



MICRO-BUSINESSES AMONG NOMADIC COMMUNITIES: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF VIJAYANAGAR DISTRICT, KARNATAKA

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Abstract

Culture is a complex and fundamental dimension of human society, closely linked to identity, social inclusion, and justice. From the perspective of social justice, all individuals should have equal opportunities to participate in and benefit from cultural and socio-economic life. However, historical and contemporary social structures have created persistent inequalities, whereby certain sections of society have enjoyed privilege and prosperity while others have remained deprived of even the most basic necessities. These disparities raise important questions regarding their causes, persistence, and the extent to which they can be reduced through social, economic, and policy interventions.

Despite constitutional safeguards and various welfare initiatives, many nomadic communities in India continue to experience social, economic, political, and educational marginalization. This study focuses on the nomadic Sindholli, Budugajangam, Sudugadusidda and Shillekyatha communities of Vijayanagar district in Karnataka. Traditionally dependent on religious begging as their primary occupation, these communities have increasingly diversified their livelihood strategies through a range of micro-enterprises. Their economic activities include collecting and selling recyclable plastic bottles, trading low-cost household items such as needles, pins, plastic containers, beads, mirrors, face powder, and ribbons, and selling balloons during festivals and local fairs. In addition, some members engage in small-scale inland fishing in ponds, lakes, and streams during their leisure time to supplement household income.

Despite these adaptive livelihood strategies, the communities continue to face chronic poverty, insecure incomes, and limited access to education, healthcare, and sustainable employment opportunities. Using these communities as case studies, this article examines the relationship between their traditional occupation of religious begging and their emerging engagement in micro-business activities. It analyses how these livelihood practices contribute to household survival while highlighting the structural challenges that continue to impede their socio-economic development and social inclusion.

Keywords: Nomadic Communities, Livelihood, Micro-businesses, Traditional Occupations, Religious Begging, Housing Conditions, Socio-economic Conditions.

Introduction

The nomadic tribal communities of Karnataka possess rich traditions in art, literature, and culture. However, despite social transformation and development, these communities continue to face poverty, hunger, illiteracy, and a lack of basic facilities. Among them, the Sindholli are one of the major nomadic communities and are classified as a Scheduled Caste. The Sindholli people travel from place to place carrying an idol of a deity in a basket on their heads, which is why they are recognized as a nomadic community.

The Shillekyatha community practices Togonalubombeyata, a traditional leather shadow puppetry art form. In contrast, the Budugajangam community performs mythological stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata using costumes, whistling, and leather puppetry. These communities traditionally sustain themselves through performing arts and religious begging. They usually live in tents, gudigundara (makeshift shelters), school grounds, railway stations, bus stands, temple premises, abandoned theatres, sanctuaries, and slum areas.



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The present study focuses on the nomadic tribal communities of Vijayanagara District, Karnataka, particularly the Sindhollu, Budugajangam, Sudugadusidda and Shillekyatha communities. These groups depend on religious begging and small-scale trade, selling items such as plastic bottles, utensils, needles, pins, rags, talcum powder, plastic raincoats, vanity bags, and dressing accessories. During festivals and fairs, they also sell bangles, balloons, and other small goods.

During their leisure time, members of these communities engage in fishing in lakes and streams or hunting in nearby forests. At present, they face severe challenges in securing sustainable livelihoods and ensuring their survival. This study examines their traditional occupations, religious begging practices, micro-business activities, and the socio-economic problems and challenges they encounter.

Objectives Of The Study

- 1) To study the historical background of the nomadic tribal communities in Vijayanagar District.
- 2)To examine the socio-economic conditions of the nomadic tribal communities in Vijayanagar District.
- 3) To analyze the participation of the nomadic tribal communities in micro-business and livelihood activities.
- 4) To identify the major problems and challenges faced by the nomadic tribal communities in Vijayanagar District and to suggest suitable measures for their socio-economic development.

Research Methods

Data on the nomadic tribal communities in Vijayanagar District (Hospet and Hagari Bommanahalli) were collected through fieldwork using questionnaires, interviews, observations, and sampling techniques. Additional information was obtained from secondary sources, including published books, ethnographic studies, research articles, and other relevant literature on nomadic tribal communities.

Communities History

Nomadic communities are groups of people who traditionally do not maintain a permanent place of residence and move from one location to another in search of livelihood, grazing land, trade, or other economic opportunities. The term nomad is derived from the Greek word nomas, meaning "one who wanders in search of pasture." Historically, many nomadic groups followed seasonal or cyclical patterns of migration and lived in portable shelters, travelling on foot or with the assistance of pack animals. In recent times, some communities have adopted motor vehicles while continuing aspects of their traditional mobile lifestyle.

According to the oral traditions of the community, many of their ancestors served as soldiers in the army of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj during the Maratha period. Following the decline of the Maratha Empire and subsequent political upheavals, they are believed to have been displaced and compelled to adopt alternative means of livelihood. Community narratives state that they engaged in fishing, hunting, leather craft, and the preparation of natural dyes from plant materials. They also developed the traditional art of leather puppet-making and travelled from village to village performing leather puppet theatre (Togalu Gombeyaata) and other folk performances, which became an important source of income. Over time, members of this community migrated to different regions of present-day Maharashtra and Karnataka, including Akkalkot, Kalaburagi, Kavthe Mahankal, Mohol, Solapur, Kurduwadi, Kinagi, Sangli, Hassan, Belur, Halebidu, and Mysuru. In different localities, they came to be identified by various names such as Gombeyata, Killekyata, Katamutikhelkar, Katabara, Khatri, and Kichalikyata. Despite these regional variations in nomenclature, they share broadly similar linguistic traditions, religious beliefs, customs, rituals, occupations, festivals, and cultural practices. Their traditional occupations include leather puppet theatre, toy-making, handicrafts, and other forms of folk performance.



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The Budugajangam community is predominantly found in Ballari district of Karnataka, although members are also distributed across neighbouring regions. They are known by several alternative names, including Hagalu Veshagar, Burra Katheyavaru, Bahurupi, Balsanthoshi, Bairagi, Kondamama, Kurukuru Mama, Jaggali, Jangalaru, Beda Jangam, and Budga Jangam. Traditionally, the community has maintained a nomadic lifestyle, travelling from village to village while performing folk arts, storytelling, and religious or ritual services, supplemented by alms-seeking.

The Sudugadusidda community derives its name from the Kannada words sudugadu (cremation ground) and Siddha (a spiritually accomplished person). According to community belief, Sudugadusidda attained spiritual powers through meditation and the practice of mantras, yantras, and tantras in cremation grounds. As members of the community travelled across different regions seeking alms and performing religious services, they became known by various regional names, including Sudugadu Siddha, Kadisiddha, Masana Odeya, Siddaiyya, Niranjayya, Graveyard Jogi, Kadupapar, Telugu Jangama, Bhikshukaru, and Jangalaru. In Karnataka, however, they are most commonly identified as Sudugadu Siddha.

The historical development of these nomadic communities illustrates their resilience and adaptability in response to changing political, economic, and social circumstances. Despite regional differences in nomenclature and occupation, they continue to preserve a rich cultural heritage reflected in their language, performing arts, religious traditions, and customary practices. Their history forms an important component of Karnataka's diverse cultural landscape and warrants further scholarly documentation and preservation.

Meaning of Micro-Business among Nomadic Tribal Communities

In the context of nomadic tribal communities, a micro-business may be understood as a small-scale economic activity operated by an individual, family, or a small group with limited financial investment and relatively simple organisational arrangements. Such businesses are often flexible and mobile in nature and may be carried out at different locations depending on market opportunities and customer demand. Micro-businesses provide an alternative or supplementary source of livelihood and can contribute to household income and economic self-reliance.

Common forms of micro-business activities among nomadic tribal communities include small-scale trading, street vending, the sale of handicraft and traditional products, the purchase and resale of locally available goods, and other small commercial activities. These Micro Businesses generally require relatively limited capital and can be adapted to the mobile livelihood patterns of the communities.

Discussion

The Sindholu are a nomadic tribal community found in different parts of Karnataka. Traditionally, they travel from place to place carrying idols of gods and goddesses in baskets balanced on their heads. They are known by different names in different regions, including Benkimaramma, Buru (Burucha), Duruga Murugi, Marammana Adisoru, and Sunklamnoru. Their mother tongue is Telugu, locally referred to as the Muruga language. Traditionally, religious begging has been their primary occupation.

The Shillekyatha community, another important nomadic group, is traditionally associated with Togalubombeyata (shadow puppet theatre), a distinctive form of leather puppet performance that represents an important component of Karnataka's folk heritage. According to community tradition, this art originated with their ancestors and has been transmitted across generations as a valued cultural legacy.

Shillekyatha artists perform Togalubombeyata in villages, towns, schools, temple premises, and public spaces, including Gram Panchayat grounds. They erect a stage with a screen behind which artists manipulate leather puppets using strings. Performances generally begin with invocations to Lord Ganesha and Goddess Saraswati, followed by prayers. The narratives are primarily drawn from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, depicting episodes such as the battles between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The artists themselves provide narration, dialogues, music, and sound effects, creating an



engaging theatrical performance. In recent decades, many members of the Shillekyatha community have diversified their livelihoods because traditional performances alone are no longer sufficient to sustain their families. Men are employed in agriculture, while women participate in agricultural activities such as sowing, weeding, and harvesting. Young men and women also work as agricultural and construction labourers. During periods of drought, many families migrate to Bengaluru and other urban centres in search of wage employment. Some supplement their income by selling plastic household articles, repairing domestic items, or marketing inexpensive goods such as needles, combs, ribbons, and hair accessories. In addition, many households practise animal husbandry, including the rearing of cattle, goats, sheep, and poultry, while continuing to preserve the tradition of Togalubombeyata.

The nomadic Budugadangam community has traditionally earned its livelihood through daytime performances and Buddha Kathas, a form of folk storytelling. Typically, one performer narrates stories while accompanying the performance on the harmonium, and another enacts the characters. Their performances combine storytelling, music, singing, and drama and have been widely appreciated across Karnataka.

Traditionally, Budugajangam performers present their programmes only within villages assigned to them according to customary performance rights. These inherited rights determine the geographical areas in which each troupe performs. The artists depend on these performances and the alms they receive to support their families. Even today, many continue to perform mythological, historical, and social narratives in both rural and urban areas.

The artists perform at schools, colleges, temples, fairs, festivals, railway stations, cinema premises, and other public gathering places. They often remain in a particular locality for several months while presenting their performances. Their repertoire includes episodes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, along with popular folk narratives such as Lanka Dahana, Ahiravana–Mahiravana, Vasishta–Vishwamitra, and stories of Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, and Shurpanakha. Through these performances, they contribute significantly to the preservation and transmission of Karnataka's rich folk literary and performing traditions.

Several artists and troupes, including those led by Shri Maresh of Sandur in Ballari district, have continued this artistic tradition by presenting daytime folk performances throughout Karnataka. To sustain audience interest, performers have also introduced devotional themes centred on deities such as Hanuman (Maruti), Ramanjaneya, and Sai Baba. Members of the Budugajangam community have also carried these artistic traditions to other parts of India, including Himachal Pradesh.

The nomadic Sudugadusidda community continues to experience severe socio-economic marginalisation. Many families remain dependent on begging as their principal means of livelihood. Traditionally, begging has been regarded as their hereditary occupation and an integral part of their cultural identity. They travel continuously from one village to another without permanent settlement, relying on alms for their survival.

According to customary practice, Sudugadusidda families seek alms only within villages assigned to them through inherited traditional rights. These customary territories continue to regulate their movements and livelihood practices. Although they remain mobile throughout most of the year, they generally return to their native settlements for a short period to participate in weddings, festivals, fairs, and other important social and religious occasions. During festivals such as Dussehra and Deepavali, community members gather in their home settlements to celebrate collectively and reinforce social ties.

In addition to begging, some members engage in hunting, with the catch traditionally shared among community members. Women and girls supplement household income by selling needles, pins, combs, bangles, and other inexpensive household items. Many also undertake sewing, domestic work, agricultural labour, and other forms of daily wage employment. Men frequently work as construction labourers, porters, or helpers in small commercial establishments. Because income from traditional occupations is often inadequate to meet household needs, many families have diversified into wage labour and other informal occupations. Despite these changes, the community continues to face significant economic challenges and social exclusion, highlighting the need for greater policy attention and inclusive development initiatives.



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Modes of Payment in Micro-Business Activities

In commonly observed micro-business practices, customers make payments for goods either in cash or through digital payment platforms. With the increasing penetration of digital financial services, payment methods such as Google Pay and PhonePe are also being used in some small-scale business transactions. The adoption of digital payments may provide greater convenience and transparency in financial transactions and can potentially contribute to the broader financial inclusion of nomadic tribal communities.

Problems and Challenges of Micro-Businesses among Nomadic Tribal Communities

Micro-businesses provide an important source of livelihood and supplementary income for many nomadic tribal communities. These Businesses are generally small in scale, require limited capital, and are often operated by individuals, families, or small groups. However, the nature of mobility, limited financial resources, inadequate training, and lack of basic amenities create several challenges for the effective establishment and sustainability of micro-businesses among these communities.

1. Time Management and Self-Discipline

Micro-business activities among nomadic tribal communities are generally not associated with a fixed location, permanent shop, or regular working schedule. Instead, many individuals and families move from one place to another in search of customers and livelihood opportunities. Consequently, effective time management, self-discipline, and proper planning are essential for sustaining their business activities. The demand for goods and services may vary considerably from one location to another, making it difficult to predict the volume of sales and maintain a stable level of income. Seasonal variations, local markets, festivals, fairs, and other social and cultural events may further influence their business opportunities.

2. Challenges to the Survival of Traditional Occupations

The increasing involvement of nomadic tribal communities in micro-business activities, alongside their traditional occupations, may gradually influence the continuity of traditional occupational practices. Although micro-businesses provide alternative livelihood opportunities, their expansion may contribute to the gradual decline of traditional occupations among younger generations. Such changes may have implications for the preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge, cultural heritage, indigenous skills, and occupational practices. Therefore, there is a need to promote livelihood diversification while simultaneously safeguarding the traditional skills and cultural practices of these communities.

3. Lack of Training and Micro - Businesses Skills

A significant challenge faced by many families belonging to nomadic tribal communities is the lack of adequate training and Micro - Businesses guidance. Limited exposure to business management, marketing strategies, financial planning, customer relations, and digital technologies restricts their ability to expand and sustain their Businesses. They may also face difficulties in maintaining accounts, managing income and expenditure, identifying profitable markets, attracting customers, and adopting improved business practices. Capacity-building programmes, Micro - Businesses training, and continuous institutional support are therefore essential for strengthening their micro-business activities.

4. Financial Constraints

Financial constraints constitute one of the major challenges affecting the sustainability of micro-businesses among nomadic tribal communities. Some families are unable to maintain or expand their enterprises because of inadequate working capital and limited access to formal credit facilities. In situations where the available capital is insufficient to purchase goods or meet day-to-day business expenses, they may be compelled to discontinue their micro-business activities and return to their traditional occupations or other informal livelihood activities. Limited awareness of banking services, difficulties in accessing institutional credit, and inadequate financial literacy may further aggravate these problems.



5. Migration and Health-Related Challenges

Mobility is an important characteristic of the livelihood pattern of several nomadic tribal communities. During festivals, fairs, religious gatherings, and other cultural events, families may migrate temporarily to different locations to undertake micro-business activities. Their stay at such locations may extend from approximately 15 days to one month or longer, depending on the availability of livelihood opportunities. Continuous travel and temporary settlement may expose them to inadequate accommodation, insufficient food, poor sanitation, limited access to clean drinking water, and other basic infrastructural deficiencies. These conditions may adversely affect their general well-being and capacity to sustain regular business activities.

6. Need for Accessible Institutional Credit Facilities

Easy and accessible institutional credit is essential for promoting and strengthening micro-businesses among nomadic tribal communities. Nationalised banks, cooperative institutions, and other recognised financial institutions should facilitate access to affordable credit for eligible Micro- Businesses. Low-interest loans, appropriate working-capital support, financial literacy programmes, and Micro - Businesses development training can contribute significantly to the establishment and expansion of micro-enterprises. Special efforts are also required to simplify procedures and improve awareness of available government and institutional financial schemes among nomadic communities.

7. Lack of Housing and Basic Amenities

The absence of permanent housing and basic amenities remains an important socio-economic challenge for several nomadic tribal families. In Vijayanagara district, many families belonging to the Sindholu, Budugajangam, Sudugadsidda and Shillekyatha communities continue to reside in tents, temporary shelters, or makeshift dwellings. Such living conditions may create difficulties in maintaining stable livelihoods and accessing education, healthcare, sanitation, and other public services. Therefore, appropriate residential plots and permanent housing should be provided to eligible families through suitable government programmes. In addition, essential facilities such as safe drinking water, electricity, sanitation, roads, and other basic infrastructure should be ensured to improve their living conditions and socio-economic security.

Findings

- 1) The nomadic tribal communities of Vijayanagar District primarily depend on religious and traditional occupations as their main sources of livelihood.
- 2) They typically reside in temporary tents or tin-roofed shelters located near schools, market grounds (santhe maidans), cinema halls, slum areas, and vacant plots.
- 3) These communities continue to live in extreme poverty, relying largely on religious begging and traditional occupations for their survival.
- 4) In addition to their traditional occupations, some members are engaged in agriculture, fishing, construction work, and the sale of small household.

Conclusion :

The study reveals that the nomadic Sindholu, Budugadjangam, Sudugadusidda and Shillekyatha communities of Vijayanagar district largely depend on traditional occupations, religious begging, small-scale business activities, wage labour, agriculture, and other informal economic activities for their livelihoods. A significant proportion of households continue to face challenges related to education, housing, healthcare, and access to basic amenities. The study highlights that micro-enterprises have considerable potential to provide alternative and complementary livelihood opportunities for nomadic tribal communities and thereby contribute to their economic empowerment.



However, inadequate capital, limited access to institutional credit, lack of entrepreneurial and managerial training, the constraints associated with nomadic lifestyles, health-related challenges, and the absence of permanent housing and basic infrastructure significantly affect the sustainability of micro-enterprises. Therefore, a comprehensive and integrated development approach is essential, encompassing financial inclusion, promotion of micro-enterprises, skill development, social security, housing, healthcare, and access to essential services. At the same time, the traditional occupations, indigenous knowledge, skills, and cultural heritage of nomadic tribal communities need to be recognized, protected, documented, and promoted.

The study further emphasizes the need for effective implementation of government welfare programmes, skill-development initiatives, financial inclusion measures, and sustainable livelihood interventions. Coordinated efforts by government agencies, financial institutions, civil society organizations, and community-based institutions can strengthen livelihood security, promote economic self-reliance, and improve the socio-economic conditions of these communities. Such an integrated approach would not only contribute to sustainable livelihoods and improved living standards but also ensure the preservation and promotion of the rich cultural heritage of nomadic tribal communities.

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