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The Unheard Story of a Banjara Warrior: With Special Reference to a Play *The Banjara Warrior* (2018)

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Abstract:

The study looks at the unheard narrative of a Banjara warrior from Shantha Naik's play *The Banjara Warrior* (2018). It was also translated into Kannada by the dramatist as *Veraalu* (2019). *Veraalu* is a Lambani term which means "courageous". The protagonist of the play is Bheema Naik, a warrior from Banjara whose name has never been mentioned in history. The play centers on the story of Bheema Naik, a caravan who provided support to Tippu Sulthan during the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War, which took place between 1798 and 1799. He turned into Tippu's obedient and trustworthy soldier. The study makes the argument that Bheema Naik's name is not well-known in the canon of historical accounts. Why are there no records of him if he existed during the colonial era? The Banjara community is also known as Lambanis, who do not have the written script. Therefore, whatever information is available, it is verbally available. Few Lambani writers have written in Kannada about Banjara culture, language, and literature. Examples of these writers are B. T. Lalita Naik, P. K. Khandoba and D. B. Naik. It was significant documentation that an effort was made to document the history of Banjara culture and tradition. Their endeavor to document the history of Banjara culture and customs is noteworthy.

Keywords: Unheard, Courageous, Loyal, History, Warrior, Culture.

“The weavers weave cloth with golden threads here and there. This adds to the beauty. Similarly, Lambanis are like the golden threads in the rich Indian heritage.”

-Smt. Indira Gandhi (Naik, D.B. 1)

One of India's most colorful tribes, the Banjaras are nomads distinguished by their vibrant clothing, multicolored jewelry, bangles, and distinctive rituals, customs, and exercises. The term 'Banjara' is derived from the original Sanskrit word 'Vanaj' or 'Banaj' which signifies 'trader'. It was once believed that the Banjaras were the traditional emissaries of supplies and cereals to the nearby army. They always had firewood, bamboos, salt, and cereals with them. They were continually moving from one location to another, which was the cause. Essentially, the term "Banjara" denotes not only a specific community but also their occupation of using bullocks to move food grains and other things.

Etymology of the word Banjara:

The term Banjara is an umbrella term, that is found all over the country. They have been described using a variety of synonyms, including Banjara, Banajara, Baladiya, Bnajari, Brajavasi, Branjari, Gavara, Gavarua or Gouria, Gavra, Gavra or Gamalia, Kangi (Kangashiya), Laban or Labana, Labana, Labhan, Labhana or Lobhana, Labhani, Ladenia (Ladania), Laman, Lamani or Lambani, Lambada, Lambadi, Phanad, Shingade-Banjari, Shirkhiband, Shirkiwala, Sugali. (Naik, D. B. 2-3)

The majority of academics believe that the Banjaras/Lambanis originated in Rajasthan and carried business in several locations. Different states have different names for banjaras. The names of the places also vary based on how they were settled. However, there is only one language that the Banjara people speak in common "Goarboli," a language that is a member of the Indo-Aryan family. It has no script. Hence, it is oral in nature, there are no any particular written records about the Banjaras. The community has migrated throughout out the country. It is script-free. Because of this, it is oral in character; no specific written records exist regarding the Banjaras. The group has dispersed across the nation. "Caravans were used to transport products throughout India. The wells are built in such a way that the heavily laden bullocks may easily descend, drink water, and climb back up, according to archaeologists excavating the Indus Valley Civilization. Laman, a word related to salt, is mentioned in the text of Bana Bhatta, written in the tenth century. Banjaras were therefore traders in salt. They also operated a larger business. Evidence has been discovered to support the theory that Amla, Bhara, and Hara were sold in ancient India. (Naik, Shantha. Preface)

Banjaras during the colonial period:

Banjaras were used as independent transporters by the Sultanate, Mughal, French, British, and Nizam troops during the colonial era. As was previously indicated, during the famines, the community contributed food grains and played a crucial role. “The colonial market economy, trade regulations and the growth of modern transport fractured their long-established caravan trade. The middle of the nineteenth century, they had compelled to depend on the livelihoods such as cattle-raising, agriculture and labor. The deployment of rules, regulations and laws based on the new colonial political rationality badly hampered their cattle-raising and agricultural practices. The state also prevented the Lambadas from leading a nomadic lifestyle and used various tactics to force them to settle down as subjects of the peasantry. However, the revenue and agricultural policies introduced by the state involved heavy exploitation and gradually reduced the Lambadas working as labourers in the dominant peasant’s fields. During the famines and the off-season, they resorted to dacoity. The State to brand them as a criminal community, and a range of methods were used to curb their dacoity.” (Bhukya, 330)

There are a few well-known Banjara independence fighters whose names are not mentioned in the majority of historical accounts. They are Bhima Naik, Reva Naik, Lakisah Banjara, Guru Govind Giri Banjara, and Mithu Bhukya. Saint Sevalal is the Banjara people's cultural icon; there were several songs, tales, and narratives about him. The Seva Bhaya (Sevalal) was the driving force behind a cultural movement that began in the 19th century. It is challenging to determine the movement's exact dates. He serves as the Banjaras' spiritual and religious leader, "preaching some new values such as vegetarianism, cleanliness, and abstinence from alcohol.” (Bhukya, 330)

“The oral narration about the Seva Bhaya reveals some fascinating facts about his movement and the period. The story claims that he was born in Gutti-Bellary and died in Pohar, and that his family provided grain to the Nizam's army during Tippu's battle. They relocated to the Maratha region with the soldiers of the Nizam after the Mysore war (1799), when the army was fighting the Marathas. 1824 saw the end of this war.” (Bhukya, 336)

However, the main occupation of Banjara was transporting goods to the armies. The honesty, bravery, and integrity of the Lambanis were well appreciated by the Moghal monarchs. They gave Lambanis the task of providing their troop encampment with food grains. Asaf Khan

had an agreement with Bhangi and Jungi, two leaders of the Lambani people, to furnish supplies for his military camps. On a copper plate, the agreement is engraved as:

“Ranjan ka Pani

Chappar ka ghas

Din ke teen khoon maf

Aur Janha Asfakhan ke Ghode

Vanha Jangi-Bhangi ke bail khade.” (Naik, D. B. 12).

The specific arrangement demonstrates the Nawab's integrity and faith in the Banjara people. The India had witnessed many downfalls of the kings and the empires during the regime of the Britishers. Nonetheless, the British were primarily responsible for the majority of the issues that the nomadic Banjara people encountered. A significant impact on the community's standard of living was experienced when the British introduced the railway system to India for the first time between 1860 and 1865. The abrupt adjustments have affected their means of subsistence. After they left the city and relocated to the forest and their separate settlement is known as ‘Tanda.’

This study examines the significant Banjara independence fighters, whose accomplishments have been missing from history and history textbooks. Nothing was recorded or documented about them, even though they were vital in giving the troops supplies and transportation to the nearby armies.

Banjara scholars and the scholars of other communities are trying to research the origin and history of Banjaras. The younger generation pursuing higher education has put a lot of effort into studying the literature and language of the Banjara people. The scholars' primary goal is to identify ways to maintain Lambani culture, customs, songs, stories, riddles, and proverbs in their writings. The language used by the Banjaras is called "goarboli." The community, however, follows an oral tradition rather than a written one. Songs and stories are the primary means of collecting literature. The oral literature must be transcribed in the State's script in order to be documented.

Banjaras in Karnataka are referred to as Lambani, Lamani, and Goarmati, and they are classified as Scheduled Caste. The majority of Lambani settlements are located in Kalaburagi,

Shimoga, Bijapur, Chitradurga, and Bellary. Only a handful of Kannada Lambani writers—B. T. Lalita Naik, D. B. Naik, P. K. Khandoba, and N. Shantha Naik write about Banjara literature and culture. One of the most well-known Lambani women writers in Kannada is B. T. Lalitha Naik.

N. Shantha Naik is a Professor of English at Vijayanagara Sri Krishndevaraya University, Bellary Karnataka. "The Banjara Language and its Cultural Dictionary" was the subject of his research that he discussed. His works include the novel *Gormati-An Ending Journey* (2015), the English play *The Banjara Warrior* (2018), and the Kannada translation *Veraalu* (2019). The Lambani term "Veraalu" denotes a brave "warrior."

Shantha Naik talked about his experience in writing *The Banjara Warrior* and how it motivated him to finish the play. He says,

“It also gave me inspiration because the British used Banjaras as laborers to build their empire and business. In order to determine India's route map, the British used Banjara's assistance and positioned them under the notified tribes. They had to give up on the bullocks because of the forest act. The present railway track is undoubtedly the Banjara route. The next generation of Banjara people should be proud of their ancestors since they were strong patriots rather than cowards like certain traitors. (Naik, Shantha. Preface)

The historical play *The Banjara Warrior* is centered on the little-known Banjara warrior Bheema Naik, who serves as the play's protagonist. The play centers on the story of Bheema Naik, a caravan that provided support to Tippu Sulthan during the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War, which took place between 1798 and 1799. During this time, attempts were being made by British armies to take over the Mysore Kingdom. Tippu Sulthan was their worst enemy, since he would do everything to drive them out of India.

The play Act I, Scene I opens with the chorus singing a prayer to their beloved Saint Sri Sevalal and the goddesses Mareyamma. The chorus felt that they were the community's protectors. Their hope is that Bheema Naik's fame will catch on like wildfire. Bheema Naik is the main character in the play. The chorus offers up prayers,

“We pray you Sevabhaya

Come.

We pray you, Mariyamma

Come.

Spread the popularity of Bheema like wildfire

Listen, Banjara.” (Naik, Shantha. Act I, Scene I, 1)

For a business relationship with Tippu Sultan, Bheema Naik and his followers are heading towards Srinrangpatanam. They headed towards Jogihalli province, loading their bullocks upon their backs. Afzal Khan, the leader of Tippu Sulthan's army, stopped them in the interim. Jemu Naik and Afzal Khan begin their conversation:

Jemu Naik: “My lord, why are you stopping our bullocks? We are going for business”.

Afzal Khan: “You idiot! Badsha Tippu Sultan Hujoor is traveling in the direction of Ballari Fort when he passes this way. Dare you continue to obstruct his path with your bullocks?”

Jemu Naik: “We apologize, my lord, but we don't know about Badsha's travels. Please pardon us; we are a modest business.”

Afzal Khan: “You are arguing with me? Soldiers, capture all the bullocks and take possession of all their goods”.

Jemu Naik: “Hujoor, please listen to me. We are only business people. We are not conspirators. If you want, I am ready to speak to my Lord, the King”. (Naik, Shantha. Act I, Scene I, 2)

When Bheema Naik finds out that Afzal Khan has struck Jemu Naik extremely severely, he goes to confront Afzal Khan. Afzal Khan was shocked to learn of Bheema's fighting ability and believes that with the right training, he has the potential to be a great warrior. Upon learning of Afzal Khan, Bheema presents himself as:

“Yes, my Lord. My name is Bheema. My father is a small businessman. We are travelling from Hyderabad. White folks in northern India are preventing us from doing business. As a result of their monopolization, we suffered loss. We came to Hyderabad with a lot much hope. Nizam is patronizing big business tycoons there. So, we have ignored him. Nanu Naik, my father, worries a lot. Please forgive me.” (Naik, Shantha. Act I, Scene I, 3)

The Banjara and Tippu shared common enemies with the British during the colonial era. Without providing the British with even the slightest hint, Bheema and his people assisted Tippu and gave him groceries. He became into Tippu's devoted soldier and trustworthy servant. Tippu Sulthan told Bheema Naik, during their first covert meeting, that he is having difficulties due of Britishers and that there is a shortage of food in his realm. Bheema was a devoted Banjara who would do everything for Tippu. Tippu and Bheema's discussion below exemplifies how close they are to each other. Tippu says:

Tippu Sultan: “Privacy (Meer Sadaq departs); you are aware of Bheema due to Britishers, I am dealing with numerous issues. They are observing my every move, and I am running short of groceries. Furthermore, any movement from our side will provoke their ire, and they may attack. To get the stuff we need, I need your help.”

Bheema Naik: “My lord, before I came here, I also had the same wish. Whoever was around your fort, keeping a wary eye on things. I'll make sure your needs get to you when you need them.” (Naik, Shantha. Act II, Scene I, 11)

Bheema, a sixteen-year-old, is an obeying son to his father, leading his people with a flock of bullocks and having all the war skills. He is a warrior, ready and willing to defend his people at all times. Tippu receives assurances from him on Banjaras' loyalty, dependability, and sincerity. He takes an oath on behalf of Sevabhaya and Mariyamma, so accepting responsibility for Tippu. His dependability and honesty impressed Tippu. As soon as Bheema informs Tippu:

Bheema Naik: “My life's ambition is to serve a king as brave and giving as you are. I swear to you, Sevabhaya and Mariyamma, that I will work for you. Loyalty is a trait associated with banjaras. I shall never turn away from my duty and oath.”

Tippu Sultan: “Bheema Naik, I am aware of your dedication, boy. I need you and other patriots. I'll be back from the Bellary fort as soon as possible. I think your group should succeed. I would like to talk with you about a few crucial matters.” (Naik, Act II, Scene I, 11)

Bheema was asked to bring the weapons from the caverns of Babubudangiri. Sadly, one of the main conspirators, Meer Sadaq, told the British about this covert gathering. Tippu says to Bheema:

Tippu Sultan: No, Bheema won't work out with just willpower. Weapons are necessary for us. Oh, and why did I call you? I stopped believing in everyone who was with me. You are the only person in the world I truly trust. Additionally, I am aware that only you are capable of doing this task. All of our Persian weapons are hidden away in the hill caves of Bababudangiri. You will receive the root map from Afzal uncle. We would hold off the British for a while if you managed to capture them.” (Naik, Shantha. Act IV, Scene 5, 31)

Later, Bheema was apprehended by soldiers under Captain Mackey (The Britisher). In order to get Tippu's secret, Mackey tortures Bheema. He was subjected to horrific torture and skinning in order to reveal the details of the covert meeting. However, he never disclosed any secrets to them. He is well aware that he will undoubtedly be slaughtered along with his fellow Banjaras if they are discovered. In order to prevent the opponent from understanding them, Bheema gave them advance warning not to divulge anything and advised them to speak in Goarboli, a Lambani dialect. He claims,

Bheema: “Listen carefully. Please don't reveal our destination if someone manages to get hold of us. Don't disclose the fact that even if we may have killed. Since nobody understands Goarboli, we must interact only in Goarboli. Remember all these carefully.”

Jatu Naik: “All right, Bheema. Whatever you order, we obey. We are all thankful to you for including us all in this work of our motherland.” (Naik, Shantha. Act V, Scene 1. 34)

Bheema never disclosed anything, even after being tormented and peeled inch by inch, and he was eventually slain. The play's primary focal point is the brave and valiant fight of Bheema Naik, a Banjara who ultimately meets a heroic end. The play goes into great detail about how Tippu was helped by a Banjara warrior during his difficult times.

As a Banjara scholar, I understand that a large number of Banjaras are unaware of Bheema Naik's life. However, after reading the play, I learned that such a personality existed throughout the colonial era. The playwright, Shantha Naik, asserts that a temple in Kudalgi taluk Chikka Joogihalli, which was built in honor of Bhima Naik, served as inspiration for him as he was gathering material for the play. In conclusion, a lot of unknown stories existed, and people are unaware of historical details. Understanding the history of the Banjaras and how they contributed

to the Indian freedom movement, whether directly or indirectly, is essential. They are not included in the canon of history; therefore, it is crucial to preserve this kind of history.

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