
UNIT 4 MIGRANT TRIBES / NOMADS

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

After having read this Unit you will be able to:

- explain about nomads;
- discuss about the characteristics of Nomad and their food habits;
- list the different types of Nomads and their life style; and
- explain about the origin and myths of Banjara tribe.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Nomads are found all over the world. It can be presumed that the early man was a nomad. Our remotest ancestors, who for millions of years were obliged to earn their livelihood through food gathering and later by hunting, must have lived as nomads. No other way method could have suited their environment, tradition and living conditions. “The term nomad is derived from the Greek word “*Nemo*” which literally means “to pasture”. It was applied by the ancients to hunter/gathers and herdsmen. These groups permanently or periodically wandered without any particular home or habitat, tending flocks of sheep or goats or herds

of cattle; horses, mules, camels, yaks etc. Later, they began to trade in livestock, as is common now in Jammu and Kashmir, and in a few other Himalayan states. In Indian language a Nomad is denoted as “*Khanabadosh*” which means “a home on shoulders”. (V.Raghaviah.1968.Nomads.pp. 47-52).

4.1.1 Definition of nomads

The *Dictionary of Anthropology* defines a nomad as “a person who lives completely from his flock and does not domicile himself to plant”. The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, in their work “Notes and Queries on Anthropology” (sixth edition) describe nomadic people as “those dependent principally on hunting or collecting for their food supplies, having no permanent abodes”. They further add that “it will generally be found, that the groups which habitually move about together, tend to be precisely defined, in terms of tracts of territory with which they are specially associated. A horde is a group of nomads, claiming exclusive hunting or grazing rights, over one or more defined areas, within which their wanderings are, as a rule, confined”.

B.H. Mehta, from the Tata Institute of Social Science, Bombay, describes the nomads as “grass landers” and cattle breeders. He describes nomadism as “regular, seasonal or cyclical movements of groups for sustenance. According to food supply, it may assume different forms, depending upon topography and climate. There are nomads, who hunt, and nomads who collect food, as well as pastoral and even agricultural nomads. Nomads are usually found in small kin-bands. They are not only grasslanders, but take to nomadic life, on account of economic insecurity, and lack of will for social adjustment.

The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences (Vol. 11 and 12, pp. 390-392) defines Nomadism, as involving the repeated shifting for subsistence and undirected wandering, but is focused around temporary centers of operation, stability of which depended upon food supply and the state of technical advance. It assumes different forms, according to methods of obtaining food, topographic and climatic conditions.

Nomadic tribes are found all over the world. Nomads are born as well as made. Nomadism is a pre-pastoral trait of all early humanity, passing through the digging stick stage of transition and civilization. It was pre-pastoral pattern of life, universally practiced in every country; West and East.

4.1.2 Characteristic of nomads

The following features can be considered as the main characteristics of nomadism.

- 1) Nomadism is a group or tribal trait, not an individual characteristic.
- 2) Timidity; modesty bordering on timidity of publicity and contact with outsiders. For example: dislike of photography, fear of police and village officers.
- 3) Fondness for open-air life, resulting in hardiness that can stand all kinds of weather.
- 4) Aversion to artificial embellishment, ornaments and clothing, and relying confidently on their natural beauty and body-build, which they expose to the fullest possible extent.

- 5) Absence of understanding the capitalistic values of time, money and economy.
- 6) Aversion to monotony in work and positive dislike to daily wage labour obtained in factories.
- 7) Dislike of change to economic modes common to industrialized, Western society.
- 8) Suspicion of all others except their closest kin group.
- 9) Aversion to allopathic medicine and a preference for natural cures. They enjoy work and rest alternately to relive boredom and are so well contented that they refuse to work on days when they have enough to eat.
- 10) Few personal possessions.
- 11) Bigger groups of Nomads are called “Dals” which consist of larger numbers of families, numbering 200 to 300 members led by women leaders called *Mukhyas*.
- 12) Nomads are honest, sincere and hard-working, are happy and enjoy life more fully than others.
- 13) Like other tribes, they uses weapons like bows and arrows for hunting. They are very skillful hunter. (V.Raghaviah.1968. Nomads. pp.53-55).

Check your progress 1

Note: 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;
2) You can check your answers with possible answers given at the end of the Unit.

1) What do you understand by the term “nomad”?

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2) Write few characteristics of the nomads.

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4.2 FOOD HABITS OF NOMADS

The food habits of the nomads are dependant on their living conditions and environmental constraints, as well as the seasonal patterns of migration. Their

eating habits are constructed by the environment in which they live. Walden observes “collecting the wild fruits of earth, and hunting its wild life for food are the simplest ways of earning a living. Life among the hunting tribes is one long struggle for food, broken by short periods of over-eating, sleeping and rejoicing. The hunting people have the least understanding of nature, and know least how to use her laws for comfort and support. There is truly a battle with nature, in which they are often the losers, for they are slaves of their environment. Only the simplest of the people living in the really luxurious zones of the earth’s surface remain in the purely hunting stage for long, the step to primitive cultivation being an easy one if circumstances permit”. Here are five examples of such tribes, the Semang and Sakai of Malaya, and the Pygmies of the South America, who subsist mainly on wild roots resembling potatoes, berries, the wild African banana, bread fruit and durain.

4.3 GYPSIES

The Gypsies are “a nomadic Caucasian minority race in Hindu origin”. According to Bhikshu Chaman Lal, writer of *Gypsies-Forgotten Children of India* (1962), the gypsies regard India as their motherland and believe that they originally emigrated from India when “barbarians invaded our motherland”. Bhikshu Chaman Lal who met the gypsies frequently in his travels, particularly in Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, France, England, Spain, Germany, Sweden, Russia and United states of America, believe that they belong to the Aryan stock of Punjab, Sind, Saurashtra, Rajputana and Malwa. The folk songs of the Hungarian gypsies, the system of panchayats, marriage customs, and thousands of gypsy words, prove the Hindu origin of the gypsies.

There are a number of theories available as to the period and causes of the gypsy migration from India. Some scholars believe that the earliest migrations might have occurred during Alexander’s invasion in 326 B.C. Others believe that the invasions of Muhmood of Gazhni in the 11th century resulted in enslavement of millions of gypsies from the North and North Western India, who were carried away by the ruthless conquerors. (V.Raghaviah. 1968. Nomads. pp.77-78).

4.3.1 Sea gypsies

The sea gypsy people live for most of the year in boats, like the Mawken tribe. It is stated of them that they had been driven to this plight owing to several adverse circumstances, one of which had been their expulsion from the land by superior war-like people since more than a century, on the South Burma coast. Several Chinese in the Canton Coastal state, live in boats, so that the small patch of land they used to occupy for house-sites might grow rice, so much in short supply to meet the teeming millions of populous China. Several Chinese, perhaps do not have any sites at all. (V.Raghaviah.1968.Nomads.pp. 73)

4.4 CLASSIFICATION OF NOMADS

Nomadic groups found all over the world can be divided under the following division. They are:

- 1) Food gathering Nomads
- 2) Pastoral Nomads

- 3) Trader Nomads
- 4) Mendicant Nomads

4.4.1 Food gathering nomads

The searches for food dominates their lives and occupies most of their time, if not all their waking hours, the hunting and collecting people all over, have been called food gatherers. Nomads engaged in food gathering pursuits as opposed to food producing i.e. agricultural activities can be brought under this category. They can be more aptly called cultural nomads, as nomadism is an inseparable part of their culture, handed over from pre-historic times. Some of the food gathering nomads of India are Challa Yanadi of Andhra Pradesh, the Malapandaram of Kerala, and the Bihor of Bihar etc. An example of food gathering nomads is given below:

Case study: the Malapandaram of Kerala

According to A.A.D. Luiz's records in his book "Tribes of Kerala" The Malapandarams inhabit the high ranges in Kottayam and Quilon districts in the Achen Koil, and Sabarimala hills and forests, and are primitive hunters and food gatherers, "Preferring to roam unnoticed by the advanced society". It is indeed a very rare privilege, as Luiz states, to establish any contact with this most elusive group of primitive people. Luiz describes their day-to-day life in the following order. The Malapandaram have one important meal and that is at dusk. They collect, till produce, hunt fish and catch tortoise from the Pamba river and forest streams. Herbs, roots and the yam found in the forests, form the principle part of their diet. Collecting honey is done at nights and fishing is done by poisoning streams with the bark of wild trees. A digging stick and bill-hook are their chief implements. They are conversant with the use of the bow and arrow, blow pipe, spear, traps, nooses and snares. They are fond of pets, especially the parish dog which accompanies them in all their wanderings. They are known to live in caves, under overhanging rocks and in the hollows of trees during their temporary halts. They keep the fire glowing through the night. Before starting to use matches, they made fire with "Chakmuk"; rubbing stones or bamboo.

The Malapandarams are animists worshiping hills, trees and streams as even enlightened Hindus still do, throughout India. They do not bury or cremate their dead, but simply leave the corpse where death occurs and shift away. They sometimes use the bark of trees for clothing. (V.Raghaviah.1968. Nomads.pp.120-122).

4.4.2 Pastoral nomads

Pastoral nomads wander their entire lives and depend upon nature's bounty for their living. The Pastoral nomads of India are concentrated in hilly and forest areas, and are rarely seen in the plains. They are found in large number in the North-Western states of India, namely Kashmir, Punjab, western Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and, to a certain extent in Rajasthan. An example of Pastoral nomads is given below;

Case study: the Todas

These are pastoral nomad tribes of South India, who live in the Nilgiri groups of hills. Their main occupation is rearing the buffaloes. They have contempt for

cultivation, and despite a large extent of potato land secured for them from the government, they have not shown much interest in utilizing it. They, instead, lease it out to the more enterprising and agricultural minded Badaga, who makes a good cultivator. The Toda hut is half-barrel shaped, oblong and has a small entrance through which the inmate creeps. A Toda hamlet which is called a Mand, consists of similar houses, less than half a dozen in number, with milk houses separately attached to every family house. It is in this house that milk is boiled, to which access is denied scrupulously to all women. The cattle pens are close by the huts.

H.C. Wilson writes in his report about the Toda; “during the annual migration of the buffaloes to the Kundahs and when they were approaching the bridle path leading from Avalanche to Sispara, I witnessed an interesting custom. Both the ordinary and sacred herds were on the move together. As soon as the sacred herd crossed the bridle path, the Toda men having put down all their house-hold utensils, went to where the women and girls were sitting and carried them one by one over the place where the buffaloes had passed, depositing them on the path above. One of the men told me that the females are not allowed to walk over the track covered by the sacred herd and have to be carried whenever it is necessary to cross it. This herd has a recognized track when migrating, and is led by the old buffaloes which appear to know the exact way”. (V. Raghaviah. 1968. Nomads. pp.160-163).

4.4.3 Trader nomads

They are also known as “*Khanabadosh*” or wandering tribe, like gypsies. Some of the trader tribes of India are Yerukalas, Gadia Lohars, Kalbelias, Iranis, Dheas, Shitooras etc. An example of trader nomads is given below:

Case study: the Iranis

The Iranis are a small tribe of trader wanderers who keep to towns and cities where they sell cutlery, mirrors, scents, beads, and many kinds of fancy articles. Like similar nomads, they camp outside towns, or near railway stations, parks or open public spaces to vend their wares which are small and also cheap. They are fond of bright colors as all North-Western Indians are, they wear multifold short skirts, which keep rhythmically dancing on their hips, wear nose, ear and ankle ornaments plentifully. Being in every sense the better halves, they dominate their men-folk and take the lead in professional and domestic matters. The Iranis know more than one language. They are highly conservative in their social dealings; they do not marry outside their limited circles. The Iranis keep dogs and other animals as pets and even trade in them. They carry their belonging on small ponies or mules which they use as mounts also for the old and the infirm. (V. Raghaviah. 1968. Nomads. pp.179-180).

Case study: the Kalbelias

Kalbelias are a wandering tribe of snake-charmers found all over India. They are known as Pamulas in Andhra Pradesh. They belong to the profession of performers, an institution of moving zoos, organized in this country centuries back. They move about the countryside exhibiting the animals and collecting some fees in kind for the show, on the lines of an itinerant circus through on a far smaller scale. The Kalbelias and the Pamulas make their living by taming the

king cobra and showing the same around. They are also experts in catching poisonous serpents and extracting poison from their fangs, which they sell to medical practitioners for medicinal use. The Kalbelias move about in small groups of twenty to thirty and stay in each camp for a fortnight and move in small portable huts, with small reed-roofs slanting on either side being barely of three to four feet height in the central position. As a side profession they also collect rags and used paper which they sell to merchants for converting the same into good paper again. (V. Raghaviah. 1968.pp.180-182)

It is not uncommon that the very snakes which are tamed sometimes bite the charmers and cause their death.

4.4.4 Mendicant nomads

These nomads live by collecting alms and begging. Some of the mendicant tribes of India are; the Gulgulias, the Dommaras, the Singiwalas, the Karwals, the Jogis, the Munduputtas and Kelas, Pamulas, Kakmaras etc. Examples of mendicant nomads are given below:

Case study: the Bynollu

The Bynollus are vagrant and carry stringed black cylindrical drums thoroughly exposed on one side and a sheet of thin leather covering at the other end with a wire mounted upon it and also consisting of a number of bells fitted inside which can produce a jingling musical sound. With his right hand, the musician beats the hollow drum producing the effect of a thud, another keeps the chorus by playing upon the wire drum fitted with a single string. They entertain villagers by singing praises of Gods and Goddesses and their miracles. All able bodied Bynollu, are in great demand on occasions when village Gods are worshiped, as they sing the praises of Gods and can narrate “Ellamma katha” and other ballads. They are the priests for Madigas. They are found in Kurnool and Anantapur districts of Andhra Pradesh. (V. Raghaviah. 1968. Nomads. pp.247)

Case study: the Dommaras

The Dommaras are itinerant performers of acrobatic feats with which they entertain villagers and get compensated by doles of grains, cast off clothing as well as money grants. Their numbers are small and they must have originally migrated from Orissa. They are a nomadic tribe found all over the state rearing pigs and carrying all their worldly possessions, on donkeys. Their standard of cleanliness is low; though on that account they do not cease to be hardy and sturdy. They camp in portable huts, often choosing lonely spots on the outskirts of a village for camping places.

Edgar Thurston describes the Dommaras as a nomadic tribe of athletes and jugglers, exhibiting their feats as they wander about the country. A few of them have settled down as agricultural laborers dwelling on the outskirts of the villages in tiny huts or “guidiseys”, made of bamboos and plaited palm leaves. In social position they rank just above the Harijans. They rear pigs and make combs out of the wood. M.A. Stuart observes that “in the matter of food, the Dommaras eat all sorts of animals including cats, crows, squirrels, snakes and mongooses”. (V. Raghaviah. 1968. Nomads. pp.234-236).

The Kakmaras are a nomadic tribe of West Bengal. They correspond to the Bandas of Andhra Pradesh. Though the Telugu Bandas migrated to Bengal more than 200 years ago on account of their poverty, they still speak Telugu at home and are able to converse in Bengali. They are mainly a beggar community and get their name on account of their fondness for the crow flesh as is the case with the Bandas of Andhra Pradesh. The crow is a forbidden bird and unfit for the table for almost all Indians except very few tribes like the Kakmaras. The Kakmaras were classified in the census report of 1951 as "Madrasis". They camp during their wanderings sometimes under the trees, near market places, near fairs or in open places.

It is difficult to describe the reason of migration of the Kakmaras. It might be due to poverty or recurring famines. They move in batches of 2 to 3 families and keep roaming for the major part of the year. Some times they return to some sort of temporary habitation they keep in certain villages, though they do not have much attachment to them.

P.K. Bhowmick, made a close study of this small tribe, the population of which is below 300. They settle down for 10 to 30 days at a stretch and after exhausting chances of begging in the surrounding areas move to another place. When they go to any particular place, they keep their scanty belongings in the cavities of big trees or keep them hanging from the branches in the trees and move about within a radius of 3 to 4 miles for carrying on their only profession i.e. begging. They are mostly found in Contai, Taviluk and in parts of Sadar sub-division of Midnapur; and a few of them in the districts of Balasur and Puri in Orissa. Bhowmick observed that "the Kakmaras men dress themselves in a peculiar fashion with vermilion marks on the forehead and a colored head gear or crown is worn by them. They wear an iron bangle around the right wrist and carry a sharp knife without handle for use as well as for defense. They have bags made of palm leaf mats and spears for killing or catching birds. Dogs are trained and employed to keep watch on their bedding or other domestic kits hung on a tree. Women generally move about with the children carrying infants tied to their back with a piece of cloth. To get more alms, they recite loudly the name of God in melodious tone "Govinda" every time they approach a prospective giver. They have the dirty habit of spitting frequently and thus they soil the place they visit. Sometimes they make a gash on their bodies from which blood is allowed to flow. In this way they try to draw sympathy, more rice, vegetables, and torn clothes from people of charitable disposition in the village.

The Kakmaras keep very few domestic utensils, one or two iron or aluminum pots for cooking and a few earthen pots. They sleep on date-leaf mats and eat mongooses, otters, tiger-rats, crows etc. The Kakmaras employ a curious method to snare crows. The feathers of a dead crow are cleverly manipulated and tied to a pole which draws the attention of the crows which have a very communal sympathy for their fellow beings. As the crows come closer they are caught by a net. The Kakmaras worship Hindu goddess Kali, Sitala or Manasa, and sacrifice goat and fowls to propitiate their goddess. (V. Raghaviah. 1968. pp.248-252).

Check your progress 2

- Note:** 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;
2) You can check your answers with possible answers given at the end of the Unit.

3) Who are the food gathering nomads? Give an example.

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4) Describe about mendicant nomads with an example from the above mentioned writings.

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4.5 CASE STUDY: BANJARA TRIBE

The Banjara belong to nomadic tribal group. They are also known as Lamani, Lambada and Lambhani. The word “Lambani” derived from Sanskrit word lavana (salt), which they mainly transported and marketed along with other goods until the end of the 19th century. The generic name “Banjara” is derived from the Sanskrit word *vanachara* or “wanderers in forest”. They left their original occupation after the introduction of railways and roads transports by the British and adopted various skills for livelihood. In India there are a total of 36 nomadic and semi-nomadic tribal groups. They all claim to be from Rajput community. Many accounts suggest that the Lambanis are originally from Marwar region of Rajasthan.

The Lambani are spread mostly in Northern and Southern regions of India, a large number of their communities are settled in the state of Karnataka (South India). They are found in the Dharwad, Bijapur and Gulbarga districts of Karnataka. They speak Banjari dialect within their community. The Lambani have both nuclear and joint family. Property is divided equally among the sons; the younger son is required by customs to take care of the old parents and given extra property rights, for example if there is only one house, it is given to the younger son. The Lambani cremate their dead. On the 13th day of the death, a feast is given to all the relatives.

Most of the Lambani work as agricultural labourers. Because very small number of Lambani families possesses own land. Apart from that, they also work as wage labour in various fields such as factories, roads, making tools or collects forest products etc.

The Lambani women have equal role in the management of the family and contribution to the family income. They do the day to day households work like cooking, cleaning, fetching water, collecting firewood from the forest etc. They are known for their colourful heavily embroidered work, studded with small mirrors and cowries (sea shells). The Lambani women have distinctive costume; they wear multi-coloured heavily embroidered costume with ornamented hairstyle and silver jewellery.

The Lambani celebrates number of festival which is closely associated with their traditional customs and rituals. Birth of a child (specially boy) is celebrated with drum-beats and considered to be a happy occasion, they distribute food and gifts among relatives. Later a number of ceremonies like *dhond* (community feast), Kalperu (thank giving) to the deity etc., are observed after child birth. Puberty rituals are observed for the young girls. Other than these, they celebrates major Hindu festivals such as Ugadi, Dussehra, Deepavali etc. (K.S.Singh. (ed). 2003. People of India: Karnataka. pp. 880-887).

4.5.1 Origin and myths

The Lambani believe the origin of the earth to Jambava and his two sons Heppumuni and Rudra or Raktamuni. Form the seed of the creator a beautiful girl was born, later she created a boy out of the sweat of her body. Then she desired to consort with him, but her offer was rejected. Again she created another boy for the similar purpose and her wish was fulfilled. Later they became progenitors of the human race, their descendants were given various names one of them are Dhaj. Later Dhaj had a son Kowdhaj and his son was Karan. Karan's son was Kachchap, and he had two sons Thida and Chada. The descendants of Chada are the settles tribes of towns and villages. While the descendant of Thida are the wandering tribes "Banjara". Thida had five sons: (1) Nathad; his descendant was Vagris like Shikaris, (2) Joghad; his descendant was the wandering Joghis, who rear pigs, (3) Khimad; who is the ancestor of the wandering blacksmiths like Bailukammaras, (4) Mota; who has given rise to the Labhans, and (5) Mola; who is the ancestor of the Banjaras.

According to another account Thida was a descendant of Sugriva (from the epic Ramayan) and Tara (his wife). Thida's son Mola was an attendant of Krishna, who was supposed to be in love with Radha. Mola earn goodwill by his patient service to Radha and both adopted the profession of dancer and acrobats. They exhibited their skill before the princes of Dhanjighad, Banoghad and Jagatghad. They got their three boys as a reward and they are Rathod, Pamhar and Chovhan. Later they became the progenitors of the clans which still bear their names. The descendant of these three boys were the Banjara (H.V. Nanjundayya and L.K Ananthakrishna Iyer. 1928. The Mysore tribes and Castes. Vol.II. pp.136-139).

4.6 LET US SUM UP

In the above mentioned article, we tried to appreciate and understand Nomadism with some definitions and descriptions. But other than that, there are several

categories of nomads living at varying stages of Nomadism with their wandering habits in all over the world. Nomadism can be simply described as a wandering habit, pursued by a group or groups of people, who practice the same. It may also be assumed that, Nomadism is a cultural trait which results from want of ambition or aspiration, either total or partial. The degree of the occurrence of ambition can be considered to be the criterion for determining the stage of Nomadism through which a particular tribe is passing. Nomadism might have been forced wholesale upon larger groups of people, sometimes even whole tribes, by natural calamities, earthquakes, floods, invasions, expropriation and other acts of God and man, resulting in large scale migration from a previously settled life, centuries ago.

Check your progress 3

Note: 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;

2) You can check your answers with possible answers given at the end of the Unit.

5) Write about origin and myth of Banjara tribe?

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4.7 ACTIVITY

We have together, above, discussed about Nomads. Do you think that now you know different types Nomads and their culture? Try to discuss about Nomadic tribe by explaining it to another friend of yours and see how well you have understood it.

4.8 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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- ii) Raghaviah, V. Nomads. Bharatiya Adimajati Sevak Sangh. 1968.
- iii) Singh, K.S. The scheduled tribes. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1994.
- iv) Singh, K.S.(ed).People of India: Karnataka. Vol.XXXVI, Part two. Anthropological Survey of India. New Delhi. 2003.
- v) Shashi, S.S. The Nomads of the Himalayas. Delhi: Sandeep Prakashan. 1979.

4.9 GLOSSARY

Dals	:	groups
Mukhyas	:	head of the group
Khanabadosh	:	wandering tribes
Ellamma	:	mother goddess
Harijan	:	economically backward community
Kali	:	mother goddess
Manasa	:	serpent goddess
Sitala	:	goddess of small pox

4.10 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

- 1) see section 5.1
- 2) see section 5.1.2
- 3) see section 5.4.1
- 4) see section 5.4.4
- 5) see section 5.5.1