www.ijarp.com ISSN 2456-9992 Page: 01-11

International Journal Advanced Research Publications

Review Article

Volume: 02
Issue: 09

SEVA, SAVIOUR AND STATE: REASSESSING THE HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE BANJARA COMMUNITY TO NATION BUILDING IN INDIA

***Prof. Bhavani Eslavath**

Dept. of English, Acharya Nagarjuna University.

Article Received: 16 August 2026, Article Revised: 06 September 2026, Published on: 26 September 2026

***Corresponding Author: Prof. Bhavani Eslavath**

Dept. of English, Acharya Nagarjuna University.

Doi: https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.1112

ABSTRACT

The history of India is not solely the history of kingdoms, empires, and political institutions; it is also the history of communities whose contributions sustained economic exchange, social integration, and cultural continuity across vast geographical regions. Among such communities, the Banjaras occupy a unique and significant position. Known by various names such as Lambadi, Gor, Sugali, and Vanjari in different parts of the country, the Banjaras developed a distinctive identity rooted in mobility, trade, transport, and community organization. For several centuries, they served as the principal carriers of goods across the Indian subcontinent and played an indispensable role in linking distant regions through commercial networks. Their contribution extended beyond economic activities and encompassed military logistics, environmental stewardship, cultural preservation, and social reform. This paper examines the historical evolution and contemporary relevance of the Banjara community through the conceptual framework of "Seva, Saviour and State." The concept of Seva highlights their contribution to economic development and public welfare through transportation and distribution networks. The notion of Saviour reflects their role in sustaining armies, protecting livelihoods, preserving indigenous knowledge systems, and promoting social reform. The dimension of State explores the community's interaction with political authority, particularly during colonial rule and in post-independence India. Drawing upon historical accounts, anthropological perspectives, and community traditions, the study argues that the Banjara experience offers important insights into nation-building, social resilience, and inclusive development. Recognizing their contribution is essential for

constructing a more comprehensive understanding of Indian history and contemporary social transformation.

KEYWORDS: Banjara, Lambadi, Nomadic Communities, Nation Building, Indigenous Knowledge, Sevalal Maharaj, Social History, Tribal Studies

INTRODUCTION

The social and cultural diversity of India has produced a rich mosaic of communities that have contributed to the making of the nation in different ways. While political history often emphasizes rulers, wars, and state institutions, many communities that facilitated economic exchange, social cohesion, and cultural continuity remain underrepresented in mainstream narratives. The Banjara community represents one such example. Historically recognized for their mobility and entrepreneurial skills, Banjaras emerged as one of the most influential transport and trading communities in pre-modern India. Their caravans traversed forests, deserts, plateaus, and river valleys, carrying essential commodities and linking regional economies long before the establishment of modern transportation systems.

The significance of the Banjaras lies not merely in their occupational specialization but in their capacity to create networks of connectivity across diverse regions and cultures. Their mobility enabled the circulation of goods, ideas, languages, and customs, thereby contributing to processes of integration that preceded modern forms of nationhood. Their settlements, known as Tandas, developed sophisticated systems of governance, resource management, and social regulation that ensured collective welfare and security. These institutions demonstrate the existence of complex social organization among communities often stereotyped as marginal or peripheral.

The history of the Banjaras also reveals the challenges faced by mobile communities in the context of colonial rule and modern state formation. Colonial policies sought to regulate and restrict mobility, culminating in the stigmatization of several nomadic groups through legislation such as the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. The consequences of these policies continued to shape the socio-economic conditions of the community long after independence. At the same time, the community has demonstrated remarkable resilience through cultural preservation, educational advancement, and political participation.

This paper seeks to examine the multidimensional contributions of the Banjara community by focusing on three interrelated themes: service to society, protection and preservation, and engagement with state structures. Through this framework, the paper argues that the Banjaras

should be viewed not as peripheral actors but as active contributors to India's historical development and contemporary progress.

Historical Origins and Social Organization of the Banjaras

The origins of the Banjara community have attracted considerable scholarly attention. Historical traditions frequently associate the community with Rajput lineages of northwestern India, particularly Rajasthan. Oral narratives preserved within the community describe migration, adaptation, and transformation in response to changing political and economic circumstances. Whether viewed through the lens of genealogy, occupation, or migration, the emergence of the Banjaras illustrates the dynamic nature of social identities in the Indian subcontinent.

A defining feature of Banjara society was the Tanda, a mobile settlement that functioned as a self-governing social unit. The Tanda was not merely a temporary encampment but a structured community possessing leadership systems, mechanisms of dispute resolution, and norms governing economic and social conduct. Leadership positions such as the Nayaka and Karbhari provided administrative direction and ensured adherence to customary regulations. These institutions enabled the community to maintain order while operating across extensive geographical territories.

The social organization of the Banjaras demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of collective responsibility and community welfare. Decision-making processes emphasized consultation and consensus, while customary laws regulated relations within and between Tandas. Such systems reveal that mobility did not imply social disorganization; rather, it required highly developed forms of coordination and cooperation.

Banjaras and the Development of Long-Distance Trade Networks

One of the most significant contributions of the Banjara community was their role in the development of long-distance trade and transportation networks. Prior to the construction of railways, the movement of goods across India depended heavily upon human and animal-based transportation systems. In this context, the Banjaras emerged as indispensable intermediaries connecting production centers, marketplaces, and consumers across vast distances.

The transportation of grain, salt, textiles, metals, and other commodities required extensive logistical expertise. Banjara caravans developed routes that crossed challenging terrains and adapted to changing environmental and political conditions. Their knowledge of roads, water

sources, seasonal variations, and local markets enabled them to sustain commercial activity across regions that otherwise remained isolated from one another.

The economic significance of these activities extended beyond commerce. By facilitating the movement of goods, the Banjaras contributed to regional specialization, market integration, and economic stability. Their services reduced transaction costs, increased access to essential commodities, and promoted interaction among diverse populations. In many respects, they functioned as the logistical backbone of pre-modern India, creating networks that anticipated later developments in transportation and communication infrastructure.

Food Security, Famine Relief and Public Welfare

The importance of transportation becomes particularly evident during periods of scarcity and crisis. Historical accounts indicate that Banjara caravans frequently played a crucial role in ensuring the availability of food supplies during droughts and famines. Their ability to transport grain into regions experiencing shortages helped mitigate suffering and maintain economic stability.

The significance of this contribution can be understood in the context of pre-modern governance, where centralized mechanisms for food distribution were limited. Communities often depended upon commercial networks to access essential resources. The Banjaras therefore served not only as traders but also as providers of public welfare through their capacity to connect surplus regions with areas facing scarcity.

Their role in food security illustrates the broader relationship between mobility and resilience. By maintaining circulation across diverse regions, the Banjaras reduced vulnerability to localized crises and contributed to the survival of communities during periods of environmental stress. This dimension of their history highlights the importance of indigenous logistical systems in supporting social welfare and economic sustainability.

Military Logistics and the Strategic Importance of the Banjaras

The contribution of the Banjara community to military logistics constitutes one of the most significant yet underexplored aspects of Indian history. Before the advent of modern transport systems, the movement and sustenance of armies depended heavily on reliable supply chains. Military campaigns often failed not because of battlefield defeats but because of disruptions in the transportation of food, fodder, weapons, and other essential resources. In this context, the Banjaras emerged as indispensable partners of various ruling powers across the Indian subcontinent.

Historical records indicate that Banjara caravans supplied grain and provisions to the armies of the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughal Empire, the Deccan Sultanates, and the Marathas. Their extensive experience in navigating difficult terrains enabled them to transport large quantities of goods across regions affected by conflict and political instability. Thousands of bullocks organized into caravans carried food supplies that sustained soldiers during prolonged military campaigns. The efficiency and reliability of these networks contributed significantly to the operational capacity of pre-modern armies.

The strategic value of the Banjaras was recognized by several rulers. Historical narratives describe instances where military commanders granted special privileges and protections to Banjara groups in exchange for logistical support. Such arrangements demonstrate that the community occupied a position of considerable importance within broader political and military structures. Their role challenges conventional distinctions between civilian and military contributions to state formation and highlights the significance of logistical expertise in historical processes of governance and expansion.

Beyond material support, the mobility of the Banjaras facilitated the transmission of information across regions. Their interactions with diverse communities enabled them to function as informal channels of communication, contributing to the circulation of knowledge and intelligence. Through these activities, the Banjaras became active participants in the political and economic dynamics that shaped the Indian subcontinent.

Indigenous Environmental Knowledge and Sustainable Living

The historical mobility of the Banjaras required an intimate understanding of environmental conditions. Their livelihoods depended upon the ability to navigate varied landscapes while ensuring the well-being of people and animals under their care. Consequently, the community developed extensive knowledge regarding geography, ecology, climate, water management, and natural resources.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Banjara environmental knowledge was their ability to identify water sources across arid and semi-arid regions. This expertise was essential for sustaining caravans during long journeys and contributed to the establishment of temporary and permanent settlements. Oral traditions preserved within the community contain detailed information regarding seasonal variations, vegetation patterns, and ecological indicators that guided movement and resource utilization.

The environmental practices of the Banjaras also reflected principles of sustainability. Mobility encouraged a balanced relationship with natural resources because overexploitation

could threaten future survival. Grazing patterns, water usage, and settlement decisions were often informed by collective norms designed to maintain ecological equilibrium. Such practices demonstrate that indigenous communities developed sophisticated systems of environmental management long before the emergence of modern sustainability discourses.

In contemporary discussions on climate resilience and sustainable development, indigenous knowledge systems are increasingly recognized as valuable resources. The experiences of the Banjaras illustrate how traditional ecological knowledge can contribute to contemporary efforts aimed at environmental conservation and adaptation. Documenting and preserving this knowledge is therefore important not only for cultural reasons but also for addressing present and future environmental challenges.

Sant Sevalal Maharaj and the Philosophy of Social Reform

Among the most influential figures in Banjara history is Sant Sevalal Maharaj, whose teachings continue to shape the cultural and spiritual identity of the community. Revered as a saint, reformer, and social leader, Sevalal Maharaj occupies a central place in Banjara collective memory. His life and teachings represent an important dimension of the community's contribution to social and moral development.

Sant Sevalal Maharaj emphasized values such as truth, compassion, service, discipline, and community welfare. His teachings encouraged ethical conduct and promoted social harmony within and beyond the community. He advocated the rejection of practices that undermined social well-being and emphasized the importance of collective responsibility. Through his spiritual leadership, he provided a framework for addressing social challenges while preserving cultural identity.

The significance of Sevalal Maharaj extends beyond religious devotion. His teachings can be interpreted as a form of indigenous social philosophy that sought to balance tradition and reform. By promoting moral values and community solidarity, he contributed to the strengthening of social institutions and cultural resilience. Annual celebrations and commemorative events associated with Sevalal Maharaj continue to serve as important occasions for cultural preservation and collective identity formation.

The enduring influence of Sevalal Maharaj highlights the role of spiritual leadership in processes of social transformation. His legacy demonstrates how cultural and religious traditions can function as sources of empowerment and community development.

Colonial Rule and the Marginalization of the Banjaras

The colonial period marked a profound transformation in the socio-economic conditions of the Banjara community. The introduction of railways, changes in commercial systems, and new forms of administrative control altered traditional patterns of mobility and economic activity. Communities that had previously occupied important positions within transportation networks experienced increasing marginalization.

One of the most damaging developments was the enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. Under this legislation, numerous nomadic and semi-nomadic communities were officially categorized as "criminal tribes." The Act subjected entire communities to surveillance, registration, restrictions on movement, and social stigmatization. The Banjaras were among the groups affected by these policies in several regions.

The implications of this legislation extended far beyond administrative regulation. The labeling of communities as inherently criminal contributed to widespread discrimination and exclusion. Traditional livelihoods became increasingly difficult to sustain, while access to economic opportunities and social services remained limited. The stigma associated with colonial classifications continued to affect community perceptions long after the formal repeal of the Act.

Scholars have argued that colonial policies reflected broader attempts to impose sedentary models of governance and social order upon mobile populations. Communities whose mobility had previously been valued for economic and strategic reasons were increasingly viewed as administrative challenges. The experience of the Banjaras therefore illustrates the complex relationship between state power, mobility, and social identity.

Constitutional Recognition and Democratic Participation

The attainment of Indian independence created new opportunities for addressing historical inequalities and promoting social justice. Constitutional provisions aimed at protecting marginalized communities provided an important framework for the advancement of groups affected by colonial discrimination. In different states, sections of the Banjara community received recognition under Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste, or Other Backward Class categories depending upon regional circumstances.

Access to affirmative action policies in education, employment, and political representation contributed to gradual socio-economic mobility. Increasing numbers of Banjara students entered schools, colleges, universities, and professional institutions. Educational attainment

facilitated participation in government services, business, academia, and civil society organizations.

Political participation has also expanded significantly. Members of the community have served as elected representatives, local leaders, activists, and administrators. Their involvement in democratic institutions demonstrates the capacity of historically marginalized communities to contribute meaningfully to governance and public life.

Despite these achievements, disparities remain. Uneven access to educational resources, healthcare, infrastructure, and employment opportunities continues to affect many Banjara settlements. Addressing these challenges requires sustained policy interventions and community participation.

Cultural Contributions and Preservation of Heritage

The cultural heritage of the Banjaras constitutes one of the richest dimensions of their contribution to Indian society. Banjara culture is characterized by distinctive forms of language, music, dance, embroidery, oral literature, and ritual practice. These traditions represent valuable expressions of India's cultural diversity and historical continuity.

Banjara embroidery is internationally recognized for its intricate designs, vibrant colors, and artistic sophistication. The production of embroidered garments and decorative items reflects generations of accumulated knowledge and creativity. Beyond aesthetic value, these practices contribute to economic livelihoods and cultural identity.

Music and dance occupy a central place in community life. Traditional performances accompany festivals, ceremonies, and social gatherings, fostering collective participation and intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. Oral narratives preserve historical memories, ethical values, and community experiences that might otherwise be lost.

The preservation of cultural heritage is particularly important in the context of globalization and rapid social change. Efforts to document, promote, and revitalize Banjara traditions contribute not only to community empowerment but also to broader initiatives aimed at safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

Contemporary Challenges and Emerging Opportunities

Although significant progress has been achieved, the Banjara community continues to face numerous challenges. Educational attainment remains uneven, particularly in remote settlements where infrastructure and institutional support are limited. Economic vulnerability

persists among households dependent upon low-income occupations and informal employment.

Urbanization has generated both opportunities and challenges. Migration to urban areas can improve access to education and employment, but it may also weaken traditional support networks and cultural practices. Balancing integration with cultural preservation remains an important concern for many community members.

Digital technologies, however, have created new possibilities for social and economic advancement. Access to online education, digital entrepreneurship, cultural documentation, and social networking platforms enables greater participation in contemporary economic and cultural processes. Community organizations increasingly utilize digital tools to promote awareness, advocacy, and cultural preservation.

Women's empowerment represents another area of growing significance. Educational opportunities, self-help groups, entrepreneurship initiatives, and leadership programs have expanded the role of women in community development. Supporting gender equality remains essential for achieving inclusive progress.

Vision for 2047: The Banjara Community and the Future of Nation Building

As India approaches the centenary of independence in 2047, the experiences and contributions of indigenous and marginalized communities assume increasing importance within national development discourse. The Banjara community possesses significant potential to contribute to the realization of inclusive and sustainable development goals.

Future policy initiatives should prioritize quality education, skill development, digital inclusion, healthcare access, and infrastructure improvement in Banjara settlements. Equally important is the preservation of cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge systems. Integrating traditional knowledge with contemporary development strategies can enhance environmental sustainability and community resilience.

Research institutions, universities, and policy makers should undertake systematic documentation of Banjara history, language, folklore, and socio-economic experiences. Such efforts would contribute to a more inclusive understanding of Indian history while supporting evidence-based policy formulation.

The vision for 2047 should recognize the Banjaras not merely as beneficiaries of development but as active participants in shaping India's future. Their historical experiences of mobility, adaptation, entrepreneurship, and community organization offer valuable lessons for addressing contemporary challenges.

CONCLUSION

The history of the Banjara community demonstrates that nation building is not solely the product of political institutions and state actors. It is also the result of the contributions made by communities that facilitated economic exchange, preserved cultural traditions, sustained social welfare, and adapted to changing historical circumstances. Through their involvement in trade, transportation, military logistics, environmental stewardship, social reform, and cultural preservation, the Banjaras have played a significant role in the development of India.

The framework of "Seva, Saviour and State" provides a useful lens through which to understand these contributions. Their service to society through transportation and commerce supported economic integration and food security. Their role as protectors of livelihoods, knowledge systems, and cultural traditions reflects their importance as agents of resilience and continuity. Their interactions with state structures reveal both historical challenges and contemporary opportunities for inclusion and participation.

Recognizing the contributions of the Banjaras is essential for constructing a more comprehensive and inclusive narrative of Indian history. Such recognition not only corrects historical omissions but also affirms the importance of diversity, resilience, and community participation in the ongoing project of nation-building.

WORKS CITED

1. Bayly, C. A. *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870*. Cambridge UP, 1983.
2. Bhukya, Bhangya. *Subjugated Nomads: The Lambadas under the Rule of the Nizams*. Orient BlackSwan, 2010.
3. ---. "Enclosing Land, Enclosing Adivasis: Colonial Agriculture and Adivasis in Central India, 1853–1948." *Social Change*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2013, pp. 119–139.
4. Briggs, John. "Account of the Origin, History and Manners of the Men Called Bunjaras." *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay*, vol. 1, 1819, pp. 183–194.
5. Dirks, Nicholas B. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton UP, 2001.
6. Dyer, Caroline. *The Education of Nomadic Peoples: Current Issues, Future Prospects*. Berghahn Books, 2006.
7. Enthoven, R. E., editor. *The Tribes and Castes of Bombay*. Vol. 2, Government Central Press, 1920.
8. Ghurye, G. S. *The Scheduled Tribes*. Popular Prakashan, 1963.

9. Guha, Ramachandra. *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals and India*. Oxford UP, 1999.
10. Habib, Irfan. *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556–1707*. 3rd ed., Oxford UP, 2013.
11. Hardiman, David. *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India*. Oxford UP, 1987.
12. Hasan, Farhat. *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572–1730*. Cambridge UP, 2004.
13. Misra, P. K. *Tribal Development in India*. Vikas Publishing House, 1987.
14. Risley, Herbert Hope. *The People of India*. Thacker, Spink and Co., 1908.
15. Russell, R. V., and Hira Lal. *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*. Vol. 2, Macmillan, 1916.
16. Shah, Ghanshyam. *Social Movements in India: A Review of Literature*. Sage Publications, 2004.