



AN ETHNOGRAPHIC INVESTIGATION INTO THE KOYA TRIBE AND THE GATTU–GOTRA SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

The Koya tribe, one of the most prominent tribal communities of South India, represents a distinct cultural group inhabiting the hilly and forested regions of Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Maharashtra, and Chhattisgarh. Rooted in the Dravidian tribal fold and closely associated with the Gonds, the Koyas have nevertheless developed their own unique identity through kinship systems, rituals, and socio-cultural practices. Central to their cultural organization is the Gattu–Gotra system, an elaborate kinship and marital regulation framework that combines lineage-based descent groups (Gotra) with numerical clan divisions (Gattu). This dual system regulates exogamy, prescribes ritual duties, and ensures the continuity of cultural identity. The present study traces the historical origins of the Koyas, their myths of creation, migration patterns, and encounters with colonial power, before situating the Gattu–Gotra system as their moral constitution. The ethnography demonstrates how surnames, marriage rules, and ritual duties are preserved through this system, which not only prevents inbreeding but also organizes socio-religious life. Despite the challenges posed by modernization, urbanization, and inter-caste interactions, the system remains a strong cultural identifier in rural Koya settlements. This article argues that the Gattu–Gotra system represents a unique indigenous model of kinship law and cultural resilience, and preserving it provides insights into the anthropological and historical richness of Indian tribal societies.

KEYWORDS: Koya Tribe; Gattu–Gotra System; Kinship; Marriage Rules; Clan Exogamy; Tribal Identity; Telangana Tribes; Cultural Resilience

1. INTRODUCTION

The tribal societies of India are a testament to the diversity of humanity, the ability to adapt to the natural environment, and the persistence of culture. They are the custodians of the "aboriginal" legacy of the nation, protecting bodies of knowledge, social institutions, and ecological understanding that all predate the establishment of modern states. One of the most distinctive and historically significant tribal people in South India is the Koya tribe, which is situated in the hilly and forest parts of the states of Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Maharashtra, and Chhattisgarh. There are a number of different groups that fall under this category.

The Koyas are classed as belonging to the Dravidian tribal groupings, which have historically been linked to the Gond people. However, throughout time, they developed into an own tribal identity with their own social structures, rituals, and customs (Hasnain, 2006). The Koyas, in contrast to a number of other tribes that incorporated themselves into social frameworks that were based on dominating castes, managed to preserve their own kinship structure as well as their own customary law. The rigid marriage regulations, ritualistic responsibilities, and powerful sense of cultural identity that are ingrained in kinship institutions serve as the guiding principles of their culture.

The Gattu–Gotra system, a one-of-a-kind institution that dictates the rules surrounding social ties, marriage, kinship, and ritual obligations, is the foundation upon which this organization is built. The Koya system, which is one of the most intricate systems of clan exogamy in India, combines lineage-based descent groups (Gotram) with clan divisions that are based on numbers (Gattu). This is in contrast to the majority of tribal cultures in India, which depend on clan exogamy and lineage-based constraints. In addition to regulating marriage partnerships, these institutions also serve as the foundation for cultural identity, social law, and moral order.

This study will investigate the historical background, cultural traditions, and way of life of the Koya people, with particular attention being paid to the Gattu–Gotra system. In addition to investigating how this institution serves as a cultural identifier and a kinship regulator, this study examines how it has evolved in response to the demands of industrialization and migration.

2. THE KOYA TRIBE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

2.1 Origins and Relationship to the Gonds

The Koyas have a close relationship with the Gonds, who are one of the major tribal populations in India, and the Koyas claim that their ancestors were members of the Dravidian tribal heritage. The Koyas are believed to be an offshoot of the Gond tribe that has adapted to the Godavari valley region, according to



anthropologists like Grigson (1938) and Haimendorf (1948). Despite the fact that they also assert their distinct identity through myths, rituals, and kinship norms that are unique to them, the oral traditions of the Koyas serve to strengthen this connection.

The Koya people made their home in the valleys of the Godavari and Sabari rivers, which is why they became known as "valley dwellers." On the other hand, the Gonds mostly lived on the central Indian plateau, which includes the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and eastern Maharashtra. They were exposed to a wide range of cultural influences as a result of their strategic location at the confluence of the Deccan Plateau and the Eastern Ghats. However, their location also allowed them to preserve a relatively isolated existence from caste society.

2.2 Beliefs Based on Mythology

The stories that make up Koya mythology explain that the universe came into being as a result of a cosmic egg. Life on Earth began when the egg ruptured, which resulted in the sky and the earth separating from one another (Elwin, 1955). This cosmogonic myth emphasizes the close relationship that the tribe has with nature and fertility, a relationship that is shown in their agricultural ceremonies as well as their veneration of ancestors.

According to another story, the first Koya ancestor was born as a result of the union between the ground and the rain, which represents the dependence that the Koya have on their environment. Myths of this kind offer more than only provide an explanation for the beginnings of things; they also provide justification for rules regarding kinship. For example, there are some clans that are regarded to have descended from brothers and sisters; these clans are barred from intermarrying.

2.3 Migration and Settlements

In their early days, the Koyas were pastoralists and shifting farmers, and they practiced podu (slash-and-burn agriculture). Over the course of centuries, they gradually shifted to settled agriculture in the lush river basins of the Godavari, Indravati, and Sabari Rivers, among others (Sundar, 1997). According to oral traditions, there were several waves of migration:

- Certain individuals relocated from the Bastar region, which is located in what is now Chhattisgarh.
- Other people settled along the Eastern Ghats, which stretch into the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.
- Still others made their way to the borders between Odisha and Maharashtra.

The following are the areas in Telangana that they are focusing on today:

- Bhadradi Kothagudem, Khammam, and Warangal
- Andhra Pradesh — Visakhapatnam and East and West Godavari
- Chhattisgarh: Dantewada and Sukma
- Border districts of Maharashtra and Odisha

2.4 Encounters During Colonial Times

Throughout the period of British control, the Koyas often opposed the policies regarding taxation, land alienation, and forest laws. Colonial efforts to regulate woods and limit podu agriculture had

a direct impact on them. Koya districts have been the location of revolts from as early as the 19th century.

The Rampa Rebellion, which took place between 1879 and 1880, was the most prominent rebellion. It was led by Alluri Sitarama Raju and brought together the Koyas to fight against landlords and officials from the forest service (Sharma, 2001). Their determination to preserve the autonomy of their tribe, their rights to the land, and their access to traditional resources is highlighted by these revolts. Even after the country had gained its independence, their political identity continued to be shaped by their attempts to avoid being displaced as a result of projects such as the Polavaram dam.

3. LANGUAGES SPOKEN BY THE KOYAS

The Koya language is a member of the South-Central branch of the Dravidian family. As such, it is closely linked to both Gondi and Telugu (Singh, 1992). It has been passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition, as it does not have a proper written script.

As a result of prolonged interaction, the language's vocabulary has been impacted by Telugu, and its phonetics is similar to those of Gondi dialects.

- Oral literature, which consists of riddles, folktales, and ceremonial chanting

As a result of migration and education, a large number of Koyas are multilingual in Koya and Telugu or even trilingual in Koya, Telugu, and Hindi in the current day. On the other hand, the Koya dialect is flourishing in the distant hamlets of Khammam and Sukma, which has allowed for the preservation of ritual chanting and storytelling traditions. As a result, language continues to serve as both a symbol of individuality and a tool of resistance to cultural absorption.

4. CULTURAL PRACTICES AND LIFESTYLE:

4.1 Economic System

~The Koya livelihood is a combination of agriculture, forest resources, and animal husbandry, all of which are essential to their way of life:

- Agriculture, which includes paddy, millets, pulses, and shifting cultivation (podu).
- Bamboo, honey, gum, tubers, and medicinal herbs are some of the resources that can be found in forests.
- Animal husbandry, which includes goats, pigs, and cattle, all of which are also used in religious sacrifices.
- Handicrafts—Basket weaving, bamboo crafts, and tools made of wood are all examples of such items.

Their biological adaptation to surroundings that are hilly and riverine is reflected in this hybrid economy.

4.2 Housing and Settlements

~Villages, also known as pentas, are small settlements made up of mud homes that have roofs made of thatch. Most of the time, houses are constructed in a linear form along ridges or streams. Locations that are known as community halls, or Gudi or



Manduva, serve as locations for ceremonies, meetings, and dispute settlement.

4.3 Beliefs and Rituals

Trees, ancestors, and the deities of the village are all objects of veneration for the Koyas. The Anagondi, which is the worship hall, is where rituals are most frequently carried out. The sacrifice of chickens in a manner that is not only unique but also one of the most unusual rituals is the pounding of the bird on the ground instead of cutting it with a knife (Hasnain, 2006). The sacredness of ceremonial cleanliness and the importance of receiving ancestral approbation are emphasized by this symbolic act.

4.4 Festivals

The most expansive tribal celebration in Asia is the Sammakka–Sarakka Jatara, which takes place in Telangana and is celebrated by the Koya people, who play a prominent role in the festivities (Xaxa, 2008). Holidays celebrating the harvest, which are associated with the cycles of shifting cultivation, are among the other significant holidays.

- Ancestral rites, which are carried out on a seasonal basis
- Rituals that mark the beginning or end of a significant life event, such as birth, marriage, or death.

5. THE SYSTEM OF GATTU-GOTRA

The organization of Koya society is characterized by one defining aspect, which is known as the Gattu–Gotra system. It is a combination of:

- Gattu → Clan divisions that are based on numbers (3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th).

- Gotra → Within each Gattu, there are descent groups or lineages.

The regulations that govern marriage, kinship, and ceremonial responsibilities are formed by them working together.

5.1 The significance of Gattu

In a literal sense, the term "Gattu" can be translated as "ridge" or "division. In the Koya community, the Gattus, which are numbered 3 through 7, each stand for a different kinship cluster.

- Numbers are passed down through the male line and are hereditary.

5.2 Understanding the Meaning of Gotra

The word "gotram" is derived from the Sanskrit word for family or lineage, which is "gotra. Gotras, which are found among the Koyas, are associated with both myths of origin and ancestor deities. Specific surnames are associated with each Gotra, which helps to ensure that the identity of the clan is preserved.

5.3 List of the Most Important Gotras

1. Third Gattu - Vadde Gotram (Kaketi Pujari Gotram) o

Surnames: Allem, Aluri, Pendakatla, Chapala, Daram, Siddaboyina, Teerthala

Priestly clan; oversees the ritual sacrifices that are made.

2. 4th Gattu - Sanpagani Gotram o Well known for its lineage in agriculture

3. 5th Gattu - Bandani Gotram o Regarded as being a fundamental component in marital alliances; very compatible with other gotrams.

4. 6th Gattu - Berumboina Gotram o This gotram is associated with both animal husbandry and the slaughter of cattle.

5. 7th Gattu - Pareduguttu Gotram o This clan is associated with hunting and martial traditions.

6. REGULATIONS GOVERNING MARRIAGE IN THE GATTU–GOTRA SYSTEM

Gattu-Gotra regulations exercise a great deal of control over the institution of marriage.

6.1 Guidelines

Exogamy → It is forbidden for an individual to marry someone from the same Gotra as themselves. Thodudammulu (Brothers) → There are specific gotras (clans) that are thought to be brothers and are therefore prohibited from intermarrying. Varusa Ayyevaru (Permissible alliances) => Certain Gotras are compatible for marriage.

6.2 Examples of Marriage Rules

The following are some examples of rules that may be imposed on people who are married: 3rd Gattu (Vadde) → Marriage to members of other 3rd Gattu households is prohibited, but marriage to 5th Gattu (Bandani) is permitted. 4th Gattu (Sanpagani) → May marry 5th, 6th, or 7th Gattus but is prohibited from marrying 3rd Gattu. Because the fourth and seventh Gattus are thodudammulu (brothers), marriage between them is forbidden. 5th Gattu (Bandani) → Is permitted to marry any other Gattu with the exception of its own.

7. TABLE OF MATRIMONY (MARRIAGE ALLIANCES)

Gattu / Gotra Permitted Alliances (Varusa) Forbidden Alliances (Thodudammulu)

3rd – Vadde Gotram 5th (Bandani) 3rd (own clan), 4th, 6th, 7th
4th – Sanpagani 5th, 6th 7th (brothers), 3rd 5th – Bandani Third, fourth, sixth, seventh, and fifth (own clan)

Berumboina is at the sixth position. 4th, 5th, 7th 3rd 7th – Pareduguttu 5th, 6th 4th (brothers), 3rd

This table functions as a social constitution by controlling marriage and prevents any violations of exogamy from occurring.

8. THE ROLES OF GOTRAS IN FESTIVALS AND RITUALS

During festivals such as Sammakka–Sarakka Jatara, each Gotra is expected to perform certain rituals:

- Kaketi Gotram (Third Gattu) → Roles in the priesthood, sacrifices

- Bandani Gotram (5th Gattu) → Rituals that are related to agriculture

- Pareduguttu Gotram (7th Gattu) → Festivals that feature hunting and dancing that are performed by warriors

Tasks like this are essential for the preservation of collective memory and for guaranteeing that all clans are represented.



9. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SURNAMES AND IDENTITY

Surnames are used as indicators of one's affiliation with a certain Gotra. Allem, Aluri, Chapala, Pendakatla, Yapa, Daram, and Teerthala are all members of the Vadde Gotram.

- Sanpagani Gotram → Surnames that are specific to a certain region (these surnames differ from district to district).
 - Bandani Gotram → Surnames that are related to agriculture
- The preservation of genealogy and the prevention of marriage violations are guaranteed by the documentation of surnames.

10. Social law is represented by the Gattu-Gotra

The Koya tribe's moral constitution is represented by the Gattu-Gotra system. The occurrence of inbreeding is prevented by it.

- Maintains cohesion between members of the same family
- Organizes tasks associated with rituals.
- Keeps the balance between tribal endogamy and exogamy in check.

Koya laws are more stringent and are based on a unique number-based system, which is in contrast to the Gond clan system and the Hindu Gotra exogamy, which are both used as comparisons by anthropologists (Thusu, 1999).

11. Changes in the Modern Era

Strict adherence to the precepts of Gattu-Gotra has been weakened by modernization, education, and migration.

- The Koyas who live in urban areas are increasingly adopting Telugu Hindu marital rituals.
- Despite the fact that they are still stigmatized, marriages between people of different castes are becoming more common.
- When people move to cities, they develop hybrid customs in which they continue to use surnames but disregard the Gattu regulations.

However, the system has continued to be strong and highly regarded in the distant regions of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

12. CONCLUSION

The Koya community continues to rely on the Gattu-Gotra system as its most important foundational element. It represents more than simply a norm that must be followed in marriage; it also stands for a concept that encompasses kinship, social order, and the continuity of culture. The system continues to regulate marriages, organize festivals, and protect Koya identity, despite the challenges of industrialization.

The study of this system provides anthropologists and historians with valuable insights into a number of different areas, including tribal kinship law, ecological adaptation, and cultural resilience. It is imperative that the Koyas, as well as the wider cultural history of India's indigenous groups, be preserved.

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