



NOMADIC COMMUNITIES OF VIJAYANAGARA DISTRICT: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT-----

Vijayanagara district, carved out of the erstwhile Bellary district in 2021 and home to the ruins of the medieval Vijayanagara Empire at Hampi, is also home to a cluster of nomadic and semi-nomadic communities whose way of life has survived from the pre-colonial period into the present. Communities such as the Sudugadu Siddha, Handijogi, Chennadasara, Killekyatha, Hagaluveshagaras, Hakki-Pikki, Durga Murgi (Dakkaliga), and Sindollu have historically combined itinerant subsistence with specialised ritual, performative, or artisanal occupations — begging, puppetry, exorcism, fortune-telling, and folk theatre among them. This article surveys the historical background, traditional occupations, social organisation, and contemporary socio-economic condition of these eight communities, situating them within the wider administrative and cultural history of the Vijayanagara region. Drawing on ethnographic literature, government commission reports, and heritage documentation, the study argues that these communities, though numerically small and administratively fragmented across Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and Other Backward Class categories, together constitute an intangible cultural resource of the district that is under sustained pressure from modernisation, loss of patronage, and continuing socio-economic marginalisation. The article concludes with observations on the need for focused ethnographic documentation, welfare convergence, and heritage safeguarding measures specific to the district.

KEYWORDS: Vijayanagara district; nomadic tribes; denotified communities; Hampi; folk performance; Karnataka ethnography-----

1. INTRODUCTION

India's nomadic and semi-nomadic communities — often described in administrative literature as Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) — form one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged segments of the population. Karnataka alone is estimated to have well over a hundred such communities, many of them concentrated in the Deccan plateau districts of the north and centre of the state. Vijayanagara district, formed in August 2021 by bifurcating Bellary district and named after the medieval empire whose capital, Hampi, lies within its boundaries, sits at the historic crossroads of this region. Its landscape of granite hills, riverine plains along the Tungabhadra, and small market towns has long supported itinerant groups whose livelihoods were intertwined with, yet distinct from, settled agrarian and temple-centred society.

The nomadic communities examined in this article — the Sudugadu Siddha, Handijogi, Chennadasara, Killekyatha, Hagaluveshagaras, Hakki-Pikki, Durga Murgi, and Sindollu — represent a cross-section of the occupational and cultural diversity found among these groups: ritual mendicancy and folk exorcism, wandering minstrelsy, temple-based begging, leather-puppet theatre, itinerant day-time disguise performance, hunting-turned-herbal trade, fortune-telling, and portable deity-worship respectively. Several of these communities have a documented or plausible historical connection to the Vijayanagara Empire itself, either through royal patronage of performing arts (as in the case of the Killekyatha puppeteers) or through association with the empire's ruined temple complexes and cremation grounds that dot the district (as with the Sudugadu Siddha). This makes Vijayanagara district a particularly apt unit for a historically grounded study of these groups.



2. METHODOLOGY

This study is primarily descriptive and historical, based on a review of published ethnographic accounts, government backward classes commission reports, heritage and folklore documentation, and journalistic field reports on Karnataka's nomadic communities. Given the scarcity of dedicated village-level census data disaggregated at the level of Vijayanagara district — a unit too recently constituted to feature in most existing surveys, which instead report figures for the undivided Bellary district — the article draws on studies conducted across northern Karnataka more broadly and situates their findings within the specific historical and geographical context of the Vijayanagara region. Community names, spellings, and classifications vary considerably across sources (for instance, Sudugadu Siddha/Sudugaadu Sidda, Killekyatha/Shillekyatha/Sillekyata, Durga Murgi/Dakkaliga); this article notes such variation where relevant rather than adjudicating a single correct form.

3. VIJAYANAGARA DISTRICT: HISTORICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE CONTEXT

Vijayanagara district was carved out of Bellary district in August 2021, with Hospet (Hosapete) as its headquarters. The district takes its name from the Vijayanagara Empire (c. 1336–1646), whose capital city, now the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Hampi, lies on the southern bank of the Tungabhadra river within the district's limits. The imperial capital, at its height, was a cosmopolitan centre that drew not only settled artisans and temple functionaries but also itinerant performers, mendicants, and ritual specialists who served the court, the temples, and the rural hinterland alike. This legacy of royal and temple patronage for folk and devotional performance forms an important backdrop for understanding communities such as the Killekyatha puppeteers and the Hagaluveshagaras (day-performers), both of whose traditions are still practised in villages around Hampi and the neighbouring Koppal district.

Following the fall of the Vijayanagara Empire in the late sixteenth century, the region passed through Bijapur Sultanate, Maratha, Hyderabad Nizam, and eventually British and Mysore administrative control, before its incorporation into unified Karnataka in 1956 as part of Bellary district. Throughout these transitions, nomadic communities continued their circuits of seasonal movement across village clusters, adapting their services — begging, healing, entertainment, small trade — to changing patrons while remaining largely outside the framework of settled land rights and formal education. Colonial-era administrators frequently classified many of these groups under the stigmatising rubric of "criminal tribes" (under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871), a legacy of surveillance and social exclusion whose effects persisted long after the Act's repeal in 1952 and the formal "denotification" of these communities.

4. THE NOMADIC COMMUNITIES: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEMPORARY STATUS

4.1 Sudugadu Siddha

The Sudugadu Siddha (also rendered Sudugaadu Sidda) — literally "ascetic of the cremation ground" — is one of the most distinctive ritual-performance communities of northern Karnataka. Popular tradition traces their origin to the twelfth-century Veerashaiva reformer Basavanna, who is said to have entrusted a revived devotee named Siddhayya with the duty of guarding villages from evil spirits, giving him a conch and bell; his successors came to be known as Sudugadu Siddhas. Traditionally, members of the community are said to meditate at cremation grounds on full-moon and new-moon nights before returning to villages blowing a conch to ward off evil spirits, after which they perform tricks and comic illusions to entertain rural audiences by day, collecting rice, money, and other offerings in return. They are also referred to as bahuroopi ("of many disguises") and are closely related to the Hagaluveshagaras in performance style. Sudugadu Siddhas are found in Vijayanagara and other northern Karnataka districts (including former Bellary, Bijapur, and Raichur), and their presence is closely linked to the numerous cremation grounds and hero-stone sites scattered across the Vijayanagara ruins and surrounding villages. In administrative terms, the Sudugadu Siddha are today classified among Karnataka's Scheduled Caste nomadic communities. Community leaders report that a large proportion still depend on religious begging as illusionists and street performers, and that the community remains among the most educationally and economically backward within the state's SC list — a grievance



that has fuelled the community's participation in recent campaigns for internal reservation among the "untouchable nomadic communities."

4.2 Handijogi

The Handijogi are a nomadic community traditionally associated with religious begging accompanied by the kinnari, a stringed folk instrument, which gives the community its performative identity as wandering musician-mendicants. Along with related communities such as the Sindollu, Helavaru, Sudugadu Siddha, and Budaga Jangama, the Handijogi historically practised itinerant begging as a devotional or religious duty rather than as mere charity-seeking, moving from village to village and camping in tents. Despite the pressures of modernity, sections of the community have continued to preserve the Kinnari-accompanied performance as an art form even as their overall socio-economic position remains precarious, with migration and temporary settlement continuing to characterise their way of life.

4.3 Chennadasara

The Chennadasara (also Chenna Dasar) are a Kannada-speaking mendicant community found principally in northern Karnataka, historically dedicated to Lord Venkateshwara of Tirupati. Traditionally, Chennadasara men travelled from village to village as religious mendicants, singing devotional songs and seeking alms in the name of the deity, a practice that placed them within the wider tradition of Vaishnava dasa (devotee) mendicancy that also produced the celebrated Haridasa poet-saints associated with the Vijayanagara court, such as Purandara Dasa. Over recent generations an increasing proportion of the Chennadasara have shifted to agricultural labour and daily-wage work, even as sections of the community continue seasonal begging rounds tied to temple festivals. They are officially recognised as a Scheduled Caste nomadic community in Karnataka.

4.4 Killekyatha

The Killekyatha (also Shillekyatha, Silleykatha) are the traditional leather-shadow-puppeteer community of Karnataka, practitioners of Togalu Gombeyaata ("play of leather dolls"), one of the state's oldest performing art forms. Puppeteer troupes, known as bhagavataru, craft puppets from treated goat or sheep hide and perform all-night shows narrating episodes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and regional folktales, accompanied by narration in medieval Kannada. Scholars trace the migration of these puppeteer clans southward from present-day Maharashtra into Karnataka, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh, and shadow puppetry in the region is recorded as having received court patronage from successive dynasties — the Rashtrakutas, Chalukyas, and Hoysalas — before reaching its documented peak under the Vijayanagara Empire, whose rulers extended patronage to puppeteer communities; a surviving land-grant record from the Bijapur Sultanate dated to 1520 CE, shortly after Vijayanagara rule, attests to continued royal recognition of the community. The comic jester character named "Killekyatha" within the puppet plays is themselves the probable source of the community's name.

In present-day Vijayanagara and neighbouring Koppal district, Togalu Gombeyaata survives through a small number of practising families; the Padma Shri-awarded puppeteer Bhimavva Doddabalappa Shillekyathara of Koppal district is among the most prominent living exponents of the art, having performed continuously since the 1950s. Administratively, the Killekyatha are classified as a Scheduled Caste nomadic community; many families today additionally depend on coracle (round-boat) fishing along the Tungabhadra and fortune-telling for subsistence, and the community continues to report a lack of land, housing, and access to welfare schemes despite the cultural prestige of their art.

4.5 Hagaluveshagaras

The Hagaluveshagaras ("day-time disguise performers," from hagalu, "day," and vesha, "disguise/role") are itinerant folk actors who perform primarily in the morning hours, moving door to door within a village to enact scenes from the epics and vachana (devotional verse) literature of poets such as Basavanna and Sarvajna, applying make-up and costume at their camp rather than on any fixed stage. Male performers take on all roles, including female characters (stree-vesha), and troupes are typically accompanied by harmonium, tabla, and cymbals. The community performing



this art is predominantly drawn from the Budaga Jangama nomadic community, and its practice is especially associated with villages around Hampi and Kishkindha within present-day Vijayanagara district and neighbouring Koppal district — making the Hagaluveshagaras arguably the nomadic performance tradition most directly rooted in the district's own soil. Alternative names recorded for these performers include bahuroopi and, in some usages, sudugadu siddha, reflecting the overlapping performative repertoire shared across several of these communities. Practitioners report that opportunities for performance have contracted with the decline of the village-square mela circuit, and younger members increasingly combine performance with agricultural labour.

4.6 Hakki-Pikki

The Hakki-Pikki — from the Kannada hakki ("bird") and pikki ("to catch") — are a Scheduled Tribe community whose traditional occupation was bird-catching and hunting. Community tradition holds that their ancestors, associated with a Kshatriya warrior lineage under a legendary figure named Ranapratap Singh, migrated south from Gujarat and Rajasthan following defeat by Mughal forces, and their mother tongue, Vaagri (Vaagri Booli), an Indo-Aryan language, is listed by UNESCO among endangered languages — a linguistic marker that sets the community apart from its Dravidian-speaking neighbours. Displaced from forest habitats through rehabilitation drives in the 1950s–60s and subsequently barred from hunting by the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, the Hakki-Pikki reinvented themselves as itinerant traders in spices, flowers, and above all Ayurvedic and herbal formulations, a shift for which they have become nationally and even internationally known, with family groups travelling as far as African countries to sell herbal hair oils and traditional remedies. Within Karnataka the community is concentrated in Shivamogga, Davanagere, and Mysuru districts, with smaller settlements recorded in Vijayanagara and neighbouring districts of the central Deccan; the 2011 Census recorded a state population of 11,892.

4.7 Durga Murugi (Dakkaliga)

The Durga Murugi — generally identified with, or closely related to, the Dakkaliga (also Dakkal) community recorded in ethnographic and backward-classes literature on Karnataka's nomadic tribes — are traditionally itinerant fortune-tellers and genealogist-entertainers. In the wider Deccan tradition documented for related Dakkal groups across Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra, the community's ritual role was to recite genealogies and folk tales for patron communities in exchange for alms, food, and gifts, visiting a given village once every year or so as part of a fixed circuit; some households additionally kept pigs and donkeys, the latter used for transporting merchants' goods. The Durga Murugi/Dakkaliga are today listed among Karnataka's Scheduled Caste nomadic communities and share with the Sudugadu Siddha and Killekyatha a continuing dependence on fortune-telling and astrology as a livelihood, alongside increasing recourse to daily-wage agricultural labour.

4.8 Sindollu

The Sindollu (Sindhollu) are a nomadic Scheduled Caste community distinguished by their practice of carrying a portable image of a deity in a basket balanced on the head as they move from village to village, the husband typically carrying the deity while his wife accompanies him beating a hand-drum to announce their arrival. This form of portable-deity worship and itinerant blessing-giving, in exchange for grain, cash, or other offerings, places the Sindollu within the same broad category of religious-mendicant nomadic groups as the Handijogi and Chennadasara, though their specific ritual practice — carrying the deity itself rather than merely invoking it — is distinctive. Like other communities discussed here, the Sindollu continue to live largely in tents, temple precincts, or temporary settlements on the margins of villages and towns, and studies of the community's socio-economic condition consistently report high levels of landlessness and dependence on begging or unskilled labour.

5. COMPARATIVE OBSERVATIONS

5.1 Occupational and Ritual Specialisation

A recurring feature across all eight communities is the combination of geographic mobility with a narrowly defined, hereditary ritual or performative specialisation — puppetry for the Killekyatha, day-time disguise theatre for the Hagaluveshagaras, cremation-ground exorcism and illusion for the Sudugadu Siddha, portable-deity worship for the



Sindollu, genealogical recitation and fortune-telling for the Durga Murugi/Dakkaliga, kinnari-accompanied begging for the Handijogi, temple mendicancy for the Chennadasara, and hunting-turned-herbal trade for the Hakki-Pikki. This pattern reflects a historical division of ritual and cultural labour in rural Deccan society, in which specific services — protection from spirits, entertainment, blessing, prophecy, and traditional medicine — were rendered by specialist itinerant groups in a reciprocal, if unequal, economic relationship with settled agrarian communities.

5.2 Administrative Classification and the Politics of Internal Reservation

Most of the communities discussed here — the Sudugadu Siddha, Handijogi, Chennadasara, Killekyatha, Durga Murugi/Dakkaliga, and Sindollu — are classified as Scheduled Castes in Karnataka, while the Hakki-Pikki are recognised as a Scheduled Tribe; the Hagaluveshagaras, being drawn from the Budaga Jangama community, fall within the Scheduled Caste category as well. Karnataka is estimated to have around 120 recognised nomadic communities in all, spanning Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and Other Backward Class categories. In recent years, several of these "most backward" nomadic groups have organised under bodies such as the Confederation of Untouchable Nomadic Communities of Karnataka to demand internal reservation — sub-categorisation within the existing SC quota — arguing that clubbing them together with comparatively better-off SC sub-castes such as the Lambani, Bhovi, Koracha, and Korama has diluted the benefits intended for the most disadvantaged groups. This ongoing debate, still unresolved at the state level, has direct bearing on the communities of Vijayanagara district, several of whose members have participated in the associated protests and representations to the state government.

5.3 Threats to Cultural Continuity

Across the eight communities, the study identifies three converging pressures on cultural continuity. First, the decline of traditional patronage: village fairs, temple festivals, and household begging rounds — the economic basis for performative and mendicant traditions alike — have shrunk with urbanisation and changing rural consumption of entertainment. Second, legal and ecological restriction, most sharply illustrated by the Hakki-Pikki's forced exit from hunting after the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, which required wholesale occupational reinvention. Third, intergenerational disengagement, as younger community members increasingly migrate to agricultural and daily-wage labour, or to towns, rather than inherit specialised hereditary skills such as puppet-making, kinnari-playing, or Togalu Gombeyaata narration — skills that in several cases now survive with only a handful of ageing practitioners, as seen in the case of nonagenarian puppeteer Bhimavva Doddabalappa Shillekyathara of neighbouring Koppal district.

6. CONCLUSION

The nomadic communities of Vijayanagara district — the Sudugadu Siddha, Handijogi, Chennadasara, Killekyatha, Hagaluveshagaras, Hakki-Pikki, Durga Murugi, and Sindollu — represent a historically rich but increasingly fragile stratum of the district's social and cultural fabric. Their traditions of puppetry, disguise-theatre, portable-deity worship, ritual mendicancy, and itinerant trade are woven into the longer history of the Vijayanagara region, in some cases tracing documented patronage back to the imperial court itself. Yet these communities continue to rank among the most socio-economically disadvantaged in the state, facing landlessness, limited access to education and formal welfare schemes, and the erosion of the very patronage networks that historically sustained their specialised occupations. As Vijayanagara district — itself named for, and substantially built around, the heritage economy of Hampi — continues to develop as a centre of cultural tourism, there is a corresponding opportunity, so far only partially realised, to integrate the documentation, welfare, and heritage recognition of these nomadic communities into the district's broader development and cultural-heritage planning. Focused village-level ethnographic surveys specific to Vijayanagara district, coordinated welfare convergence across the SC, ST, and OBC administrative categories in which these communities are variously placed, and active support for surviving practitioners of endangered arts such as Togalu Gombeyaata and Hagalu Vesha would together constitute a meaningful first step toward safeguarding this intangible heritage for future generations.



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