



## ORGANIZATIONS AND STRUGGLES OF KUNABI COMMUNITY

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**ABSTRACT** The authors have primarily selected Uttara Kannada District Kunabi Association, situated at a distance of 106 kms from the Dharwad. This village is famous as a heritage of rich Kunabi culture. To capture the nuances of their rural life, the authors make a double journey as if, travels into the village from Dharwad to conduct the field work for collection of materials through photography and interview, followed by a journey through time to capture the dialectics of Kunabi life.

**KEYWORDS :** Uttara Kannada, Dharwad, Kunabi

**INTRODUCTION**

Kunabi community is a unique one. They live here and there in the middle of forest and gather together during festivals, fairs and wedding ceremonies only. For all these reasons they were not organized. But in recent years, due to availability of transport facilities, influence of voluntary organizations and little literacy has awakened them. 'Green India' a voluntary organization, through its reflective programmes has filled the spirit of organization among community people. Besides this, their life is becoming weak day by day, neglected by the government without proper implementation of development programmes and bad political atmosphere. All these created inevitable situation for the communities to organize themselves. As a result of this, "Uttara Kannada District Kunabi Association" has come into existence. "The Uttara Kannada District Tribes Expression Forum" which is a complimentary to Kunabi association gives its support and cooperation to Kunabis protests.

When any society faces insecurity or constant fears, inevitably turns towards protests. It is not so easy to organize Kunabi community who live in dense forests in scattered conditions. But it was inevitable for the survival of their existence. Mild struggles began in the community as a result of support of some progressive organizations and small demands of social thinkers. Silver rays of awakening have begun in innocent Kunabis, who believed that their 'right' was a gift given by others. The article published in Vijaya Karnataka, daily newspaper on 21-02-2002 was a proof for such struggles.

**Struggles for Kumri Farming**

"Natural and unique cultivation in the slope areas of mountains without ploughing the field and without using any agricultural tools, growing crops like ragi, navane, maize, etc. through sprinkling the seeds on the ground is known as Kumri Farming".

Kunabis of Uttara Kannada district practiced this type of farming. This type of farming is mostly inhabited by the Kunabis of Joida taluk. Approximately about 8000 acres of land was cultivated through Kumri type of farming. Since 1987, farmers of Joida taluk and some political leaders have been protesting for the rights of Kumri.

When Kunabis were disappointed as their struggles resulted in failure, former Industrial Minister R.V. Deshpande gave statement on 25-01-2001 in Anumod that "I have discussed about Kumri issue with the forest department, Kumri area belongs to us only, those farmers deprived of this land can apply to local forest officer's office along with their documents from tomorrow itself". But still this issue is pending.

On 24<sup>th</sup> December 2001, the former Member of Parliament and National B.J.P. Youth Front President held another struggle in Anasi for the sake of Kumri rights. Since 1986 forest department has snatched the traditional Kumri land, their food and their culture. Kumri rights were legally recognized by the British Government in 1889. According to the Forest Department Act, by 1978 the captured Kumri land should be handed over to farmers, but still today these lands are not given to farmers. Discussions have been done regarding this issue by 'Kumri Hakkala Horata Samiti', 'Green Indian Organization' and 'Social Representatives Committee', but the issue still remains. Kunabis desires of getting land have failed and the dream of Choma to Kumri land is still a dream.

**Struggles for Forest Rights**

Traditionally, Kunabis are the residents of forests, for many decades they were depended on these forests for their livelihood. They were collecting small forest products like fruits, vegetables, potatoes, herbal plants, honey, along with these firewood, bamboo, palm, hem, fibers, flowers, variety of plants from forests. All these forest products helped them a lot to lead their lives. While they were living in forests, they obtained their essential ingredients of life from agriculture, farming and collection of food products. They obtained agricultural tools, housing materials, firewood, musical instruments, etc. from forest. They hunted animals in the forests to obtain meat.

When colonial administration came to India, they considered forests as government properties. At this stage, the tribes in the forest rebelled against the policies of colonial administration. Global corporations such as World Bank took over the responsibility of main forests of India. In addition, forest laws were also tightened.

The situation has continued to be stagnant upto 2011, when field work of this research study was going on. Not a slight hopeful growth has happened. Dream of Kunabis to own their land and their dream of wandering freely in forests have remained stagnant. This situation may get out of control at any time. In this connection, the government has to create a high level committee consisting of local people and solve the problems of Kunabis impartially.

**Movements regarding Reservations**

Kunabi community is having characteristics of tribes. Kunabi community is socially, economically, politically and educationally very backward. Traditions, language, actions, folk, along with all other Kunabi cultures have 100 percent resemblance with tribal cultures and characteristics. For this reason, neighbor state Goa has considered Kunabis as scheduled tribes according to 2003 Gazetteer, 13-14-90 S.W.D. (Volume 3), 190.

'The Uttara Kannada District Kunabi Sangh' and 'Uttara Kannada Zilla Budakattu Abhivyakti Vedike' has been fighting with the government for the last 15 years for the overall development of Kunabi communities and to add these communities to scheduled tribe.

Kunabi community socially and culturally represents the ancient tribal culture. Kunabis are demanding to recognize them as scheduled tribes. Kunabi community is having hope that one day the government will consider them as scheduled tribe. For this reason they are putting pressure on government by doing Satyagrahas, Strikes, Debates, etc. On the whole these communities have not yet got any facilities which are allotted to Category-I. The bureaucrats and politicians are equally responsible for this.

It is a tragedy, that the people's representatives have negligent concerns towards Kunabis and have not taken it seriously. This is the destiny of the minority community in today's democratic voting system. In this background, it is the duty of the government to provide constitutional eligible requirements to these communities. These communities are having all the eligibilities of scheduled tribe category. Central Government has to add this community to scheduled tribe category and to provide them with abundant special facilities.

**Struggles and Protests of Kunabis**

'Tilori Kunabi Unnata Sangha' was established in Mumbai on 1<sup>st</sup>

October 1920 to organize Kunabis and to improve their economic conditions. In 1935 a monthly magazine by name 'Kunabi Udaya' was started by late Gunajimali and friends, to create awareness among Mumbai and Konkani Kunabis.

Late Annasahed alias Sham Roa Peje were well-known and prominent leaders of Kunabi society. They lead Kunabi society for a long period of 40 years in political and social fields. They were elected as MLA for 4 times and once as MP from Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra state. Annasahed along with his friends established 'Sham Rao Peje Memorial Trust' in 1993 for the upliftment of Kunabi society.

At present, in the modern Kunabi community some educated enthusiastic youths have built new volunteer associations and implemented new development plans with regional and religious coverage in different names. The details of this new group of associations are as follows.

**Table-1 New Organizations of Kunabi Communities**

Sl. No.	Name of the Organization	Village	Taluk	District
1	Samagra Kunabi Samudaya Abhivruddhi Sangha (R)	Kattege	Yallapur	Karwar
2	Uttara Kannada Zilla Kunabi Samaja Seva Sangh (R), Kunabi Bhavan, Joida	Joida	Joida	Karwar
3	Joida Taluk Kunabi Samaja Abhivruddhi Sangha	Joida	Joida	Karwar
4	Green India	Dandeli	Haliyal	Karwar
5	Karwar Taluk Kunabi Samaj Abhivruddhi Sangha	Hatre-Bhaire	Karwar	Karwar
6	Ankola Taluk Kunabi Samaj Abhivruddhi Sangha	Kaigadi	Ankola	Karwar
7	Karnataka Rajya Kunabi Samaja Abhivruddhi Maha Mandala, Kunabi Bhavan	Joida	Joida	Karwar

Now, new organizations have come into existence. For example: Uttara Kannada District Kunabi Sangha has become an important Kunabi organization and has covered the whole Uttara Kannada district under its service range. Head office of this organization is in Joida.

These new organizations are different from traditional 'Odo' units whose nature, aims, objectives and working styles are different. Officials of these organizations are elected through direct electoral system and have removed the old tradition of electing through preceding genealogy.

In recent years, many new volunteer organizations have emerged in the infatuation of foreign currency. But, 'Green India' volunteer organization of Dandeli is working for the welfare of Kunabis on ideological grounds. Keeping in view 'forest and land culture' as aim, this organization is working for the cooperation and organization spirits. Uttara Kannada district Tribal Expression Forum is working to cooperate Kunabi, Gawali, Siddi and Halakki community people of Uttara Kannada district. Green India's concerns towards saving the cultural identity can be seen here.

#### List of Adivasis who does not belong to Kunabi Adivasis

Previously Kunbis migrated as helpers to Shivaji's army to search ways in dense forests, to collect food materials and forest products of economic importance. These people basically spoke Marathi and gradually migrated to forests. During the administrative time of 'Channabhairadevi' of Gerusoppa was famous for her name 'Sambaru Rani'. The tribal people who were illiterates assisted Queen Channabhairadevi to export spices like Pepper, Cinnamon, Cardamom, etc. along with other Sambar spices through Goa.

Today, the government of Karnataka is considering 50 communities as Kunabi Adivasi Communities by providing them all the government facilities. But in Karnataka, for centuries many communities have remained by safeguarding their appearance, clan profession, rituals, language, tradition and their speciality, which had all the characteristics of adivasis. Till today the government has not added these communities to Scheduled Tribe and has kept them in Class-I group. But all the adivasis are living in forests separately away from

civil society without getting any facilities from government. Kunabi community is also one among such adivasi community. Here efforts are made to explain some aspects to introduce the origin and profession of Kunabis. These people have migrated from other states and have been living in forests for many years. Their population has also increased. So, Kunabis should be added to the list of tribal adivasi community by giving them appropriate importance.

Even still today Kunabi families are living in the forest areas of Western Ghats region. Some people of this group have slowly come into contact with people living near cities and thereby have started living in the villages surrounding the cities. But those who lived in forests have settled there even till today.

Kunabi people can be found in Uttara Kannada, Shivamoga, Dakshina Kannada, Udipi, Belagavi and Kodagu districts, who were recognized into different sub-communities. "Kunabi, Kudubi, Goa Kunabi, Kudiya Kunabi, Are Kudubi, Jogi Kudubi, Nada Kudubi, Kadu Kudubi, Kumri Kudubi, Kunabi Marathi, Kumri Marathi" who belonged to same community have been identified by different names in different places and circumstances.

The eight characteristics of Tribal Communities which are seen in Kunabis are as follows.

- 1) Away from the civilized community, Kunabis are living in forest and hilly areas till today.
- 2) They speak a separate mixed language of forest Marathi, i.e. the combination of both Marathi and Konkani.
- 3) They follow the ancient religious traditions of worshipping their ancestors, ghosts and goddess Tulasi.
- 4) They pursue ancient occupations like hunting, farming and collecting forest products.
- 5) Identified as tribes, Kunabis share meat while eating.
- 6) Even though they are identified as tribes, in some areas we can still see semi-naked Kunabis.
- 7) These people having the culture of migration, have special interest in drinking and dancing like Kunabi dance, Holi dance, etc.
- 8) Colour and heritage of Nigroid, Astroloid and Mongoloid origin can be seen.

#### CONCLUSION

Kunabi community is socially, economically, educationally and politically very backward. According to their traditions, environment, living conditions, development plans, etc. has to be carried out for the allround development of Kunabi community. To remove their superstitions, blind beliefs, unwanted traditions, etc. literates in Kunabi community should increase. To achieve this goal rate of literacy in Kunabi community has to be increased drastically.

Even though Kunabis are backward class people, various stages of Kunabis such as Marriage System, Funeral Rituals, Methods of Worship and Festive Celebrations have gained their own importance. The Kunabi associations have been fighting with the government for the last 15 years for the overall development of Kunabi communities and to add these communities to scheduled tribe, which is legally acceptable.

Our neighbor state Goa has considered Kunabis as scheduled tribes in 2003, which has been published on 22 April 2003. To improve the primary fundamental facilities and to give them all the rights of scheduled tribe, there is a demand that the villages in the border areas have to be merged with Goa state.

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