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Cultural Changes and Marginalisation of Lambada Community in Telangana

Venkatesh Vaditya

Introduction

The Lambadas/Sugalis or Banjaras are one of the Scheduled Tribe communities spread across Telangana and Andhra Pradesh states in South India. As historical account goes, they are not the autochthons of South India and they were unsettled nomads of North India. They are believed to be originated from Marwar region of Rajasthan. In the absence of mechanised transportation system in the bygone era, the transportation skills of Lambadas were well appreciated. With the advent of British rule, the Lambadas were compelled to give up their traditional occupation of transporting goods owing to introduction of mechanized transport system, laying roads and rail lines by the then the colonial State. As a result, they lost their livelihood sources and compelled to take-up such activities, which was considered by the colonial state as criminal occupation. In the post-independence India, along with other communities they were de-notified, since then, tremendous changes have taken in their occupational structure. Culturally, Lambadas represent a different ethnic community, Lambada women are known for wearing colourful embroidered attire. One distinctly finds the absence of custom of dowry in traditional Lambada marriages. With the material changes in the recent past, they are coming out of their Adivasi (primitive) worldview, which had inbuilt egalitarian value practices and it has been affecting the community in adverse terms.

The Lambadas, a semi-nomadic tribe, is made of various groups found throughout India and most of them are predominantly located in the states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh in South

India. They tend to live in small isolated groups; many are now engaged in farming and cattle breeding. Due to their isolation, most are not well educated and are very poor in some instances. Compared to other groups in the area, the Lambadas are tall with fair complexion, have aquiline noses, and classical Nordic features. They are the largest Scheduled Tribes⁴⁵¹ (STs) of Telangana and said to have originally originated from Rajasthan; they were engaged in business of collecting, carrying and supplying goods to the travelling and invading armies during pre-colonial period. During the peace time, they were transporting the goods to the nearby markets, it is amply clear that their chief mode of transportation was supported by the cattle. Mr. G. A. Grierson writes that, ‘the Banjaras are the well-known tribe of carriers who are found all over Western and Southern India. The language that is spoken by Lambadas is known as “Gor Boli” or Lambadi’.⁴⁵² It is further noted by him that the Banjari dialect of Southern India is mixed with the surrounding Dravidian languages. European Roma Gypsies said to have been migrated from India and it is not out of the place to mention them here. For that, it is observed that, there are many cultural similarities between the Roma Gypsies and Banjara Lambadas.⁴⁵³ There is almost 90 percent similarity with regard to their language, costumes, and lifestyle and food habits. A world conference of Banjara Romas was held in Germany in 1980. A delegation of Gor Banjaras from India under the leadership of Ramsingh Bhanawat was present in the conference.⁴⁵⁴ Commemorating the historical links, the second International Roma festival was organised in Chandigarh in 1983. Shyamala Devi makes an attempt in her work to ‘understand the

⁴⁵¹ Certain indigenous Communities have been recognized constitutionally as Scheduled Tribes and State Affirmative Action has been extended to these communities in India.

⁴⁵² G. A. Grierson ‘Linguistic Survey of India, in Edgar Thurston, ‘Castes and Tribes of Southern India,’ Vol-4, (Madras: Madras Government Press, 1909), 208.

⁴⁵³ D.B. Naik, *The Art and Literature of Banjara Lambanis* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 2000), 4.

⁴⁵⁴ See Motiraj Rathod, ‘Ancient History of Gor Banjara’, retrieved from http://www.banjaratimes.com/mgcontent18022_18026.gif (accessed on 22 December 2016).

culture and heritage of the highly dispersed and persecuted 'Gypsies' in Europe and elsewhere leads to the Ghor/Banjaras of India, with whom they share a common cultural heritage.⁴⁵⁵

The nomadic communities like Lambadas have been historically on the constant move. In spite of that, they could evolve a distinct and rich cultural ethos of their own. It seems that with a settled life only one could have evolved such a rich culture like any other settled community. Wherever they migrated as nomads, they retained their identity and adapted to the immediate mainstream cultures. However, with the process of assimilation or acculturation they are able to preserve their separate cultural identity for centuries. This in turn has led them being called differently in different parts of the country. According to a Report submitted by the All India Banjara Study team, it is learnt that, the Banjaras are known by at least 26 different names⁴⁵⁶ and have at least 17 sub-groups⁴⁵⁷ across various states of India.⁴⁵⁸ The Lambadas also claim themselves as Kshyatriya Gorvamshiya tribe. There is need for in-depth research in this regard. As has already been noted, with affect of constant acculturation process, the Lambadas have developed a tendency towards Sanskritisation or Hinduisation. These tendencies are more visible especially, among the Lambadi of South India.⁴⁵⁹ In addition,

⁴⁵⁵ For details see, B. Shyamala Devi, 'A comparative study of some aspects of the socio-economic structure of Gypsy/Ghor communities in Europe and in Andhra Pradesh, India', *Intercultural Education*, 6 (3)1996: 15-23.

⁴⁵⁶ 26 different names of Banjaras are:

Banjara, Banjari, Vanajara, Banjare, Binjari, Brinjari, Lamban, Lamani or Lambani, Lambada, Lambadi, Laban or Labana, Labhan, Labhanis, Labhana or Lobhana, Baladia, Ladenia, Sugali, Gwar or Gauria, Gwaria, Gavaria or Gamalia, Gavara, Phanada, Kangi or Kangashiya, Shirkitaband, Shirkiwala, Shingade-Vanjari.

⁴⁵⁷ 17 Sub-Groups of the Banjaras are: Gor, Mathura or Mathure, Dhadi, Sanar, Navi, Dhadia, Shingadya, Maru, Bamania, Bagora, Digora, or Gigora, Charan, Badi, Bajigar, Jogi or Bharava, Rohidas and Dhan-Kute.

⁴⁵⁸ D.B. Naik, *The Art and Literature of Banjara Lambanis*, op. cit., 2.

⁴⁵⁹ Universally they worship goddess Shakti in all her forms like (i) Durga, (ii) Kankaali, (iii) Tulja Bhavani, (iv) Maryamma, (v) Hingala, (vi) Amba or Masori and (vii) Mathral or Seetla. In addition, they have a strong belief that the dead persons would also become gods and goddesses.

they are known for believing in several blind faiths.⁴⁶⁰ They have very low value-orientation; fatalism is part of their common sense, they rely on their fate, which indicates their lack of scientific outlook and approach. Majority of them believe, 'every event in man's life has already been settled and determined by his fate.'⁴⁶¹

I. Lambadas: Their History and Their Historical Contribution

In Telangana and Andhra Pradesh states, the Lambadas are called by at least four different names. One is *Sugali*: this is said to be a corruption of the word *supari* (betel nut), because they formerly traded largely in this commodity. The name Banjara and is probably derived from the Sanskrit word *Vaniyakarakas*, a merchant, or through the Prakrit *Vanijjaarao*, a trader. The derivation of Labhani or Labani, etc., is obscure. It has been suggested that it means salt carrier from the Sanskrit *lavanah*, salt, because the tribe carried salt, but this explanation goes against,⁴⁶² Siraj-Ul-Hassan's account, in his opinion the name Banjara is supposed to be derived from the Persian *Berinj Arind* it means 'dealer in rice'. Some derive it from Sanskrit *Banij-a* merchant. The Banjara have other names, as Lamani, derived from the Sanskrit *Lavana*-salt' Wanjari from *Vana*-a forest; and Lambadi, from *Lamban*-length, which probably refers to the long line or terrain in which their bullocks move. Their tribal name is *Gobar* - a man.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶⁰ There are a number of Bhagats, bhopas and Janyaas and priests of some God or goddesses whom ignorant Banjaras often consult them as Gods or Goddesses are supposed to speak through them. These Bhagats use "Chhumantar" magic method to convince the people that the evil spirit can be driven away or the disease can be cured. Many of them are exploiters of the ignorant Banjaras. See for Details Ramesh Arya, History and Belief of Deccan Tribal Lambadis, <http://www.banjaratimes.com/32401/32527.html> (Accessed on 10 August 2016).

⁴⁶¹ R.K Samanta and L. Shyama Sundar, 'The Lambadis: Their Socio-Psychological and Agro-Economic Characteristics' *Man in India*, 65 (3) 1985, p. 275.

⁴⁶² Edgar Thurston (1909): *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, op. cit., 207.

⁴⁶³ Syed Siraj-Ul-Hassan, *Castes and Tribes of the Nizam's Dominion*, Vol-1 (New Delhi: Vintage Books, 1990), 16.

Table-1			
District-Wise Lambada Population in Telangana			
Years	1911*	1991	2001
Mahabubnagar	12863	198531	246810
Ranga Reddi	-	89509	123753
Hyderabad (including Atrafi Balda) @	4095	12618	17145
Medak	3975	80170	118642
Nizamabad	1819	110496	142355
Adilabad	5379	77263	103303
Karimnagar	6095	48960	51157
Warangal	53558	297737	368446
Khammam	-	218127	271373
Nalgonda	38065	255769	320959
Total	125849	1389180	1763943

@ Atrafi Balda used to be the Hyderabad Nizam's Private Lands, the revenue that was generated were used for maintenance of Nizam's family.

*Source: Syed Sirajul Hassan (1920): "Castes and Tribes of the Nizam's Dominion", p.27.

Source: *Tribes and Tribal Areas of Andhra Pradesh (Basic Statistics), Government of Andhra Pradesh (2004, 2008).*

Table 2		
District-Wise Lambada Population in Andhrapradesh		
Years	1991	2001
Srikakulam	235	43
Vizianagaram	276	49
Visakhapatnam	416	822
East Godavari	305	455
West Godavari	6097	7223
Krishna	41687	53232
Guntur	59171	76825
Prakasam	12667	16290
Nellore	561	572
Chittoor	18070	22274
Kadapa	14541	18257
Ananthapur	75790	87727
Kurnool	22901	30235
Total	252717	314004
Telangana	1389180	1763943
Andhra	252717	314004
Andhra Pradesh Total	1641897	2077949

Source: *Tribes and Tribal Areas of Andhra Pradesh (Basic Statistics), Government of Andhra Pradesh (2004, 2008).*

In south India, the Lambadas predominantly inhabited in undivided nine districts of Telangana and they are sparsely distributed in Guntur, Krishna, West Godavari and Nellore districts of coastal Andhra Pradesh. Various census reports show that, there has been a constant growth in Lambada population in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh state. According to the 1961 census, their population was 96,174, the 1971 census report indicates their population at 1,32,464 mark. Both the census of 1961 and 1971 of Lambada indicates the population in Andhra and Rayalaseema regions, because Lambadas in Telangana were not enumerated as STs since they were not part of ST list. Lambadas in Telangana regions were enumerated as STs since 1981 census. As a result the population of Lambadas that reflected in census report increased many fold. According to the 1981 census, their population has been recorded as 11,58,342 people. The same for 1991 reports their population risen up to 16,41,897. The 2001 census report records their population at 20,77,947. In Telangana state alone, their population according to 2011 census was 20,46,117.⁴⁶⁴ Literacy among the Lambadas was recorded as 15.22 per cent (both male and female) during 1991 census and it was recorded in 2001 census at 34.33 per cent. Level of female literacy has been recorded as very low among the Lambadas. According to the 2001 census, mere 20.80 per cent female literacy was recorded compared to their male counter-part at 47.02 per cent. Region-wise distribution of their population in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh shows that they are predominant in Telangana region. According to 2001 census, out of 20, 77,949 state's total Lambada population 17, 63,943, is inhabited in the Telangana region. Rest of the 3, 14,004, are inhabited in Rayalaseema and Andhra districts (see table 1 and 2). Not only they are in good numbers in Telangana state, but also even Lambadas actively participated in the famous peasant armed resistance in

⁴⁶⁴ Govt. of Telangana, Tribal Welfare Department,
<http://twd.telangana.gov.in/tribal-profile/> (Accessed on 5 May 2017).

Telangana known as 'Telangana Armed struggle (TAS of 1946-51).⁴⁶⁵ Generally, they live in exclusive settlements called '*tanda*', and maintaining their cultural affinities and ethnic identity.

Lambadas and their Traditional Occupation: The Colonial Account

The Banjaras, as historical account goes are not the autochthons of South India and they were unsettled nomads of North India. It is generally recorded that the Banjaras originally have come to the south with the Moghul army. Highly fascinated by their spirit of adventure and honesty, the Moghul kings appointed many of them for the supply of food grains to their army.⁴⁶⁶ Natesa Shastri writing about the "Lambadis of Bellary" goes on to say that they 'ha[d] a tradition among them of having first come to the Deccan from the north with Moghul camps as commissariat carriers in the early 17th Century. Their carrying trade has been recorded by almost all European travellers'.⁴⁶⁷ Hassan provides proof of Banjara trade caravans with the help of various travellers' account, taking Mandeslo's account in 1638 A.D. he describes the account of trade in Deccan of Banjaras buying wheat and rice in the markets of the Deccan towns and carrying them to Hindustan in caravans some times of ten thousand animals. In the accounts of Sir A. Wellesley who campaigned in the Deccan, the Banjaras were frequently mentioned as suppliers of food and forage to his forces. 'Many thousands of them' says Abbe-Dubois, 'were employed by the English for transporting their provisions' in the last war with the sultan of Mysore.⁴⁶⁸ It is noted by Wilks that, the travelling grain merchants, who furnished the English army under Cornwallis with

⁴⁶⁵ For details see, G. Bhadrū, 'Role of Lambadas in Telangana Armed Struggle: with Special Reference to Dharmapuram Village in Jangoan Taluk', in A. Satyanarayana et. al (Eds.) Retrieving the past: History and Culture of Telangana, (Hyderabad: Department of History, Osmania University, 2005), 164-178.

⁴⁶⁶ H.V. Nanjundayya and Ananthkrishna Iyyer (1928): 'The Mysore Tribes and Castes', Vol-4, in D.B. Naik, The Art and Literature of Banjara Lambanis, op.cit., 6.

⁴⁶⁷ S. M. Natesa Sastri (1905), Calcutta Review, in Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, op.cit., p. 219.

⁴⁶⁸ Syed Sira-Ul-Hassan, Castes and Tribes of the Nizam's Dominion, op. cit., 17.

grain during the Mysore war, were Brinjaris, and, he adds, 'they strenuously objected, first, that no capital execution should take place without the sanction of the regular judicial authority; second, that they should be punishable for murder.'⁴⁶⁹ Orme mentions the Lambadis as having supplied the Comte de Bussy with store, cattle and grain, when besieged by the Nizam's army at Hyderabad. In an account of the Brinjaris towards the close of the eighteenth century, Moor writes that:

In times of war they attend, and are of great assistance to armies, and, being neutral, it is a matter of indifference to them who purchase their goods. They marched and formed their own encampments apart, relying on their own courage for protection; for which purpose the men are all armed with swords or matchlocks.⁴⁷⁰

They came into the Deccan (South India) as transporters of supplies or merchandise for the armies of Delhi emperors in their raids in the South early in the 17th century. They became a useful medium of transaction between the South and the North during periods of peace until 1850s. In the 18th century, they had also taken up service under the Maratha rulers of Satara, the Peshwas of Poona, the Nizam of Hyderabad, and the British during Mysore and Maratha wars. Some of the Lambadas returned to the North but some stayed behind and carried on petty trade with their pack-bullocks.

Taking Khafi Khan, a contemporary Mughal chronicler *Muntakhab* into account Eaton writes that, as early as 1708 Papadu popularly known as Sarvai Papanna who is considered as social bandit in Telangana region during late 17th century in Deccan history from the Social History point of view, Eaton Says:

If he acted like a king, he had actually become a parvenu landholder. For we hear that he raided passing Banjaras

⁴⁶⁹ Historical Sketches of the South of India: Mysore, in Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, op. cit, 213.

⁴⁷⁰ Moor, 'Narrative of the Operations of Little's Detachment against Tippoo Sultan 1794', in Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, op. cit, 210-211.

(itinerant grain carriers) and seized their cattle, which he put to work plowing his fields for him. Since he is said to have seized between 10,000 and 12,000 head of cattle for this purpose, the agricultural operations he controlled must have been extensive.⁴⁷¹

The Lambadas have strong ecological connections. Domesticated animals form an integral part of their economy, especially cow and oxen. As they were constantly on the move, they did not have any domicile. Wherever they settled down, they were granted the domicile of the respective states. Lambadas are physically strong and hard-working people. Moreover, they believe in the principle that the sweat of the brow gives the bread. Occupation wise colonial anthropologists projected them as both trading and a community that had a high tendency for the petty crimes. Apart from supplying provisions to the armies the other common occupation of the Lambadis of Mysore is said to be ‘the transportation’. They specialised in transporting in the hill and forest tracts which were thought to be difficult to access for grain and other produce on pack bullocks of which the Lambadis kept transporting on large herds.⁴⁷² While writing about the occupational structure of Banjaras, Hassan reports that, ‘they are the grain and salt carriers, cattle breeders and cattle dealers, found all over Dominions... they have no settled homes, but led a wandering life in bands, each band being under a hereditary leader styled *Naik*, to whom implicit obedience is yielded by the men’.⁴⁷³ In the Madras Census Report, Lambadas are described as a class of traders, herdsmen, cattle-breeders, and cattle lifters, found largely in the Deccan districts, in parts of which they have settled down as agriculturists. In the Cuddapah district, they are said to be found in

⁴⁷¹ Eaton, Richard M, *The New Cambridge History of India: A Social History of the Deccan, 1300–1761 Eight Indian Lives*, (New York: Cambridge university press, 2005), pp. 165-66.

⁴⁷² In Report on Public Instruction, Mysore, 1901-02; and Mysore Census Report, 1891, in Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, op. cit, 214-15.

⁴⁷³ Syed Siraj-Ul-Hassan, *Castes and Tribes of the Nizam’s Dominion*, op. cit., 15.

most of the jungly tracts, living chiefly by collecting firewood and jungle produce.⁴⁷⁴

Lambadas and their Historic Contribution: The Colonial Representation

Contribution of Banjaras in the pre-colonial and colonial India is well appreciated phenomenon. The Banjaras in the capacity of wandering grain and salt merchants have rendered invaluable service to the country. They visited the most secluded regions and lone hamlets, collecting the small quantities of grains, cotton, wool and other commodities obtainable, and brought them to the larger markets. Their value, as carriers and collecting merchants, in times of scarcity and great demand, was incalculable, for no other means could bring in the small stores of the outlying hamlets. Captain J. Briggs, in 1813 writes about the contribution that the Lambadas have made to the Deccan, he states that:

As the Deccan is devoid of a single navigable river, and has no roads that admit of wheeled traffic, the whole of the extensive intercourse is carried on by laden bullocks, the property of the Banjaris.⁴⁷⁵

Banjaras contribution was well recognised by the Nizam of Hyderabad. Syed Siraj-ul- Hassan, in his “Castes and Tribes of the Nizam’s Dominions”, reports that, the two clans of Charan Banjaras: Rathods and Vadyas or Badityas are chiefly found in H.H the Nizam’s Dominions, the Rathods occupying the Maratwada districts adjoining Berar and Badityas abounding in Telingana. Both these clans are said to have come to the Deccan with Asaf jah, the *Vazir* of Shah Jahan, who campaigned against Bijapur around 1630. The Rathod Banjaras under their naiks Bhangi and Jhangi, had 1,80,000 bullocks, which formed the army commissariat of the *Vazir* and, in order to keep up the supply of

⁴⁷⁴ Manual of the Cuddapah District, in Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, op. cit, p. 215.

⁴⁷⁵ In S. M. Natesa Sastri, Calcutta Review, 1905, in Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, op. cit, p. 219.

grain and fodder, they secured from him the following prescriptive rights engraved in golden letters on a copper plate:

“Ranjan ka Pani, Chappar ka ghas;

“Din ka teen Khun Maff,

“Aur jahan Asaf Jah ke ghore

“Wahan Bhangi Jhangi ke bail”⁴⁷⁶

(Bhangi and Jhangi may freely have, pots of water and grass for *chappar* (roofs): three murders a day will be pardoned, because where Asaf Jah’s horses (cavalry) are, there are Bhangi’s and Jhangi’s bullocks).

Hassan writes that the plate remains in the possession of the descendants of Bhangi’ who are still recognised by the Hyderabad court: and on the death of the representative of this family, his successor receives a *khillat* from His Highness Nizam. The well-appreciated community of Lambadas started facing problems due to entry of market economy in Hyderabad state. The Lambada caravans encountered hostile reception when they entered Hyderabad state. It was due to deployment of Commercial Treaty of 1802 between Nizam and British Indian government. In Bhukya’s argument, it was under this treaty that the state’s market regulation and economy was restructured along modern lines, which destroyed many old market relations and promoted the emergence of new trading communities. Another component of the treaty enabled the state to establish custom’s houses (*nakas*) on all the main roads in 1808 to regulate the influx of goods into both the territories of British as well as Nizam, to collect duties.⁴⁷⁷

Dislocation of Livelihood and Criminal Tribes Act, 1871

The well appreciated Banjaras being the goods- and service-nomads, lost their livelihood due to the processes of mechanisation and

⁴⁷⁶ Syed Siraj-Ul-Hassan, op. cit., p. 20.

⁴⁷⁷ Bhanguya Bhukya, Subjugated Nomads: The Lambadas under the Rule of the Nizams, (Hyderabad: Oriental Black Swan, 2010), 58-59.

industrialisation characterised by improved methods of production and transportation in colonial India. The mass production of industrial goods and their extensive distribution in rural markets had occurred on an unprecedented scale. Introduction of Railways during 1860-65 adversely affected the trading and business prospects of Lambadas, the oxen of Lambadas could not compete with the speed of Railways. In Bhukya's opinion, 'the railway economy, in short, established a regulated large-scale trade in the state that was almost entirely out of the control of Lambadas'.⁴⁷⁸ Gradually they started selling out the cattle and lost their livelihood sources. Writing about the impact of modern transportation system that has made on the livelihood of Lambadas of Bellary, Mr. Francis writes that:

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. Some Lambadis are, now (1908), working in the Mysore manganese mines. Sensing the danger of a rebellion from them, British government declared them as criminal tribe and restricted their movements severely. This criminalisation process is mainly the contribution of the colonial government.⁴⁷⁹

The British land settlement operations and administrative restructuring accelerated a process of dislocation. This was also the reason why some of these communities took to crime.⁴⁸⁰ During the transition from a nomadic to a settled peasant life in the second half of the nineteenth century, a considerable number of Lambadas

⁴⁷⁸ *ibid*: 64

⁴⁷⁹ Gazetter of the Bellary District, in Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, *op. cit*, 212

⁴⁸⁰ Milind Bokil, 'De-notified and Nomadic Tribes: A Perspective', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37 (2), 2002 p.149.

began resorting to decoity.⁴⁸¹ Decoity was neither an in-born trait nor a hereditary practice in Lambada society. Rather, some Lambadas took to decoity when colonial interventions destroyed their long-standing livelihood practices and threw them into perpetual impoverishment.⁴⁸² Although only a few Lambada gangs committed decoities, mainly during times of famine and drought, the whole community was stigmatized.⁴⁸³ The creation of 'criminality' in oriental understanding of India was catapult through in Bhukya's opinion:

The creation of a body of anthropological knowledge about the 'criminal' communities, as it helped the state to separate supposedly 'delinquent' subject from 'honest' subject. In turn, it conferred a specific social identity upon such groups, and thereby socially stigmatizing them. The creation of surveillance society served colonial end.⁴⁸⁴

In this regard, there is a need to redress damages done by colonial anthropology to these communities. After the mutiny of 1857, the British administration took a number of preventive steps to maintain law and order. The enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871 was one of them. It was a dark phase for the nomadic communities in India. However, the act was based on a fallacious understanding of Indian society, particularly the caste system. One of the influential members of the Law and Order Commissioner, T V Stephens equated caste with profession and believed that certain communities were professionally criminal and crime was their caste, occupation as well as religion.⁴⁸⁵ These ideas were conveniently used to formulate the act, which notified certain communities as criminal tribes. The provisions of the act were

⁴⁸¹ Bhangya Bhukya, op.cit., 116.

⁴⁸² *ibid.*: 128.

⁴⁸³ *ibid.*: 124.

⁴⁸⁴ *ibid.*: 116-117.

⁴⁸⁵ Laxman Mane (1997): *Vimuktayan: Maharashtraatil Vimukta Jamati: Ek Parshwa Bhoomi* (Marathi), Yahwantrao Chavan Pratishtan, Mumbai, 120, in Milind Bokil, 'De-notified and Nomadic Tribes: A Perspective' 150.

extremely oppressive. Every member of the notified community was compelled to register himself/herself at the local police station and had to give '*Hajeri*' (attendance) at a specified time of the day. Their movements were curtailed. They could not shift their residence at will and had to take proper permission before any travel or movement. The penalties for breaking these rules were quite severe.⁴⁸⁶ It notified Banjara community as criminal tribes. Since Thurston's volume was produced in the light of this oppressive act, he endorses the criminal behaviour of Lambadas. Conclusively Thurston says 'and it must suffice for the present purpose to note that they commit dacoities and have their receivers of stolen property and that the Naik or headman of the gang takes an active share in the commission of crime'.⁴⁸⁷ However, "they", Hassan reports that 'do not, however appear to be hereditary criminals and have taken to a course of rapine and pillage owing to the decline of their original trade'.⁴⁸⁸ The stigma of being a criminal community haunted Lambadas for a long time. After independence, the Indian government revoked the Criminal Tribes Act in 1952 and the notified criminal communities were de-notified. It was replaced with the Habitual Offenders Act; this act intended to target the individuals not the entire communities. Even though the communities were de-notified, the stigma continued to haunt them. On historical accounts, these De-notified Tribes in India could be said as one of the most subjugated sections of Indian society who have been the victims of historical dislocations, unconventional occupations, colonial legacy and social stigma. There may not be any other case in social history where cultural singularity of a set of communities has proven to be a bane to their existence.⁴⁸⁹ Lambadas of Telangana continued as de-notified tribe until 1977, and they were notified as Scheduled Tribes in that year. They are

⁴⁸⁶ ibid

⁴⁸⁷ Edgar Thurston, op. cit., 232.

⁴⁸⁸ Syed Siraj-Ul-Hassan, op.cit., 21.

⁴⁸⁹ Milind Bokil, op. cit., 148.

now settled down as pastoralists and agriculturalists across Telangana. In addition, many of them are entering in to modern industrial and service sector. The Lambadis present a complete picture of transition from pastoral nomads to settled peasants in recent times.⁴⁹⁰

II. Lambada Women and the Changing Cultural Patterns

Various travellers and official accounts of colonial state have referred the Lambada people. However, in the opinion of Suneetha Rani, their history has not been completely documented in this situation 'orality, which is a part and parcel of their life, also plays its role in recording their history and culture. Their oral literature holds a mirror to their evolution from nomadism to pastoralism and ultimately to agriculturalism'.⁴⁹¹ Historically, without support of Lambada women, the Lambadas men could not have travelled to the remotest areas of the country. The Lambada women historically, drive the cattle along with men in their arduous long journey. Their appearance was robust; they undergo a great deal of labour with apparent ease. The dress of women is colourful and peculiar, and their ornaments are so singularly chosen that they have had eight or ten pounds weight in metal or ivory round their arms and legs along with a child at their backs. Thurston reports that:

The favourite ornaments appear to be rings of ivory from the wrist to the shoulder, regularly increasing in size, so that the ring near the shoulder will be immoderately large, sixteen or eighteen inches, or more perhaps in circumference. These rings are sometimes dyed red. Silver, lead, copper, or brass, in ponderous bars, encircle their shins, sometimes round, others in the form of festoons, and truly we have seen some so circumstanced that a criminal in irons would not have much more to incommode him than these damsels deem

⁴⁹⁰ S. Yaseen Saheb and M. Rajendra Prasad, 'Physical Growth and Nutritional Status of the Lambadi Children of Andhra Pradesh', *Anthropologist*, 11(3) 2009: 195-206.

⁴⁹¹ Suneetha Rani Karamsi, 'Deconstructing the Caste Hegemony: Lambada Oral Literature', *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, 2 (1)2010, p. 459.

ornamental and agreeable trappings on a long march, for they are never dispensed with in the hottest weather. A kind of stomacher, with holes for the arms, and tied behind at the bottom, covers their breast, and has some strings of cowries, depending behind, dangling at their backs. The stomacher is curiously studded with cowries, and their hair is also bedecked with them. They wear likewise earrings, necklaces, rings on the fingers and toes, and, we think, the nut or nose jewel.⁴⁹²



Illustration-1: Lambada Women in Traditional Attires as depicted in Edgar Thurston (1909): *“Castes and Tribes of Southern India”*, Vol.4, p. 210

Different writers have variously described the costume and personal adornments of the Lambadi women. The women are said to remind one of the Zingari of Wallachia and the Gitani of Spain.⁴⁹³ Married women are distinguished from the unmarried in that they wear their bangles between the elbow and shoulder, while the unmarried have them between the elbow and wrist. Unmarried girls may wear black bead necklets, which are taken off at marriage, at that time they first

⁴⁹² Edgar Thurston, op.cit, 211-12.

⁴⁹³ H. A. Stuart writes, *Manual of the North Arcot District*, in *ibid*: 217.

assume the ravikkai or jacket. Matrons also use an earring called guriki to distinguish them from widows or unmarried girls.⁴⁹⁴



Illustration-2: Lambada couple in traditional Attire

(Taken from an old photo from Chirmal Kucha Tanda, Hanwada Mandal, Mahabubnagar District, Telangana, photographed in the year 1979)

Source: Collected by the Author

The women wear a peculiar dress, consisting of a lunga or gown of stout coarse print, a tartan petticoat, and a mantle often elaborately embroidered, which also covers the head and upper part of the body. The hair is worn in ringlets or plaits hanging down each side of the face, decorated with shells, and terminating in tassels. The arms are profusely covered with trinkets and rings made of bones, brass and other rude materials. The men's dress consists of a white or red turban, and a pair of white breeches or knicker-bockers, reaching a little below the knee, with a string of red silk tassels hanging by the right side from the waistband.

⁴⁹⁴ ibid

The women are, as a rule, comely, and above the average height of women of the country. Their costume is the *laigna* (*langa*) or gown of Karwar cloth, red or green, with a quantity of embroidery. The *chola* (*choli*) or bodice, with embroidery in the front and on the shoulders, covers the bosom, and is tied by variegated cords at the back, the ends of the cords being ornamented with cowries and beads. A covering cloth of Karwar cloth, with embroidery, is fastened in at the waist, and hangs at the side with a quantity of tassels and strings of cowries. Their jewels are very numerous, and include strings of beads of ten or twenty rows with a cowry as a pendant, called the *cheed*, threaded on horse-hair, and a silver *hasali* (necklace), a sign of marriage equivalent to the *tali*. Brass or horn bracelets, ten to twelve in number, extending to the elbow on either arm, with a *guzera* or piece of embroidered silk, one inch wide, tied to the right wrist. Anklets of ivory (or bone) or horn are only worn by married women. They are removed on the death of the husband. Women also wear *Pachala* or silk embroidery adorned with tassels and cowries as an anklet. Their other jewels are *mukaram* or nose ornament, a silver *kania* or pendant from the upper part of the ear attached to a silver chain, which hangs to the shoulder, and a profusion of silver, brass, and lead rings. Their hair is, in the case of unmarried women, unadorned, brought up and tied in a knot at the top of the head. With married women, it is fastened, in like manner, with a cowry or a brass button, and heavy pendants or *gujuris* are fastened at the temples. This latter is an essential sign of marriage, and its absence is a sign of widowhood. *Lambadi* women, when carrying water, are fastidious in the adornment of the pad, called *gala*, which is placed on their heads. They cover it with cowries, and attach to it an embroidered cloth, called *phulia*, ornamented with tassels and cowries.⁴⁹⁵ In the recent past, it has become so difficult to recognise and differentiate *Lambada* women from non-*lambada* women due to adoption of mainstream dress pattern (*sari* wearing) by the *Lambada* women.

⁴⁹⁵ *ibid*: 218-19.



Illustration-3: Community in Transition-Elderly Lambada Women in Traditional Attire in a Community gathering. Women wear traditional attire only in such occasion only. The younger generation looks down on it and prefers to wear the attires of mainstream Hindu society.

Source: Collected by the Author in 2010 from Chirmal Kucha Tanda, Hanwada Mandal, Mahabubnagar district, Telangana.

The Lambada families are patriarchal in nature and enforce traditional patriarchal structures and institutions. Lambadas are divided into jatis and gotras; they are endogamous within the jatis and exogamous between gotras, their matrilineal system permitting cross-cousin marriages. In Rathord's opinion:

Traditionally, the largest debts are incurred due to 'bride price' payable in livestock, land, ornaments, etc. however, this tradition is fast changing under the influence of the wider society that they form part of; now Lambada girls pay dowry in order to get married.⁴⁹⁶

A Lambada person cannot marry out-side the sub-caste nor inside the section to which he/she belongs. Earlier polygamy system was

⁴⁹⁶ B. Shyamala Devi Rattord, 'Class and Caste Differences among the Lambadas in Andhra Pradesh', *Social Scientist*, 12 (7)1984, 50.

prevalent, now since Lambadas are covered under Hindu marriage law, legally it is not allowed. Among the Lambadas child marriages are not preferred/allowed. Girls are not usually married under twelve years of age. The traditional Lambada marriages are considered egalitarian in the sense there was no financial considerations in determining marriages. The practice of bride price has been a well-appreciated cultural practice among the Lambadas. Even the marriage ceremonies pattern also differs from mainstream Hindu marriages. In historical accounts, the marriage ceremonies of the Sugalis of North Arcot, Thurston reports that:

The marriages last for three days. On the first an intoxicating beverage compounded of bhang (Cannabis indica] leaves, jiggery (crude sugar), and other things, is mixed and drunk. He also mentioned that, when all are merry, the bridegroom's parents bring Rs. 35 and four bullocks to those of the bride as bride price, and, after presenting them, the bridegroom is allowed to tie a square silver bottu or tali (marriage badge) to the bride's neck, and the marriage is complete; but the next two days must be spent in drinking and feasting. At the conclusion of the third day, the bride is arrayed in gay new clothes, and goes to the bridegroom's house, driving a bullock before her.⁴⁹⁷

There is also a detailed description of the marriage ceremony in the volume, especially the unique custom of abusing the officiating Brahmin in the marriage ceremony. Quoting from the Mysore Census Report, 1891, Thurston noted that:

One unique custom, distinguishing the Lambani marriage ceremonial, is that the officiating Brahman priest is the only individual of the masculine persuasion who is permitted to be present. Immediately after the betrothal, the females

⁴⁹⁷ Edgar Thurston, op.cit, p. 220.

surround and pinch the priest on all sides, repeating all the time songs in their mixed Kutni dialect.⁴⁹⁸

The Brahmin is surrounded by mischievous lasses of the tanda who pinch and prick on all sides, smear his body with cow-dung, try to strip him naked and tease him every way possible.⁴⁹⁹ The pinching episode is notoriously a painful reality. It is said, however, that the Brahman, willingly undergoes the operation in consideration of the fees paid for the rite. One more unique tradition among the Lambadas is that the existence of feminised weeping at Lambadi weddings, known as *dhavalo*. The bride is taught *dhavalo* rhythmically to sing and weep simultaneously. Elderly women usually teach it. Brahmins are sometimes engaged to celebrate weddings, and, failing a Brahman, a youth of Lambada will put on the thread, and perform the ceremony.⁵⁰⁰ When the guest arrives after a long gap Lambada women offer them water-filled pots and express their joy and sorrow hugging the guest, moving the neck and weeping, this is called *malero*. Gradually, *dhavalo* and *Malero* tradition also silently has been withering away from this community. Traditionally, among the Lambadas, widow remarriage and polygamy have freely prevailed. In addition, it is customary for divorced women to marry again during the lifetime of the husband.⁵⁰¹

Changing Traditional Lambada Marriages: Entry of Dowry

The process of continuous contact between the Lambadas and caste ridden Hindu village society has brought several changes in life style of Lambadas.⁵⁰² Apart from the material changes within the Lambada society, there have also been changes in cultural terrain. For instance, the Lambadas, apart from ancestral worship, usually

⁴⁹⁸ The vicarious punishment to which the solitary male Brahman is thus subjected is said to be apt retribution for the cruel conduct, according to a mythological legend, of a Brahman parent who heartlessly abandoned his two daughters in the jungle, as they had attained puberty before marriage.

⁴⁹⁹ Syed Siraj-Ul Hassan, op.cit., 23.

⁵⁰⁰ Edgar Thurston, op.cit., 222.

⁵⁰¹ *ibid*: 224.

⁵⁰² K. Ilaiah, 'The Lambadis: Their Identity', *Man in India*, 75(1) 1975: 97-100.

worship female deities on various occasions like Tulja Bhavani, Kankali Bhavani, Maremma Bhavani, Hingla Bhavani etc. however, in the last couple of decades there has been a sudden change in the spiritual realm, and all the traditional goddesses are being replaced with patriarchal Hindu male gods.⁵⁰³ The impact is felt more in the marriage practices. In Lambada traditional marriage, bride price was/is in practice, the bride's parents do not pay dowry. Rather, it is the bridegroom's parents who pay bride price, it is called *Karar*. The wedding expenses are also shared more or less equally.⁵⁰⁴ Thurston's informs us in his volume that the existence of bride price, of Rupees 35 and four bullocks. Even Hassan recorded the same thing in his volume that the bride price system varies according to the means of the bridegroom. However, it is no case, less than Rupees 121/- Half the amount is paid at the betrothal and the remaining half is paid when the bridegroom comes to the bride's house for the marriage.⁵⁰⁵ This well appreciated practice has undergone a tremendous change. Over a period it became impossible to protect their ethnic identity amidst the in-egalitarian society that had been surrounding it, because of their living proximity with the caste ridden Hindu mainstream society. Even the changing pro-market ideology of Indian state from 'economic nationalism' to 'economic globalisation' through LPG (Liberalisation, Privatisation and globalisation) is affecting them in adverse terms (there is a need for in-depth research impact of LPG on this community). Since 1990s, these socio-economic reforms have had a great impact on their mode of thinking. In the past the adivasis' mode of thinking about the forest, universe, their social and cultural practices and work culture, which transforms their universe into a living space, was backed by egalitarian values and practices. The Lambada community

⁵⁰³ Gita Ramaswamy & Bhangya Bhukya, *The Lambadas: A Community Besieged-A Study on the Relinquishment of Lambada girl babies in South Telangana*, UNICEF and Dept of Women Development & Child Welfare, Government of AP, (Hyderabad, 2001), **32**.

⁵⁰⁴ Gita Ramaswamy and Bhangya Bhukya, 'Lambadas: Changing Cultural Patters', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37 (16) 2002: 1497-98.

⁵⁰⁵ Syed Siraj-Ul-Hassan, *op. cit.*, 22.

has come out of this mode of thinking and had been imitating caste-Hindu practices and ethos in their day-to-day life. As the Lambadas are close to villages, they come under the influence of village society, which is caste-stratified, within a short time. All village practices have begun having corresponding resonances in the 'thanda' society.⁵⁰⁶ Consequently, gradually the practice of bride price is replacing with the dowry. Especially since 1990s, they have given up their traditional marriage systems.



Illustration-4: A Traditional Lambada Marriage (Bidding Farewell to Bride) as depicted in D.B. Naik (2000): “*The Art and Literature of Banjara Lambanis*”, p. 19

However, the costs of the new practices have thrown them into a crisis. In the words of Ramaswamy and Bhukya, it has come from mainstream Hindu society as a part of the package deal of modernity. In a money economy, dowry is an important source of capital, and the only models the Lambadas had were the upper castes in the villages. Excessive dowry is a symptom of the marginalisation of the Lambadas, and particularly of the Lambada women. As Lambada, tandas are located in plain areas and near

⁵⁰⁶ Gita Ramaswamy and Bhangya Bhukya, 'Lambadas: Changing Cultural Patters', op. cit., 1497.

villages; they could not protect their cultural values from the onslaught of Hinduism. Rambal, an activist of *Lambada Hakula Porata Samiti* (Organisation fighting for the rights of the Lambadas) from Mahabubnagar district, says that forms of marriage in the community has changed in 10-15 years now. By referring his own family experience he says ‘my elder brother had to take a pair of bullocks and all kinds of materials and provisions for his half share in the wedding for his bride. The next brother had a Hindu marriage and took dowry’.⁵⁰⁷ Chandru from Shivampet mandal of Medak district, who had given way one of his girl children a couple of years ago, has five daughters now, of which the elder three are married now. For their marriages, he had to pay dowry beyond his capacity. He says that ‘girls cost the earth to get married’.⁵⁰⁸



Illustration-5: the Hinduisation of Lambada Marriage and the presence of Brahmin Priest- both bride and groom are first generation well educated persons (in the photo groom’s mother could be seen in traditional Lambada attire).

Source: *A photograph collected by the Chirmal Kucha Tanda, Hanwada Mandal Mahabubnagar District, Telangana, year 2014*

⁵⁰⁷ Gita Ramaswamy and Bhangya Bhukya, *The Lambadas: A Community Besieged-A Study on the Relinquishment of Lambada girl babies in South Telangana*, op.cit., 24.

⁵⁰⁸ *ibid*: 24

The entry of dowry among the Lambadas has turned the daughter who was earlier considered as an asset now as liability. Lambada girl child trafficking in south Telangana conclusively caused by the imbalance between material and cultural changes has led to a moral crisis in Lambada society.⁵⁰⁹ The newly educated first-generation (hence employable) Lambada grooms heralded the dowry system. Instead of education becoming a liberative force to this community from blind faiths and other social problems, has become a means of Hinduisation and Sanskritisation, hence demanding more dowries. The families those who have one or more daughters, the burden are heavy. Under the grip of Sanskritisation, Lambada community is becoming an unconscious victim. M.N. Srinivas defined 'sanskritisation as the process by which a 'low' caste or tribe or other group takes over the custom, ritual, beliefs, ideology and style of life of a high and, in particular, a 'twice-born' (*Dwijia*) caste'.⁵¹⁰ This is coupled with this the adoption of Hindu customs, a crisis has been crept into the Lambada society, needless to say that, the weakest always is the victim. Bhukya informs us the worst type of burden that has been manufactured through these changes i.e. selling of girl child by Lambada women in Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh. The Lambada society, coupled with poverty and dowry sees Lambada girl child as burdensome; consequently, Lambadas have instances of selling their girl children just for a sari valued at Rs 200.⁵¹¹ While giving an example of such incident Bhukya narrates the story of a Lambadi woman Mudavath Champli. They say:

Champli of Bodagutta thanda of Balanagar (Mahabubnagar district) is a 30-year old woman who was married when she was 15 years old). She was paid Rs. 116 and offered two

⁵⁰⁹ Gita Ramaswamy and Bhangya Bhukya, 'Lambadas: Changing Cultural Patters', op. cit., 1497.

⁵¹⁰ In B. K. Nangla, Indian Sociological Thought (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2008), 142.

⁵¹¹ Gita Ramaswamy and Bhangya Bhukya, 'Lambadas: Changing Cultural Patters', op. cit., 1497.

bullocks as bride price at her marriage. Today bridegrooms are demanding a dowry of Rs 50,000-60,000 for her daughter. Fearing the future, Champli gave up her one-month old sixth girl child for Rs 200.⁵¹²

The issue of dowry has been central to the problem of relinquishment of the girl child in the perception of the Lambadas themselves. In their survey, Bhukya and Ramaswamy found that, out of 9,223 total surveyed women, 2,501 women said dowry was the main reason for relinquishment of girl children.⁵¹³ The National Human Rights Commission took *suo motu* cognisance of a news item published in the Hindu of 22 January 2000, which highlighted the suffering of women of the Lambada Tribe in Telangana Region. It was reported that, in a number of instances, they were being compelled by their circumstances either to sell or to kill their infant girls soon after birth. Unfortunately, in most of such cases, poverty and illiteracy were the main cause for the giving-up of the child.⁵¹⁴ Mudavath Chander of Bodagutta Tanda of Balnagar mandal has three acres of land and a family of seven daughters. When his wife gave birth to the eighth daughter, he gave her away to Sanjeeva Rao, Action for Social Development, for a paltry sum of Rs. 100. The main reason for giving up the baby, he points out, are poverty and dowry.⁵¹⁵ The Lambada women are even changing their dressing practises. They have started wearing sari, which is worn by the Mainstream Hindu women. Even the change in dress pattern from traditional Lambada dress to sari wearing by women hints the practice of dowry. In Ramaswamy and Bhukya's opinion, the

⁵¹² ibid: 1497-98

⁵¹³ ibid: 1497

⁵¹⁴ Government of India, National Human Rights Commission Annual Report 2001-2002, 'Sale of Female Children of Lambada Tribals in Telangana Region, Andhra Pradesh' in National Human Rights Commission, (New Delhi, 2002) pp.73-74, Retrieved from <http://nhrc.nic.in/documents/AR01-02ENG.pdf> (Acceded on 10 December 2014).

⁵¹⁵ Gita Ramaswamy & Bhangya Bhukya, The Lambadas: A Community Besieged-A Study on the Relinquishment of Lambada girl babies in South Telangana, op.cit., 31.

change in dress pattern also hints that dowry is oldest among sari-wearing families. They narrated the story of Salibai of Osmankunta thanda of Nalgonda district, who informed them about the entry of dowry among Lambada society without hesitation, answers ‘*sado bandhin katnam ayoo* (dowry has come with the sari).⁵¹⁶ It seems that the community is victim of double tragedy. In the colonial times, they were stigmatised with the tag of notified tribe and in the post-colonial state, the tragedy emanates from their inability to interact with the in-egalitarian caste/class stratified mainstream society. It is amply clear that dowry is not part of Lambada culture. It has entered in the community through the interaction with the mainstream Hindu society; it is the social interaction of Lambadas with the mainstream society, which has led to the social process of acculturation. In Ramaswamy and Bhukya’s opinion ‘In a money economy, dowry is an important source of capital, and the only model the Lambadas had were the upper-castes in the villages. Excessive dowry is a symptom of the marginalization of the Lambadas, particularly Lambada women’.⁵¹⁷ Further, they opined that, the very sudden entry of dowry into the lives of the Lambadas has been, in historical terms, nothing short of catastrophe.⁵¹⁸

Concluding Remarks

The nomadic Lambadas’ life has been conditioned and limited by various factors: of physical environment, technology, economy, their own turbulent history, their subjugation by colonial rule. Present-day Lambada community seems to be under a deep cultural crisis, emanating from leaving away their old egalitarian practices and adopting the in-egalitarian Hindu culture. It is in a sense changing the gender relations and making it more patriarchal. It is

⁵¹⁶ Gita Ramaswamy and Bhangya Bhukya, ‘Lambadas: Changing Cultural Patters’, op. cit., 1498.

⁵¹⁷ Gita Ramaswamy & Bhangya Bhukya, *The Lambadas: A Community Besieged-A Study on the Relinquishment of Lambada girl babies in South Telangana*, **op.cit.**, **26**.

⁵¹⁸ Gita Ramaswamy and Bhangya Bhukya, ‘Lambadas: Changing Cultural Patters’, op. cit., 1498.

coupled with poverty, adversely affecting the gender relations within the community. It seems that the community is victim of double tragedy. In the colonial times, they were stigmatised with the tag of notified tribe and in the post-colonial state, the tragedy emanates from their inability to interact with the in-egalitarian caste/class stratified mainstream society. There is a need for reforms among the educated especially among the educated people of the community who are readymade victims of acculturation and Hinduisation, because the poor illiterate Lambadas are just imitating the Hindu practices adopted by the more advanced among them. It is a point of fact that there a necessity to insulate the community from the onslaught of Hinduisation. This community needs a serious non-hinduised modernisation or modernisation which by-passes sanscritisation. It could retain certain egalitarian old cultural practices with respect to non-Hindu cultural practices. What is more, the community is in need of serious reform from within. They could as well affiliate themselves with larger egalitarian cultures like Buddhism. There is an ample scope for the scholars to conduct extensive study on this under-researched community.

Social change in India and particularly among the Lambadas has been channelized through sanscritization process. It is quite opposite to the western modernity, which has done away with larger social identities and created society based on individualism. Marginalised communities in India are neither able to preserve some of their age-old egalitarian practice like 'bride price' nor able to completely moving towards western modernity. These marginalised communities are struck in between with Hindu cultural practices and unable to move beyond it. Liberation from such regressive religious practices would mean that the community is liberating itself from the marginalised social position.