

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SUGALI TRIBE

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Andhra Pradesh in south India has the highest tribal concentration with a population of 50.24 lakh (2001 census) constituting about 6.59 per cent of total population as against the national average of 8.2 per cent and there are 35 notified Tribes in the state. The present paper attempts to discuss the historical background of the Sugali tribe inhabiting throughout Andhra Pradesh. Their population according to 2001 census is 20, 77,947 in the state. The Sugalis live in exclusive settlements of their own called 'Thandas', usually away from the main village, tenaciously maintaining their cultural and ethnic identity. The culture and dialect of the Sugalis indicate that they had come from Northern-India. According to Deogaokar & Deogaokar, Sugali's language called as Banjari or Labhani belongs to Austro-Asiatic group of languages and sounds nearer to Rasthani languages (Deogaonkar et al. 1992, 57). Their folklore depicts them to be the descendents of the Rajputs.

Thurston treats Lambada as synonym of Brinjari or Banjari, Bhoipuri, Sugali or Sukali (Edgar 1909, 209-10). According to 1911 Census of India, Lamanis or Vanjari, Lambhanas and Sukalirs, Hanjaras, Banjaris, Brinjaris, Lamans, Lambadis, Labhans are one and the same. In Telangana, the neighbouring castes generally call them as Banjara and in Andhra and Rayalaseema regions they are called as "Sugalis". Ranjith Naik describes that the word 'Banjara' is said to be derived from the Sanskrit word 'vanachara' or wanderers of jungle and the Sugali is derived from the word 'Sug-Wala' means a 'good cowherd', and who produces good breed bulls (Ranjit 1968, 17-25).

Historically, the Sugalis had been carriers of supplies and drivers of pack-bullocks. There are a number of historical evidences which prove that the Sugali tribe is one of the aboriginal and primitive tribes of Indian sub-continent. The 'Lamani Margas' dating back to 6th century B.C., proves that this tribe lived even before the period of Buddha (Ranjit 1968, 17-25). So, the Sugali seems to be the most ancient, since their migrations go as far back as the 6th century B.C., their extensive migrations took them sometimes outside the frontiers of Rajasthan. These migrations if they are judged by the inscriptions found in Khyber and Bolan passes, had taken place between 600 B.C. and 350 B.C (Ranjit 1968, 17-25). Perhaps, the Sugalis stopped their migrations towards West during decline of Buddhism around 12th Century A.D., before Moghul invasion (Kosambi 1975, 254). This period is noted with a great isolation agglomeration. Thus, the carvaneers found great possibilities of selling goods. They exchanged luxury articles for some

time and that was given up to the benefit of items of food stuffs of duty necessities exchanged between towns and villages in north-west India.

According to Colonel Tod, most of the nomadic communities including the Sugali (Banjara) believe that they are descended from Rajput ancestry. He says that these are in all thirty six nomadic and semi-nomadic groups. Incidentally the number 36 coincides with Rajput dynasties which are referred to as 'Royal races, and mentioned in Hindu scriptures. The nomadic communities which are similar to the Sugali are Kanjar Bhat, the Habura, the Nat, the Sansi, the Beniya, the Moghul, the Bauria, the Dosadhas, and the Gudulia Lohar etc. All these groups state that during the period of All-Ud-din Khilji and the defeat of Maharana Pratap Singh of Chittoor (1568-69) at the hands of Moghul Emperor Akbar they retreated to forests and took an oath to return to their mother country only when Mewar was freed from the alien domination. Since then these tribal groups had developed a dislike for Muslims (Tod 1914, 1ff).

There is no unanimity among the historians about the exact location or exact place from where this tribe spread to other parts of the country. Mythological and historical accounts suggest that their homeland was somewhere in north-western India, and more likely in the Marwar region of Rajasthan, from where they spread in the historical past, in all directions to Kashmir in the north, Deccan and beyond in the South, and in the East to Eastern Uttar Pradesh (Nanujundaiah and Iyer 1928, 128-136). It appears to be a mixed ethnic group and owes its origin and organization to the wars in the Southern India of the Delhi emperors, both Afghan and Moghul. When the Sugalis carried the commissariat of the imperial armies, they helped the imperial armies fighting in an exhausted country far from their supply base, by conducting a fearless and reliable transport service. In view of their occupation the Sugali may be referred to as non-pastoral nomads or service nomads (Gunda 1981, 287-300).

Based on the past identity of the Sugalis, and their wandering habits, they were classified as the Gypsies of India. They are supposed to be descendants of the original Aryan Gypsies of North West India, whose descendants are also to be found in various parts of central and southern Europe and the America (Iyer 1962, vii-ix). The word Gypsy used in this connection is employed in its purely conventional sense of 'Vagrant'. It is only the recent research that has established the genetic connection between the Sugali and Gypsy and the European Gypsy and the Sugali have been identified as one people before dispersion. The Sugali culture and language indicate that they hail from North India. Their folklore depicts them to be the descendants of Rajput stock (Sarma 1983, 4). There are many similarities between the Sugalis and Rajputs. Both have veneration and devotion for the Sun God.

The Sugalis like Rajputs build their houses with the main doors facing the East. While they dine or assemble in group they always sit in a circle resembling their ancestors, Rajputs. Rama Sarma says that the Sugalis synchronize with the Rajputs not only in their legends, even in the clans, *gotras* and the sub-groups (*Padas*). This similarity aligns the Sugalis with Kshatriyas who form one of the major castes of Hindu society (Sarma 1983, 4). The nomadic Sugali moved not only through the greater Punjab, but also transverse far beyond Sindh, up to Beluchistan (Sarma 1983, 86). That is how the traces of Punjabi and Sindhi find in their nomadic language. Then it can be said that Punjab and Rajasthan, should have also been the original home of not only the Sugalis but also of the Gypsies.

The Sugalis of Deccan often mentioned by Mohammedan and British historians have a long history of migrations. What distinguishes the migration of the Sugalis from the migration of other tribal groups is the fact that they never shifter their habitat as aimless wanderers rooted out of their native habitat by the invasions of a superior people or by the exhaustion of natural sources or livelihood in the original homeland.

Their lucrative business transactions as carriers of merchandise on the back of pack-bullocks to the invading Mohammedan and British armies, brought them to the South and helped their scattering throughout the length and breadth of Deccan Plateau. There is no doubt of their having come down to Southern India within the historical times. The turbulent medieval period provided them ample opportunities to utilize their ingrained business talent to profit by working as a sort of unofficial commissariat to the warring armies.

The theory of Sugali migration from Rajputana to Deccan has been shrouded in controversy as there is difference of opinion between various historians. But the Sugalis who are in Deccan claim that they came from North India, particularly from five distinct regions of Rajasthan: 1. Jobhpur, 2. Jaisalmer. 3. Shekhavati near Jaipur, 4. Haranti of Kota Bundi, and 5. Marward near Ajmeer (Sarma 1983, 4).

The earliest recorded evidence regarding this nomadic trading community is available in the personal narration of Mohd. Ferishta Bilgram's Tarikh-e-Khan Jahan Lodi-e-Niamutullah about 1612 A.D. Ferishta was in the court of Bijapur and the reference is to the events of 1417 and of 1504 relating to the Mohammadan monarchs. It is mentioned in that account that in 1417 a large convoy of Sugali bullocks was seized by the brother of Feroz Shah Bahmani when the former rebelled and made an attempt on the throne of Gulbarga, then the capital of Deccan (Nanjundaiah and Iyer 1928, 128-136).

Many authorities on medieval history and ethnographers of Deccan mention that the Sugali migrated to Deccan along with the conquering armies of Mohammedan rulers especially they came to South India along with the great armies of the Moghul Emperors when they invaded the South. The Sugalis with their pack-animals helped the imperial army, fighting in an exhausted country far from their base of supplies, by supplying fearless and reliable transport service. When the Sugali came to the South, they were in five groups, Rathod, Pamhar, Chowhan named after the names of Rajput clan's said to have been adopted by Mola.

As the Moghul emperors conquered Southern India and strengthened their position up to the end of the 17th C. A.D., some Sugalis remained in different parts of the Deccan and Southern India. Later in the 18th century, some Sugalis took up service under the Maratha rulers of Satara, and subsequently under the Peshwas of Poona and the Nizam of Hyderabad. They also played a significant role as carriers of luggage and provisions for the British in their Mysore Wars (1792-1799) and the wars with Marathas (1800-1818).

William Irwin gives a graphic account of the Sugalis as suppliers of rations to the warring Indian armies. He states that it was by this people that the Indian armies in the field were fed but left un-injured by either army. The grain was taken from them but invariably paid for. They encamped for safety every evening in a regular square formed of the bags of grain, of which they

constructed breast work. They and their families were in a centre and the oxen were kept outside. Guards with matchlocks and spears were placed at the corners and their dogs did duty as advanced posts. Irwin states that he himself had seen them with droves of 50,000 bullocks. They did not go beyond two miles an hour as they allowed them to graze as they proceeded on the march (Irwin n.k., n.d.).

Mr. Crook is of the opinion that the first mention of the Sugalis in Mohammedan history was made in Sikander's attack on Dholpur in the year 1504 A.D (Crook 1975, 209-10). Mr. Cumberlege another British historian states that the Sugali first came to Deccan with Asaf Khan in the campaign which closed with the annexation of Ahamed Nagar and Berar by the emperor Shahjahan about 1630 A.D. (Cumberlege 1882, n.k.) The Sugali evidently came to the Deccan with Asaf Khan, the Vazir of Shahjahan and in the year 1630 or there about. Bangi and Jhangi Naik had with them one hundred and eighty thousand (1,80,000) bullocks and Bhagawandas, the Vadtia Naik had only fifty two thousand (52,000) bullocks. Both the Sugali Naiks accompanied Asaf Khan during their raid into the Deccan against the Bijapur.

It was the object of Asaf Khan to keep these bullocks well up with his force, and so much were they prized by the Vazir that he was induced to give an order to Bhangi and Jhangi Naik's as they put forward excuses regarding the difficulty of obtaining grass and water for the fettle. The order engraved on copper plate in gold letters (Russel and Hiralal 1975, 168-69) runs as follows:

***Ranjankapani, Chappar Ka ghas,
Dinka teen Koon Maff,
Aur Jahan Asaf Janka Ghode,
Wahan Bhangi Jhangi Ka bail***

The meaning of the inscription seems to be: 'if you can find no water elsewhere, you may even take from the Ranjans (name pots) of my followers, grass you may take from the roof of their huts and if you commit three murders a day, I will even pardon this provided that where I find my cavalry, there I must find always Bhangi and Jhangi Naik's bullocks.'

Orem mentions the Sugalis as having supplied the Comte de Bussy store, cattle and grain, when besieged by the Nizam's army at Hyderabad (Thurston 1909, 210). Moore (Thurston 1909, 210-11) writing about the Banjaras or Sugalis towards the close of 18th century says that they associate chiefly together, seldom or never mixing with other tribes. They seem to have no home, no character, but that of merchants, in most in which capacity they travel great distances to whatever parts are most in want of merchandise, which is the greatest part of corn. 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, relying on their own courage for protection; for which purpose the men are all armed with swords and match locks. The women drive the cattle, and are the most robust undergoing a great deal of labour with apparent ease.

With the advent of the British rule the Sugalis gave up much of their traditional occupation of transporting goods due to introduction of mechanized transport, laying of roads and railway lines by the then Government. Hence they resorted to cutting of wood and collecting forest

produce. But this avocation could not provide enough livelihood because the forest in the country was cut down to provide wood for industry and railway lines in the country. Being poor, illiterate and lacking technical skills they degenerated and took to crimes like robbery dacoity, cattle lifting and kidnapping of children until the middle of last century. To reform them through persuasion and education was considered impossible by the British administration. Therefore in order to control their criminal activities they were brought under the purview of the criminal tribes act of 1871.

Further, despite the precarious economic position they did not like to adopt wage labour as it was against their proud spirit and tradition. Therefore the Sugali men did not stop poaching in the forest, though it had been banned. Their women took up collection of forest produce and later agricultural wage labour on the farms of neighbouring peasants, out of sheer necessity. Thus after 1880s forest act, sale of forest produce and pastoralism became their main occupations. However by 1930, the forest work had ceased to provide them enough earnings because of deforestation, strict implementation of forest protection measures and declaration of forests as reserved forests. This situation compelled the Sugali men to turn their attention towards agricultural and other types of labour in order to supplement the earning of their women. But after 1930s they ultimately settled down first as pastoralists and then as agriculturists, although agriculture had never been their occupation in their history. After independence they were listed in 1949 as one of the denotified communities and since 1977, they have been recognized as a scheduled tribe. The inclusion of a particular group in the list of scheduled tribes or scheduled castes depends upon local socio-economic conditions of a particular community hence the Sugalis are listed as scheduled castes in Karnataka, Haryana, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. They are classified as scheduled tribes in Andhra Pradesh. In Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra they do not fall under any category. The Sugali is declared as a scheduled tribe in Andhra area according to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes list Modification Order 1956 and as a Denotified Tribe in Telangana area of Andhra Pradesh. They are also found in other states like Bihar, West Bengal, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Mysore and Orissa where they are called as Banjara.

In Andhra Pradesh, the Sugalis are spread extensively both in Telangana and Rayalaseema regions. In the plains, the Sugalis live along with other communities like Yerukalas, Dommaras etc. But as an ethnic group they have retained their cultural identity. They used to reside in small huts in the hilly areas separated from the villages or habitations. These houses have thatched roofs. They usually do not like brick or tiled houses. According to a legend, one of their forefathers once built a storeyed house by destroying a thatched roof hut. But after a few days all the residents of the house died. However, their way of life got changed under the influence of modern civilization. They have given up their age-old practices and traditions and adopted new ideas. Now-a-days they have started living in tiled as well as brick houses. Generally they have their own habitations. In villages, where they live with other communities they occupy more or less exclusive living areas known as thandas. A traditional Sugali settlement called 'Thanda' comprises 30 to 70 barrel-vaulted huts, a buffalo pen and a shed for the goats.

The socio-economic life of the Sugali has undergone a major change. The economic change has been the primary, though not the only factor in bringing socio-cultural change and the economic factor has been influenced by cultural factors. Of all changes the economic change is the very significant factor in total change of the Sugali. With the advent of British and

implementation of mechanized transportation started the breakdown of their traditional occupation and they were forced to change their mode of residence from nomadism to a settled one, thereby making contacts with the non-Sugali peasant communities more frequently. This historical association explains the far-reaching effect of the socio-cultural environment on the manners, customs, practices and beliefs of Sugalis. In spite of all these interactions the Sugali have not completely lost their cultural identity. Whether as a nomadic tribe in the past, or as recently settled peasants and wage labourers, the Sugali distinguish themselves as a separate community in the settled region. The Sugalis have been preserving ethnic exclusiveness and socio-cultural identity in terms of manners, the dress and ornaments of their women, a common dialect of their own, a stronger feeling of communal solidarity and identity bordering on clannishness, though they have frequent interactions with the neighbouring Hindu peasants. The Government also should recognize the need to protect, promote and preserve the cultural identities of the tribes, instead of simply reducing to dumb uniformity in the name of bringing them to the mainstream of national life.

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