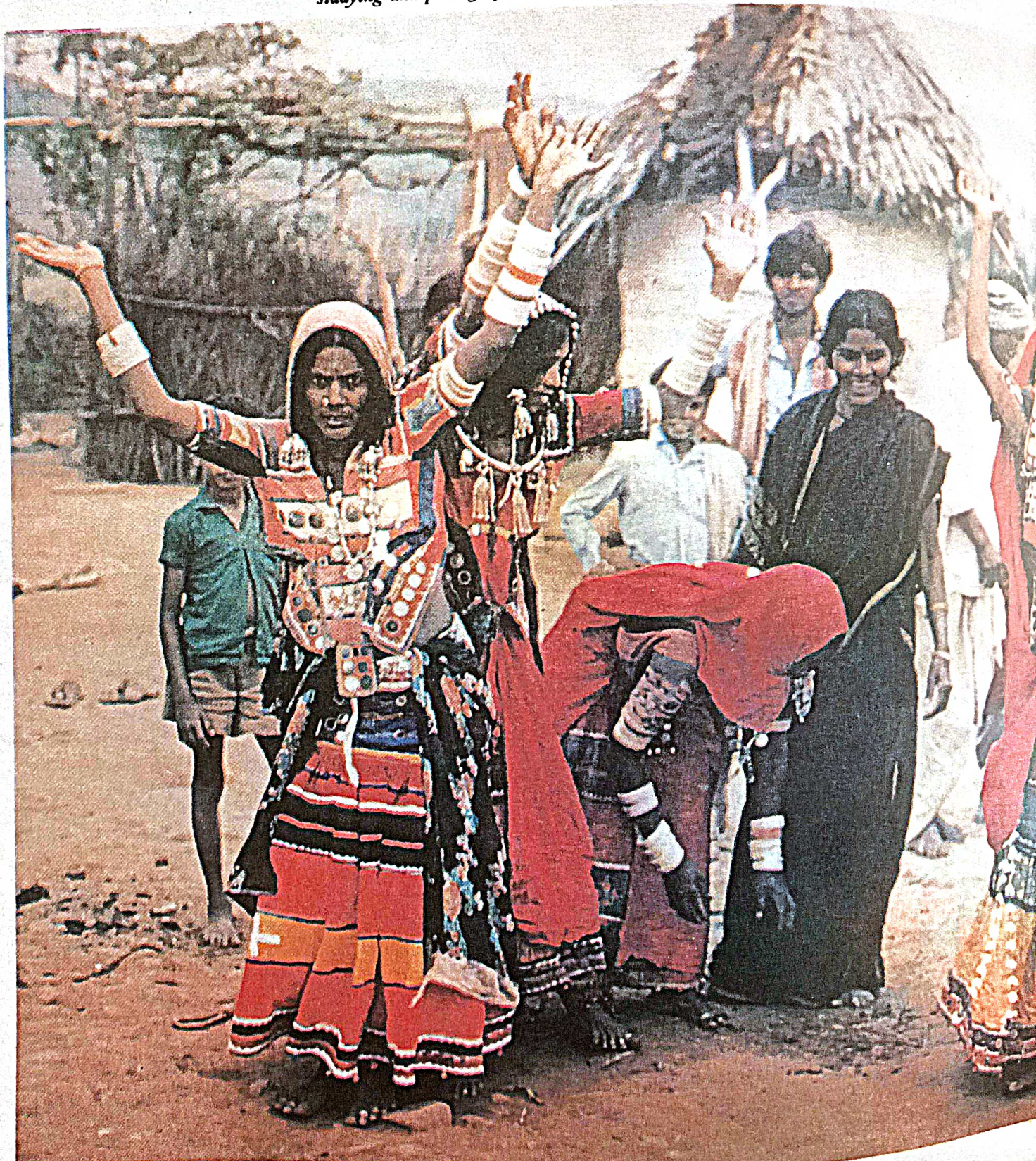


Of Caravans and Wanderlust

The Banjaras

*Text and photographs by
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Christian Jost, a frenchman, fascinated by the Banjara gypsies spent time with them studying and photographing their lifestyle.



Ivory bangles above the elbows signifies a married woman and so a bride is adorned before the wedding



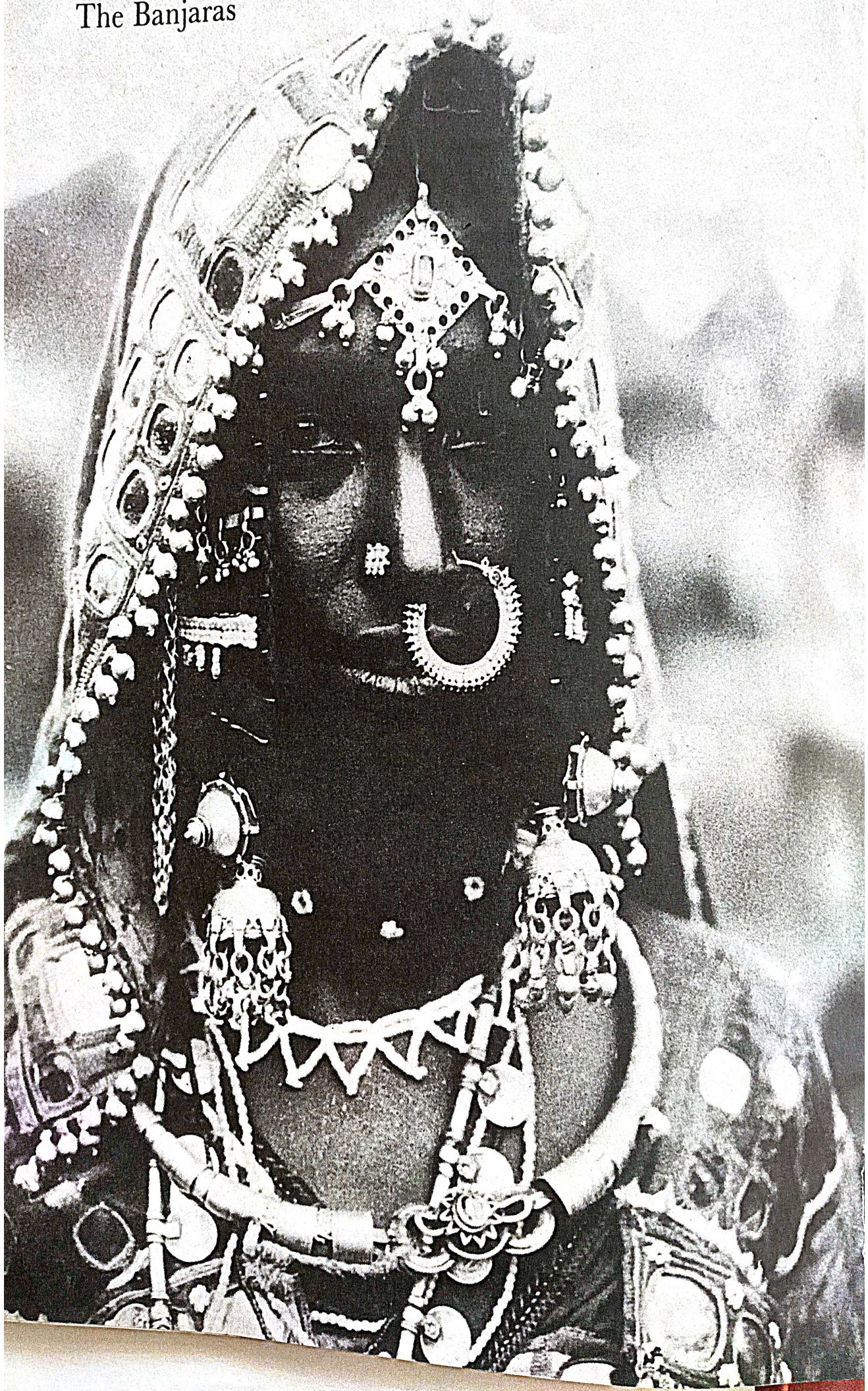
Nomads...caravaners...gypsies...these words always evoke images of liberty and of adventure. The world in its mad rush for progress harbours somewhere a touch of bitterness, even of jealousy, towards these "free-people" who bring to us the part of dreams so necessary for our mental balance.

In India, the Banjaras are one of the oldest nomadic communities. Their movements have been known for over 2500 years. But our dream fades away little by little as today there remain no more than a few thousand semi-nomads. In spite of this, they have preserved a gaiety, an attitude to life and to people, as well as a dignity that I have found among all underprivileged communities of the world, particularly amongst the nomads.

When my research and stay in the villages of coastal Andhra led me to the arid highlands of the Oriental Nallamallas, I did not expect to find — in this little village of earth on the fringe of the forest — the lineage of the ancestors of the Roma gypsies of Europe, nor did I expect the same tranquil atmosphere, warm and noble that I had so strongly sensed among the populations of the Sahara desert.

I arrived at the tando flanked by hundreds of cows which were returning from the hills to rest around the thatched houses and

The Banjaras



the round granaries, just at the end of the village, as if to protect it as in bygone days. After the evening monsoon when the last heavy clouds still glided on the rays towards the setting sun, the sweat and dust of the earth were finally washed away and life started up again. Just as from the mosaic of the rice — fields of the plains, the twinkling of the sun reflected out to me from the hundreds of mirrors on the women's dresses... welcoming me... drawing me closer...

The popular view of the Banjaras is one of women bedecked with shimmering costumes, weighed down with silver and ivory ornaments, working on the roads or building construction sites. One often thinks of them as unsociable even while accepting their value, particularly the women, as labourers of quality, robust and reliable. Out of the cities, because of their isolated situation, they have little contact with other communities and are often regarded with suspicion: when one knows their history better one tends to remember the days of the British Raj during which the Banjaras were considered a criminal tribe rather than the days when their value as trusted caravaners was recognized by all.

It has been established that the Banjaras originated from old Rajputana where they were mainly salt traders and merchants living on the outskirts of the cities. With their herd they helped Alexander the Great carry towards Greece, the wealth collected during his campaign in North India. Recent research shows that they migrated towards Central Asia and Europe from Afghanistan and Greece. The similarities discovered between the Roma Gypsies and the Gor Banjaras (Banjaras call themselves Gor and the non-Banjaras, Kor) are striking: the links between both communities are not only linguistic but also cultural in terms of dressing and in the performing of certain ceremonies...

In the 14th century the great Moghul army used the Banjaras and their herd to carry arms and provisions in the conquest of the Deccan. Thus the Banjaras reached South India. When this duty ended, they started trading with their cattle and became a useful medium of transaction between the North and South. Their wide knowledge of places and people was put to use by various rulers who employed them as the intelligence corps. For example, they were spies for both camps during the struggle between Tipu Sultan of Mysore and the British. They were mainly used as carriers by the Duke of Wellington and by the French army.

The introduction of modern means of transport by the British superseded their economic function and the Banjaras were forced to settle down. Their only wealth being cattle, they settled near forests where there were vacant lands for pasture.

In 1896 the authorities declared them a criminal tribe. No doubt some were driven to crime by the misery of their situation but this status was conferred essentially to

control them in case of their revolt against the new state of affairs.

Today, the Banjara community, spread over 21 Indian states mainly Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, forms the largest tribe of India with more than 10 million members, if one considers the extent of the spoken language. According to the All India Banjara Seva Sangh of 1968, they are divided into 17 subgroups and are known under at least 27 synonyms such as Lambadi, Labhan, Baladia, Sugali ... The word Banjara is derived from the sanskrit word *vanijyam* which means trade, as Lambadi comes from *lavan*, or salt. *Sugali* is a Telugu word which means people rearing good cows.

The unseen majority of the Banjaras are now farmers and herdsmen in rural areas. Their village or *tanda* is mainly located in isolated drought-prone areas. Their backwardness has limited their access to modern education and agricultural aid but, has at the same time, preserved their traditional culture and organization.

In southern Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, where they are called Lambadi or Sugali, some are still forced to make seasonal migrations because their unirrigated land does not provide enough to live on all the year round.

In the district of Guntur, for example, men and cattle of all the *tandas* meet in the hills at the end of November and start their migration, lasting several weeks, towards the wealthier areas of the delta. There they work in tobacco or cotton mills and hire out their cattle for nightpenning.

The day before the auspicious day for the departure, a ritual ceremony is performed by cooking large pots of rice on seven fire-holes in between each of the houses.

The final preparations over, that evening and half of the night are spent in dancing, playing games and singing. At dawn, the time for departure, the entire herd loaded with bags of grains offers a moving spectacle as they file past the houses: from every part of the tanda then rises the ritual and the sincere weeping of those who remain watching the long line slowly disappear on the track to the plains.

We moved between the hills and soon men and beasts from other tandas joined us, swelling the herds with hundreds of animals. Overnight stops were known in advance to locate grazing pastures. Long before sunrise the muted pounding of the pestle and the jingling of footsteps set a rhythm to my dreams of the night. One night, we heard the howl of a female fox, a bad omen. Though they lost a whole day of work in the delta, hundreds of people and thousands of animals had to wait an extra day to appease the spirits. Other images of red dots flowing down the hill into the sand, of the cattle going towards the river or of their figures dancing around the fire, together, have composed the melody of their life which still plays in my mind.

Yet, these images become rarer going north to Maharashtra. The settlements being older (some 200-250

years), their integration with other communities often exists. The level of education and conditions of life here are better but a lost culture is the cost. There the Banjaras are no more nomads, their dialect is little spoken and the dress of the women is much poorer; printed cottons with no embroidery or mirrors, with very little jewellery.

The Banjara community forms a real and unique tribal group with their own language, their own encampments, mainly in backward areas, and their own customs. Because of their isolation from modern society, the Banjaras have retained their traditional and administrative system. The chief of the village, the *Naik*, has an hereditary office and presides over the *Gor Panchayat*. He rules over disputes of property, matters of inheritance, sometimes even criminal cases. The *Bhagat* is the spiritual leader of the village.

The traditional tongue of the Banjaras, *gor boli*, has roots which are not found in any of the fourteen recognized languages of India. Words for parts of the body, clothing and professions are unique to this tongue and some sanskrit words point to a very ancient origin. In each state the Banjara dialect borrows freely from the local language. Though the *gor boli* is traditionally an unwritten language, recently the Devnagari script has come to be used and sometimes a regional script such as Telugu.

Despite these unique features the Banjaras are recognized as a scheduled tribe in Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Bihar Orissa and West Bengal.

Although it is a patriarchal society, women are given great importance in the household and everyday village life. They share with the men all domestic decisions, the children's education and even decisions concerning the village by exerting their influence over their menfolk. It is the women who welcome a visitor to the *tanda*.

Any occasion is good enough for dancing and singing and I was soon pulled up by the hand into a circle of women. To the beat of the nagaras the women throw their arms to the moon, bend their graceful bodies like labourers in the field, ringing out their song to the rhythm of their ivory clad arms, their copper feet on the ground ... while the children watch them.

Apart from some families who make combs and weave grassmats, craftsmen and small industry which require a fixed domicile, are noticeably lacking among these nomads. Only recently has the traditional embroidery and decoration of fabric with mirrors, been commercialized. Certain crafts such as the making of their jewellery and the tattooing of their bodies are shared with other communities. In former times, the "impure" work was given to the lower castes to do. These people were from neighbouring villages and today one still finds ancient servants, the Jangads, living in





Grinding grain

The Banjaras

harmony with the people of the *tanda*.

The silver, brass and ivory ornaments the women wear can weigh anything upto four kilos. Today silver has been replaced by aluminium and ivory or bone bangles by plastic. Anklets, round hair ornaments, the *ghoogari*, worn above two *toplis*, and bangles above the elbow indicate that the woman is married. The tattoos, they believe, are the only things which pass from this world to the next. The mirrors on their dress are there to scare off wild animals when they go into the forest for firewood. In the same way, the jingling anklets are intended to frighten away the snakes.

According to mythology, the Banjara's ancestor is Mola, a disciple and cattle-keeper of Lord Krishna, who gave Radha, a gopika from Yadava community, as a wife to Mola. Radha and Mola were wandering acrobats moving from kingdom to kingdom. Having no children of their own they received from three kings, as presents for their skill, three boys who became their sons. They then married them to three brahmin girls from whom originated the different exogamous clans of the Banjaras.

Based on Hinduism with Vishnu and Krishna as their main gods, the faith of the Banjaras turned towards the

An expression of a bride's vows:

"I will be soft like lead in the fire and obey all my elder's in my husband's house,

I will withstand the hard life as silver withstands heat,

I will be as obedient as thread in the needle; even then I will not give a bad name to you and our tanda."



own heroes or gods such as Maremma, Sewabaya for the Lambadis and Kalu Bava for the Lambhanis. In Maharashtra, at the Pora Devi Mother Temple a mammoth festival takes place every year. Here, more than one hundred thousand Banjaras congregate from all over India.

The ceremonies and customs of the Banjaras differ greatly from those of other communities. For example, at the time of marriage, the dowry is given by the family of the future husband instead of the family of the wife. The marriage is celebrated with four ceremonies which in the old days would be spread over three months. *Gotta* was an offering of tamarind, jaggery and vegetarian food to the whole *tanda*. *Wayah*, is the actual marriage ritual. *Got*, the meal of sheep or goat and *dhavalo*, the farewell where the community weep when saying goodbye. During *dhavalo* the bride, taken by her husband on a decorated bullock-cart, cries and chants in the most pathetic and plaintive way, songs taught to her by the older women, weeks before the marriage. The special features of *dhavalo* are the three modes of expressing pathos: expression of sorrow, expression of prayers, expression of the bride's vows.

All ceremonies and festivals are celebrated by the Banjaras in a distinctive manner; the main festivals being

Diwali, *Holi* and *Teej*. During *Holi*, for example, the burning of Lord Kama is performed at the end of the night, often in a large and excited gathering of several *tandas*. People dance and sing in the fields around the fire until dawn. *Teej* performed only when people are contented with life, is a kind of homage offered by the young girls and boys to the elders through small plants of wheat grown during the ten days of the festival.

The Banjaras' expression of art consists essentially of chants, poems, dances and operas on mythological history. Some of these chants tell the story of these nomads from Rajputana.

Adaptation to a modern way of life is fraught with difficulties. Their integration with other communities, like in northern Maharashtra, must not be made unthinkingly, risking a brutal cultural shock and dilution of their traditional way of life. Shocking examples of Banjaras in Bombay working in the Atomic Research Centre, a few hundred yards from their *tanda*, should be avoided. Sometimes the Banjaras have to move away from their original homesteads due to economic pressures. This is the situation in Hyderabad in the Banjara Hills. The contrast of life in India exists there, but a radical change could lead to a disastrous deculturation if not promoted thoughtfully and with consideration.

