



Original Article

Exploring the Socio-Economic Status of the Banjara Community in Karnataka

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Abstract

The Banjara community, a prominent nomadic tribal group in India, faces persistent socio-economic challenges despite policy-level efforts for inclusion. This study aims to assess the current socio-economic status of the Banjara community in Karnataka, with a focus on key indicators such as education, employment, income, housing, and healthcare access. It also explores the impact of traditional occupations and cultural practices on their economic sustainability and social identity. A structured questionnaire was administered to 384 respondents across selected districts in Karnataka. The demographic data revealed a relatively low literacy rate, high dependency on agriculture and manual labor, and limited income levels. The socio-economic profile indicated that a majority reside in semi-pucca or kutchha houses and primarily depend on government healthcare facilities. Findings also show that while a significant portion of the community values traditional occupations as integral to their identity, youth interest in continuing these practices is declining. Hypothesis testing revealed significant associations between education and income, gender and income, and involvement in traditional occupations with both cultural importance and economic returns. The results highlight the need for targeted development initiatives that address educational gaps, gender-based income disparities, and support for preserving cultural heritage in economically viable ways. This research contributes to a nuanced understanding of marginalized tribal communities and serves as a foundation for policymakers and social researchers to formulate inclusive strategies.

Keywords: Banjara Community, Socio-Economic Status, Traditional Occupations, Karnataka.

Introduction

India's social fabric is woven with a multitude of communities, each with distinct cultural, historical, and socio-economic characteristics. Among these, the Banjara community, traditionally known as nomadic traders and transporters, represents one of the most marginalized and underrepresented groups, especially in the southern state of Karnataka. Despite their rich cultural heritage, including vibrant customs, folk traditions, and languages, the Banjaras have long faced socio-economic disadvantages rooted in historical displacement, social exclusion, and lack of access to institutional support.

The Banjara community is classified under the Scheduled Tribes (ST) category in Karnataka, granting them constitutional safeguards. However, this status has not entirely translated into meaningful social or economic upliftment. Factors such as low literacy rates, poor access to healthcare, high unemployment, and landlessness continue to plague the community, limiting their upward mobility. While governmental programs exist to support Scheduled Tribes, the effectiveness of such policies remains inconsistent across regions and often fails to address the specific needs of Banjara settlements.

This study seeks to explore the socio-economic status of the Banjara community in Karnataka, focusing on key indicators such as education, employment, income levels, housing, health, and social inclusion. By critically examining these dimensions, the research aims to shed light on the everyday realities faced by Banjara families and assess the extent to which public welfare schemes and affirmative actions have impacted their lives.

Furthermore, the study places emphasis on regional disparities within Karnataka, recognizing that the socio-economic conditions of the Banjaras may vary between rural, semi-urban, and tribal pockets.

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Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis, this research intends not only to highlight the persistent challenges but also to suggest policy-level recommendations for the empowerment and sustainable development of this historically marginalized community.

Review of literature

Recent literature highlights the complex socio-economic and cultural realities faced by the Banjara community in Karnataka. Abhinav Yadav (2024) and Dr. S. Lal (2022) explore the historical migration and transformation of the Banjaras from nomadic traders to settled communities, emphasizing how this shift impacted their social identity and economic adaptation. Reports such as those from the *Times of India* (2025) point to the stagnation of initiatives like the Banjara Tribal Park in Bidar, revealing systemic neglect in promoting their traditional livelihoods. Wikipedia entries and ethnographic documentation detail traditional practices such as Lambada embroidery, folk art, and beadwork, underscoring their deep cultural significance yet declining economic relevance. Similar studies by Pawar et al. (2023) and Manjunatha & Gangadhar (2017) demonstrate how tribal artisans, including Banjaras, remain marginalized due to poor literacy, limited market access, and low income. Research by Serrao et al. (2021) and Montes et al. (2018) highlights that despite financial inclusion efforts in Karnataka, many Scheduled Tribes remain excluded, reinforcing socio-economic isolation. Vahia et al. (2014) and Lal & Jyothi (2020) also explore traditional knowledge systems and consumption patterns, noting the disconnect between ancestral occupations and contemporary livelihoods.

Further studies on related tribes and occupations reveal a general decline in the intergenerational transmission of skills and cultural knowledge. Most scholars agree that while traditional practices are vital for community identity, they are insufficient for economic sustainability without institutional support, skill modernization, and policy attention. Together, these studies provide a foundation for analysing the socio-economic conditions, cultural dynamics, and future challenges of the Banjara community in Karnataka.

Research Gap

Despite increased attention to marginalized communities in India, research specifically focusing on the Banjara community's socio-economic status in Karnataka remains limited. Existing literature often generalizes tribal issues or overlooks localized, data-driven insights into the Banjaras' unique historical, cultural, and occupational shifts. Critical aspects such as gender inequality, regional disparities, and access to welfare schemes are often underexplored. Moreover, few studies assess the effectiveness of government programs or the potential of traditional occupations like embroidery and folk arts for economic sustainability. This study aims to address these gaps through a focused and empirical analysis of the community's current conditions and development needs.

Statement of the Problem

The Banjara community in Karnataka, despite being recognized as a Scheduled Tribe and eligible for various welfare schemes, continues to face persistent socio-economic challenges marked by poverty, low literacy, unemployment, inadequate housing, and limited access to healthcare and education. Their traditional livelihoods have diminished in viability, while modern economic opportunities remain largely inaccessible due to systemic exclusion and lack of institutional support. Existing policies and programs have often failed to address the specific needs of the community, particularly in remote and rural Tandras where awareness and implementation are weak. This disconnect between policy intent and ground-level impact highlights the need for a focused investigation into the actual socio-economic status of the Banjaras in Karnataka, to identify gaps, challenges, and areas requiring targeted intervention.

Objectives of the study

- To assess the current socio-economic status of the Banjara community in Karnataka.
- To explore the impact of traditional occupations and cultural practices on the economic sustainability and social identity of the Banjara community in Karnataka.

Research Methodology

The current study employs a qualitative and quantitative (mixed method) research methodology to gain a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic status of the Banjara community in Karnataka. This approach allows for both statistical analysis and in-depth exploration of community experiences, perceptions, and challenges.

1. Research Design

The study follows a descriptive and exploratory research design. Descriptive design helps in presenting the current socio-economic conditions of the community, while the exploratory element investigates lesser-known cultural, occupational, and social factors influencing their development.

2. Population and Sample

The target population includes members of the Banjara community residing in selected districts of Karnataka such as Bidar, Kalaburagi, Ballari, and Vijayapura, where the Banjara population is significantly concentrated. A multi-stage sampling technique is used, combining purposive and random sampling to ensure representation across regions, age groups, and gender. A sample of approximately 384 respondents (households and individuals) was selected to gather diverse perspectives.

Data Collection Methods

- **Primary Data was collected through:** Structured questionnaires to gather quantitative data on income, education, health, housing, and employment. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with elders, women, youth, and community leaders to capture qualitative insights.
- **Secondary Data was obtained from:** Government reports, census data, academic research articles, NGO

reports, and official records related to Scheduled Tribes and rural development in Karnataka.

Tools for Data Analysis

Quantitative data has been analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean, and cross-tabulations and hypothesis testing using appropriate tests through software like SPSS.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents (N = 384)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	212	55.2%
	Female	172	44.8%
Age Group (in years)	18–25	66	17.2%
	26–35	102	26.6%
	36–45	91	23.7%
	46–60	85	22.1%
	Above 60	40	10.4%
Marital Status	Married	308	80.2%
	Unmarried	76	19.8%
Educational Qualification	Illiterate	147	38.3%
	Primary (1–5 Std)	98	25.5%
	Secondary (6–10 Std)	78	20.3%
	Higher Secondary (11–12 Std)	35	9.1%
	Graduate and above	26	6.8%
Occupation	Agricultural Laborer	134	34.9%
	Small/Marginal Farmer	89	23.2%
	Traditional Artisan (Embroidery, etc.)	42	10.9%
	Private sector job/daily wage	76	19.8%
	Unemployed/Housewife /Student	43	11.2%
Monthly Household Income	Below ₹5,000	122	31.8%
	₹5,001–₹10,000	176	45.8%
	₹10,001–₹15,000	54	14.1%
	Above ₹15,000	32	8.3%

(Source: primary data)

Interpretation:

The demographic profile of the respondents reveals key insights into the socio-economic structure of the Banjara community in Karnataka. A slightly higher proportion of the respondents are male (55.2%) compared to female (44.8%), indicating near gender balance in the sample. The age distribution shows that the majority of respondents fall within the productive age group of 26–45 years (50.3%), reflecting a young and economically active population. A significant majority (80.2%) of the respondents are married, which is typical in traditional community structures.

Scope and Limitations

The study is confined to specific districts in Karnataka with a substantial Banjara population and may not fully reflect the status of Banjaras in urban areas or other states. Time constraints, language barriers, and accessibility to remote Tandras may also pose limitations during data collection.

The educational profile highlights considerable educational deprivation within the community, with 38.3% of respondents being illiterate and only 6.8% attaining graduation or higher education. This suggests limited access to educational opportunities and possibly high dropout rates. Occupation-wise, a large portion of the community is engaged in low-income, unskilled labor, with 34.9% working as agricultural laborers and 23.2% as small or marginal farmers. Only 10.9% are involved in traditional artisan work such as embroidery, and nearly one-fifth are engaged in private sector jobs or daily wage work.

Income distribution further underscores economic hardship, with 77.6% of households earning ₹10,000 or less

per month. Only 8.3% report earning above ₹15,000, indicating that the vast majority of the Banjara community lives with limited financial resources. These figures reflect widespread poverty, occupational vulnerability, and limited

upward mobility, reinforcing the need for targeted educational, skill development, and livelihood enhancement programs.

Table 2: Socio-Economic Status of the Banjara Community in Karnataka (N = 384)

Indicator	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Education Level	Illiterate	147	38.3%
	Primary (1–5 Std)	98	25.5%
	Secondary (6–10 Std)	78	20.3%
	Higher Secondary & Above	61	15.9%
Employment Type	Agricultural Laborer	134	34.9%
	Small/Marginal Farmer	89	23.2%
	Traditional Artisan (Embroidery, etc.)	42	10.9%
	Private Sector/Daily Wage	76	19.8%
	Unemployed (including students/housewives)	43	11.2%
Monthly Income	Below ₹5,000	122	31.8%
	₹5,001–₹10,000	176	45.8%
	₹10,001–₹15,000	54	14.1%
	Above ₹15,000	32	8.3%
Housing Type	Kutcha (Mud/thatched house)	149	38.8%
	Semi-Pucca (Partly concrete)	162	42.2%
	Pucca (Fully concrete)	73	19.0%
Healthcare Access	Government hospital only	216	56.3%
	Private clinic/hospital	94	24.5%
	No regular access to healthcare	74	19.3%

Source: Primary Field Data

Interpretation:

The data in Table 2 highlights the socio-economic challenges faced by the Banjara community in Karnataka. A significant portion of the population is illiterate (38.3%), and only 15.9% have completed higher secondary education or above, reflecting a low level of educational attainment. Employment is primarily concentrated in low-paying and unskilled sectors, with 34.9% working as agricultural laborers and 23.2% as small or marginal farmers, indicating high dependence on the agrarian economy. Income levels are also notably low, with over three-fourths (77.6%) of households earning less than ₹10,000 per month, suggesting widespread economic hardship.

Housing data reveals that only 19% of the respondents live in pucca (concrete) houses, while 38.8% still reside in kutcha structures, indicating poor housing conditions. In terms of healthcare access, more than half of the respondents (56.3%) rely solely on government health facilities, and 19.3% report having no regular access to healthcare, reflecting both affordability issues and inadequate infrastructure. Overall, the data underscores persistent underdevelopment and highlights the need for targeted interventions in education, livelihood generation, housing, and healthcare accessibility for the Banjara community.

Table 3: Impact of Traditional Occupations and Cultural Practices on Economic Sustainability and Social Identity (N = 384)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Involvement in Traditional Occupations (e.g., embroidery, folk singing, beadwork, blacksmithing)	Yes	136	35.4%
	No	248	64.6%
Income from Traditional Occupations	Less than ₹3,000/month	92	67.6% (of 136)
	₹3,000–₹6,000/month	34	25.0%
	Above ₹6,000/month	10	7.4%
Is Traditional Work the Main Source of Livelihood?	Yes	42	11.0%
	No (supplementary/seasonal)	94	24.4%

Transmission of Traditional Skills to Next Generation	Actively taught at home/community level	98	25.5%
	Not taught/skills declining	286	74.5%
Perceived Cultural Importance of Traditional Practices	High (strong link to identity)	213	55.5%
	Moderate	103	26.8%
	Low (seen as outdated)	68	17.7%
Interest Among Youth in Continuing Traditional Occupations	Yes	72	18.8%
	No	312	81.2%

Source: Primary Field Data

Interpretation:

The data indicates that only 35.4% of the respondents are currently engaged in traditional occupations such as embroidery, folk singing, beadwork, or blacksmithing, while a majority (64.6%) have moved away from these roles. Among those involved, most earn less than ₹3,000 per month (67.6%), suggesting that these occupations are economically unsustainable for most families. Only a small fraction (11%) rely on traditional work as their primary source of income, while the rest use it as a supplementary or seasonal livelihood.

Skill transmission appears to be in decline, with 74.5% reporting that traditional skills are not actively

passed down, which may lead to the erosion of cultural heritage. Despite this, over 55% of the respondents regard traditional practices as having high cultural importance, indicating that these occupations still play a key role in shaping social identity. However, 81.2% of the youth show no interest in continuing these occupations, revealing a significant generational disconnect and a growing preference for modern livelihood options. Overall, the findings suggest that while traditional occupations are deeply rooted in the Banjara community's cultural identity, they are no longer viable sources of economic sustainability in their current form.

Table 4: Hypothesis Testing Based on Study Objectives (N = 384)

Hypothesis (H ₀)	Variables	Test Used	Test Result	Significance (p-value)	Inference
H ₀₁ : There is no significant association between education level and monthly income.	Education Level (ordinal) vs. Monthly Income (ordinal)	Chi-Square Test of Independence	$\chi^2 = 22.67$	$p = 0.003$ ($p < 0.05$)	Reject H ₀ : Significant association found
H ₀₂ : There is no significant difference in income levels between males and females.	Gender (nominal) vs. Monthly Income (interval)	Independent Sample T-test	$t = 2.45$	$p = 0.015$ ($p < 0.05$)	Reject H ₀ : Males earn significantly more than females
H ₀₃ : There is no significant association between involvement in traditional occupation and perceived cultural importance.	Traditional Occupation (Yes/No) vs. Cultural Importance (High/Medium/Low)	Chi-Square Test of Independence	$\chi^2 = 19.83$	$p = 0.001$ ($p < 0.05$)	Reject H ₀ : Strong link between traditional work and identity
H ₀₄ : There is no significant difference in income between those involved and not involved in traditional occupations.	Traditional Occupation (Yes/No) vs. Monthly Income (interval)	Independent Sample T-test	$t = -3.12$	$p = 0.002$ ($p < 0.05$)	Reject H ₀ : Traditional workers earn less

Observations and Findings

1. Demographic Profile:

The majority of respondents were male (55.2%), and a significant portion fell in the economically active age group of 26–45 years (50.3%). A large percentage (80.2%) were married. Education levels were alarmingly low, with 38.3% illiterate and only 6.8% graduates. Most respondents were engaged in low-income occupations like agricultural labor (34.9%) and small-scale farming (23.2%), while over 77.6% of households earned ₹10,000 or less monthly, indicating high economic vulnerability.

2. Socio-Economic Status:

The data confirmed widespread poverty: 31.8% of the respondents earned less than ₹5,000 monthly, while only 8.3% earned above ₹15,000. Housing quality also reflected economic hardship, with 81% living in kutchra or semi-pucca houses. Healthcare access was limited, with 56.3% depending solely on government hospitals, and nearly one-fifth (19.3%) reporting no regular healthcare access.

3. Traditional Occupations and Cultural Identity:

While 35.4% of respondents were involved in traditional occupations like embroidery or beadwork, most (67.6%) earned less than ₹3,000 monthly from such work. Only 11% depended on traditional jobs as their main income source. Cultural transmission is weakening: 74.5% reported that traditional skills were not being passed to the younger generation. Though 55.5% perceived traditional practices as culturally significant, youth interest was low—only 18.8% were willing to continue these traditions.

4. Hypothesis Testing:

- There is a strong association between education level and income, indicating education's role in improving economic outcomes.
- A gender gap exists in income, with males earning significantly more.
- Involvement in traditional occupations correlates with cultural identity, but income from such jobs remains significantly lower than modern employment.
- Traditional occupations, while culturally valued, are not economically sustainable, leading to their declining relevance.

Conclusion

The present study critically examined the socio-economic conditions and cultural sustainability of the Banjara community in Karnataka. Based on empirical data from 384 respondents, the findings highlight the persistent challenges faced by this marginalized community. A significant proportion of the population continues to struggle with poverty, low educational attainment, limited employment opportunities, inadequate housing, and insufficient access to healthcare facilities. While traditional occupations such as embroidery, beadwork, and folk arts remain culturally significant, they are no longer economically viable for most families, resulting in their gradual decline and reduced transmission to the younger generation.

Statistical analysis confirms that education plays a crucial role in improving income levels, and traditional occupations are closely tied to cultural identity, even though they provide limited economic benefits. The widening gender gap in income further underscores the need for inclusive development strategies. Overall, the study concludes that while the Banjara community maintains a rich cultural heritage, their socio-economic marginalization demands targeted policy interventions in education, livelihood diversification, healthcare access, and cultural preservation to ensure sustainable and equitable development.

Limitations and further research scope

The study is limited to Karnataka and may not reflect the entire Banjara population. It is based on self-reported data, which may have biases. Future studies can explore other regions, focus on gender issues, and assess the long-term impact of government schemes and cultural transitions.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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