



SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CONDITIONS OF TRIBAL COMMUNITIES IN TELANGANA: TRADITION, CULTURAL IDENTITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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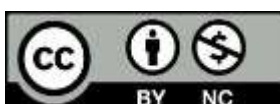
Abstract:

The tribal communities of Telangana possess distinctive social, cultural and religious traditions that have developed through a long and complex interaction between community life, ecological surroundings, customary institutions and spiritual beliefs. Their socio-religious life cannot be understood merely through conventional categories of religion, caste or social organization because tribal institutions are closely connected with kinship, clan organization, natural resources, festivals, marriage, family relations and customary forms of social control. Communities such as the Lambada, Gond, Koya, Chenchu and other tribal groups have historically maintained distinctive patterns of social organization and cultural expression. At the same time, education, settlement, occupational transformation, contact with neighbouring communities, government intervention, Christianity, Hindu religious influences and modernization have produced significant changes in traditional practices. This article examines the socio-religious conditions of tribal communities in Telangana by focusing on social structure, traditional political organization, religious beliefs, festivals, housing, dress, ornaments, food habits, marriage, family, divorce, widow remarriage, life-cycle rituals and health conditions. Particular attention is given to the changing position of traditional customs and institutions. The study argues that tribal society in Telangana should not be viewed as static or isolated. Rather, it represents a dynamic cultural system in which traditional practices continue to survive, adapt and sometimes decline under the influence of wider social and economic transformations.

Key words: *Telangana, Tribes, Lambada, Gond, Koya, Tribal Society, Religion, Culture, Social Change, Tradition.*

1. Introduction

Tribal communities constitute an important component of India's social and cultural diversity. Their social institutions, customary practices, religious beliefs, material culture and relationship with nature provide valuable insights into the plurality of Indian civilization. The tribal communities of the Telangana region have historically maintained distinctive cultural systems shaped by forests, hills, agricultural environments and community-based resource use. Their traditions are expressed through kinship, clan organization, customary leadership, festivals, religious ceremonies, marriage practices, food habits, dress and material culture. The historical literature on the tribes of the former Andhra Pradesh region indicates considerable diversity among tribal groups. Lambada, Koya, Gond, Yenadi, Yerukala, Konda Dora and several other communities have occupied different geographical and cultural spaces. The Lambadas constituted the largest tribal community in the historical Andhra Pradesh framework used in the source material, while Gond and Koya populations were particularly important in the northern and forested areas associated with present-day Telangana.





The socio-religious life of these communities is particularly significant because religion is not separated sharply from everyday social life. Religious beliefs are connected with agricultural cycles, forests, animals, ancestors, village deities, clan identity and community welfare. The source material conceptualizes tribal religion through three interconnected elements: belief in a superhuman world, the establishment of relationships with that world, and the performance of rites and rituals through which those relationships are expressed. However, tribal society has undergone considerable transformation. Permanent settlement, education, employment, interaction with neighbouring populations, religious conversion, state intervention and modernization have altered many traditional practices. In some cases, these changes have expanded social opportunities; in others, they have contributed to the weakening of traditional institutions and oral cultural traditions. The present article therefore examines tribal society as a dynamic social formation located between cultural continuity and social change.

2. Objectives of the Study

The article has the following objectives:

1. To examine the major features of the social organization of tribal communities in Telangana.
2. To analyse their traditional political and customary institutions.
3. To examine tribal religious beliefs, rituals, festivals and sacred traditions.
4. To understand marriage, family, divorce and widow-remarriage practices.
5. To examine material and cultural expressions such as houses, dress, ornaments and food.
6. To assess the major changes occurring in tribal socio-religious life under modernization.
7. To identify major health-related challenges associated with the socio-economic conditions of tribal communities.

3. Methodology

The article is based primarily on a descriptive and analytical review of secondary material contained in the Ph.D. chapter supplied for the study. The chapter draws upon government publications, tribal research reports, ethnographic works, books on tribal culture, cultural research studies and documented oral traditions. The analysis follows the organization and evidence presented in the source chapter.

The approach is qualitative and interpretative. Instead of treating tribal communities as a homogeneous category, attention is given to variations among communities such as Lambadas, Gonds, Koyas, Chenchus and other groups. The study also distinguishes between traditional practices and more recent transformations. Since much of the source literature relates to the former Andhra Pradesh administrative context, references to Andhra Pradesh in historical sources are interpreted carefully in relation to the Telangana region rather than being treated as contemporary state-level statistics.

4. Social Structure of Tribal Communities

The social organization of tribal communities is strongly based on kinship, clan, lineage and customary relationships. Different tribal groups possess distinct systems of clans, phratries, gotras and exogamous units. Among the Gonds, for example, society is traditionally organized through phratries known as *Saga*, which are further divided into clans and sub-clans. Marriage rules are closely associated with these divisions, particularly the principle of clan exogamy.





The Koya social system also demonstrates the importance of territorial and kinship organization. Their traditional territorial organization, referred to as *Gumpu*, links community identity with hillocks and surrounding natural resources. The management of such resources was associated with traditional leaders. Similarly, Chenchu communities traditionally recognized territorial units known as *Haddu*, within which forests, water and other natural resources were treated as community resources managed by elders.

The Lambadas have historically maintained their own clan organization and traditional leadership. Their traditional community council is known as the *Kula Panchayat*, while the community leader is generally referred to as the *Naik* or *Nayak*. Such institutions performed important functions in maintaining social discipline, settling disputes and preserving community norms. These institutions demonstrate that tribal society possesses its own systems of governance and social regulation. The community council was not simply a judicial institution; it was also an important mechanism for maintaining collective identity.

5. Traditional Political Organization

Traditional tribal political organization is based upon community participation and customary authority. In several communities, disputes were resolved through intra-tribal councils, village councils and inter-village councils. The Chenchus, for example, had elaborate intra- and inter-village councils under community elders. Konda Dora communities maintained *Kula Panchayats*, while Konda Reddy society had hierarchical traditional leadership involving *Pinna*, *Pedda* and *Pedakapu*. The existence of these institutions indicates that tribal communities developed mechanisms of social control independent of modern state institutions. Their authority derived primarily from custom, collective recognition and community tradition.

The traditional leadership of the Lambada community, particularly the *Naik*, played an important role in marriage, widow remarriage, disputes and community decisions. Although the authority of traditional leaders has declined in many areas because of formal administration, education and modern legal institutions, their symbolic importance remains significant.

The weakening of customary political institutions also raises an important cultural question. When younger generations increasingly participate in modern education and employment, traditional knowledge may not always be transmitted to them. Consequently, the preservation of customary institutions requires documentation as well as intergenerational cultural transmission.

6. Religious Beliefs and Worldview

Religion occupies a central position in tribal social life. Tribal religious systems often integrate supernatural beliefs with nature, ancestors, clan identity and community welfare. The source chapter emphasizes that tribal religion consists of belief, value and action systems. Religious beliefs are consequently expressed not only through formal worship but also through everyday behaviour, festivals, agricultural activities and community rituals. Among the Gonds, *Persa Pen* occupies the position of a supreme deity, while clans and lineages possess their own deities. Other sacred figures include *Aki Pen*, the village deity, and *Nat Aawal*, associated with the village mother. Elements of nature such as animals, forests and trees can also possess sacred significance. This worldview illustrates a close relationship between religion and ecology. Nature is not merely a physical environment but forms part of the sacred universe. Forests, animals, agricultural implements, rain and fertility can acquire religious significance.



The Koya religious system similarly reflects the relationship between agriculture and spirituality. Their *Bhudevi Panduga*, celebrated before the agricultural season, expresses reverence for Mother Earth, agricultural implements and bullocks.

At the same time, tribal religious life has been influenced by external religious traditions. Hindu religious influence has resulted in changes in food practices and ritual behaviour among sections of the Gond population. Christianity has also influenced sections of the Koya community, contributing in some places to the decline of certain traditional festivals.

Thus, tribal religion represents both continuity and cultural interaction.

7. Festivals and Collective Identity

Festivals provide an important mechanism through which tribal communities reproduce collective identity. They combine religion, agriculture, music, dance, food, ritual and social participation.

Among the Gonds, Nagoba Jatra and Dandari are important festivals. Traditional bards known as *Pradhans* historically played an important role in ceremonies and festivals through songs and musical performances. Their songs preserved aspects of tribal oral history. However, the declining number of traditional *Pradhans* and the increasing participation of younger generations in education and employment have created concern regarding the transmission of oral traditions.

The Bud Baavey Festival demonstrates the ecological dimension of tribal religion. Celebrated around the beginning of the monsoon, the ritual involves children, the village community, the priest and symbolic use of a frog to invoke rain. The ritual concludes with prayers for rainfall and agricultural prosperity.

Similarly, the Novang Festival is connected with the first crop after the rainy season. Village elders, the Patel and the Devari participate in ritual activities associated with the village boundaries, deities and agricultural cycle.

The Sammakka-Saralamma Jatara at Medaram occupies an especially important position in the cultural landscape of Telangana. The festival commemorates Sammakka and Saralamma, who are revered in tribal memory as figures associated with resistance and sacrifice. The Jatara has developed into a large cultural gathering attracting people from several regions.

These festivals demonstrate that tribal religion cannot be isolated from community identity. They provide opportunities for cultural transmission, social interaction and collective remembrance.

8. Tribal Houses and Material Culture

Tribal housing reflects the ecological environment, economic conditions and cultural preferences of communities. Traditional houses commonly use locally available materials such as mud, wood, bamboo, grass and thatch.

Gond houses, for example, traditionally contain a living area, veranda, kitchen and sometimes a separate rear room associated with childbirth and ritual restrictions. Bamboo, wood, mud and thatch are integral to the traditional construction system.

Lambada houses traditionally display a different settlement pattern. Their settlements, known as *tandas*, were generally located outside established villages, often on elevated land and near roads. Traditional houses were large rectangular structures using bamboo and thatch.





The transformation of housing from traditional structures to cement and permanent houses illustrates the broader process of sedentarization and modernization. While modern housing can improve physical security and living conditions, the replacement of traditional architecture may also result in the gradual disappearance of indigenous construction knowledge.

9. Dress and Ornaments as Cultural Identity

Dress and ornaments are significant markers of tribal identity. The traditional dress of Lambada women is particularly distinctive. However, the source material documents a gradual shift toward the sari and blouse under the influence of neighbouring society, education and changing social aspirations.

The debate surrounding traditional Lambada dress illustrates an important dimension of cultural change. Some community members regard traditional dress as a symbol of cultural identity and religious obligation, while others associate modern dress with social mobility and wider participation in society. Some women have resisted the abandonment of traditional attire because they feel uncomfortable in new clothing or regard traditional dress as connected with their religious traditions.

Ornaments similarly serve both aesthetic and cultural purposes. Lambada women traditionally use a wide variety of ornaments made from silver, gold, brass, beads, wood, bamboo, seeds, shells and other materials.

Thus, material culture becomes a visible expression of collective identity. Changes in dress and ornamentation should therefore be understood not simply as fashion changes but as indicators of broader social transformation.

10. Food Habits and Relationship with the Environment

Food habits among tribal communities are closely related to agriculture, livestock, hunting and forest resources. Lambadas traditionally consume jowar, bajra, ragi and rice, along with meat-based dishes. Their food practices also include traditional beverages associated with social and ceremonial occasions.

Koya food practices demonstrate a strong relationship with forests. In addition to cultivated crops such as jowar and rice, communities traditionally collected roots, tubers, flowers and leaves from the forest. Fish and hunted animals also formed part of their diet.

However, ecological degradation, commercial forestry, encroachment and restricted access to forest resources have affected traditional food systems. The decline of forest-based food resources can increase food insecurity and nutritional vulnerability. This indicates that tribal nutrition cannot be examined separately from environmental rights and livelihood systems.

11. Marriage and Family Organization

Marriage is an important social institution among tribal communities because it regulates kinship, inheritance, social identity and community continuity. Traditional marriage rules often require marriage outside the clan but within the tribe. Several forms of marriage have historically existed, including negotiation, elopement, capture, service, exchange and bride-price arrangements.

Among Lambadas, marriage traditionally operates within the community, with clan and *gotra* rules regulating matrimonial relationships. Community elders and the *Naik* have historically played important roles in arranging marriages. Koya marriage practices traditionally included negotiation and, historically, marriage





by capture. However, the source material indicates that several older practices have declined under the influence of education and wider social interaction.

A significant contemporary change is the influence of non-tribal marriage practices. In some communities, traditional bride-price arrangements have increasingly been replaced or supplemented by dowry practices. Modern marriage ceremonies may also involve loudspeakers, music bands and larger expenditure. These developments illustrate the process of cultural assimilation as well as socioeconomic change.

12. Divorce and Widow Remarriage

Tribal marriage systems have traditionally demonstrated greater institutional flexibility in relation to divorce and remarriage than is sometimes assumed. Among the Banjaras, divorce can be considered by the community *panchayat*, which hears both parties before reaching a decision. Widow remarriage is also socially accepted. Traditionally, a widow could marry the younger brother of her deceased husband, although the source material indicates that this practice has declined and is no longer necessarily obligatory. A widow may now marry another member of her community subject to customary procedures. These practices demonstrate that tribal social institutions have historically developed mechanisms for protecting family continuity and social security. Their transformation reflects changing concepts of individual choice, gender relations and marriage.

13. Life-Cycle Rituals

Tribal socio-religious life is expressed through ceremonies associated with birth, marriage and death. Among Lambadas, the naming ceremony traditionally takes place after a few days of birth, although later practices have incorporated influences from Hindu customs. Names may be associated with deities, days of the week or festivals. Death ceremonies similarly reflect the community's religious worldview. Funeral practices, treatment of the deceased, ornaments, clothing and symbolic food offerings are associated with beliefs about death and the transition of the individual. In Lambada tradition, for example, jaggery has symbolic significance in relation to happiness and the afterlife. Such ceremonies are important mechanisms of cultural transmission because younger generations learn community values through participation in life-cycle rituals.

14. Health Conditions and Socio-Economic Vulnerability

Health remains one of the major challenges confronting tribal populations living in remote and forested areas. The source material identifies malnutrition, inadequate hygiene, unsafe drinking water, limited health infrastructure, geographical isolation and lack of medical services as important factors contributing to poor health. The chapter also highlights malaria, tuberculosis and iodine-deficiency-related problems among tribal populations in the historical Andhra Pradesh region. The distribution and functioning of health institutions have been affected by scattered settlements, shortage of medicines, inadequate transport and shortages of medical personnel.

An important dimension is the decline of indigenous medical knowledge. Traditional medicinal knowledge historically formed part of tribal adaptation to the forest environment. However, modernization and changing lifestyles have contributed to the weakening of this knowledge, while modern health services have not always been sufficiently accessible. Therefore, tribal health policy requires a combined approach involving modern healthcare, nutrition, sanitation, safe water, geographical accessibility and respect for appropriate indigenous knowledge systems.





15. Tradition, Modernization and Cultural Transformation

The most important feature emerging from the study is that tribal society is neither completely traditional nor completely modern. Instead, it exists within a process of continuous cultural negotiation. Education has created new opportunities for younger generations, particularly in employment and interaction with wider society. At the same time, education and employment can reduce the transmission of oral traditions. The decline of the traditional Pradhan performers among the Gonds is a clear example. Their songs historically preserved oral history, but younger generations increasingly pursue formal education and employment.

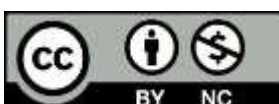
Similarly, changes in Lambada dress demonstrate the tension between cultural identity and social integration. Some members see modern dress as necessary for social mobility, while others regard traditional dress as an important symbol of cultural and religious identity.

Religious transformation is equally complex. Hindu influence has modified certain Gond practices, while Christianity has influenced sections of the Koya population. Traditional festivals may consequently decline in some communities. The appropriate interpretation, therefore, is not that modernization simply destroys tribal culture. Rather, modernization produces selective adaptation. Certain practices disappear, some are modified, and others acquire new meanings in contemporary contexts.

16. Major Findings

The study identifies the following major findings:

1. Tribal communities possess complex social structures based on clans, lineages, kinship and customary institutions rather than being socially unorganized groups.
2. Traditional leadership remains culturally significant, although its practical authority has been reduced by formal governmental and legal institutions.
3. Religion is deeply integrated with everyday life, particularly agriculture, forests, natural resources, community identity and seasonal cycles.
4. Festivals function as mechanisms of cultural continuity, preserving oral traditions, collective memory, ritual practices and community solidarity.
5. Material culture reflects identity, particularly through traditional houses, dress, ornaments and food.
6. Marriage systems are undergoing significant change, with education, employment and neighbouring social practices influencing traditional arrangements.
7. Widow remarriage and divorce demonstrate institutional flexibility within tribal society.
8. Traditional ecological knowledge is under pressure, particularly because of environmental changes and declining access to forest resources.
9. Health vulnerability is closely related to geographical isolation, malnutrition, sanitation and inadequate healthcare infrastructure.
10. Modernization is producing both opportunities and cultural loss, making preservation and adaptation equally important policy concerns.





17. Conclusion

The socio-religious conditions of tribal communities in Telangana reveal a complex interaction between cultural continuity and social transformation. Tribal society has historically developed sophisticated systems of kinship, clan organization, customary leadership, religious belief, resource management and social regulation. Religion is inseparable from everyday life, and festivals, agricultural rituals, sacred places and life-cycle ceremonies collectively sustain community identity. The Lambada, Gond and Koya examples demonstrate the diversity of tribal cultural systems. Their houses, food habits, ornaments, marriage customs and religious practices have evolved in close relationship with their physical and social environment. At the same time, modernization has introduced substantial changes. Education and employment have widened opportunities, while settlement, external religious influences and contact with neighbouring populations have transformed traditional practices.

The central challenge is therefore not to preserve tribal culture in an unchanged form but to ensure that tribal communities can participate in contemporary development without losing the cultural knowledge and identity that constitute their historical heritage. Documentation of oral traditions, support for indigenous cultural practices, recognition of traditional ecological knowledge, improved healthcare and education, and culturally sensitive development policies are essential.

The socio-religious life of Telangana's tribal communities should consequently be understood as a living cultural system. Its traditions are not merely remnants of the past; they continue to influence social identity, community solidarity and relationships with nature. Sustainable development in tribal areas must therefore recognize culture as an important dimension of social well-being rather than treating it as an obstacle to modernization.

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