
THE FESTIVALS OF BANJARAS

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Abstract:

Banjaras are the most colourful of all the Tribal groups of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, widely dispersed in almost all the districts. In Andhra Pradesh state they are most numerous in Guntur and Krishna districts of coastal Andhra and Anathapuram and Karnool districts are Rayalaseema. In Telangana state they are predominantly inhabiting Adilabad, Nizamabad, Warangal, Mahaboobabad, Khammam, Bhadrachari, Mahaboobnagar, Suryapeta and Nalgonda districts. The Banjaras living in Both States are declared as a scheduled tribe whereas in Telangana region they are recognised only as a De notified Tribe.

Festivals of Banjaras: Banjara or Lambada or sugali are the different phonetic representations of the same nomenclature. The Banjaras claim to be descendants from Mota and Mola, the two mythical brothers who tended Krishna's cows. The stories of the modern Marwaris, Mathura Banjaras and Labhanas are believed to have sprung from Mota. Mola, who had no issue, once visited a prince's court with his wife Radha and there he 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 three infant boys of different castes as rewards. In course of time the boys grew up and married; their progeny are known as 'charan Banjaras'.

The Banjara culture and language indicate that they hail from Northern India. Their folklore defects then to be the descendants from the Rajput stock. The Banjaras of Deccan, as quoted by Mohammadan and British historians have a long history of migrations. What distinguishes the migrations of Banjaras from the migrations of other tribal groups is the fact that they never shifted their habitat as aimless wanderers rooted out of their native habitat by the invasions of superior people or by the exhaustion of natural sources of livelihood in the original home land. Their lucrative business transactions as carriers of merchandise on pack-bullocks to the invading Mohammadan and British army's brought them to south and helped their scattering throughout the length and breadth of Deccan plateau. The turbulent medieval period provided them ample opportunities to utilise their inherited business talent to profit by working as a sort of unofficial commissariat to the armies of warring Moghuls, Marathas and even the British.

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The period of migration from Rajputana to Deccan has been shrouded in controversy as there is difference of opinion various historians. But the recorded evidence pertaining to Lambadas can be traced to the regime of Faros Shah Bagman. According to General Briggs, Mahammad kasim Fiestamase a reference to the activities of Lambdas. As nomadic grain dealers they had traversed the Deccan from one end to the other in the 15th century. William Irvine in his book “The Army of Indian Moghuls” gives a graphic account of the Banjaras as suppliers of regions to the warring Indian armies. He state that “It is by these people but the Indian armies in the field are fed and they are never injured by either army. The grain is taken from them but invariably paid for. They encamp for safety every evening in a regular square formed of the barga of grain, of which they construct breast work. They and their families are in a centre and the oxen are made fast outside. Guards with match locks, and spars are placed at the corners and their dogs do duty as advanced posts. I have seen them with droves of 50,000 bullocks. They do not move above two miles an hour as their cattle are allowed to graze as they proceed on the march”. The vivid description of William Irvine shows the important role played by Banjaras in the wars of medieval period.

Many authorities on medieval history and ethnographers of Deccan mention that the Banjaras migrated to Deccan along with the conquering Mohammad an armies, especially Moghul armies. Mr. Grookes is of the opinion that the first mention of Banjarasin Mohammed an history was made in Sikhandar’s attack on Dolpur in the year 1504 A.D. Mr. Gumberlege, another British historian states that Banjaras first came to the Deccan with Asif Khan in the campaign which closed with the annexation of Ahmed nagar and Berar by the Emperor shah Jahan about 1630 A.D. He further mentions that “The immigration witchsettled the Banjaras upon Decking (Dickon) soil food place when the grain carriers came down with the Mughal armies early in the seventeenth century. In fact they seem to have derived their whole origin and organisation from the long wars the Delhi Emperors in the south”. But Russel and Hiralalin their book “Tribes and castes of central Provinces” attribute the Banjara migration to latter period as they state that Banjaras migrated to Deccan along with the forces of Aurangazeb. Syed Sirajul Hasan, an ethnographer of Deccan endorses the view of Mr. Cumberledgeas he was also of the opinion that the Banjaras came to Deccan with the armies of Asaf Zah, the Vazir of Shah Jahan. Another eminent Anthropologist Prof. Christopher won Furer Haimendorf who worked for a long time among the tribes of Deccan during the nizam’s time is of the opinion that the Banjaras have migrated to the Deccan “In the van of Aurangzab’s armies” as carriers of merohandise. But General Briggs give a longer period of migration, spread over more than 400 years, to the Banjaras of Deccan when he states that “as carriers of grain for Mohammadan armies, the Banjaras have figured in the history from the days of mohammad Tuglak (A.D.1340) to those of

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Aurangzeb (A.D.1656-1707)”—and they supplied grain to the British army under the Marquies of Cornwallis during the seige of seriga -Patnam (1791-92 A.D)”from the proceeding discussion it can be understood that most of the Banjaras migrated to Deccan during the mogul period and their migrations are purposeful then accidental. It can also be firmly inferred that the Banjaras were never original inhabitants of Deccan and they had their home land in northern India; especially around marwarin Rajputana.

Their flourishing trading operations mainly thrived on their pack bullocks which provided them a dependable means or transport at a time when roads were not developed and other modern means of transport were quite unknown. But, as normally was restored with the firm establishment of British Empire in India, the Banjaras who were moving from place to place had to slowly give up their nomadic habits of transport facilities hastened the decline of their business operations as their slow moving buses, trains etc. Hence they were forced to give up their unprofitable skill in cattle rearing and breeding and this age old pastoral trait which largely helped them in carrying out their once flourishing trade also contributed in no less measure to their recent shift agriculture.

One cannot but note the period of social maladjustment that had erupt into their Life during which they degenerated and took to crimes like robbery and decolty in the process of transition from nomadic business to sedentary agriculture and pastorals. They were even notified under the criminal Tribes Act/And a keen which was kept over their movements. However, after independence the criminal Tribes Act was repealed in 1952 and the Banjaras were denitrified.

The present day Banjaras live in detached settlements of huts called ‘Tandas’ usually at some distance from the main Village of other communities. Their house types vary from square to rectangular with the tohed roofs and sides protected with bamboo wattles. They generally live in single room detainments. The cattle are tied outside. In the words o F.Thurston, “there is an air of encampment about the village which suggests a gipay life”.

The Banjaras are a strong and virile race, with tall stature and fair complexion. Men are muscular and of medium height with Rajaput features. The traditional dress of the men comprises of dhoti; short-trousers and gaudy turbans. The women folk wear ‘lainga’ of course cotton prints, richly embroidered with many folds at the waists. The ‘Phadki’ is worn over the shoulders and on the head where it rests on a horn or wooden comb. The bodice, with long sleeves embroidered at the front side covers their breasts and it is tied at the back with straps whose ends are decorated with cowries, beads, glass pieces and tassels.

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They are expert cattle-breeders. In Amarabad area of Mahaboob nagar district, a special variety of bulls which are popularly known as ‘Amarabad bulls’ are reared by them. Their cattle are driven for forage even to the higher plateau of Farhabad for grazing purpose. Erstwhile Hyderabad Government assisted these Banjaras by establishing a cattle breeding farm at Amarabad in 1946 with a view to improve the quality of their cattle.

Man believes that there is some supernatural power which controls all events concerning his happiness and tribulation. While happiness is attributed to benevolent Gods, suffering is ascribed to malevolent spirits. Hence, he fears the malevolent spirits and adores the benevolent gods. In orders to escape the wrath of the malevolent spirits he appeases them through bloody sacrifices and humble submission and invokes the benevolent gods through ritual and devotion. Thus the performance of various rituals and the associated beliefs constitute core of any religion. The beliefs and rituals are expressed either individually or collectively, in the form of periodical family offerings and community festivals.

Generally a festival involves either a single ritual or conglomeration of rituals intended to propitiate either a single deity or a number of deities. It may also be a period which is specifically meant for public religious observances or private family propitiation. The festivals are both social and religious in nature, symbolizing the feeling of a whole community. They are very durable and are marked for their holiday character. There are festivals to mark the emergence of a season or the end of one. Festivals are also celebrated for the successful completion of an economic activity or for affording protection to cattle and people. As the society developed, festivals became more elaborate, numerous and stylized.

In all societies, throughout the world, whether progressive or primitive, queer ceremonies have been evolved to protect and sanctify every sphere of human activity , so much so, that if closely studied they will provide history of ideology and mode of life of the respective societies. The Banjaras of Andhra Pradesh, like many other ethnic groups, believe that the world is peopled by a multitude of spirits, benign and malign. They also believe that all the catastrophes occur due to the wrath of the malignant spirits. Hence these malignant spirits are periodically appeased through sacrifice and supplication which form the content of their festivals like Seethala and Tolja Bhavani. The Banjaras also worship and pay reverence to the benevolent gods such as Vishnu, Rama, Venkateswara or Balaji and Shava Bhavya. The worship of benevolent gods provides the frame of like Teej. This dichotomy of Banjara attitude, awe and reverence towards malevolent and benevolent powers respectively is a characteristic feature of primitive religion.

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Conclusion: The festivals of Banjarashave three types of implications i.e., productive (fertility), protective and seasonal. The Banjara rituals are obviously intended for the propitiation or appeasement of the various supernatural movers which are believed to mould the material, social and physical welfare of the community and individual as well. The rituals connected with the agricultural cult of Teej provide for pomp and decoration blended with dance and song. Further, these rituals are intended to perpetuate the fertility of woman and fruitfulness of the soil on which they depend for their livelihood. Certain rituals of Teej symbolically express the function: of a man and woman in the procreation of the race and in eking out a livelihood. The virgins put earth and manure in small baskets in which the young unmarried man sows seeds. This act of virgins and unmarried men symbolically expresses how they have to cooperate in the field of agriculture and also in the reproduction of the off springin future life. The Holi festival, celebrated by the Banjaras of Andhra Pradesh, is probably a hold over of vernal equinox ceremonies which symbolize the feeling of a whole community, providing an occasion to completely forget all their past petty wrangles, problems and hardships of life and nature group life and we feeling. They only live in the pleasures of the present reflecting their communal harmony in this merry occasion of the Holi. This happy atmosphere enhances communal solidarity.

With the rapid growth of their population, shift in their occupation and change of habitation, the Banjara belief and relief also undergone considerable changes. The regional variation in the observance of Holi and other festivals by the Banjaras can be safely attributed to the impact of the surrounding cultures on the plastic culture of Banjaras which amply illustrates their great receptivity to change. The regional variations in their ritual practices will have been described at the end of the description if each festival.

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