TRIALS AND TRIUMPHS: THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION OF MIGRATED TELANGANA'S BANJARA/LAMBADA WOMEN IN NORTH INDIAN CITIES

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the socio-economic transformation experienced by Banjara/Lambada women who have migrated from Telangana to major North Indian cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata. The Banjara/Lambada community, traditionally nomadic traders, has faced marginalization and economic challenges in their native regions. This study explores how migration to urban centers has impacted the lives of Banjara women, focusing on changes in their economic activities, social status, and cultural identity. Through a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative data analysis and qualitative interviews, the research reveals both the trials and triumphs of these women as they navigate new urban environments. Key findings indicate that while migration often leads to improved economic opportunities and greater personal autonomy for Banjara women, they also face challenges related to cultural adaptation, discrimination, and the preservation of traditional practices. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for policy and future research on marginalized communities in urban India.

KEY WORDS: *Banjara, Lambada, migration, women, socio-economic transformation, urban India, Telangana.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Banjara, also known as Lambada, are a traditionally nomadic community with a rich cultural heritage deeply rooted in the Indian subcontinent. Historically engaged in trade and transportation, the Banjara have faced significant socio-economic challenges in recent decades due to changing economic structures and marginalization. [1] In the state of Telangana, where a substantial Banjara population resides, these challenges have been particularly acute, leading many community members, especially women, to seek opportunities through migration to major urban centers in North India.

This paper focuses on the experiences of Banjara/Lambada women who have migrated from Telangana to three major North Indian cities: Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata. By examining their socio-economic transformation in these urban contexts, we aim to shed light on the complex interplay of factors that shape the lives of marginalized communities in rapidly changing urban environments.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform policy decisions and interventions aimed at supporting marginalized communities in urban areas, as well as contributing to the broader

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academic discourse on internal migration, gender, and social change in India. By centering the experiences of Banjara women, this study also addresses a gap in the literature, which has often overlooked the specific challenges and triumphs of women from nomadic communities in urban settings.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we provide a brief historical and cultural background of the Banjara/Lambada community, with a focus on their presence in Telangana. Next, we outline the methodology employed in this study, including data collection methods and analytical approaches. The findings are then presented, organized around key themes that emerged from the research. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings and offer conclusions and recommendations for future research and policy considerations.

2. BACKGROUND:

The Banjara, also referred to as Lambada, Lambadi, or Ghor in various regions, are believed to have originated in Rajasthan and spread across India over centuries.[2] Traditionally, they were nomadic traders and transporters, playing a crucial role in the pre-modern Indian economy by facilitating the movement of goods across long distances. Their distinct culture, characterized by colorful attire, intricate jewelry, and rich oral traditions, has long been a subject of fascination and study.[3]

In Telangana, the Banjara community has a significant presence, with many having settled in rural areas over time. However, economic changes in the 20th century, including the advent of modern transportation and changes in agricultural practices, have posed challenges to their traditional livelihoods.[4] Despite efforts by the government to improve their socio-economic conditions through reservation policies and targeted development programs, many Banjara in Telangana continue to face poverty, lack of education, and limited economic opportunities.[5]

In response to these challenges, migration to urban centers has emerged as a strategy for many Banjara, particularly women, to seek better economic prospects and escape the limitations of their traditional rural settings. This migration pattern aligns with broader trends of rural-to-urban migration in India, driven by the promise of employment opportunities and improved living conditions in cities.[6]

The focus on Banjara women in this study is particularly important given the intersectionality of their experiences, shaped by both their ethnic identity and gender. Traditional Banjara society, like many other communities in India, has been characterized by patriarchal norms that often limit women's autonomy and opportunities. [7] Migration to urban areas potentially offers these women not only economic opportunities but also the possibility of greater personal freedom and social mobility.

3. METHODOLOGY:

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data analysis with qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic transformation of Banjara women in North Indian cities.

3.1. Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis:

Secondary data was collected from various government sources, including the Census of India, National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), and state-level reports from Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata. This data provided demographic information, employment statistics, and socio-economic indicators for the Banjara community in these cities.

Additionally, a survey was conducted with 300 Banjara women (100 in each city) to gather primary quantitative data on their economic activities, living conditions, and social experiences. The survey was designed to capture changes in their economic status, education levels, and social integration since migrating to the cities.

3.2. Qualitative Data Collection:

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 45 Banjara women (15 in each city) to gain deeper insights into their personal experiences, challenges, and perceptions of their socio-economic transformation. These interviews allowed for a nuanced understanding of the cultural and personal dimensions of their migration experience.

Furthermore, focus group discussions were held with community leaders, NGO representatives, and government officials working with the Banjara community in each city. These discussions provided contextual information and perspectives on the broader social and policy environment affecting Banjara women.

3.3. Data Analysis:

Quantitative data was analyzed using statistical software to identify patterns and trends in the socio-economic indicators of Banjara women across the three cities. Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups was transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and narratives.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative data allowed for triangulation of findings, enhancing the reliability and depth of the research outcomes.[8]

3.4. Ethical Considerations:

The study was approved by the Indian Council of Social Science Research as a Minor Research Project during 2024-25 academic Year. The project undertaken by the Zaheerabad Government Degree College, Political Science department which is affiliated to the Osmania University, Hyderabad, Telangana. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the research process.

4. Findings:
4.1. Economic Transformation:

The migration of Banjara women to North Indian cities has led to significant changes in their economic activities and financial status. Table 1 presents an overview of the primary occupations of Banjara women before and after migration:

Table 1: Primary Occupations of Banjara Women Before and After Migration

Occupation	Before Migration (%)	After Migration (%)
Agriculture	62%	3%
Domestic Work	15%	38%
Street Vending	8%	22%
Factory Work	2%	18%
Service Sector	1%	12%
Other	12%	7%

Source: Survey data collected by the author (2024)

As evident from the table, there is a significant shift from agricultural work to urban-centric occupations such as domestic work, street vending, and factory employment. This transition reflects the adaptation of Banjara women to the urban economic landscape.

Income levels have also shown improvement, with 68% of respondents reporting an increase in their monthly earnings post-migration. The average monthly income rose from ₹3,500 in rural Telangana to ₹8,200 in the urban centers (Survey data, 2024). However, it's important to note that this increase in nominal income should be considered alongside the higher cost of living in urban areas.

Qualitative interviews revealed that many women viewed this economic transformation positively. As one respondent from Delhi stated:

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"In the village, work was uncertain, and we often struggled to make ends meet. Here, I can find work every day, and even though expenses are higher, I feel more financially secure." (Interview respondent, Delhi, 2024)

However, challenges persist. Many women reported facing exploitation in informal sector jobs, lack of job security, and difficulties in accessing formal financial services due to their migrant status.

4.2. Educational Opportunities:

The migration to urban areas has had a notable impact on the educational opportunities available to Banjara women and their children. Table 2 presents data on the educational status of Banjara women before and after migration:

Table 2: Educational Status of Banjara Women Before and After Migration

Education Level	Before Migration (%)	After Migration (%)
No Formal Education	58%	42%
Primary Education	28%	32%
Secondary Education	12%	20%
Higher Education	2%	6%

Source: Survey data collected by the author (2024)

The data indicates a positive trend in educational attainment post-migration. The percentage of women with no formal education decreased, while those with secondary and higher education increased. This change can be attributed to better access to educational institutions in urban areas and increased awareness about the importance of education.

Moreover, the impact on the next generation is significant. 89% of respondents reported that their children were enrolled in schools, compared to only 62% who said their children were regularly attending school in their native villages (Survey data, 2024).

Qualitative interviews highlighted the value Banjara women place on education in the urban context. A respondent from Mumbai shared:

"I never had the chance to study properly, but here, I'm determined to ensure my children get a good education. It's the key to a better future for them." (Interview respondent, Mumbai, 2024)

However, challenges such as language barriers, discrimination, and the cost of education in cities were also reported as obstacles in accessing quality education.

4.3. Social Status and Empowerment:

The migration experience has led to complex changes in the social status and empowerment of Banjara women. On one hand, 72% of respondents reported feeling more independent and having greater decision-making power in their households after moving to the city (Survey data, 2024). This increased autonomy was often linked to their economic contributions and exposure to urban lifestyles.

A respondent from Kolkata reflected on this change:

"In the village, women's voices were often ignored. Here, I earn, I make decisions about my children's education, and I feel more respected in my family." (Interview respondent, Kolkata, 2024)

However, this empowerment is often accompanied by new challenges. Many women reported feeling isolated from their traditional support systems and facing discrimination in urban settings due to their ethnic identity. Table 3 presents data on the social challenges faced by Banjara women in urban areas:

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Table 3: Social Challenges Faced by Banjara Women in Urban Areas

Challenge	Percentage Reporting
Discrimination in housing	68%
Social isolation	54%
Language barriers	62%
Loss of traditional support systems	71%
Difficulty in cultural adaptation	59%

Source: Survey data collected by the author (2024)

These challenges highlight the complex nature of social transformation experienced by Banjara women in urban settings. While they gain certain freedoms and opportunities, they also face new forms of marginalization and cultural dissonance.

4.4. Cultural Identity and Adaptation:

The migration to urban centers has had a significant impact on the cultural identity of Banjara women. Many respondents reported a gradual shift away from traditional practices and attire as they adapted to urban lifestyles. Table 4 presents data on cultural practices before and after migration:

Table 4: Adherence to Traditional Cultural Practices Before and After Migration

Cultural Practice	Before Migration (%)	After Migration (%)
Wearing traditional attire	89%	37%
Speaking Banjara language	96%	68%
Practicing traditional crafts	72%	28%
Celebrating community festivals	94%	61%

Source: Survey data collected by the author (2024)

The data indicates a significant decline in the adherence to traditional practices post-migration. This change was often described as a necessary adaptation to urban life, but it also raised concerns about cultural erosion among some respondents.

A community leader in Delhi expressed this concern:

"Our women are losing touch with their roots. It's important to adapt, but we must also find ways to preserve our unique culture in the city." (Focus group participant, Delhi, 2024)

However, many women viewed this cultural adaptation positively, seeing it as a way to integrate into urban society and access better opportunities. Some have found innovative ways to maintain their cultural identity while adapting to urban life, such as organizing community events or teaching traditional crafts to their children.

4.5. Health and Well-being:

The urban environment has had mixed effects on the health and well-being of Banjara women. On one hand, 76% of respondents reported having better access to healthcare facilities in cities compared to their native villages (Survey data, 2024). This improved access has led to better maternal health outcomes and increased awareness about health issues.

However, urban living has also introduced new health challenges. Table 5 presents data on health issues reported by Banjara women in urban areas:

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Table 5: Health Issues Reported by Banjara Women in Urban Areas

Health Issue	Percentage Reporting
Respiratory problems	42%
Stress and anxiety	58%
Nutritional deficiencies	37%
Occupational health hazards	45%
Reproductive health issues	31%

Source: Survey data collected by the author (2024)

The data highlights the health challenges associated with urban living and working conditions. Many women reported working long hours in poorly ventilated spaces, leading to respiratory issues. The stress of adapting to urban life and financial pressures also took a toll on mental health.

A healthcare worker in Mumbai commented on these issues:

"We see many Banjara women suffering from stress-related ailments. The pressure to earn and adapt to city life, often without proper support systems, affects their overall well-being." (Focus group participant, Mumbai, 2024)

5. DISCUSSION:

The findings of this study reveal a complex picture of the socio-economic transformation experienced by Banjara women who have migrated from Telangana to North Indian cities. This transformation is characterized by both significant improvements in certain areas of their lives and new challenges that arise from urban living.

5.1. Economic Empowerment and Its Limitations:

The shift from primarily agricultural work to diverse urban occupations has led to increased income levels and financial independence for many Banjara women. This economic empowerment has, in turn, contributed to enhanced decision-making power within their households and communities. However, the nature of their urban employment, often in the informal sector, leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and job insecurity. The lack of formal skills and education further limits their ability to access better-paying, more secure jobs in the formal sector.[9]

These findings align with broader research on the feminization of labor in urban India, where women from marginalized communities often find themselves in precarious employment situations.[10] The challenge for policymakers is to create pathways for these women to transition into more stable and rewarding economic roles while providing social protection in their current occupations.

5.2. Educational Advancements and Persistent Barriers:

The improved access to education, both for Banjara women and their children, is a significant positive outcome of urban migration. This aligns with studies that have shown how urban environments can provide better educational opportunities for marginalized communities. [11] However, the persistence of language barriers and discrimination in educational settings highlights the need for more inclusive educational policies and practices in urban areas.

The emphasis placed on education by Banjara women for their children is particularly noteworthy, as it suggests a potential intergenerational shift in socio-economic status. This finding underscores the importance of supporting these aspirations through targeted educational interventions and support systems for migrant communities.

5.3. Social Empowerment and New Forms of Marginalization:

The increased autonomy and decision-making power reported by many Banjara women in urban settings is a positive development, challenging traditional patriarchal norms. This aligns with research on how migration can lead to the renegotiation of gender roles and power dynamics within

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families.[12] However, the social isolation and discrimination faced in urban areas present new challenges to their well-being and integration into urban society.

5.4. Challenges Faced by Migrated Banjara/Lambada Women:

Migrated Banjara/Lambada women face a complex web of interconnected challenges in their new urban environments:

- **Economic Vulnerability:** Often lacking formal education and skills, many women are forced to take up low-paying and precarious jobs in the informal sector, such as domestic work, construction labor, or street vending. They often experience exploitation, low wages, and lack of job security.
- **Social Exclusion and Discrimination:** As a marginalized community with a distinct cultural identity, they often face prejudice and discrimination based on their ethnicity, language, and traditional attire. This can lead to social isolation and limited access to resources and opportunities.
- **Access to Education and Healthcare:** Limited access to quality education and healthcare remains a significant hurdle. Language barriers, financial constraints, and lack of awareness about available services restrict their access to these essential amenities. This has a cascading effect on their children's education and overall well-being.
- **Housing and Living Conditions:** Many migrated families live in informal settlements or slums, facing inadequate housing, sanitation, and basic amenities. These conditions exacerbate their vulnerability to health risks and other social problems.
- **Cultural Preservation and Identity:** Maintaining their cultural identity and traditions in a new urban environment presents another challenge. The pressure to assimilate, coupled with the lack of community spaces and resources, can threaten the continuity of their cultural practices.

5.5. Triumphs and Resilience:

Despite the daunting challenges, Banjara/Lambada women have demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability in their new urban environments. Their experiences highlight their agency and strength in carving out new lives for themselves and their families:

- **Entrepreneurial Spirit:** Many women have displayed entrepreneurial skills, establishing small businesses, engaging in street vending, or developing craft-based enterprises. This allows them to generate income and achieve a degree of economic independence.[13]
- **Community Networks and Support Systems:** Migrated communities often form strong support networks, providing emotional, social, and financial assistance to each other. These networks play a crucial role in navigating the challenges of urban life and preserving their cultural identity.[14]
- **Negotiating Urban Spaces:** These women demonstrate remarkable adaptability in navigating the complexities of urban spaces, learning new languages, adapting to new social norms, and accessing available resources.[15]
- **Preserving Cultural Heritage:** Despite the pressures of assimilation, they actively strive to preserve their cultural heritage through traditional music, dance, attire, and celebrations. This reinforces their sense of identity and belonging.[16]
- **Advocacy and Empowerment:** Some women have emerged as community leaders and advocates, raising their voices against discrimination and advocating for their rights and access to resources.[17]

6. Policy Implications and Recommendations:

Addressing the challenges faced by migrated Banjara/Lambada women requires a multi-pronged approach that recognizes their specific needs and vulnerabilities. Policy interventions should focus on:

- *Skill Development and Employment Generation:* Providing skill development programs tailored to their needs and linking them with employment opportunities in the formal sector can enhance their economic empowerment.

- ***Access to Education and Healthcare:*** Ensuring access to quality education for their children and providing accessible healthcare services is crucial for their overall well-being. This includes addressing language barriers and cultural sensitivities.
- ***Housing and Basic Amenities:*** Improving their living conditions by providing access to affordable housing, sanitation, and basic amenities is essential for enhancing their quality of life.
- ***Social Inclusion and Combating Discrimination:*** Promoting social inclusion through awareness campaigns, combating discrimination, and creating platforms for intercultural dialogue can foster a more inclusive urban environment.
- ***Empowering Women's Leadership:*** Supporting and strengthening women's leadership within the community can amplify their voices and empower them to advocate for their rights and needs.

7. CONCLUSION:

The migration of Banjara/Lambada women from Telangana to North Indian cities presents a complex narrative of challenges and triumphs. While they face significant hurdles in navigating new urban environments, including economic vulnerability, social exclusion, and limited access to essential services, their resilience, adaptability, and entrepreneurial spirit are equally remarkable. By understanding their lived experiences, we can develop more effective policies and programs that address their specific needs and empower them to achieve their full potential. This research serves as a call for greater attention to the unique struggles and remarkable contributions of this marginalized community, advocating for a more inclusive and equitable urban landscape. Further research is needed to explore the intergenerational impact of migration on Banjara/Lambada families and the evolving dynamics of their cultural identity in urban spaces.

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