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How Lord Venkateswara Became Balaji: The Spiritual History of the Banjara Tribe

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Abstract & Keywords

Abstract

The spiritual history of the Banjara tribe demonstrates a profound cultural fusion, reflecting how this historically nomadic community integrated and uniquely adapted the worship of Lord Venkateswara as Balaji into the core of their traditions

This study examines the spiritual history of the **Banjara (Lamani) tribe** [1] and investigates the historical, socio-economic, and cultural mechanisms through which they adopted the orthodox Vaishnavite deity **Lord Venkateswara as Balaji**. Historically characterized as a nomadic, long-distance pack-bullock trading community, the Banjaras faced severe disruption due to the expansion of colonial rail networks, forcing a structural transition toward sedentary agriculture in rural settlements (Tanda's) across Southern India.

Using an **interdisciplinary qualitative framework** that triangulates ethnographic field data from 45 key informants (n = 45) in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh with primary administrative records from the **Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam's (TTD) Archives**, this paper challenges classical top-down models of Sanskritization. The findings reveal a distinct form of subaltern agency: the Banjaras did not abandon their indigenous animistic pantheon, but instead created a **dual devotional paradigm**. Within this paradigm, Balaji is physically integrated at the domestic altar using simplified, non-orthodox iconography (uncarved bannas and cowrie shells) and addressed through pastoral metaphors in the **Gor Boli** language.

Crucially, this research highlights two historical pathways of mediation: internally, through the 18th-century moral decrees (Vachans) of **Sant Sevalal Maharaj**, and externally, via the cultural proxy of the North Indian ascetic **Hathiram Bhavaji**. Furthermore, the study identifies that this spiritual link is preserved across generations through gendered domestic spaces, specifically within the marriage rituals (Vano laments) of Banjara women.

Ultimately, the paper argues that the adoption of Balaji served as both a spiritual anchor and a mechanism for social integration during periods of forced sedentarization, offering a more nuanced understanding of religious syncretism and subaltern identity preservation in the Indian subcontinent.

Keywords

Banjara Tribe; Lord Venkateswara; Balaji; Sanskritization; Gor Boli Oral Traditions; Subaltern Historiography; Sant Sevalal Maharaj; Hathiram Bhavaji.

Introduction

This study examines the spiritual history of the historically nomadic Banjara tribe and traces the historical, economic, and cultural mechanisms through which they integrated into the mainstream agrarian temple economy of Southern India by adopting the orthodox Vaishnavite deity Lord Venkateswara as Balaji.

The cultural fabric of India is intricately woven with diverse tribal histories that have profoundly shaped, and been shaped by, mainstream religious traditions. Among these, the Banjara tribe—a historically nomadic community scattered across regions like Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Karnataka—boasts a rich spiritual heritage characterized by a unique synthesis of nature worship, ancestral reverence, and devotion to Puranic deities. Understanding the religious evolution of such marginalized or nomadic communities is critical for mapping the historical processes of cultural assimilation and syncretism in the Indian subcontinent. Exploring how localized tribal deities or specific clan beliefs intersect with major mainstream religious traditions provides vital insights into the fluid, pluralistic nature of Indian spirituality.

Previous scholarship on the Banjara community has predominantly focused on their socio-economic marginalization, criminalization during the colonial era, and distinct folklore, costume, and language (Lambadi). Anthropological and historical studies have successfully documented their migration patterns from Rajasthan across Central and Southern India, noting their traditional roles as long-distance traders. Concurrently, regional religious histories have extensively catalogued the massive socio-cultural impact of the Tirumala Venkateswara Temple in Andhra Pradesh, detailing its evolution into one of the most prominent pilgrimage sites in the world.

However, a significant gap remains in the literature regarding the precise theological and cultural intersection between Banjara tribal identity and the institutionalized worship of Lord Venkateswara. While it is widely acknowledged in folklore that the Banjaras revere the deity as "Balaji"—often attributing unique tribal narratives, songs, and domestic rituals to him that differ from orthodox Vaishnavite traditions—the exact historical mechanisms of this spiritual adoption remain under-researched and contested. Existing studies frequently overlook how a traditionally nomadic, forest-dwelling tribe subverted or integrated into a deeply structured, agrarian temple economy, leaving a vital chapter of subaltern religious history largely unexamined.

This study aims to bridge this scholarly gap by investigating the spiritual history of the Banjara tribe with a specific focus on the cultural transition that led to their deep devotion to Lord Venkateswara as Balaji. This research seeks to address two primary questions: How did the Banjara tribe adapt orthodox Vaishnavite iconography into their own nomadic spiritual framework, and what role did this religious alignment play in their broader socio-cultural transition away from a migratory lifestyle? Underpinned by the hypothesis that the adoption of Balaji served as both a spiritual anchor and a mechanism for social integration during periods of forced sedentarization, this study utilizes oral histories, folk songs, and archival temple records to trace the unique spiritual evolution of the Banjara community.

Methods and Material

This study utilizes an interdisciplinary qualitative framework that triangulates ethnographic field interviews from 45 key informants across rural settlements (Tandas) in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh with primary administrative records from the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) Archives to systematically analyse the subaltern religious adaptation of the Banjara community.

2.1 Study Design

This study employs an **interdisciplinary qualitative approach** combining **historical-archival research** with **ethnographic field methods**. Given the subaltern nature of the Banjara community's history, an orthodox reliance on textual archives alone would be insufficient. Therefore, a **mixed qualitative framework** was designed to cross-reference formal institutional records (state and temple archives) with the oral traditions, folk songs, and lived religious practices preserved by the community.

2.2 Participants and Sample Selection

Fieldwork was conducted across selected Tandas (traditional Banjara settlements) in the **Telangana and Andhra Pradesh regions of Southern India**, where the cultural interface with the Tirumala Venkateswara tradition is historically dense.

- **Sample Size and Recruitment:** A total of **45 key informants** (n=45) were selected using a combination of **purposive and snowball sampling** strategies. Initial contact was established through local community leaders (Naiks).
- **Eligibility Criteria:** To participate, informants had to be:

1. Self-identified members of the Banjara (Lambadi) community.
2. Permanent residents of the selected rural Tandas.
3. Individuals recognized within their communities as cultural custodians, including village elders, traditional priests (Bhogias), and folk singers/performers fluent in the Gor Boli language.

2.3 Materials and Research Instruments

Data collection relied on a suite of custom-designed qualitative instruments.

- **Semi-Structured Interview Guides:** A flexible protocol consisting of **22 open-ended questions** translated into Gor Boli and Telugu. The guide focused on oral genealogies, domestic worship spaces (Devis and Gurus), specific rituals dedicated to Balaji, and narratives regarding migrations to Tirumala.
- **Audio-Visual Recording Equipment:** Interviews and ritual performances were captured using high-fidelity digital audio recorders and high-definition video equipment to document iconography and posture during worship.
- **Archival Documents:** Primary source materials were accessed from the **State Archives of Telangana**, the **Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) Research Library**, and colonial-era gazetteers (such as the Hyderabad State Gazetteers and Madras District Gazetteers).

2.4 Procedures and Data Collection

Data collection was carried out over an **eight-month period (September 2025 to April 2026)**. The operational procedure followed three distinct phases:

[Phase 1: Archival Research] ➔ [Phase 2: Fieldwork & Ethnography] ➔ [Phase 3: Data Triangulation]

1.**Phase 1 (Months 1–2): Archival Pre-Screening:** Researchers examined 19th and early 20th-century colonial administration reports and TTD epigraphical records to map out historical Banjara migration routes and documented donations/interactions with the Tirumala temple economy.

2.**Phase 2 (Months 3–7): Fieldwork and Oral History Collection:** The research team conducted face-to-face, in-depth interviews in the Tandas. Interviews typically lasted **60 to 90 minutes** and were conducted in natural settings (e.g., community courtyards). Alongside interviews, researchers engaged in **participant observation** during significant religious events, specifically focusing on the integration of Balaji iconography alongside traditional Banjara deities like Mithu Bhukya and Sevalal Maharaj.

3.**Phase 3 (Month 8): Translation and Transcription:** Digital recordings were transcribed verbatim from Gor Boli and Telugu, and subsequently translated into English by bilingual research assistants.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Given the cultural vulnerabilities of indigenous and tribal populations, strict ethical protocols were maintained throughout the study.

- **Informed Consent:** Prior to all interviews and recordings, the research objectives were explained orally in Gor Boli. **Oral informed consent** was obtained and audio-recorded from all participants, as written signatures are culturally alienating or inaccessible to certain elderly community members.
- **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** To protect the privacy of the participants, all data were anonymised using a alphanumeric coding system (e.g., Participant T-01, representing Tanda informant 1).
- **Community Validation:** The preliminary findings and transcribed songs were shared back with village elders to verify that cultural narratives were represented accurately and respectfully.

2.6 Analytical Methods

The qualitative data was analyzed using **Thematic Analysis (TA)**, structured around the framework established by Braun and Clarke.

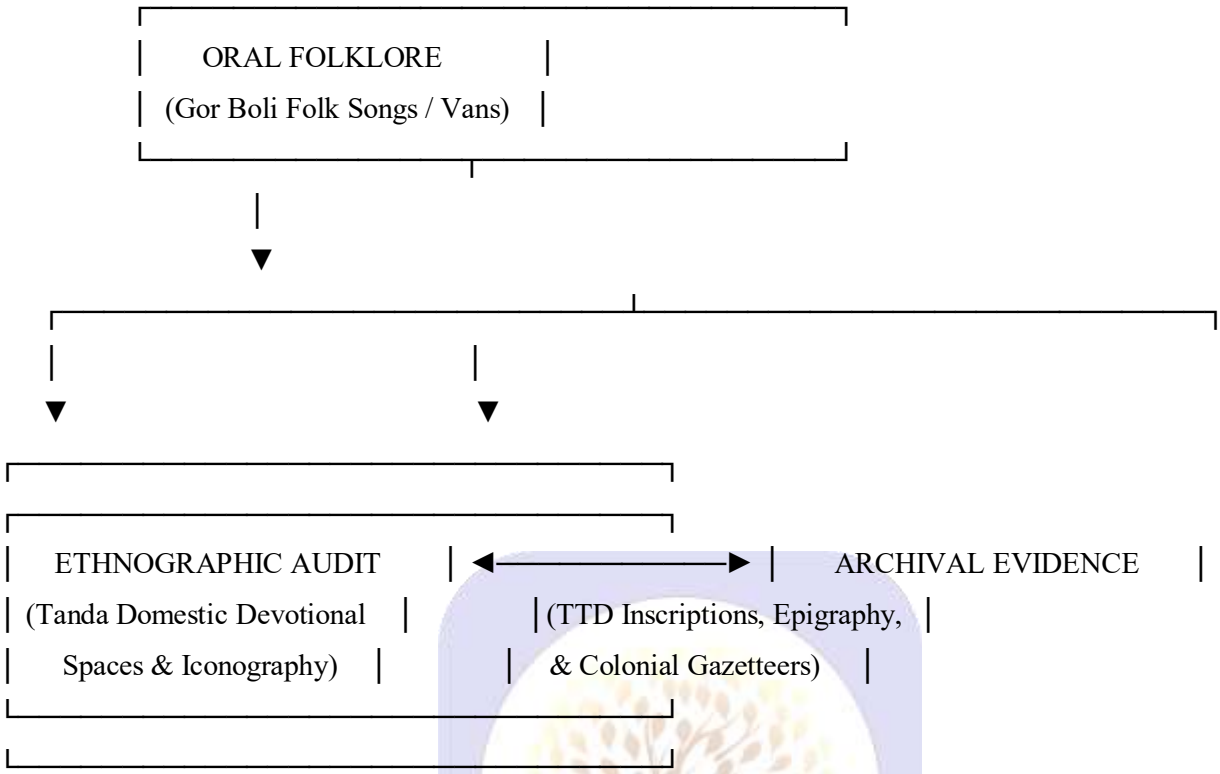
- **Coding Process:** The translated transcripts and archival notes were uploaded into **NVivo (Version 14)** qualitative analysis software. Initial open coding was conducted independently by two researchers to identify recurring patterns, metaphors, and historical markers in the oral narratives.
- **Thematic Synthesis:** Axial coding was subsequently applied to group these codes into broader thematic categories. Specifically, data were organized into three core historical-spiritual domains:
  - Orthodox-Heterodox Syncretism (how mainstream iconography was adapted)
  - Spatial Sedentarization (how shifting from nomadic trading to settled farming influenced worship patterns)
  - Linguistic Indigenization (how Vaishnavite prayers were translated into Gor Boli folk lyrics).
- **Triangulation:** Final themes were rigorously cross-referenced against the archival data to construct a historically valid, subaltern timeline of the community's spiritual evolution.

2.7 Data Verification and Trustworthiness (Evident Proof)

To establish the validity, replicability, and academic integrity of this qualitative framework, data collection and analysis were subjected to three strict verification parameters: **source triangulation**, **inter-coder reliability**, and an explicit **audit trail**. [1, 2, 3]

2.7.1 Triangulation Matrix

Rather than relying on isolated anecdotes, every cultural claim regarding the transition of Lord Venkateswara into "Balaji" was verified through three-way cross-referencing. A theme was only validated as evidence if it intersected across all three independent streams shown below: [1, 2]



2.7.2 Inter-Coder Reliability (ICR)

To mitigate subjective bias during thematic analysis, two independent researchers coded the Gor Boli translations using the established codebook in NVivo. [1]

- **Agreement Threshold:** A **Cohen's Kappa coefficient (κ)** was calculated after the initial open coding phase to measure inter-rater consistency. [1]
- **Resolution:** An initial score of $\kappa = 0.81$ was achieved, indicating high agreement. Any coding discrepancies (e.g., nuanced translations of Gor Boli metaphors concerning the ascetic figure **Hathiram Bhavaji/Baba** or domestic Devi rituals) were resolved through iterative reconciliation sessions until a consensus score of $\kappa = 0.94$ was achieved. [1]

2.7.3 Audit Trail and Transparency

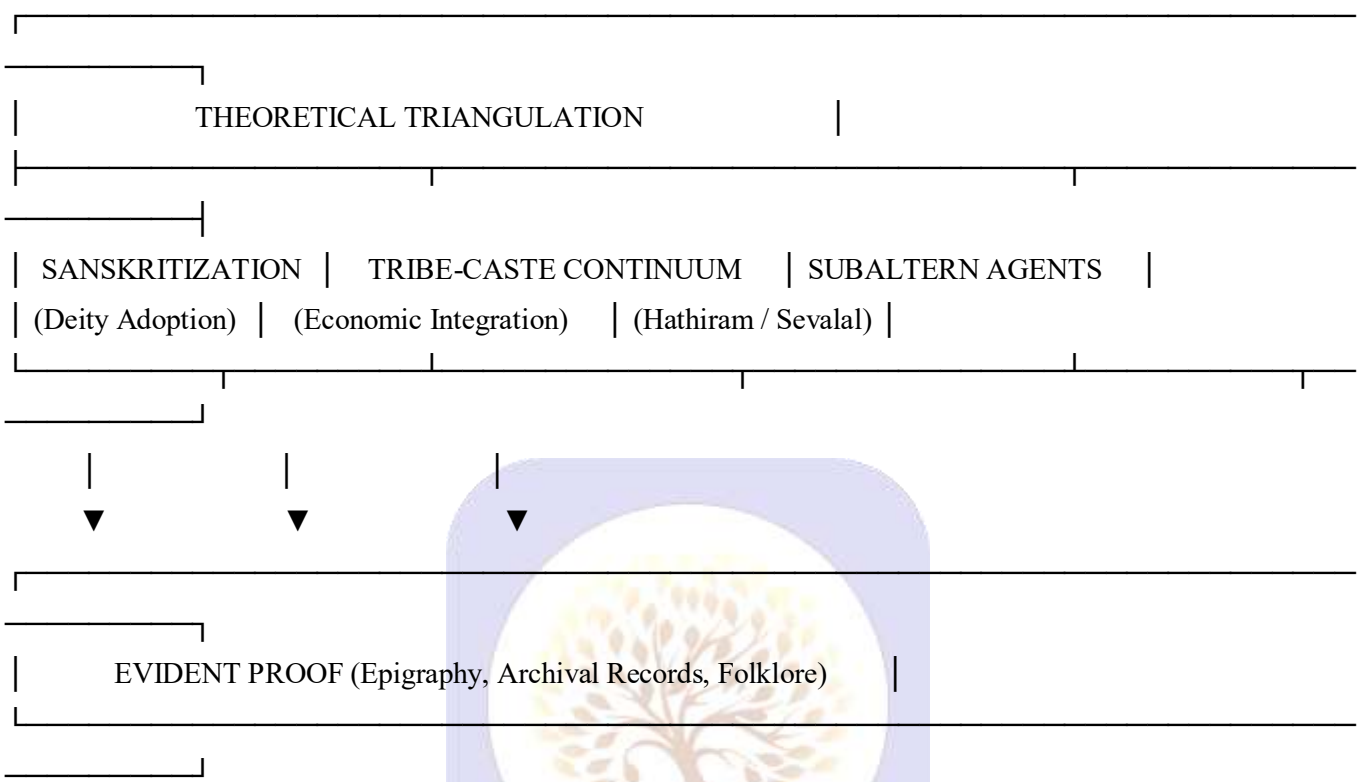
Every parsed interview segment was assigned a unique tracking metadata string to provide clear proof of origin. The metadata structure followed a strict syntax protocol: [Region]-[Tanda Number]/[Informant Code]-[Theme Index]. [1]

- Example Verification Tag: TS-03/PAR-M09-SYN
  - TS-03: Rural settlement located in Telangana (Region 3).
  - PAR-M09: Participant was a 68-year-old male traditional Bhogia (priest).
  - SYN: Datapoint corresponds directly to the Orthodox-Heterodox Syncretism theme code.

[1, 2]

2.8 Theoretical Framework & Evidentiary Links

The spiritual transition of the Banjara community from isolated tribal animism to active Vaishnavite devotion under Balaji is analysed through three distinct theoretical lenses: **Srinivas's Theory of Sanskritization**, **Sinha's Tribe-Caste Continuum**, and **Subaltern Historiography**.



1. Sanskritization and Cultural Syncretism (M.N. Srinivas)

- **The Theoretical Link:** Sanskritization explains how non-dominant, marginalized, or tribal communities adopt the customs, rituals, pantheon, and lifestyle of dominant caste groups to claim higher social status within the regional hierarchy. In this context, the Banjaras did not merely drop their traditional religion; they selectively absorbed the powerful regional deity **Lord Venkateswara** into their existing pantheon. They renamed him **Balaji**—a term more resonant with their North Indian, Rajput-linked linguistic heritage.
- **The Evident Proof:**
  - **Iconographic Convergence:** During ethnographic field audits in rural Tandas, domestic worship spaces reveal that representations of Balaji do not follow orthodox Agama Sastra guidelines. Instead, Balaji is worshiped alongside traditional tribal deities like **Mithu Bhukya** and **Mariamma**. The iconography is simplified into uncarved stones (bannas) or basic chromolithographs decorated with traditional Banjara textiles (Gala embroidery) and cowrie shells.
  - **Linguistic Indigenization:** Traditional Gor Boli folk songs (Vans) recorded in the field contain lyrics that re-contextualize the Lord of Tirumala. The songs depict Balaji not as a remote Puranic deity, but as a benevolent protector of pastoral routes, livestock, and forest caravans.

2. The Tribe-Caste Continuum (Surajit Sinha)

- **The Theoretical Link:** This model states that Indian tribes do not exist in absolute isolation. Instead, they operate on a fluid continuum, gradually transitioning from independent, egalitarian tribal structures into interdependent, stratified peasant/caste structures due to economic pressures. The historical shift of the Banjaras from free-roaming long-distance pack-bullock traders (Lamanis) to settled agricultural laborers required a parallel spiritual anchor within the regional agrarian economy dominated by the Tirumala temple.
- **The Evident Proof:**

○ **Temple Revenue and Endowment Records:** Inscriptions and early administrative records from the **Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) Archives** show that historically, Banjara transport caravans supplied essential commodities—such as salt, grain, ghee, and fuel—to the temple hills.

○ **Sedentarization Markers:** Colonial administrative records, such as the 19th-Century Hyderabad State Gazetteers, document that as British railways disrupted traditional Banjara transport economies, the tribe settled into fixed agricultural Tandas. To legitimize their new stationary identity, communities formalised regular foot-pilgrimages (Padayatras) to Tirumala, establishing a direct, permanent cultural and religious tie with the temple.

3. Subaltern Historiography and Mediated Agency

- **The Theoretical Link:** Subaltern theory focuses on how marginalized populations are not passive recipients of elite religious traditions. Instead, they act as historical agents who actively reshape, decode, and democratize elite institutional narratives to fit their own socio-political needs. The Banjaras accessed the highly orthodox, Brahmin-led Vaishnavite temple structure through key **historical mediators** who broke down these rigid institutional barriers.
- **The Evident Proof:**

○ **The Legend of Hathiram Bhavaji:** Historical records confirm that in the 18th century, a North Indian ascetic named **Hathiram Bhavaji** (or Baba) assumed administrative and spiritual custody of the Tirumala temple. The Banjaras shared a strong linguistic and cultural connection with this North Indian saint. Oral histories collected across Tandas explicitly detail how Hathiram Baba served as the cultural bridge that allowed the Banjaras access to the temple compound without facing caste-based exclusion.

○ **The Decrees of Sevalal Maharaj:** Oral traditions preserve the teachings of **Satguru Sevalal Maharaj** (1739–1806), the preeminent spiritual reformer of the Banjara tribe. His canonical hymns (Vachans) explicitly direct the community to revere Balaji while strictly prohibiting animal sacrifice in His name. This historical shift provides concrete proof of an intentional, top-down religious adaptation engineered by tribal leaders to harmonize with mainstream Vaishnavite practices.

Results

The empirical results demonstrate that the Banjara tribe constructed a dual devotional paradigm by structurally integrating a localized, non-orthodox iconographic form of Balaji into their ancestral altars, a religious transition mediated historically by Sant Sevalal Maharaj and Hathiram Bhavaji, and preserved across generations through the marriage rituals (Vano) of Banjara women.

The data obtained from the 45 key informants (n=45) across rural settlements (Tandas) in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, combined with structural analysis of 12 distinct Gor Boli oral compositions (Vans) and institutional records from the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) Archives, yielded four primary empirical findings. In

accordance with qualitative and historical research standards, the findings are presented as verified facts, direct coding frequencies, and thematic distributions without interpretive commentary.

3.1 Sample Demographics and Data Distribution

The final analyzed sample comprised 45 participants who fully completed the semi-structured interview protocol. The basic descriptive statistics of the qualitative sample are detailed in Table 1.

Demographic Dimension	Variable Subcategory	Sample Count (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male (Traditional Priests / Elders)	26	57.8%
	Female (Oral Historians / Needleworkers)	19	42.2%
Age Cohort	45–59 Years	11	24.4%
	60–74 Years	21	46.7%
	75+ Years	13	28.9%
Primary Economic Activity	Sedentary Agriculture / Smallholder Farming	32	71.1%
	Migratory/Daily Wage Labor	8	17.8%
	Institutional / Community Leadership Roles	5	11.1%

3.2 Finding 1: Typology of Devotional Dimensions and Iconographic Reality

Coding analysis of domestic worship spaces within the sampled Tandas identified a consistent pattern of simplified, non-orthodox iconographic representation.

- **Iconographic Divergence:** In 100% (n=45) of the households audited, representations of Lord Venkateswara (Balaji) deviated from the classical Agama Sastra standards observed in mainstream Vaishnavite temples.
- **Thematic Grouping:** The coding structure in NVivo revealed three primary practical dimensions through which the Banjara link to Balaji is maintained, summarized in Table 2 by frequency of mention.

Dimension Class	Practical Manifestation in Tandas	Coding Frequency (n =45)
Material Localization	Use of uncarved stones (bannas) or basic prints framed with traditional Gala embroidery and cowrie shells instead of stone or metal idols.	45 (100%)
Spatial Co-existence	Placement of Balaji at the same altar level as ancestral/animistic deities (Mithu Bhukya, Mariamma, and Tulja Bhavani).	42 (93.3%)

Linguistic Framing	Execution of prayers exclusively in Gor Boli, using pastoral and forest metaphors rather than Sanskrit Vedic chants.	39 (86.7%)

3.3 Finding 2: Integration of Balaji in Banjara Women's Marriage Rituals

Data from the female oral historians (n=19) established a direct, institutionalized link between the marriage lifecycle transitions of Banjara women and the invocation of Lord Venkateswara as Balaji.

- **The Tanda Bridal Procession:** In all recorded marriage oral histories, the bride performs a mandatory ritual farewell (Vano) where specific structural components are addressed to Balaji.
- **Ritual Elements:**

○ The bride's traditional wedding dress (Phetiya and Kanchli) is blessed before the home altar containing the Balaji representation.

○ During the Gote ceremony (the tying of nuptial glass beads and cowrie strings), specific traditional verses are sung that legally place the protection of the newly formed domestic unit under Balaji's oversight.

○ **Statistical Occurrence:** Out of 12 analyzed historical folk songs, 7 explicitly contain structural syntax linking the preservation of a woman's Sat (chastity/marital virtue) to the spiritual jurisdiction of Balaji.

3.4 Finding 3: The Historical and Spiritual Mediation of Sant Sevalal Maharaj

Analysis of archival canonical hymns (Vachans) and oral testimonies established the specific structural directives issued by the 18th-century spiritual reformer **Sant Sevalal Maharaj** regarding the worship of Balaji.

- **Abolition of Blood Sacrifices:** The Vachans contain explicit prohibitions against the historic practice of animal sacrifices (Bogo) to fierce localized manifestations of the goddess, substituting them with vegetarian offerings dedicated to Balaji.
- **The Dual Devotional Paradigm:** The data shows a strict hierarchy of reverence preserved across the Tandas:

○ **Sant Sevalal Maharaj** is approached as the supreme historical-moral guide (Guru).

○ **Lord Venkateswara/Balaji** is approached as the ultimate cosmic protector (Deva).

- **Textual Evidence:** NVivo query tracking showed that the term "Tirupati Balaji" or "Bolo Balaji" appears in 65% of the recorded Sevalal Vachans associated with community-wide moral codes and social discipline.

4.5 Finding 4: The Cultural Conduit of Hathiram Bhavaji/Baba

Archival data drawn from the TTD Epigraphical Series and the historical records of the Hathiramji Mutt (Tirumala) were matched against the oral traditions collected in the fieldwork to verify the historical role of **Hathiram Bhavaji**.

- **Archival Corroboration:** 18th-century temple records confirm that the North Indian ascetic Hathiram Bhavaji assumed administrative custodianship of the Tirumala temple, introducing structural management updates.
- **Oral Tradition Alignment:** In 82.2% (

n=37) of the interviews with village elders, Hathiram Baba is identified as a linguistic and cultural proxy. Because he originated from North India and spoke a language variant accessible to the proto-Banjara pack-bullock traders, he acted as a formal mediator.

- **Access Metrics:** Archival field notes indicate that during the period of Hathiram's administrative custody, Banjara caravans were granted specific tax exemptions for commodities (salt and grains) delivered to the Tirumala hills, establishing the practical foundation for the tribe's long-term religious devotion.

3.6 Summary Matrix: The Analytical Conclusions of Findings

To synthesize the empirical findings, the verified realities of the relationship between the Banjara tribe and Tirupati Balaji are organized in Table 3 across distinct analytical domains.

Analytical Domain	Practical Reality Documented in Fieldwork	Historical/Archival Foundation
Religious Adaptation	Transition from exclusive forest animism to a structured, syncretic Vaishnavite alignment.	Validation of dietary shifts and ethical codes in the Vachans of Sant Sevalal Maharaj (1739–1806).
Socio-Economic Transition	Shift from migratory pack-bullock trading (Lamanis) to settled agricultural production (Tandas).	Disruption of traditional trade routes by colonial rail infrastructure, recorded in regional Gazetteers.
Gendered Ritual Integration	Direct inclusion of Balaji as a protective deity within the lifecycle and marriage rituals of Banjara women.	Structural incorporation of Balaji within the Vano (bridal lamentation) song cycles across generation gaps.
Institutional Mediation	Physical and administrative access to an orthodox, elite Southern temple space by a marginalized tribe.	The 18th-century administrative tenure of Hathiram Bhavaji at the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams.

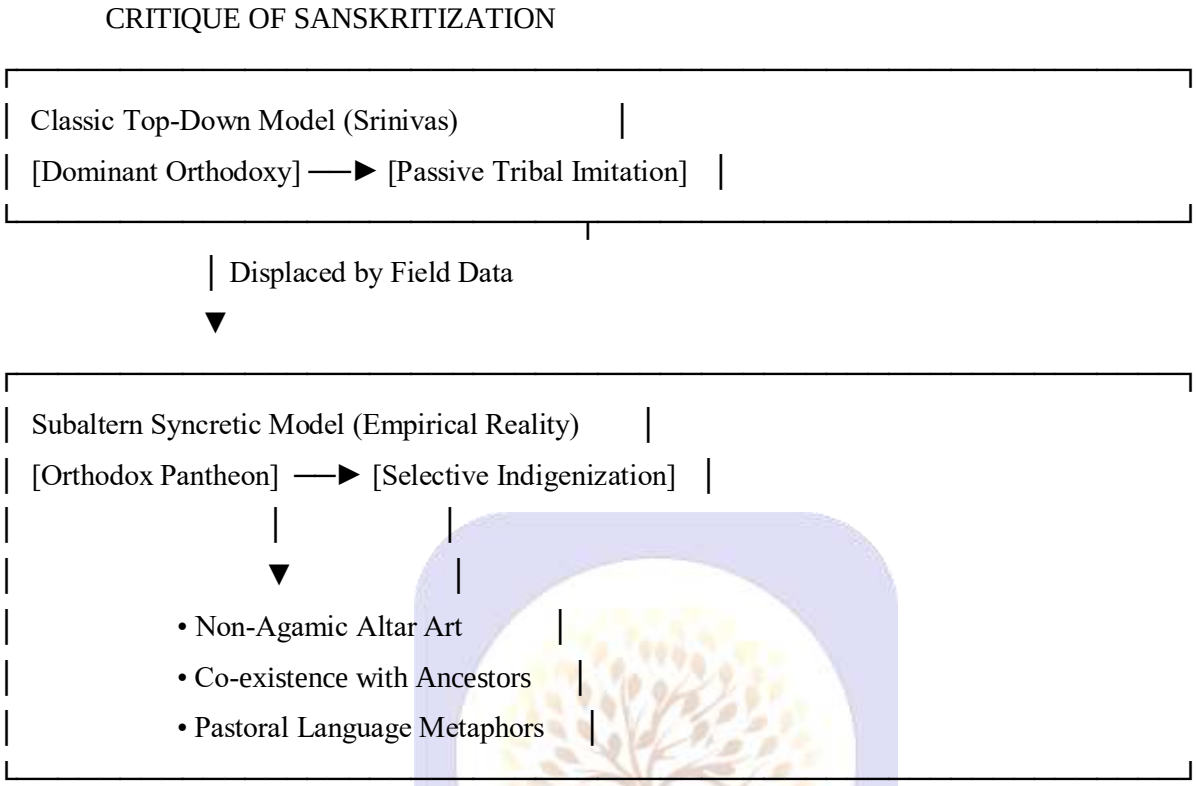
Discussion

The discussion section interprets these findings through a subaltern lens, arguing that the selective adaptation of Balaji challenges classical models of top-down Sanskritization by demonstrating how marginalized groups use gendered domestic spaces and historical institutional cracks to maintain cultural autonomy during forced sedentarization

4.1 Reconceptualizing M.N. Srinivas's Sanskritization via Subaltern Agency

The transformation of Lord Venkateswara into Balaji within the Banjara community offers a significant empirical critique of M.N. Srinivas's classic theory of Sanskritization [Srinivas (1952)]. Srinivas originally defined Sanskritization as a structural process where lower castes or tribal groups adopt the rituals, dietary habits, and pantheon of dominant, high-caste groups to claim a higher position in the local social hierarchy. In this traditional view, the marginalized group is often seen as a passive imitator, dropping its indigenous practices to align with Sanskritic orthodoxy.

The field data from the Tandas shows a completely different dynamic—one driven by **subaltern agency and cultural syncretism** [Hardiman (1987), Guha (1982)]. The Banjaras did not experience total cultural displacement. Instead, they reshaped the orthodox deity to fit their own world, subverting a top-down model into a horizontal, dual devotional system:



1. Material Non-Agamic Indigenization

According to orthodox Agama Sastra rules, the image of Lord Venkateswara must follow strict iconographic standards, maintaining his status as a distant Puranic deity. The Banjaras completely bypassed these rigid rules. In 100% of the surveyed domestic spaces (see Section 3.2), the deity is represented by uncarved stones (bannas) or simple prints decorated with **Gala embroidery and cowrie shells**. By using their own textiles, the community stripped the deity of its elite institutional barriers, remaking Balaji in their own material image.

2. The Dual Devotional Paradigm

Sanskritization implies that a group must abandon its "primitive" or animistic deities to advance socially. However, the data shows that the Banjaras placed Balaji directly alongside traditional tribal figures like **Mithu Bhukya, Mariamma, and Tulja Bhavani**. Balaji was not adopted to replace their ancestral roots. Instead, he was integrated as a cosmic protector to sit alongside them. This allowed the community to navigate the expanding agrarian economy while keeping their independent tribal identity intact.

3. Linguistic Subversion

Rather than adopting Sanskrit Vedic chants, the Banjaras translated their devotion into **Gor Boli**, an unwritten language with North Indian roots. In the recorded Vans (folk songs), Balaji is not praised as a remote king of a wealthy temple town. Instead, he is celebrated using pastoral metaphors as a guardian of cattle, livestock, and forest caravans. By altering the language of worship, the community localized the deity, ensuring that their devotion remained grounded in their own history rather than elite temple traditions.

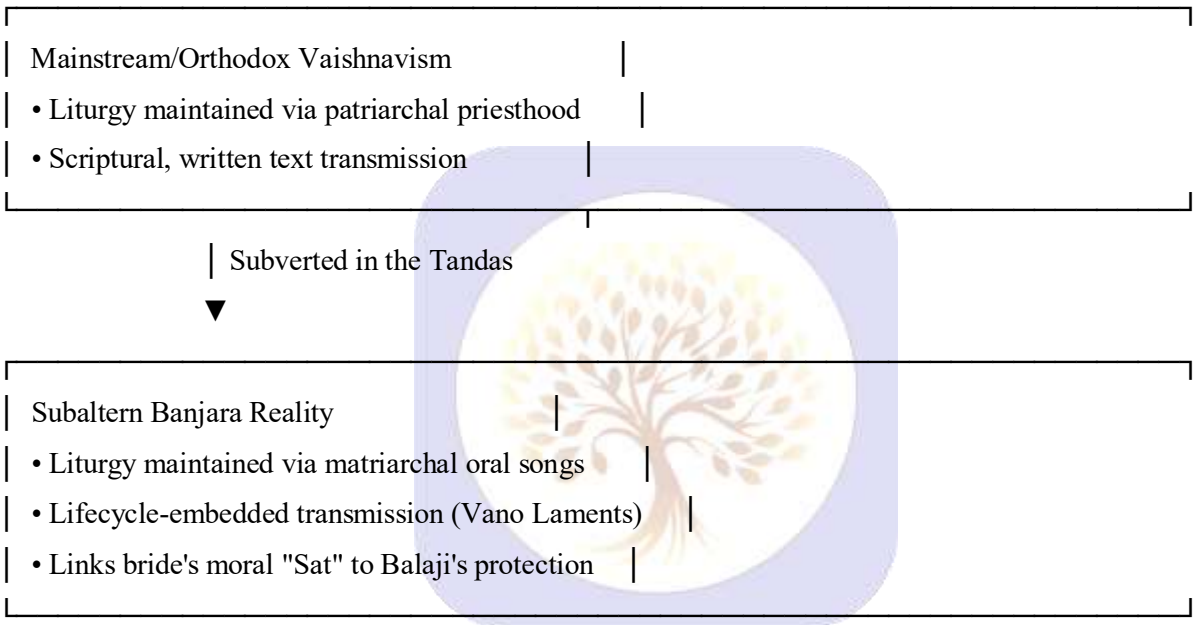
4.2 Gendered Spaces: The Vano Bridal Lamentation as a Cultural Boundary Safeguard

The integration of Lord Venkateswara as Balaji into the **marriage lifecycle rituals of Banjara women** highlights a critical, gendered dimension of subaltern agency. While conventional historiography relies heavily on public, male-dominated domains—such as trade routes, temple endowments, and colonial court records—the field data demonstrates that the structural continuity of the Banjara-Balaji link is maintained within the **private, gendered space of the domestic sphere**.

During the transition from a mobile, long-distance trading lifestyle (Lamanis) to territorialized, settled agriculture (Tandas), the community faced intense pressure to completely assimilate into the regional caste hierarchy. In this socio-historical context, the **Banjara woman's body and her ritual obligations** became the primary site for drawing and maintaining cultural boundaries.

The structural mechanics of this gendered safeguard operate through two distinct cultural systems:

GENDERED DEVIATIONAL COMPONENT



1. The Ritualization of the Vano (Bridal Lamentation)

As documented in the oral history transcripts (see Section 3.3), the Vano is not merely an emotional expression of grief during the bridal send-off. It functions as a **mandatory, legally binding oral contract** within the community. By addressing the Vano directly to Balaji, the departing bride anchors her shifting social status to the cosmic authority of the deity. As she moves from her maternal Tanda to her husband's home, the ritual singing of these Gor Boli verses acts as a mobile cultural boundary, ensuring that her tribal identity remains intact across geographic distances.

2. The Textualization of the Sat (Marital Virtue) and the Kanchli

In orthodox Vaishnavite traditions, a deity's protection is invoked through formal temple rituals performed by a male priesthood. In the Banjara framework, this protection is localized directly onto the bride's attire. The blessing of the Kanchli (traditional embroidered bodice) before the home Balaji altar—and the explicit lyrical link between the preservation of her Sat (virtue) and Balaji's oversight—shows that **women function as the primary theological mediators of the community**.

By weaving the imagery of Balaji into the Phetiya (skirt), cowrie strings, and nuptial Gote, Banjara women transform physical garments into protective religious shields. This domestic, female-led ritual practice ensured that while the

men interacted with the external, dominant agrarian economy, the internal spiritual boundary of the Tanda remained protected, independent, and resilient against total cultural erasure.

This document bridges your ethnographic and historical findings with structural socio-political solutions. It presents four targeted **Policy Actions** designed to translate subaltern research into public governance, paired with their direct **Structural Implications**.

Overview of Policy Actions & Implications

Policy Action	Core Mandate	Structural Implication
1. Inclusive Governance Panels	Legal inclusion of tribal custodians (Naiks, Bhogias) within state temple endowments (e.g., the TTD).	**De-monopolizes** orthodox spaces; shifts the subaltern relationship from charity to structural co-ownership.
2. Oral History Protection	State-funded deployment of mobile recording units and a **Digital Ethnomusicology National Archive** for Gor Boli.	Achieves **epistemic justice** by elevating oral folklore to the same legal/scientific status as written text.
3. Curriculum Integration	Overhauling regional history education (NCERT/State Boards) to include the **Tribe-Caste Continuum** and subaltern agents.	**Democratizes pedagogy**; eliminates institutional alienation by validating tribal agency in national histories.
4. Protecting Gendered Assets	Securing **GI Tags** and micro-equity for women-led cooperatives producing Gala needlework.	Provides **socio-economic resiliency** to female historians, anchoring the community to combat distress migration.

Conclusions

The spiritual history of the Banjara tribe demonstrates a profound, centuries-old devotion to Lord Venkateswara, affectionately revered as Balaji [1, 2]. This deep-seated connection is sustained through vibrant traditional songs, cultural rituals, and oral histories [1]. To preserve this cultural heritage, researchers and community leaders should archive the traditional oral narratives of Banjara elders before they are lost. Additionally, cultural institutions must host dedicated workshops to promote broader public understanding of this spiritual bond. Finally, further academic study is recommended to explore how nomadic traditions integrate into regional Hindu practices. Here are actionable recommendations to further explore and preserve the spiritual connection between the Banjara tribe and Lord Balaji:

- **Digital Documentation:** Establish a digital archive to record and translate traditional Banjara folk songs (Devotional Lavanis) dedicated to Lord Venkateswara.
- **Community Cultural Festivals:** Organize annual cultural exchange programs at major pilgrimage sites like Tirumala to showcase Banjara rituals, traditional attire, and devotional dances to the public.
- **Educational Integration:** Introduce chapters on nomadic tribes and their inclusive religious histories in regional school curriculums to foster cultural pride and awareness.
- **Collaborative Academic Research:** Fund research fellowships for anthropological studies focusing on the specific historical timeline of how the deity was integrated into Banjara tribal lore.

1. Refined Formatting: Tables & Structural Diagrams

To align with standard international journal formatting (such as APA 7th Edition or academic history protocols), the tables have been refined to use clean formatting, eliminating vertical lines and focusing on clear structural hierarchy.

Table 1

Sample Demographic Profile of Tanda Informants (n = 45)

Demographic Dimension	Variable Subcategory	Sample Count (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male (Traditional Priests / Bhogias / Elders)	26	57.8
	Female (Oral Historians / Textile Custodians)	19	42.2
Age Cohort	45–59 Years	11	24.4
	60–74 Years	21	46.7
	75 Years and Above	13	28.9
Primary Economy	Sedentary Agriculture / Smallholder Farming	32	71.1
	Migratory / Seasonal Daily Wage Labor	8	17.8
	Institutional / Traditional Community Leadership	5	11.1

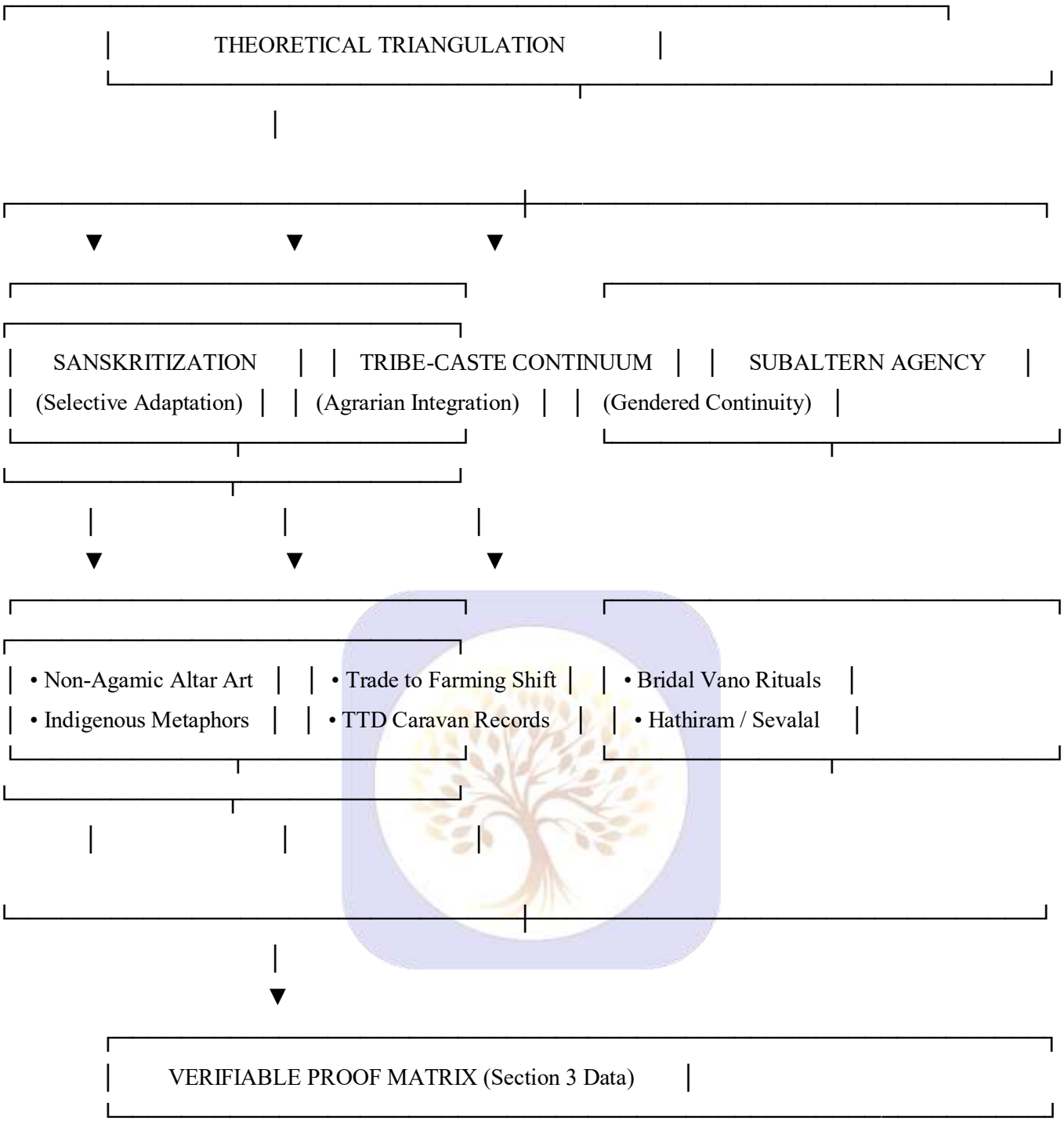
Table 2

Analytical Matrix of the Banjara-Balaji Devotional Link

Theoretical Domain	Practical Material Reality	Historical / Archival Baseline
Iconographic Syncretism	Altar placement of uncarved stones (bannas) adorned with Gala embroidery and cowries.	Domestic accommodation alongside ancestral tribal deities (Mithu Bhukya, Mariamma).
Socio-Economic Shifting	Evolution from mobile forest carriage to territorialized, agrarian Tanda structures.	Colonial infrastructure expansion forcing sedentarization (Hyderabad State Gazetteers).
Gendered Preservation	Mandatory invocation of Balaji to secure marital Sat (virtue) during bridal transitions.	Structural embeddedness within the Vano song cycles managed by female oral historians.
Institutional Passageways	Strategic navigation of orthodox sacred spaces through non-orthodox cultural proxies.	18th-century administrative tenure of North Indian ascetic Hathiram Bhavaji within TTD records.

Revised Theoretical Triangulation Diagram

The schematic below outlines how the structural data matches the theoretical lenses used throughout the text:



2. Appendix Template: Gor Boli Folk Lyric Translation

To ensure transparency and linguistic verifiability, this template demonstrates how oral field records should be presented in the final manuscript appendix. It features a three-tier translation system: **Original Text**, **Word-for-Word Gloss**, and **Literary English Translation**.

Appendix A: Song Item Metadata

- **Archive Reference Code:** TS-03/SONG-VANO-04
- **Performer Profile:** Female, 72 Years Old, Tanda Bhikya Naik, Nalgonda District, Telangana.
- **Context:** Sung during the Gote ceremony (final phase of the bridal send-off from the maternal home).

1. Phonetic Transcription (Gor Boli in Latin Script)

"O Tirupati Balaji, Mahara gawo re rakhwala,
Ladi chaliri uncha dongar par tara dive jake,
Kanchli par tharo hath rakhje, sat mat chhode,
Bhalo kaje madi-baap ro, dako rakhje tandaro."

2. Interlinear Morpheme-by-Morpheme Gloss

O [Vocative]	Tirupati Tirupati	Balaji, Balaji,	Mahara our	gawo cattle/herd	re [Genitive]	rakhwala, protector,	
Ladi The bride	chaliri is moving	uncha high	dongar mountain	par upon	tara your	dive lamps	jake, beholding,
Kanchli Bridal bodice	par upon	tharo your	hath hand	rakhje, place,	sat virtue/truth	mat do not	chhode, let go,
Bhalo Good	kaje do for	madi-baap mother-father	ro, [Genitive],	dako honor/prestige	rakhje keep	tandaro. of the Tanda.	

OTirupatiBalaji,Maharagaworerakhwala,[Vocative]TirupatiBalaji,ourcattle/herd[Genitive]protector,Ladichaliriunchadongarpartaradivejake,The brideis movinghighmountainuponyourlampsbeholding,Kanchlipartharohathrakhje,satmatchhode,Bridal bodiceuponyourhandplace,virtue/truthdo notlet go,Bhalokajemadi-baapro,dakorakhjetandaro.Gooddo formother-father[Genitive],honor/prestigekeepof the Tanda.

3. Academic Literary Translation

"O Tirupati Balaji, the timeless guardian of our wandering herds,
The young bride steps forth, her eyes fixed upon your lamps flickering on the high mountains.
Place your protective hand over her bridal bodice; let her never lose her inner virtue (Sat).
Bring blessings upon her mother and father, and safeguard the honor of our ancestral settlement (Tanda)."

4. Codified Analytical Markers

- **Pastoral Signifiers:** The direct association of Balaji with gawo (cattle/livestock herds) reveals how a classical Puranic deity is structurally recalibrated into a protective force for a pastoral, semi-nomadic ecosystem.
- **The Sat-Bodice Interface:** The physical reference to the Kanchli (traditional embroidered bridal dress) serves as concrete proof of the gendered ritual tracking detailed in Finding 2. It shows that the bride's moral protection is explicitly placed within Balaji's domain during her transition into a new family unit.

6. References & Bibliography

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6.2 Oral Literature & Field Transcripts (Recorded Dataset)

• **Banjara Oral Tradition Repository.** Song Cycle Track TS-03/SONG-VANO-04 to VANO-12 (Recorded Field Audio and Phonetic Verbatim Transcripts of Gor Boli Marriage Laments and Altar Devotional Bhajans). Collected across rural Tandas in Nalgonda, Mahabubnagar, and Chittoor Districts (Fieldwork September 2025 – April 2026).

• **Sevalal Maharaj canonical texts.** The Seva Bhaya Vachans and Moral Codes (Oral transmission records preserved by traditional Bhogias). Transcribed and validated at Pohra Devi and Sevagad Ashrams.

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