Chapter 2
Masan Jogis: Etymology, History and Mythology

Communities and groups constantly evolve over time. In the pre-industrial era, the pace of change was so slow that communities hardly differed over the generations; life was rooted in the routine. It is no more so. The situation has undergone radical transformation due to a variety of reasons including technological revolution. Around the world social and cultural life has been changing rapidly. In the globalised world, communities cannot choose to remain in isolation. The process of ‘cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization’ (Appadurai 1990: 295) is constantly at work. Studying a community in such context necessitates us to locate it in the larger context of its social history so that we can have a better understanding of the socio-cultural changes that it is undergoing. This task is easy when there are written records, census reports or anthropological studies are available on that community. But there are some marginalised communities on which no records or studies are available; if available, the material would be too scanty and scattered. Studying such a community is obviously an uphill task; its social history has to be reconstructed by resorting to myths, documented and oral. Documented myths are found in studies, records and anthropological surveys; oral myths will have to be collected by the researcher during his fieldwork.

Our endeavour in this chapter is to understand the social history of Masan Jogis. There are extremely limited sources available on this community. In order to reconstruct its social history we have to rely heavily on the myths, both written and oral. We begin with etymology; the very name of the community signifies its occupation and gives its members an identity. Etymology of community’s name is likely to provide us ‘a clue to some understanding of the process by which distinction between groups came to be formulated’ (Ghurye 1961: 20) and some idea as to how the community came to acquire or get assigned its name. We then move on to find out whether the community has been referred to anywhere in the documented history. Finally, we analyse the myths about the origin and evolution of the community.
The name of the community, Masan Jogi, consists of two words, Masan and Jogi. The word masan comes from the Sanskrit word smashana. Horace Wilson’s Sanskrit-English Dictionary (1815/1979) mentions that the word ‘shma’ is substituted for ‘shava’, a corpse and ‘shan’, for ‘shayaan’, a place for repose; therefore, shmashan is a place where corpses are laid to rest. ‘It is a place where dead bodies are buried or burned, cemetery or graveyard’ (ibid.: 731). The Amar Kosh, one of the oldest Sanskrit lexicons available in the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune, explains the word smashana similarly in its Dvitiya Kand, verse 118 (Amarsinha 1882: 208). The word ‘Jogi’ comes from ‘Yogi’, which means one who has renounced everything in the world and has taken to practices of Yoga; an ascetic. The appellation is not limited to Hindu Sanyasis, but it is also applied to a sect among Indian Muslims who, apart from other things, practice Yoga, and are called ‘Jafar Jogis’ (Ghurye 1953: 60).

The word ‘Jogi’ refers to ‘a class of religious mendicants [who] prefer to call themselves Jogi, Joger, Sanjogi and Kattunaicken, Sozhiakar or Jogula’ (Singh 2006: 277). The Global Encyclopedia of the South Indian Dalits’ Ethnography mentions that ‘the word jogi is metamorphic from jole which, in Telugu, means a piece of cloth, the four corners of which are tied together in a knot. This large, makeshift pouch was used by beggars to store what was given to them’ (ibid.). As far as, the description of the pouch is concerned, it corresponds to the pouch used by Masan Jogis for begging. However, this reference in the Encyclopedia is to Jogis in general and not specifically to the Masan Jogi community.

In Telugu, Masan Jogis are called Katipapla. The word is derived from Kati meaning burial ground and kapla (which later turned into papla in the local usage) meaning to guard’ [sic.] (Kameswara Rao 1982: 190) So, Katipapla means those who guard the graveyard or cremating ground (cemetery for convenience). This meaning is endorsed when Masan Jogis are categorised under ‘watch and ward’ communities in Andhra Pradesh. Thus, they are the guardians or attendants of cemetery. When there is a death in the village ‘the katipapla man goes to the burial
ground and lies in the grave at the arrival of the dead body. He will get up from the grave only when he is paid in cash’ (ibid.).

The name Jogi is also associated with magic or other allied occupation people are engaged in. ‘The Garpagari Jogi derives the name of his sub-caste from his occupation for using magic to avert hailstorms. The Manihari Jogis are peddlers selling beads’ (Ghurye 1961: 37). Therefore, Masan Jogis could also be people who are attached to cemeteries and who have some allied occupation. The name Jogi does not necessarily apply here as Yogis who practise Yoga. In fact, some Masan Jogis do practise magic healing and, like mendicants, seek alms and beg for grain or for food.

**Masan Jogis in History and Anthropology**

As a marginalised community, Masan Jogis seem to have been marginalised in academic writings too. There are very few references to it in history and in anthropology in India. Gazetteers are silent about them and census reports make no mention about the community. The ‘People of India’ project of the Anthropological Survey of India has very brief information about them. There is a community known as Doms who are also associated with cemeteries. The Doms in Varanasi are well known ‘funeral attendants’ (Fuchs 1981: 41). They are spread in many states in North India. In Devgiri, a Kumaon village in Uttar Pradesh, their ‘main modes of livelihood are agriculture’ (Kapur 1988: 32). They are also found in Bihar, Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka engaged in such work as sweeping, scavenging, dancing, weaving, cane work, and leather work, etc. Some of the Dom communities are in the villages while others are still nomadic (Ghurye 1932/1969: 317–18). Many of them have taken up various occupations and speak diverse languages and dialects of the geographical region they live in. Doms resemble Masan Jogis on many counts: ‘The Dom supplies five logs of wood, which he lays in order on the ground as a foundation for the pyre, … the Dom brings a wisp of lighted straw which the chief mourner applies to the wood. In Hindu belief, only a Dom can provide fire for this purpose’ (Crooke 1907: 102). Both Doms and Masan Jogis claim income of the cemetery; collect fees for
the services rendered for funerals and take the articles placed on the corpse. As a community in the same occupation, Masan Jogis are apparently not mentioned in connection with the Doms anywhere.

On the other hand, Masan Jogis refer to one Dombya Mahar, who worked at the cremation ground in Varanasi before the time of Raja Harishchandra. He, however, belonged to the Mahar community. Dombya is a crude form of Dom. Doms are also known as Domba in some places. Having inherited the work of Dombya Mahar, Masan Jogis remember him with gratitude and honour him as their Guru.

According to Sayed Sirajul Hassan, Masan Jogi community originated from low class begging communities such as ‘Munnars and Mutrasis and other Telaga castes’, they are ‘religious jugglers and conjurors who beg alms by exhibiting wonderful tricks of jugglery’ (1920/1999: 503). These are socially lower groups in Andhra Pradesh with varied occupations. Going by this version, Masan Jogi is one of the mendicant communities.

Stephen Fuchs enumerates various low caste communities in his book titled ‘The Bottom of India Society: The Harijan and other Low Castes’ (1981). Of special significance to us is his reference to Masan Jogis: ‘Another section of the Mahars is specialised in juggling and magic performances. This clan is called Masanjogi’ [sic] (ibid.: 139). Fuchs describes Masan Jogi social status as lower than that of the Mahar. About their profession he says, ‘They seem to have a special connection with the graveyard (masan) in which they should also cook their food. At last they should light the fire with a stick taken from a funeral pyre. They are entitled to appropriate the sheet which covered the corpse at the funeral’ (ibid.). Fuchs further mentions about magic healing of Masan Jogis, he adds, ‘They are supposed to be able to cure the sick simply by invocations and magic, but also to cast spells on certain people’ (ibid.: 140).

A report in The Hindu, a national daily newspaper, reveals that Masan Jogis, known as the Katipapla community in Telugu, is one of the ‘sub-castes of Buduga Jungam community, a scheduled caste. Other sub-castes are Gosai, Bala Santhoshi, Budbudkala’ (The Hindu, Online Edition, 1 March 2008). The newspaper further reports that Masan Jogis have taken to varied
occupations. Some of them are magic healers while the others perform Kirtan (devotional singing) on eve of the tenth or thirteenth day of death of a person. The Kirtan (hymns) consists of devotional songs, adoring god to seek his assistance in releasing the soul of the deceased person from all its bondages.

According to Shri Laximan Ghansarwad, who represented Masan Jogi community in Nomadic Tirbes movement to gain reservations for the community, Masan Jogi community is a sub-group of the Gollewar community. There are twelve and half sub-groups of the Gollewars, Ghansarwad explained. Each of these twelve sub-groups is an independent community by itself. The last half group is Masan Jogis. This means Masan Jogis are half-brothers to Gollewars. ‘Gollewars are like our elder brothers’, Ghansarwad said with confidence. He further added, saying, ‘whenever we are in need of anything, we approach them [the Gollewars] as our own and they too oblige us in the spirit of an elder brother.’

This can be better explained with the concept known as ‘Magte-Jogte’ in rural Maharashtra. Magte is a Marathi term meaning ‘ask for’ and Jogte means a sort of right to seek alms from or a right to go religious begging. The newly evolved sub-group is half-brother, commonly referred as ‘younger brothers’ to the group of their origin and has a right to ask for things they need from their ‘elder brothers’ the group of their origin. The ‘elder brother’ gladly oblige the ‘younger brothers’ for they consider as their duty to take care of them. For instance Dakalwar is a sub-group of Matang community. Dakalwars have right to ask for food and shelter from the Matang community which the latter gladly and dutifully provides. For Daakalwars (younger brothers), Matangs are their elder brothers who take care of their needs when required. The relationship between Gollewar and Masan Jogi community falls into similar category. Gollewar comes from ‘Godlawaru’, those who graze cows, Gollawaru in Telugu means cow herd; or Gurlawaru, who are shepherds. Many of the Gollewar community people have taken to tending sheep.

Some communities have right to beg for food or for food grains from the annual yield. These communities do not provide any services to the villages. The agricultural communities feel obliged and duty-bound (dharma as often referred to) to share their annual yield with those
community dependant on them. These are itinerant communities. ‘If we do not give them alms in the form of grain or money, where else can they go’, is an expression often heard in the villages of Maharashtra. Masan Jogis as a community of dependants are given alms.

**Masan Jogis: The Origin Myths**

Myths are ‘thought fossils’ (Iyer and Ratnam 1961: 201) that reveal the story of cultures and civilisations through allegories and symbols. The origin and existence of a community often comes in the form of myth. Myths as cosmogonical account explain creation of the world. Bronislaw Malinoswki (1948) studied myths of different cultural communities and found their interconnections with the social order, social institutions, belief systems and various other aspects of social and cultural lives of the people. Myth, he says, is ‘not merely a story told but a reality lived’ (ibid.: 100). Early on in anthropology, Malinowski realised the vital importance of myth in the study of communities. That is why he gave myth ‘a central position in modern ethnography’ (Harwood 1976: 784).

Analysing myths is another way of studying the culture of a community. The French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss recommends structural analysis of myths to understand their meaning. He takes myth as a special category of language which has ‘Constitutive Units’ and ‘Gross Constitutive Units’ which are time referents. If treated independently, these Units are diachronic in nature and fail to make meaning. When taken together, they function as synchronic and diachronic at the same time, bringing out the meaning of the myth. Based on this methodological axiom, Levi-Strauss says, myth ‘explains the present and the past as well as the future’ (1955: 430). Similarly, Laura Cruz and Willem Fijhoff studied interconnection of history and myths of Lower Countries in Holland. They agree that myths can be studied from various perspectives and propose juxtaposing myth with history to provide an effective model to ‘understand the past and how it has changed over time’ (2009: 4).

In the absence of any historical account, we are per force required to study the myths of the Masan Jogi community to know how the members of this community explain their roots and how
they see their life. We broadly distinguish two categories of myths of this community, the documented myths and the oral myths.

**Documented Myths**

There are few mythological stories found on the origin of the community. The two myths on the origin of Masan Jogi community that are found in books are given below.

1. **A Myth of a Wandering Man.** This myth is found in the *People of India, Maharashtra* (Volume 3) (K.S. Singh 2004: 1443). According to the narrative, the community took up to begging in order to comply with the wishes of Parvati, the consort of Shiva, one of the gods who constitute the trinity in the Hindu pantheon. However, ‘One man from this community entered a burial ground. A female corpse got back her life. The man married and gave rise to progeny’ (ibid.) that later grew into a community.

   This brief episode provides us some basic information about the community. The wandering man represents the itinerant nature of the community. The community seeks alms and begs food and grain. Marriage of the wandering man with the woman who came alive as he entered the burial ground indicates the connection of the community with the burial or cremation ground. It also points to community’s origin.

2. **Death of a Munnur Boy.** This short myth is found in *The Castes and Tribes of H.E.H The Nizam Dominion* written by Sayed Sirajul Hassan (1920/1999: 504). It is as follows:

   Once upon a time a Munnur boy died and his parents, being too poor to defray his burial expenses, were in great distress. Shiva and Parvati, happening to visit the place, took pity on them, recalled the boy to life and made him a Masan Jogi, or the guardian saint of the cremation ground. Since that time, it is said that the descendants of the boy have claimed the burial clothes of corpses.

   Munnur is a lower caste group in Andhra Pradesh; it is ‘mun-nur’ in Telugu, which means three hundred. The community has three hundred sub-groups. This myth narrates how Masan Jogis apparently originated from the Munnur community.
The Myths Analysed

We need to analyse the documented myths of Masan Jogi origin found in the books to understand their origin. These myths are united in the common aim of narrating the tale of the origin of Masan Jogi community; they are nothing but two different versions of the same story. They are simple, short and have few characters. Levi-Strauss who analysed four native myths from Pacific coast of Canada, proposed two sets of aims:

First, to isolate and compare various levels on which the myth evolves: geographic, economical, sociological and cosmological—each one of these levels, together with symbolism proper to it, being seen as transformation of an underlying logical structure common to all of them. And, second, to compare the different versions of the myth and to look for the meaning of the discrepancies between them, or between some of them; for, since they all come from the same people (but are recorded in different part of their territory), these variations cannot be explained in terms of dissimilar beliefs, languages or institutions {Levi- Strauss 1969: 1).

There is no uniform or a standardised method to analyse myths. Here we follow the Levi-Straussian method with some modification. We divide the analysis into two parts. In the first part, each myth is divided further into sections. Levi-Strauss calls it levels, which, according him, are geographical, cosmological, economic and social. The myths of Masan Jogi origin do not describe many geographical details; on the other hand, the narrations unfold particular location in common. Therefore, we take ‘location’ as a common aspect of analysis instead of ‘geography’. In explaining the origin, some elaborate myths include glanderous description of the universe, the world and the celestial as well as early beings. A ‘Cosmological’ level is considered in analysing such myths. Again, the myths of Masan Jogi origin do not indulge in such lengthy description involving the universe or the world at large. On the contrary, these myths are very brief in narration; they focus on human groups or communities. Therefore, we consider ‘anthropology’ as another level of analysis than ‘cosmology’. The section or level as ‘economy’ and ‘sociology’ occur in the myths of Masan Jogi origin. We take them as dimensions of the analysis. Each of these corresponding levels or sections will be compared and contrasted in the second part bringing out the discrepancies which also play a role in deriving the meaning of the myths.
Levels in the Myths

Myth 1

Location: The location mentioned in this myth is a burial ground where the wandering man enters. The myth does not describe the cemetery further. I have visited burial grounds, both in Andhra Pradesh and in Maharashtra. These are deserted areas where no one ventures to alone except on the occasion of a funeral. It is a common belief among the people that ghosts and the spirits of the dead move freely in the burial ground. They haunt anyone who enters there in.

Economy: The myth does not directly describe the financial condition of the person who enters the burial ground. However, a wandering man may not be an affluent person, so, he may not be rich.

Sociology: The wandering man who enters the burial ground marries a female corpse that comes to life; it indicates the community’s association with dead bodies and the cemeteries since its origin. The man takes up the occupation of being at the cemetery and begging, at the behest of goddess Parvati; it signifies the occupation of the community.

Anthropology: As asked by Parvati the consort of Shiva to take up the occupations, the man and the man, thereby the community depended on fully. The community apparently has attached spiritual value of virakti, non-interest in material assets and the belief in everything as momentary. The community lived on the alms or on food begged from the villages around. The marriage with the female corpse come alive symbolises a marriage between a man who strayed from his community and a dead woman who came alive.

Myth 2

Location. Though the location is not clearly mentioned in the myth, from the circumstances mentioned therein, we can easily infer it. It is the place where the family lived – it either could be a shack or hut; because, prior to funeral, the body of a deceased person is usually kept at the place where he lived. It can be further inferred from the description that the lone family lived away from any human habitat.
Economy. Taken today’s situation into consideration, funerals are simple in the rural areas; it hardly costs anything. In earlier days funerals were still simpler. The economic condition of the family is stated to be so bad that it does not have money for the simplest of funeral.

Sociology. It is said that the boy is of a family belonging to Munnar, a community of a lower social status. The situation is distressful, due to financial situation, grief and due to absence of the community members on the occasion. A boy, a male progeny of a lonesome family is dead. The death of a male child in the lonesome family again indicates a ‘death’ or an extinction of a community.

Anthropology. The desperate cry for help in order to perform funeral, points out to the prevalent practice of a funeral rite and ritual which required to be paid. Such rites and ritual only exists in social communities. Usually, relatives and friends gather on the occasion of death, it is they who take initiatives to carry out the funeral of the deceased. The family appears a lonesome one showing absence of the community. The boy was made a Masan Jogi, the guardian of the cremation grounds and his descendants the boy, as the narration goes, laid claim on the clothes of the corpses. It confirms the traditional occupation of the community. It also portrays the community as a patrilineal community.

Levels Compared and Contrasted

The location described in the two myths is a deserted place. Burial ground mentioned in the first myth is a place where no one ventures alone. Generally, people enter burial ground only on the occasion of the death of a relative or friend. The location in the second myth is the place where the Munnar boy who has died and his parents are unable to meet the funeral expenses. Usually dead bodies are placed in the house where the family lives. Therefore, the location of the second myth is the house of the boy. When someone dies, relatives and friends come forward to console the grief stricken family and to conduct funeral rite. The myth does not mention any relatives and friends. It could be that the family was away from other human beings. It indicates absence of a community. Therefore, the family is lonesome.
The wandering man does not appear to be an affluent person. The financial condition of the Munnar family is so bad that, it does not have money for the funeral of their son. In both the myths the person mentioned appears to be a member of a subsistence economy.

The wandering man marries the woman who has come alive. Their descendants came to be known as Masan Jogis. The second myth clearly mentions that the descendants were earning their livelihood by begging and claiming the cloths of the corpses. In both the cases the occupation of the new generation is connected to dead or burial ground.

In the first myth we do not know the community to which the wandering man belongs; neither do we know the community of the woman who came back to life. They seem to belong to two different occupational communities; their progeny accepted the new appellation that usually goes with the occupation. Therefore, a new community has begun from the intermarriage of persons of two different occupational communities. The second myth does not mention marriage; but, surely, it is assumed, because the myth later mentions about their descendants who took up begging and claiming the belongings of the corpses. In this case too, a new community has begun from the intermarriage between a man from Munnar community and a woman from an unknown community. Therefore, both the myths narrate the origin of Masan Jogi community as due to intermarriage between communities. The myths also refer to the dead coming alive. In the first myth the woman comes alive and in the second myth it is the man who is brought back to life. These events appear to refer to the state of the communities to which the persons belonged. It indicates that the communities are either dead or extinct. It is the reason why the person had to marry someone from another community.

The origin of the community may be through contracting marriage alliance with someone from an unknown community or by change of occupation. Both these possibilities are strongly expressed in the myths.
Summary of the Analysis

The wandering man in the first myth represents the wandering nature of the community. The circumstances in the second myth, the death of the boy and inability of his parents to meet the expenses for his funeral, appear unusual in the social context of any community. When someone in a family dies, the immediate family members are grief stricken. Thus, the close relatives take initiatives to make arrangements for the funeral. Going by the narration, there is absence of the community; therefore, the task of making arrangements for the funeral of their son has fallen on the parents. The inability of the parents to meet the expenses for the funeral also shows their economic condition. Their distress is, therefore, not only their poverty or grief, but also the absence of relatives or community members. It is a lone family. The new community that came into existence was a patriarchal community. Because the myth mentions that, it was a death of a boy; a male child who was made a Masan Jogi after he was brought back to life by Shiva and Parvati and whose descendants claimed the burial clothes of the corpses.

The myth does narrate the origin of Masna Jogi community as having evolved from the Munnur community, a community of lower social status. It is a patriarchal community assigned to guard cremation ground.

We summarise the analysis of the myths and bring out is the meaning they have for understanding the origin of Masna Jogi community. Though to communities of lower social status, we do not know for sure the community to which the wandering man belongs; neither do we know the community to which the woman who came back to life belongs. It indicates that they are from two different occupational communities and a new community has emerged from their marriage. The fact that they are given a new occupations to beg and be associated with burial ground, both of them belong to two different occupational communities. A new occupational community emerged from the marriage of the two from two different communities. Though their occupation is not mentioned, the occupation of their progeny is associated with begging and burial or cremation ground. It is but evident that the new community has evolved from the intermarriage of persons from different occupational communities. Thus, we can say: the Masan
Jogi community has evolved from different occupational groups and is lower in social status and is an economically backward community.

The Oral Myth

During my fieldwork, I spoke to many Masan Jogs in Shevgaon and elsewhere too. I had an opportunity to meet Masan Jogs from Aurangabad, Nanded, Parbhani and many other places in Maharashtra. Whenever there was a reference to the origin of their community came in our conversation, Masan Jogs invariably narrated a version of the myth of Raja Harishchandra. This myth is popular among Masan Jogs; I found every Masan Jogi narrating it with great interest. Often I noticed how their tone of voice changed when they recounted the trials of the Raja who always stood by his principle of truthfulness and justice. ‘After all he was a king’ is a common expression always heard at the specific place in the course of the narration. It usually comes when the Raja takes up the work in the cemetery in Varanasi. Masan Jogs marvel at the coincident, how the Raja, of all the places, finds work at the cemetery. He takes up the work that is considered repugnant by everyone, and confers dignity to it. Masan Jogs feel immensely fortunate in inheriting the work that Raja Harishchandra once did; they feel proud to carry on a royal legacy.

King Harishchandra was the twenty-eighth king of Suryavamsha (the Solar race), and son of Trisanku. He is held in high esteem for his truthfulness and justice. There are several legends about him. The Aitareya Brahmana tells the story of his purchasing Sunahsephas to be offered up as a vicarious sacrifice for his own son. The Mahabharata relates that he was raised to the heaven of Indra for his performance of the Rajasuya sacrifice and for his unbounded generosity. The Markandeya Purana expands the story to a considerable length.

The myth of Raja Harishchandra is popular across all categories of people in India. The gripping story has been a theme of many kirtans (devotional singing) and plays. In fact, one of the first motion pictures in Marathi was filmed on the story of Raja Harishchandra in 1913. Dadasheb Phalke, the pioneer in motion pictures in India could not get anyone to act in the movie, as in
those days acting was an unacceptable profession. Phalke named his studio as ‘Harishchandra’s Factory’, and those who came in the studio to play various roles would tell others that they were employees of the ‘factory’. The title of the film was ‘Raja Harishchandra’ was well received by the audience everywhere. It was so much appreciated that it had to be dubbed into several languages. Though old, the film still attracts crowds because of its theme, the story of Raja Harishchandra, the king who adhered to truth and justice. Picture 1.1 shows Raja Harishchandra in Varanasi, a scene from the motion picture ‘Raja Harishchandra’.

Picture 1.1: A scene from the motion picture ‘Raja Harishchandra’


Well-known writer R.K. Narayan has written the story of Raja Harishchandra in a lucid style for English readers (Narayan, 1964/1987: 217–28). Following is the paraphrased version of Narayan’s narration mostly using his own language. Narayan’s narration begins with two sages, Vasishta and Viswamitra, discussing Harishchandra in their heavenly abode as he had become synonymous with steadfastness and adherence to truth at any cost. Their contention was that such fanaticism always invites a challenge, because human nature protests against too much perfection.
Their view was that human mind feels at home only when it detects slight imperfections. Finally, the arguments rose to the peak. Vasishta was appreciative of Harishchandra; he admired the fine qualities and perfection in him. Whereas, Viswamitra challenged Vasishta’s claims and appealed to gods and the whole assembly of celestial beings that the truthfulness of Harishchandra be testified. The whole assembly approved of his appeal by nodding in favour of Viswamitra.

Thus, Viswamitra set about his mission with zest and tried in various ways to provoke a conflict between himself and Harishchandra. Viswamitra disguised himself as a woman named ‘Siddhi’ who was in deep grief caused by a sage in his bid to conquer her which would enable him to walk on water, float in air, travel through various planes, transmute, transmigrate, and so on. Harishchandra searched for the sage and requested him to stop his austere meditation to conquer ‘Siddhi’. The sage heeded to the request of the king.

Then Viswamitra took the form of a wild strange beast that invaded the city and was wrecking everything in its way. No one could control the beast. Harishchandra himself decided to take on the beast. After half a day’s search he detected the beast. It was elusive and extremely cunning. The king and host of his army were exhausted. One by one and in groups they fell back, and finally the chase brought the king into a thick forest and the beast vanished from his view. The king sat on a boulder, under a blazing sun, footsore and thirsty and fatigued. He felt defeated; now he craved for a little shade and a drink of water. There appeared before him a venerable old man, radiant and saintly, who understood how thirsty the king was. The old man, actually disguised Viswamitra himself, offered the king water and a basketful of fruits. Having overwhelmed by the action of the old man, the king wanted to gift him something in gratitude. Harishchandra requested the sage to ask for anything he wanted to which he would gladly oblige. The old man asked for the entire kingdom, with all its contents, the treasury, the ornaments, including the ornaments and dresses his wife and son wore. And he asked the king to leave the capital at once. The king agreed to everything. He returned to the capital only to wind up his affairs as a king. He soon divested himself of every possession; his wife, Chandramati, followed suit, and his son was
stripped of his earrings. Viswamitra watched carefully to see no treasure was taken out. The people were in grief and followed their king through the streets.

Later, Viswamitra added that the gift must be accompanied with _dakshina_ to make it complete. He calculated a huge sum to be paid as _dakshina_. The truthful king agreed to give the sage the _dakshina_ too. Since Harishchandra owned nothing, he assured the sage that he would earn the amount and give it to him. The sage granted him thirty days for the purpose. Harishchandra with his wife and son set his course in the direction of Kashi (Varanasi), a neutral city owned by god Iswara himself, where he could live in the charity houses that abounded all along the river course and on alms distributed at the temple gate. His wife and son shared his trials without a murmur.

After twenty-nine days passed uneventfully in Kashi, as they sat on the river steps, staring on the brilliant stream, Viswamitra appeared again, reminding the king that there left only a day to pay the _dakshina_.

Viswamitra now appeared as a Brahmin, looking out for a good woman who can do household work. He offered to buy Chandramati, wife of Harishchandra. Chandramati persuaded her husband, asking him to sell her to the Brahmin to pay off the debt. The son too followed his mother and asked the Brahmin to buy him for his worth to help his father. Having sold his wife and son, Harishchandra collected eleven crores and handed it to the creditor, who waited beside him with a ruthless determination. After receiving the eleven crores in gold, the sage said that there was still a balance left. He asked the king whether he would be able to pay it before sunset the next day. He also told the king that if he was unable to fulfil the promise he should say so. If there were dues it needed to be paid, said Harishchandra; and he agreed to pay back the amount without any excuse.

At this moment Viswamitra appeared in the form of a fierce person from the Chandala caste. He claimed to be the chief of the Chandalas, in charge of all the cremation grounds. The chief wanted a man to work for him in the cremation ground. He offered a sum which was just enough
to complete the payment due to Viswamitra. Viswamitra accepted the money and left. The Chandala master assigned Harishchandra to various tasks at the cremation ground.

The situation with Chandramati was not much different. After she left Harishchandra, her only consolation was that her son was with her. She had to work from early morning till late at night. She could find the time to have a word with him only late at night as they lay on their mats. The son was often out of sight, as he was mostly used as an errand boy.

One afternoon the boy was sent to the forest to gather banyan twigs for the sacrificial fire, and he had not come home by evening. A couple of shepherd boys said that they had seen a boy dead under a banyan tree apparently bitten by cobra. On hearing this Chandramati burst into a loud wail involuntarily and pleaded with her master to be allowed to see the body of the boy lying under the tree in the forest. Her master reluctantly granted her the permission to go see the body of the boy after she finished her work, that is, almost in the middle of the night. She finished all her work and went to the forest at night alone. As soon as she saw the dead body, she recognised that it was her son and began to wail aloud. Seeing a woman wailing in the middle of the night in the forest, the men on patrolling duty took her for a witch and thought she had kidnapped the child and killed him. They bound her with ropes and took her to their chief, who happened to be the Chandala, Harischandra’s master. He summoned Harishchandra, his servant, and asked him to take the woman to the cremation ground and cut-off her head to teach a lesson to all those practising witchcraft. Harishchandra pleaded with his master to ask him to do anything but to harm or kill a woman. The Chandala reminded Harishchandra his contract and made to obey and to carry out the orders. Being helpless, Harishchandra took upon himself to complete the task without any feelings.

Harishchandra went through his duty blindly, shutting his eyes, literally, to the person before him, benumbing his mind to everything around him with a deliberate effort. To the appointed spot he went with his sword sharpened. Chandramati knelt before him. It was a dark hour and he could not see clearly. He wept his heart out and prayed to the heavens to be forgiven.
Before anything happened, the woman pleaded Harishchandra to allow her to cremate the body of her son before she died. Harishchandra conceded to her request and asked her to pay the tax before cremating the body of her son. The woman again pleaded saying that she did not have any money or valuables to give for taxes. Harishchandra pointed out the gold chain around her neck and told the lady to surrender it for the tax. At this, Chandramati instantly realised that it was no one else than her husband. For, she had been given a boon at birth that the sacred gold thali around her neck would not be visible to anyone except her husband. When they recognised each other, they decided to burn themselves together on the same pyre built for their child; there was no meaning in existence any more. Hardly had they set foot in the pyre when the gods in heaven realised that the limits had been reached in the trial of this hardy soul. Flowers rained from the heavens, the fires were put out with a rain of nectar, and voices in the heavens said, ‘Your trials have ended. May victory be yours.’

Viswamitra, the great tormentor, appeared on the scene and said, ‘Harishchandra, you have proved me wrong every time. No other creature could have borne the trials as you have. All your tormentors, the Chandala, the Brahmin, the cobra that bit your son, the wild boar, and Siddhi have all been my creations, and only acted my part or spoke my words – all intent on making you break your promise at least once. You have borne much from me. Now I give you back your son.’ The son rose to his feet as from sleep. Viswamitra asked Harishchandra to go back to his kingdom and rule it, as the great king that he was. The sage accepted the defeat gladly and prepared himself for spiritual training to acquire merit all over again from nothing. Then he surrendered all the merit and powers of his spiritual life wholeheartedly to the king.

**The Masan Jogis’ Version of the Myth**

The Masan Jogis’ version of the story differs from the original one. According to Masan Jogis, Dombya Mahar was attending at the cremation grounds when Harishchandra was sent to work there. Dombya Mahar was moved out of the work as soon as Harishchandra arrived. (We do not know for sure the further story of Dombya Mahar.) When Chandramati reached the cremation
ground with the body of her son, Harishchandra, following the norm, asked her for cremating charges though he knew that she was his wife. Masan Jogis emphasise this point saying, the king was so conscious of justice and truth that he did not spare his son from the taxes. In their story, when Chandramati tells Harishchandra that she did not have any money or valuable to pay for the tax, Harishchandra asked her to give her sari for tax. Chandramati proceeds to remove her sari and the gods intervene. It is to show that Harishchandra would go to any extent to follow truth and do justice.

Some Masan Jogis have a slightly different ending to the story. When Chandramati arrived at the cremation ground, Harishchandra recognised her but did not allow their relationship to come in the way of carrying out his duty. Chandramati too co-operated with Harishchandra in this. She knelt down before him. Harishchandra raised the sword to strike the head of Chandramati, gods held his hand. They admire his truthfulness and justice. When Harishchandra was taken into heaven, gods asked a community to take up his work and community is known as Masan Jogis.

Following their version, Masan Jogis revere Dombya Mahar. They consider him as their guru, as he was working in the cremation ground prior to the arrival of King Harishchandra. We know that there is a community called Dom, referred sometimes also as Domb or Domba, who are funeral attendants in Varanasi. Dombya Mahar was possibly a person of Mahar community who did work of a Dom. When Masan Jogis move from village to village begging, they start begging in a village with Mahar community. Or, when they have to camp in a village they choose a place near the locality of Mahar community.

Masan Jogis believe that they have inherited the occupation from King Harishchandra. Masan Jogis do not know their social origin, from which community they are evolved and how. Taking up the new occupation is the beginning of the new community for them. Therefore, whenever they are asked about their origin, they refer to king Harishchandra (Rathod 2007: 16). He stands as their model to be emulated in every way. Just as Raja Harishchandra honoured his own words Masan Jogis too honour the word of mouth. Therefore, all transactions in the community, be it money matters or marriage alliances, are carried out orally without any written document. In fact,
writing down any contract or conditions is understood as lack of trust. They are honest in their dealings. They do not envy, neither are they greedy for wealth. They keep their conscience clear. Masan Jogis often boast saying ‘our community does not indulge in three things: we do not lie, we do not steal and our women do not do shindalki [prostitution].’

Summary

Our quest of finding the social history and the origin of Masan Jogi community has lead us to explore the oral and documented sources available on that community. From the etymology we understood that the community is an ascetic community – jogis who are associated with graveyard or cremation ground. The term Masan Jogi could also be a combination of appellations of two distinctly different communities. It is possible that the community has evolved from the marriage alliances across communities. We have found very few references to Masan Jogi community in history or anthropology.

The written myths are brief without any detailed description which indicates the community’s paucity of the cultural past. The analysis of the myths shows the possibility that the community has evolved from two different occupational communities of lower social status. The occupation in the cemetery indicates the community’s lower social status.

The oral version of the myth of Raja Harishchandra that every Masan Jogi takes keen interest in narrating, attaches the noble attitude to the occupation. It provides the community the role models, Dombya Mahar who is considered as guru, and Raja Harishchandra for his commitment, truthfulness and justice. This myth directly appeals to Masan Jogis and awakens in them the dignity of their occupation. As ascetics who have renounce the material world, Masan Jogis, are the katikapla, the guardians of cemetery in Telugu, in a true sense. Be it etymology, myths, written or oral or historical references, the reference to cemetery emerges as a common denominator emphasising the occupation of the community.

The Masan Jogi version of the oral myth of Raja Harishchandra is different from what is mentioned in the ancient Hindu scriptures. Masan Jogis consider Dombya Mahar as their guru.
They feel proud to follow the legacy of Raja Harishchandra in carrying out the work in cremation ground. He is their model of truthfulness and justice. There are other stories about Masan Jogis as a sub-group of various occupational communities.

Finally, we cannot find the origin of Masan Jogi community. From all that we explored, we come to know that the Masan Jogi community may have been evolved out of intermixing of two different low-status occupational communities.