

# BANGANE, KARNATAKA: SCHOOL BUILDING CONSTRUCTION AND WELL-BEING STUDY

CLASS OF 1995 SUMMER SERVICE FUND 2004 PROJECT SUMMARY  
SUNEEL BHAT

## Introduction



Bangane

Bangane is a small village located in the Kumta Taluk of the *Uttara Kannada* (North Kanara) District in Karnataka, India. It is a small settlement, consisting of approximately 70 households, with a fairly stable population of roughly 350 individuals, all whom identify themselves as *Kumbri Marati*. The households are spread out over an area of 3 to 4 square kilometers, which is situated at the foot of a *ghatta*, or low-lying mountain. Opposite the mountain is the Aganashini River, a notable feature of the region. The area is fertile, with monsoon driven agriculture, and

the surrounding forest is home to a diverse and thriving ecosystem. The nearest road is 1 km away, after crossing the river from the village, which is also 1 km away from the riverbank. The closest adjacent village accessible by foot is about 8 km through the forest. Therefore, in all expected aspects, Bangane should reflect a typical South Indian *halli* or *koppa* (small village); however, this is not exactly the case. While normally a modest waterway, during the downpours of the rainy season, the Aganashini metamorphoses into a deep red, furious brute, with extremely fast, violent, and turbulent currents. Crossing the river in this state is quite difficult and very dangerous; 3 to 4 people from the region typically die each year in attempted river crossings. The nearest road via mountain and forest paths is over 15 km away from Bangane, and again an unfeasible option during heavy rains. Therefore for nearly 5 months every year the village is entirely inaccessible. This unique situation of Bangane, coupled with utter poverty and immobility, has kept it near complete isolation until the past decade.



The Aganashini River

## History

The *Kumbri Marati* have an uncertain history. Linguistically and culturally distinct from the surrounding populations, it is likely that they are remnants of Shivaji's campaign for a unified India in the 1600's, possibly deserters who took to the remote mountainside for shelter. For several hundred years the *Kumbri Marati* population, which numbers in the thousands for the state of Karnataka, has existed as nomadic bands whose sustenance was rudimentary hunting or gathering and sporadic slash-and-burn farming, which is the source of the designation *Kumbri*. In 1871 the *Kumbri Marati* were

labeled by a piece of British legislation known as the Criminal Tribes Act, effectively codifying the group as a marginal and negatively viewed population<sup>1</sup>. At some point in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *Kumbri Marati* settled in small villages across the North and South Kanara districts. With the passage of The Mysore Tenancy Act of 1952, squatters and tillers officially gained ownership of the lands they worked, and Bangane became a legitimate settlement. However, the *Kumbri Marati* of Bangane lived in destitute poverty and hunger. They were financially exploited by surrounding land owners, and fell into tremendous debt

(borrowing rice at 100% interest). In 1966 Dr. T.T. Hegde, my maternal grandfather, the first post-British era

educated physician in the area, purchased a tract of land adjacent to the Aganashini river, and hired some villagers from Bangane to help cultivate it. He also began to serve as their only source of medical treatment, as he (even today) never asks for payment from the poor, and has always been the only physician willing to cross the river to treat patients. Over time, with Dr. Hegde's help (he would help pay off the loans of those who worked for him - every family in Bangane has had someone work for him at some point) and support, the villagers of Bangane have emerged from debt. Dr. Hegde has taught many of the villagers how to farm, providing them with seeds and techniques. In the last 5 to 10 years, many of the families have begun to cultivate small tracts of land, and Bangane, while still very poor and fairly isolated, is slowly becoming a self standing community.



Dr. T.T. Hegde and one of his workers crossing a stream on the path to Bangane

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the qualification of "criminal activity" by the British could be as minor as existing as a nomadic tribe, or hunting/gathering on state lands.

*Project: Balwadi Construction*

The *Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram* is a non-profit tribal welfare institute promoting social, educational, and health well-being in poor villages across India. The dedication of the members of the organization is greater than that of any other that I have seen; its members are extremely honest and fully devoted to selfless service. None receive any compensation (the organization is completely voluntary) except a meager allotment for food (\$10 dollars a month).

Most interestingly, over 50% of the leaders

themselves are originally from poor areas, which promotes the stability and self-perpetuation of the organization. The focus placed on self-development and empowerment of those in need is very well received and has been met with tremendous success. The *Vanvasi Kalyan* holds nursery classes in Bangane (along with periodic skills classes, such as sewing). The nursery teacher stays in the village, and had been living/teaching in a makeshift thatch hut. This summer, as per the proposal presented in the spring, I organized (with the support and guidance of my grandfather, Dr. Hegde) the construction of a two-room school house in the center of the village. As there was the constant fear that the start of the monsoons in full force would cause difficulties, I had arranged for all the necessary materials to be sent across the river while before I arrived, and my grandfather established an agreement to purchase the land from a villager. Immediately upon my arrival, work began; M. K. Bhat, a friend of my grandfather



School construction with young helpers from village



The newly constructed school building (rear)

and a local contractor, had agreed to plan the construction for no profit. I personally stayed in my grandfathers house which is located approximately 40 min. from the river banks, and traveled to the site daily to ensure the correct and efficient progress. The structure was completed within 10 days, and enlisted a substantial degree of community participation; whenever possible, laborers were hired from within the village. Many villagers came in their free time to watch the construction; from its start, the village has been completely delighted by the school, and the

concept that someone had finally given something *to them*. At completion, the school was 200 sq. feet (two 10'x10' rooms), with an 80 sq. foot covered porch, and an attached bathroom behind the building (with appropriate drainage into a septic tank). The school represents the first cement building in the village, the first stone tile flooring in the village, and the first bathroom in the village. It has been fitted for electricity (the *Vanavasi Kalyan* is attempting to sanction electricity to the area), and now houses the

only local sewing machine (which is open for village usage). After its completion, the school building and land upon which it sits was signed over to the name of the *Vanavasi Kalyan*. The gratitude of the villagers is extremely difficult to express in words, but was manifested in a token of appreciation by the village. Towards the end of my stay in India, the villagers pooled what little materials and resources they had and hired a priest to hold a *Satyanaryana Puja* (a ceremony intended to bring well-being, satisfaction, and happiness to its beneficiaries). Each family gave everything they possibly could spare, a few tablespoons of milk, a coconut, a banana; it was here that both the poverty as well as true appreciation of the village became clear. This *Puja* (which is thought by the villagers to be very meaningful and powerful) was held specifically in honor of my grandfather, myself, and you- all those who contributed from a land so far away to make the construction of a school for the people of Bangane possible.



The newly constructed school building (front)

*Project:  
Anthropological/Sociological  
Case Study*

The village of Bangane is truly in an interesting state of existence. Due to its essential isolation from modern developments, the villagers had been living in a very simplistic manner, struggling to survive as hunter/gatherers and slash and burn farmers up until only 10 years ago. Even today, some families in

Bangane still engage in *adikaramana*, or illegal cultivation of government lands. Isolation, coupled with the difficulties of poverty, provides a unique situation to study well-being and poverty dynamics in a complete population, at the level of the village. In an effort to fully understand the situation, I wanted to interview every individual in the village in as complete a manner as possible (covering issues of health, diet, lifestyle, living conditions, customs, etc.). Over the course of my stay with my grandfather, I was able to interview all but 6 households (due to their distance from the center of the village), and so have a fairly complete data set with regard to the village. I had initially expected to find rampant disease, ignorance of population control, and general disarray. However, this was as far as possible from reality<sup>2</sup>. At the point in time evaluation of my study, no single member of the village had an acute infectious disease (save worm infestation, which everyone had). No single member of the village had any ongoing known chronic disease. While the majority of individuals were plagued by malnutrition under Western standards, the life span of most people appeared to be fairly long (70+), and the majority of death (aside from childbirth) was due to old age. The population was surprisingly stable; after the birth of either a son or 3 children most families underwent sterilization (female) operations. The youngest generations were beginning to pursue education, taking advantage of the free schooling and

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<sup>2</sup> Please note, the reason the quantification I provide here is vague is that I still have not been able to get through the volumes of data I have and analyze them. I hope to have this accomplished in the next couple of months, and eventually publish the findings.

college education provided by the *Vanvasi Kalyan*. Instead of a depressed and antagonistic community, I found a comfortable cultural and societal structure. The *Kumbri Marati* speak a unique dialect, a mesh of Kannada (the local language) and Marati (the language of the state of Maharashtra) that is understood only by themselves. There is no tribal governing system (the *Kumbri Marati* of the region often look towards my grandfather to arbitrate disputes and for advice); the village exists as a close-knit network of individual households. Often when asking questions directed towards one individual (for example age), others would answer in their stead.

The most striking aspect of Bangane is degree of apparent happiness and peacefulness that pervades the air. Everyone is friendly and welcoming (this may be a product of my role there), and the region is beautiful. There are almost no synthetic manmade products in the area (save clothing); time is unreal, as there are only two or three clocks in the entire village. The inhabitants are not stressed by the multitude of burdens we face in a modern society, and are happy to get even something small. When even a full meal cannot be considered an expectation, there is little in daily life that comes off as a disappointment; instead every small positive becomes something to be thankful for. Even in the most difficult of times, the people of Bangane stay bright, and work in any way they can towards betterment. This comfort with life is something I am almost jealous of, and something we all may learn from.

### *Implications*

This is one of very few studies that focus on individuals at the whole village level. In this manner (with a near complete sample) the intricacies of an essentially independent community may be carefully analyzed, and understood. The manuscript generated from these results should provide important insight in the fields of the human sciences. While on one hand, there is much that may be learned from such data, it also brings up some tremendous ethical and philosophical questions. Issues emerge about how to approach development, how to collectively serve the well being of the tribe, and whether aggressive modernization and societal integration may actually be more detrimental than beneficial.

These questions must be thought through quite carefully; in time I intend to consolidate these ideas and put together a manuscript regarding the ethical considerations of socioeconomic improvement, and the manner in which development should be approached. I hope that these products of the project in Bangane, on top of local benefits that the project provided, will have impact on upcoming issues in community development, and provided an exemplary framework for the course of future approaches to social work.



*Balwadi* children with teacher