

# LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES OF THE SUGAL TRIBAL COMMUNITY IN ANDHRA PRADESH

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## **Introduction**

Tribals, like any other group of population, live in and depend upon environment. Their interaction with the environment is expressed in two different ways: adaptation to and changing of a given environment. The tribal people of India have got a heterogeneous cultural pattern with varied economic conditions and activities largely conditioned by ecological settings and their environment. The historical evidence reveals that they associated themselves with the forests which provided them all their day-to-day requirements. Even today, majority of the tribal population in India continue to depend on forests for their day-to-day existence. In addition, the influence of forests is reflected on every aspect of tribal culture. It appears that a comprehensive understanding of their culture can be had by examining it in relation to the forests.

The present paper deals with the Sugalis (also called Banjaras), one of the largest and advanced tribes of Andhra Pradesh, inhabiting the Erramalias range of Eastern Ghats of Kurnool district of Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh. The historical evidence reveals that the Sugali's associated themselves with the forests for many a century. Their culture originated, developed and even today largely flourishes in the lap of nature, as ecological conditions play a pivotal role in their life-styles. But with the passage of time, several negatively interacting forces, especially deforestation destroyed their environment which ultimately resulted in shattering the Sugali life particularly their economy. However, without suffering any social disorganization, the Sugalis have successfully adapted themselves to the changing environment.

The main objective of this paper is to analyze how the two groups of Sugalis - pastoralists and peasants - have interacted with the environment in the stream of history and to highlight how their occupational mobility has influenced or altered other aspects of Sugali life, especially social life. The data were collected from Two Sugali settlements namely, Alayabad Tanda with 78 families practising pastoralism as the primary source of living and Lakshaihkunta Tanda with 93 families carrying out agriculture as the mainstay of their economy in Dhone and Nandyal (erstwhile) taluks respectively of Kurnool district of Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh.

### **Historical background**

The Sugalis are not the autochthons of South India. Their original home is believed to be Marwar in Rajasthan. They came into the Deccan (South India) as transporters of supplies or merchandise for the armies of Delhi emperors in their raids in the South early in the 17th century. At that time, they were unsettled nomads and often resorted to robbery (Craufurd: 1872, Ibbetson: 1883). Some of the Sugalis returned to the North but some stayed behind and carried on petty trade with their pack-bullocks. They became a useful medium of transaction between the South and the North during periods of peace until 1850s. In the 18th century they had also taken up service under the Maratha rulers of Satara, the Peshwas of Poona, the Nizam of Hyderabad, and the British in their Mysore and Maratha wars (Nanjundayya and Iyer: 1928, Siraj-ul-Hussan: 1920).

With the advent of the British rule, the Sugalis gave up much of their traditional occupation of transporting goods due to introduction of mechanized transport, laying of roads and rail lines by the then Government. Hence, they turned to the forests for their livelihood by cutting wood and collecting other forest produce. But this avocation could not provide enough to live by as much of the forest in the country was cut down to provide wood for industry and rail-laying. Being poor, illiterate (Campbell: 1883) and lacking technical skills, they degenerated and took to crimes like robbery, dacoity, cattle-lifting and kidnapping of children until the middle of the last century (Panakal and Puneekar: 1961). To reform them through persuasion and education was considered

impossible by the British administration. Therefore, in order to control their criminal activities, they were brought under the ambit of the Criminal Tribes Act XXVII of 1871.

Further, despite the precarious economic position, they did not like to adopt wage-labour as it was against their proud spirit and tradition. Therefore, the Sugali men did not stop poaching in the forest, though it had been banned. Their women took up collection of forest produce and latter, agricultural wage labour on the farms of neighboring peasants out of sheer economic necessity. Thus, after 1880's, forest labour, sale of forest produce and pastoralism became their main occupations, However, by 1930, the forest work had ceased to provide them enough earnings because of deforestation, strict implementation of forest protection measures and declaration of some forests as reserved forests. This situation compelled the Sugali men to turn their attention towards agricultural and other types of labour in order to supplement the earnings of their women. But after 1930, they ultimately settled down first as pastoralists and then as agriculturists, although agriculture had never been their occupation in their history (Thurston: 1975, Halbar: 1986). After Independence, they were listed in 1949 as one of the denotified communities, and since 1977, they have been recognized as a Scheduled Tribe.

### **Occupational Structure of the Sugalis**

The foregoing account of the nomadic Sugalis of historical past reveals that their life has been conditioned by the limitations of the physical environment, technology and economy, their turbulent history, their subjugation to almost two hundred years of colonial rule, etc. At present, broadly speaking, the Sugalis of Alayabad Tanda are primarily pastoralists and their counterparts at Lakshmaiahkunta Tanda are agriculturists. This dissimilarity has arisen due to the difference in their resource base. The Sugalis of Alayabad Tanda have to depend only on pastoralism as the primary occupation because of the prevailing ecological constraints, i.e., highly hilly nature of the surrounding area and limited cultivable land. On the other hand, the Sugalis of Lakshmaiahkunta Tanda had to take up agriculture as primary source of livelihood as their pastoral economy had almost been destroyed by the gradual decline in the population of cattle such as cows and

bullocks. Their numbers are reported to have dwindled in the last two decades mainly due to fatal diseases, cyclones and lack of sufficient fodder. At the same time, exploitation of the forest for fire-wood both for domestic consumption and selling, overgrazing, and intensified cultivation; of the hill slopes by the local population have caused rapid deterioration of the fodder, soil and water resources of their environment in Lakshmaiahkunta Tanda area where vegetation has been almost totally reduced to scattered scrub. The reduction in tree growth in forested tracts also led to inadequacy of water resources and grazing ground for cattle in the dry season. All these difficulties have compelled the Sugalis of Lakshmaiahkunta Tanda to seek other means of livelihood such as cultivation, goat-keeping and other economic pursuits. Further, they are also fortunate enough to get fully reclaimed lands with irrigational facilities. Thus, this has made all the difference between the pastoralists of Alayabad Tanda and the peasants of Lakshmaiahkunta Tanda.

### **Occupational Mobility**

Table 1 reveals that majority families (66.67 %) of Alayabad Tanda depend on the cattle-rearing as their main source of living, while most of the families (62.35 %) at the other Tanda- primarily depend on cultivation for their livelihood. The remaining families of both the settlements depend on casual labour, attached agricultural labour, firewood selling as primary sources of living. Further, at both the Tandas, almost all families also follow these occupations as secondary sources of living to augment their income. An analysis of mobility of occupation during the last three generations reveals that among the Sugalis of Alayabad Tanda there is no much change in their traditional occupation i.e., pastoralism from the generation of grand father to that of ego. On the contrary, at Lakshmaiahkunta Tanda there is a gradual decline of traditional occupation which is of great significance.

Further, the present tendency of the pastoral Sugalis of both the Tandas is to take up goat-keeping and to become full-fledged agriculturists, as they feel that wealth in cattle is highly volatile or unstable move over, the cattle are less disease-resistant, require

better grazing, more water and shade; during summer the pastoral Sugalis of either Tanda feel it difficult in taking out the cattle and grazing them in the surrounding areas, as during .dry months the surrounding area of either Tanda cannot provide sufficient fodder or pasture for the cattle. On the other hand, goats are more disease-resistant, can tolerate the scarcity of fodder and water, particularly during the drier season.

With a view to becoming advanced peasants the Sugalis of both the Tandas made representations to the Government seeking permission to cultivate the near by deforested fertile lands in their respective reserved forest areas. During the last ten years, a few Sugalis of either settlement have also purchased land, both wet and dry, located in the respective adjoining villages. A few families at either Tanda have even started irrigating their lands with the help of electric/oil motors and their methods of cultivation are in no way different from those of other agricultural castes. Through the demonstration effect of the pioneering Sugali cultivators, the non- cultivating Sugalis have also desired and tried to achieve the status of a cultivator today, the needs and aspirations of the Sugalis of the two Tandas have increased within a typically peasant frame of mind. In this respect the peasant Sugalis of both the settlements are far more advanced as compared to the nomadic Banjaras of Western Rajasthan who need a fresh orientation and persuasion to take up agriculture (Malhotra and Bose: 1963).

### **Adaptive Responses of the Sugalis in Social Organization**

It is a well-known fact that a society "that is a whole by itself is a misnomer these days and different societies have different degrees of inter- dependence" (Redfield: 1956). Economic mobility among the Sugalis from semi-nomadic life towards domestication of cattle and dependence on agriculture have also led them to maintain some economic relationships such as grazing the cattle of caste farmers, working for the non-Sugalis as attached agricultural labourers or casual labourers, and share-croppers, borrowing of money and agricultural implements etc., with the caste peasants of neighboring villages. Thus, by taking up non-Sugali pursuits of economy and by improving their standard of living considerably the Sugalis of either Tanda consciously

sought a prominent place in the caste hierarchy in their respective revenue villages basing on the concepts of commensality, purity and pollution. Hence, the new claim of the Sugalis helped them maintain patron-client (*Jajmani*) relationships with the service and the artisan castes. The change from tribal status to caste (*kulam* or *Jati*) status, thus, is an important structural change which integrated them into the civilization of wider society.

Various factors - social, economic technological and demographic - have inclined the Sugalis of both the Tandas to adopt neolocality as the most ideal and the multilocality as the actual type of residence. Growth of population, agricultural economy, economic status are the decisive factors in the adoption of multi-locality. While those families of either Tanda which depend on pastoralism or wage labour or firewood-selling as the mainstay of their economy have opted for neolocal pattern of residence, other families with good landed property and huge number of cattle, the management of which require much manpower, practice patrilocal type of residence.

Nuclear families are more predominant (62.82 %) at Alayabad Tanda than at Lakshmaiahkunta Tanda (32.26 %) mainly due to the difference in their primary occupation, At Alayabad Tanda a young man immediately after marriage can very easily set up his independent household unlike at Lakshmaiahkunta Tanda where setting up an independent family involves division of land, house and other assets of the family. On the other hand, extended families occur more frequently among cultivators where the task of cultivation and the pursuit of secondary occupations, especially pastoralism requires a large labour force.

Furthermore, changing economic structure has influenced not only family but also its organisation. The organisation of a peasant family at either Tanda is entirely different from that of a family among the pastoralists. The daily income that a nuclear family derives from such economic pursuits as cattle-rearing, liquor-selling, firewood-selling, casual labour etc., is just enough for a day and this type of economic system does not require any ill complicated organisation of family. On the other hand, a peasant family has to organise itself properly according to the time schedule to get better yields from

agriculture and other occupations like cattle-rearing and fire- wood-selling. Each member of the family has to be entrusted with a specific duty to be completed within a prescribed time which -will be conducive for the productive work of the family.

In addition, the Sugalis adapted themselves in their political and religious spheres of life also due to internal changes in the society and acculturation( Krishna Reddy: 1991, 617). However, inhabitants of both the settlements are able to maintain their separate ethnic identity in terms of a few core traits such as myths, ceremonies, kinship system, a common name viz., Banjara, endogamy, Banjari dialect, distinctive dress and ornamentation of their women etc. They have successfully acclimatized themselves to the changing canvas of Sugali way of life, especially in the realm of economy and to the increased contact situation and have yet preserved a pattern of culture which is, by and large, satisfying to them.

## **Conclusion**

(1) The foregoing account of the Sugalis' interaction with the environment - physical and social -supports the idea that man's general tendency of seeking, as far as possible, better and stable means of livelihood coupled with advanced technology than the present ones holds good in the case of Sugalis, too, who regard pastoralism as a risky business and attribute their fortunes to fate. Hence, they are obsessed with the need for good land, better cattle, irrigational facilities and assured crops.

(2) There is an association of extended families with larger food supplies and increasingly diversified specialties or supplementary sources of income. This tendency found in a tribal population like the Sugalis is of great anthropological significance and has also received statistical confirmation (Nimkoff and Middleton: 1960).

(3) The Sugalis have made adaptive responses by means of three kinds of cultural behaviour: technological, organizational, and ideological in order to cope with environmental problems. These changes have helped them adapt in at least four ways: (1) by providing basic solutions to environmental problems; (2) by improving the effectiveness of the those solutions; (3) by providing adaptability; and (4) by providing

awareness or recognition of environmental problems. Hence, cultural behaviour can serve as a 'buffer' between humans and random fluctuations in the environment (Hardesty: 1977, 24).

(4) The correspondence between environmental system and social system of the Sugalis indicates that the former plays an active, not just a limiting or selective, role in human affairs and supports the idea that environment and culture are involved in " dialectic interplay or what is called feedback or reciprocal casualty (Kaplan and Manners: 1972, 79).

(5) The successful adaptation of the Sugalis to the changing environment and maintenance of their own ethnic identity can also partly be attributed to their turbulent history, sedentarization, their socio-cultural potential for adaptation, acculturation, endogenic forces etc., as no single factor can . be considered totally responsible in effecting changes among them.

(6) Suitable measures are to be taken by the Government to increase the Sugalis' understanding of their utter dependence on and their responsibilities in maintaining and improving ecological balance. They are to be motivated or informed of the need and uses of different non-conventional sources of energy such as bio-gas, biomas, wind-mill etc., and social and I commercial forestry.

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Table 1. Occupational Mobility of the Sugalis of Alayabad Tanda and Lakshmaiahkunta Tanda

Sl no	Name of occupation	Alayabad Tanda			Lakshmaiahkunta Tanda		
		Second ascending generation	First ascending generation	Ego's generation	Second ascending generation	First ascending generation	Ego's generation
1.	Pastoralism	46 (58'98)	42 (53'85)	52 (66'67)	73 (78'49)	38 (40'86)	9 (9.68)
2.	Agriculture	4 (5.12)	9 (11.54)	1 (1.28)	-	16 (17.20)	58 (62.35)
3.	Transportation of provisions, especially salt	-	-	-	5 (5.38)	-	-
4.	Liquor-selling	-	2 (2.56)	1 (1.28)	-	9 (9.58)	1 (1.08)
5.	Firewood-selling	-	1 (1.28)	2 (2.56)	-	4 (4.30)	4 (4.30)
6.	Casual labour	27 (34.62)	20 (25.65)	19 (24.56)	7 (7.53)	19 (20.48)	18 (19.35)
7.	Attached agricultural labour	-	2 (2.56)	3 (3.65)	2 (2.15)	2 (2.15)	1 (1.08)
8.	Crop watching	-	2 (2.56)	-	2 (2.15)	3 (3.29)	2 (2.16)
9.	Rope-making	-	-	-	4 (4.30)	-	-
10.	Business in traditional dress and bull-calves	-	-	-	-	-	-
11.	Honey-selling	-	-	-	-	2 (2.15)	-
12.	Selling of bamboo articles	1 (1.28)	-	-	-	-	-
Total		78 (100.00)	78 (100.00)	78 (100.00)	93 (100.00)	93 (100.00)	93 (100.00)