



A Historical Transition of Banjara Community in India with Special Reference to South India

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Abstract

An incisive insight into the literature on Banjara Community clearly indicates that ample literature has been produced by the Western and Indian scholars. Yet the treatment of the problem is exponential. Deep delve into the process of historical transition of the Banjara Community enables us to focus on various controversial issues and complexities of historical significance. Issues like Semantics, Historicity, Location, Ethnicity, Categorization, Caste-clan, Dichotomy and the community's identity continued to gravitate the attention of the scholars and researchers alike. Lack of unanimity among the scholars and policy makers on these contentious issues has added perplexity to the puzzle. Ambiguous explanations given by the community historians have further complicated the clear-cut understanding of the process of historical transition. The antiquity of this Banjara Community is traceable to Harappa and Mohenjodaro. Its influence continued to spread and retain its relevance down the centuries to shape and reshape the course of history. There is a speculation about the group of Banjaras who were concentrated outside India and called as Roma Gypsy, where their social history is not yet clear but proved to be of Indian Origin. This paper however strives to focus on historical transition within the context of India from 13th Century A.D. till 1950's. Such a treatment might look intellectually awesome and anarchic. Despite it a depiction of the historical transition is inevitable to bridge several centuries old transitional life of the Banjara Community. This paper also unfolds important milestones coupled with phases of migration from North to South India. Thus this is divided into the following, Introduction, Phases of transition and the conclusion.

Keywords: Community, Banjara, Historical Transition, South India.

Introduction

The survey of literature on Banjara Community clearly indicates that ample literature has been produced by the Western and Indian scholars. Yet the treatment of this problem is exponential. It enables us to focus on various controversial issues and complexities of historical significance. 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. Lack of unanimity among the scholars and policy makers on these contentious issues is the real source of the problem. Their Ambiguous explanations have further complicated the understanding of the historical transition. Despite it, it may be argued that this community has experienced rough weather all through the concomitant processes of migration and transition. Banjara community retains its influence down the centuries to shape and reshape the course of political history in India.

This paper therefore, focuses on Banjara community's historical transition during Islamic, colonial and constitutional regimes in India. Such a focus is warranted to bridge centuries old gap in its ever organic life. This reveals how 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. Their transition from nomadic state to sedentised state is undoubtedly a watershed in the community's history. This paper therefore, attempts to construct a discourse on their transition from historical perspective. A discourse on such a problem is essential to reveal the communities' elevation and decline over the times, gradual socio-economic, political and cultural power consolidation and constitutional position.

Conceptualizing the term Banjara

There is no unanimity among the scholars regarding the nomenclature of this community. Collection of data regarding its semantics drives one to identify various terms by which it is called in common parlance. The vocabulary of this community study indicates that there are 27 terms that have been used to label and characterize the Banjara community. Therefore, the term "Banjara" defies a clear cut definition. Its conceptualization however depends upon context of its local specific characterization. However, in the context of this paper the term "Banjaras" may be defined as, "Those people who have been well known tribe of commodity carriers who are found all over western and southern India"¹.

Brief reference to the historical dimensions of various terms associated with the nomenclature of this community is tenable to achieve conceptual clarity. It has been argued that Grouping of the divergent communities into one Grand Social stock or homogeneous community was indeed, tempered by the colonial politics of knowledge creation and European racial theories of the 19th Century². The colonial state collected the social and demographic data of the colony for consolidating its domination over the community. It conceived its anthropological knowledge of the colony as the principal device to understand and control its subjects to legitimize its hegemony. It may be argued that the historicity of the Banjara Community is symbiotically linked with shifts in the use of the terms to identify and determine this community from time to time. Accounts of the European travelers and colonial anthropologists have incidentally testified that there were several social groups of the caravan traders. These social groups though were nomadic in character had their distinct cultural and historical background. Colonial and indigenous scholars used different terms to describe the term Banjara. But, H.M. Elliot, 19th Century Ethnographer standardized the term Banjara and enriched India's community's glossary³. The racial characterization started seriously after the revolt of 1857 in India in response to the emergence of a more aggressive racial theory in Western Europe. In this shift every caste began to be defined in terms of race. This resulted in opening up of serious discourses on caste and caste system as a whole. Occupation was considered as one of the main criteria in defining caste clan shift.

Caste -clan

Banjaras do not follow the caste system, they have clan system. clan denotes a close knit group of interrelated families. In the context of this community it refers to principal social base of a Thanda. The "thanda" refers to a "a multi layered and multi purpose system that developed in the course of their nomadic life and continued in their settled lives" each Thanda is inhabited by a single clan. Sarung Bhangi, a Lambada chief who moved south carrying on the transport trade driven large bullocks and members of his clan. he was found to have given a social code to govern all the Thandas. Bhagawan Vaidya united nearly whole of his clan and controlled 12000 head of cattle⁴. Both were instrumental in bringing about a positive transition in the community's life. Thus formation of thanda system and social code represent a milestone in history of community's transition.

Categorization

The Banjara tribe was divided into five clans namely. Mathura, Labhani, Charan, Dhadia and Dhalias. Charan Banjara formed a majority in South and they were divided into five exogamous clans Rathod, Pawar, Chawan, Vaidya and Tori concentrated in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka⁵.

Transition of the Banjara Community in three Phases - Pre-colonial (Ancient period of India to the Mughals): Tracing Historically in Zia-Barani's account, the Banjaras were termed as Karavanis⁶. During the reign of Ala-ud-din-Khilji Banjaras were engaged in trading activity. Although retained a nomadic status had purchased 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 price control mechanism put in place by the Ala-ud-din-Khilji appeared to have helped the Karavannis to buy transport and sell commodities at stipulated price. The vast and expanded territory of the Khilji Dynasty of Ala-ud-din-Khilji gave this community a comprehensive geographical and economic space to carry out their trading activity. Conversely Karavannis had not yet got an opportunity to emerge as a trading community but also a way to enter into South India. Thus Zia-Barani's account recorded Banjaras participation in the market.

The first arrival of the Banjaras in the South is mentioned in Perishta's 'a History of the Rise and progress of the Mohammaden faith in the country of the Hind' in 1417, a large convoy of Caravanners' bullocks was seized by prince Khan-Khanam, the brother of Feroze Shah Bahmuni, when the former rebelled and made an attempt on the throne of Gulbarga, the Deccan Capital⁷.

But Crooke suggests that the first mention of Banjaras in the South was made in the history of Mohammedas during Sikandars attack on Dholpur in 1504, and believes that a large convoy of Charan Banjaras came to South with Asaf jha Wazir of Shahjahan in 1630, under the leadership of Bhangi and Jhangi Nayaks of the Rathod Clan, with 1,80,000 bullocks⁸.

Over the period of time few Banjara communities began to establish their connections with armies of various Islamic dynasties. The account of Shaik Nasiruddin (c.1355) describes the Karavannese as Nayaks (The chief or head men of Banjara Groups)⁹ supports the same. Their gradual transformation into slightly higher position than that of the traders was a visible phenomenon. During the reign of Tughluq and subsequent dynasties served in armies as warriors and also supplied grain to the military camp. A military business complex of this sort helped them in achieving political and economical mobility. *Warriorship coupled with tradesmanship was infact a significant element in their historical transition.*

Col. Briggs, gives an account of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb's campaign against the rulers of Bijapur and Golconda. Like his predecessors, Aurangzeb employed a large Banjara Horde in order to supply food grains to his army¹⁰.

There is a considerable ambiguity in the historical records on the Banjaras trade activities and their arrival in the South, what is clear is that after Aurangzeb's campaign while the war auxiliaries who had come along with Aurangzeb did not go

back to their homes in Southern India. Some discernable reasons for their Deccan stay are notable¹¹.

Frequent occurrences of famines and draughts in South India, is the reason helped them intensify their trading activity. They brought grains from far of places and sold the same in draught affected areas of South India.

Inhospitable roads and absence of navigable rivers where the other reasons for the Banjaras to intensify the transport business as they were sufficiently diligent and industrious in animal husbandry, also crossing the hilly region. Not only bullocks horses and other animals of transportation but also a ride.

Constant rivalry for political domination among the kings of South India after the death of Aurangzeb, gave an opportunity for the Banjaras to sell and transport the grains and prove their metal in war fare. Gradual transformation of Banjaras as warriors from traders is indeed a transition of political and historical, political and military significance.

Colonial Phase

Advent of Europeans into India like that of Muslims had also left its indelible imprint on the transitional process of Banjara community. Numerous acts, initiatives attitudes and activities of the Britishers contributed to both positive and negative transition. The British pattern of interaction with the people of Banjara community itself underwent a change depending upon the formers interaction with the various Kings, Dynasties and principalities. Their colonial centric interest infact shaped their interaction with the community. However a careful survey of the colonial interaction with the Banjara community till 1947 creates an impression that the Banjara community was enslaved to its hilt. A brief account of colonial phase of historical transition of this community is therefore in an order.

Colonial domination over the trade and transportation

To begin with the Banjaras where relatively independent merchants and transporters and had their own trade practices. But 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 has served their armies from the times of Aurangzeb. The first Nizam employed them in large numbers during his early consolidation of the Deccan. He issued a special order stating: *Ranjan ka pani, Chhappar ka ghas, Din ka tin khun muáf, Aur jahan Asaf Jan ke ghore, Wahan Bhangi Jhangi ka bail*¹².

This means if you can find no water elsewhere, you may even take it from the pots of my followers; grass you may take from the roofs of their huts; and if you commit three murders a day I will even pardon this, provided that wherever my cavalry is stationed there I always find Bhangi and Jhangi's bullocks.

The Banjaras were employed in the army by French, English, Nizam, Marathas in the same capacity. 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, and the Banjaras, too., were certainly culpable of this. Banjaras were quite favored by Peshwas, Tipoo Sulthan, hence British saw this free booting, to be crushed with a ruthless use of force. Many Banjara naiks involved were hanged publicly. With the loss of their chief livelihood, the Banjaras became financially vulnerable and in time fell into the clutches of big traders and merchant moneylenders and also in desperation some of them along with the members of other subaltern communities took to dacoit. Thus the Banjaras who had previously enjoyed enough economic strength to weather such demands. In all, their reduced circumstances under colonial rule meant that they now lacked the resilience to defend their interests effectively.

Also as D. A. Washbrook's study on the south observed that the construction of roads for military purposes undermined the Banjaras economy. After they lost their transporting occupation, the Banjaras settled down as agriculturists in the forested areas and greatly contributed to the expansion of agriculture in the eighteenth century¹³.

Since the colonial state was ever suspicious and fearful of the moving people the Banjaras became the target of colonial wrath. The main aim of the colonial state was to coerce the Banjaras to sedentirise into settled agriculture. The entire colonial police, bureaucracy and legal institution was organized to monitor and force the Banjaras to abandon their traditional lifestyle. This resulted not only in their cultural loss but also demographic decline. The Banjaras became the worst victims of colonial mainstream Hindus and Muslim persecution and oppression¹⁴.

Enforcement of Criminal Tribes Act

Banjaras were subjected to Criminal Tribes Act (CTA). Which was enacted in 1871 applied mostly in North India, then extended to Madras Presidency in 1911, finally the Criminal Tribes Act incorporated all of them. The reasons given were criminal tendencies are hereditary and should be monitored and prosecuted. Resulting through various acts twisting observation on their practices which stigmatized an entire community, however and this had severe implications for both the guilty and innocent.

With their nomadic way of life under threat from the 1820's onwards and their gradual realignment within different social spaces, the Banjaras had to negotiate new social roles and

identities for themselves, in particular they sought to carve out a new position for themselves within the Hindu caste hierarchy.

Final Phase – Post colonial Phase

On 14th Mid night August 1947, India attend independence. However whether her triest with the destiny is commensurate with the destiny of the Banjaras is a question to be probed. A negative note of this kind appears to be critical yet inevitable. People of Banjara community as inseparable part of Indian democratic citizenry began to breath a sigh of relief as a result of various constitutional provisions, legislative measures and executive orders. These have boosted their confidence and self respect and elevated their status in various walks of life. What appears to be roseate statement may not be in tune with the reality. Therefore the post colonial phase of Banjara community's historical transition is equally interesting. The Government of India denotified Banjara community as a criminal tribe. It passed serious of acts generally entitled as Habitual Offenders Acts¹⁵.

According to 1950's , 56 & 76 Schedule Cast and Schedule Tribes acts, many Schedule Cast and Tribes were included within the ambit of the S.C/S.T's act and were guaranteed safeguards as per the constitution including reservation of seats in Education, Employment. However the problem of categorization of Banjaras into SC's & ST's in different states of India is still posing a challenge to the possibly emergence of Banjara community as a homogeneous social entity.

Conclusion

A careful account of the historical transition of the Banjara community into pre colonial and post colonial phases in the context of India in general and South India in particular yields following derivatives which have much bearing upon the transformation of this community. Mythologically the origin of the community is traceable to Krishna and Radha. 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 and geographical move to Southern India. During British Raj the Banjaras once a self sufficient and monopoly traders became victims of predatory capitalism. 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. 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. Inspite of these formidable challenges and

lacking. Community people are bubbling with enthusiasm to include themselves in the system for the greater transition in the age of Globalization and Democracy.

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