CHAPTER TWO

TRADITIONAL AND HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF THE ORIGIN OF LAMBADIES - A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The Lambadies are also known as Banjaras. They were a caste of carriers and drivers of packs of bullocks. They are also known as Charans. Most familiarly and commonly they are referred to as Banjaras by which name they prefer to be called. According to them Lambani is a name applied to them by mistake indicating that they were of an alleged division as such. Sukali (Sugali) is yet another name with which they are associated. These tribals desist this appellation. On the other hand, they would prefer to be called as Ghors. Ghor Mati and Ghor Dasi are the terms with which they refer to their fellow kinsmen. Ghor Mati, however, would indicate that they were non-Banjaras (Cf. H.V. Nanjundayya and L.K. Ananta Krishna Iyer, The Mysore Tribes and Castes, Vol. II, pp. 135 ff.).
The term Banjara is itself explained in different ways. Some equate it with vanjara meaning burners or inhabitants of woods. Some try to derive it from the Persian Biranjar - a rice carrier. Most probable derivation appears to be from the term vanja (vanik) tradesman. More plausible is the derivation from vanchara (Wanderer in the jungle) which also is derived from Sanskrit. It is interesting to note that the elderly persons of Chapancheruvu, Pallegudda and Jadavaraopalle thandas derive the word Banjara from Vanachara. It is generally agreed that these terms are used for carriers of commodities over packs of bullocks who roamed about even in forests, grain and salt carriers, Lambady being derived from lavan - traders of salt, cattle breeders and dealers. They are a wandering tribe moving from place to place, in bands, each being under a hereditary called "Naik" who expected implicit obedience from his bandsmen.

Two other interesting interpretations may also be stated. Dama Naik, a young man in Khammam derives the name Lambada from the word lamba meaning tall. According to him Banjaras are a handsome and
tall people. It is also suggested that many Lambadies in Palayampalli, Singampalli and Sugalimetta believe that the name Sugali is derived from supari, the forefathers being traders of supari.

The Lambadies or Banjaras claim their origin from a hoary past if we listen to their traditional account. It is generally agreed that they hailed from Rajasthan and belong to the Kshatriya race. We have the oral accounts from Rooplal of Mahaboobnagar and Linga Naik of Chapancheruvu thanda who outlined the story of their origin in a rather detailed fashion.

Mohammed Ghori of Afghanistan invaded India in the 12th century and defeated Prithviraj Chauhan despite stiff opposition offered by the latter. It was during this period that these Banjara Kshatriyas stood by Prithviraj Chauhan. The Ghor ordered complete annihilation of the Rajput soldiers. Naturally, the latter fled and quite a good number of them took shelter in thick forest. To cover up their identity they referred to themselves as
Banjaras or Lambadas a forest tribe. They adduce evidence in the form of a people who call themselves Chauhans suggesting close relationship with Prithviraj Chauhan. Till this point the traditional account becomes acceptable. It is possible that these had been recruited from Rajput clans or their followers who have adopted the clan-names of their masters. It has been felt that these are of mixed origin, an amalgamation of all those who have been grain carriers to the armies. Among them are also included Marathas, Mahars and such other tribes. The fact that they were nomadic constantly on move, disabling them to take their women with them in hazardous routes of the armies seem to have resulted in their admitting women besides men of course, to their caste.

To this extent the tradition about their origin seems to have a historical background. But then, myth plays its role making the account from tradition meaningless and not beyond suspicion. Quoting a passage from Dasakumara Charita of the 11th-12th century by the poet Dandi it was held by Sir H.M. Elliot that they had a historical antiquity
traced at least up to that period. Here in a reference it is said to be found of a cock fight in a Banjara camp. But Prof. Cowell opines that in the original texts there was no such reference at all to the Banjaras (Crooke: Tribes and Castes). But a number of European travellers have, in their travelogues seem to have made a mention of this community. General Briggs says that the earliest mention of these is made in the work of Mohammed Khasim Farishta, who stayed in the court of Bijapur wherein Ferishta says that in 1417 A.D., a large convoy of Banjara bullocks was seized by Khan Khanera, the brother of Sultan Feroze Shah of Bahamani who had revolted and attempted to get hold of the Bahamani throne. These people are described by Ferishta as grain merchants travelling about the country from one end of the Deccan to the other (Gen. Briggs in "Transactions of Bombay Literary Society", Vol. I).

In the Berar Census Report, 1881 the antiquity is pushed back even to the 4th century B.C. where, according to Arrian, they were leading a
wandering life dwelling in huts and letting out for hire their beasts of burden. They seem to have moved towards South India along with the Mughal army which invaded the south. It is said that these (referred to as Charans, the descendents of Mola) helped the army with their herds of pack bullocks fighting in a war-torn region by supplying a fearless and reliable transport. In the Berar Gazetteer it is stated that these people came to the Deccan with Asaf Jah (Asaf Khan), the Vazir of Shahjahan whom they accompanied carrying his provisions during his Bijapur invasion. Asaf Jah desired to keep these bullocks with his forces and so he seems to have ordered supply of water and fodder to the Bhangi and Jhungi nayaks who had with them 1,80,000 bullocks. The order was engraved on a copper-plate in golden letters and read as follows: Ranjan ka pani, Chappara ghas Dinka tin khuni maaf, Aur jahan Asaf Janka Waha Bhangi Jhungi na bail. This allowed them to take water from the pots of his followers if they could not find it elsewhere and grass from the roofs of the huts (of the soldiers) and that even if three murders per day are committed
by him they would be pardoned provided their (Bhang and Jhungi's) bullocks are found wherever his own horses were.

Along with the two there was also Bhagavandas, the Vadathyas, who desired a similar privilege. But it was turned down. He had only 52,000 bullocks with him. The first two are referred to as belonging to the Rathod clan, and a conflict between them and the Vadathyas became inevitable. Banjara bards sing of their feuds. While Bhungi Naik was returning from the Hyderabad durbar with four of his followers, Bhagavan Das and his followers fell on them and killed them. When complained, the Nizam advised them of revenge. Narayan-bhungi with a number of his followers attacked one group of Bhagavandas when the latter with as many as 100 of his followers were sacked to death. Yet another revengeful attack followed. This time the Vadathyas attacked the Rathods and seized their standard, a present from the Nizam to Bhungi. What ultimately happened is not clear from the bardic songs.
The traveller Mandelsa also writes in 1638 A.D., of their buying of wheat and rice in the markets of the Deccan towns and carrying them to the north (referred to as Hindustan) in caravans which some times had 10,000 animals. According to Abbe Dubois (Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies, p. 451) many thousands of them were employed by the English for transporting their provisions in the IV War of Mysore. Sir Arthur Wellesley also refers to their supplying his forces with food and forage.

Let us get back once again to the myth-bound tradition regarding their origin, as narrated by Ruplal and Linga Naik referred to above. Mola and Mota were servants of Lord Krishna. When Krishna foresaw his leaving this universe he invited all his followers to his chambers and to each one of them gave one Gopika to look after and enjoy family life.

But, on that occasion Mola had absented himself since he had gone out of official work. By the time he returned all the Gopikas had been handed over. The enraged Mola spoke to his Master rather harshly. But Krishna took it lightly and told him that Radha
had been reserved for him. But, he warned Mola that since she was very divine Mola had to look after her with delicacy without having sexual relationship with her. Mola willingly agreed and he and Radha lived thereafter as husband and wife. Being an acrobat himself, he trained Radha also in that art. Acrobatics now became their profession and they earned their livelihood through it.

The desire of progeny made them adopt three boys from higher castes. For this purpose they gave a performance of acrobatics in the presence of the Raja of Ramgadh, who, being pleased, permitted them to ask for any thing in the palace as a present. Astounded he was, when they asked for his son to be adopted by them. But he kept up his word. This boy came from Ramgadh and hence was named Rathod. Similarly, they received two more boys from the Rajas of Chathogadh and Pammadh whom they named respectively as Chauhan and Pamar. The three sons came of age and were to be married. In the village they were camping there lived a Brahmin who had three daughters of marriageable age. Poverty had
prevented him from celebrating their marriages. But the villagers showered abuses on him since he had allowed the daughters to grow, even after puberty, without marriage. Disgusted he went into the forest with his three daughters to abandon them there. But, as luck would have it, Mola chanced to meet them and after hearing the Brahmin's account of his plight, sought the hands of those three girls for his own three sons. The Brahmin was agreeable to the proposition. It is to these three pairs the Lambadies traced their origin. Thus they had Rajput fathers and Brahmin mothers.

There are slight variations in other accounts. Lambadies of Anantapur, Chittoor and Kurnool believe that it was Rukmini and not Radha who was given by Lord Krishna. Another version records that it was Sugreeva whom the Lambadies considered as their originator. In the family of Sugriva and Tara was born Thida whose son was Mola. It was this Mola who was an attendant of Krishna.

In the Mysore Tribes and Castes referred to above, some other accounts of origin are recorded.
Jambava had two sons Heppumuni and Rudra or Raktamuni. Out of the seed of the creator shot into the space was born a damsel who in turn created a boy out of the sweat of her body. This boy and yet another turned down her offer to consort with him. But finally her attempt succeeded with the second and to the two were born children who were progenitors of the race. Kachchap (a variation of Kasyap borrowed from a classical source) was one of their descendants. Dhanj was probably a later descendant.

The first three had their own descendants. Nathad's descendants were Vagris - Shikaris. Joghis
who rear pigs are descendants of Jhoghad while Kimad's descendants were Bailukammaras - wandering blacksmiths. Mota had Labhans and Mola the Banjaras as their descendants.

Incidentally, it may be noted that the term Bailukammara is a name of Kannada origin, Kammars meaning blacksmith. Here we may turn our attention to a slightly different account as narrated by Loka Naik of Nerniki thanda. According to him the supporters of Prithviraj in an effort to conceal their identity from the enemy, tore off their clothes, the women too following by tearing of their sarees. Skirts replaced sarees and the blouses were reversed. Women-folk adorned their ears with jungle flowers and barks of banyan trees were tied around their upper and lower arms.

Loka Naik of Nerniki thanda adds some more details unsubstantiated by any other evidence. The oral evidence avers that since the girls had been socially boycotted, marrying them was considered to be sinful act. As a compensation Radha gave them three cows whereafter the boycot was removed and
they were accepted by the society and allowed to stay with them.

Thereafter the entire family moved over to Machchargarhad where they sought the permission of the king to exhibit their acrobatic talents. It was evening time and the place was infested with mosquitoes which made the king suggest a postponement. But Radha's eldest son had two sons - Bhavya and Gavya - of whom the former had magical power to do away with the mosquitoes. With this he collected all the mosquitoes tied them all in a bundle which was buried outside the village thus preventing their re-entry into the village. Bhavya was paid for the work done; but he found it insufficient. He decided to leave his work incompletely. But, through the intervention of the Reddy the king paid more.

However, he was afraid that Bhavya may return to the village and free mosquitoes. Hence, a plan was hatched and Bhavya was killed. But no sooner than his head was cut, it flew into the air and fell into the hands of a local doctor living outside the
village. He got the head buried. Bhavya's mother was offered a compensation which she politely refused and adamantly asked for her son alive. Finally, a muslim thambura-player was given to her on the condition that was laid out by that individual that thenceafter those people should not breed pigs and donkeys. The beneficiary of the monetary compensation was also this thambura-player.

At this point, yet another story is introduced into the account. This thambura-player secured a promise from their pontiff, Demaguru of Kamched village, the right to sell powder of the Jaji flower procured from the Jaji hill, from Demaguru. It was stipulated that some amount had to be paid to the pontiff for having sold the rights. The Lambadies were to pay this. But, for generations they did not pay and his original amount that was due went on increasing. Forced to pay, the Lambadies quietly left the place under cover of night. The Guru sent his assistant Savu a brahmin in search of the Lambadies who were finally traced. They asked him to stay in the place and they would
go to the Guru, settle the account and return. But they could not raise the amount due; much less could they secure any concession either.

So they hatched out a plan. They alleged that the brahmin assistant had unlawful connection with an unmarried girl left behind for his services. They thereupon beat up the girl, Huski Bai, only in an effort to make the brahmin yield and get the loan cancelled through his offices. At this stage the pontiff interfered and suggested a way out. Accordingly, it was decided that on the eve of every marriage in the Lambady family one and half seers of rice, jaggery and one rupee was to be set apart to be paid to the Guru. They were also to copperise with a needle. The custom is followed by them even today. It is said that one of the authorised disciples of the Sringeri Matha, to which Demaguru seems to have belonged, even now visits the Nerniki thanda occasionally once in two or three years to collect the accumulated amount, besides an interest thereupon, at the rate of 25 paisé per rupee. The Lambadies feel that through this they would have repaid the amount due to Demaguru for the Jaji
All this is pure myth – each even unconnected with the other. Nothing is said about the amount due to Demaguru. Even the story of the mosquitoes' menace and Bhavya's miracles are unbelievable. There is no chronology – herein, no reference to any contemporary king or dynasty which would have enabled us to fix up a date. Suddenly some disciples of the Sringeri Math are foisted upon us. The earliest reference to this Matha is the beginning of the 14th century and if this could be accepted at all Demaguru must have lived much earlier. But when? Further, we do not know if the pontiffs of the Sringeri Math had anything to do with the Lambadies of the Ceded Districts. May be that somebody claiming to have associations with the Matha, lawfully or unlawfully, started visiting these thandas and collect the accumulated wealth. But, how many marriages might have taken place in a short span of two to three years in a small thanda like Nerniki? These are figments of fertile imagination. Even today we see some devotees (?)
claiming to belong to one or the another Matha, visit houses and collect donations for some festival or ritual. Much of these are, therefore introduced into the traditional accounts somewhere and at some point of time, perhaps to claim that the Lambadies had been accepted by highly religious institutions like the Sringeri Matha as its disciples.

All the different versions agree upon one aspect, that they migrated from the North. Whether they came to the Deccan in the wake of Ghor's invasion or later when Shahjahan invaded the Deccan is not clear. Some of them, according to Thurston the Lambadies of Bellary in particular—came to the Deccan as commissariate carriers, along with the Moghal armies. They supplied grain to the English army during the IV Mysore War. The Vishakapatnam District Gazetteer records that Vinayaka Deva, the Raja of Jaipur had to face a revolt (in the 15th century) and regained the throne with the help of Banjaras. Some Banjaras like those of Chapancheruvu thanda claim that their ancestors were soldiers. Again, as evidence they show swords and armours
preserved in some households - an evidence which does not prove their claims. We had in the Deccan, almost at the same time, a body of merchants belonging to a guild called Ayyavole who were also merchants carrying their merchandise from place to place. They had with them persons trained in warfare who too carried swords etc., with them. They cannot, on that account alone, be considered as soldiers.

It has been opined by a quite good number of scholars that Banjaras formed the main caste of which Lambadies and Charans were sub-divisions. Charans are identified with bards. However, it is held that it is the Charans (Banjaras, the descendants of Mola) who with their herds of pack bullocks helped the imperial army (The Mysore Tribes and Castes, Vol. II, pp. 138-39). Camberrege (Monograph on The Banjara Clan, p. 8) says that of the four divisions existing in the Charan or Bhat caste of Rajputana, by far the most numerous and interesting are the Charans. They were always ready to kill themselves rather than give up other's property held in trust. Naturally, they became the
safe conduct for the passage of goods in Rajputana.

Rathod, Pamar and Charan, besides Vaditya were exogamous groups belonging to several Gothas (Gotras?). In a couplet it is stated that there were seven gothas of Rathod, six gothas of Chauhan and twelve gothas of Panwar. There was yet another exogamous group, the Tori.

Syed Siraj-ul-Hasan (The Castes and Tribes of HEH the Nizam's Dominion, p. 19) states that originally there were only three who were the sons of Mola - Rathod, Palmar and Chauhan. To these latter were joined Vaditya and Tori. Of Vaditya, Gen. Brigg says, the Panwars, in the course of their travels discovered a male infant under a tree far away from any habitation, obviously abandoned. A charitable lady of the group, however took it up, reared it and adopted. Since the male child was found under a Bur tree he was named Burteeah. Later on, attaining manhood he fell in love with a girl of their own clan which was taboo. All advice, even by the lady in love, fell on deaf ear. Finally, the lady agreed to elope which they did. But, they were
pursued and taken. The Panchayat expelled the Povuray from her tribe. Finally, they regarded the pair as the head of an outcaste tribe to be denominated after the fondling Burteeah. But they are allowed to claim descent only from the mother's side (Mysore Tribes and Castes, Vol. II, p. 51). The Vadithyas, however, claimed that they are the progeny of a Brahmin from a Banjara clan.

Syed Hasan says that Tori, while an infant was found by Mola in a farm and brought up by him as his own son. But the Census of 1961 (Vol. I, p. 8) gives a different version. Mola had borrowed money from a Brahmin for celebrating his sons' marriages. As a surety he had kept with him one of the servants of the Brahmin. Mola could not pay even after two years. The Brahmin started sending a Rajput to Mola's house for collection. The frequent visits of the Rajput resulted in intimacy with the wife of Rathod, the son of Mola. It was finally discovered. But, being under obligation, Mola could not raise his voice. However, Rathod declined to have any more relationship with his unchaste wife. On his
part the Rajput was ready to take her away. Mola now got them married and allowed them to stay with them, treating the Rajput as a son. That Rajput had already six sons from his first wife. She too now joined the family. But it is not clear whether this Rajput was Tori or yet another 'son' of Mola taking the number of sons to six. These six sons had six clans and there were sub classes. Each of the clan is exogamous and persons belonging to the same clan are considered blood relatives, marriage between blood relatives being prohibited. Violation of the rule would result in excommunication.

We are here concerned, however, with one clan, the Lambadies living in a small thanda - the Nerniki thanda - near Holagunda a Mandal headquarters. It is about their society, life style etc. with which we are concerned at present.