

*Urban Nomads: The Masan Jogis*  
**(Based on the Field Work Experiences in Mumbai)**



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# The Masan Jogis



*This paper is based on my field work experiences as a student social worker placed in TANDA (2011-12) with Masan Jogi community living in Mumbai city, which is a De-Notified Tribe. There is lack of awareness and knowledge about these communities and my attachment with this community motivated me to share my understanding about them with others. However, I do not claim that the present paper is of high academic quality. It is an honest attempt to document the experiences of Masan Jogis living in Mumbai. Most of the information in this paper is based on my interaction with them, especially women from the community.*

## **Introduction**

Mumbai is a city of dreams and pains. This city is known around the world for its hindi film industry (often referred to as Bollywood), Antila (the name of the house of leading business tycoon Mukesh Ambani), cricket, the Taj Mahal Hotel, slums, and diversity in context of ethnicity and religion. Since its inception, the city has attracted people not only from India but also from all parts of the world. Many people from different communities and regions migrate to this city in search of livelihoods and among them are the Nomadic and De-notified Tribes (hereafter referred to as NT-DNTs). In 1882, in the book *Notes on Criminal Tribes*, Major E.J. Gunthorpe has documented about the DNTs who kept visiting the Bombay Presidency (Gunthorpe: 1882). This book is an account of the criminal activities carried out by them. Along similar lines, colonial rulers from time to time have published various documents about NT-DNT communities.

These documents show their bias against the nomadic way of life in the context of their struggles to understand and deal with the socio-cultural dynamics resulting from the presence of gypsies in Europe and their misinterpretation about Indian caste

system, resulting in stigmatisation of NT-DNT communities (D'Souza:2001). The sad part of this reality is that even after independence, the issue of stigmatisation was not addressed in Indian constitution nor was any affirmative programme created to ensure the empowerment of NT-DNT communities (Panda: 2008). After the repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 in 1952, a new legislation named the Habitual Offenders Act was introduced with almost similar provisions (Rana: 2011). Without any rehabilitation programme and with the implementation of legislations such as the Habitual Offenders Act, Bombay Prevention of Beggary Act and Animal Protection Act, NT-DNT communities continue to be criminalised by the State.

In Maharashtra, there are fifty one NT-DNT communities with their unique culture, language, norms and values. According to Bokil (2002), based on their occupation, the NT-DNT communities can be classified in four categories:

**(a) *Pastorals and hunter-gatherers:***

*Dhangars* and *Pardhis* are good examples of pastoral and hunter-gatherer communities respectively. *Dhangars* move from one place to another with animals. They sell animals and their fur. The *Pardhis* are a hunter-gatherer community. *Phase Pardhis* or *Haran Pardhis* are good in trapping and hunting wild animals.

**(b) *Goods and service nomads:***

Communities such as the *Ghisadis* and *Gadi Lohars* are wandering blacksmiths. There are many such communities which provide services like stone workers (*Patharwats*), stone dressers (*Beldars*), earth and stone workers (*Vadars*), metal casters (*Otari*), knife sharpeners and weapon makers (*Shikalgars*), transporters and salt carriers (*Banjaras* or *Lambadas*), wool weavers and blanket makers (*Sanagars*), basket and broom makers (*Kaikadi*), distillers (*Kanjarbhats*), roof-thatchers (*Chapparbands*), wandering quacks (*Vaidus*) and a variety of traders who sell beads, bangles, ornaments, perfumes and so on.

**(c) Entertainers:**

The entertainers comprise of the danseuses (*Kolhatis*), acrobats and tumblers (*Dombaris*), jugglers (*Karkarmundis*), picture showmen (*Chitrakathis*), strolling actors (*Bahurupis*), wrestlers (*Dangats and Virs*), bull decorators (*Nandiwallas*), snake charmers (*Garudis*), wild bear exhibitors (*Darweshis*), monkey-trainers (*Makadwales*) and others. These groups satisfied the entertainment needs of rural society.

**(d) Religious performers:**

They include the balladeers (*Vasudevs*), minstrels (*Gondhalis*), bards (*Rawals*), ascetics (*Gosavis*), devotional singers (*Aaradhis*), harpers (*Bharadis*), astrologers (*Joshis*), and so on. Some of them also recorded and recited the genealogies. The *Joshis* have been a pan-Indian phenomenon. They provided useful forecasts on natural events like rain, drought, cyclone, etc, and provided auspicious timings and occasions for marriages, betrothals, naming ceremonies and other rituals.

***Masan Jogis; the spiritual healers:***

*Masan Jogis* can be categorized under religious performers. Their identity varies in different states. For example in Maharashtra, their status is of nomadic tribe while they are categorized as SC in Karnataka. The *Masan Jogis* living in Maharashtra are categorized under the Central OBC list (Resolution No. & Date - 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993) by the Government of India.

They move from place to place in caravans in search of livelihood which makes it difficult to get data regarding their population. Also since they are listed in the OBC list, data on their population cannot be derived through the census. They know several languages according to the area they come from but Hindi is known to most of them. They are also known by different names in different states like *Telugu Jangams*, *Kilikets*, *Sudugadu Siddas*, *Kasuppas*, etc.

*Masan Jogis'* occupation is attached with the meaning of the word *Masan* and *Jogi*. The etymological meaning of the word *Masan* is burial ground and *Jogi* is saint. Hence *Masan Jogis* are saints who reside in the *Hindu* graveyard. They believe that they are descendants of Lord *Shiva* and *Parvati* and their mother *Parvati* requested them to beg with their *jholis* (cloth bags). Earlier they would sit on the burial pits and obstruct burials until alms were paid. They perform black magic, spirit medication and exorcised evil spirits from haunted houses and persons. They also engage in folk arts during the harvest season from one village to the other. The *Masan Jogi* women prepare *Godhadis* (a mattress made of old cloth) and collect alms during the harvest season with their families. During the dry season, their men and women collect date leaves to prepare mats. Traditionally, women from this community do not practice black magic and nor beg at burial grounds. They also do not inherit parental property. In short they are limited to household work and help her husband's in preparation of mats and *Godhadis*.

***Masan Jogis* in Anushakti Nagar, M East Ward, Mumbai:**

*Masan Jogis* living in Anushakti Nagar area are from the Karnataka-Maharashtra border. They are from Sitapur and Chinchore block (*taluka*) of Jairabad and Gulbarga district of Karnataka. *Masan Jogis* have different surnames like *Sripathi*,



*Bolpath, Kemencha, Sernam, Rudraksha, Madinam* and *Intiperu*. Their surnames are derived from the name of place e.g. *Andharasi*. They usually speak in Telugu and Kannada but their clan language is *Kathipapal*. Most of the men and women from these communities are presently into begging or daily wages work where as few women also engaged as house maids. Women usually wear dirty clothes and carry their children with them while going out for begging.

### **Dresses of *Masan Jogis*:**

Traditionally, they wear a distinct type of dress when they move out for begging. They seek alms in the guise of Lord Shiva by wearing a black cloth on the bottom half of the body, several necklaces; hair tied at the top of the head; a cloth armlet with different symbols of snakes and *Rudraksh*<sup>1</sup> tied under the right shoulder along with a bell in the right hand. They also carry a skull which is decorated with several talismans. They still wear such dresses in rural areas but the numbers are very few now. In the city where I did field work, most of the women wear *saris* and men wear pants and shirts. The elderly wear *dhoti* and *kurta* with *muretha*. They wear many rings and bangles in both hands and few men have long hair than usual. Their dresses and ornamental style is more similar to their native place e.g. *Andhrasi Masanjogis* wear more jewelry, rings and have the practice of keeping long hair compared to Karnataka *Masanjogis*. *Masanjogi* women from the *Andhrasi* community put lot of vermilion on their heads and large *bindis* on foreheads compared to the Karnataka *Masanjogi* women.

### **Food habits of *Masan Jogis*:**

The *Masan Jogis* traditionally enjoy non-vegetarian food like pork, rat, fox, fish and lamb meat. Earlier they used to eat beef but now they have started abstaining from it, probably due to a gradual process of 'hinduisation'. Rice and *jowari* are their staple food. Other than this, they eat vegetable, fruits and pulses. They enjoy fermented *palu sap* (*Kachi*) and distilled local liquor purchased from the market. They smoke *bidis* and *cheroots* besides taking betel nut, powdered weed and tobacco orally.

Though there is no taboo of liquor drinking among their women, the prevalence of consuming liquor is more common among the male members of the community. Tobacco and powdered weed is consumed by most women but they do not consider it as a form of intoxication or addiction.

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<sup>1</sup> Seeds; which is traditionally used for prayer. It is a Sanskrit word compounded from Rudra ('Shiva') and aksha ('eyes'), hence *Rudraksh* is also depicted as Lord Siva's eyes.

### **Marriage ceremonies of Masan Jogis:**

Marrying relatives within three generations is forbidden; however, they practice cross-cousin marriage with the mother's brother's daughter/son and also between maternal uncle-niece, but they do not practice marriage with mother sister's daughter/son. The marital age for grooms is between 16 to 18 years where as for brides, it is 12 to 14 years. In most of the cases, the marriage of girls is finalized immediately after their birth. When a girl has her first menstrual cycle, they celebrate a feast with chicken and wine after the twelfth day. If a girl has her menstruation after marriage, they fill the sari and *kusunipata* as information to boy's house. Marriage by negotiation is known as *ehapa veyetam* and marriage by exchange known as *edurukola*. They practice bride price in cash or kind which is paid to the girl's parents. Married women put vermilion on the forehead and they wear *mangalsutra* and toe ring. Marriage has different important stages from 'seeing a girl' to finalization of the marriage. They celebrate marriages on Mondays. They do not consult a Brahmin priest for fixing up an auspicious time for marriage. In the marriage ceremony, an elderly person instructs the groom and the bride to sit in the middle of the mat, and all the elders bless them by uttering the name of Lord *Hare Hare Shiva*. The relatives throw *akshatas* when the groom ties the *mangalsutra* or turmeric to the neck of the bride, known as *kasula*. The marriage ceremony held in the evening. After the marriage, the couple goes to Lord *Hanuman* temple to pray for a happy and healthy married life. Silver toe rings, green bangles and new clothes are worn by bride at the time of marriage. Marriage is celebrated in girl's house. All the guests are served liquor along with food as part of the function.

Divorce is called *vidichi petatam* of *farakath*. Either the husband or the wife can seek divorce from the *jat panchyat*. It can be sought on the grounds of sexual immorality, impotence, disease, etc. Compensation in cash is given to the aggrieved party. They can remarry in the case of both widowhood and divorce, known as *udiki*.

### **Conception practices of Masan Jogi women:**

Conception is called *kadupu*. They practice several taboos from the fifth month of pregnancy in diet and movement. They are forbidden to eat papaya and carry heavy

weight. Birth of the child is carried out with the help of women from the community and the mother eats herbs, cooked or raw, after the birth of the child. When they travel from one place to another, they consume a herb which prohibits pregnancy. They worship their God after the fifth day of the birth of the girl child and seventh day after the birth of a male child. They celebrate the first hair removal ceremony of the child (both boys and girls) in the third or fifth year of their birth.

#### **Death Ceremony of *Masan Jogis*:**

*Masan Jogis* keep the dead body (*pinaga*) on a mat for the last visit by relatives. The eldest son in the case of the father and the youngest son in the case of mother lights the pyre. They serve liquor to the relatives after returning from the cremation ground. They perform death rituals on the third day known as *dinalu*; they offer food to the grave and to relatives.

#### **Lifestyle of *Masan Jogis* of Anushakti Nagar:**

They live in hutments made of plastic on the pavements. Their life is very mobile. Everyone has a bucket in which they keep small things and they fold their plastic tents very systematically with ropes and hang them from sticks during the day time. In the night, they unfold the plastic sheets and sleep in these makeshift tents. They have very unique method to put up their tents with ropes and three sticks which remains stable even in heavy winds. They have thin *godhadis* to sleep on made from old clothes. They have very few utensils of aluminum and plastic which they use for several purposes. They cook food on the kerosene oil stoves and with dry wood on brick ovens. They fetch water from nearby a pump near Mankhurd Railway Station or from water tankers at Rs 10/- per gallon. They have very few clothes. They make cradles for their young ones from *saris*. One family can sleep easily inside the tent. Elderly people and male youth sleep outside in the open.

Women are the home makers where as both sexes are engaged in paid work outside the home. The female head of the family worships Goddess Parvati and Lord Shiva everyday inside her tent. The educational status of children is very low and begging among them is very prevalent. At times, children earn more than the adults. Another



reason given by the adults for sending their children to beg is that the earnings of the family are not sufficient to sustain their expenses. They use ration facilities from homeless ration card. Other than this they hardly use any government schemes. They use allopathic medicines only in case of prolonged or serious illness; otherwise they rely on herbal medicines. They have good knowledge of herbs for all types of illnesses.

It emerged from the discussion with the community members of Anushakti Nagar that everyone has a dream to own a house and land to cultivate in the village. But they feel that they will have to live in this city with all harsh conditions till the end. Because they are seeing the same condition form generations without any government support or hope for better life. Nevertheless, they still migrate from the city to the village according to agricultural seasons as agricultural laborer with the hope to stay connected with the native place.

In spite of living in city, they make all decisions relating to their civic and social lives in their *jat panchyat*. People who do not abide by the decisions of the *jat panchyat* are expelled or out casted from the community.

### **Learning:**

This is my first experience of interacting with the NT-DNT community during my one year field placement which helped me to gain different types of experiences and knowledge about the community. The *Masan Jogis* have their own norms, values, customs and culture. They are resistant to changes in their cultural practices and also resist any outside interventions in their cultural and social practices. It is a challenge to work with them and a time-taking process to building rapport. The community is struggling on day-to-day basis for their survival. Most of them have a strong perception that social workers come to meet them for their own benefit and they hardly do anything for them. In the past, they have been cheated by few individuals and organizations which further strengthen their distrust. They face lot of harassment from the police and local people who stay in nearby apartments. While interacting with the women, I came to know that though drinking and wife beating is in practice among male but they are not afraid of resisting violence from their husbands. Women

from the community are brave and have strong hold on household affairs still male enjoy more respect in the community at large.

At a personnel level, I learnt that it is a vulnerable community which needs to be dealt with patience and sensitivity. There is need to work with this community with an open mind and heart. Also a question is raised in my mind that there is no universal value system and how can we categorize any individual or community as bad or good/ criminal or non-criminal on the basis of self learnt or taught values of the society.

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