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Culture, Traditions and Transformations: A Study on Kannada Novel

Havan

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Abstract:

Language, tradition and culture share a deeply interconnected and symbiotic relationship. Language is not just a means of communication but also a reflection of the values, beliefs, and social norms of a particular culture. The intertwining of language and culture creates a rich tapestry of human diversity and expression, as each influence and shapes the other. The Lambani/Banjara is one of the most beautiful and colorful nomadic tribes in India. It is very rich in its traditions and cultural practices. In Karnataka, the Lambani/Banjara tribe comes under the Scheduled Caste category and speaks the state language Kannada. This community has its own language, known as 'Goarboli' or 'Goarmati, which is oral in nature and does not have a written script. Basically, 'Goar' means Banjara, 'Mati means a person, and 'Banjara means a person.

The present paper examines the Kannada novel *Havan* (2001), written by Mallikarjun Hiremath and translated into English by S. Mohanraj. The novel discusses themes such as tradition, modernity, transformation, the importance of education, jobs, lack of facilities, cultural customs, songs, and stories on Sevalal; celebrations; food habits; exploitation of the upper caste; illicit liquor; politics; and corruption. The representation of Thanda and the settlement of Lambani are very different from what has been presented in the novel. Hence,

the paper discusses certain observations made in the novel. First, it presents how modernization is a threat to the culture and how it affects the tradition and culture of the Lambani tribe. Second, this paper inquires why the present generation is drifting away from the Lambani culture. Considering these issues, the study investigates whether modernity is seen as a threat to a culture or as a sign of progress. What role do education and urbanization have in the novel? How does education, as a means of advancement, fail to protect Lambani culture?

Keywords: Tradition, Modernity, Culture, Language and Education.

Introduction to Banjara:

According to the new historicists, the proper way to understand literary text is through the culture and society that produced it. The attempt is to trace how the Lambani community is referred to at different junctures and how the partial references can be traced through the discourses on Lambani in history, sociology, and other disciplines. “Gazettes of Madras describes the Lambani community 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” (E. Thurston and K. Rangachari 1891). The Lambani community is one of the several nomadic-tribal communities first branded as criminal tribes and later reckoned as denotified tribes that are found scattered in most parts of India. The term “nomad,” which means “no fixed place,” and nomadic communities are believed to have no fixed abode. The word ‘nomad’ is derived from the Greek word “Nemo,” which literally means wanderers and “to pasture.”

Although officially most wandering or nomadic communities are considered to be “tribes,” they are called by different names in different languages and in different parts of India. In Andhra Pradesh, these nomads are called Drimmarulu, which in Sanskrit and in Telugu literally means “wanderers,” and Lambani “Ladhne.” In the North, Northwest, and central parts of

India, they are called Banjaras. The word “Banjara” is derived from the original Sanskrit word “Vanaj” or “Banaj,” meaning “trader.”. The Banjari/Lambani/Gorboli language falls in the Austro-Asiatic group of languages and sounds nearer to Rajasthani languages.

The term “Vanjara” or “Banjara” does not indicate any particular community; rather, it denotes the profession of transporting the food grains. Laman, a term derived from the Sanskrit word “lavan,” meaning 'salt.' Basically, Banjaras got their identity because of their occupation, the transportation of the salt, which had connected with the “Loni” river in Rajasthan. Geographically, the Banjaras/Lambanis are spread all over the country from north to south but are densely populated in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Goa. “In Kerala and Goa, the divide between village and city is almost indistinct, whereas in Maharashtra and Gujarat the difference is quite dramatic. The agricultural villages in the plains have an architectural composition, which the adivasis in the forests and hills will not even be able to identify as a village. The nomads live in *thandas*, while in some parts of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka houses are built of solid stone. The demographic composition too varies between the composite and ethnically pure”. (Devy, 2)

In recent times, *Havana*, a Kannada novel, is the only work of art by a non-Lambani writer, and *Nele-Bele* and *Gati* are the two Kannada novels penned by B. T. Lalita Naik, a Lambani woman. In Indian Writing in English, *Goarmati: An Unending Journey* (2015), a novel written by Shantha Naik, is a singular attempt to represent the Lambani community life so far.

Mallikarjun Hiremath, a non-Lambani writer, pictures the struggle of the Lambani community, which is caught in a flux of tradition and modernity. The community is dealing with poverty, ignorance, and illiteracy, accepts a new way of life, and yet struggles to maintain and keep intact the tradition and culture of the community. The novel *Havan* provides a minute description of the community that only an insider can provide.

Biography:

Mallikarjun Hiremath (b. 1946) was a well-known Kannada writer and retired as principal from First Grade College, Hungund (Northern district of Bagalkot). He lives in Dharwad and has published a collection of poetry, a collection of stories, a novel, a travelogue, a collection of personal essays, and three collections of criticism. He is a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Honorary Award (2008), among other literary awards. Hiremath is the present co-editor of Samahita, a Kannada literary journal. He has been appointed as the president of the Basavaraj Kattimani Trust by the Government of Karnataka and has also been working as an advisor to the Dharwad Sahitya Sambhrama.

About the Novel:

Mallikarjuna Hiremath's *Havan* is a significant literary Kannada work that intricately explores the interplay between tradition and transformation in Lambani community. Through its narrative, the novel delves into the complexities of cultural heritage, social norms, and the evolving perspectives of individuals and communities. By examining the characters, themes, and symbolic elements in *Havan*, the study aims to highlight how the novel reflects the tension between upholding traditions and embracing change. These traditions are not only markers of cultural identity but also serve as mechanisms of social control, dictating the behavior of individuals and their roles within the community.

Havan is about the Lambada people, who have been a wandering tribe for ages and who, perhaps, originally belonged to Rajasthan. Literally, Havan is the name of a settlement of Lambadas near Kalluru. The novel explores the lives of a few people of this settlement and faithfully recreates the history of the tribe, its characteristics, social events and celebrations, songs and dances, beliefs and customs, and their exploitation by landlords and the police. The first part of the novel is narrated by one Basappa, who comes to the Thanda (settlement) as a

schoolmaster, and the second part is narrated by Loku, Zimri, Hari, and Kasnu—members of the tribe.

Writing on the life of the Lambanis, Mallikarjun Hiremath says that, “I have been attracted to the Lambada tribe right from my childhood. Being curious about these neglected people, it has become a habit with me to wander around their settlements known as ‘Thanda’ and mix with them.” In addition, he also expresses how he was attracted towards the Lambanis. The novelist has always been interested in the people of Thanda. When he was a child, he used to look curiously at the Lambada women who often came to his village either to sell fruit or lend a helping hand harvesting jowar.

The novel *Havan* refers to the history of the origin of Lambanis/Banjaras about their trade and business and how they have been settled in different places. Banjaras belong to the Rajput community from Rajasthan, who joined the Mughal troops as soldiers and wandered along with them towards the Marathi and Kannada regions. Those people were trading lavana. Lavana means ‘salt.’. Since Banjara sold lavana, they came to be known as Lamanyas or Lambanyas. They also supplied the gunpowder, ammunition, and food grains to the soldiers who were engaged in war on the battlefields. Their business was put to an end after some time, and these people became homeless, referred to as wanderers. Further, one group of people came to Solapur after traveling to different places. Lambanis roamed around the place for several years in search of livelihood and grazing lands for cattle. They reached Gulbarga and from there traveled towards Badarbandi in Koppal. They settled there. When the group left that place and started on their journey towards Nagarkote, the British flags were lowered, and the green, white, and orange flags were being hoisted over all the monuments. Around that time everyone was raising slogans— “Bharat mata ki jai!” Vande mataram! “Jai Hind!” (Havan, 16)

C. N. Ramchandran in the Preface of the Novel:

Writing the preface of the novel, *Havan*, C. N. Ramchandran, a Kannada critic states that, “Two streams of thoughts are prevalent in India about the concept of tribes in the country who are culturally rich but suffer from poverty and lack of education. One thought persuades all the communities to join the mainstream by changing their lifestyle, food, clothing, etc., and getting access to modern education and jobs. The other stream argues that the government should provide these people with adequate facilities whereby they can retain their traditional lifestyle as well as food habits and other cultural practices. The first stream is “interventionalist,” and the second is “non-interventionist.” Neither the social scientists nor the politician has been able to decide which of the two is “correct.” Both approaches are not without limitations. *Havan* is emphatic in convincing us that there are no easy solutions to such dilemmas”. (*Havan*)

Excerpt from *Havan*:

T. P. Ashok writes that, “Hiremath’s novel and stories are based in the geographical and cultural surroundings of Bagalkote (Karnataka). The works closely describe the lives of different communities that live there, their struggles, different skills they have, vocations they pursue and their language and customs. Neither the localized environment nor the language seems to have imposed any restrictions on Hiremath’s narratives. They become functional and cease to be ornamental. *Havan* documents the unique life pattern of a community and attracts the reader with its lucid narrative providing a perspective on human life.”

In the beginning of the novel, Basappa master makes a revelation. This revelation has a cultural dimension. His revelation brings to light several factors that are integral to Lambadas’ life but not obvious to the outsiders. The facts related to the granite mining in the second part have a different purpose and form, and their impact is also different. The author’s vision has been shaped in the contrast between these two descriptions. The author portrays the life of Lambadas

with a lot of concern and compassion. At the same time, the novel also underscores the limitations, weaknesses, and differences that exist among the members of the community and the conflict among people of different generations, thereby gaining objectivity and maturity. *Havan* is a novel that haunts us for a long time. It compels us to read and reread.” (Excerpt from *Havan*)

Basappa, the protagonist, was posted to Havan Thanda as a school teacher; he was criticized and advised by the people not to accept the job offer. They say, “Why do you want to go to that Thanda? You should try elsewhere. It is good you got a job, but you should not have been posted to the Thanda.” (4) Accepting the government job offer is not easy for Basappa, but he challenges his friends that he will accept it and says, “I can do well, no matter what the place is like.”.

But it was a challenging journey for Basappa to work in a Thanda, where Lambani people never give much importance to education. They think, if they send their children to the school, who will earn their daily bread for them? In Thanda, when Basappa enquired about the school and Nayaka (the head of the village), one of the old men from the Thanda responded in a very sarcastic way, saying that,

“Nayak has lost his senses. He wants the children in the Thanda to go to school because the children in towns go to school. Is it possible for us to learn the way the town children learn? Is it possible for us to dance to the same tunes as they do? We live by hard work. If we send our children to school, we will be left with nothing but mud to eat, he retorted rather angrily and got up and walked away, muttering to himself.” (P. 7)

For Basappa, it is his first encounter at the new place; it was quite a challenge for him and difficult to swallow the words of the old man. For a moment he thought, “How rude he is!”

(P.7) The people of the community were not aware of how important it is to get educated. Somalya Nayak, the head of the village, met Basappa, the teacher, for the first time. He had some kind of positive ideas towards the importance of education. He says to Basappa that,

“It is not necessary to start school tomorrow itself. To begin with, we need to generate interest in the people and the children about the need for education. So, don’t be worried if things get delayed a bit. If people make negative comments out of their ignorance, don’t take it to heart. If you have any problems, do let me know. You should earn the blessings of God by making the children here literate and educating the people.”

“This is my first job. I don’t have any experience. But I’ve come here to work with love and devotion. Please, see to it that the children come to school’ Basappa requested.

(P.9)

Mallikarjun Hiremath has focused on the gradual shift in the mode of living and thought in the Lambani community in the novel. He tried to represent the cultural aspect of the community and the Thanda life in a very realistic way. The Thanda was surrounded by the hillocks, which provided pasture for their cattle and firewood. Basically, Lambani community women are the prominent food gatherers. The men go hunting, whereas women venture out deep into the forest to collect gum, cherry, berry, honey, wood, and bark for liquor making. The community women’s routine begins with fetching water from distant places, washing utensils, making jowar roti, frying dry fish, pounding green chutney, and boiling the broken jowar/rice. After completing their daily household chores, they rush to work as farm laborers during rainy and harvest seasons, whereas on every weekend and in the off season, women go to the forest to collect wood and forest products. Women walk a long distance to sell the firewood; they carry heavy loads of dry and wet timber on their heads and struggle to sell it to the city people.

Havana depicts the community people who had by now settled down at the outskirts of the villages where they could be hired for farm work, harvesting, and helping at different shops, factories, and mills. Their culture was completely different from that of the caste people living in the villages; the dress of women, food habits, rituals and rites, language, and participation of women in labor work seemed uncivilized to the caste people. Education, which was to bring awareness in the community and lead them towards change and progress, turns up with its own negative impact. The younger generation fell to the temptation of city life and started considering their community life and culture as low, uncivilized, and backward; the community culture, which was a matter of pride, turned out to be a matter of shame.

The younger generation of the Lambani community is moving away from the Thanda in search of education, migrating for livelihood, and gradually there was a phase when they refused to acknowledge or practice Lambani culture or speak the Lambani language. Their traditional dress was discarded for saris, pants, shirts, and churidars. The writer provided the view of the stronghold of the patriarchal system in the community, primarily coming down heavily upon women who adopted the modern way of dress code. While stating the greatness of this community, the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi said, “The weavers weave the cloth with golden threads here or there. This adds beauty. Similarly, the Lambanis are like the golden threads in the rich Indian cultural heritage” (Naik 1).

The Forces of Transformation:

The novel portrays a changing India where modernization, education, and individual aspirations disrupt established customs and beliefs. One of the primary catalysts for transformation in the novel is education. Characters who seek knowledge and intellectual growth often find themselves at odds with traditional values. The novel emphasizes the power of education to question, reinterpret, and sometimes dismantle oppressive structures. Through

the experiences of key characters, *Havan* illustrates the struggle between adhering to conventional wisdom and embracing new perspectives that offer social and personal liberation.

Additionally, the novel explores the impact of globalization and urbanization on traditional communities like Lambani. As the community people migrate to cities and are exposed to diverse cultures and ideologies, their worldview begins to shift. This shift creates a generational divide, where the younger generation often seeks to break free from the constraints of tradition, while the older generation strives to uphold them. This tension is a recurring motif in *Havan*, showcasing the evolving nature of cultural identity in a rapidly changing world.

Mallikarajun Hiremath pointed out the loss of opportunity for the growth and change in the lives of Lambani women of the community. The novelist diverts attention to two important facts: the internal change in the community, the desire for a better life, and acceptance by the “other communities” in the mainstream society. Whereas in modern times, on one hand, the Lambanis were looking down upon their cultures, and on the other hand, they adapted “other” cultures and maintained internal caste hierarchies.

The ritual and custom of Lambani marriage is slowly declining due to the modernity that has taken its place. People are adopting very rapidly to the new culture. The protagonist Somalya, belonging to the older generation, is not ready to accept the change. For him, marriage does not involve two families, but the entire Thanda would participate at one family. This practice is missing in the present time. Somalya is true in one sense, his displeasure can be seen his words. Commenting on the marriage, he exclaimed, “What kind of wedding was that? They did not observe any of our rituals. The sambandis did not speak to us properly. All the women there were draped in silk saris and blouses, master. Our women were wearing skirts, blouses and veils. Believe us, we were like fish out of water in that place. The influence of city fashions and the arrogance of money were quite evident. We were just like dirt under their feet. Don’t

we have self-respect? How well we celebrated the wedding of our Limbya! We celebrated the wedding for four-five days in moonlight and enjoyed ourselves. We spent just a quarter of the money these people had spent lavishly in a single day and celebrated by dancing and singing in the moonlight instead of sacrificing our customs and rituals. If we lose what we have and imitate others, how does that help us? (Havan, 115)

Mallikarjuna Hiremath's *Havan* is a profound exploration of the dynamic relationship between tradition and transformation in Lambani community. Through its rich narrative, compelling characters, the novel presents a nuanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities that arise from the change. While it acknowledges the significance of tradition in shaping identity and values, it also advocates for the necessity of progress and reform to address the evolving needs of individuals and communities.

In examining *Havan*, one gains a deeper understanding of the complexities of cultural transformation and the resilience required to navigate the intersections of past and future. The novel serves as a reminder that while traditions provide a foundation, true growth lies in the ability to adapt, question, and evolve in response to the changing world.

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