

Food, Food Habits and Beverages of the Banjara Community in the Pre-Colonial Era in India

Daravath Ravi

Research Scholar, Department of History and Tourism Management, Kakatiya University, Warangal, TG., India

Email: [daravathravi\[at\]kakatiya.ac.in](mailto:daravathravi[at]kakatiya.ac.in)

Abstract: *The food culture of the Banjara community represents an important dimension of India's indigenous social and economic history. Historically associated with nomadic movement, caravan trade, pastoralism, and transporting agricultural commodities, the Banjaras developed food practices closely adapted to mobility and diverse ecological environments. During the pre-colonial period, their diet was primarily based on cereals such as jowar, bajra, ragi, and rice, supplemented by pulses, vegetables, seasonal forest resources, dairy products, and, depending on availability and social circumstances, meat and poultry. Jowar roti, dal, vegetable preparations, chutneys, curd, and buttermilk constituted important elements of traditional meals. Their nomadic lifestyle encouraged foods that were durable, easily transportable, and relatively simple to prepare, contributing to household food security during long-distance journeys. Banjara food culture also extended beyond everyday nutrition. Special foods and beverages were associated with festivals, hospitality, marriage ceremonies, ancestor worship, and other social and religious occasions. Fermented beverages and locally produced alcoholic drinks formed part of particular ceremonial and social practices. The community's historical role as mobile traders also facilitated cultural exchange and the incorporation of regional food practices. Colonial policies, restrictions on mobility and the decline of caravan-based trade gradually encouraged sedentarisation and transformed traditional livelihood and dietary patterns. In the post-colonial period, market integration, urbanization, education and changing employment have further influenced Banjara food habits. Nevertheless, traditional millet-based foods, dairy products, chutneys and ceremonial preparations continue to contribute to cultural identity. The study argues that Banjara food traditions should be understood not merely as dietary practices but as an adaptive cultural system reflecting mobility, ecology, livelihood, social organization and collective memory. Documenting these traditions is therefore important for preserving Banjara intangible cultural heritage and recognizing the nutritional knowledge embedded in indigenous food systems.*

Keywords: Banjara community, food habits, beverages, nomadic life, pre-colonial India, millet foods, indigenous food culture, cultural heritage

1. Introduction

Food is more than nourishment; it expresses a community's ecology, occupation, mobility, social organization, religious beliefs, and cultural identity. Among India's Banjara community, food traditions developed around a historically mobile way of life. The Banjaras, also known in different regions as Lambadi, Lambani, Banjari, Labana, Vanjari, Sugali and related names, historically traveled in large caravans known as *tandas*. They were important mobile traders, pastoralists, carriers and suppliers of agricultural commodities, particularly grain and salt. Their movement across different ecological regions enabled them to acquire, exchange and incorporate a wide range of food traditions (Lal, 2026; Ota et al., 2015; Satya, 1997). The pre-colonial Banjara food system was therefore shaped by two apparently contrasting requirements: mobility and nutritional security. Families traveling with caravans required foods that could be stored, transported, prepared with limited equipment, and consumed after long journeys. At the same time, access to livestock, grain, forest resources and agricultural settlements provided opportunities for a diverse diet. Historical accounts indicate that Banjaras transported grain over considerable distances and maintained households within their mobile caravans, making food provisioning an integral part of their economic and social organization. (Sathee)

2. Objectives of the Study

- 1) To examine the traditional food patterns of the Banjara community during the pre-colonial period.

- 2) To analyze the influence of nomadic life on Banjara food habits
- 3) To study the traditional beverages of the Banjara community
- 4) To examine the relationship between food, festivals, rituals and social institutions
- 5) To assess continuity and change in Banjara food culture

3. Methodology

Research Design: The study adopts a descriptive and historical research design to examine the food, food habits, and beverages of the Banjara community in relation to its pre-colonial and nomadic way of life.

Sources of Data: The study primarily uses secondary data from historical writings, colonial-era records, Census of India ethnographic monographs, Tribal Research Institute publications, government reports, books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly studies on Banjara/Lambadi/Lambani communities.

Historical Approach: This study adopts a historical-descriptive approach to reconstruct the food system of the Banjaras during the pre-colonial and early colonial periods. The analysis focuses on the relationship between nomadic mobility, caravan organization, livestock, trade in agricultural commodities, access to local resources, and household food provisioning. The study also considers regional variations because Banjara communities have historically lived and traveled across different parts of India. Therefore, food practices are interpreted within their particular ecological,

economic, and cultural contexts rather than assuming that all Banjara groups followed an identical dietary pattern.

The Pre-Colonial Banjara Economy and Its Influence on Food

The relationship between Banjara food and their economic life cannot be understood separately from their role in India's inland trade. During the medieval and early modern periods, Banjara caravans transported grain and other commodities to markets and armies. Historical records describe their use of large numbers of bullocks to transport grain, and the caravans also carried household members and essential domestic possessions (Satya, 1997). Their trading activities connected agricultural regions with military centers, towns, and rural markets.

This economic mobility influenced their dietary practices in several ways. First, grain was central to both their commercial activities and household consumption. Second, their movements exposed them to different regional food crops and culinary practices. Third, livestock supplied both transportation and, on appropriate occasions, food products. Thus, the Banjara diet evolved within a mobile food economy rather than within the relatively fixed agricultural setting of settled communities.

Grain holds particular historical significance. Banjaras were not merely consumers of food grains; they were also major carriers and distributors. Peter Mundy's seventeenth-century account describes a Banjara *tanda* transporting thousands of bullocks loaded with wheat and rice. (Sathee) This illustrates how closely food, trade, and mobility were interconnected in Banjara society.

Staple Foods

Millets occupied an important place in the traditional Banjara diet. Jowar (sorghum), bajra (pearl millet) and ragi (finger millet) were especially significant because they are comparatively hardy crops, nutritionally valuable and suitable for making durable flatbreads. The Lambadi ethnographic record identifies jowar roti as one of the community's most important foods and notes that they commonly ate it with vegetables, pulses, chutney, and meat. (Census India)

Jowar roti was particularly compatible with a mobile lifestyle. It required relatively simple ingredients—millet flour and water—and could be prepared on a flat cooking surface without elaborate equipment. Traditional preparation involved kneading the flour into dough, shaping it by hand, and baking it on a heated pan. The absence of elaborate ingredients made the food economical and practical for households whose livelihoods involved continuous movement.

Ragi was another important cereal. Ragi-based *sangati* could be consumed with buttermilk and chutney and was also associated with non-vegetarian dishes. People consumed rice in several forms, including cooked rice with dal and rasam. Official ethnographic materials similarly identify ragi, jowar and rice as important components of Banjara food traditions (Ota et al., 2015). (KBK)

Pulses, Vegetables and Chutneys

Pulses provided an important source of protein in a diet in which meat consumption varied according to economic circumstances and availability. Gram, green gram and horse gram were among the pulses traditionally used. *Dal* was prepared by boiling pulses and adding salt, chili, onion, turmeric and other seasonings. (Census India)

Vegetables, seasonal greens, tamarind and locally available fruits supplemented the cereal-based diet. Kitchen gardens became increasingly important as sections of the community settled. Traditional accounts mention vegetables grown near Banjara households and their incorporation into everyday curries (Ota et al., 2015). (Tribal Repository)

Chutneys and pickles were also significant because they could add flavor to otherwise simple cereal-based meals. Their use illustrates an important characteristic of Banjara cuisine: relatively basic ingredients could be transformed into distinctive meals through spices, chili, tamarind and other locally available flavoring agents.

Meat and Non-Vegetarian Food

Non-vegetarian food has historically occupied an important place in Banjara culinary culture. Ethnographic sources describe the consumption of goat, sheep and poultry, together with various locally available animal foods. Some accounts also document the historical consumption of wild animals and birds. (Census India)

Meat consumption, however, should not be interpreted as an everyday practice for all Banjara households. Economic capacity, availability, seasonality, and social occasions influenced consumption. Historical ethnography records that non-vegetarian food could be eaten periodically, while households with greater resources could consume it more frequently. This distinction matters because food practices differed by locality and economic circumstances.

Certain dietary restrictions also existed. Historical ethnographic accounts identify beef and pork as prohibited foods in the communities studied, while goat, sheep and poultry were widely appreciated. (Census India) The diversity of reported practices across regions suggests that Banjara food culture should not be treated as completely uniform; local ecology and interaction with neighboring populations influenced particular dietary customs.

A distinctive preparation documented in ethnographic sources is *saloi*, a non-vegetarian dish made with goat blood and other parts of the animal. (KBK) Such preparations demonstrate the community's traditional practice of making extensive use of available animal resources.

Food Preservation and Mobility

Nomadic life created special requirements for food storage and preparation. Unlike settled agricultural households that could depend on fixed kitchens, cultivated fields, and permanent storage structures, Banjara families traveling with tandas had to carry essential food supplies and cooking equipment over long distances.

Cereals and pulses were particularly suitable because they could be stored for extended periods and transported without rapid deterioration. Dry grains could be ground into flour when required and transformed into rotis or other preparations. Pickles, dried ingredients, and other relatively durable foods also helped households cope with journeys when fresh food was uncertain.

The cooking system was correspondingly simple. Ethnographic records describe the use of earthen cooking pots and basic utensils. Banjaras traditionally regarded food prepared in earthen vessels as especially tasty. (Census India) This combination of portable ingredients, simple utensils, and fuel-efficient preparation techniques was well adapted to caravan life.

Daily Meal Pattern

Traditional accounts indicate that people generally ate several times a day. The morning meal could include leftovers from the previous evening, including ambali, a liquid preparation made with millet or *sangati* mixed with buttermilk and sometimes tamarind or pickle. (Census India) Such practices demonstrate an important principle of traditional food systems: leftovers were not necessarily waste but could be transformed into nutritious, convenient meals.

The evening meal was often more substantial and could include jowar roti with dal, vegetables, or meat, or rice with curd or buttermilk. The evening meal also had a social dimension because household members could eat together after completing the day's work. (Census India)

Food was therefore connected not only to nutrition but also to the rhythm of labor. During travel and work hours, meals had to be convenient and quick. In the evening, eating could become a more relaxed social activity involving conversation, family interaction and, on particular occasions, music and dancing.

Buttermilk, Milk and Other Traditional Beverages

Milk products have traditionally been significant in Banjara food culture. Milk could be processed into curd, butter and buttermilk. Buttermilk was particularly well-suited to millet-based foods and was consumed alongside sangati, roti, and other preparations. (Census India)

Buttermilk had nutritional and practical advantages. It provided fluid, minerals, and some protein while also complementing cereal-based meals. In hot and dry environments, beverages based on fermented milk could be particularly valuable.

Traditional cereal-based drinks were also known. *Chauli*, described in ethnographic sources as a rice-based fermented beverage, was associated particularly with festivals and ritual occasions. It may also have been connected with offerings to ancestors and deities. (KBK) This demonstrates that beverages could have religious and ceremonial significance in addition to their dietary role.

Alcoholic Beverages and Social Life

Alcoholic beverages formed another part of traditional Banjara social life. Ethnographic sources refer to *mad* or

country liquor and to *mahuli*, while *chauli* was associated with ceremonial occasions. (KBK) The consumption of alcoholic beverages was not simply an individual dietary practice; in particular circumstances it was connected with festivals, social gatherings, hospitality, celebration and ritual.

The relationship between food and beverage consumption was especially visible during social occasions. Relatives and visitors could be welcomed with meals, and non-vegetarian dishes and alcoholic beverages could form part of communal celebrations. Food thus functioned as a mechanism of hospitality and social solidarity.

Food, Festivals and Rituals

Festivals and ceremonies provided opportunities for more elaborate food preparation. Ordinary meals were generally simple, whereas special occasions encouraged the preparation of meat dishes, rice-based foods, puris and sweets. Ethnographic documentation records *garelu*, a sweet preparation involving rice flour and jaggery, among ceremonial foods. (Census India)

Food also had a ritual role. Ethnographic records describe the offering of cooked rice and chicken to ancestral spirits during important household ceremonies. (Tribal Repository) Likewise, *chauli* could be offered to ancestors and deities. (KBK) These practices demonstrate that food operated within a broader religious system in which nourishment, sacrifice, remembrance and community identity were interconnected.

Food and Gender Roles

Food preparation traditionally formed an important part of domestic labor. Women played a central role in preparing rotis, dal, vegetable dishes, meat preparations and beverages. Food preparation and serving were also embedded in household hierarchies and social conventions.

Ethnographic observations from Lambadi communities indicate differentiated patterns of serving food within households, including priority being given to children and subsequent serving of adult members. (Census India) Such practices reveal that food distribution reflected wider ideas about family responsibility, age and gender.

At the same time, cooking was not merely domestic labor. Knowledge about ingredients, preservation, preparation methods and ceremonial foods represented a form of cultural knowledge transmitted across generations, particularly through women's everyday practices.

Women in Banjara society play a vital role in social, cultural, economic, and religious life and are considered an economic asset. But they still lag far behind in areas like education, employment, and health. Though they are industrious, they have limited control over resources (Lal, 2005).

Food as an Adaptation to the Nomadic Environment

One of the most important characteristics of traditional Banjara food culture was adaptability. The community traveled through diverse ecological zones of India, interacting with agricultural communities, pastoralists, forest populations and market centers. Consequently, their food system

incorporated locally available cereals, pulses, vegetables, fruits, dairy products and animal foods.

The Banjaras' mobility also encouraged a practical culinary system. They had to prepare food with relatively limited equipment and ingredients that could survive transportation. Millets and pulses were especially appropriate because they were comparatively durable and versatile. They could prepare meat when livestock or hunted resources were available, while dairy products supplemented cereal-based meals.

This adaptability helped the Banjara community sustain itself despite the uncertainties associated with long-distance movement. Their culinary system can therefore be interpreted as an indigenous food-security strategy developed under conditions of mobility.

Food, Trade and Cultural Exchange

The Banjaras' role as traveling merchants created opportunities for cultural exchange. Their caravans moved between different regions and interacted with communities possessing different cuisines and agricultural systems. Historical records indicate that Banjara trade involved commodities such as food grains, salt, spices, tamarind, and other consumable products. (South Indian History Congress Journal)

This movement of commodities also meant movement of culinary knowledge. Ingredients encountered in one region could become incorporated into Banjara food practices elsewhere. Consequently, Banjara cuisine should be viewed as a dynamic food culture rather than a closed culinary system.

Their food traditions provide evidence of the broader role mobile communities played in connecting India's regional economies. The Banjara caravan was simultaneously a commercial institution, household space, transportation system, and cultural corridor.

The migration of Banjaras to South India can be broadly categorized into two phases. The first Phase of Lambadas' migration to the South took place during the Sultanate Period, especially during the invasions of (a) Malik Kafur and (b) Mohammad Tughlak. The second phase of migration occurred during the Mughal invasion of the Deccan, spreading during the period of rule from Shah Jahan to Aurangzeb (Lal, 2016).

Colonial Transformation and Changing Food Habits

The colonial period brought profound changes to Banjara economic and social life. The colonial state increasingly viewed mobile communities with suspicion and attempted to encourage or compel their settlement. Satya (1997) shows that colonial policies disrupted Banjara mobility and traditional economic activities.

The decline of long-distance caravan trade and the movement toward settled agriculture, wage labor and urban employment inevitably affected food practices. As communities became more settled, access to markets, permanent houses, new cooking equipment and commercially produced foods increased. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs similarly notes a transition among Banjaras from nomadic and pastoral

occupations toward settled agriculture and diversified employment, accompanied by changes in food preferences and material life. (Tribal Repository)

Thus, the traditional Banjara diet did not disappear, but it became increasingly combined with foods and beverages introduced through markets and urbanization.

Continuity and Change in Contemporary Food Culture

Contemporary Banjara communities continue to preserve several elements of their traditional food culture, particularly jowar and other millet-based foods, dal, chutneys, buttermilk, and non-vegetarian dishes. At the same time, rice, tea, commercially purchased foods, and urban culinary practices have become increasingly common.

Recent empirical research on Banjara households in Telangana suggests that traditional food practices continue alongside dietary changes associated with education, income, urbanization and market integration. (Granthaalayah Publication) This demonstrates that food culture is neither static nor completely replaced by modernization. Instead, traditional and contemporary practices coexist and interact.

The persistence of traditional foods is culturally important because food knowledge carries memories of mobility, ecology, occupation, and community identity. Preserving this knowledge can therefore help safeguard intangible cultural heritage and indigenous nutritional practices.

Nutritional Significance of Traditional Banjara Foods

From a nutritional perspective, the traditional Banjara diet has several strengths. Millets provide complex carbohydrates, dietary fiber and important micronutrients; pulses contribute plant-based protein; milk, curd and buttermilk provide protein and minerals; vegetables and fruits add vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals; and meat supplies high-quality protein and micronutrients.

Combining cereals and pulses is particularly valuable because it improves the overall protein quality of a predominantly plant-based meal. Fermented foods and beverages may also contribute to dietary diversity.

However, traditional diets should not be romanticized. Food availability depended heavily on economic resources, seasonality, market access, and livelihood success. Historically, mobile communities could experience food insecurity during difficult journeys, economic crises, and environmental stress. The colonial disruption of Banjara occupations further intensified socioeconomic vulnerability in some regions (Satya, 1997).

4. Conclusion

The food culture of the Banjara community emerged from a distinctive combination of mobility, trade, pastoralism, ecological adaptation and social tradition. In the pre-colonial era, the Banjaras' role as traveling traders and carriers placed food grains at the center of both their economic and domestic life. Jowar, bajra, ragi, rice and pulses formed the foundation of the diet, while vegetables, chutneys, dairy products and meat provided variety. Non-vegetarian foods had an

important cultural position, although their frequency depended on household resources and availability.

Beverages such as buttermilk formed part of everyday nutrition, whereas fermented rice beverages and alcoholic drinks could assume ceremonial, social and ritual significance. Food was also central to festivals, hospitality, ancestral worship and community relationships.

The traditional Banjara food system was particularly well adapted to nomadic life. Durable cereals and pulses, simple cooking methods, portable utensils and flexible use of locally available resources enabled families to sustain themselves while traveling across India. Their food culture therefore represents an important example of how mobility can generate distinctive systems of food security and cultural adaptation.

Colonial disruption of caravan-based livelihoods, followed by settlement, urbanization, education, and market integration, transformed Banjara dietary practices. Nevertheless, many communities still maintain traditional foods. Preserving and documenting these culinary traditions matters not only for understanding Banjara history but also for recognizing the nutritional knowledge, ecological adaptability, and cultural heritage embedded in indigenous food systems.

Acknowledgements

I thank Prof. B. Suresh Lal, Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, Kakatiya University, Warangal, for his ideas, analysis, and support for writing this article.

References

- [1] Food and Agriculture Organization. (2021). *Indigenous peoples' food systems: Insights on sustainability and resilience*. FAO.
- [2] Lal, B. S. (2026). Food, food habits, and beverages of Banjaras: An empirical study in Telangana. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 7(10s), 646–652.
<https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i10s.2026.8762> (Granthaalayah Publication)
- [3] Lal BS (2016). *A Historical Study of Origin and Migration of Banjara Tribe in Telangana State*, International Journal of Current Research, Vol. 8, Issue 10, pp.40261–40267, October.
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311562515>
- [4] Lal BS(2005). *Empowerment of Tribal Women in Andhra Pradesh*, Southern Economist, Vol.44, No. 15&16, December.
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339016781>
- [5] Ota, A. B., Mohanty, S. C., & Patnayak, K. (2015). *Banjara*. Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute, Government of Odisha. (Tribal Repository)
- [6] Rathod, S., Bellurkar, C., & Shinde, P. S. (2014). Adoption of traditional knowledge about processed food by the Banjara community. *Agriculture Update*, 9(1), 7–11.
- [7] Satya, L. D. (1997). Colonial sedentarisation and subjugation: The case of the Banjaras of Berar, 1850–1900. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 24(4), 314–336.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03066159708438653> (Taylor & Francis Online)

- [8] Singh, R., & Sharma, A. (2019). Indigenous food systems and nutritional transition among tribal populations in India. *Journal of Rural Development*, 38(3), 421–438.
- [9] Census of India. (1961). *Lambadi: Ethnographic study, Monograph Series No. 17*. Government of India. (Census of India)
- [10] Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India. (n.d.). *Banjara: Food & drinks*. Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation/Tribal profile materials. (KKBK)
- [11] Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India. (n.d.). *The Banjaras of Bapunagar: A settlement in the urban environs of Hyderabad*. Tribal Research Institute, Andhra Pradesh. (Tribal Repository)