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Reconstructing Lambadi History through Narratives: An Ethno-Historical and Ethno-Ecological Study of Ceded Bellary

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Abstract

This paper examines the history of the Lambadis in Ceded Bellary through oral narratives, settlement memory, and ecological experience. It argues that Lambadi history cannot be reconstructed only through formal archival records because much of the community's past survives in stories, songs, memories, migration narratives, ethnographic writings, and local knowledge. Using an ethno-historical and ethno-ecological approach, the paper explores how Lambadi elders remember migration, tanda formation, livelihood change, and the relationship between community life and environment over time. It shows that the Lambadi past in Bellary was shaped by mobility, pack-bullock trade, cattle, forest and grazing landscapes, and later by sedentarization, agriculture, and colonial restructuring. The paper argues that oral narratives are not merely supplementary sources but important archives of social memory that preserve how the Lambadis understood land, labour, ecology, and collective identity. By reading oral materials alongside district history, ethnographic accounts, and modern scholarship, the paper reconstructs the changing social life of the Lambadis and highlights how migration, ecology, and livelihood were deeply intertwined in their historical experience.

Keywords: Lambadi, Banjara, ethno-history, ethno-ecology, oral narratives, Ceded Bellary, migration, settlement

Introduction

The Lambadis, also known as Banjaras, are one of the historically mobile communities of India whose past has often been discussed through migration, caravan trade, colonial disruption, and criminalization. Colonial and later studies have frequently described them in terms of transport, mobility, marginality, and surveillance. These themes are undoubtedly important, but they do not fully explain how the community

understood its own past or how its collective life was shaped through changing relations with land, cattle, village margins, forest spaces, and routes of trade. As Bhukya (2010) has shown, Lambadi history under colonial rule was not only a story of decline but also one of transition, adaptation, and internal reorganization. For that reason, Lambadi history cannot be reconstructed only through colonial categories. It must also be approached through community memory.

This paper therefore reads Lambadi history in Ceded Bellary through oral narratives and ecological memory. It asks how Lambadi elders remember migration, tanda formation, changing occupations, and settlement. It also asks how their historical experience was shaped by their relationship with land, grazing spaces, mobility routes, and agrarian transformation. The central argument is that Lambadi history can be understood more fully when oral narratives are treated as serious historical sources and when these narratives are read in relation to ecology and livelihood. Migration, in this perspective, was not simply movement across territory. It was a movement across ecological zones. Settlement was not merely the formation of tandas. It was a social and environmental adaptation to changing conditions.

This approach addresses an important gap in the existing literature. Colonial ethnographers such as Thurston and Rangachari (1909) and district writers such as Francis (1904) recorded the Lambadis mainly through visible customs, occupations, and settlement patterns. Modern scholarship, especially Bhukya (2010), has moved beyond this by recovering Lambadis as historical actors shaped by subjugation, reform, and adaptation. Yet a sustained ethno-historical and ethno-ecological reading of Lambadi narratives in Bellary remains underdeveloped. This paper contributes to that direction by combining the district history of Bellary, Lambadi social history, and oral narrative based materials in order to reconstruct the community's historical relationship with environment, occupation, and memory.

Historiography and the Problem of Perspective

The existing scholarship on the Lambadis provides a useful but uneven foundation. Colonial ethnographers and district administrators were among the earliest to describe the community. Thurston and Rangachari (1909) presented the Lambadis through dress, language, mobility, and customary features. Francis (1904), in his district account of Bellary, described them as numerous in the region, living in tandas, led by hereditary nayaks, and increasingly dependent on agriculture and grazing after the decline of older trade patterns. These works remain useful for descriptive detail, terminology, and settlement references. However, they also reflect the classificatory logic of colonial knowledge.

This limitation is not accidental. As Dirks (2001) has argued, colonialism transformed caste and community into administrative and political categories. Cohn (1980) similarly showed that colonial rule functioned through records, classifications, and systems of legibility. When read in this light, colonial writings on the Lambadis appear less as a neutral description and more as part of a wider apparatus of governance. The community entered written records mainly as transporters, nomads, caste types, or suspicious populations, rather than as narrators of their own history.

Modern scholarship has gone much further. Bhukya (2010) is especially important because he reconstructs the Lambadis as a historical community shaped by transition, subjugation, and internal reform rather than merely by ethnographic type. His work makes clear that the colonial and princely state order did not only marginalize the Lambadis from above. It also created the conditions under which reorganization, adaptation, and new forms of self-definition became historically necessary. Deogaonkar (1992) and Singh (1994) are useful in offering broader social and anthropological context for the Banjara or Lambadi community, but Bhukya remains especially significant for understanding political and historical change.

This paper differs from descriptive ethnography by treating oral narratives as historical evidence rather than as anecdotal residue. It seeks to show that narrative, settlement memory, and ecological recollection are central to reconstructing Lambadi social history in Bellary.

Sources, Oral History, and Method

The first methodological challenge in writing Lambadi history is the source base itself. The Lambadi profile material makes clear that the history of the community does not survive in a continuous written archive produced from within. Instead, it has had to be reconstructed through “fables and fictions, folklores, stories, songs, memories, census reports, and ethnographic writings, travelogues, interviews, questionnaire and other local sources” . This dispersed archive is not simply a limitation. It is also a historical fact about the position of marginalized communities within regimes of documentation.

The ethno-historical chapter provides the strongest methodological grounding for the present paper. It states that the socio-economic, cultural, and political history of the Lambadis in Bellary district was reconstructed through oral narratives gathered from elderly men and women in selected tandas, supported by fieldwork, interviews, observation, and written sources . It further emphasizes that oral and written materials were read together in order to reduce error and strengthen empirical justification .

This approach is methodologically sound for two reasons. First, it recognizes that oral narratives preserve forms of historical knowledge that formal archives often omit. These include memory of migration, reasons for settlement, occupational change, and relations with neighboring communities. Second, it avoids the opposite error of romanticizing oral sources. Oral memory is not beyond interpretation. It requires contextualization and comparison. A stronger historical account emerges when oral narratives are read alongside district manuals, gazetteers, census reports, and ethnographic writings.

This method also supports an ethno-ecological approach. Oral narratives do not only tell us that a community moved; they often tell us why it moved, what environmental features mattered, what kinds of occupations were possible, and how settlement occurred within specific ecological settings. In that sense, oral history is also environmental memory.

Lambadi History and the Limits of Written Archives

The broader Lambadi profile chapter offers a crucial historical frame. It states that Lambadi history stretches far back in time, but remained obscured because of the limited written record. It also explains that this history had to be reconstructed through oral and local sources as well as through census and ethnographic materials . This is a foundational observation, because it shows that the Lambadis do not enter formal history through a continuous documentary tradition. Instead, they appear intermittently, often through the needs and categories of ruling powers.

This means that Lambadi history has often been mediated by outsiders. The community appears in written sources in relation to armies, trade, caste and tribe classification, or later criminalization. Such material is historically valuable, but it is limited in perspective. It reveals what administrators, rulers, or ethnographers found important, not always what the Lambadis themselves remembered as central. This is precisely why oral narratives matter.

The same chapter emphasizes that Lambadi history must be understood as a long transition across precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial contexts . Mobility, adaptation, and reorganization were thus not

exceptional moments but recurring features of community life. Narratives preserve this long transition not only as chronology, but as lived experience.

Migration, Tanda Formation, and Settlement Memory

The chapter on Lambadies in Ceded Bellary is especially important for reconstructing migration and settlement. It presents the Lambadis as a widely distributed community whose movement into southern India and settlement in Bellary formed a major part of their historical experience. It also describes tanda based settlement, hereditary leadership under nayaks, and a social order deeply tied to migration, trade, and changing livelihood patterns .

This material takes on greater significance when read through an ethno-ecological lens. Tandas were not merely settlements; they were social and environmental locations. They were often established at village margins, in dry zones, near routes, grazing areas, or foothill and forest edge spaces that allowed both survival and relative autonomy. Settlement therefore involved ecological judgment as much as social necessity. A tanda name itself may preserve memory of a landscape, founder, event, or environmental feature.

The ethno-historical materials confirm this. Elderly respondents were asked about the names of their tandas, the migration of their ancestors, the conditions of settlement, the ecology of the site, and the occupations pursued at different times . Such evidence shows that settlement memory is historical evidence. It preserves how the community understood the relation between movement, land, and livelihood.

Bellary as Historical and Ecological Region

The district chapter on Ceded Bellary provides the wider environmental and historical setting for these processes. Bellary is described as a frontier district within the Madras Presidency, shaped by changes in trade, agriculture, transport, demography, administration, and state power between 1800 and 1947 . It is linked geographically and politically to the Nizam's dominions, Mysore, and the Bombay Presidency, and is characterized by varied topography, differing soils, river systems, and a changing economic order.

This regional ecology matters because Lambadi life was tied to movement, cattle, trade routes, and later settled cultivation. Pack-bullock trade required access to fodder, water, and routes. Grazing depended on land and ecological commons. Settlement depended on adaptation to dry conditions and access to marginal spaces. The district profile also notes the decline of handicrafts, changes in internal and external trade, and the expansion of transport and communications . These structural changes affected all communities in Bellary, but they had a particularly direct impact on a mobile community like the Lambadis.

Thus Bellary's environment was not mere backdrop. It actively shaped Lambadi transition. The history of the Lambadis in this region cannot be understood without taking geography, drought, trade routes, and agrarian change seriously.

Occupation, Ecology, and Historical Transition

The connection between ethno-history and ethno-ecology becomes even clearer in relation to occupation. The Lambadi chapter links the community historically to migration, trade, cattle, and later agriculture and grazing. The ethno-historical chapter notes that interviews specifically focused on occupations practiced over the previous two hundred years. Occupational change therefore becomes one of the clearest ways to trace historical and ecological transition together.

Pack-bullock trade was not simply an economic role. It depended on animals, fodder, mobility routes, and access to exchange networks. Grazing depended on land and common resources. Agriculture required more settled access to land, adaptation to local soils, and new relations with village society. When colonial rule altered routes, markets, land relations, and systems of surveillance, it changed not only work but the ecological basis of social life.

The chapter on the impact of colonial rule indicates that British economic and administrative restructuring affected Lambadi livelihood in profound ways. The chapter on the Criminal Tribes Act further shows that surveillance and stigma accompanied the weakening of traditional occupations. Read together with Bhukya (2010), these chapters suggest that Lambadi occupational change must be understood not merely as voluntary adaptation, but as transition under unequal and coercive conditions.

Oral Narratives as Social and Ecological Archives

The strongest reason to take narratives seriously is that they preserve forms of history that formal archives often suppress. The ethno-historical chapter makes clear that elderly Lambadis were asked not only about migration and occupation, but also about social conditions, treatment by neighboring communities, and the changing circumstances of livelihood over time. Such material is rarely available in administrative records.

Oral narratives therefore serve as both social and ecological archives. They preserve how the Lambadis understood land, settlement, labour, caste relations, mobility, and environmental change. A district report may tell us that trade declined. A narrative can tell us how a tanda survived the decline. A census may classify a population. A story can preserve what that classification meant in lived social terms.

This is why ethno-ecology is useful here. Lambadi narratives preserve not only memory of social events, but also memory of how people inhabited space. They reveal how community life was tied to cattle, fodder, mobility, settlement at village margins, and adaptation to scarcity or ecological change. Such narratives therefore do not sit outside history. They are among its most important surviving forms.

Conclusion

The chapters shared for this study provide a strong basis for reconstructing Lambadi history through narratives and ecological memory. They show that the history of the Lambadis in Ceded Bellary cannot be adequately understood through written archival records alone. It must be reconstructed through stories, songs, memories, settlement histories, occupational transitions, and environmental recollection, read alongside district history and colonial description.

This paper has argued that an ethno-historical and ethno-ecological approach is particularly useful because it reveals how migration, settlement, livelihood, and environment were deeply intertwined in Lambadi life. The Lambadis' past was not only a story of movement or marginality. It was also a history of how a community understood, inhabited, and adapted to changing ecological and social conditions over time.

Most importantly, the paper suggests that Lambadi narratives are not mere cultural residues. They are historical archives. They preserve how the community remembered its past, its occupations, its ecology, and its changing social world. To reconstruct Lambadi history through such narratives is therefore not to move away from history, but to recover forms of history that written records alone cannot preserve.

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