

The Paradoxical Polity: Traditional Governance, Nomadism, and Change among the Banjara Tribe of India

Sanjay Mangilal Rathod^{1*}, Dr. Yogesh Gangurde²

¹Dept. of English, KRT Arts BH Commerce and AM Science (KTHM) College, Nashik

²Associate Professor, Dept. of English, KRT Arts BH Commerce and AM Science (KTHM) College, Nashik

Corresponding Author: *Sanjay Mangilal Rathod* (Dept. of English, KRT Arts BH Commerce and AM Science (KTHM) College, Nashik)

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Abstract: This paper examines the political organisation of the Banjara tribe of India, highlighting the paradoxical co-existence of democratic and monarchical principles within tribal polities. Utilising historical and anthropological frameworks, it explores the Banjaras' classification as a "stateless system" rooted in territorialism rather than genealogical or associational units. Furthermore, the paper analyses how their historical role as nomadic military carriers shaped their internal authority structures and concludes with an assessment of how modern state-sponsored institutions affect traditional tribal governance.

Keywords: *Nomadism, Tradition, monarchy, democracy, polity etc.*

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Introduction

The Tribal Political Paradox

The political life of indigenous tribes in India presents a unique socio-political paradox where democracy and monarchy coexist. While tribal leadership often mirrors monarchical structures—where heads of clans, villages, and territories are deeply honoured and obeyed—the foundation of their power is inherently democratic.

Key Principle: A tribal leader governs the community *only* because they are backed by the majority or the entirety of the group. Every tribal member retains a share in the political ties of the village and region.

Anthropological evidence suggests that political activities are universal; even the smallest communities require some form of government to regulate social life. Typically, these operate under two major organisational principles:

1. **State Systems:** Centralised systems with formal, overarching governments.
2. **Stateless Systems:** Decentralised systems lacking a single formal government embracing the whole society.

The Stateless Political Organisation of the Banjara

The Banjara tribe functions strictly within a **stateless system**. Their political framework is defined by territorialism rather than by genealogical or specialised associational units.

Structural Layout of Banjara Polity

- **The Thanda (Settlement):** The *thanda*, originally a moving camp and later a permanent settlement, serves as

the smallest territorial unit of organisation, represented fundamentally by the family.

- **Clan Equality:** Unlike tribes with rigid hierarchical structures, there is no separate headman for every individual clan. All clans within the Banjara socio-political matrix enjoy completely equal status.
- **Absence of Specialisation:** Traditional Banjara (Laman) society lacks specialised political associations, such as distinct military or religious organisations. Social control is seamlessly integrated into daily territorial life.

Historical and Economic Foundations of Authority

To understand the traditional political organisation of the Banjara, one must look at their historical economy as that of nomadic carrier bands.

Historical records from Persian and British historians, missionaries, and administrators dating back to the 14th century—including early accounts by the British historian Craufurd (1742)—confirm that the Banjaras lived in mobile tents, travelling in separate groups governed by strict internal regulations.

(14 th century: Invasion of Deccan —► 15 th -19th Century: Inter-kingdom and Colonial wars —► Banjara serve as military carriers or suppliers —► strengthened patrilineal authority and clan system)

Between the late 15th and mid-19th centuries, India experienced massive political upheaval as wars between indigenous kingdoms and European colonial powers (British, French, and Portuguese) raged. The Banjaras played an essential, paid role as carriers and suppliers of provisions to these armies.

The Economics of Strong Leadership

The dangerous nature of transporting goods through war zones directly influenced their internal power dynamics:

- **Patrilineal Strength:** The patrilineal clan system organising the caravans (*thandas*) remained incredibly strong until the last quarter of the 19th century.
- **Centralised Caravan Headmen:** Well-defined, rigid authority was granted to caravan headmen. This absolute obedience was a direct requirement of their peculiar

economic pursuits; survival during wartime transport demanded strict execution of orders.

- **The Right to Plunder:** The strategic importance of the Banjaras was so immense that Mughal Emperors granted them the explicit right to plunder enemy territories. Consequently, highway robbery during transit was not viewed internally as a crime, but rather as an extension of their economic livelihood. Historically, two specific clans—the Rathod and the Vadtya (or Burthya)—dominated this transport and trade monopoly.

Dynamics of Political Change and Modern Transitions

Changes in tribal political organisations generally occur across five distinct vectors:

Vector of Change	Traditional Banjara Context	Modern Transition State
Spatial/Organisational	Mobile <i>thandas</i> (moving camps)	Sedentary, permanent settlements
Type of Leadership	Caravan headmen backed by consensus	Elected representatives / State-recognised leaders
Legal System	Customary codes and internal regulations	Indian constitutional law and judiciary
Military/Warfare	Logistics providers for imperial armies	Integrated into the peacetime civilian economy

Impact of State-Sponsored Institution

The introduction of modern, state-sponsored governance institutions (such as the Panchayati Raj system, local municipalities, and statutory legal frameworks) has profoundly impacted the traditional Banjara polity.

The introduction of external legal systems and formal government administration often creates friction with the customary codes of the *thanda*. As state institutions centralise judicial and administrative power, the traditional authority of the lineage and the *thanda* elders faces erosion, shifting the Banjara from a purely autonomous, self-regulating stateless system into the broader, formalised state system of modern India.

Conclusion

The Banjara tribe offers a compelling case study into how economic necessity shapes political structure. Their history as vital

military carriers necessitated strong patrilineal authority and highly disciplined *thanda* leadership, yet their internal clan dynamics remained fiercely egalitarian and democratic. As modern state institutions continue to sponsor new administrative frameworks, the traditional, territorial stateless system of the Banjara faces a pivotal transformation, balancing age-old customary codes with the realities of contemporary democratic integration.

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