

Hunters and fowlers in the Tungabhadra Plains of Andhra Pradesh, South India: an ethnographical study of Nir Sikaris



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Abstract

Hunting and gathering, which date back to the Middle Pleistocene, are the oldest sources of sustenance. Practically, these hunting and gathering societies have gradually expanded their settlements and culture across the country. The present paper attempts a qualitative ethnographical study on the ongoing life of the Nir Sikaris which is one of the hunting and fowling tribes in the Tungabhadra Plains of Andhra Pradesh. Primarily it focuses on their settlement patterns, subsistence strategies, and living traditions. S(h)ikar means hunting; Sikari means hunter. They populate Kurnool, Anantapur (Andhra Pradesh), Bellary (Karnataka) Districts and Maharashtra. They were labelled with a social stigma of a criminal tribe under the British Raj and were also considered ex-criminal tribe and de-notified tribe in post-independence India. They are currently classified as one of the backward classes (B.C.-A) by the State Government of Andhra Pradesh. It becomes vital to shedding light on documentation of Nir Sikaris' evolving cultural life for posterity, as they are culturally transforming due to modernization in the current globalised society.

Keywords Nir Sikaris · Ethnography · Settlement patterns · Social status · Social change

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Introduction

Food gathering, hunting, pastoralism, and agriculture were the four key stages of early man's subsistence. The oldest forms of sustenance are hunting and gathering food. The antiquity of the hunting-gathering way of life in India goes back to the Middle Pleistocene and possibly even earlier. By the beginning of the Holocene, Stone Age hunter-gatherers had extended their settlement into almost all parts of the country, including sparsely colonized habitats.

Until the early part of the 3rd millennium BC, an economy based on pastoralism and limited plant cultivation came to be established in the southern part of the peninsula. Gradually, the knowledge of agriculture spread among the pre-existing hunter-gatherers who slowly adopted the new economic mode. However, despite the long history of agriculture in most parts of India, the hunting-gathering way of life has not disappeared totally. In the hilly and forested environments of all parts of the country, tribal societies practising some form of primitive agriculture, continue to supplement their subsistence by hunting and gathering. A community like Chenchus in the Eastern Ghats continues to live entirely by hunting and gathering (Malti and Misra 1994).

But it is to be noted that even in the alluvial plains of the Tunga Bhadra River, which is also the most densely populated part of Andhra Pradesh; tribes like Yanadi, Nir Sikari, Boya etc., live by hunting-gathering and fowling even to this day. Understandably, these people also migrated from hilly and forested environments, which were their original habitats, to the plains.

Geographic location: the Tungabhadra Plains

The Tungabhadra River rises in the Western Ghats, and shortly after receiving the Hagari in the Bellary District, becomes the boundary between the Kurnool District and the Doab (Karnataka). It then runs east and reaches Kurnool, where it unites with its tributary, the Handri (Indravathi), and winds northward, and finally falls into the Kistna (Krishna River) at Kudali Sangam (Sangameswaram of Nandikotkur Mandal) in Kurnool District (Gopalakristnamah Chetty 1886). Thus, in Andhra Pradesh, it exclusively flows through the Kurnool District.

The Kurnool District has an annual average rainfall of 715 mm and a temperature of 27.9 °C. The western part of the Kurnool District, Andhra Pradesh wherein Tungabhadra River flows maximum extent forms as a part of Dharwar Cratonic rocks viz., granites, granitic gneisses, granodiorites, amphibolites group of rocks, hornblende schists, dolerite dykes etc., (Raghu et al 2020). Large tracts of woodland existed in the Plains as recently as 50–70 years ago. But, due to the conversion of forests into farmlands and the current pressures on human and living stock populations, the natural vegetation cover of tropical dry deciduous woodlands and thorny scrub has been nearly wiped out. The remained vegetation, hills, hillocks, rock gardens and foothill zones in the River Plains are supporting wildlife, particularly boar, blackbuck, chital deer, wolf, fox, leopard, porcupine etc. However, the mountainous

and bountiful environment has attracted hunter-gatherer societies since primitive times.

Tungabhadra plains in Kurnool District can be defined as an area delimited to the Mandals such as Manthralayam; Yemmiganur; Pattikonda; Gonegandla; Kodumur; Devanakonda; Gudur; Kurnool; Kallur; Nandikotkur; Orvakal; Adoni; Alur etc. This area comprises people of various tribes, nomads and semi-nomads (Chenchu, Nir Sikari, Golla, Kuruba, Boya, Bestha, Budabudakala, Jangala etc.) along with various castes and communities engaged in a variety of occupations and have a distinct livelihood.

Objectives of the study

Despite several studies, there is so much to explore and bring to the limelight the living traditions of many marginalized tribes, nomads and semi-nomads who are living in specific locations in India. Taking into account the nature, livelihood, settlement and subsistence patterns, and social change of Nir Sikaris, the following objectives are intended to be met in this research:

- A) To capture and document the unique lifestyle and livelihood traditions of Nir Sikaris, a marginalized tribe in India, which are unexplored and on the verge of extinction.
- B) To examine the livelihood of Nir Sikaris and estimate changes in their life in the context of tradition, modernity and social change.

Methodology

The present research has been carried out through the participant observation method in dwelling places of Nir Sikaris such as Bangarupeta of Kurnool City, Munagalapadu, Orvakallu, Pasupala villages and Nandikotkur town of Kurnool District, Andhra Pradesh which are situated on the Tungabhadra River Plains.

Discovering, Delving, and Documenting the unearthed issues are a result required for posterity. In this paper, the researcher tried to fill the gaps by spotlighting the ethnography of Nir Sikaris, which had hitherto been undocumented and concealed. In this regard, it becomes necessary to throw much light and record the changing cultural life of Nir Sikaris for posterity, which is going to disappear gradually in the present scenario due to globalization and modernization. As Nir Sikaris have no script for their language, there can be no literary evidence found. So, the researcher elicited maximum of the data by taking oral interviews, through personal observations, interactions and audio records in the field and as the study has its novelty and first of its kind, it took several years to collect the diversified modes of data for which the researcher underwent so many struggles in the field. So, this paper gives a detailed account of Nir Sikaris, one of the hunters and fowlers in the Tungabhadra plains of Kurnool District, Andhra Pradesh, South India. However, since it

is a descriptive ethnographic study, a qualitative methodology has been employed to analyze the collected data.

The study includes two types of data.

1. Primary source, obtained by oral interviews conducted during field investigation. In this regard, an intensive survey is conducted, with data collected through an oral questionnaire and also elicited by using the method of 'participant observation' which gave the researcher a better understanding knowledge of the living traditions of Nir Sikaris in all domains.
2. The basic literature for this study has been gathered from a small number of books and proceedings.

The characteristics of participants

The hunting and fowling community present understudy i.e. Nir Sikari populates in villages in the district such as Gudur, Munagalapadu, Bangarupet of Kurnool City, Pasupala, Nandikotkur, Orvakal, all of which are located on the Tungabhadra Plains. The data reported in this paper mainly was observed and collected by the researcher from different families of the same areas such as Bangarupeta (Kurnool City) and Gudur Town and also from the other dwelling places such as Munagalapadu village and Nandikotkur towns of Kurnool District, Andhra Pradesh.

To collect the data, the researcher has considered five to six families of the same tribe in each area for the study. Further, he interacted with 20 families where all the participants are adults who are above the age of 18 years. The participants have been well informed about the ethnographic research and utilization of the same data being collected and they willingly participated in this research process. Additionally, to strengthen the study, the researcher has interviewed core social groups and collected the views about these Nir Sikaris from the folk of the core society.

Literature review

The name Sikari is derived from Urdu or the Persian word Shikar/Sikar (www.lexico.com). S(h)ikar means hunting; Sikari means hunter, who hunts big game considering it a major occupation of the community. Nowadays, hardly any Sikaris are engaged in this occupation. Even though they are called both Sikaris and Neeri/Nir Sikaris, they prefer to be called Sikari (Personal communication 2012 & 2013, Sikari Nana Singh).

The Bahelias of Uttar Pradesh and the Nir Sikaris of Andhra Pradesh have certain parallels in their nomenclature.

'The occupation of the Bahelias is described as hunting, bird trapping, and collection of jungle produce. Bird catchers among the Bahelias were known

as *Miskar*, said to be a corruption of *Mir Shikar*, meaning “head huntsman” or *Maskar*, meaning “eater of meat” (Malti and Misra 1994).

During the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1922, peasant nationalists killed 23 police officers and set fire to a police station in *Chaurichaura*. In this regard, in the 55th session of the Indian History Congress Symposium held in 1994 at Aligarh and entitled *Some concerns on evidence, language, and history*; Shahid Amin, a historian, stated that *Mir Shikari* is the first accused in the *Chaurichaura* case.

“At the non-violent event, we threw mud pellets and stoned each other; I, too, threw mud pellets. I and the rest of them had slain the cops when the cops came and barricaded themselves in the police station, *Mir Shikari* stated in court”.

In legal parlance, *Shikari*, who was himself an important figure in the local volunteer organization, acted as the court’s ‘Approver’ by testifying against his fellow volunteers in hope of pardon for himself (Steadly 1997). This *Mir Shikari*, Vakulabharanam Lalitha opined, could be *Nir Sikari* (Lalitha 1995). However, the distinction between the phrases *Nir Sikari* and *Mir Shikari* is merely a matter of pronunciation; the word *Nir Sikari* also denotes a head huntsman/meat-eater.

Based on the geographical regions of their subsistence, there is a distinction in terms of nomenclature. They are known as *Nir Sikaris/Sikaris* in Andhra Pradesh; whereas *Pardhis/Maha Pardhis* in Maharashtra (Personal communication 2012 & 2013, Sikari Nana Singh), and *Hakki Pikki* (bird catchers) in Karnataka. The alternate names of *Hakkipikki* include *Harana Shikari*, *Adavi Chenchar*, *Shikari* etc. *Nir Sikaris* of Andhra Pradesh have marital ties with *Hakkipikkis* of Karnataka and *Pardhis* of Maharashtra (Personal communication 2012 & 2015, Sikari Rajamma). The name *Pardhi* is derived from Sanskrit *paradh*, meaning “hunt” or ‘hunting’ (like the word *Shikar*). (Malti and Misra 1994).

Vakulabharanam Lalitha opined that they were named ‘*Sikari*’ by the Europeans (Lalitha 1995). According to Thurston, *Shikari*, meaning a sportsman or hunter, occurs as a synonym of *Irula*, and a sub-division of *Korava*. The name *shikari* is also applied to a Native who “accompanies European sportsmen as a guide and aid, and to the European sportsman himself” (Thurston and Rangachary 1909). According to Johnson “*Shecarries* are generally *Hindoos* of the low cast, who gain their livelihood entirely by catching birds, hares, and all sorts of animals.” (Henry Yule and Burnell 1886). Ghurye called them “*Backward Hindus*” as most of them follow Hindu beliefs and customs (Ghurye 1949).

Generally, it is known that the socio-economic and cultural profile of hunting-gathering societies since the later part of the 19th Century was documented by Europeans in general, by British administrators in particular. Their documentation was mainly to acquire accurate knowledge of the same societies for the proper rule.

Bating sketchy notes which were published in the form of census reports; gazetteers, dictionaries, and a few articles, detailed accounts of *Nir Sikaris*, in particular, are unfortunately absent. Anyway, some of the data for this paper has been obtained from published sources and extensive information which I came across from time to time is elicited by oral interviews and case studies i.e. through fieldwork.

However, a few ethnographers such as Johnson, Yule & Burnell (1886), Edgar Thurston (1909), Vakulabaranam Lalitha (1995 & 2009) and Yadava Raghu (2005, 2012 & 2017) were who threw light on Nir Sikaris, the Ex-Criminal Tribe. With little research being done on this community in all spheres, a vast and intact field awaits both ethnographers and social scientists. Hence, there is a dire necessity to focus on them and to bring to light their ethnicity and socio-cultural profile.

Vennelakanti Raghavaiah and Vakulabharanam Lalitha, renowned Telugu ethnographers, made efforts to bring the socio-economic and cultural profile of various ethnic groups like Yanadi, Chenchu, Nir Sikari and others to light. Both these ethnographers' work prompted me to focus on this subject.

Origin of Nir Sikaris in Telugu speaking areas

The Nir Sikaris are semi-nomads and populate Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Tamil Nadu. As no script is available, understanding their language is extremely difficult and in all seriousness, it is on the verge of extinction. They speak all South Indian languages including Telugu, Kannada and Tamil, in addition to their own.

Based on case studies taken and oral interviews conducted with Nir Sikaris, as well as their spoken language, it is assumed that they have a hoary past and hail from Maharashtra. They claimed that they had an ancestral relationship with the legendary king Sivaji. When it comes to the migration of Nir Sikaris, scholars have differing perspectives. After the Maratha's defeat by the Moghuls, some scholars think, they went to South India.

The study area, in particular, fell under the control of the Yadavas of Devagiri (Maharashtra) in the early mediaeval period. Tungabhadra plains have a plethora of inscriptional evidence dating back to the Devagiri Yadavas, which provides massive information about their rule here. Later, Sivaji invaded South Indian territories which include Karnataka, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamilnadu between 1676 and 1677. In February 1677, he entered Hyderabad of Asafjahis and in March 1677, he marched from Hyderabad to Kurnool. He then flew from Kurnool to Srisailem, where his army was waiting for him in Anantapur. Sivaji travelled from Srisailem to Atmakur and Nandyal before making his way to invade Gandikota Fort in Kadapa District. After that, he made rapid marches and entered Tamilnadu (Sarkar 1920).

Knowing this, it's understandable that certain Marathi families and warrior tribal clans stayed and settled in South India under the rule of the Yadavas of Devagiri and during Sivaji's invasion of South India rather than returning to Maharashtra. Different Marathi caste people such as Bhava Sara Kshatriya Rangaraj (Darji), Are (Arya) Marathi, Are Katika, Chitari, and warrior tribes like Nir Sikari are still residing in the Tungabhadra Plains (Personal communication 2021, Uttarakara Satyanarayana). As a result, it is now widely accepted that the Nir Sikaris of Rayalaseema were also from Maharashtra and they had ancestral relations with the legendary King Sivaji. It came to know that Nir Sikaris worked as coolies in the

construction of the KC Canal (Kurnool – Cuddapah Canal, constructed from 1860 to 1872) during the colonial rule (Personal communication 2012 & 2015, Sikari Rajamma).

Livelihood and lifestyle

Settlement pattern

In the past, they would go hunting for a week or ten days every month, but nowadays, only on Saturdays. In general, meat is only eaten on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Fridays in Hindu culture. On Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, Hindus abstain from eating meat in honour of Gods such as Siva, Saibaba, and Venkateswara Swamy. Nir Sikaris follow a similar practice as well and go hunting on Saturdays to consume meat on Sundays as part of this.

They use to select the forested area first, and then put up their temporary settlements or bases outside the villages near the same forest area while hunting. During this course, almost all their activities, such as cooking (sometimes their women cook, if not they adjust with cooked food which the women and kids beg from the farmers' homes of the core village), eating and sleeping take place under the sky.

It has been observed that the nature of housing in Nir Sikaris' inhabited places differs from that of core areas. The residences of economically better-off Nir Sikari families consist of one or two tiny rooms made of stone, brick, or mud, whereas impoverished families make do with a single thatched hut with gable or conical roofs.

Hunting – trapping and gathering

Nir Sikaris have previously lived a nomadic existence. They continue to live as semi-nomads today. Hunting and bird catching is their main occupation. They subsist by hunting foxes, hares, wild boars, pigeons, field rats, iguana, wild cats, and fish, as well as trapping birds like pigeons, bellam guvva, quail (*Burra pitta/kamju*), crane (*Konga*), duck (*bathu*) etc., Nir Sikaris, like all other hunters and fowlers, can locate game birds from afar and thus can attract and trap them by mimicking their sounds. They used to go hunting for a week or ten days a month, but now they only go on weekends (Fig. 1).

The hunting and trapping equipment of Nir Sikaris are: *Goppeni/Galolin* (Fig. 2), *Kandalin* (Fig. 3), *Tantallon* (Fig. 4), *Jaalin* (Fig. 5), *Pishiyan* and *Mangarin*. They would make nets with horsehair as well as commercially available nylon wire. The foremost and the early hunting material of Nir Sikaris is *Goppeni* or *Galolin* (catapult or pellet bow). With *Galolin* they frequently shoot a bird flying. The remaining hunting materials are *Tantallon* (a large/small trap made up of multiple nooses, suspended from a rope) to hunt foxes; *Kandalin* (a trap made of bamboo sticks and nylon string) for partridges; *Jaalin* for rabbits, wild cats and jangam cats; *Pishiyan*

Fig. 1 Nir Sikaris' readiness for hunting and fowling



for Cranes and other birds and *Mangarin* (a cylindrical trap) for Iguana (*Udumulu*) and wild foxes (Personal communication 2015, Sikari Prasad).

They do not use the *Galolin* to kill monkeys, cows, crows, sparrows and snakes and for this, there is a legend. Accordingly, *Goppeni* or *Galolin* was bestowed by Kodyar Devi, one of their deities. "Once upon a time there was a monarch named Sawai Lodhi. When Sawai Lodhi Lagman s/o Sawai Lodi was out grazing the cattle, an elderly woman appeared for three days and told him he could wish for anything. In fright, Lagman rushed to his mother and told her the same thing. His mother told him *that the old woman could be our deity Kodyar Devi and that if she arrived again, just wish for something like a treasury*. Days passed, it was on one fine day about 12 'O'clock, the same old woman came out from *IngalaJavaadi temple* (a temple situated at *IngalaJavaadi* of Maharashtra) and appeared once again with a stick in her hands. Lagman wished her a Galoli for Sikar (hunting) instead of the treasury. She laughed at him and made a Galolin/Goppen with a stick in her hands while taking an oath from him that he would never use the Galolin to kill monkeys, cows, crows, sparrows and snakes. (Personal communication 2012 & 2015, Sikari Rajamma).

Many of the Nir Sikaris' hunting material nomenclatures are indistinguishable from those of other tribes such as Nakkala (Telangana), Kanjara Tribes (Uttar Pradesh), Kuchbandhias (Uttar Pradesh. & Madhya Pradesh) and Pardhis (Maharashtra). For

Fig. 2 Galolin**Fig. 3** Kandalin

ex. Nir Sikaris' Galolin – Nakkals' *Guler* (Personal communication 2021, Ganesh) and Kanjars' *Gulel*; Nir Sikaris' *Taantalon* – Pardhis' and Kuchbandhias' *Tantla* and *Tantli*; Nir Sikaris' *Kandalin* – Pardhis' *Khandara*, Nir Sikaris' *Mangarin* – Pardhis' *Mangri* etc. (Malti and Misra 1994). Thus, we can notice certain parallels.

Fig. 4 Tantallon**Fig. 5** Jaalin**Fig. 6** Nir Sikari munching chillies with rice

Based on the elicited information, it came to know that the ancestors of Nir Sikaris used to collect forest products like roots, herbs and vegetable products while hunting in the jungles. Now, no Sikari is collecting roots and herbs but they gather vegetable products and honey. Likewise, these collections are neither bartered nor sold. However, the information regarding gatherings for the subsistence of their economy is not as copious as on hunting.

Food and dress

I found uniqueness in their food habits; cooking techniques; dress code and beliefs and customs which are as follows...

Food

Though they are both vegetarians and non-vegetarians, they prefer to consume meat. Fox meat is a favourite of theirs (Personal communication 2013, Sikari Raju). In most cases, when there is no availability of *dal* and *curries*, they munch green chilly with rice (Fig. 6). By interviewing *Sikari Hira*, I came to know that there are seven sects or gotras among the Nir Sikaris and only women have some restrictions regarding consumption of food based on their sect as mentioned below.

Sl. No	Name of the sect	Food should not be eaten
1	Korabiya	Egg, the meat of rooster, ram (<i>Pottelu</i>) and the he-goat
2	Kodiyara	Meat of ram
3	Hikotiya	The meat of ram and he-goat
4	Harkatiya	Egg and capon
5	Mandhio	Meat of ram
6	Chavandiya	Beef
7	Pimpalaja	Beef with rice

They believe that if any woman does not adhere to their sect's eating practices, they will experience tremendous troubles and loss in no time (Personal communication 2014, Sikari Heera). In any case, similar dietary approaches are not found in non-tribal societies in the research area.

During my fieldwork, I saw that some of them go begging. While I was interviewing Sikari Nana Singh and Sikari Heera, came to know that Sikaris refuse meals from Scheduled Caste people and that they avoid going to Scheduled Caste residences even when begging. In the past, fried gram and jaggery rice were served during weddings. Instead of sweets, they now prepare and serve Rice or Chapathi, Dal, and Brinjal Curry. As a result, they claim, wedding costs are quite inexpensive. They use earthenware and aluminium utensils to cook. *Saara* (arrack) consumption is a widespread habit and an all-too-common occurrence in their lives (Fig. 7). They make *Saara* in their houses and

Fig. 7 A scene of preparing arrack (saara) by Nir Sikari girls



Fig. 8 Kumpati



little shrubs near their habitats. They have black teeth as a result of regular smoking and the use of *nasyam podi/mukku podi* (snuff).

Cooking techniques

They use earthen pots and vessels to cook. In the past, earthen pans were used for baking and roasting Roti, but currently, iron pans are used instead. In fact, in the past, the poor who lived in huts used *kumpati* (Fig. 8.) (A brassier made of clay or a half-broken earthen pitcher) to cook their food, whilst the wealthy used hearths. A pot is also arranged at the hearth to facilitate cooking and boiling water simultaneously. The dried-up trees of *Nalla Thumma* (black babul) and *Nuggulu* (cow-dung cakes) were used as cooking fuel. Due to the *Deepam scheme* launched by the Government of Andhra Pradesh, several Sikaris have been utilizing gas stoves for the last twenty or twenty-five years, and *kumpati* and hearth have vanished practically from everyone's house. During the field study, however,

I found that some Sikaris still cook rice and other items solely on the *kumpati*. As a result, their economic condition and their attitude towards rapid societal change, like that of many other tribes, nomads, and semi-nomads, are understood.

Dress code

They bathe regularly but are uninterested in clothing and grooming. Even now, the proper dress code is not followed. As a result, if someone else isn't dressed properly, he will be compared to Sikari and asked, "*Why looks like Sikari?*" (*field observations*). In the past, the womenfolk of the Nir Sikaris wore coarse saris and use them as bed sheets at night (Lalitha 2009).

Nir Sikaris are the most backward and marginalized in the study region, both socially and economically. The majorities of Nir Sikaris are poor and still live in thatched huts, eating stale food begged from households and hotels. They are despised by core society because of their poverty, eating and drinking habits, generally unhygienic lifestyle, and also they are fond for larceny and robbery. The current generation is uninterested in their forefathers' practices.

Due to modernization, they are gradually giving up not only their hunting lifestyle and unlawful activities, but also attempting to blend into the mainstream without their cognizant. Selling block tickets at cinema halls, cultivating and selling grass in the Handri River, working as a coolie, night watchmen tasks, and auto driving, as well as weekend hunting and making arrack, are all part of their livelihood now. Some of the youth often go to play the drums at functions and festivals.

Despite their financial hardships, they prefer not to engage in manual labour. The majority of them were illiterates. When we look at the literacy rate of Nir Sikaris, we can see that it is extremely low. Only some of the young men such as Sikari Venkatesh s/o Lachchu from Bangarupeta in Kurnool City; Sikari Vijay from Gudur and the other six students namely S.M. Raghavendra, S. Venkatesh, S. Suresh, S. Sophi, S. Sanker and S. Ramu from Nandikotkur completed their Bachelor of Commerce degrees. Nowadays, some Nir Sikari children are attending school and it is the happiest thing, despite facing discrimination in the core society.

Beliefs, customs and socio-cultural practices

In general, Hindus (both men and women) pray to God and go to the temple to tonsure their hair to God/Goddess if their desires or wishes are fulfilled. In Telugu, this ceremony is referred to as '*mokkubadi*'. In contrast, in the name of God/Goddess, Nir Sikaris grow their hair for a lifetime (Personal communication 2012 & 2013, Sikari Nana Singh). Due to the impact of modernization and urbanization, unforeseen changes in their livelihood have begun, as well as some alterations in their livelihood. Everything is changing, especially among the youth.

Child marriage is an extremely common occurrence. Following the wedding, the bride and groom will be blessed by the elders of their community and sent for begging. The lack of practice of the socially bad dowry system, which is rampant in our civilized and developed society, is unique in the Nir Sikaris. Mothers-in-law, on the other hand, will undoubtedly be required to gift something to the bride (daughters-in-law). Polygamy is only accepted and tolerated with the consent of the first wife. Widows are permitted to remarry. The problems are solved at the local panchayats. These panchayats are classified by them as *Kharkar na Kaanta zeeth baluschuv*; *Kuwa nu zeeth baluschuv*; *Dood ni zeeth baluschuv*; *Deevo ni zeeth baluschuv* etc. The punishments will be depending on the wrongdoings.

(A). Kharkar na Kaanta (Jujube thorn) zeeth baluschuv (Panchayat):

If anyone maintains an illicit/illegal relationship, the problem will be solved through a panchayat known as *Kharkar na Kaanta zeeth baluschuv*. In this panchayat, the person shall be punished with *Jujube thorn* (*Gangareni Mullu in Telugu*). If the woman makes such a mistake, the right side of her nose and her left ear will be cut off with a *Jujube thorn*, while the man's left ear would be cut off and be branded a mark (Personal communication 2012 & 2015, Sikari Rajamma). Following that, a massive boulder or rock will be placed on the victims' heads, and both victims will be flogged with *chalkai* (a slang term for a whip), made of iron, by their community heads (Personal communication 2012 & 2013, Sikari Nana Singh). The *chalkai* is constantly kept in the box in front of Goddess Durga since it is considered sacred. It is taken out only when the wrongdoer is to be punished. Mistakes such as theft, black magic etc. are solved by panchayats called *Kuwa nu zeeth baluschuv*; *Dood ni zeeth baluschuv*; and *Deevo ni zeeth baluschuv*.

(B). Kuwa nu zeeth baluschuv:

If anybody is accused of committing crimes such as theft, black magic etc., he will be called for this *Kuwa (Well) nu zeeth baluschuv (Panchayat)*. The individual who is being accused, the headmen, and everyone else of Nir Sikaris gather at a well. The person who is blamed, on his behalf, must first choose two people, then take three measures of a long bamboo stick from the well, and have a third person standing there. One of the two men chosen will be drowned in the well. Meanwhile, the other must go towards the third person from the well, touch him, and then return to the well to touch the person who has drowned. If they are successful in doing so it is said that the one who is being accused has made no mistakes. In the contrast, if the one who has been drowned in water comes out before being touched, then it is said that the blamed has made the mistake.

(C). Dood (Milk) ni zeeth baluschuv (Panchayat):

If it is suspected that someone has used black magic, each family head and his wife should go to a Neem tree and pour milk to it. Within 2 to 3 weeks, any of the family members of the person who has done a mistake will fall ill and then the person will accept his mistake. After that, the person is beaten with wild date palm sticks and also he will be fined an amount of three to four thousand.

(D). Deevo (Lamp) ni zeeth baluschuv (Panchayat):

In this panchayat, a lamp is lit in any one of the temples and the blamed is asked to put off the lamp. Within 2 to 3 weeks, if any family member of the blamed falls ill it is said that the blamed person will be considered a victim and will be punished. The blamed is beaten with wild date palm sticks and will be fined an amount of three to four thousand (Personal communication 2022, Sikari Vijay).

Thus, the *Panchayat* system is very unique. The panchayat is run by a council consisting of five headmen. For instance, there is a headmen council at Bangarupet of Kurnool City whose headmen are 1. Sikari Jalla (s/o Jangir); 2. Sikari Nana Singh (s/o Sonu Singh); 3. Sikari Jalli (s/o Ramdas); 4. Sikari Syam (s/o Jamili) and 5. Sikari Sanjay (s/o Ganesh) (Personal communication 2012 & 2013, Sikari Nana Singh) (Fig. 9). The five members of the headmen council at Gudur town are Char-mal Pawar, Chattar Singh Pimpla, Sajan Pimpla, Pedda Kasthur Pawar, and Ramdas Kale (Personal communication 2022, Sikari Vijay).

Nir Sikar tribe has seven sects/*gotras*: Kodiyara, Harkatiya, Hikotiya, Korabiya, Chawandiya, Pimpalaza, and Mandhiyo. Every sect has its deity. Kodiyar Devi for Kodiyaras, Harkat Devi for Harkatiyas, Hiko Devi for Hikotiyas, Prati Pawar/Bhakti Pawar Devi for Korabiyas, Sarak Savandiya Devi for Chawandiyas, Pimpala Devi for Pimpalajas and Mandhiya Devi for Mandhiyos (Personal communication 2014, Sikari Heera). All seven deities are daughters of Dhanibhavo, the male deity of Sikar. Besides the said deities, other deities worshipped by the Nir Sikaris include Gaal Devi, Kaanaberi, Jibathuttudi, Maalpara, Deogara, Shiderghara, Parthan Devi etc. (Personal communication 2012 & 2013, Sikari Nana Singh). In addition, every year in February, the Nir Sikaris celebrate Durgamma Jatara (fair). This three-day jatara is celebrated in the belief that Goddess Durga will protect and look after their health, wealth and fortune. Nir Sikaris spend time with their families and relatives in the vicinity of the temple and they celebrate this event by taking non-veg food and by drinking alcoholic beverages in general, as well as *Saara* in particular.

Devara celebrations

While everyone performs the Durgamma Jatara together, on the other hand, each sect of Nir Sikaris celebrates *Devara* individually by butchering He-Buffalo for their deity. During this process, the nerve in the He-Buffalo's neck is first cut (Fig. 10) and the blood that flows out is offered to the deity as *Naivedyam*. That *Naivedyam*,

the freshly collected or clotted blood, is then mixed with rice and ghee and consumed by a special person under the Trans (Personal communication 2012, Sikari Mahali). It's worth noting that Nir Sikaris and the Masai Tribe of East Africa use a similar technique to cut an animal's nerve. The Masai, or Cattle Pastoralists, drink the blood of both bulls and cows. This is obtained by tying a leather cord around the neck of an animal until the veins swell. A vein is then punctured by a special arrow-head and the blood gushes out and is collected and drunk fresh or clotted (Leong 1971). The difference in this is, that the Masai tribesmen drink their animals' blood but do not slaughter them for meat, but the Nir Sikaris butcher a He-buffalo during the ritual.

Social status

Nir Sikaris are socially comparable to tribes, but they felt about themselves as equal to *Kshatriyas* in the *Chaturvarna* system. *'We are Sivaji's descendants; our forefathers came from Maharastra and settled here during Sivaji's invasions,'* claimed Sikari Nana Singh. They think of themselves as having a superior social status to the Marwadis. They assert that *'the ancestor of both Nir Sikaris and Marwadis was the same; the Nir Sikaris were born to an ancestral wife and the Marwadis to a concubine; this is the cause for their backwardness in all spheres.* The Marwadis, of course, do not accept this (Raghu, 2005 & 2012).

As semi-nomads, their families wander around with their bags and baggage and pitch tents in the suburbs of the village or in solitary. Women rush to adjacent villages to beg as soon as the men go hunting. At this time Nir Sikari women come to the front of the villagers' houses and shout for food. If they had the chance, they would steal the belongings of householders while begging. Because of this panic, villagers react quickly and provide them with a proper portion of food. For this reason, any villager who yells at someone is compared to Sikaris and is questioned *'endukuraa atlaa arusthav sikaroni lakkala* which means *why yell like Sikari?* (Personal communication 2004, Ranga Das Yadav). According to villagers, Nir Sikaris are virtuosos in

Fig. 9 Head Men Council, Bangarupet, Kurnool City



Fig. 10 Butchering a He-Buffalo by cutting the nerve in its neck during the Devara



theft. With their nefarious deeds, they intimidate travellers and rob them even in broad daylight.

The Nir Sikaris, like several other nomadic primitives in Andhra Pradesh such as the Chenchus and Yanadis, are still hunter-gatherers and fowlers. If we look at their social status under the British Raj, we can see that they were labelled with a social stigma of a criminal tribe. In post-independence India, they were also deemed de-notified and ex-criminal tribes. They are currently classified as one of the backward classes (B.C-A) by the state government of Andhra Pradesh.

Crime, a socio-economic phenomenon, is a very regular and major problem that human society faces. Socio-economic factors of a particular society influence the human behaviour of the same. So criminals are made but not born, sociologists opined. The early history of the criminal tribes in India is unknown. Ethno-Archaeologists think, however, that these tribes were also the original inhabitants of the country. In connection with this if we accept sociologists' assertion that '*criminals are made but not born*' it is also rational to assume that criminal tribes are also the original owners of the region or land where they live. Y.C. Simhadri defined a criminal tribe as: "Tribal groups of people in India who have traditionally committed criminal activities for their livelihood and who accept such activities as their way of life" (Simhadri 1979).

Many criminal tribes had existed in India for a long time back and they were first dealt with by regulation in 1773, and then again in 1871, during the colonial period. They were listed as a distinct category for the first time in the 1911 census. In the criminal acts of post-independent India, these tribes have been dubbed De-notified and Ex-Criminal Tribes. According to a report by the National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes of India, there are 64 Denotified Tribes and 62 Nomadic Tribes in Andhra Pradesh. Nir Shikari, the tribe under study, is mentioned as one of the 64 denotified tribes. (Ramji Idate 2016).

Although the Nir Sikaris are mostly hunters rather than criminals, the overwhelming of them had been involved in illicit acts like robberies in the study area. They were known as infamous dacoits in Kurnool City for robbing and stealing from people on public highways at all hours of the day and night. For this cause, until about 20 years ago, the proclivity of the police was to arrest; harass and persecute first Nir sikaris whenever there was a theft or robbery. This implies how Nir Sikaris are constantly involved in perpetrating thefts. They said, however, one fact about their thievery is that they used to make *saaraa* (arrack) for their subsistence in the past. As a result, police officers frequently used to arrest and brutally punish these people. Under these circumstances, Nir

Sikaris gave up making arrack and turned to robbery for their livelihood. When a district collector (name not known) noticed this, he let them continue making arrack instead of committing robbery. Hence, they ceased robbing and concentrated on making arrack, which has been the community's main source of income to this today (Personal communication 2012 & 2013, Sikari Nana Singh).

Conclusion

Since independence, both the Central and State Governments have been providing plots for housing and cultivation, as well as low-interest bank loans for their livelihood in general, particularly to purchase agricultural implements or start small businesses or build houses etc. under many schemes aimed at accelerating the development of many nomadic tribes (NT) and semi-nomadic tribes (SNT). Unfortunately, the present tribe understudy does not receive any government subsidies or benefits and instead of this loss; they are considered one of the Backward Classes in Telugu-speaking states. We can sometimes presume that democracy is nothing more than a numbers game and that no government is concerned about the upliftment of these Nir Sikaris because they are few.

Even though Nir Sikaris are superstitious, uneducated, and illiterate, there is no sign of a dowry system in them. In the meantime, it's worth noting that widow remarriages are permitted. Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh is noted for its factional rivalry and drought in general. One of the causes of the emergence of factious crimes in this region is illegal and illicit relationships. In connection with this, if we see the Nir Sikaris, they use to solve these kinds of problems in a peaceful manner according to their norms and panchayats.

According to Article 342, communities with primitive attributes, geographical isolation, distinct culture, shyness and fear of contact with the general public, as well as being economically backward, are eligible for tribal status (Bade Saheb 2016). As a result of this, Nir Sikaris will be recognized as a tribe. They have given multiple representations to the Kurnool district Collector, to get tribal status.

Fig. 11 Researcher with Nir Sikaris



Although the governments of Karnataka and Maharashtra have granted tribal status, the government of Andhra Pradesh has made no move to do so or take any steps to help them flourish in all spheres. Instead, the Government of Andhra Pradesh is interested in incorporating some well-developed castes into the Backward and Scheduled castes. In democratic countries in general, castes with the biggest population will achieve anything, while castes with the lowest numbers will achieve nothing. In light of this, the current study is important not only for gaining a better knowledge of past settlement and subsistence patterns by examining contemporary patterns in the area but also for governments designing socio-economic development strategies.

Though the fact that Nir Sikaris' livelihood has changed dramatically, they are not fully committed to social participation. Despite living on the plains, they are lovers of independence and have no desire to assimilate with the broader populace and continue their hunting practices (Fig. 11).

Author's information

I am working as an Assistant Professor in History and have attended about 100 National and International conferences, seminars and workshops, and have 02 research books and 53 research articles published in various journals; proceedings and volumes. I have written 14 book chapters for Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University's syllabus curriculum in Hyderabad, Telangana, India. As a field archaeologist, I have explored many new archaeological sites (Upper Palaeolithic, Neolithic, Megalithic sites and Pre and early historic Rock-Art Sites in Andhra Pradesh of India.) Besides these archaeological explorations, I have been working on many nomadic, semi-nomadic tribes and pastoral communities and documenting the data which I have elicited on the same communities and expending the same through publications in various journals.

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Availability of data and materials I have elicited the ethnographic data through oral interviews and documented it in a manuscript. I possess the manuscript data that I have collected.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate The research adheres to the ethical principles of ethnographic research and all the participants are adults who are over the age of 18 years. They have been informed about this ethnographic research and utilization of the same data being collected and they willingly participated in this research process.

Consent for publication When I informed the tribe under study's participants (Nir Sikaris) about the research process and publication, they indicated their consent orally for publication.

Competing interests There are no competing interests as the data is collected in fieldwork by the author's personal effort. All findings have been checked for accuracy and are found to be valid and accurate.

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Comments

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