrit which falls into the category of Indo-Aryan. Words like dand-danth, (tooth), mun-mundo, (mouth), loon-lon-noon, (salt), akha-anke (eyes), khel-khel (play) is identical with those in northwest India and Banjara with Romani.

<sup>52</sup> Singh, *People of India...*, Vol. II, 124.

<sup>53</sup> See Appendix II, No.4.

The Banjara women's best art work is seen on their costumes and dress with rich embroidery.<sup>54</sup> K. S. Singh mentioned that "The art of body tattooing and crafts like embroidery (cloth), carpentry, and blacksmithy were practiced by them. Community possessed the oral traditions, folk-tales, and folk-lore in which their history was continued. Folk songs were sung by both men and women. Percussion, bronze plates and cymbals were their musical instruments."<sup>55</sup> Banjara dance<sup>56</sup> was famous in which both men and women danced to the tune of Drum (nangara<sup>57</sup>) and songs. Due to the impact of modernism many of its cultural identities were slowly lost.

### 1.5. Education Among Banjara

The Banjaras were predominantly non-literate as they lived a nomadic life which did not give them the opportunity to learn. Colonel Mackenzie says that "A Banjara who can read and write is unknown. But their memoirs, from cultivation, are marvelous and very retentive."<sup>58</sup> But due to modern education impact there are changes and K. S. Singh points out that "They favor education for boys but are not favorably disposed towards girl's education. Their children drop out from educational institutions owing to poverty, disinterest and/or other social reasons."<sup>59</sup>

According to 1981 census Banjara literacy rate in Karnataka was 13.54 of which rate of male literacy 21.54 and 5.02 of female literacy.<sup>60</sup> But in 2001 there is a slight change in its literacy progress in Karnataka standing at 43.0 percent, still lower than any other SC communities.<sup>61</sup>

There were reasons why Banjara did not get education. First, they were nomads, often were on move from place to place. Second, whole family was involved in trade, cattle breeding, and some were in dacoiti. Third, education was only given to a section of people

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<sup>54</sup> The whole dress of Banjara women consists of Kurtha- top, Phetiya-skirt, Kanchali-blouse, Chantiya-veil, Baliya and bangadi-bangles, kasautiya-armlet, sadak-skirt's decorated draw string, topli-clips worn only by married women, paawlar haar/haasli-necklace made of coins, kolda-anklets, Bhuriya-nose ring and khavya-left armlet Also see *Appendix II, No 5*. Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India: Vol. IV, K to M* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1987), 211-212.

<sup>55</sup> Singh, *People of India...*, Vol. II, 125.

<sup>56</sup> According to the tradition and belief the Banjara dance was first had its origin at Nagarjuna Sagar in Nalgonda District of Andhra Pradesh.

<sup>57</sup> Nangara is a big half moon shaped wooden drum covered with camel skin. This musical instrument used by the Banjara during festivals, daily evening prayers and other community occasions was kept holy and reverence. It is made of skin, covered upon the half-round shaped metal instrument.

<sup>58</sup> Russell and Hira Lal, *Tribes and Castes*, Vol. I, 191.

<sup>59</sup> Singh, *People of India...*, Vol. II, 127.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>61</sup> The literacy rate of Banjara in Karnataka is as follows: Literate without educational level-3.2; below primary-41.2; primary-25.1; middle school-10.6; metric/HSC- 14.9; technical and non-technical Diploma-1.1 and graduate-4.0. "Karnataka-Data Highlights: The Scheduled Castes- Census of India 2001", [Censusindia.gov.in/Tables\\_published/SCST/dh\\_SC\\_Karnatka.pdf](http://Censusindia.gov.in/Tables_published/SCST/dh_SC_Karnatka.pdf) (21.8.2012)

in society, whereas Banjara keep secluded. Fourth, people disliked them and so Banjara people could not mix with other people. And finally, they were not aware of the value of education nor any body bothered about them.

### 1.5.1. Banjara Literature

Traditionally, Banjaras never kept any written records nor sustained an oral history due to their frequent travels. Banjara dialect does not have script hence the history and tradition of Banjaras are reflected in the form of songs, ritual songs, folklores, stories, myths, proverbs and phrases. Hiralal says that their history and songs were learnt by heart and transmitted orally from generation to generation.<sup>62</sup>

Due to the impact of modern influence on younger generation, much of the oral history and songs were lost and therefore the local script is used to write and preserve the rich traditional history of Banjara.<sup>63</sup>

### 1.6. Economic Life of Banjara Community

Before the establishment of British colonialism in India, the economic life of Banjara had flourished through trade on packed bullocks. During colonial times as the new transport, market and circulation system were developed, free pass was restricted and tax were laid on sale by the Banjara. As a result the economic life of Banjara was put to death. Francis in this regard writes:

“They used to live by pack-bullock trade, and they still remember the names of some of the generals who employed their forebears. When peace and the railways came and did away with these callings, they fell back for a time upon crime as a livelihood, but they have now mostly taken to agriculture and grazing.”<sup>64</sup>

As their business diminished, they resorted to dacoities and cattle stealing.<sup>65</sup> Majority Banjara live under severe poverty and in the modern times a very few hold white collar jobs.<sup>66</sup> Tanaji G Rathod who did a study on socio-economic life of Banjara in Karnataka says that due to illiteracy, alcoholism, crimes, anarchy, exclusion from outside world, rigidity, and ignorance and lack awareness of situations Banjara were still under the

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<sup>62</sup> Russell and Hira Lal, *Tribes and Castes...*, Vol. II, 191.

<sup>63</sup> Only in the later part of 19<sup>th</sup> and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the British anthropologists, sociologists, census reporters and historians began to write about Banjaras and for most of the research these accounts have been depended highly.

<sup>64</sup> Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India: Vol. IV, K to M*, 212.

<sup>65</sup> Gane Naik, the researcher's great grandfather was well known for his notorious acts of dacoits and people were afraid of him and even to hear his name. He stole many cattle and within a night he use to cut the harvest and take away.

<sup>66</sup> Because of the modern education few Banjara people have become teachers, nurses, servicemen, MLA, poets and other jobs in private and public

severe poverty.<sup>67</sup> The loss of their livelihood led to indulge in various types of crimes<sup>68</sup> and unsocial works. Despite various programs by the governments, NGOs, and self-help groups the economic condition of Banjara remains pathetic.

The Banjara migrants who have settled in Bagepalli taluk about two centuries ago have not been assimilated into the main stream economic life. Poverty, food insecurity, debts, and economic difficulties prevailed among them.<sup>69</sup> People constantly move to distant places for earning livelihood. As a result during off season and whenever possible migrate to the cities.

### **1.6.1. Land and Banjara people**

A few Banjara owned land, but majority were landless laborers and still live the migratory life. Land gives the identity and autonomy to the people which Banjara does not have. Banjara, the nomads, had never own land, but always on move from one place to another.<sup>70</sup> Banjara people were pushed to the periphery, and were controlled by the local land lords.<sup>71</sup>

### **1.7. Religious Life of the Banjara People**

Banjara were animists or nature worshippers. In the Banjara religious world the animal sacrifices, ceremonies, gods, house, ancestors, stories and myths, sin and punishment, and future of death occupy the centre stage. The religious life of Banjara worshipped Nature, Sun, Fire, Water, and the Earth. The festivals, gods, rituals, and beliefs, ceremonies were peculiar to Banjara people. Banjara follow Hinduism but practices in their own way. Iyer writes that “Banjaras resemble other Hindus in their religious faith and worship all the gods of the Hindu Pantheon.”<sup>72</sup> They worship lord Krishna, Bull, Hanuman, lord Venkateshwara, and Shiva besides their tribal gods Tulja Devi, Banashankari,

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<sup>67</sup>Rathod, “Socio-Economic Issues of Banjara” (22.8.2012).

<sup>68</sup> After British had taken over the rule of India, to suppress and stamp-out the anti-social bodies that were always troubling the British army, merchants and indulged in robbery were termed as “criminal tribes.” In 1871 the Criminal Tribes Act was promulgated which was amended later several times, the last time in 1924. After India became independent the Criminal Tribes Act was rescinded in 1952 by the new Indian Government and they are called as “Denotified Communities.” See Stephen, *Aboriginal Tribe...*, 124-25.

<sup>69</sup> See, Appendix III, Diagram 13.

<sup>70</sup> They never construct a permanent house, own property, amass wealth or till the land. They never harmed trees or nature or destroyed for any selfish purposes. Their life resembles that of Abraham in the Old Testament who lived in the tents and never had a permanent place. The family structure, tribe system, government all resembles Abraham.

<sup>71</sup> In the present researcher’s own tribes experience in the early times the tribe wanted to settle near a forest hill side, away from the non-Banjara people. But Venkatareddy, and Maddireddy, stopped them and asked to stay near their village, Maddireddypalli and work in their fields. No one had land. Later few people got some government “paramboku” land far away from their place. Interview with Chinna Jamla Nayaka, 23 December 2012.

<sup>72</sup>Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, Vol.II, 184.

Maramma, and Huliamma, Mittu Bhukiya, Banjari Devi, and Siva Bhiya/Sheval Bhaiya. They also worship cattle. Whole community participates in the religious celebrations, but only men perform the ritual.

### **1.7.1. Festivals**

The festivals also distinguished Banjaras from others as festivals brought identity and vigor to the community life. Banjara celebrate the Hindu festivals Dusshera, Diwali, Ugadi, Holi, Ganesh Chathurthi, and in recent times they also celebrate the New Year. During Holi women go around villages, perform kolata (Holi dance) and collect alms for celebrations. On full moon day early morning both men and women gather around the fire to quench their desires. Both men and women will have great fun letting their vent to various propositions. Teej is famous festival of Banjara where both boys and girls come out to enjoy in celebration.. *Bhog* is another important celebration of Banjara during which the new born child's hair cutting will be held and child was dedicated.

### **1.7.2.Sacrifices**

Banjara were a non-vegetarians and offered sacrifices during marriage, festivals, rituals, journey, and celebrations. On occasions such as sickness, death, and pilgrimages sacrifices was offered. For invoking the blessings of gods and their legendary ancestors Banjara people offered animals and it was an important part of Banjara religious life.<sup>73</sup>

### **1.7.3. Ancestor Worship**

Banjara were animists and worshiped nature viz., sun, moon, water, trees, wind, fire, earth and cow. Banjara have a strong belief in ancestors and during Diwali and Holi festivals, on the day of 'Pitru puja' they mix cooked rice with Jaggary and Ghee (clarified butter), and offer it on fire, it is known as "Dhabkar." Also sweets, goat curry, and liquor were offered to their ancestors.<sup>74</sup> This ritual is performed by only men, women were not allowed. In the common worship or prayer both men and women participate, normally in the evening. Normally the place of worship will be in the east side of the Thanda and but facing West side they pray with folded hands. Head of the family or Thanda will lead this prayer. Even today this practice was continued among them.

### **1.7.4. Spirits/Demons**

Banjara people believed in magic, sorcery, and spirits for good and bad purposes. For good purpose such as health, successful travel, while going for dacoiti, to find offenders, the Bhagat or janiya, the witch doctor was consulted. For bad purpose such as to harm, bring sickness, and death, breaking the family, and any bad works the *dakun*(witch)

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<sup>73</sup> See, Appendix IV, Diagram 15.

<sup>74</sup> See, Appendix IV, Diagram 16.

was consulted. There was a belief that the spirit of those who had died due to suicide, poison consumption, unnatural death and with gross sins will be turned into demons (*Bhoot*) and troubled people. Since Banjara lived in seclusion and away from outsiders they highly believed in them.<sup>75</sup>

### **1.7.5. Rituals of Death**

According to the Banjara traditional custom the dead persons were buried with their head facing to the North and legs towards the South. Gor people still follow this direction while burying the dead. In Some places Banjara people burn the married person on funeral pyre and unmarried were buried.

The word “Samgo” or “Saat Wego” is used to convey the news of a dead person. Whole Thanda is gathered in front of the bereaved family to express solidarity in their sorrow by part-taking water from a single pot.

On the third day the relatives collect donations and cut a goat to give food to the bereaved family. As a custom the ritual is performed outside the Thanda under a tree where the relatives and Naik prepare rice cake, mix with jiggery and Ghee which is called “Churmo”. After offering the water and *Churmo* to the dead person the remaining is shared among them.<sup>76</sup> The *Churmo* is eaten in the same place and not allowed to take home. No other community or people practice such a ritual to a dead person.

### **1.7.6. Belief of Sin and Salvation**

Banjara exactly do not believe in Sin and Salvation but believed that a person’s future is based on his/her works. According to Banjara for an unjust cause if any person does wrong or commits crime is a sin and will go to hell. For a just cause or without knowing if any wrong is done it is pardonable. The unjustly sinned person will be thrown into the “angaarer Khuvema” (well of fire) and is tormented forever.

Banjara believe in life after death or in salvation of the soul. The righteous person will go to *Hariyali Bag*.” The soul will rest in a place where happiness exists and there is no thirst or hunger, the person will live in eternity. Therefore, they never harm the Mother Nature and before venturing into any works they asked forgiveness for any untoward works done.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>75</sup> See, Appendix IV, Diagram 17.

<sup>76</sup> Before the ritual begins two persons go to the buried place, on the head side they make a piece of ground equal and come back. After “Churmo” is ready two men will take the water and bread goes the buried spot. Whatever foot prints they find on the plain leveled piece of land they declared to the people that the person is reborn or turned into another form. It may be a cow, dog, pig, crow or anything, but certainly not human.



Banjara were one of the ancient nomadic tribes of India which possessed a peculiar habitation, history, culture, religious and social practices, festivals, language, folk lore, dress, governing system, understanding of death, sin and salvation. The Thanda living helped Banjara people to preserve their traditional and cultural practices undefiled from outsiders. At various point of times and due to various reasons Banjaras had migrated to Europe through Asia Minor and Greece. The British colonialism had uprooted them from their nomadic trade, culture and social life by branding them as criminals. Many tribal characteristics, cultural and social practices have under gone tremendous change. Severe poverty among Banjara had forced them to migrate to the cities where they came in contact with modern culture, language, lifestyle, and living system which impacted on their tribal life. At this juncture of transition in early 1970s Christianity entered the Banjara community in Bagepalli. The next chapter has exclusively dealt with the advent of Christianity and its influences among the Banjara people.