

# BANJARAS OF INDIA — A DEPRESSED CLASS :

## A PRELIMINARY REVIEW

**All-India meet of Banjaras (Lambanis) at Bijapur Karnataka — a need to create awareness among them about their rights and privileges for their all-round development.**

Banjaras also called Lambanis are found all over India barring a few small North-eastern States of Sikkim, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura. Several empirical studies made in the past such as reports of Commissions of Inquiries, Universities of great stature, official Committees constituted both by Central and State Governments and decennial census publications reveal that Banjaras to-day number over a crore of population. It is a historical community which has played a dominant role to cater to the needs of Indian people in matters of transport of essential goods such as food-grains, salt, cloth, building materials, etc., by reaching them to the nook and corner of the country for centuries together. In fact and reality the whole carrying trade of India was in their hands. Though the country was divided into various kingdoms and principalities there were no restrictions whether administrative or political on their mobility or movements from one part of the country to the other in matters of their carrying trade. No wonder, therefore, they have been depicted in the pages of Indian history as a Wandering Tribe. In fact their very nomenclature "Banjara" is derived from this trait, meaning Vana = forest and 'Char' = wander, wanderers in forests. Similarly its synonym

“Lambani” has also a significant meaning ‘Lamba’=long and ‘Ani’=trader. As their mode of transport was cows and bullocks they had to travel in long rows and hence the derivation ‘Lambani’. Their several folk-lore indicate that each family had in its possession not less 100 cows and bullocks loaded with goods moving in a large group of families with adequate security arrangements against intruders, plunderers and robbers.

But Banjaras did not realise that their profession had various in-built disadvantages. They were completely segregated from villages, towns and cities which in its wake brought several drawbacks as far as their development was concerned. They remained quite away from the main stream of a civilised society. Education became foreign to them. They were steeped in utter illiteracy and ignorance for centuries together. Even their camps on their journeys were away from growth centres. As they had no social contacts they remained quite unaware of tremendous social, political, educational, commercial and industrial changes that were taking place especially after the dawn of foreign powers such as the British, French and Portuguese in our country. Who ruled the country was immaterial to them as long as they were left to themselves to move freely with their carrying trade. For them, there existed only two worlds - one of their own and the other, of others. The introduction of railways and other fast moving modes of transport were a bolt from the blue to them. Their carrying trade collapsed to pieces and they were deprived of their means of livelihood. The inevitable result was their massive abject poverty combined with acute illiteracy. On the collapse of their profession many groups among them have taken up to unclean professions which are so considered by the rest of

the Hindu Society as degrading and low. Such professions are manufacture of combs out of cattle horns, compelling them to be considered as untouchables, begging, dancing and manufacturing of mats out of palm leaves and above all resorting to questionable means of livelihood. Ultimately the community landed in the clutches of the Criminal Tribes Act beginning from the year 1860 and various regulations under it, passed from time to time. These Criminal Tribes Act and other Laws were enforced rigorously both by the British Govt in India as well as native States. Once a peace loving community, it was declared as a Criminal Tribe through-out the country along with some other communities like Bovi, Korma and Korcha and every member of the community whether innocent or otherwise was branded as a criminal and suffered from the stigma of criminality. Further more a large section of Banjaras were interned in what were called 'settlements' surrounded by high stone walls and barbed wires creating a complete barrier over their free movements. Such a scenario can well be compared to those of segregation of Red Indians of America by relegating them to deep forests in the interior parts of the country. How such a harsh policy of the white-man in his quest and greed for gold and pelf has ultimately resulted in the major extinction of Red Indian is too well known to be repeated. Another such inhuman policy is the racial segregation called apartheid mooted and practised by the whites in South Africa against coloured men. Whether it is the internment of humans by branding them as criminals in settlements or segregation of Red Indians by relegating them to deep forests or apartheid nursed in South Africa, they are all crimes against humanity. Untouchability which is the creature of caste system prevalent in our country is another heinous crime against humanity and a blot on our ancient civili-

zation. It existed in the hoary past and continue to be so at present inspite of valiant fights put up against it by crusaders like Budha, Basav, Mahaveer, Gandhi, Phulay and Ambedkar. Though constitutionally abolished, its practice in any form forbidden and any disability arising out of it is declared as a cognizable offence it continues to flourish though mollified to some extent in cities and industrial towns. All these crimes especially our native ones have a lasting perennial and disastrous effect on the minds of sufferers that they have become almost permanent victims of social and educational backwardness as understood by the founding fathers of our Constitution. The depressed conditions of Banjaras or as a matter of fact, of other similarly placed communities and castes is the direct result of social and educational backwardness as envisaged by our Constitution. They were labouring under appalling conditions and the British government in India when awakened to its senses by great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Mahatma Phulay and Babasaheb Ambedkar thought of bringing improvement in depressed conditions of these communities by adopting special measures generally called reservations. For this purpose lists of such permanent victims were drawn up carefully with reference to British territories and various ameliorative measures were adopted in all walks of life wherever they considered feasible and practicable. Though it is difficult to say when exactly such lists were mooted it can safely be said that they began manifesting soon after the introduction of Montague-Chelmsford Reforms in India in 1919. In some progressive native states like Mysore they were mooted much earlier. These lists continued to be in force till the Government of India Act, 1935 was passed by the British Parliament and enforced. Under the provisions of this Act of

1935 the Depressed classes were split into two Viz the Scheduled Castes and Aborigines. When free India's Constitution came into force on 26th January 1950 this Scheduled castes list was adopted without any changes whatsoever by the President of India in exercise of the Powers conferred on him under Art. 341. As regards the list of Aborigines it was also adopted without any change but styled as Scheduled Tribes list by the President of India in exercise of the Powers conferred on him under Art. 342. As analysed above the list of depressed classes was drawn up consisting of various communities and castes who were labouring under depressed conditions as they suffered perennially from stigma of untouchability, criminality, internment in settlements and other various traditional occupations which were considered degrading and low in the eyes of the Indian Society.

From the foregoing analysis it is crystal clear that untouchability is not the sole criterion which has generated social and educational backwardness based on which the list of depressed classes was drawn up and corollarily, the Scheduled Castes list. The stigmas of some traditional occupations may not be as virulent as of untouchability. Nevertheless, the backwardness that has resulted since ages, has eaten into the vitals of the Indian Society which cannot be called a progressive or egalitarian society the establishment of which is a Constitutional commitment. Constitutionally guaranteed equality before law to all citizens is meaningless to those who are labouring under depressed conditions, arising out of social and educational backwardness. So also the concept of equality of opportunity. It is a well known dictum of social justice that there is equality among equals. To treat unequals as equals is to perpetuate inequality. The makers of

our Constitution were quite aware that castes and tribes listed as depressed classes genuinely needed philip for their advancement to be placed on par with other advanced communities took for granted that they were socially and educationally backward and left the task of enlisting them to the President of India in consultation with Governors of States. In fact he, in his wisdom has issued two Orders called the Constitutional (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 and the Constitutional (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 and all the communities and castes who formerly constituted the depressed classes list have been incorporated in these two Constitutional Orders. So there is consummation of the matter as to who are the Scheduled castes' and Scheduled tribes. These communities and castes have been carefully selected by the British authorities at a time when there was no race for inclusions in the lists and thus there is a finality to the matter. It is significant to know that no Commission of Inquiry was appointed to investigate the conditions of these depressed classes and the difficulties under which they were labouring. This is so for obvious reasons that they were all socially and educationally backward. Things that are obvious need no proof.

This being a factual position of law and fact it is strange Shri N. Rachaiah former minister in the Devaraj Urs Cabinet and some others should have to harp, time and again, publicly that some communities like Banjaras, Bovis, Kormas, Korchas, etc., should be deleted from the list of Scheduled castes on the ground that they do not suffer from the stigma of untouchability. Candidly speaking, it is very difficult to define precisely where untouchability begins and where it ends, the only sure test being the depressed condition of a caste. The Ex-minister's views are,

therefore, obviously erroneous, untenable and unconstitutional. We, therefore, take the liberty of advising him to put an end to his outbursts in the interest of down-trodden castes of India to one of which he himself belongs. But unfortunately he is a hard nut to crack and we consider it necessary to draw the attention of the enlightened public to an analytical rejoinder of Shri V. Hanumantappa, IAS (Retd) stated in his famous book called "The Down Trodden Races of India". He draws four questions and his answers to them forms his rejoinder.

The first question is : Was there a list of untouchables at any time, if so when ?

His answer is that there exists no such list drawn by any government whether Central or State for obvious reasons that untouchability is never a sole criterion for inclusion of any community in the list of Scheduled castes though it is so among many, resulting in depressed conditions.

His second question is : Was there a list of Depressed Classes ? If so when ?

His answer is that there was such a list till the Enactment of British Parliament called The Government of India Act, 1935 under which it was split into Scheduled castes and aboriginals. We have analysed this issue in foregoing paras.

His third question is : When was the list of depressed classes divided into two lists-one called 'Scheduled Castes' and another 'Scheduled tribes' ?

His answer is as above to question No. 2 and further Aborigines are Scheduled tribes for the first time when free India's Constitution is enforced.

His fourth question is : Was there a list of Harijans? if so where ?

His answer is that there is no such list. Only certain communities like Adi Karnatak, Adi Dravid, Holeyar and Madig were called Harijans. Even this nomenclature is done away with by the Government of India.

Thus suffice it to say that only the former depressed classes were split into Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under the Presidential Orders called the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 and Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 respectively and if any changes are to be effected in them it can only be by a law of Parliament.

What, however, has disturbed the Banjaras of India is the recent statement of Dr.(Smt) Rajendra Kumari Bajpai, Honourable Minister of State of Welfare, Government of India made on the floor of the two Houses of Parliament that the Central Govt. would soon be introducing a comprehensive bill for inclusion and exclusion of certain Castes and Communities from the lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and all that Banjaras pray for is that the analysis made above may be taken into consideration and wherever they are in the list of Scheduled Castes (Karnataka, Union territory of Delhi and Himachal Pradesh) they should not be excluded. Similarly, wherever, they are in the list of Scheduled Tribes (Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Bihar) they should not

be excluded. This is our humble preventive objective behind holding this conference. Besides we pray for positive action. Banjaras; wherever they are not in the list of Scheduled Castes or in the list of Scheduled Tribes in relation to any State or Union Territory, they should all be specified as Scheduled Tribes in the States or Union Territories as they have all the required characteristics of a tribe such as segregation from the main stream of the Indian Society, habitat in jungles, clanishness and shyness to be away from general public.

Three resolutions on each of these issues are under preparation assigning adequate reasons therefor and would be placed before the Conference for thread-bare discussion and adoption based on which a suitable Memorandum would be submitted to the Govt. of India as well as the concerned State Govts. urging them for their consideration and incorporating them suitably in the proposed Comprehensive Bill that is being introduced in the Parliament.

As stated earlier, the population of Banjaras in the country is over a Crore. They not only suffer from the oppression of economic exploitation but are also victims of social discrimination. They have few assets and are generally dependent on agricultural labour and other low income occupations. Some of them are small farmers and marginal farmers and diversification of agriculture is a "must" for them for their sustenance. They have also to be enabled to take up to new employment opportunities generated through various economic development programmes. They are in fact caught up in a vicious circle in which they are dependent upon their own exploiters for their sustenance and are largely denied opportunities to develop their capability of attain-

ing an independent livelihood. New policy of education of the Government of India must also reach them. By and large, Land Reforms in India have failed and there is a need to rejuvenate them on top priority. Various social measures undertaken by the Government must also reach them. Suitable resolutions on all these issues are under preparation and would be placed before the Conference for discussion and adoption.

We are happy to announce that Shri Buta Singh, Hon'ble Minister of Home Affairs, Govt. of India has graciously agreed to inaugurate the Conference.

We are also happy to announce that Shri Ramakrishna Hegde, Hon'ble Chief Minister of Karnataka would grace and preside over the inaugural function of the Conference.

Shri Uttam Rathod, M.P. (Lok Sabha) Hingoli, Maharashtra and President All-India Banjara (Lambani) Seva Sangh, Aurangabad will preside over the two day deliberations of the Conference.

The following dignitaries will be our honoured Chief Guests and participate in the deliberations of the Conference Viz.

1. Dr. (Smt) Rajendra Kumari Bajpai  
Hon'ble Minister of State of Welfare, Govt. of India,  
New Delhi
2. Shri Janardhan Poojari  
Hon'ble Minister of State of Finance, Govt. of India and  
President, KPCCI, Bangalore
3. Hon'ble Shri Ghulam Nabi Azad  
General Secretary, AICC (I), New Delhi

4. Shri R. L. Jalappa  
Hon'ble Minister, Home Department, Govt. of Karnataka,  
Bangalore
5. Shri B. Basavanneppa  
Hon'ble Minister, Dept. of Social Welfare, Govt. of  
Karnataka. Bangalore
6. Shri P. G. R. Scindhia  
Hon'ble Minister, Dept. of Transport, Govt. of Karnataka,  
Bangalore
7. Hon'ble Shri Sudhakar Naik  
Ex. Minister, Dept. of Revenue and Industries, Govt of  
Maharashtra, Bombay
8. Hon'ble Shri Ravindra Naik  
Ex. Minister of State, Dept. of Social Welfare A. P.,  
Hyderabad
9. Sri Ramaji Bhanavath  
Adviser, All India Banjara (Lambani) Seva Sangh,  
Yeotmal Dist.
10. Shri Swamy Naik  
M. P., A. P., Hyderabad

The venue of the Conference is the **Vasant Rao Naik Nagar, Bijapur, Karnataka.**

The photos of the following dignitaries who have dedicated themselves for the cause of Banjaras and other allied Communities and who are no more with us would be unveiled Viz.

Sarvashri

- a. V. P. Naik, Chief Minister of Maharashtra
- b. Baliram Hiranman, Patel of Mandvi, Dist. Nanded
- c. Babasaheb Naik of Pusad, Dist. Yeotmal

- d. Jathar Naik, M.R.A. Babbur Farm, Chitradurga Dist.,
- e. Sannarama Naik, M.R.A. Chikkanayakana Halli, Tumkur Dt.
- f. H. V. Kodanda Ramaiah, Social Worker  
Holalkere, Chitradurga Dist.,
- g. Tejasingh Rathod, M.L C. of Gulbarga
- h. Kheera Naik, M.R.A. Kudineerkatte, Chitradurga Dist.,

Letters from Banjaras of various States and Union Territories are pouring in our office advising us that they would attend the Conference as delegates and we expect a gathering of not less than 30 thousand. The exact date of the Conference either at the end of December 1987 or beginning of Jan 1988 will be announced shortly.

Jai Hind.

Dr. Shankar Naik  
President, All-Karnataka Pradesh  
Banjara (Lambani) Seva Sangh  
Bangalore

L. R. Naik, Ex. M.P.  
Working President  
All-India Banjara  
(Lambani) Seva Sangh  
Bangalore

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