



Lambadas: Identity and Their Unsung Contribution as The Warriors of Deccan

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Abstract- The Lambadas, also known as Banjara or Sugali communities, represent a historically significant yet often marginalized group in the Deccan region of India. Traditionally recognized as nomadic traders, transporters, and warriors, the Lambadas played a crucial role in the political, military, and economic history of the Deccan plateau. This study explores the identity of the Lambadas with particular emphasis on their contribution as warriors and defenders of regional powers during medieval and early modern periods. Despite their involvement in safeguarding trade routes, supplying armies, and participating in military campaigns, their role remains largely absent from mainstream historical narratives. The paper highlights the martial traditions, social organization, and cultural resilience of the Lambadas while examining the reasons behind their historical invisibility. By revisiting archival sources, oral traditions, and regional histories, this study aims to acknowledge the Lambadas' contributions and reaffirm their place in the broader history of the Deccan.

Keywords- Lambadas; Banjaras; Deccan History; Warrior Communities; Nomadic Tribes; Marginalized Histories; Cultural Identity.

I. Introduction

Lambadas have a unique culture of their own. Their customs, traditions, language, food and dress habits, in short their life style is unique which does not have anything in common either with the population of plain areas or with the local tribes who are popular as lambadi or Banjara or Sugali is different parts of Deccan.

Lambada is declared as a scheduled tribe in Andhra area according to scheduled caste and Tribes lists modification order, 1956 as 'Sugali' and de-notified tribe in Telangana area of Andhra Pradesh. They are also found in other states like Bihar, west Bengal, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Orissa where they are called as Banjaras. The Lambadas of Telangana region call themselves as Banjara and they believe that Banjara, Lambada and Sugali are one and the same, rather they are synonyms, where as many Lambadas of Chittoor, Ananthapur and Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh are not aware of the name Banjara and the existence of their counterparts in other parts of India. In the districts like Chittoor, Ananthapur and Kurnool, they call themselves as 'Sugali' and are well aware of the name 'Lambada'.

Lambadas, as immigrant community of Northern India, they listed as scheduled Tribes. This is unique because the Lambadas are scheduled caste in Karnataka, Haryana, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. They are known as 'Naiks' in Madhya Pradesh and are included in the list of other Backward Classes. In Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra, they do not fall under any rural category. They believe that they are the descendants of the Rajputs.



The Lambadas are most recent immigrants. Their homeland is undoubtedly North India, and in physical characteristics, language and traditional dress, they are similar to the population of Rajasthan, originally, they were engaged both in cattle breeding and in transport of goods on the back of their packed bullocks, and it was in their capacity as carriers that they served the Mughal armies and moved in their wake as far South as the Deccan. When modern means of transport outstripped, the Lambada bullock caravans, many of them took to farming, with particular emphasis on rearing of live-stock.

Lambadas are known by 27 names all over the country. These include Banjara or Banjari, Boipari, Laman, Lambhani, Sugali, Sukali and Lambadi, which is said to have originated from another name Laman or Labhan.

Aiyer is of the opinion that Banjaras are also called Labanis, Lambadis and Sugali. Thurston treats Lambada as a synonym of Brinjari or Banjari, Boipari, Sugali or Sukali. According to Grierson, "the Banjaras are the well known tribe of carriers who are found all over the western and Southern India". Enthoven is of the opinion that Lamanis, Vanjaris, Banjaras, Banjaris, Lamanas, Lambadis, Lambars and Sukali are one and the same. In the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh, the other castes generally call them as Banjaras and Lambadas and in Andhra and Rayalaseema region, the most popular name by which they are known as Sugali.

Various explanations are given as to how the names Banjara, Lambada and Sugali have been derived. Thurston connects the origin of their name with Prithviraj Chauhan, who was defeated by Ghori Mohmad in the battle of second Tarain, 1192. Immediately after the defeat of Prithviraj Chauhan many of the Rajput soldiers ran to forests with their families and hid themselves to escape from the hands of Ghori Mohmad and then onwards, forest became their abode and their people called them as 'Vanacharis'.

Aiyer is of the opinion that the word 'Banjara', might have been derived from Sanskrit word 'Vanija' meaning trade from which the words Banija and Banjira have been derived. According to Enthoven, the name might have been derived from the Punjabi word 'Banaj' or 'Vanaj' meaning bargain or trade and he feels that the name 'Lambhani' is derived from 'Lavan' meaning salt since the tribe carried salt to different places before introduction of railways and road transport.

The elderly person of Lambada community in Andhra Pradesh derives the name 'Lambada' from the word 'Lamba' meaning 'tall'. They say that Banjaras are very tall and handsome. So, they have been called 'Lambada' meaning people who are tall and a few people of the community believe that the name 'Sugali' has been derived from 'Supari' meaning 'Betel nut', since they believe that their forefathers traded in Supari. Thus, it is agreed by all the authors as well as the people themselves that the names Banjaras, Lambada and Sugali are in one way or the other connected with their traditional occupation, namely trading.

The Lambada seems to have been one of ancient tribes of India since their name is found in old Sanskrit work like 'Dasakunara Charitha' written by 'Dandi', who live



between 11th and 12th centuries. As we found same cultural traits among Lambadas, Gurjaras, Marwadas and Rajputs, we can come to a conclusion that all these races had their own origin from one common race. These are having lots of similarities among these races. Culturally, Rathods, Chowhans and Paramaras were very close to Marwadas, Gurjaras and Lambadas. There is no doubt to lay that all these tribes originated from one race.

The Lambada settlement is traditionally not only a political unit but an independent and self sufficient unit headed by headman is partly hereditary and the choice also depends on ability. The headman exercises complete authority over the traditional political organization of 'Gor Panchayat' and over his men and settle disputes pertaining to the settlement. The 'Nayak' is assisted in discharging his duties by other elders of the 'Thanda', the settlement of Lambadas.

The Lambadas are divided in to four patrilineal clans Rathod, Ramhar, Chauhan and Vadatyas. The popular ways of acquiring a spouse are negotiation and exchange. The practice of paying bride price is prevalent. The rule of post-marital residence is patrilocal. Divorce is permissible and widowers are allowed to remarry.

The Lambadi women take part in economic activities, social functions and rituals. The Lambadas make colourful geometric patterns of garments, which are further decorated with small mirrors, some round and square, beads, coins and couric shells. The women wear heavy ear rings consisting of a solid round piece which is worked in raised moulding with a bell – shaped hanging from each piece. Flexible silver waist belts are also worn at times. However, the traditional and cultural views of Lambadas have not completely disappeared and are still appearing in few of their thandas.

II. Migration to the Deccan

Actually Lambadas were belongs to North India particularly found in Rajasthan and these people were scattered all over the country. This is also corroborated by the current views among the Lambadas who claim Rajput status to themselves. Since the profession of fighting wars, earlier occupation of the Lambadas, the status attributed should be seen in broader attempts of linking Lambadas to Kshatriya status.

They themselves claim that, they belong to Rajput clan, as in the light of this, they claim that they are Kshatriyas. The elders of the community claim that, their forefathers were the soldiers who stood with the onslaught of Ghori Mohmad, who invaded India during 12th century A.D. Prithviraj Chowhan was defeated in the second battle of Tarain by the Ghori in collusion with treacherous Jayachandra. Then Ghori ordered the wholesale massacre of the Rajput Soldiers to avoid further problems from the defeated forces. The defeated soldiers ran away in to forest, changed their dress and named as vanacharas, who late on became Banjaras or Lambadas. So that Ghori forces might not find out their identity.

Crooke says that, the legends popular amongst the Lambadas and the evidence of arms found in the houses of Lambadas in the present day proves that the Lambadas were formerly soldiers.



It is agreed by all the scholars that the Lambadas of Deccan are migrants from North but the exact period of migration is not clearly known. A few scholars identified the migration that might begin from Delhi Sultanate period and a migration in bulge was took place during Mughals in to various places of Deccan.

According to R.C. Majumdar, Allauddin Khilji thought to take the help of Banjaras, who could move fast along with their pack-bullocks and quick supply of food grains to the armies. So, Banjaras kept the well stocked provisions required by armies. Later Sultan granted some privileges, such as advancing money for this trade and asked to supply food grains whenever the states needed.

Crooke says that the Banjaras mostly trade the rice, corn and salt and they exchanged commodities such as rice transported to the place where only corn grew, and the corn was transported where the rice grew, and salt to the places where it was not produced.

Mohmad Farooque says that during the medieval period, Banjaras were given much importance and honoured by the Mughals. The great Mughal ruler Akbar encouraged the Banjaras by exempting them from tolls and taxes.

According to Briggs, the first historical mention of Lambada of Deccan is found in the work called "A History of the Rise and Progress of Mohmmaden Faiths in the Country of Hind" written by Mohmad Ferishta. He records that in the year 1417 A.D., a large convoy of Banjara bullocks was seized by Khan-i-Khanan, the brother of Ferozshah Bahmani, who rebelled against his brother to occupy the throne of Gulbarga. H.K. Kaul says that Lambadas migrated to the South with the first Mohammadan armies, which invaded the South in the fourteenth century and they clearly show that Lambadas came to the Deccan even earlier than the Mughals, who accompanied the army of Khilji under the command of Malik Kafur, who invaded Devagiri in 1307 A.D., as the Lambadas were the only source to supply the food grains to the army at the time of war during the reign of Allauddin Khilji.

Briggs again says that Lambadas figured in history from the days of Mohammad-bin-Tughlaq might be correct, Juna Khan, prince popularly known as Mohammad-bin-Tuglaq invaded South in 1323 A.D., and there was no cast roads, and crossing the Vindhyas was very difficult as it was thick forest and there was no means of transportation to enter into South. So, they required the services of Lambadas who were well equipped in moving from one place to other place with their pack-bullocks even through thick forests and mountains. The Lambadas were employed by Mohammad-bin-Tuglaq in his invasions to Warangal, the then Capital of Kakatiyas.

Mohammad-bin-Tuglaq defeated Pratapa Rudra Deva, the Ruler of Warangal in 1323 A.D., when Devagiri was already a part of the Delhi Sultanate. This clearly shows that Tuglaq might have come to the South through Devagiri to Warangal.

After the conquest of Warangal, most of the Lambadas stayed in Warangal and started trading in the South as it was not compulsory for Lambadas to return back to capital along with the army, since their services were required only at the time of war and during rest of the time they were allowed to do their trade. The Lambada population



concentrated in the regions where Tughlaq marched to Warangal. The concentration of Lambadas was in the areas like Devagiri, Aurangabad and Mandvi in Maharashtra, Adilabad district in Andhra Pradesh is also more populated by the Lambadas. The Lambada population in Warangal district is more in the Andhra Pradesh when compared to other districts.

Comberlege, another British historian states that Lambadas came to Deccan with Asaf Khan in the campaign which closed with the annexation of Ahmed Nagar and Berar by the emperor Shah Jahan about 1630 A.D. Asaf Khan also called Asaf Jah, the Wazir of Shah Jahan came to Deccan and Bhangi and Jhangi, the leaders of Lambadas also followed them with their packed bullocks. They accompanied Asaf Jah carrying his provisions during his raid to the Deccan. It was an object of Asaf Jah to keep these bullocks well up with his force and he was induced to give an order to Bhangi and Jhangi Naiks as they put forward excuse regarding the difficulties of obtaining grass and water for their cattle. So, Asaf Jah gave them an order engraved on copper plate in gold letters which ran as follows:

Ranjan ka pani
Chhappar ka ghas
Din ke tin khus muaf
Aurjahan Asaf Jah ke ghore
Wahan Bhangi Jhangi ke bail.

This is still in the possession of the descendants of Bhangi, who are still recognized by the High Court at Hyderabad and on the death of honour (Khillat) from His Highness the Nizam. The meaning of the inscription seems to be “If you can find no water elsewhere, you may take it from the pots of my followers, If you need grass, you may take from the roofs of their huts. I will pardon you three murders a day, provided where my cavalry is there; I find also the bullocks of Bhangi and Jhangi”.

By and large, most of the scholars agreed that the Lambadas came to the Deccan with the armies of Mughals, as majority of scholars linked the migration with Asaf Jah's invasion of 1630 A.D. Thus, the migration took place during the reign of Shah Jahan and similar migration might have taken place even during the campaign of Aurangzeb to the South.

III. Service of Lambadas in Armies of Deccan

The Lambadas of Telangana were always in the picture during the time of Nizam, providing commissionerate service to Nizam armies.

Dungeons (present Osmania University College of Women, Koti), a warehouse was looked after by Lambadas, where surplus food grains, ammunition and weapons were stored along with the prisoners, horses and cattle. Most of the moving guards appointed by the local Nawabs were the Lambadas to watch the prisoners and a few Lambadas also served as the main messengers for the army chiefs. During the war period, their services were required to supply the food grains and water to the army and during no-war period, they were allowed to trade any provision.



The service of Lambadas was satisfactory and the Nizam Government was gifted an area i.e., the present Banjara and Jubilee Hills in Hyderabad, where the Lambada or Banjara Thandas were spread over, those are Hema thanda, Seethya thanda, Bhukya thanda, Amaraiah thanda, Ajmeera thanda and two additional settlements called Bhangi and Jhangi thandas located.

Lambadas gained wider knowledge of places and the people because they travelled around so much. This knowledge was put to use by various rulers who employed them as intelligentsia corps. The ruler of Mysore, Tipu Sultan, who waged wars against the British in the late 18th century, used the Lambadas for espionage and for causing harassment to the enemy camp.

The British also made use of them and it is recorded that the Duke of Wellington, when he was a junior officer, employed the Lambada pack bullocks as carriers. He made mention of the valuable services they had rendered to his troops.

The Lambadas used the bullocks as pack animals to transport the supplier, which might have been a lucrative occupation. As times changed and conditions became normal during the British period, the Lambadas, who were for some centuries moving from place to place had to give up their nomadic habits. Till late 20th century, it is reported that, they were moving along with the armies and their services were discontinued due to the development of road transport and railways.

The Lambadas, a complete picture of transition of a group of people from nomads to settle peasantry, the transition was no doubt marked by their struggle to adopt themselves to the changing conditions. They are a versatile lot when once their occupation of trading with the armies was lost, they gradually started to settle down, first as pastorals and then as settled cultivators. One cannot miss the transitional maladjustment, they had to face during which they degenerated and took to crimes like robbery and decoy in the process of their adjustment. So, they were notified under the criminal tribes act, and a keen watch over their movements was kept.

However, after Indian Independence, the criminal tribes enquiry committee was appointed in 1949 and on its recommendation that it offended, article 19, 21 and 22 of the Constitution of India, the Criminal Tribes Act of 1924 was repealed with effect from 31st August, 1952 and the Lambada community was de-notified and later by orders dated 27th July, 1977, Lambadas are also become scheduled tribes in Andhra Pradesh thus after the recognition of Lambadas as scheduled tribes, they have been given many provisions for their development. Gradually, there is considerable change in all aspects of social life among the lambadas due to the influence of non-tribals, urbanization, modernization and industrialization.

IV. Conclusion

The Lambadas occupy a distinctive position in the historical and cultural landscape of the Deccan. Their contributions as warriors, transporters, and protectors of trade and territory were vital to the functioning of regional kingdoms and empires. However, due



to their nomadic lifestyle and marginal social status, their role has remained underrepresented in written history. Recognizing the Lambadas as an integral part of Deccan's martial and socio-economic past challenges dominant historical narratives and promotes a more inclusive understanding of history. Acknowledging their resilience, cultural identity, and service not only restores historical balance but also contributes to contemporary discussions on social justice and representation. Future research and documentation are essential to preserve Lambada heritage and ensure their rightful recognition as unsung warriors of the Deccan.

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