Masan Jogis of Shevgaon, Maharashtra: An Ethnographic Study

Abstract

This is an ethnographic study of the Masan Jogi community of Shevgaon in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra. Masan Jogis, who have been categorised as a Nomadic Tribe in the state, trace their origin to Telngana in Andhra Pradesh. They lived in the Kingdom Hyderabad under Nizam which now stands divided among the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra. Traditionally, they lived in cremation grounds where they attended to funerals and were paid in cash and kind for their services. They also went on begging expeditions seeking alms from villagers. For a long time after their migration to Maharashtra, they were mostly confined to a few districts in Marathwada region. During the draught of 1972 they spread to several other districts in western Maharashtra in search of various livelihood options. They live in settlements of different sizes, usually on the fringes of large villages and new townships and speak a mixture of Marathi, Telugu, Urdu, Hindi and Kannada. One of the largest settlements of Masan Jogis is in Shevgaon, District Ahmednagar.

I came to know the Masan Jogi community almost unexpectedly while I was involved with development programmes for the marginalised groups in Shevgaon. My curiosity grew as my association with the community grew over the years. I was faced with many questions about their origin, occupation, culture, social organisations, and the Jat Panchayat. Except for the few references, I could not find any literature on the community. I found the community is not only marginalised socially, but it also unknown to the scholarly circles. This intrigued me and thus I decided to do a formal research on the community. The questions that emerged while I was in the field as part of my curiosity were organised into the research questions from which the research objective were derived. As an exploratory research that is based on the firsthand experience under the purview of qualitative research paradigm, the ethnographic study was undertaken.
A pilot visit to Masan Jogi settlements in various districts of Marathwada and Western Maharashtra regions was carried out to assess the overall situation of the community at the initial stage of the research. This provided the study a wider perspective.

A formal period of fieldwork was carried out with participant observation as a major tool of data collection. Informal interview, casual conversations, solicited and unsolicited conversations were other tools used for data collection. The qualitative data was analysed to construct the ethnographic study of the Masan Jogi community. The Thesis has been divided into eight chapters as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Masan Jogis: Etymology, History and Mythology
3. Occupation and Livelihood
4. ‘Religion’: Myths Beliefs and Practices
5. Social Organisations: Family, Marriage and Kinship
6. The Cultural Heritage of Masan Jogis
7. The Jat Panchayat
8. Summary and Conclusion

The introduction consists of the general description on Masan Jogis the place and the context of the study. It delves further on the antecedents of the research, the research questions and research objectives of the thesis and finally it states the methodology of the research. As an ethnographic research, the study uses qualitative research paradigm and participant observation, qualitative interview, casual conversations and solicited and unsolicited conversations as tool for data collection. The second chapter analyses the etymology and the documented and oral myths prevalent in the community, to explore the origin of the community. It also traces the references to the community in historical and anthropological literature. The third chapter deals with Masan Jogis’ occupation and livelihood. In the first part it deals with begging and attending at the cremation ground as the traditional occupations of community. The second part of the chapter focuses on the newly acquired occupations by the community members; thereby it assesses the
occupational mobility of In the Masan Jogi community. Their religious practices need to be understood from the perspective of their devotion to various deities, beliefs and myths, an analysis of which is presented in the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter explores the Masan Jogi social organisation by exploring their family organisation, marriage practices and kinship system. As a community that has migrated from Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh, Masan Jogis have assimilated many Maharashtrian cultural elements. However, they also have retained some of the cultural elements of the land of their origin. The continuity and change in the cultural elements of the Masan Jogi community forms the theme of sixth chapter. As the sovereign institution of the Masan Jogi community, the Jat panchayat maintains the identity of the community and mediates transactions and resolves disputes among its members. The seventh chapter describes the structure and functioning of this unique body. Finally, the eighth chapter summarises the main findings of the study and makes some observations about the identity of the community.