

# Investigating The Lost Adivasi Sustainable Culture: The Fascinating Case Of The Thoti Adivasi Community In The Adilabad District

Dr. S. Kannan

Assistant Professor, ICFAI Law School, IFHE (Deemed to be University), Hyderabad.

---

## Abstract

*The Adivasi communities around the world possess distinct and unique cultural traditions that promote sustainability. In India, these communities maintain a variety of traditional practices despite their diversity. However, many of these unique, sustainable cultural practices are at risk of being lost. The Thoti Adivasi community in Adilabad District is experiencing a decline in traditional practices such as tattoo-making and storytelling, particularly through the musical tradition of 'Gond Gatha.' To preserve this cultural heritage, efforts are needed. One viable solution is to revive these traditions by teaching them in the Tribal Ashram Schools located in the Adilabad District. This approach would help ensure the preservation of the community's unique sustainable cultural heritage and values.*

**Keywords:** Thoti, Adilabad, Sustainability, Culture, Preservation.

---

## INTRODUCTION

In India, the term "tribe" is commonly referred to as "Adivasi," which means "original inhabitant" or "indigenous people." However, the term "Scheduled Tribes" (STs) does not fully capture the essence of "Adivasis". "Scheduled Tribes" is an administrative classification intended to offer specific constitutional privileges, protections, and benefits to historically disadvantaged and underprivileged segments of the population (Garg & Upadhyay, 2024; Omvedt, 1980). This administrative label does not accurately represent all groups identified as "Adivasis." Out of the 5,653 distinct communities in India, 730 are recognized as "tribes" or "Adivasis" under Article 342 of the Constitution of India<sup>1</sup>. International organizations, such as the United Nations, generally classify STs as "indigenous peoples." As of 2011, the ST population constitutes 8.6% of India's total population, making the country home to the largest concentration of indigenous peoples in the world (Kumar, 2021).

Adivasi communities are deeply connected to their territories, which are fundamental to their existence. These lands are not only the homes of their spirits and ancestors but also the sources of their knowledge, technology, way of life, religion, and culture. Historically, Adivasis functioned as self-governing "first nations". During most of the pre-colonial period, they were generally regarded as part of the "unknown frontier" of various states, where the authority of local rulers did not fully extend. As a result, Adivasi communities managed their own governance without external influence.

The concept of private property was introduced with the British Permanent Settlement in 1793, along with the establishment of the "Zamindari" system. This system transferred control over vast territories, including Adivasi lands, to designated feudal lords for the purpose of revenue collection by the British. This marked the beginning of a significant and forced alteration in the relationship between Adivasis and their territories, as well as a shift in the power dynamics between Adivasis and others (Bijoy, 2003). The dominant external caste-based religion established and enforced a rigid and highly discriminatory hierarchical structure, deeply rooted in cultural beliefs. This structure significantly influenced how the larger society, particularly within the Indian diaspora, perceived Adivasis, shaping their social, economic, and political standing. As a result, Adivasis were often relegated to the lowest tier of the social hierarchy, a situation that became normalized and influenced social and political decision-making, predominantly

---

<sup>1</sup> [Press Release Ifrma Page: Press Information Bureau \(pib.gov.in\)](https://pib.gov.in/Press-Release-Ifrma-Page)

controlled by upper castes. Additionally, ancient Indian scriptures, authored by these upper castes, further legitimized this hierarchy. (Ul Hassan, 1989).

Adivasi communities around the world have distinct cultural traditions. In India, each Adivasi community has unique cultural practices that are sustainable by nature. While British scholars documented some of these traditions during colonial rule, after India's independence, Indian scholars and various government agencies have also contributed to this documentation. However, much of their sustainable practices, which are documented and makes their culture unique, is at risk of disappearing (Elizabeth, 2000). Many Adivasi communities are migrating in search of livelihoods and assimilating into modern society. Unfortunately, Adivasi populations are often misunderstood, seen as superstitious and impoverished, which leads to misconceptions about their culture. In reality, the Adivasi way of life is harmonious with nature and sustainable, as evidenced by the practices in tribal villages. To explore this further, a detailed survey was conducted on the Thoti Adivasi community in the present-day Adilabad District to understand their lost socio-cultural practices.

### **ADIVASI COMMUNITIES IN ADILABAD DISTRICT**

After the reorganization of districts in Telangana State in 2016, the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) in Utnoor now operates across four districts: Adilabad, Asifabad, Nirmal, and Mancherial. According to the 2011 census, the total tribal population in Telangana is 9.08%, which includes 32 different tribal communities. In Adilabad district, the tribal population consists of 259,461 individuals, representing several communities, including the Gond, Lambada, Kolam/Manevarlu, Pardhan, Andh, Thoti, and Naikpod. Notably, the Kolam and Thoti are recognized as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)<sup>2</sup>. The Thoti community is a small Adivasi group associated with the Raj Gonds. The Thoti population living in the districts of Adilabad, Hyderabad, Karimnagar, Khammam, Mahboobnagar, Medak, Nalgonda, Nizamabad, and Warangal in Telangana are recognized as Scheduled Tribes. However, this study specifically focuses on the Thoti Adivasi population residing in the newly formed Adilabad district.

### **THOTI ADIVASI COMMUNITY**

The Thoti tribe is a primitive Adivasi community located in the Adilabad district of Telangana. The Government of India officially recognized them as such in 1983. They are the smallest Adivasi group in the Adilabad district, with a population of 2,231 according to the 2011 census. The Thotis inhabit the villages of Utnoor, Tosham, Pitlaguda, and Chinchughat.

Historian Thurston (1909) describes the Thotis as village servants in the Rayalaseema area of Andhra Pradesh, where they are often known as scavengers and other types of menial workers, many of whom belong to Scheduled Castes. Additionally, Muslim scavengers in Hyderabad are also referred to as Thotis (Ziyouddin, 2018). However, this study specifically focuses on the Thoti Adivasi population in the newly formed Adilabad district.

In the 1961 census, the Thoti Adivasi population in what was then known as Andhra Pradesh was reported to be 646. By the 1971 census, this number had significantly increased to 1,785, reflecting remarkable growth of 226.92%. However, by the 1981 census, the population decreased to 1,416. The literacy rate among the Thoti people in 1981 was 17.94%, with only 4.51% of females being literate. The gender ratio reported in 1981 was 1,004 females for every 1,000 males. The 1991 census indicated that the Thoti population had risen to 3,654, but then decreased to 2,074 in 2001 (Rao et. al. 2012). According to the 2011 census, the Thoti population in Telangana was recorded at 2,231, with 0.49% of

---

<sup>2</sup> The government of India has identified certain tribal groups as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) among the Scheduled Tribes based on specific criteria. These criteria include: 1. Pre-agricultural level of technology and extreme backwardness. 2. Stagnant or declining population. 3. Very low level of literacy.

them residing in the Adilabad district. A significant portion of the Thoti community lacks basic literacy skills.

The Thoti are a minority Adivasi community found in the tribal areas of Adilabad district. In Maharashtra, they are known as Korka Gond and Burud Gond. The Thoti people speak Gonti as their mother tongue and have a more traditional appearance compared to the Pardhans. They are characterized by darker skin pigmentation and share similar clothing and ornaments with the neighbouring Gond people.

The Thotis occupy a lower social ranking among the Adivasi communities in the Adilabad district. They worship Bheema as their supreme God and accept food from both the Gonds and the Pardhans, although the Pardhans do not accept food from them. Due to their marginalized position, Thoti is not allowed to participate in Jangubai worship, Gusadi or Dandari dance, and Perse pen worship of Gonds. The stories and songs recited by the Thotis are largely similar to those of the Pardhans, but they also have unique narratives about the god Bhimana.

During ceremonial occasions, Thotis play the kingri, a three-stringed fiddle, and blow trumpets. Many Thoti women are skilled tattoo artists, and they are responsible for the complex tattoos covering the arms, shoulders, and chests of many Gond women. For their services, they are compensated with cash or grain and often travel to Gond villages where their skills are in demand. The Thotis worship the Gond gods, participate in the same social system, and observe similar social customs. However, they appear to be less inclined to abandon their traditional role as bards in favor of agriculture, as very few Thotis have become independent farmers. (Haimendorf, 2021).

The Thotis, similar to the Pardhans, are recognized as the bards of the Gonds. They take part in Gond marriage and funeral ceremonies, providing music for entertainment. In return, they receive money and gifts from the Gond community. In Telugu-speaking villages, Thotis can often be found wandering through the fields during the sowing and harvesting seasons, collecting food grains by begging from the farmers (Kumar, 2021). Opinions regarding the relationship between the Thotis, Gonds, and Pardhans vary. Russell (2016) describes the Thotis as a sub-tribe of the Pardhans. Like the Pardhans, the Thotis are known as professional bards and musicians for the Gonds. The stories and folk songs they recite are often similar to those of the Pardhans. Additionally, the Thotis possess clan names<sup>3</sup> and social customs that are akin to those of the Gonds. Thoti women are skilled tattoo artists, known for their elaborate designs that cover the arms, shoulders, and chests of many Gond and Kolam women. They are compensated with cash or grains for their services and make regular visits to Gond villages to provide their tattooing work (Srinivas, 1948).

The village served as the primary political unit in tribal life, with traditional panchayats functioning as the governing body for village affairs. These panchayats were managed by secular leaders and included various functionaries, both secular and religious, who were essential to the tribal organization. The activities of the traditional panchayats were guided by tribal customs and overseen by hereditary leaders. These leaders administered justice based on established principles of fairness and equity, and the rulings of the tribal panchayat or village headman were regarded as law by the tribal community.

In every Gond village, there was a headman known as a Patla or Patel. This position was hereditary, typically held by the largest clan group in the village. Usually, the family that founded the village had the right to the Patla position, and succession passed down through the family line, often with the eldest son as the designated heir. If a Patla died without an heir, another member from the Patla's clan would be chosen to take on the role. The Patla is highly respected among the villagers and serves as a guide and custodian of traditional values. He prioritizes the welfare of the village and influences decisions and actions within the community. The village Patla presides over panchayat meetings, and his rulings are considered law by the Gond people. He manages judicial, administrative, social, and religious matters

---

<sup>3</sup> They are Yerwan Saga, Sarwan Saga, Siwen Saga and Nalwan Saga.

and is required to attend all important village meetings. In disputes with other villages or during functions outside the village, the Patla represents his community (Metry, 2019).

While the implementation of the Gram Panchayat system has introduced a new village leadership structure with the position of “Sarpanch,” traditional leadership remains prevalent in Gond villages (Jharja, 2025). Historically, the Thotis have transitioned to settled agriculture, cultivating various crops. In addition to farming, they craft small bamboo items such as baskets and mats, and they also sell medicinal plants. They collect forest products, including Mahua flowers and wax. During certain seasons, when agricultural work is scarce, they often work as daily wage laborers (Rao, 2024).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The objective of this study is to identify and analyze the lost sustainable socio-cultural practices of the Thoti Adivasi community in the Adilabad district. Data was collected through fieldwork conducted in the villages of Tosam, Pitlaguda, Gurjamannur, Utnoor, and Chinchughat using the snowball sampling method. Observations and interviews were conducted with community members to gain insights into their sustainable socio-cultural practices. The interviews involved village elders, and informal observations were carried out to enhance the reliability of the data. Additionally, data was collected through direct observations of some festivals that took place during the field investigation. The qualitative data was analyzed descriptively using content analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The Adivasi communities in Adilabad enrich their sustainable socio-cultural life with their own Gond songs, dances, and traditional tattoos. The tribal culture of Adilabad is vividly portrayed in the modern world through poetry, art, craft, and music. While conducting fieldwork, I had the opportunity to observe two prominent socio-cultural practices within the Thoti community through in-depth interviews and informal and direct observations.

### **BARDS OF THE GOND COMMUNITY**

The information gathered indicates that the Thoti tribe, similar to the Pradhans, served as bards for the Gonds. The Gonds referred to both the Pradhans and the Thotis as “Patadi.” Like the Pradhans, the Thotis sing Gond history at their annual Jataras, recite stories and folk songs, and perform with the Kingri, a musical instrument, during community events such as marriages and funerals.

The Jhatur, another musical instrument used by the Gond community, was played by the Pahandi Kupar Lingal in his quest to find the Gond Gods. Haimendorf (2021) described this instrument as resembling a guitar, although it has some differences in construction. It is made from teak wood, a round dried bottle gourd, and yak tail hair. In contrast, the instrument used by Kumra Lingu, a Thoti Adivasi, is crafted from a bamboo stick, horse tail hair, and a round dried bottle gourd. Kumra Lingu's ancestors learned to create and play a similar instrument from the Gond community.

The Thoti community incorporates the Kingri, an instrument borrowed from the Hirasuka tradition, which is associated with an ancestor of the Pardhan who played it during the Perse Pen worship of the Gond people. Additionally, the Thoti tribe uses the Dumru, an instrument that was not originally part of any local tribal culture. Instruments like the Jatur, Kingri, and Dumru are vital for the Thotis as they help preserve and convey the history of the Gond people.



**Fig 1: The researcher in Divya Guda village with the Jatur music instrument**

The Jatur (see in Fig 1) was exclusively played by the late K.S. Kumra Lingu from Divyaguda village<sup>4</sup> in Chinchughat, who recited stories and sang about the mythological tales of the Gonds. Sadly, with his passing on December 4, 2022, the tradition of making and playing the Jatur has diminished (Kannan, 2024). The next generation has not embraced this practice, as they are increasingly influenced by Westernization and Modernization. This trend reflects a loss of indigenous knowledge and a sustainable musical tradition. Nevertheless, the Thoti community continues to actively play the Kikri and Dumru.

#### **TATTOO PRACTICE (SRINGER POTTU)**

The Gond, Pardhan, and Kolam women in the Adilabad region have a rich cultural tradition of adorning their bodies with tattoos. These tattoos hold significant cultural and spiritual value, as they are believed to offer protection against illnesses and negative influences. Often featuring images of deities or personal names, these tattoos are highly regarded for their supposed ability to shield individuals from diseases and malevolent forces. Among these tattoos, the more intricate designs known as “Kohkana” in the Gondi language are particularly noteworthy. They are thought to protect exposed body parts from evil and are believed to have healing properties for certain ailments.



<sup>4</sup> The newly formed exclusive Thoti Adivasi community inhabited the village, which was named after the Ms. Divya Devrajan District Collector (2017-2021) who worked for their welfare.

|                                  |                                |                                  |                                  |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| (a)Thoti women making tattoo ink | (b)Tattoo marks on hands (let) | (c)Tattoo marks on hands (Right) | (d) Tattoo marks on the Forehead |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|

**Fig 2: Tattoo ink making and tattooing Gonds by Thoti women**

Historically, the Thotti tribe undertook the task of tattooing Gond and Kolam women, They often included their tribe's sacred crescent moon and star symbol on the women's foreheads (see Fig. 2(d)), along with two dots on either side of their eyes and one on their chin. The Thottis were compensated for these services with money or grain, and they regularly visited Gond villages to carry out the tattoos. The initiation of the tattooing process occurs around the age of 5, and the resulting patterns endure throughout the individual's lifetime. The tattoo ink is produced by soaking “vegu” tree wood (botanical name: *pterocarpus marsupium*) in water for two hours and subsequently blending it with Lampblack, a charcoal variety of fine texture (see Fig. 2 (a)). The “singer pottu,” a specific kind of tattoo, necessitates specific paraphernalia, including a pot, three pins bound by a cotton rope, and an extract derived from the “vegu” tree wood.

Tattooing was historically very popular, especially among Gond and Kolam Adivasi women, as it represented their identity. They used to have numerous tattoo marks on their backs, arms, breasts, legs, and faces. The most common designs included columns with alternating vertical and horizontal lines, dots, stars, and crosses (see Fig. 2 (b & c)). However, contact with non-tribal communities has led them to abandon full-body tattooing, practicing it only on the forehead, cheeks, and chin, where they typically tattoo a dot or a semicircle with a dot above it to symbolize the moon and a star, which is the symbol of their Adivasi Community. It is believed that a young girl is not eligible for marriage unless she has at least one tattoo mark on her body. These tattoos are usually applied during childhood by a Thoti, who periodically visits their villages for this purpose. The community holds the belief that tattoo marks protect individuals from evil spirits and ghosts.

In contemporary times, many women from the Gond and Kolam Adivasi communities have chosen to forgo the practice of receiving tattoos due to the influence of Western lifestyles and the associated stigma. Nevertheless, some tribal and non-tribal individuals still seek out these women for traditional healing purposes, such as alleviating joint pain, leading some Thottis to pursue alternative vocations. Despite the continuation of sustainable agricultural practices among certain tribal members, a significant portion is migrating to nearby towns, where they seek employment as construction laborers. Concurrently, younger community members pursue education, while the elderly either remain in the village or relocate to other areas in pursuit of livelihood opportunities. Economic survival has taken precedence over socio-cultural activities within the community.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The analysis of the sustainable cultural practices of the Thoti Adivasi community shows that modernization, westernization, and globalization have significantly influenced their traditional ways of life. These changes are particularly evident in their Sustainable cultural practices. Traditional sustainable activities, such as tattoo making and singing 'Gond Gatha' to preserve the history of the Gondwana kingdom through oral storytelling, are at risk of decline. Additionally, the use of instruments like the Jhatur, Kikri, and Dumru by male community members during festivals and funerals in Gond houses has significantly diminished. Only a few community members continue to engage in these traditional occupations.

The practice of creating tattoo marks by female Thoti community members for other tribal communities, especially the Gond and Kolam, has also drastically declined due to Western cultural influences. It is crucial to take steps to preserve this fading cultural heritage. The researcher recommends that the Government of Telangana implement initiatives to revive the lost cultural traditions within the community through tribal (Ashram or residential) schools in the Adilabad district. This will help ensure



that the younger generation learns to sing and thus preserves this unique aspect of their cultural heritage. Such efforts are intended to uphold the sustainable cultural values of the Thoti community.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research paper is part of a seed money project funded by the ICFAI Foundation for Higher Education (a deemed university) in Hyderabad. The paper was enhanced based on a presentation delivered at the International Conference on "Tribal Livelihood Patterns, Issues, and Strategies for Empowerment," which took place on August 8th and 9th, 2024, at Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University in Hyderabad, Telangana.

## REFERENCES

- 1) Bijoy, C. R. (2003). The adivasis of India-A history of discrimination, conflict, and resistance. *PUCL Bulletin*, 1-7.
- 2) Elizabeth, A. M., Saraswathy, M. N., Sachdeva, M. P., Chaudhary, R., & Kalla, A. K. (2000). Demographic Profile of Thoti - A Primitive Tribal Population of Andhra Pradesh. *The Anthropologist*, 2(2), 119-122.
- 3) Garg, S., & Upadhyay, V. K. (2024). Equality, Affirmative Action, and Economically Weaker Sections in India. *Lentera Hukum*, 11, 124.
- 4) Jharia, A.A., 2025. Cultural Sustainability in Built Environment: Lessons From Gond Houses In Mandla, MP. *Innovations in Built Environment*, p.42.
- 5) Kannan. S (2024) "Research by Dr. S. Kannan highlights Gond Instrument Jhatur at risk of Disappearing" published in *Deccan Chronicle* dated 31<sup>st</sup> October 2024, P.5.
- 6) Kumar, L. A. (2021). To Ascertain the Level of Knowledge of Beneficiaries Regarding Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) Providing Farm Services Adilabad District of Telangana.
- 7) Kumar, M. M., Pathak, V. K., & Ruikar, M. (2020). Tribal population in India: A public health challenge and road to future. *Journal of family medicine and primary care*, 9(2), 508-512.
- 8) Metry, K. M. 2019. Gond Tribes of India. *AGPE The Royal Gondwana Research of History, Science, Economic, Political and Social Science*, 1(1), pp. 13-60.
- 9) Omvedt, G. (1980). Adivasis, culture and modes of production in India. *Bulletin of concerned Asian scholars*, 12(1), 15-22.
- 10) Rao, M.B. (2024) Occupational Mobility Among the Adivasis of Telugu-Speaking Regions. *Anveshana's International Journal of Research in Regional Studies, Law, Social Sciences, Journalism and Management Practices*. 9(12) pp.39-43.
- 11) Rao, P. T., Reddy, M. G., & Chathukulam, J. (2012). Implementation of tribal sub-plan (TSP) strategy: Impact on livelihoods of tribals in Andhra Pradesh. *Research Unit for Livelihoods and Natural Resources*.
- 12) Russell, R. V. (2016). The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India I. *anboco*.
- 13) Srinivas, T., 1948. Tribes: Culture and Ecology (Doctoral Dissertation, Osmania University).
- 14) Thurston, E. (1909). Castes and Tribes of Southern India. Vol. IV:329-387. Cosmo Publications: New Delhi. (Reprinted 1975)
- 15) Ul Hassan, S. S. (1989). The Castes and Tribes of HEH the Nizam's Dominions (Vol. 1). Asian educational services.
- 16) Von Furer-Haimendorf, C., & Von Furer-Haimendorf, E. (2021). The Gonds of Andhra Pradesh: tradition and change in an Indian tribe. *Routledge*.
- 17) Vorontsova, V. L., Salimgareev, M. V., & Vladimirovich, D. (2019). Socio-cultural dynamics of social phenomena of the Russian civilization. *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews*, 7(4), 385-389.
- 18) Ziyauddin, K. M. (2018). Muslim at the Margin: Understanding Their Changing Occupations in Hyderabad, *Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, 3 (3), pp. 124-133.