



# Caste and Religion in Telangana: A Historical Study

**Chakrapani Ghanta<sup>a\*</sup>**

<sup>a</sup> Faculty of Social Sciences, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad,  
Telangana State, India.

## **Author's contribution**

*The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Caste and Religion are the principal identification markers in India. They are becoming increasingly significant in mass mobilization for identity politics and urge for social equality and social justice. This paper examines the link between caste and religion, especially in the case of the lower castes. It argues that both caste and religion meant different things at different levels of social hierarchy. It also examines the distinctive characteristic feature of religious identities in Telangana, South India. India is culturally diverse; though it broadly appears as a single entity, there are several cultural and religious differences from state to state and region to region. Telangana, the newly formed state in India, got its significance in religious practices and caste hierarchy. This paper attempts to map the socio-cultural characteristics of the people of Telangana based on caste, religion, and other cultural practices. It analyses the distinctive caste and spiritual aspects of Telangana society and caste-based hierarchy in terms of religious rites and rituals of the lower castes.

**Keywords:** *Telangana; caste; religion; hierarchy; culture; festivals; fairs.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Indian Caste system is a rigid social stratification characterized by hereditary status, endogamy, and social barriers sanctioned by custom, law, or religion. Caste as a social system divides every individual and the occupation they perform, where and how they live and are perceived by the society, by a person's birth. Generally, it is assumed that caste was a matter of the past that does not exist in India today. Caste adversely dominates the lives of various marginalized communities in

Telangana, especially lower-caste communities like the Other Backward Castes and Dalits. While being born as upper-caste gives an individual social, economic, and political capital, birth as lower-caste deters an individual from accessing even fundamental human rights. Thus, the caste-based social system created by humans to determine that some communities enjoy privileges which remain intact only within and for these communities still structures every individual life in India [1,2]. To keep this system intact, inhumane and brutal crimes are committed against the lower-castes,

<sup>#</sup>Professor of Sociology, Dean;

<sup>\*</sup>Corresponding author: Email: ghantac@hotmail.com;

especially the Dalits and indigenous communities.

Telangana got its distinctiveness. Sri Krishna Committee, the Committee for Consultations on the Situation in Andhra Pradesh, the united State of Andhra and Telangana [3], which the government of India constituted during the bifurcation of erstwhile States, gives the basic understanding of population shares of socio-cultural communities in the state. Telangana is a demand for socially, economically and politically equitable and inclusive state because it reflects the aspirations of “disadvantaged social groups” – SCs, STs, OBCs and Minorities (89%) “Sub-regionalism is a movement which is not necessarily primordial but is essentially modern – in the direction of a balanced and equitable modernization” (SKC, para 7.18.02).

Telangana is a newly formed state in India, situated on the south-central stretch of the country on the high Deccan Plateau. After decades of movement for a separate State, Telangana was created on Jun 2nd, 2014, with the historical city Hyderabad as its capital, bypassing the A.P. State Reorganization Bill in both houses of Parliament of India. Telangana shares borders with Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh in the North and Karnataka in the West. The residual Andhra Pradesh in the South and East. Telangana is the eleventh-largest State and the twelfth most populated State in India, with a geographical area of 1,12,077 Sq. Km. has a population of 3,50,03,674 per the 2011 Census (Census India 2011). According to the 2011 census, Hindus form 85.1% of the State's population. Muslims form 12.7% and Christians form 1.3% and 0.9% others. The Telangana region was part of the Hyderabad state from Sept 17th, 1948, to Nov 1st, 1956, until it was merged with Andhra State to form the Andhra Pradesh state. As of 2019, the present Telangana State is with 33 districts.

The seeds of the Telangana struggle were sown in 1955 when the recommendation of the States Reorganization Commission to retain Hyderabad as a separate State went unheeded. Telangana leaders accused the people of Andhra of "colonizing the region" by grabbing their jobs and land and the Government of not investing in the region's infrastructure. This struggle lasted almost six decades; finally, India's 29th State was formed.

## 2. CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TELANGANA

The question is who are the people of Telangana? Telangana is culturally different from the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh; the latter is important because the Telangana movement articulated and presented its case as they are different from the people of the Andhra region, which was merged with the Telangana region in 1956. On the other hand, they argued that they have been subjugated and culturally suppressed. The movement also blamed 'Andhra communities and dominant castes' for their political hegemony over the region [4,5]. In the context of the formation of the new State, knowing the composition of its population is historically significant. It is pretty visible that the social and cultural composition of Telangana is different from Andhra Pradesh in terms of Caste, religion, language dialect, food habits, and religious rituals. In this context, the study presents the socio-cultural aspects of the Telangana people [6-8].

Understanding the people of a region or a nation is very important to understanding the social composition of its population. For this purpose, every country enumerates its people frequently in a systematic manner. This will help provide essential information on their spatial distribution, age and sex structure, and other critical social and economic characteristics. Because of this, they are a unique source of information for benchmarking and generating statistics for small areas and population groups. For Telangana, which was carved as a separate state from erstwhile Andhra Pradesh in 20014, the authentic socio-cultural data of people is not available. Although the Census 2021 data is published, it gives basic statistics of the population as India is not collecting socio-economic and cultural aspects such as Caste and subcaste data as part of the Census [9-11].

To understand its people, the Telangana Government began collecting its people's socio-economic data, a one-day survey of its entire population on Aug 19th, 2014, immediately after the State's formation on Jun 2nd, 2014. The Government conducted a comprehensive household survey and collected all the details of each family, with the broad objective of creating a reliable household database in the new State to effectively facilitate the implementation of welfare and development programs [12]. The Bihar government has already initiated a similar

exercise [13]. There are demands from states like Maharashtra, Karnataka, Odisha, and Tamil Nādu to have a countrywide caste-based census. The demand for a caste census goes beyond politics, and India runs the world's most extensive affirmative welfare program based on caste identity.

Reservation in educational institutes and government jobs are provided on the basis of caste identities [14]. Indian social scientist Yogendra Yadav argues that 'there is something weird about the current debate on caste census. You can predict who stands where if you know their stand on reservations. Those who support caste-based reservations support caste enumeration in the Census, and those who oppose caste quotas are opposed to caste censuses [15].

On the other hand, Sankaran argues that it is feasible and shows how every effort to ensure representation in the State of all historically oppressed communities is bound to fail without such a census [16]. The academic debate shows that understanding Caste is crucial for inclusive social policy. Since the legal litigations over the caste census, the governments at the local level are preparing for Social-Economic Surveys and household surveys. However, they are also subject to the scrutiny of the judiciary.

In Indian society, caste is a fundamental social component and has always formed the basis for public policy. Structurally, the society is built on Caste, which has functional value. Functionally, it is a complex and culturally unique social system that combines some aspects of descent based on hereditary occupation and strictly follows endogamy. Socially, it ascribes the social class, social identity, and hierarchy which exclude each other and decides power and authority in the society. Based on Caste, the Indian society has been divided into thousands of strict and closed stratification groups. Unless the pattern of Caste and hierarchy is understood, it is not easy to frame a comprehensive social policy. Since British rule, Caste has been the primary criterion for understanding the basic structure of India. After Independence, the public policy related to development focused on Caste, which is a conflicting point of social development. Keeping this in view, an attempt is made to understand the structural aspect of Telangana Society based on available (1931) census data and other documents.

The third reason to take up this work is to understand the influence of the ruling class (religious) on social formation. As part of Hyderabad's Princely State, Telangana was ruled by Muslims from 1512 AD onwards. The largest princely State located on the Deccan plateau acted as a protection wall to South India from the invasions and political turmoil that affected North India. This allowed the Muslim-ruled State of Hyderabad to develop a distinctive culture during the Qutb Shahi dynasty, fast Mughal rule, and later the Asaf Jahi dynasty of the Nizams. Still, the religious fabric and caste structures were intact till the region became part of India in 1948. Keeping in view the historical, cultural, and political context, it is felt that understanding the sociological foundations of a new state in south India is essential.

### 3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

From the earliest times, Telangana's geographical position made it the bridgehead between the north and the south. Situated between Aryavarta and Dravida, Telangana had the advantage of contact with both. Having assimilated the influences from both the regions, it represented the synthesis of cultures. Two non-Vedic religions, viz., Buddhism and Jainism were popular in Telangana for nearly one thousand years. Buddhism spread in the ancient Asmaka/Telangana region at a time when the process of Aryanization of the south India/Deccan began. According to historical studies, the Aryanization of south India/Deccan region was a slow process spread over several centuries. Beginning around 1000 BCE it had reached its completion in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. The Yaksas were closely associated with the Nagas. In the epics, the Yaksas are noted for their musical talents. Singing is the profession of the Jakkulas/Baindla/Pambala. The musical instrument played by them is called Zamidika. The process of Aryanization in Telangana was a slow but sure process, characterized by conciliation, compromise, and synthesis which laid the foundations of cultural pluralism. Aryanisation was affected by mutual acculturation, with more fruitful results in the south than in the north. The Aryan and Dravidian elements found it beneficial to coalesce with each other, each absorbing what is considered to be the best in the other. The fact that the Dravidians had reached a high degree of civilization by the time the Aryans advanced to the south must have been largely responsible for this unique development.

For about one thousand years (400 BCE-600CE), non-brahmanical religious and cultural traditions flourished in Telanagana and they shaped the socio-cultural ethos in the most formative period of its history. The lower sections of Telangana society articulated their spiritual unrest, against the cruel sacrifices and unfair social distinctions perpetuated by the Brahmanical religion, philosophy, and ideology. Available sources indicate that Buddhism spread like wildfire among the non- Aryan tribes than among the Aryans. Of all the non-Aryan groups Nagas and Yaksas, in particular, opposed the expansion of Brahmanism. Throughout India, of all the non-Aryan tribes, the Nagas appeared to have evinced special interest in the Buddha and his teachings. The Brahmanical literature describes the Nagas as vile and venomous creatures, disturbing the peace and social harmony. The popularity of Buddhism for about a century in the Telangana region had a profound impact, as it shaped its personality and contributed to the emergence of composite culture. Unlike in the Indo-Gangetic valley, the caste system of Telangana did not strictly correspond to the Vedic *Varnavyavasta*. For example, there was no pure Kshatriya Varna in Telangana. All the rulers of the kingdoms from Satavahanas to Padmanayakas were not Kshatriyas by birth. Moreover, the social formation was not as rigid as in the Indo-Gangetic Valley/Aryavarta, and the caste system in Telangana was more fluid and flexible. As anti-brahmanic religions condemned caste hierarchy, social discrimination and women enslavement, Telangana society evolved on the basis of the non-Aryan communitarian ethic. Elements of pre-Vedic social cohesion as prevalent in the tribal society were continued [17].

The Telangana region and Hyderabad State had never been a part of British India. Telangana had been a part of the multi-lingual Hyderabad Princely State until 1948 and was ruled by the Nizams of the Asaf Jahi dynasty. Nizams of Hyderabad enjoyed partial autonomy under British Paramountcy. Under the regime of feudal-aristocratic-landlords, Telangana was not exposed to the socio-economic changes of the kind brought about by the British in their presidencies. Hence, Telangana remained the same as it was in pre-British times. The Telangana region, along with the Hyderabad State, was part of the Indian Union through an armed police action in 1948. After a period of military and provisional civil government, a popular ministry and legislature were set up in

the state in March 1952. The existence of the multi-lingual Hyderabad State, as an integral part of the Indian Union, continued until 1956, and only later was the state trifurcated during the reorganization of states. Marathi-speaking areas of the state were merged into Maharashtra, Kannada-speaking areas into Mysore (Karnataka), and Telugu-speaking Telangana areas comprising ten districts into Andhra Pradesh. Hyderabad, a feudal kingdom-turned-princely state that was in existence for 300-plus years, was erased from the maps.

The geographical location of Telangana has strategic importance, especially in medieval India situated in the Deccan. Telangana acted as a buffer zone for south India and absorbed all shocks of invasions and crusades from the north. Thus, the region underwent many catastrophes and calamities. As a cumulative effect of these historical developments and subsequent misadministration during Mogul and Nizam rule, Telangana remained poverty stricken and backward. "There was very little development either in commerce or agriculture until after the First World War; education was limited, and relations were backward, and it may not be inaccurate to call the state the "most feudal" in the Indian sub-continent (Bhaskar Rao, 1982). A noted sociologist, Dhanagare (1983), described the conditions of the Hyderabad State as "a page from medieval feudal history." Since the region was never exposed to the modern education and administration of British rule directly, the social dynamics, political ethos, and administrative traditions of Telangana were entirely different from those of the other two regions of the state, viz. Coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema.

In the agricultural sector, the region has also not been given enough attention in the post-state formation period. Traditionally, Telangana is famous for its tank irrigation and dry land agriculture. The development paradigm of post-Independent India has been for high-input and high-yield agriculture, which hurts rain-fed and dry land areas. Though two of the largest rivers of peninsular India, Godavari and Krishna, and several of their tributaries, such as Manjeera, Maneru, and Musi, flow through the region, the assured irrigation facilities are inferior. The major crops in the area are paddy, maize, cotton, and groundnut.

Seventy percent of the population, including peasant and labor communities, depends on agriculture directly. The relations in the villages

are still caste-based, and the culture in the countryside predominantly belongs to little tradition. The composition of the Telangana population primarily consists of Backward Classes, Dalits, and Tribals. For centuries, the region was under Muslim rulers such as the Bahmani Sultans, Qutb Shahi, and Asaf Jahi, which influenced Islamic, Central Asian, West Asian, and north Indian cultures and ethnicity upon local traditions and religions.

As the 20th century began, the land holdings and production relations in the erstwhile Nizam dominion had become feudal. Ironically, efforts of reforms in the land tenure and revenue system resulted in more cruel and exploitative forms of feudalism. Pavier and Barry observed (1981), "The villages of Telangana were dominated by a particular type of landlord called Deshmukh. Their origin lay in the administrative reforms of Salarjung I, Prime Minister of the Hyderabad State in the 1860s and 1870s." The *zamindars* and *Jagirdars*, who were initially the supervisors of the land holdings, tax collectors, and contractors in the Nizam administration, became landlords and emerged as very powerful local dictators. As Dhanagare (1983) observes, the *zamindari* system was the main reason for the prevalence of feudal cultural practices such as *Vetti*, *Dasi*, and other forms of human exploitation.

Srikrishna Committee, the Committee for Consultations on the Situation in Andhra Pradesh, the united State for Andhra and Telangana [3], which the government of India constituted during the bifurcation of erstwhile States, gives the basic understanding of population shares of sociocultural communities in the state. Andhra Pradesh state has very nearly the same distribution of SC and ST populations as the rest of the country. In the form, together, these groups account for 22.8% of the population. The Backward Caste groups – same as OBCs elsewhere in the country – constitute almost half of the state's people at slightly more than 45%. The upper castes constitute about 22% of the population, although their importance and influence remain disproportionate to their share of the people. With a significant population of religious minorities (Muslims and others) at about 11%, social groups as political constituencies are thus relatively well defined and organized. While SCs are more or less evenly distributed among the three regions, the proportion of STs is higher in Telangana. OBCs are most significant in number in Telangana,

followed by coastal Andhra. High castes take the lead in coastal Andhra, followed by Rayalaseema, with the lowest presence in Telangana. Muslims have the highest concentration in the city of Hyderabad.

According to the 1991 census, out of 1,05,92,066 Scheduled Caste people of the state, 40 percent live in the Telangana region, which is one percent higher than the percentage of the population of all social groups in Telangana, i.e., 39 percent. In the total population of Telangana, they account for 16.38 percent, whereas in the state population, the percentage of Scheduled Castes is 15.93. The difference of 1.0 percent and 0.45 percent appears negligible, but its impact on them in the social composition is not insignificant.

Of the total number of Scheduled Tribes population of Andhra Pradesh State, 53 percent live in Telangana. The tribal people of the region, according to the 1991 census, are 22,39,327. The S.T.s comprise 8.58 percent of the state's total population, whereas, in Coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema, they account for 5.71 and 2.74 per cents, respectively.

About the Other Backward Caste (OBC) population, there has been no official enumeration after 1931. However, according to unofficial estimates and studies, the OBC population in the region is around 60 percent. Reddy community is the central dominant upper caste in the area, followed by Velamas and Brahmins.

Munnurkapu, Mudiraj, Goud, and Golla are the dominant OBC castes in the region. They occupy the primary block in the population and political power among backward communities. Muslim people also have a considerable number in the region.

#### 4. RELIGION, CASTE, AND CULTURE IN TELANGANA

The impact and domination of Vedic Religion are far less in Telangana when compared to other regions. The region appears to be a conglomeration of innumerable "little traditions." "Cults and worships of a purely local nature still hold firm in the region. Diversity is seen spatially and among the social groups of the population. Beliefs, totems, rituals, and taboos differ from one community to the other. Caste-wise, family-wise, village-wise, and sub-region-wise,

fairs, cults, and practices are observed in Telangana.

Since the social relations in Telangana are traditional and Asiatic, the religious values, rituals, and identities are more primitive. Though both Vedic Hindu and local deity worship co-exist in Telangana, the latter is more popular than the former.

Elmore (1912) rightly observes that in the Telangana region, the little tradition is more dominant and influences the people and their beliefs at all levels. In religious aspects, village deities are more popular than Vedic gods; practically all the people except Brahmins join actively in the worship of these gods.

Dube [18] summarizes the religious and ritual structure of Telangana as follows:

"Hinduism, as it is practiced in a (Telangana) village, is not the Hinduism of the classical philosophical systems of India, for it possesses neither the metaphysical heights nor the abstract content of the latter. It is a religion of fasts, feasts, and festivals, and prescribed rituals cover all the major crises of life. Worship and propitiation of gods and spirits follow the annual round of festivals and the ritual of the human life cycle. Disease and difficulty may also necessitate invoking assistance from these sources."

The field study results in the Karimnagar district also corroborate Dube's observation. The study found that shrines and idols of the village deities receive people's attention and worship. The village goddess worship is sacrifice-based, and most of the sacrifices involve slaughtering animals and fowls; hence, the Brahmin is excluded from the process by default.

Whitehead's (1921) observations also endorse the same. He writes, "one of the most striking features of the worship of village deities is the absence of anything like a priestly caste in connection with it. Every other department of village work belongs to a special caste, and the ordinary worship of Vishnu and Shiva, the priestly caste of the Brahmin, is supreme. However, in worshipping the village deities, the *pujaris* are indiscriminately drawn from the lower castes".

Historically, Shaivism is predominant among the mainstream religions in the Karimnagar district,

where the study is conducted. There are a number of Shaiva temples like *Vemulawada Rajarajeswara swamy*, *KothakondaVeeranna, Komuravelli Mallikharjuna swamy*. The *Muktheswara* temple at *Kaleshwaram* lingam is believed to be one of the twelve *dyotirlingas* in India and one *linga* of *thrilingas*, which the names Telugu and Telangana are supposed to have derived.

A few Vaishnava temples also exist in the district. The prominent ones are the Dharmapuri Laxmi Narasimha Swamy temple, Illanthakunta Kodanda Ramalayam, and Seetharama temple at Ramagiri near Peddapally. Manthani, Dhoolikatta, Bonkur, Jainoor, and Nagunoor villages are known for district Buddhist and Jain cultures.

Though they come under great tradition, the Shaivite and Vaishnava sects of Telangana had a history of opposing Vedic Religion. Karnataka's Basavanna's influence was immense in Telangana, and two crucial Veerashaiva poets came from Telangana – Maallikaarjuna Panditaaradhya and Palkuriki Somana. Both the poets adopted people's form of verse, 'dwpada,' and strongly criticized the Brahminist Religion. Vaishnava sect has got strengthened during Muslim rule only. Srivaishnavaites- followers of Sri Ramanujacharya proponents of VishistaAdwaita- migrated from Tamilnadu (especially from Srirangam) during the 16-17 centuries towards Andhra. Several migrants settled in different parts of Telangana. Aristocratic sections of Telangana have welcomed the Vaishnava religion and converted it into it. Many other communities and castes too followed them. Vaishnavism opposed, in principle, the caste differences and put the dedication (Bhakti) in a superior position over rituals. Vaishnavism was more accommodative and straightforward to follow. Islam and the Sufi sect have influenced the Vaishnava sect to some extent. The impact and influence of Shaiva and Vaishnava sects in Telangana can be seen from the vertical division among all castes in the region. Most of the castes in the area have sub-sects, namely Shaiva and Vaishnava. There are no intermarriages between these two sub-sects.

Apart from the great tradition's puranic gods, worship of local deities and goddesses play an essential role in the countryside. Non-brahmin caste people worship the deities like Pochamma, Yellamma, Maisamma, Mahankali, Durgamma, and SammakkaSarakka. The places of worship

of these village deities are generally located outside the village, and all the castes worship them. *Peddamma*, *Pochamma*, *Ellamma*, *Maisamma*, *Maremma*, *Eedamma*, *Mahankali*, *Durgamma* are the important village deities of the region. Specific communities worship their 'own God or Goddess' only. For instance, the *Golla* and *Kuruma* communities of Karimnagar worship *Beeranna*, and the Telugu community claims *Peddamma* as their caste goddess, whereas *Padmasali* caste people pay reverence to *Markandeya*, etc.

In any religious organization, ritual processes play a more significant role. The deities and goddesses, their festivals, and fairs are the central points to reflect the people's beliefs and help shape the socio-cultural order of that particular society.

At the practical level, in the Telangana region there, several such religious practices exist. Those practices can be classified theoretically into two main belief structures based on their spiritual and ritual processes, Brahmin and non-Brahmin religious orders.

A Brahmin religious order is mainly the religious belief structure of *Dwijas* or twice-born people, emphasizing Hindu *puranic* gods and *dharma sastras*, popularized by Hindu *darshans*. In other words, it represents excellent tradition or Brahmanism, a dominant branch of Hinduism. Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, and their other *avatars* are the main gods in the system. Traditionally, the cults in the *Brahmanic* religious order are projected as sober, and all their gods of theirs are vegetarians. The priest of this cult will be the Brahmin.

The parallel order to Brahmanism in rural India is the non-Brahmin religious order. Several studies describe this form as Little Tradition (Singer; Marriott – 1955), Dravidian Tradition (Whitehead 1982, Elmore 1925, Shastri 1916), and Dalit Bahujan Tradition (Ilaiyah – 1995). Worship of deities, spirits, and ancestors is the main element in the Dalit religious order. Dumont (1966), Srinivas (1952), Dube [18], Kosambi [19], Thurston [20], and several others focused much light on it. In recent times Dalit writers and ideologues initiated a robust debate on Dalit religious order. Kanchallaiah (1995) distinguishes the Dalit Bahujan religious order from the Hindu one.

A non-Brahmin religious order is a very informal and most ancient order in India. The roots of this

order can be traced to pre-Vedic communities and their beliefs. According to historians, the worship of deities and spirits was the soul of Indian aboriginal communities, which has been changing from time to time. The dominant nature of Hindu Brahmanism is slowly assimilating the aboriginal culture. Kosambi [19] rightly pointed out the Hindu religion's imperial nature. He writes;

"The stratification of Indian society itself reflects and explains a great deal of Indian history, is studied the field without prejudice. It can easily be shown that many castes over their lower social and economic status for their present or former refusal to take to food production and plow agriculture. The lowest castes often preserve tribal rites, usages, and myths. A little higher up, we see these religious observances and legends in transition, often by assimilating other parallel traditions. Another step above, they have been rewritten by Brahmins to suit themselves; still higher, we come to what is 'called' Hindu culture.

According to Kosambi, Brahmanism was to be responsible for disappearing the local cults and lower caste religious traditions. In his words, "the main work of Brahmanism has been to gather the myths together, display them as unified cycles of stories, and set them in a better developed social framework. Many originally different gods and cults are identified (synchronized) or several deities made into a family or a royal court of the gods" (1962:21).

There is no lack of work on Indian Religion. However, unfortunately, the majority of these studies were focused on Brahmanism, a dominant branch of Hinduism, and neglected the other part of the Indian Religion, i.e., the Dalit religious order. In the studies of the early period, discussion about deities and the worship process of lower castes is limited to a page or two. At the same time, tremendous treatment is given to the Brahmanic gods. Krishna Shastri (1916) rightly observes this discriminatory treatment of historians; he writes, "almost every village of South India, however insignificant it may be, has a shrine for one or more goddesses of this nature. Generally, they are situated outside the village in groves of trees much dreaded by the people and are considered to be the *grama devatas*, the guardian deities of the village. These deities do not have any interesting system of philosophy behind them. They do not have any written history, and their history

contains legends recited by wandering singers who attend the festivals and worship the deities".

In the Telangana region, such deities are more popular among the people. These deities are known as the seven sisters of *Shakthi*. In every village, worship of these deities is a regular phenomenon. Pambala and Baindla community people worship these *Grama devatas*.

## 5. FAIRS AND FESTIVALS

In any rural social setup, fairs and festivals assume a greater significance. They not only represent the religious beliefs but also reflect the socio-cultural interaction and inter-dependency of the people (Inapur: 1982). Festivals, Fairs, and other religious congregations build unity and interaction among the people and reaffirm their faith and respect for their beliefs. In the Telangana region, Fairs, Festivals, and other local *Jathras* have an essential place at family and social levels. All these religious celebrations and functions can be broadly classified into four types as

- i) Family Festivals
- ii) Community Festivals
- iii) Inter-village level festivals like fairs and jatharas
- iv) Festivals having regional character and an all-India character

Family festivals are purely confined to the family level. These festivals are broadly divided into vrathas and ancestral worship. Generally, people perform vrathas for prosperity and the good looks of gods and goddesses. The second types of family function are traditional worship. People in Telangana worship their ancestors at least once a year on Pethra (pithru) Amavasya day.

Community-level festivals play a more significant role in the social setup.

These festivals contribute a lot to mutual understanding and solidarity among the people of a particular community. Worship of caste goddesses and deities and celebrations of life cycle functions like birth, puberty, marriage, and death rites and rituals. Moreover, the third type of festival is inter-village fairs and carnivals like jatharas, and thirunals, where people from several villages assemble on a particular day and pray deity or god. The *jatharas* are customarily held annually at temple sites and pilgrim centers. Except for the festivals with national or all Indian

characters, all the other festivals represent tradition and collective group activity.

The last and fourth type of festival is known for its national and regional importance and practice. The festivals such as Dussehra, Sankranthi, Bathukamma panduga, and Ugadi. are celebrated by all communities in the region. The celebrations in the 'great traditions' practice will come under this classification.

Apart from all these activities, the people of Telangana organize common festivals for their village deities and occasionally respect worship various shakti to appease evil spirits. The worship village of goddesses is a common phenomenon in which all communities participate.

Elmore (1925:48) describes these worships as "common worships." He says, "In Telangana, the little tradition influences the people and their beliefs at all levels. In religious aspects, village deities are very popular than Vedic gods. Practically all the people except the Brahmins join actively in the worship of these gods, and the Brahmins are by no means indifferent. The Religion of Dalit communities, popularly known as village goddess worship, is sacrifice-based, and most of the sacrifices are in the form of slaughtering of animals. Hence, usually, a Brahmin will not act as a priest. An occasional exception, however, is found. The Brahmins entirely commonly direct some parts of the worship and often are present, usually standing at a distance.

Henry Whitehead's (1921:62) observation also immensely supported Elmore's views. He writes, "One of the most striking features of the worship of the village deities is the absence of anything like a priestly caste in connection with it. Every other department of village work belongs to a special caste, and in the ordinary worship of Vishnu and Shiva, the priestly caste of the Brahmins is supreme. Nevertheless, the pujaris are randomly drawn from the lower castes to worship the village deities. Though in any one village, the pujaris of a particular goddess nearly always belong to one particular caste".

Whitehead's observations were mainly from Coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema regions. In Telangana, the Pambala or Baindla officiate the priestly function, especially the ceremonies connected with the sprinkling of the blood.



The worship of deities is not confined only to lower castes. The peasants, artisans, and service castes also participate in it. In more primitive villages where it may be presumed that primitive customs prevail, it is remarkable that a variety of people take an official part in the worship. The potter, the carpenter, the toddy-tapper, the washer man, Malas and Madigas, and the Brahmin, Karanam or village accountant, have all their parts to play.

The widespread worship and belief show the popularity and importance of the village goddesses. The people collectively pray to these gods as individuals and community members. They offer faith in them, and these gods have a lot of moral and psychological impact on them. Through the relation and closeness with these goddesses and their role in rituals, worships, and ceremonies, Pambalas gained respect among the village community.

## 6. CASTE AND HIERARCHY

Telangana's hierarchy of castes and their religious inclinations are in the following order.

- Brahmins
- Vaishyas
- Peasants and Artisans
- Service castes
- Nomads and Semi-nomads
- Other religious groups
- Dalits and Dalit priests.

### 6.1 Brahmins

In Telangana, the Brahmin population is significantly less, and most of the Brahmins settled in the riverbeds of Godavari and Krishna. Historically, very little is known about the entry of Brahmins into Telangana. Oral literature says that Brahmins first colonized the country under the leadership of Agastya, a celebrated Vedic sage, penetrated through the Vindhya Mountains, which are fabled to have prostrated themselves before him and advanced as far to the South as Cape Cameroon (BC 500). According to Srinivasa Rao Vepachedu, A group of Brahmins migrated approximately 600 years ago (1300 1400AD) from Saurashtra towards the south of Vindhya and settled on the banks of River Kaveri in Tamandu and adopted the Tamil language. These Brahmins are related to the Ayyars of Tamilnadu. Later, some of these Brahmins migrated northward toward coastal Andhra to the River Godavari basin and are called Dravida Brahmins [21].

However, Brahmanism spread in the region only after 1000 AD. Brahmins enjoyed high status in the Kakatiya dynasty (1150-1325). To oppress the domination of the Jains in the region and resurrection Shaivite culture, the Kakatiyas encouraged Brahmins (Prathapa Reddy, 1992). Under the Vijayanagara Empire, the sovereign power of southern Brahmins had reached its zenith. One important thing is that all the Brahmins of Telangana until Kakatiya rule were Shite. Since the fall of the Kakatiya and Vijayanagara dynasties, the influence of Brahmanism in Telangana declined. The Brahmins are divided into two major sects viz., Vaidic and Niyogis. Vaidic Brahmins are the priests of Hindu *Vaidic* gods. The Niyogis are little secularised Brahmins. Many were engaged as writers and village accountants in Kakatiya Empire and continued their presence even in Nizam's dominion.

Regarding the land settlements and taxes, the Nizam always depended on them. Their primary job was fixing the land revenue and maintaining records related to land holdings. Regarding social status, the Niyogis rank below the *Vaidiks* with whom they share the food. However, no marital relationships. They worship Vedic gods, but occasionally they also participate in the worship of village deities such as Pochamma, Poturaju, Yellamma, Mutyalamma, and others (Hason, 1989). Brahmins who belong to neither sect do exist in Telangana, such as Srivaishnavas, Madhvas, and Golconda Vyapaaris are some of them.

### 6.2 Vaishyas

Vaishyas occupy the second rung on the social ladder. They are locally known as Komati, traditionally a trading caste. Every village of Telangana has one or two Komati families.

Other communities like Gandla, Lingayats, and Satani also enjoy a similar status in Telangana. They are vegetarians, and inter-dining is acceptable among these castes. Even Komatis eat Kachha (cooked) food from their hands. All these communities, regarding social status, come almost next to Brahmins.

### 6.3 Peasants

Reddy, Velama, and Munnurkapu are the major peasant castes in Telangana. The main occupation of these communities is agriculture. Among these three, Reddy and Velama enjoy

almost equal status. Munnurkapu is a widely diffused cultivating caste, probably an offshoot from the Kapus and indigenous to the Nizam's dominions. As these three communities are peasant castes, they pay more reverence to the animistic deities than to the great gods of the pantheon. Pochamma, the goddess of smallpox, is worshipped, and worship of other village goddesses such as Maisamma, Yellamma, and Mutyalamma is also practiced. Kapus and Reddys worship these gods on Friday in the month of *Ashadha* (July-August).

The farmers perform the ceremony to the goddess whenever the caste suffers from a disease. The ceremony ends with sacrificing a goat in the name of the goddess. Kapus also worship another village deity by the name of Balamma, the neglect of whose worship, it is popularly believed, brings calamity. Generally, the worship took place on the 15th of *Chaitra* (February-March) and the 9th of the lunar half of *Aswija* (September-October) in every household. A small earthen pot, painted profusely with strips of *Sunnam* (burnt lime) and covered with a lighted lamp, represents the deity.

For all these deities and ceremonial occasions, the Pambala or other lower caste people act as priests, and they perform the whole ceremony. The cultivators worship these gods and sacrifice a goat, sheep, or chicken to satisfy the goddesses in general and at the time of harvesting (Hasan, 1989).

#### 6.4 Artisans and Others

All major artisan castes, i.e., Kammari (blacksmith), Kummari (Potter), Vadala (carpenter), Avusala/Kamsali (goldsmith), Kanchari (bronze worker), Padmashali (weaver), Medari (basket maker) are present in Telangana. Though the image-making artisan communities (smiths) claim partial brahminhood, their involvement in agricultural and rural livelihoods makes them worship the animistic deities. The other artisan communities like Medari, Boya, Tenugu, Muttarasi, etc., honor all the village deities.

Gouda, a taddy tapping community, worships Yellamma, Pochamma, Idamma, Durgamma, Matishanu, and Mutyalamma and offers goats or sheep yearly. *Padmasalis* or *Sales* are now more inclined towards their "modern" god Markandeya. Reverence is paid to Pochamma, Yellamma, Maisamma, Maremma, and other minor village

deities. They also offer animals to appease deities. In the Medak district, some Padmasalis engage priests from among themselves, instead of Brahmins, for all religious and ceremonial observances. In other sections of Telangana, there is a tendency toward conformity to Brahmanical rites, and the caste members strive to abstain from consuming non-vegetarian food and alcohol and wearing the sacred thread (Hasan, 1989).

Gollas worship Pochamma and Maisamma praying to them to protect sheep and cattle from gattara (disease). They sacrifice goats and sheep at temples to appease these goddesses and ancestors.

Mutrasi, Boya, and Tenugu communities are traditional fruit collectors and in-land Fishermen. Their main goddess is *Peddamma*, the elder sister of the seven Shaktis and Pothuraju. In some parts of Telangana, the dependent priestly caste of these communities is also called Pambala.

#### 6.5 Service Castes

These communities include castes like Chakali (washermen) and Mangali (barbers). Until recently, people of these castes were *vetti* workers in the *gadis* of zamindars and full-time servants. Chakali and Mangali take part and work for all festivals and functions, individual or community functions, in the village. These communities not only worship the village deities but also act as priests and receive, as their perquisite, the offerings or a part of the offerings made to the deities.

#### 6.6 Nomads and Semi-Nomadic Communities

Apart from these village communities, there are several nomadic tribes and Semi-nomadic communities in Telangana. These people settle partially or entirely in a village, visit surrounding towns, perform their folk arts, and accept alms from the villagers. Some communities sing the songs, religious rhymes, and Thathwalu, which were popular in the Bhakti cult. Among them Budabukkala, Peddammala, Balasanthula Picchakuntla, Gangireddula, Dommara, Rajannala, Poosaverla, Dakkali, Dasari are very popular in Telangana. These communities visit the village during the daytime by singing devotional and spiritual songs and begging for alms.

Most of these communities are shaivaites and deity worshippers, and they believe in Peddavara, Pochamma, Balamma, and Pothalingadu or Potharaju. However, for various reasons in recent times, these communities are also losing their identity.

### 6.7 Other Groups

In this section, we may classify village communities that neither directly worship the main Hindu gods nor practice the little village tradition.

In Telangana, by and large, every community worships village goddesses and participates in the ritual processes except Muslims and tribal groups. In fact, in plain areas, some tribal communities like Lambadas and Erukals also worship the village deity at their community temple or place of worship.

They invite the Pambala, Baindla, or Dubbula to perform the ritual activity and celebrate it as their exclusive function.

### 6.8 Dalits and Dalit Priests

Dalit communities are predominant in the Telangana region.

According to the 1991 census, out of the total 105,92,066 Scheduled Caste population of Andhra Pradesh, 42,73,121 live in Telangana districts accounting for 40 percent of the total population of Scheduled Castes in the State.

In the Telangana region, where feudal relations prevailed for several years, the Dalit castes were under slavery and exploitation by upper caste landlords. The Feudal lords used to engage Dalits under the *vetti* and *Bagela* systems and extract work without paying any wages.

*Vetti* is a system that legitimized caste occupational labor services and serfdom by the members of the lower caste and untouchables to *Doras*, a combination of the landlord, money lender, and village official who traditionally enjoy all the privileges and services of occupational castes.

The *Bagela*, *Bagutha*, *Begar*, *Vetti*, slave labor, and bonded labor are the different forms of serfdom in Feudal society that existed in the region. On the other hand, several inhuman practices like *Devadasi*, *Basavi*, *Matangi*, and

*Sivaparvathi* were prevalent in the area. Under these customs, a woman should not marry anyone in her lifetime and should have sexual relations with *Doras* and their men. In other words, *Doras*, *Patels*, *Patwaris*, and other officials used to exploit these Dalit girls sexually. Dalit women and their girl children were considered *Dasis* (bonded servants) in the hands of *Doras*.

Dalit communities in the region are chiefly divided into two broad groups viz., Mala and Madiga. Officially there are 59 caste groups among the Scheduled Castes in Andhra Pradesh, though all these communities do not exist in the region. Since the area was under feudal oppression and an orthodox political regime, the occupational mobility and professional diversity among these Dalit communities were minimal. Moreover, the original cultural and traditional communities still exist in the region. Apart from their occupational differences, Telangana Dalit communities are polarized as Mala and Madiga as sub-castes and satellite castes.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Caste and Religion are crucial elements of Indian society; they contribute to the culture and shape the community's structure. These two elements form the hierarchy in rural areas: status, power, and authority. Traditionally sociologists and social anthropologists rely on these two factors to understand the characteristics of society. It is found that a village has multiple identities and cultures. It is a case of unity in diversity, the core value of India.

Historically, in from the ancient period to the present the non-brahmanical heritage and legacy prevailed. The identity and personality of Telangana are historically rooted in non-vedic and folk religious and cultural traditions. For about a century the people of Telangana, especially traders, artisans and craftsmen, peasants, service and productive castes, Dalits, Adivasis practiced folk religion and it significantly impacted their culture, traditions and world view. A number of non-brahmanic/heretic sects emerged as an alternative religion to Vedic/Hindu religion but also threw up alternative ideology, spirituality, and religious practices. Available historical, literary and archeological evidence indicates that Buddhism and Jainism were embraced by the vast majority of non-Brahman castes. Thus the anti-brahmanical Dhammic and

religious traditions and principles remained an integral part of Telangana society, culture, and ethos. In fact, in Telangana Buddhism, Jainism, and other heretical religions contained the spread of Vedic religion and its ideology, while in the medieval period Saivism, Vaishnavism, Bhakti, Sufi movements propounded social equality and justice. In the modern period, anti-caste social reformers and intellectuals were inspired by the non-brahmanic religious philosophy and ideology and launched militant anti-caste movements for achieving social equality and justice. In contemporary times, shramanic principles of freedom, equality, and fraternity became the guiding force of non-brahmanic identity and self-respect movements.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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